

The Almighty Dominance - Chapter 711[1,609 words]

Alex looked at the fox, then at the old woman's face, and understood — with real irritation that he'd already lost.

The fox wasn't dying. That would've been simpler. A dying thing he could argue himself out of.

This one was just old: one back leg curled wrong from a break that had healed badly years ago, wheezing thin and soft, like a bellows with the leather gone.

"Please." The old woman's nerve had run out on the first try. Her voice dropped to almost nothing. "He's all the company I've got left."

Behind her, Monica wasn't even trying to hide her smile.

Alex exhaled through his nose. "Inside. Not out here where the whole street can watch."

He worked fast. No ceremony this time, no long search for the heart by feel - he knew where it sat on this body now.

Three needles. A thin thread of inner force, in and gone again inside a minute, just enough to unknot old scar tissue and settle the lungs. The fox jolted awake, blinked up at him with wet black eyes, and immediately tried to bite his thumb off on

principle.

"There." Alex pulled his hand back before it connected. "He'll outlive you now. Congratulations."

The old woman started crying before he finished the sentence.

She tried to press coins into his hand - not many, from the weight of them, probably everything she owned. He closed her fingers back around the purse.

"Keep it." His eyes cut to Monica, who'd gone very still, watching him build a policy in real time. "If you hear anything — anyone who's crossed the Feral Line and come back to talk about it - bring me that instead. That's the price."

The old woman blinked at him like he'd asked for the moon. She agreed to something she didn't understand and left with the fox tucked in her coat, already asleep.

Monica waited for the door to shut. "So we're a charity now."

"I'm not a healer. I told you that."

She didn't put it on the sign. Didn't need to. Willowmere ran on gossip the way better neighborhoods ran on credit, and within a week the whole arrangement had spread without either of them saying a word:

the new man at the Reagent branch would look at your beast — if all you had to offer him was a story. About the roads. The Line. The places past it nobody official liked to name.

He never asked twice. Never explained why he wanted to know. People decided — the way people always decide what makes them comfortable — that he was simply eccentric.

A driver told him about the three checkpoints on the eastern trade road, and what each one searched for.

A retired trapper - missing two fingers to something he wouldn't name - sketched him a rough map of where the Feral Line bent closest to town before curving away again.

A boy no older than twelve, whose lizard had swallowed a fishhook, told him — trying to sound older than he was - that his uncle used to run goods past the marker stones. Until one year he stopped coming home for dinner. And never started again.

None of it was a map. Not on its own. Together, slowly, it was starting to look like the edge of one.

The shop slid into an easy rhythm. Monica finally put her beautiful niece on the counter for good — wages agreed with a handshake, never written down.

When the news started turning ugly - the same story looping on the radio like a stuck record - Monica stepped into the role of manager without anyone naming her to it. She told Yolanda to post the healing f*e.

Alex looked at the number. "Double it."

Monica went still. "Set it that high and no one comes."

"That's the point."

He walked back to his room, where a small shelf held everything he owned about the history of the Dominion of Beasts — and grew, book by book, every time he passed a shop that sold one.

The Cinder hound — still unnamed, answering to nothing more than a low whistle took up permanent post by the door. It did more for foot traffic than any sign ever could.

Shelves filled in slow: wards and tonics bought cheap, marked fair. Nobody in Willowmere trusted fast money. They trusted a man who was still there in the morning.

Two weeks in, the shelves were bare enough that Monica finally said what she'd been holding back since day one. "We need supply. Real supply — not what I can barter off the noodle cart. There's a trading floor two streets over. Everyone who deals feed, wards, creature goods comes through it eventually."

The floor turned out to be a covered market built into the shell of an old grain hall loud with barking and chittering, thick with a hundred kinds of feed fighting for the same air. Monica cut through the crowd like she still owned the block.

Alex followed, cataloguing exits out of old habit. Watching her move through a place like she'd built it, he almost said something. He didn't.

She led him to a stall buried under hanging charms, dried herbs, and — inexplicably — a full rack of knitted sweaters sized for something with four legs and a long tail. The man behind it was built like a barrel, dressed for reasons Alex chose not to ask about in a stitched approximation of a Cinder hound's own hide, ears included. "Monica!" He beamed like she owed him money and he was delighted about it. "And a new face. Oskar Penn. Best feed and ward stock this side of Willowmere. Possibly the world-haven't checked the world."

"He's exaggerating," Monica said.

"I'm not exaggerating. I'm marketing." Oskar was already sizing Alex up with the frank, professional interest of a man calculating margins. "You're the healer. Word's ahead of you."

Tell you what — buy a season's feed order today, I'll throw in the ward-charms half off. And if you want, a full costume set to match your hound. Great for morale. Builds trust."

"No," Alex said, without much heat.

"Everyone says no the first time." Oskar was already writing an invoice nobody had agreed to.

Alex was still working out how to escape the sweater conversation when the noise around the stall changed. Not louder.

A man in a gray traveling coat had stopped a few stalls down. Not shopping. Not talking to anyone. Just looking at Alex the way you look at something you're trying to place.

"Funny thing." He didn't bother

closing the distance once he saw he'd been noticed. His voice carried easy over the market noise, pitched. exactlyplout exactly gloud enough for Alex alone. A healer who can fix a chained-up guard-beast in under a minute. No scars. No contract. No Beast Tamer's mark on him anywhere. We don't get many of those out here."

Oskar went quiet behind his counter. Monica's hand drifted, casual, toward nothing in particular.

"Go to the Beast Hall Master," the man went on, tilting his head. "You'll hear the story you're looking for. Nobody else around here can give it to you anymore. A thousand-year-old beast can tell you anything you want to know."

He smiled, unhurried, and walked off before Alex said a single word back.

Alex frowned at Monica. "What was that."

Her eyes went wide. "The Beast Master Hall There's an old beast that lives there the guardian..

thousand years old maybe more. Know things nobody else does anymore. If there's a way to find what you're looking for, that's where you'd start."

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Monica led him to the biggest hall he'd ever seen, people lined up outside like they were waiting to see something sacred.

They'd barely joined the line when Alex felt it — a pulse of power rolling out from the center of the hall, and something looking directly at him.

He turned. There was nothing there.

Then a staff member came running, straight at Alex, ignoring everyone else in line.

"Sir. The guardian wants to speak with you."

"What?" The whole line went silent. Nobody talked to the guardian beast. Ever.

"Please," the staffer said. "Follow me."

Monica moved to follow. A second staffer stepped into her path. "Only him."

They led him into a single room that went utterly silent the second the door closed.

A curtain of cloth hung between him and whatever waited on the other side — and even through it, Alex could feel what stood there. Old. Older than old. Something between a wolf and a fox, and neither.

Its voice, when it came, was heavy. An animal's voice that had learned, a long time ago, to sound like a man's.

"Royal blood." A slow inhale. "Five hundred years since I last caught that scent. What are you doing here."

"Tell me way to the Empire." Alex asked.

"Ahh." The beast made a sound that might have been a laugh, might have been a cough. "The royal blood wants to go home. No wonder." It coughed again, wet and

old. "You will find no way to the Empire."

"What do you mean?"

"Only a legendary beast can carry

you there. That is the only way there has ever been." Another cough. "And in five hundred years, there has been no legendary beast. Except me I can take you to the Empire - but it will be my last journey."

Alex went still. He understood now — this thing had called him here for a reason.

"What do you want."

"Smart." Something in the beast's voice sharpened, almost pleased. A medal shot

out from behind the curtain and landed in Alex's palm before he'd even moved to

catch it.

"I heard you treat my kin. Inside that medal is a way to learn the skills of every beast there is. Fill it. A thousand skills, mastered to perfection — and I will carry you to the Empire myself. That is the only road you have left."

The Almighty Dominance - Chapter 712[1,018 words]

Proofread & edited version:

The medal stayed warm in Alex's hand long after he left the Hall.

On the walk back he turned it over, wanting a closer look. Instead the knowledge hit him all at once, the way a forgotten name suddenly returns complete.

It was Legendary work. Not praise—just fact. Only something like the guardian could still make a thing like this. What it did was simple to say. Living with it would not be.

It could take a beast's own skill, understand it completely, and make that skill his to give away.

Three rules. No exceptions.

He had to see the skill used with his own eyes, by the beast that owned it.

He had to touch that beast-skin, fur, or hide-while the memory was still fresh.

And the time between seeing and touching could not stretch past most of an hour, or the impression faded and the skill failed to copy.

Teaching the skill to another beast cost something separate. Strength, spent according to how strong the skill was. And only onto a beast built to receive it. Not people.

He stood in the street and only then thought to check what was already inside the medal.

Something was there.

One entry. Faint at the edges, like an old photograph left too long in the sun-but still clear.

Skill: Sovereign's Tongue.

Level: Unrated. Beyond normal ranking.

A voice-bound authority skill. It worked across species without translation, without consent, and without resistance from anything weaker than the will behind it. No living record of its natural use existed outside this one.

Status: No Target Set.

Alex read it twice. His pulse did not slow between readings.

He had not watched anyone use a skill. He had not touched anyone on purpose either-except the guardian had pressed the medal into his open palm while speaking in the voice it had spent a thousand years learning to wear like a man's.

Both conditions met in the same five seconds. Neither of them intentional.

He had walked out of that room carrying a fingerprint of power taken from the oldest, strongest thing he was ever likely to stand in front of—and he had not even known there was anything to steal.

Alex tried to understand what the medal really meant.

He had already learned one thing from it: how to take a beast's skill, keep it, and later give it away. The skill sat inside the medal like a stored memory. He could collect them. He could teach them.

One thousand. Only when the medal held a thousand skills would the path to the empire country open.

Alex stood still for a long moment and decided.

This would be his last resort.

He would look for every other way first. He would search, fight, trade, or invent whatever path he could find that did not depend on filling the medal to the brim. But having a final option was not wrong. A man who refused every last door only trapped himself.

He put it back in his pocket and returned.

The hound was waiting at the shop door, tail already wagging before Alex reached the step. He crouched down out of habit-and the entry for Sovereign's Tongue stirred awake in the back of his mind, testing the air like a compass finding north. Status: Can Be Taught.

Just from proximity. No contact needed for that part. Only for the taking. Alex went still.

A hound whose bloodline already held a shape waiting further up. A skill in his pocket that, an hour ago, had belonged to the single most dangerous creature in the country.

He did not move. Not yet. Whatever this cost, he was not going to find out by guessing. He would find out on purpose, later, on his own terms.

"Not today." Alex straightened, put the medal in his pocket, and went back to work

like a man who had not just found a loaded gun in his coat.

He broke that promise inside the hour. Not knowing itched worse than the risk.

A customer's cat wound around the counter leg while Monica wrote up the order Nothing special. An ordinary house cat No more powerful than the floorboards, Alex glanced at it out of habit-and the entry stirred anyway.

Status: Can Be Taught.

That should not have been possible. He crouched down and checked twice. Same answer both times.

He put the thought away and went back to work.

Late in the day, while reading, he caught a moth against the window glass without thinking—the same reflex that caught falling cups—and felt the moth throw everything it had at his closing hand.

A thin, sticky thread shot from somewhere on its body and wrapped once around his fingers.

The medal answered before he did.

Skill: Silk-Cast.

Level: None-beneath standard ranking.

Adhesive filament produced under threat. Harmless in its current form.

Status: No Target Set.

Alex looked at the moth. It had given up the moment the thread ran out and was simply waiting to be let go. He started laughing before he could stop himself.

He had taken an authority skill from the single most dangerous creature in the country. Twenty minutes later he had taken this from something that could not survive a light breeze.

Fine. Useful in its own small way. If teaching cost something-and every instinct said it would-better to find out with the cheapest, most worthless thing in the medal than gamble that math on Sovereign's Tongue.

He let the moth go. Then looked for the smallest moth and caught it.

This time he could hear a voice saying, "Too young. Have no skill. Can be taught Silk-Cast."

"Let's try it," Alex said. "Teach."

Warmth ran down his arm and out through his fingers, thin as the thread itself.

Suddenly Alex realized there was

cultivation, heaven and earth energy,

and for magicians they divided into something called mana and used by magicians to control elemental energy in the air. And this skiftook out something like mana.

The young moth twitched, shuddered, went still against his palm-then it let silk out.

A voice appeared. "The skill successfully taught."

"You're grinning at a moth," Monica said, looking at Alex.

"Am I?" Alex asked.

"Yes, you are," Monica said. "At a moth. Why don't you just look at my beautiful niece and smile at her?"

Alex looked at Rebecca and choked because a voice appeared:

You can teach Skill: Sovereign's Tongue to the target.

The Almighty Dominance - Chapter 713[1,487 words]

Alex didn't say it out loud to Yolanda. He turned the question over instead, quiet and careful, the way he turned over everything that mattered now.

Could this skill be taught to humans, too?

"Monica." He kept his voice low. "Can beast skills be taught to humans?"

She looked at him like he'd asked whether water was wet. "Of course. Every skill can be taught. The real question is whether the human's any good at learning it. Some people take five years for something simple. Others take decades. Mostly it comes down to the bond-how close you are to the beast."

Alex nodded, but his mind had already moved on. Collect everything. As many skills as he could get his hands on.

He found his first target without leaving Willowmere.

The town had one licensed healing house - real fees, real credentials, and behind the counter, something rare: a Driftlichen. A floating tuft of moss that trailed spores like smoke and closed wounds in minutes. Champions came here when their own healers weren't enough.

Alex walked in limping on a leg that had never once given him trouble and told the man behind the counter he'd wrenched it carrying stock.

The keeper didn't buy it — Alex saw the doubt flicker behind his eyes - but coin didn't ask questions. He summoned the Driftlichen anyway.

It drifted down in a slow spiral, spores trailing like smoke, and settled against Alex's leg, glowing faint and warm while it worked.

Alex watched every second of it. When it finally lifted off, he reached up like he needed the balance — and let his fingers brush its underside.

New entry recorded. Skill: Spore-Knit. Level: Intermediate. A wood-type healing ability. Speeds the mending of ordinary wounds. Status: No Target Set.

Three skills now. Sovereign's Tongue, Silk-Cast, Spore-Knit.

He thanked the keeper, paid full price without haggling, and left. The limp vanished the second he turned the corner.

A new number was already sitting at the front of his mind. The medal had answered his silent count with one of its own.

Capacity: 3 of 5.

Five. Not a thousand. Five — and no way yet to know if that number was a wall or just where he happened to be standing today.

Monica answered the next question before he'd even finished asking it. "Menagerie Yard. Once a season, out past the east road. Traders bring in anything that isn't nailed down on a farm. Half of Willowmere goes just to look."

It ran for two days. They caught the second.

The Yard didn't feel like a market. It felt like a held breath—pens and cages and open paddocks crowding a central lane, buyers shoulder to shoulder, every animal in the Dominion arguing at once.

A woman in a full elk costume, antlers and all, met them at the gate. Ledger under one arm, a grin that had already decided what she was going to sell them.

"Nell." She didn't offer a hand, just the grin. "First time at the Yard? I can tell. You've got the look of a man who's about to spend more than he planned."

"I'm looking, not buying."

"That's what the last forty of you said." She fell into step beside them anyway, guiding rather than following. "What kind of looking?"

"Something nobody else wants."

Nell's grin didn't move, but something behind it sharpened. "Now that's a specific kind of looking."

She led them past gem-eyed cats, crated hawks, a stall selling saddle charms — all the way to a paddock at the end of the lane. Half-empty. One animal stood alone inside it.

A colt. Galewing stock, judging by the faint static lifting its mane without any wind — the kind of bloodline that grew into something dangerous, with the right skill and enough years.

This one stood too still for that promise. Head low, ribs showing a little too much. It watched them with an attention that looked almost embarrassed to be caught.

"What's actually wrong with it?" Alex asked.

"Runt of a good litter," Nell said, and for exactly as long as it took to say that, the salesman dropped out of her voice. "Should've called its wind-skill months ago. Hasn't. The breeder's asking price isn't a price. It's an apology." She glanced at the colt. "Poor thing's been out here every night, practicing alone, like it can shame the talent into showing up."

Something in Alex's chest went tight and quiet. He knew what that looked like — trying that hard for something that wouldn't come.

The colt looked back at him and didn't lower its head any further. Didn't look away, either.

"Nobody's sure yet what's wrong with it," Nell said, shrugging — for the first time since the gate, without a quick answer ready. "That's the trouble with the ones like this. You don't find out what's wrong with them, or what's right, until somebody's willing to keep them long enough to see."

"I'll take him."

Nell raised an eyebrow, like she'd been waiting to see whether he'd actually say it. "No discount. Breeder's pride won't allow it. The price is already an apology, remember."

"I didn't ask for one."

"Good, because you weren't getting it." She was already reaching for her ledger, already softening in the same breath. "I throw in a season's feed, though Galewing colts eat like debt when

they're paying off a destikee

they're training that hard. You'll want the head start."

Alex didn't argue.

The colt, however, had other opinions.

The moment Nell opened the gate and reached for the halter, it understood, with sudden total clarity, that it had just been chosen. It responded the way anything with pride and no leverage responds. Badly.

It reared, spun, made a break for the far fence. Static crackled loose down its mane, like outrage alone had briefly done what months of effort hadn't.

Galewing colts, it turned out, were not going to be anyone's anything without a fight.

Nell caught the lead rope on the second pass and hauled it down like she'd done this more times than she'd admit to a customer. "Easy. Easy — nobody's dragging you anywhere."

"Then what's the plan?" Alex asked.

"Let him hear the terms." She held

the colt's head steady, spoke to it

directly, like it had asked a

reasonable question and deserved a reasonable answer. "Better feed than you've had all year Room to actually run instead of pacing a fence line. And-" she glanced at Alex "—someone who already knows

what to do with a body that isn't cooperating yet."

The colt's ears flicked toward Alex. Sides still heaving, but the fight had gone out of it, replaced by something more calculating.

"Food and a real vet," Alex added. "Included."

That did it. The colt's head dropped. Not surrender - more the specific disgust of an animal doing math it didn't want to do, and not liking the answer.

Alex crouched the way he did with anything he was about to be responsible for. Two fingers against its chest, no needle this time, just checking. No injury. Just a body running hot on discipline and short on whatever its bloodline was supposed to hand it for free.

"Squall," he said, before he'd decided to — exactly the way Grim the hound had happened. The colt's ears swiveled at the sound, unimpressed but listening anyway.

The weight came a second later, low in his chest. Unmistakable, now that he knew what it felt like.

Capacity increased. 3 of 6.

"Three of six," Alex repeated.

Not from the copying. From this — the taking-responsibility part. The part with no skill attached to it at all.

He filed it away carefully. The medal didn't grow because he collected things.

It grew because he kept them.

Nell watched his face do something she clearly found funny. "You always talk to a number in your head like that, or is today special?"

"Today's special."

"Uh-huh." She handed over the lead rope like she was handing over something heavier than rope. "Feed's being sent to the address on file. Try not to lose this one

to a fence again."

Before they left, Alex made one more stop the adult paddocks, where full-grown Galewings stood in

loose clusters, indifferent to the crowd One of them restless, threw off a gust hard enough to flatten the grass around its hooves. A common trick. Nothing rare. Nothing anyone here would think twice about.

Alex leaned on the fence rail beside it until it settled, then reached over as if to

steady himself on its shoulder.

New entry recorded. Skill: Windshear. Level: Low. A wind-type ability. Generates a short, cutting gust at close range. Common among adult Galewings — more a matter of full growth than any particular talent. Status: No Target Set.

Four of six now. Common as it was, it was one more than he'd had that morning — and it had cost him nothing but a fence rail to lean on.

Squall, on the other end of the lead rope, watched the whole exchange with the same flat, assessing look he'd given Alex in the paddock. Like he already suspected his new owner had gotten the better end of today's deal, and was filing that away for

later.

Alex looked at Squall.

The prompt was already waiting.

Teach Windshear to target?

The Almighty Dominance - Chapter 714[1,459 words]

"Teach," Alex said.

It cost him more than the moth had. He felt the mana leave in real time - five for the moth, fifty for this - warmth draining out of his chest and down the lead rope like current through wire. Squall's whole body flinched, not from pain. From being asked a question in a language he half-remembered.

The air cracked at the colt's hooves. A blade of wind sheared through the paddock rail and took splinters off it.

Squall went still. Stared at his own legs like they belonged to someone else.

Alex saw it happen in his face — the flattened ears, the pride gone stiffer than before. Gratitude and humiliation, arriving at the same exact second.

He recognized that particular flavor of misery. He'd seen it on Grim the hound, too an animal that had decided a long time ago that being wanted had to be earned first, because it never had been, not the one time it counted.

A runt held back a season past his littermates, passed over again and again for the easy ones. That didn't undo itself over one gust of wind.

"That doesn't make the months worthless," Alex said. "It means you had the shape of it already. I just handed you the last piece."

Squall didn't buy it. Squall, Alex was learning fast, didn't buy anything easily.

"Rest," Alex told him.

Squall planted all four hooves and stared him down instead - the stare of an animal who'd built his whole worth on never resting until he'd earned it, and had no plans to un-decide that tonight.

Alex didn't fight it. "Fine. Control drills. Small, slow, nothing that puts a hole in anything. Work on not embarrassing yourself next time it goes off."

That, Squall accepted. He cut the same six inches of wind, over and over, careful and furious with concentration, while Alex sat on a crate and watched him do it.

It hit harder than the moth's cost had — a pull behind the ribs that didn't fade. He checked the medal. Dimmer at the edges than he'd seen it since Grim's mastery. A new line sat under Windshear that hadn't been there an hour ago.

Cooldown: 24 hours.

"You're not the only one who has to earn things slowly," Alex told him. Squall ignored him completely and kept cutting the same six inches of air.

By the time the colt finally wore himself out — not from anything Alex asked, just his own stubbornness — Alex had already done the math he'd been avoiding all night.

Two beasts now. A hound that held the door. A colt that needed a paddock he didn't have. Every Beast Tamer in this country apparently had somewhere to put their animals overnight. He had a back room, a chain that had never once held Grim, and whatever patience Willowmere's other tenants had left for the noise.

If he meant to keep doing what he'd started at the Yard — and he did, that was the whole point — this was a problem too. And the problem had a shape: he needed ground. Real ground. More than a shop could hold.

Monica found him staring out the back window the next morning and read his face before he opened his mouth.

"You're thinking about the lot."

"What lot?"

"Behind the tree line. Runs the whole back edge of the property -used to belong to the branch, before the branch went under, before most people even remember it had a name. Empty since." She shrugged. "Nobody's touched it because nobody's had a reason to ask. And Willowmere doesn't hand out land for free just because it's sitting there."

"Who do I ask?"

"City hall. Warden's office — same one that licenses every beast-keeper, kennel, and menagerie stall in the district." A beat. "Fair warning. They don't just want your coin. They'll want to know what you're doing with the ground before they let you touch it. That land's for beasts only. That's the rule."

That, at least, was a problem Alex understood the shape of better than most.

The Warden's office was a narrow building wedged between two taller ones, run by a woman named Petrie who had the unhurried, unimpressed manner of someone who'd already heard every excuse a person could invent for wanting free land.

"Reagent's back lot." She said it like she'd already had this conversation in her head before he sat down. "Sat idle two years. Three requests for it. Turned down all three."

"Why?"

"Two wanted it for storage. One wanted it for a second noodle stall. Neither of those needs a forest." She folded her hands. "Land like that, this close to the Line, doesn't get.

It gets released for something that actually needs open ground and tree cover to be worth having. Tell me which one you are before I decide if you're worth a fourth conversation."

released for warehouses, e

Alex thought about Grim, asleep across the shop doorway. About Squall, still too proud to rest, cutting the same six inches of wind in a yard too small to hold him.

"I've got a hound and a colt who both need more room than a back room gives them," he said. "And I doubt I'll stop at two."

"For the best, then." She studied him. "How many beasts are you thinking? Give me a number."

Alex scratched his head. "A thousand?"

Petrie's expression didn't move, but something behind it did. She looked at him the way you'd look at someone trying to con you badly. "Whatever you're trying to pull, I'm not impressed."

"I'm not trying to impress you," Alex said, flat. "I'm opening a healing practice. Space for the beasts to stay - eat, rest, wait out the healing. And when a man starts thinking, he might as well think big. You asked how big. A thousand, then."

"A dreamer." She looked him up and down, clearly unmoved by what she saw. "Do you even have the money to pay for the permit?"

"Depends what you're asking me to pay." Alex shrugged. "Maybe I do. Maybe I don't."

"Fifty thousand." She looked down at him like the number alone should end the conversation.

"Fine. I can pay that for five years," Alex said.

"That's the part I'm tired of explaining to poor men." Petrie's mouth twisted. "That rice is for year. You think that's the five-year rate? Get out if you don't have the money."

"Even better." Alex didn't blink. "I thought that price was monthly. If it's yearly, that's cheaper than I planned for. I'll take five years."

Petrie's eyes narrowed — recalculating him in real time. "Trying to impress me now?"

"Plenty of rich men want this land," she said. "Paying isn't what worries me." She leaned in. "What worries me is a man who wants beasts and mean business. I've seen that go wrong more than I've seen it go right. You take this ground, you don't just owe the city rent. You owe every animal on it a reason to be better off for you taking it in the first place. I want to see that before I want to see your money."

Something about the way she said it — like she was already looking for a reason to throw him out — set Alex's teeth on edge.

"Humans are beasts too, aren't they?" he said. "You want me to build you a palace while I'm at it? Try to impress you that way too? How about I put you inside there."

Petrie went still. Then her face went red.

"Well." She cleared her throat. "If you put it that way - I'd be honored. But I'll let you try first."

Alex felt something go very wrong, very fast.

He'd meant it as an insult. You're an animal, same as the rest of them. But people here had something crossed in their wiring — call a person a beast, and apparently you'd just paid them the highest compliment they'd ever received.

Petrie cleared her throat again, all business now, like nothing had happened. "Back to terms. Build the shelter for the beasts like it's for them first and you second. Fencing that keeps them in without making them miserable. Vet on-site which

I hear you already are, one way or another, though I won't ask how a shopkeeper picked that up. Make about a hundred shelters." A look that said she'd ask eventually. Just not today. "Pass inspection in a season, and the lease is yours as long as the land stays what you said it'd be."

"Fine," Alex replied. Money was the last thing he worried about.

"And I... I don't mind," Petrie murmured, still a little red, "if you build a nice two-story wooden house there. You can let me live in it. You don't have to promise me a palace or anything. But if you ever felt like giving me one... I wouldn't complain."

Alex opened his mouth. Closed it again.

There was no version of this where he corrected her now.

The Almighty Dominance - Chapter 715[1,329 words]

A hundred shelters. Fencing that wouldn't hurt anything that leaned on it. A vet station solid enough that even Petrie would have to believe it. And a two-story house - he still hadn't found the sentence that walked that back.

Alex studied the map of the Regent branch land. Forest. Governor land, technically unclaimed. His, if he did this right.

He waited until the shop went dark. Monica and Yolanda had gone home.

He shut the door. Closed his hand around the ring on his finger — plain, forgettable, the kind of thing nobody looked at twice — and reached into the space folded behind it.

The drone came first. Palm-sized, matte black, curled shut like a fist that hadn't opened in years. Then the housing unit, wardrobe-sized, hit the floorboards with a thud too heavy for something that had just come out of nowhere. Last, a strip of something thin and skin-soft, weightless, which he pressed to the back of his neck. It settled in like it had never left.

Core reconnected. Systems synchronizing.

The voice arrived behind his thoughts. No sound at all.

"Gaia."

I am here. It has been a considerable interval, my king.

"Don't call me that here."

Acknowledged, sir. Any request?

"Take the drone out. Map the forest behind the building. Show me everything before I decide."

"Yes, sir." The drone shot off his palm and out the gap in the window, gone before the curtain finished moving.

A three-dimensional map bloomed on the glass in front of him — rivers, tree lines, elevation, all of it turning slow.

Alex set down twenty crawlers, each one small enough to sit in his palm. "Read every book I've got in here. Pull everything on beasts. Shelters. What they need to survive."

"Yes, sir." Gaia walked the crawlers to the shelves, and they climbed, opening pages one at a time, scanning as they went.

He'd bought most of those books without knowing which ones would matter. Now all of it would matter - every page feeding straight into the mind that would build this thing for him.

An hour later, the crawlers went still.

Your command?

"Full sanctuary. This whole lot, everything past the tree line." He watched Gaia lay the shape of it out the way he used to feed her a battlefield — the river along the east edge, the stand of old growth that had probably stood here before Willowmere had a name. "Shelter first. A hundred units. Fencing that holds without hurting anything that leans on it. A clinic that actually works. And nothing gets touched that's already growing — not the river, not those trees. Not for a support beam. Not for a foundation line."

Scanning. Terrain preservation parameters received. One hundred and four structural sites identified. Zero root or waterway disruption. Compiling.

The buildings rose in the air in front of him, floor by floor, made of light.

All of it can hold any beast eventually, sire. But long-term, we'll need separate builds

— flyers, water beasts, land beasts. For now, land first. A few water and sky units, kept ready. One each. Emergency only.

"One more thing." The words cost him something to say, and he said them anyway. "A residence. Two floors. Timber."

Added to the build order.

"How many drones does that take?"

Three hundred units, if you want it finished in a day — assuming the raw material's already staged. Or I can pull it from the forest itself.

"No." He said it fast, before the thought could finish landing. "I'll buy it. Just give me the list. We start when the material's here."

Yes, sir.

Monica's face when she saw the list the next morning was worth remembering.

"What are we building that needs this much material?" She scanned the pages twice, like the numbers might shrink the second time. "How many days do you think this takes to gather?"

Alex set a five-kilogram gold bar on the counter.

Monica went quiet. She opened her bag, dropped the bar in without a word, and walked straight to Yolanda.

"Niece. I have somewhere to be." Her voice didn't shake. "Even if it will kill me, I'm getting every last piece of this material today."

Then she was gone.

By afternoon, trucks lined the road behind the Regent building, unloading straight onto the lot. By nightfall, the material had piled into a mountain taller than the building itself.

Alex pulled three hundred building drones from his space storage inventory.

"Work quiet. I don't want the swarm seen. I don't want a single neighbor hearing so much as a hammer. It just needs to be done."

Given the material on-site, estimated completion: eight hours.

"Start tonight."

The lead drone unfolded once, twice-wings catching the last of the light in the room — and slipped out through the gap in the window without a sound. Nothing about it said magic. That was the point.

By noon the next day, Petrie stood at the edge of what used to be an empty lot and a stretch of forest, clipboard hanging forgotten from one hand.

Fencing curved around every old tree instead of through it. The river ran exactly where it always had. A hundred tow shelters sat tucked into the tree line like they'd grown there on their own. And at the far end a two-story timber house stood with its windows already glazed.

It was so beautiful, so perfect it almost didn't feel real. She had walked through so many shelters, yet none of them compared. This one fulfilled every requirement without a single flaw. His checklist was complete—35 out of 35. In her whole life of inspecting shelters and houses, she had never seen anything like this.

"You built this in a day?" Her voice cracked on the word day.

"Good workers," Alex said. True. And it told her nothing.

"Want to see the house?"

Alex guided her toward the riverbank. A two-story wooden house waited there, surrounded by a beautiful fence.

Petrie stood in silence for a long time, just looking.

"This looks like my dream house," she whispered.

Alex's mouth curved. "Of course it does. One of the drones flew over to your place and captured the exact design from the pictures of your dream house. I even made a wooden house for your fox beast."

She nearly cried. "This is really for me?"

"That was the deal, wasn't it?" Alex said. "You gave permission. It's yours for as long as the papers last."

"You've got it for a hundred years."

"What?" Alex stared at her.

"You told me you're rich. Why stop at five years? Make it a hundred. I'll take care of every permission—just pay the city deposit and it's yours."

Alex looked at the young woman in front of him. Something about her felt off. She genuinely wanted the house for a hundred years.

Still... money wasn't the problem. "Deal."

She wrote something unrelated on her clipboard.

"I have a daughter," she said. "My husband's been gone a long time."

Alex didn't know what to make of that. Petrie couldn't be more than twenty-five. People in this place married fast, mated fast-almost the same way the beasts they built shelters for did.

"And?"

"Nothing." She caught herself, shook her head. "Me and my daughter — we'd use this as a holiday house. Maybe more than that."

Two days later, Alex walked back from the café toward the clinic, coffee still warm in his hand.

Then he saw it.

Every window shattered. Glass across the ground like frost. Grim, the hound, lay in the doorway, bleeding into the floorboards. Monica was on her knees beside him, crying too hard to talk straight.

"Monica. What happened."

"The wolf gang." Her hands wouldn't stop shaking. "They said the forest behind this place was theirs. Said you stole it. So they tore through everything." A breath,

ragged. "Yolanda got hit. She's in the hospital right now."

Something in Alex's chest went cold and very still. "Where are they."

"They said "Monica's voice cracked, almost breaking. "If you're not gone from this place by noon, they reming back to kill your and burn everything here to the ground. Please, you have to run away They're the worst gang in this place. They don't leave survivors."

"Good. Me too."

Alex knelt and gathered Grim into his arms, careful of the wound, already moving toward the light.

"Let them come."

The Almighty Dominance - Chapter 716[1,322 words]

Grim's breathing evened out under the needles before noon even arrived. Alex kept his hand on the hound's flank a while longer anyway, feeding the last thread of inner force in slow, so the healing wouldn't jolt him awake into a fight he wasn't ready for yet.

Monica hadn't stopped shaking. "Please. You don't know what these people are."

"Don't worry they don't know me too." Alex stood, wiped his hands on his coat. "Get inside. Bar the door. Don't come out until I say."

She looked at him like she wanted to argue, then looked at Grim's bandaged side, and didn't.

They came at noon exactly. Twenty of them, spread loose across the torn-up lot like they'd done this walk a hundred times before - mismatched jackets, chains looped over shoulders instead of belts, the kind of confidence that came from never once having lost.

Behind them, on ropes and collars, came the beasts: a couple of mangy pit-dogs foaming at the leash, a scarred boar-thing with tusks filed to points, three jackal- shaped things moving in a pack rhythm that wasn't natural, all of it herded loosely around one animal at the back that nobody walked too close to a mastiff built like a boulder, matted grey-black, one eye clouded white from an old fight it clearly hadn't been allowed to lose.

Their leader was a lean man with a shaved scalp and a voice that carried.

"Are you the owner?"

"As you see."

"Guess nobody told you to run."

"Somebody did," Alex said. "I didn't feel like it."

"Cute." The man spread his hands. "Return this forest to us. We hate it when outsiders like you touch our stuff. That doesn't sit right with people here. And no one wants you here. Get out of this place."

"Who paid you?"

"Nobody hired us. We're from here. Grew up on this dirt. We just hate outsiders, especially the ones who walk in and take our things. Even if those things were never really ours to begin with."

"Well, if you don't like me, you need to move me." Alex smiled.

"Trying to be a tough guy, huh?" He grinned and snapped his fingers. "Get him."

The twenty came in together, with twenty beasts rushing to attack — which was their first mistake. Alex moved through them the way water moves through fingers — a wrist turned here, a knee folded there, a windpipe found and pressed just short of collapsing it.

None of them got close enough to land anything. In under five seconds the ones still standing had stopped bothering to stand.

“So weak,” Alex said, a flicker of genuine surprise in his voice. It was completely different from the arrogance they just flaunt.

Then the beasts came, and that part didn't go the way he expected.

The pit-dogs he barely noticed shrugging off. But the jackal-pack hit in a coordinated wedge that would have taken a normal man's leg off at the knee, and the boar- thing's charge cracked a fence post clean through on a miss.

Alex caught himself actually stepping back from that one- an honest, reflexive retreat, the first he'd needed all day.

He went still for half a second, reading them. He tried to measure the beasts' power and was shocked to find they were at least Foundation level, and some were at peak of it.

The twenty men didn't even reach Qi Foundation level. But the beasts had reached Foundation level, and some reached the peak.

This was really interesting. No wonder they called it dominion of the beast.

The beasts were more powerful than the humans.

The mastiff went for his throat, and he didn't kill it — caught the lunge on a flat palm to the chest and let it feel exactly how far it wasn't going to get, then bore it into the dirt hard enough to end the argument.

Its jaw was still snapping air when he pinned it, one hand flat between its shoulder blades, and in that instant, with the animal's rage still lit up and fresh.

Skill acquired: Bloodrend.

He didn't have time to think about that yet. The jackals broke off the moment their leader's dog went down, scattering the way pack animals do once the pack logic fails.

The boar-thing he put down with a strike to a joint that folded it sideways into the fence it had already broken.

The lean man with the shaved scalp was already backing toward the tree line, and Alex closed the distance before he made it three steps.

"Who paid you?"

"Nobody paid us. We're people from around here. We just don't like you. You're so arrogant."

Alex grabbed his finger and broke it. "You better say a name before each of your fingers is gone."

He screamed. "I'm telling the truth. I don't know. It's just us."

Another finger broke again.

"I don't—" A hand twisted behind the man's back cut the sentence off cleanly. "I don't know! We get a name and a number, that's it, that's how it's always—"

"Convenient."

"It's the truth!"

"Then give me the name and number." Alex grabbed another finger.

"Yes, yes, I'm giving it to you."

The district officers

arrived within

the hour, called in by neighbors who'd watched the whole thing from behind shuttered windows and finally worked up the nerve to phone it in. Their captain - a heavyset

woman with a clipboard and no visible patience for excuses - walked the wreckage, took one look at the twenty groaning men zip-tied along the fence line, and didn't ask Alex to explain himself twice.

"They'll answer for the shop, the girl in the hospital, all of it," she said. "The animals go to the Warden's office. Contracted the way these were, most of them will need re-homing, not punishing. That's not our call to make." She glanced toward the mastiff, still muzzled and shaking on its side. "That one especially."

"Petrie's office," Alex said.

"You know her." Not quite a question.

"We've done business."

The captain's mouth twitched, the closest thing to a smile she seemed willing to spend. "Then she'll take good care of it."

By evening the drones had the windows reset, the door rehung, the floorboards Grim had bled across pulled up and replaced board for board.

Gaia finished the report without being asked: cosmetic damage only, structural integrity unaffected, four hours' work compressed into forty minutes because there was so little of it this time.

Alex sat on the back step afterward with Grim's head heavy in his lap, the hound healed but not yet willing to sleep, ears up at every sound from the tree line.

Squall paced the new fence line without being let out, static crawling faint along his mane, working off something that hadn't been spent yet.

Neither of them had done anything today. That was the part that sat wrong with both of them, Alex could

tell Grim had watched from a

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bandaged doorway, Squall from behind a fence, and something the set of both animals said the same thing without either of them able to say it: let us be the ones who don't need protecting next time.

Alex looked at the mastiff's reading again in his mind, turning it over. Foundation

level, peak. Built by nothing but feeding, driving, and fighting a creature until it broke

or didn't.

He was still turning that thought when Monica came out with two mugs and her face still pale from the afternoon.

"You're not hurt," she said, like she still didn't quite believe it.

"No."

She sat down across from him, wrapping both hands around her mug before she spoke again.

"There's a place on the north edge of Willowmere. Officially beast master licensed, city-run keepers bring animals in to test them against each other, under rules, with a judge watching so nobody gets torn apart over a bet gone wrong." She hesitated, glancing at Grim, then at Squall pacing the fence. "I wasn't going to bring it up. Not after today. But watching you look at that dog just now like you're already doing math..."

"What's it called?"

Monica took a slow breath, like she already regretted saying yes to whatever came

next.

"I'll take you tomorrow," she said. "You'll see for yourself."

The Almighty Dominance - Chapter 717[1,373 words]

That night, once the shop had gone quiet, Alex sat with Grim's head against his knee and called up the skill.

Skill on record: Bloodrend. Compatible target found. Teach?

Grim was awake, ears already up, watching him with the particular stillness of a dog that knew something was about to happen to it and had decided in advance not to flinch.

"Yes."

Cost: 300 mana. Cooldown: 48 hours.

The pull came sharper than Windshear had, a cold drag behind his sternum that didn't let go for a full ten seconds. Grim's whole body went rigid, then shuddered, then settled — and when he lifted his head again there was something different sitting behind his eyes, a weight that hadn't been there an hour ago.

He tested it without being told to. A short, low swipe at the empty air, twin motions folded into one strike. The old fence post nearest him didn't so much break as disagree with existing.

"That's yours now," Alex said. "Don't waste it on fence posts."

Grim's tail didn't wag. It thumped, once, like a verdict.

Alex reached into the ring next and drew out a small lacquered case. Inside, two pills sat pale and faintly warm, the kind of thing Wudang disciples were given once they'd survived their first real injury and needed their foundation rebuilt stronger than it had been before. He hadn't planned on using them here. He hadn't planned on any of this.

He gave one to Grim, one to Squall, and pressed a palm flat against each animal's chest afterward while the pill did its slow work - bone density thickening, blood running hotter, whatever passed for a beast's inner reserve here filling in deeper than food or sleep alone could manage. Squall's static crackled once, sharp and involuntary, then smoothed into something steadier than it had ever run before. Grim just exhaled, long and low, like a held breath finally let go.

Neither animal was faster. Neither was smarter. They were simply built better than they'd been that morning, from the ground up.

Monica walked him out past the north edge of Willowmere the next day, Grim padding alongside without a leash because neither of them had ever needed one.

"The Proving Ring," she said, nodding at the fenced yard ahead — timber stands, a packed dirt floor, a low iron rail dividing spectators from whatever was about to happen inside it.

"City runs it. You register, you pay the gate f*e, and if you want it to mean something, you wager it — loser covers both f*es, winner walks off with the pot and the bragging rights. Judge keeps it from turning into a funeral."

The gate clerk barely looked up from his ledger until he clocked Grim, and then he looked up plenty.

"That's the Reagent hound." Not a question. A murmur went down the row of waiting keepers behind him, half amused, half already bored. "Starved thing they had chained out back for a year? Didn't figure it'd have the legs to walk here, let alone fight."

A woman near the rail — sharp-eyed, a breeder's calluses on both hands, clearly known to half the yard — didn't even bother lowering her voice.

"I've kept that guard-line for six years. They peak early and they peak low- good for standing at a door, useless past it. Whatever's under those ribs, it's not going anywhere today." She glanced sideways at Monica without recognizing her. "No offense to the owner."

Monica's jaw worked once. She said nothing, which for Monica was its own kind of warning.

"Easiest match on the board," someone else added, and this time nobody bothered whispering it at all.

The easiest match on the board, as it turned out, had a name - Dorian Vance, a keeper young enough to still be showing off, standing near the rail with a Rime Lynx pacing at his heel. Ice-pale fur, claws that left frost hanging in the air a full second after they moved. Proficient, by the way people around him talked about it. Frostrake to open, Glasscoat to close, and a keeper who clearly hadn't lost a match on this yard in a long time.

"You're serious about this one?" Dorian asked, glancing at Grim with the mild pity of a man about to collect an easy purse.

"He is," Monica said, before Alex could answer.

"Suit yourself." Dorian looked past them both, toward Alex, and something in the unbothered way Alex stood there made him pause half a second longer than he meant to. "You're not from the district."

"No." "Association-trained?" Dorian asked, looking Alex up and down.

"Or did some private tutor teach you how to stand like that?"

"Self-taught," Alex replied.

The crowd around them exploded with laughter.

"How about a bet?" Dorian said. "I heard you're the new guy on the reagent branch.

Hasn't it already gone bankrupt?"

"How much do you want to bet?" Alex asked.

"Whatever you've got," Foran sneered. "If you can actually cover it, I'm in."

"Fine." Alex reached into his bag and drew out two heavy gold bars, each a full

kilogram. "Two kilos. I'm sure you recognize the value."

A hush fell over the people watching.

Dorian's eyes tocked onto the gold like it was already his. "Appreciate the contribution. But my beast hasn't lost once. That skinny bound of yours is about to become the first stain on a perfect hundred-win record."

The question didn't stay between them. It spread fast through the crowd along the rail, the way gossip always does when people have nothing better to talk about.

"Look at that guy. I give it five minutes before those gold bars are gone," someone muttered from the back.

An older man was already scribbling on a betting slip. "Our easy win this time." "Yeah. Totally agree."

"Look at that one," another voice put in, jerking his chin at Grim. "Thick through the shoulders now, scars alt healed, Few months back he was a bag of bones with every health problem under the sun fromo half starving. Going nowhere. Shiny coat doesn't put muscle where it counts."

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"New money," the older man muttered, flicking his betting slip. "Buys a seat just to watch the cheque clear."

A woman near the gate snorted. "Please. That hound's going down. Book it."

Monica stood close enough to hear every guess. She didn't correct any of them. Didn't even blink.

She just tightened both hands around the mug she wasn't drinking from and thought, with something close to pity,

You have no idea.

Alex didn't answer the question. He knelt beside Grim instead while the judge finished the paperwork, one hand resting flat over the hound's ribs, and called up the first skill on record.

Sovereign's Tongue. Compatible target found. Teach?

"Yes."

Cost: 1,000 mana. Cooldown: 24 hours.

The pull didn't stop at his sternum this time. It dragged all the way through him, a full-body yank that left him light-headed for a single breath before it faded.

Now you learn the Sovereign Tongue. Give an order, and the target will understand. They will obey without hesitation. You can command them telepathically—and they will follow.

Turn to me. Bark once. Stop. Then bark twice.

Grim's head swung toward him, slow and deliberate. His eyes were wide, but not with fear.

Bark once. Stop. Bark twice.

“Good,” Alex said, a small smile touching his mouth.

The whistle went, and the Rime Lynx didn't wait to be told twice.

It came in low and fast, frost blooming off both forepaws in a hiss that fogged the air between them, and opened with Frostrake — a full, committed rake meant to end most matches before they started.

It caught Grim square across the shoulder.

The sound was wrong.

Not the wet crack the breeder-woman at the rail had clearly been expecting, but something closer to a fist meeting a sandbag — a dull, absorbed thud.

Grim staggered half a step, no more, and came back up already turning.

The crowd's murmur died mid-syllable. Somewhere behind the rail, the breeder- woman's mouth had stopped moving entirely.

Now, Alex said, and didn't need to say anything else.

Grim closed the gap in one motion, twin strikes folding into a single blow the way

they had against the fence post, except this time there was a Rime Lynx underneath it instead of old timber.

Glasscoat came up a half-second too late, a thin skin of ice that lasted exactly as long as it took Bloodrend to reach it.

The sound it made wasn't a crack. It was closer to something giving up.

The Almighty Dominance - Chapter 718[1,552 words]

The Rime Lynx hit the dirt on its side and didn't get back up, one paw twitching against the packed ground, out cold before its own keeper had finished registering what he'd just watched happen.

Dorian Vance stood frozen at the rail, mouth open, no sound coming out of it.

His vision actually swam for a second — a genuine, physical lurch, like the ground had shifted under a match he'd already spent in his head.

Fluke, he told himself, and didn't believe it even as the thought formed.

His Rime Lynx had trained under a licensed handler since it was a kit. It had never gone down in one exchange. Not once. Not to anything.

How, he thought, and had no second half to the sentence.

The breeder-woman at the rail had gone the color of old paper. "That's not—" she started, to no one, and didn't finish that either.

Grim didn't gloat. He didn't need to. He simply turned his head toward Dorian and held the look, calm and unhurried.

Behind Alex, the row of keepers who'd called this the easiest match on the board had gone very, very quiet, and stayed that way.

The judge took longer to find his voice than the fight had taken to end.

"The — " He cleared his throat and started again, pen hovering over his ledger like it might change what he'd just watched. "The Rime Lynx is unable to continue. Winner: the challenger."

Nobody cheered. Nobody said anything for a full three seconds, which on a betting yard was its own kind of verdict.

Then it all came apart at once.

"That's a hundred wins, gone. Just

gone." A man near the rail tore his betting slip

in half without seeming to notice he'd done it.

"I had money on the Lynx," someone else said, flat, like he still expected the world to correct itself.

The breeder-woman finally finished her sentence from earlier, quieter this time, mostly to herself.

"That's not a guard-line dog. I don't know what that is."

"New money," the old man muttered again, but there was nothing gloating left in it now. Just a man revising his own math out loud.

Monica didn't say you have no idea out loud this time. She didn't need to. Her face was doing it for her.

Dorian didn't move from the rail for a long moment, and when he finally did, it was toward Alex, not away from him.

"The gold," Alex said. "Two kilos."

"I don't—" Dorian's jaw worked. He had the look of a man doing arithmetic he badly wanted to come out differently. "I don't have that on me. Nobody carries that kind of weight to a yard match."

"Then you'll owe it."

"Fine. I'll owe it." Something in Dorian's voice tried, weakly, to sound like this was still a negotiation.

"No," Alex said. "You write it down. I don't trust spoken promises-only ink on paper, and a blood seal if it comes to that."

The judge, already reading the direction of the conversation and glad for something official to occupy his hands, pulled a scrap of contract paper from the registration desk before anyone had to ask.

"Write there. Two kilos of gold, owed," Alex said, "or its worth in labor, on call, whenever I need it. No set date. No negotiating the terms once they're signed. You come when I call, and you keep coming until the debt's called even."

"That's not a debt, that slavery—"

"Then settle it in cash. Do you even have the money? The whole yard watched you push for this bet. Don't stand there and tell me you can't pay."

"I..." Dorian cut himself off. His eyes moved to the crowd, then to his Rime Lynx still lying motionless in the dirt, and finally settled-longest of all-on Grim, who remained right beside Alex's leg, staring at him without blinking.

Pride wouldn't let him lose face in front of the entire crowd. He signed.

The judge witnessed it without comment, folded it once, and handed the paper to Alex like he was glad to be rid of it.

"Head to the Warden's office. Your beast is registered now. You can collect the license form there."

Processing Grim's paperwork at the Warden's office took half a day. According to Petrie, that was quick for a first registration.

"Guard-line hound, healed condition, no prior registration," she read from her copy, tapping the entry. "Tier: Low."

"Low," Alex repeated, voice flat.

"Take him out, keep fighting, drop a

few middle-tier or high-tier beasts,

put in real work-and the tier will climb." Her eyes flicked up. "I already

heard what he did. Half the district is

still talking about those two gold bars. You're not exactly poor, are you?" The corner of her mouth twitched. "Doesn't change the paperwork, though. Low tier, licensed, city seal. Congratulations. You're an official owner of record."

What she said next mattered more, and she said it like it was routine, because to her it was.

"That's also your qualifying license. First beast successfully trained and registered to city standard I— that's the bar for citizenship here, not money, not time in residence. You clear that, you're not a foreign operator with a cover story anymore. You're a citizen of the Dominion."

Alex hadn't expected it to land the way it did. Citizenship was supposed to be a side effect, paperwork that made the first thing easier. It didn't feel like paperwork.

"There's no f*e for that," Petrie added, misreading his silence. "Just obligations, same as anyone born here. You'll get called on for community contribution same as the rest of us. First one usually comes within the month."

"Obligations."

"Beasts get taken care of. People get taken care of That's the whole

shape of this country - you don't just get to own something here, you have to be worth something to t too. She slid a second sheet across the counter, this one pinned with a notice header instead of a license seal. "Mission board's this way, if you want to get ahead of it instead of waiting for the notice to find you."

The board was smaller than he expected - a cork panel behind the Warden's counter, thumbtacked with a dozen requests that had nothing to do with beast- keeping and everything to do with the district simply needing hands.

Most of it he skimmed past. A drainage ditch that needed clearing. A schoolhouse roof. Then, near the bottom, a farmer's petition out of a village on the district's eastern edge, the handwriting cramped with the kind of exhaustion that came from writing the same complaint every season.

Field infested — burrow moles undermining the north terraces, locust swarm stripping what's left standing. Requesting citizen contribution: one hundred moles culled or relocated, one thousand locusts collected, for the season's crop to be saved. Contribution logged toward standing.

Alex read it twice, mostly to make sure he wasn't misjudging the scale of it.

A hundred moles. A thousand locusts. Counted, presumably, one at a time, by someone with a ledger and no sense of irony about who they were asking to do the counting.

"You're doing the field one," Petrie said, not really asking, when she saw which notice he was still holding. "Good. Nobody's touched it in a month. Bring a second set of hands if you've got them — that quota's built for a crew, not a man alone." Alex thought of the paper folded in his coat, still smelling faintly of the judge's ink. "I've got someone in mind."

The next day Dorian shoved open the clinic door looking like a man who had spent the whole night regretting every decision he'd ever made.

"Why the hell did you call and drag me out here?" he demanded.

Alex didn't look up right away. "If you want to argue, bring the money first." He finally raised his eyes. "Hundred moles. Thousand locusts. White Field, east district. You come with me, and I'll mark it down as a few thousand dollars paid." Dorian's face went through several expressions on its way to settling on something close to despair. "That's — that's not repayment, that's farm labor." "It's whatever I decide it is. That was the agreement."

For a moment it looked like Dorian might actually argue the point — might reach for whatever pride he had left after the yard — and then his eyes dropped to the paper still folded in Alex's coat pocket, and whatever he'd been about to say died before it reached his mouth.

"Fine," he said instead, tight and clipped. "When do we leave."

"Now's fine."

Dorian stormed out and yanked the door open with the force of a man who would rather have thrown it.

Outside, Grim was already waiting, tail held low, looking far too satisfied with the way things had gone.

"Wait." Dorian stopped mid-step, remembering. "You're doing this for the community task, aren't you?"

Alex frowned. "Why else would I bother?"

"Even better." Dorian's face lit up. "So it's a team job?"

"Yes."

"Good. I'll bring a few of my people. They still need to meet their community quota.

We can clear the whole thing together."

As soon as Alex was out of earshot,

Dorian pulled out his phone and made a quick call. "I've got a job. Someone needs to disappear. You

take him out and each

of you walks with at least two gold bars. We're joining the city community task and handling it there. Bring your best beasts."

"What if the office investigates when he dies?" one of them asked.

Dorian let out a short laugh. "He dies on the mission-killed by the beasts. Simple as that."

The Almighty Dominance - Chapter 719[1,598 words]

Dorian double cabin truck dropped the three of them at White Field a little after eight, the terraces already visible from the road, brown-edged and sunken where something had been eating the roots out from under them for weeks.

Dorian had brought two people. He introduced them without much ceremony — Kass, wiry and quiet, with a badger-shaped digger pacing low at his heel; Bram, heavier through the shoulders, his

beast a hooded, dust-colored viper coiled loose around one arm like a bracelet that had decided to wake up.

"Citizen quota," Dorian said, by way of explanation. "They're behind on theirs too. Figured we'd knock it all out together. Sicen is team quota the more ithe merrier."

"Efficient," Alex said, and didn't ask anything else.

Kass's eyes moved once over Grim, cataloguing, then moved away too fast to be casual about it. Bram didn't look at Grim at all, which was its own kind of tell.

A farmer met them at the gate with the tired relief of a man who'd stopped expecting anyone to actually come. "North terraces are the worst of it. Moles first, if you can - they're taking the root systems out from under everything, and the crop won't hold past another week of it. Locusts are thick in the east hedge past noon, once the sun's warmed the grass."

"We'll start on the moles," Alex said.

The first burrow Grim found, he didn't bother digging out. He simply planted both front paws over the collapsed earth where the tunnel ran and brought one hardened swipe down through eight inches of packed soil like it was standing water.

The mole came up dead before it understood it had been found.

Kass's badger-digger, next to him, hadn't even finished orienting toward the same tunnel.

"Huh," Kass said, carefully flat.

Bram's viper flicked its tongue once, twice, and went very still.

Dorian's jaw tightened, and if anyone had been watching him instead of Grim, they'd have seen exactly how much that single motion cost him.

"We'll split up," Alex said. "Cover more ground that way. Meet back here at noon, tally what we've got."

Nobody argued. Dorian, Kass, and Bram peeled off toward the east hedge, murmuring to each other in the low, clipped way of men doing quiet math. Alex and Grim took the north terraces alone.

By noon, Alex and Grim had gone through forty-one mole burrows and hadn't lost count of a single one, because Grim hadn't stopped moving long enough to lose track. He worked the tunnels the way he'd worked the fence post — economical, unhurried, no wasted motion- and every so often paused just long enough to look back at Alex with an expression that had started to resemble pride somewhere around burrow thirty.

Dorian's group came back from the east hedge with six locusts between the three of them and a badger-digger that had gotten itself stuck twice.

"Forty-one," the farmer said, going over Alex's count with an expression that kept sliding between gratitude and disbelief. "In four hours. I've had crews of six take a week on less than that."

"Forty-one." Dorian repeated the number like it might shrink if he said it slower.

Kass didn't say anything. He was looking at Grim the way a man looks at a number that's gone wrong somewhere in his own favor.

"Lunch," Alex said, ending the conversation.

They sat in the shade of the tree line and ate. The meal wasn't comfortable, but the farmer's wife had prepared it with clear care. The plain food told Alex the family probably didn't have much, yet the woman still put effort into it. They might have been happy in their own way. It simply wasn't food that suited his mouth.

Dorian only picked at his sandwich. Bram's viper remained tightly coiled, tongue flicking toward Grim far more often than the badger-digger appeared to find necessary.

"You're not even tired," Kass said finally, like the observation had been sitting behind his teeth all morning and finally worked loose.

"No," Alex said.

"That's not — " Kass stopped himself, glanced at Dorian, and didn't finish the sentence.

Dorian stood up before anyone could ask him to. "East hedge again after lunch. Locusts'll be thick once the sun's up properly. We'll take the far tree line, work back toward you."

"Fine," Alex said.

He watched the three of them walk off, unhurried, and didn't think much of it until Grim's head turned, slow, tracking them the same way he'd tracked the fence post the night Alex taught him Bloodrend — not suspicious exactly, just attentive, the way a dog gets when something in a familiar smell has changed.

They're afraid of you, Alex said through the bond, mostly to see what Grim would do with it.

Grim didn't answer in words. He simply turned back toward the tree line, ears up, and didn't lie back down.

Alex pulled a pill from his pocket and

flicked it skyward. Grim sprang up, snatched it from the air, and

swallowed it without hesitation. If anyone present realized the dog was casually eating a strength pitb designed for Wudang disciples-like it was nothing more tharra treat they would never have believed it. Alex was testing the limits of what Grim could become, studying the hound and wondering if it might eventually reach Nascent Soul, or perhaps even Legendary.

The road ahead was long, but he still held quiet hope for it.

Out past the far hedge, once the farmhouse was well out of sight, Dorian stopped walking.

"Tonight," he said, low. "Not out here in the open with a farmer watching. Tonight, when it's dark and there's a field full of beasts already loose to blame it on."

"That thing he's got," Kass said. "You saw the burrow. That wasn't a Low-tier guard hound."

"I know what I saw." Dorian's voice held steady, but a thin, brittle edge had crept underneath it. "Remember-he's alone. We're three, with three beasts. The man was loaded. He already showed two kilograms of gold, and no one knows how much more he's carrying. Don't tell me you don't want that money."

Bram's viper tightened around his arm, tongue flicking. "What if the hound gets in the way?"

"Then kill the hound first," Dorian said. "Two gold bars each. That was the deal. You might even find more once he's down."

Behind them, far off across the terraces, a shape that was mostly patience and quiet muscle sat very still at Alex's side, and did not stop watching the direction they'd gone.

By mid-afternoon the tally board outside the farmhouse read fifty-eight moles and thirty-one locusts under Alex's name, and something in the single digits under everyone else's.

Dorian came back from the east hedge wiping sweat off his neck, and put on the kind of smile a man wears when he's decided being pleasant costs him nothing.

"You're not even winded." He said it lightly, like it was the start of a joke instead of the third time he'd said some version of it today. "What are you planning to do with a hound like that, once his tier catches up to what he actually is? District circuit? There's a championship bracket that runs twice a year, once his rating clears Mid."

"Haven't thought about it," Alex said, which was mostly true.

"You should." Dorian's voice stayed easy, encouraging even, the way a man sounds when he's decided flattery is cheaper than honesty. "Man builds something like that,

he doesn't just let it sit."

Kass didn't join the conversation. He sat a little apart, running a whetstone along nothing in particular, and every time Grim's shadow crossed near him he found a reason to look somewhere else.

The warning came over the village loudspeaker a little before four, loud enough to carry all the way out to the terraces.

"Attention all residents. The district has issued an amber notice for beast unrest along the eastern Feral marker stones. Numbers are gathering beyond the treeline in greater density than usual. This is a precaution, not an evacuation. Secure livestock and remain within marked boundaries until further notice."

The broadcast clicked off. Nobody moved for a second.

"That's not nothing," Dorian said, and for once it didn't sound performed.

The farmer came jogging up from the gatehouse, wiping his hands on his apron. "You'll want to wrap up soon. Warden's office puts out an amber maybe twice a year, and it's never been wrong yet. Nothing's coming through the marker stones today, most likely — but folks get jumpy, and jumpy folks make mistakes in the dark."

"Define jumpy," Alex said.

"Loose stock, spooked dogs, half the district's own beasts a little wilder than usual whenever the Feral Line stirs like this. Anything goes missing tonight nobody's going to look twice at how The farmer said it as simple fact the way a man describes weather, and had no idea how precisely he'd just described somebody's actual plan.

Bram's viper went still around his arm. Kass didn't look up from the whetstone at all.

They kept working past sundown anyway — the quota didn't care about warnings — and it was somewhere in that stretch, hauling a burlap sack of locusts past the field's western boundary, that Alex first noticed something.

He reached out through the bond, more out of instinct than plan. Grim. Anything?

Grim's head lifted. His ears turned toward the tree line on their own. For a long moment nothing moved. Then he slowly shook his head—the closest a dog could come to saying no.

Without warning, Dorian's Rime Lynx, the badger-digger, and the dust-colored viper burst from the darkness and charged Grim.

"Now! Hit him! Let the beasts handle that damn hound!"

Dorian, Kass, and Bram stepped out from the tree shadows. They snatched up iron pipes from the farm equipment. Dorian and Bram came forward with pitchforks, thrusting straight at Alex.

The Almighty Dominance - Chapter 720[1,522 words]

The pitchfork caught Alex square in the ribs and didn't so much as wrinkle his shirt.

Dorian's face went through confusion before it reached fear. He wrenched the tines back and drove them in again, harder, both hands behind it this time — and again, nothing. No give. No blood. Not even the small satisfaction of a man staggering

back a step.

"Trying to scratch me?" Alex asked. "Funny. I've been feeling itchy. Stab a little harder on my back."

"What-"

Bram's iron pipe smashed into Alex's shoulder and rang out like it had struck a bell instead of flesh.

"Decent massage," Alex said. "But nowhere near enough. Put some real strength into it."

All three of them stared as if they had just faced a monster. Then they attacked with everything they could-hitting, stabbing, and striking harder than before.

Alex didn't bother stepping out of range. His whole body ran thick with inner force, layered so deep under the skin that a blunt weapon might as well have been swung at a mountain. Kass, scrambling for something sharper, pulled a knife from his belt and drove it toward Alex's neck with everything he had.

The blade skated off, useless.

At their level - barely past Qi Gathering, all three of them, strength drawn entirely from fear and adrenaline rather than any real cultivation - they could have swung a sword instead of a kitchen knife and the result would have been the same. A thousand years of trying wouldn't have gotten them close enough to matter.

Across the clearing, Grim was having the same conversation without words. The Rime Lynx raked at him; the badger-digger sank its jaws in and found nothing worth holding onto; the viper struck twice and got nothing for it but a mouthful of fur.

Grim stood through all of it with the mild, faintly bored patience of something that had eaten a pill built for grown men twice already this week and felt, if anything, a little disappointed.

Then the ground stopped being solid.

It went out from under all of them at once - a low, rolling shudder that traveled through the field like something enormous had turned over in its sleep. The pitchfork fell out of Dorian's hands. Kass staggered against a fence post that was no longer where he'd braced for it to be.

The soil at the field's eastern edge tore open.

One shape came up first, then a second, then a third — not moles, not anything the quota had prepared anyone for. Segmented, easily the length of three men laid end to end, jaws ringed with teeth that didn't belong on anything that lived underground. The last time something like this had surfaced, two decades back, it had taken a town with it and left nothing anyone bothered rebuilding.

There were supposed to be one of them, if the old stories were even half right.

There were three.

Screaming reached them from the direction of the village a heartbeat later - real screaming, not the startled kind. Somewhere a roof came down. A lantern post snapped and went dark, and then another, until the only light left over the whole field was moon and starlight, thin and cold and doing nothing to make the shapes moving under it any less enormous.

Grim was already moving, barking at the nearest wyrm in short, furious bursts before he closed and bit down hard on its flank.

The wyrm didn't even flinch. Whatever the pill had done for him, it hadn't done that. The village didn't fall quietly.

The first Trench Wyrms hit White Field's outer row of houses like something dropped from a great height rather than something that had crawled up out of the ground — a whole roofline caved inward in a single collapse, beams snapping, thatch and tile going up in a cloud that caught the light of a knocked-over lantern and started to smolder.

A second house folded a breath later, one wall at a time, the way a thing gives up rather than the way a thing breaks.

Livestock scattered in every direction at once-goats screaming in a register too human for comfort, a cart-horse tearing its tether clean out of the post and bolting through a fence, chickens exploding upward in a panic that went nowhere useful.

Somewhere close a dog was barking itself hoarse, and underneath that, worse, a woman was screaming a child's name over and over into a collapsed doorway that wasn't answering back.

An old man had gone down hard in the open dirt path, one leg bent wrong, dragging himself by his elbows toward a ditch while a Trench Wyrms tail swept the ground twenty feet behind him, close enough that the dust off it settled in his hair.

Alex saw all of it in the space of two heartbeats, and none of it needed deciding twice.

He was already jumped and flying toward the village before he'd finished deciding to.

People were pouring out of what was left of two houses, an old woman half-carried by a younger man, a child screaming for someone who wasn't answering. Alex didn't stop to explain himself.

He took one long breath, the sword came out of the space inventory, white-bladed, humming faintly.

Wudang's Nine Moons Sword Art

The name wasn't a metaphor. Nine pale crescents bloomed into the night sky above the field all at once, huge and silver and impossibly bright against the dark, hanging there for the space of one full breath like the heavens themselves had multiplied to watch.

Every face still upright in that field — villager, wyrm, Dorian on his knees with the pitchfork forgotten in the dirt — turned upward without meaning to, caught by nine moons where there had only ever been one.

Then they fell.

Not slow, not gentle - nine arcs of white light collapsing inward on three points at once, converging on the wyrms with the terrible, unhurried certainty of something that had already decided how this ended before it began. Alex rode the last of them down, blade trailing white the whole way through, and didn't so much fight the Trench Wyrms as finish a sentence they hadn't understood they were already

inside of.

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All three came apart at once, cut clean through, each half falling into the crater it had just torn open.

The silence after was almost worse than the noise before it.

Alex landed light, sword already sliding back into nothing, and crouched by the nearest half of the nearest body. It was still twitching not dead yet, not quite the last of something moving through it the way a fresh injury still argued with a body that hadn't caught up to what had happened to it. He pressed two fingers flat against the ruined hide before that argument finished.

Skill acquired: Earthbore.

He didn't have time to think about what that meant yet either.

The villagers who'd made it into the open found him standing over three halved monsters under a sky gone quiet again and didn't seem to know what to do with their hands. An old man tried to bow. A woman was crying and thanking him in the same breath, over and over, like the words had run together from repetition.

Alex said almost nothing back. He didn't correct anyone who called him a licensed hunter, didn't confirm or deny anything about where he'd come from or what that sword actually was.

The villagers kept telling them how glad they were, voices full of cheers. Especially after Alex suggested using the three carcasses to repair parts of the village. More people brightened at that, because the remains of such large beasts were valuable. Even better, no one had died. They had prepared in advance.

The only result was that the doctors and their healing beasts stayed a little busier, treating the injured.

Alex walked toward Dorian. He still had to tell the group to head back to the city— their quota was already finished.

Dorian hadn't moved from where the pitchfork had fallen. Kass's knife was still in his hand, forgotten, pointed at the ground. Bram's pipe hung loose at his side like he'd forgotten what it was for.

They had come to kill what they thought was a soft outsider, rich enough to make the risk worthwhile.

Instead, they had just watched him erase three disaster-class monsters in one clean motion—the kind of beasts that used to level entire cities twenty years ago. He hadn't even broken a sweat.

As Alex walked over, Dorian understood. If death had a face, it was the one smiling at him right then.

He went to his knees in the dirt without being told to, and Kass and Bram followed half a breath later, the knife and the pipe both hitting the ground at the same time. "Please—" Dorian's voice cracked. "We made a mistake. A stupid mistake. We didn't know. We thought—"

"We thought you were just some rich outsider," Kass blurted, forehead almost touching the dirt. "We never would've..... if we'd known what you could do—"

"Spare us," Bram said, voice shaking. "It was Dorian. All of it. He's the one who wanted the gold, the one who made the plan, the one who dragged us into this. I never wanted to touch you. Please—punish him if you have to, just don't take it out on me."