

The Almighty Dominance - Chapter 721[1,236 words]

Alex looked at the three of them for a long moment. Dorian, shaking. Kass, forehead nearly in the dirt. Bram, still talking - still trying to buy his own skin with someone

else's.

An hour ago, all three had been ready to open him up. Now they couldn't hold his eyes.

"I don't care who wanted to blame who." His voice stayed flat. "You were all three swinging something at me."

Bram's mouth snapped shut.

"I'm not going to kill you." He let that sit long enough for them to feel exactly how little comfort it was. "But you're not walking away from this owing nothing."

"One year. Full obedience. No refusals — to anything I ask, whenever I ask it, no matter the hour. No matter the inconvenience."

He crossed to Dorian first. Two fingers, flat against his forehead. Barely a touch. A thread of inner force slid in and settled — the same trick he'd once learned, planting something a body would never find until it was already too late.

Dorian gasped like he'd been struck.

"That's a seed." Alex moved to Kass, then Bram. Same two fingers. Same brief press. Same quiet settling. "It does nothing. Not unless you make it. The day one of you breaks these terms, it opens." His voice never rose. It didn't have to. "Your skull won't survive it opening slowly. You'll have time to regret it. Not much. But some."

Nobody asked what opening meant. The color gone from three faces answered for them.

"Get up."

They did. None of them stood quite as close to each other as they had a minute ago.

Behind them, past the smoke, the village committee man was still counting heads - still hadn't noticed how close that count had come to falling short. Alex had made sure of that hours ago. He'd make sure the man never had to know it.

The city's response team reached White Field a little past midnight - trucks, torches, uniformed handlers, a scatter of contracted beasts moving in formation too disciplined to be anything but expensive.

At the front of it rode a woman who hadn't rushed for anyone in years, because she'd stopped needing to.

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The lion under her stood three meters at the shoulder, sitting. Storm-grey mane threaded with pale lightning that didn't need a storm to spark. Its eyes wreckage of the field the way something bored looks at a job beneath it.

She slid off before it fully stopped.

"Warden-Commander Jennifer." Badge out before anyone asked. "Crown Wardens, disaster response. Who's in charge here."

The village committee man pointed. Not at himself.

Jennifer followed the gesture to Alex - standing near three carcasses that had already stopped twitching, Grim at his side, Dorian and his two very quiet friends loitering a short distance off like men who'd just learned exactly how small they

were.

Her eyebrows didn't move. Her eyes did all the work instead - slow, methodical, cataloguing the cuts on the Wyrms bodies, the crater where he'd landed, the total absence of strain on the man standing in the middle of it.

"You did this."

"I was here."

"That's not what I asked."

She walked the nearest carcass without asking. Crouched once, studied the cut itself— clean through segmented plating her own division's equipment needed three coordinated strikes and a wasted afternoon to manage.

"One motion." Mostly to herself. "You cut three Trench Wyrms apart in one motion, and you're not even breathing hard."

Something shifted in her voice - the sound of someone recalculating what he was capable of, and not liking the math.

"I don't see the problem," Alex said.

"The problem is I run a division built exactly for this, and it took me forty minutes and a full response column just to get here after the fact." She straightened studying him now, instead of the bodies. "The problem is a man with your output doesn't exist on any registry I've ever pulled. No combat license. No battle rating past a low-tier hound. Nothing."

"I'm a citizen with a farm-relief quota," Alex said. "I filled it early."

Her mouth almost got to a smile. Didn't quite land.

"Cute."

She waited until the crowd thinned. Until the healers finished with the last of the injured. Until it was just her, the lion, and Alex, standing over ground still smoking at the edges.

"I'm going to be straight with you," Jennifer said. "The Crown Wardens don't hand out medals for good citizenship. We exist because the Dominion has a lot of ground and not enough people who can do what you just did without blinking. When someone like that shows up, we notice. We don't let it walk away twice."

"I appreciate the offer. I'm not looking for a position."

"I didn't ask what you were looking for." Her tone shifted — easy, pleasant, and entirely without warmth underneath. "Full backing. Resources on request. A rank that outranks half the bureaucracy you've been dealing with. Real freedom of movement — including past lines most citizens never get cleared to cross."

Alex went still. Not reluctance. Something colder.

Past lines most citizens never get cleared to cross.

She saw him hear it. Pressed exactly there.

"I know what you're looking for isn't a paycheck." Something flickered behind her eyes something that had nothing to do with negotiation. She didn't chase it. Neither did he. "There are places in this Dominion closed to anyone without Crown Warden clearance. I have a feeling one of them's on your list."

"That's a guess."

"It's a good one." The lion paced a slow half-circle behind her, patient the way everything about her seemed patient. "I'll be honest with you twice in one night, since the first round landed so well. This isn't a

negotiation. You're a citizen

operating outside every feigistry meant to account for someone with your capability. That makes you a problem for me either way- working with the Crown Wardens, or working around us. I'd rather you be the first kind."

"And if I decline?"

"Then I make the rest of your life here considerably less comfortable. Inspections: Audits. Questions about a sanctuary that got built in a single night. About a lease that jumped from five years to a hundred About

free field that produced two

truckloads of monster carcass and one very unregistered sword." She said it lightly. Almost kindly. That was what made it worse "Or you cooperate, and I make sure you live like a noble in this country instead. Your choice." A beat. "Though it's a choice with exactly one good answer in it."

Grim's ears went flat somewhere in the middle of that sentence.

Alex weighed it fast — the way he weighed most things now. No sentiment left over

for the injustice of being cornered by someone who'd clearly done this before.

"Reserve standing," Alex said. "Not full commission. I choose what I take on."

Jennifer considered that for exactly as long as it took to decide it cost her nothing to grant.

"Reserve standing." She agreed. "For now."

She said it the way people say for now when they intend for it to stop being true eventually — and didn't bother hiding that, either.

"Welcome to the Crown Wardens." She put a hand out. It didn't feel like an

invitation. It felt like a formality on the way to something already decided.

Alex shook it anyway.

Somewhere behind the handshake, a thought slid into place: maybe this was the

door into the Empire he'd been looking for.

"Great. You're coming in tomorrow." Jennifer was already turning, already done with

him. "There's a problem at the office. You're solving it."

"Don't you think this is moving a little fast?"

"Work doesn't wait for anyone."

