

The Almighty Dominance - Chapter 722[1,439 words]

The next morning, Grim smelled the fear before either of them said a word.

Three steps into the Warden building, his hackles rose. Not aggressive — alert.

Ears swiveling toward the double doors down the hall, where a knot of voices had gone too tight, too quiet, too fast. Alex didn't need the bond to read that kind of silence.

He'd heard it enough times now to know exactly what it meant.

Jennifer stood behind her desk, arms crossed, listening to a man old enough to be someone's grandfather grip the desk's edge like it was the only thing holding him up. Beside him, a woman in traveling clothes too fine for traveling. Behind them both, a girl young enough to still be sharp about everything - the kind of sharp that only came from never having paid for it yet.

Alex leaned against the doorframe. Watched.

"...collapsed before dawn." The old man's voice was thin, wrung out. "No warning. No wound we could find. One moment he was resting in the eastern pen. The next "He stopped. Couldn't finish it.

"Lord Calder." Jennifer's voice stayed even, professional — the voice she used when she wanted information more than she wanted to comfort anyone. "Walk me through last night again. Everything. Who he was near. What he ate. Who touched him."

"There was a gathering." The woman beside him answered instead — his daughter, by the look of her. "A trade dinner. Half the district's noble houses were there." Her mouth pressed thin before she made herself finish it. "Including House Vayne."

Something in Jennifer's expression didn't change so much as settle.

"Of course they were," she said.

The girl

arms crossed, eyes locked on Alex now instead of her own family — spoke before anyone gave her permission.

"He's not just a beast. He is our family Guardian beast." Her voice cracked on the word. She hated that it cracked. "Vesper is four generations bonded to our line. Everyone in this district knows what he is. You don't get to hold Calder land without a bonded guardian recognized by the Wardens' own charter. That's not tradition. That's law." She swallowed hard. "If he dies, we don't just lose a beast. We lose the ground under our feet."

Alex watched her chin tip up too high, the way people held their chins when they needed help keeping their eyes dry.

Wren wasn't angry. She was scared, and anger was easier to wear in a room full of strangers. He said nothing. He just decided, right then, that he wasn't leaving until Vesper was breathing easy again.

"Wren." Lord Calder said her name low- part warning, part apology to the room for his granddaughter's bluntness.

"It's true and you know it." She didn't say anything else.

Jennifer didn't disagree. She looked past the family, toward Alex, the way she'd started looking at him lately. Like she was still deciding how much to hand him at once.

"A Storm Qilin," she said, for his benefit as much as anyone's. "Bonded four generations. Guardian beast. No Qilin, no defensible claim to the land it's bonded over. House Calder loses the Qilin, they lose the district seat that comes with it. And everything downstream of that seat. The mines. The water rights. The border posts."

"And someone poisoned it during a dinner with the family that wants that seat." Not a question.

Something ugly uncoiled in Alex's chest. Poison a guardian. Smile through dinner. Wait for the land to fall into your lap.

Nobody answered. Nobody had to.

Jennifer moved with Alex and some of his soldiers. Together they went to their big, rich house, where everyone inside stood staring at the dying Vesper.

"House Vayne has wanted Calder's district since before I held this post." Jennifer's jaw tightened.

"They've never had the nerve to move outright — a Storm Qilin standing guard tends to discourage that kind of ambition. But a Qilin lying half-dead in its own pen?"

She let it hang. "Word like that doesn't stay quiet. It'll be out by tonight. And once it is, Vayne moves. Legally, if the courts let them contest the seat while the bond's down. Through someone else's hands, if they don't."

"That's why we came to you." Lord Calder's hand found the edge of the desk again. "Not for-" He glanced at the woman beside him, then back. "Not for healing. There's no healing this. Our own healers already tried everything in the old texts. What we need is protection. Enough Wardens on Calder land that Vayne doesn't dare test us while he's down. Time. That's all we're asking for. Time until he either recovers, or—"

He didn't finish that one either.

"There hasn't been a beast-healer in this district who could treat a bond-curse in thirty years," the woman added, quiet. "It's not a modern skill. It died with the last generation who practiced it."

Jennifer nodded slowly, already

turning the request into something with edges. Numbers. Schedules. Names

can put a rotation on your

outer wall by tonight Four Wardens,

staggered shifts, plus a standing patrol along the line facing Vayne's territory."

Her eyes cut sideways, just once, to Alex. A glance that wasn't really about the guard rotation at all. "I'll want eyes that can actually do something if Vayne tries anything clever instead of anything obvious."

Wren's gaze finally landed on Alex - plain clothes, no house colors, a dog sitting far too calm at his heel for the room they were standing in. "Who's this."

"Reserve standing." Jennifer answered before he could. "New."

"Great." Wren didn't bother hiding what she thought of that. "So while our guardian dies in his pen, we get a rookie standing at the wall with everyone else."

"He's not going to die in his pen," Alex said.

The room went quiet the way rooms go quiet when someone says something too calm to be a joke.

"Excuse me?" Lord Calder said.

"I can heal him." Alex pushed off the doorframe. "Today. If you let me do it now."

Nobody moved. Then Wren laughed — short, startled more than mocking. "You. You can heal a four-generation bond-curse our own healers couldn't touch."

"I didn't say it would be easy." Alex held her eyes. "I said I could do it."

Lord Calder's gaze jumped from Alex to his daughter to Jennifer, hunting for someone to tell him it was a joke. Nobody did. Hope tried to surface in his face. Thirty years of knowing better beat it back down.

Jennifer didn't say anything at all. She just watched Alex the way she'd watched the crater at White Field. Recalculating, again, exactly how much she didn't know about the man she'd recruited less than a day ago.

He caught her eyes for a second too long. Neither of them looked away first. Then the moment folded itself back up, the way it always did right before either of them said something they couldn't take back.

The family's own healer had been standing near the back the whole time, silent — an older man in worn traveling robes, exhaustion carved into his face from hours of failing and hating it. He stepped forward now, indignant.

"With respect to the Wardens." His voice went stiff. "I have spent forty years studying bond-affliction. I have

read every surviving text on curse poisoning left in this district. And am telling you plainly there is no cure for what's been done to that Qilin. Not one that still exists." A sharp look at Alex. "Whoever this is, he is either lying to a grieving family for reasons of his own, or he's a fool who doesn't understand what he's offering. Either way, Lord Calder - I'd urge you not to gamble Vesper's last hours on a stranger's boast."

Forty years of study, and the man still hadn't learned that some things don't wait for permission.

"You can believe me or not." Alex's voice didn't rise. "It won't change what I'm about to do."

The healer opened his mouth to answer that. He never got the chance.

The horn came first — too sharp, too close to be routine. Then something heavy slammed into the outer wall, hard enough that dust sifted down from the ceiling. Then shouting. Real shouting. The kind that doesn't stop to explain itself. Wren went white. Lord Calder's hand shot out and gripped his daughter's arm.

"That's the east gate." The woman's voice thinned, sped up. "That's — that's the house."

Jennifer was already moving, hand at the blade on her hip, barking orders before she'd finished crossing the room. Grim shot to his feet, a low sound building in his chest that wasn't quite a growl. Not yet.

Nobody in that office got to decide anything anymore. House Vayne hadn't waited for the courts. Hadn't waited for word to spread on its own. Hadn't waited for permission at all.

They'd simply arrived.