The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 723

Jennifer reached the east wall first, boots skidding through gravel still settling from whatever had hit it.

"Hold!" Her hand shot up before she'd finished crossing the yard. "Crown Wardens! Stand down, we talk this through before anyone bleeds for it!"

For one breath, it almost worked. The shapes past the broken gate slowed.

Then a voice cracked back, mocking. "Wardens siding with Calder now? Since when do you take a house's coin to guard its lies?"

"Nobody's taking anyone's coin-"

"They poisoned their own beast and blamed us for it! And you're protecting the ones who did it!"

That was all it took. Someone threw first- Jennifer never saw who and after that there was nothing left to argue, only a fight nobody had wanted five seconds ago and everybody was in now.

Steel met steel. A beast screamed past the treeline. The gate gave up the last of its resistance, and men poured through.

Inside, none of it had reached the office yet. Just sound, muffled through stone, closer every second.

Lord Calder stood frozen, one hand locked around his daughter's arm, staring at the door like it might hold if he wanted it badly enough.

"Every second you spend deciding is a second Vesper doesn't have." Alex's voice stayed flat. "Choose. Let me save him, or let him die. I'm not wasting my time while you make up your mind."

"You don't get to rush him—" Kevin cut in, finger jabbing the air. "That beast can't be cured. What are you really after? Coin? Scamming a dying house with something impossible?"

"I'm not rushing him. I'm telling him the truth. He can hear it now, or hear it after it's too late to matter." Alex's mouth twisted. "And being stupid doesn't mean everyone else has to be."

Kevin's face went red, and this time it had nothing to do with the fighting outside. He'd said almost nothing since Alex arrived. Now, with the house falling apart around him, thirty years of silence found its voice all at once.

"You want to know why our enemies are at the gate?" He rounded on Alex, close enough to spit the words.

"A stranger shows up out of nowhere, claims he can cure what no one's cured in thirty years — and inside the hour, House Vayne is tearing down our wall. That's not coincidence. That's timing." His voice climbed, filling every corner the horn had left behind.

"How do we know you didn't tell them exactly when to come? How do we know you're not the reason any of this is happening? He doesn't want to save Vesper. He wants him dead quiet, dressed up as a cure."

"Kevin!" Calder's voice cracked - but the words had already found the crack in him they were looking for. His eyes moved to Alex, and something in them changed. Not gratitude anymore. Suspicion, wearing fear's face.

Alex didn't raise his voice. He didn't need to.

"Enough." He looked at Calder, not Kevin. "You don't want my help, say so now. I'll walk out that door and go home. I've got no stake in whether Vayne owns this land by tonight or you do. You can all die over it and I won't lose a minute of sleep."

Nobody answered. That silence was answer enough.

"He'll only finish what the curse started." Kevin's voice dropped, but the certainty in it didn't.

"I've seen failed bond-rites before. The body doesn't hold steady when they fail — it goes faster. Let him touch Vesper, and you're not gambling on saving him. You're gambling on how much pain is left before the end."

"And what's your plan?" Wren rounded on him before her mother could stop her. "Forty years of Vesper's life, and every coin this house has paid you, and all you've ever done is watch him. What's the difference between dying now and dying an hour from now while you keep reading your books?"

Her voice broke and kept going anyway. "I'd rather bet on him still being alive."

She was already moving before her grandfather could answer. "Please," she said, not to Kevin, not to anyone but Alex. "I believe in you. Please. Help him."

"If you want him helped, you need to let me touch him." Alex fell in beside her, and for one second, before he looked away, something in his face said he'd heard exactly what that please had cost her.

"The curse spread overnight," he said, half to Wren, half to the healer trailing furious behind them. "Whatever this would've cost me this morning costs more now. I need to go in harder than I would have an hour ago."

He didn't say what harder would cost him. He didn't plan to.

"Harder how," Calder managed.

"You'll see when I start."

Vesper's pen reeked of scorched fur, and under it, something sweet and wrong. The Qilin lay on his side, the length of three men, his storm-grey hide gone dull and veined along the ribs.

His breath barely stirred the straw under his muzzle. Even dying, even collapsed, he made the whole shed feel smaller.

Alex knelt and pressed two fingers to the hide. What came back through his fingers made his jaw go tight.

"I need raw marrow," he said, standing, "from a beast that's fought the Feral Line and lived. Doesn't matter which. Fresh. And thistleback thorns — a double handful, crushed to paste. Now."

Wren blinked. "Thorns."

"You heard me."

She looked at her grandfather, got nothing, and went, because there wasn't time to ask why. A guard went with her and came back faster than anyone expected, carrying a bowl that smelled like something. that shouldn't have been opened dark paste and pale marrow folded together.

Kevin's mouth curled. "You're going to feed him that?"

"I'm going to bait him with it." Alex knelt again.

The needles came out silver, thin as hairs, more than anyone in that room had ever seen a healer use at once. He set the bowl within reach of Vesper's muzzle first, close enough for the scent to do its work, and began.

The first needle slid in beneath the jaw. The room went quiet, the way rooms go quiet when even people who don't understand what they're watching can tell it matters.

The second went above it. The third, fourth, fifth walked a slow line down the throat, and with each one Alex's brow drew tighter, sweat starting at his temple in a pen cold enough to see your breath.

Outside, the fight was close now, its noise coming through the walls whole instead of muffled.

A crash, like a beam giving out. A voice that might have been Jennifer's, sharp and furious cut off mid-word.

Alex didn't look up. He couldn't. Every needle was a thread. One slip, and the whole pattern failed.

Kevin stood with his arms crossed, mouth set hard, already composing what he'd say when this ended in a dead beast and a dead house. "This isn't healing," he muttered, to no one, to everyone. "This is theater."

By the twentieth needle, Vesper's skin had started to move — not convulsing, not yet. Rippling. Slow. Like something under the hide was being coaxed out instead of dragged.

"It's working." Wren breathed the words like she didn't quite believe them.

"It's not finished." Alex's teeth stayed clenched around it. He reached for the twenty- first needle.

That was when Kevin grabbed him.

His fingers closed hard around Alex's wrist, yanking back. "You'll kill him faster like this "

"Let go of him!" Wren hit Kevin's chest shoulder-first before her grandfather's hand even twitched, driving him back a full step. "He's had thirty years! Give him thirty seconds!"

Kevin stumbled, more startled than hurt, and didn't try again. Alex's hand had never left its line. He glanced at Wren for half a breath — something unspoken passing between them, gone before either of them could name it — then looked back down at Vesper.

"Last one." He set it.

Nothing happened. Then Vesper's whole body arched, a groan tearing out of him too deep, too large to be pain alone. Beneath the hide at the base of his throat, something moved that wasn't muscle - a black wet knot of thorned vine no bigger than a fist crawling up the line of needles like it was following a rope taid just for it, pulsing in a rhythm that had nothing to do with Vesper's heartbeat.

It broke the surface with a sound nobody in that pen would forget, and dropped, still writhing, into the waiting bowl.

The bowl smoked where it landed. Then went still.

Vesper's eyes opened.

Not the dull, half-lidded eyes of something dying. Storm-grey, and fully awake. He pulled in one long, rolling breath that shook straw off the walls of the pen.

He roared.

The sound rolled out past the shed, past the yard, past the broken gate and every man still fighting in the wreck of it — old, enormous, furious in a way that had nothing to do with Strategy and everything to do with a guardian waking up mid-battle to find out exactly what had been done to his family while he lay dying.

Outside, the fighting didn't stop. It broke apart. Vayne's men had come to finish off a house with no guardian left standing. They had not come ready for the guardian to wake up in the middle of it.

Wren was already at Vesper's side, both hands pressed to his jaw, crying the way people cry when the fear finally has somewhere to go.

Kevin stood exactly where he'd stumbled, staring at the smoking bowl. He didn't say anything at all.

The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 724

The roar hit the battle like a fist closing around it.

Men froze mid-swing. A blade an inch from a Warden's throat stopped dead - the man holding it had already stopped believing in the fight.

"That's not possible." Someone near the gate said it out loud, like saying it might undo what he'd just heard. "That thing was supposed to be dead by morning."

It wasn't dead. It was awake. Furious. And every man who'd come expecting an easy kill understood, all at once, exactly how badly the math had just changed.

"Retreat!" The order cracked from somewhere near the back. "Fall back now!"

Nobody argued. The line that had been pushing through the broken gate reversed itself just as fast - men breaking off mid-fight, abandoning ground they'd bled for twenty minutes ago without a second thought.

That kind of retreat only happens when the fear gets bigger than the shame of running.

Jennifer wasn't about to let all of them get away clean.

She caught the slowest one at the treeline - broad-shouldered, dressed in unmarked grey, giving orders instead of taking them right up until her blade found the back of his knee and put him on the ground.

"Field Manager." She read the rank stitched into his collar once she'd hauled him upright by it. "Vayne doesn't send managers to do a soldier's job unless the job matters enough to watch personally."

He didn't answer. He didn't get the chance to try.

"Corin Aldis. You're coming with me."

She marched him back through the wrecked gate, past bodies mostly groaning instead of still, into the yard where the rest of the household waited outside the shed - Lord Calder, his daughter, Wren still half-collapsed against Vesper's flank, and Kevin standing exactly where he'd been standing when the roar first went up, staring at the smoking bowl like it owed him an explanation.

Corin's eyes swept the group once, fast, cataloguing. They landed on Kevin.

Whatever calculation he'd been running fell apart right there on his face.

"You." The word came out of him like a blade. "You bastard."

Kevin's head came up. "What—"

"You told us the qilin was dying. You poison it. No cure left, nothing standing between us and this land but a handful of Wardens who wouldn't move first." Corin strained against Jennifer's grip, ignoring what it cost him.

"You gave us the timing. You told us tonight was the night." His voice cracked. "Now it's awake, roaring, and my whole team is running for the treeline because of you. You sold us a lie to trap House Vayne on Calder land — You will die. House Vayne does not forgive this. Ever."

Kevin's mouth opened. Nothing came out.

Something in his face had already answered the question before his voice caught up — and it wasn't confusion. It was panic. The kind that shows up when a plan built over months comes apart in front of witnesses you never expected to live long enough to see it.

"That's not—" He stopped. Wren had already turned to look at him. So had her grandfather. Both their faces had gone from grief straight past shock into something with no way back.

"You never expected him to live." Wren's voice had gone very quiet. "That's what he's saying. You told them the curse couldn't be cured because you were the one who put it there. It was never supposed to be curable at all."

"Kevin." Lord Calder's voice barely made it past his throat. "Eleven years. I trusted you with my grandson's fevers as an infant et trusted you with Vesper since. Before Wren could walk. His hands started shaking, and he didn't try to hide it. "We gave you everything this house. had. How dare you."

Whatever restraint Kevin had left broke all at once.

"Everything this house had?" His laugh came out jagged, nothing like a laugh at all. "House Vayne offered me ten million dollars. Ten million, for one night's work, for something I could do in my sleep after forty years nobody in this house ever once thanked me for."

He was shouting now, spit flying, every pretense gone. "You paid me a steward's wage and a room off the east wing, decade after decade, while this family threw fortunes at that beast's comfort and never once at mine! This damn qilin was supposed to die tonight! It was supposed to be over!"

Nobody in the yard moved.

Which was exactly the opening he needed.

Something slid out of Kevin's sleeve too fast to name — a thin, dark shape striking low across the straw, fangs sinking into the same raw skin Alex had spent the last hour healing.

Vesper's shriek tore through the yard, worse than anything that had come out of him yet. High. Raw. Betrayed.

"No." Wren didn't think the word tore loose before the bite had even finished, one command sent through whatever bond ran between her and the huge white shape pacing anxious circles at the shed's edge.

The wolf moved like it had been waiting all along for permission.

Three strides, and it didn't slow for the last one. There was no fight. No time for one. By the time Lord Calder turned his head toward the sound, it was already over. Kevin never said anything else, ever again.

Corin, still on his knees in Jennifer's grip, went pale watching a decade of House Vayne's planning die in the mouth of a beast that had never even been part of it.

None of it undid the bite.

Vesper's body sagged all at once, fresh venom finding a system that hadn't finished recovering from the first attack. His breathing went. shallow again fast and wrong, and the stillness that settled over him this time was worse – because everyone in that yard had already seen what it looked like right before he almost didn't come back.

"No, no, no—" Wren was at his side before she'd finished the word, hands pressed flat against his jaw exactly where they'd been an hour ago. No relief waited on the other side of it this time. She looked up and found Alex, and didn't bother hiding how close to breaking her voice was.

"Please." She didn't move from Vesper's side. "I don't care what it costs. Just save him. Again. Please."

Alex was already crouched at Vesper's other side, two fingers pressed to the hide, reading what had just been driven back into it. He hadn't waited to be asked.

"This time's worse." He didn't soften it. "Fresh venom on a body that never finished healing. I can do it. But it won't be clean, and it won't be fast. I need more time, and I need to go in careful — or I lose him rushing it."

"Take whatever time you need." Wren didn't hesitate. "Whatever it costs. House Calder will owe you for all of it, for as long as it takes to pay back."

Jennifer had already turned away, giving clipped orders to the Wardens filing back through the broken gate - securing the grounds, tending the wounded, taking stock of what House Vayne had left behind including one very uni hate "

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Field

Manager with a great deal to explain once he reached a holding cell. This part wasn't a Warden's job anymore.

"I'll leave you to it." She didn't look back. "Do what you need to do." Alex didn't answer her. He was already reaching for the first needle.

The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 725

The second round took longer than the first. Cost more, too.

By the time Alex pulled the last needle free, the sky outside had gone from black to thin grey.

Vesper's breathing slowed, steadied.

His eyes opened and tracked the room until they found Wren - the way a bond always finds the person it trusts most — and something in that huge head finally let go.

"He's stable." Alex sat back on his heels. His arms had stopped being reliable ten minutes ago. "Not going anywhere."

Nobody cheered this time. The relief came out quiet, worn thin by what it cost to get here.

Wren stayed until the staff checked Vesper twice over. Then she caught Alex at the gate before he could slip out.

"You're not just walking out of here." Not a request. A fact. "House Calder owes you. Twice now. A thank-you doesn't cover that."

"It's fine-"

"It's not." She pressed something cold into his hand before he could argue — a signet, House Calder's mark stamped into old silver. "That gets you through any Calder gate, any Calder holding. No questions asked. This isn't payment. It's the start of one. Don't lose it."

"And you're not walking home." She waved a groom over before he could argue that too.

"Garrick knows these roads better than either of us, and after tonight I'm not sending anyone from this house out alone." Something almost sheepish flickered across her face before she buried it. "I'm riding partway with you."

He didn't have the energy left to fight her on any of it.

Within the hour a plain black car idled at the gate, a broad-shouldered driver named Garrick behind the wheel, and Wren already sitting across from him like the matter had never been open for discussion.

The road back cut through low hills the district never bothered lighting. Garrick stopped the car hard, no warning, both hands leaving the wheel before Alex even understood why.

"I'm sorry" The words tumbled out fast, his eyes fixed somewhere past the windshield.

"They said they'd burn the depot down with my family inside if I didn't stop here. I'm sorry—" He was out of the car and running before anyone could grab him, boots slapping dirt until the dark swallowed him whole.

That's when the ambush hit — men breaking from the treeline in a line too clean for opportunists, weapons already drawn, beasts fanning out to ring the car before a single word was spoken.

"You the healer?" The one in front said it like the word tasted bad. "House Vayne doesn't forget a man who wrecks a year of planning in one night."

His eyes slid past Alex. Landed on Wren. Something like delight crossed his face.

"Well. Isn't this a bonus." He grinned at the others. "Came for one problem. Looks like we get two. A Calder heir's worth a fortune alive."

Wren went very still beside Alex.

"Five seconds," Alex said. "Then this stops being a conversation."

The man laughed and waved a hand. The whole line surged forward at once fifteen men, fifteen beasts, closing fast.

Alex stepped out of the car, and ten blades tore free from nothing, spinning out around him in a blur of steel. They cut through men and beasts alike. Nobody who went down got back up.

By the time the last man hit the dirt, Wren was staring at him — no fear left in her face, only disbelief.

"You didn't even use your hound." Her voice had gone strange. "You used sword? Nobody does that. Nobody can do that. Not against that many, not without a beast

"Didn't need him for this." Alex was already crouching over the one who'd spoken first.

He hauled the man up by the collar. Wren was there half a second later, a short blade from her sleeve pressed flat under his jaw — steadier than her voice had any right to be.

"Who sent you."

"House Vayne doesn't answer to "

"House Vayne just watched its whole raid crumble in one night." Wren cut him off. "Your poison source is dead. Your field manager's in a Warden cell. You don't have the coin or

the men left to try this alone — everyone in the district knows Vayne's been bleeding out for years. So who's paying for this one?"

His jaw worked. The blade pressed harder.

"Talk, or die here."

Doubt flickered in his eyes. Wren's blade found his thigh instead. He screamed.

"House Draven!" The words burst out of him. "They've backed us from the start — money, information, cover. Vayne gets the land if this works. Draven gets a weakened Calder either way. That's all I know, I swear it."

Wren stepped back, blade still in hand, and went quiet.

"House Draven. But we never have problems with them." Her voice had gone flat. "As old as us. As respected as us. Using Vayne as a knife their own hands stay clean." Herow tightened. My grandfather hears this before the banquet. Not after."

Back at the estate, once the man had been handed off to a Warden patrol and the sun was properly up, Wren caught Alex again - louder this time, past caring who heard.

"You saved Vesper twice in one day. You walked into an ambush meant to kill me too. And you're just going to leave? She planted herself in front of him to you understand what you are to this house now? don't think you do." Her chin lifted. "If you asked for me, I'd say yes. I mean that. I've never meant anything more in my life."

"Wren-"

"I'm not finished."

She wasn't. She kissed him - both hands on his face, nothing careful about it.

When she finally pulled back, her eyes stayed locked on his. "I don't want any man but you. I've never done that before. That was my first kiss." Then she was gone, face burning red, before he could say a word.

Alex stood there. He still didn't understand how these people worked — everything said out loud, nothing held back. But he had to admit it: they were braver than he'd have been.

Lord Calder stepped forward with the actual ask.

"There's a banquet next week. Long-planned - we can't move it without raising the exact questions we're trying to avoid. We're expected to present Vesper publicly. Proof the bond's intact, proof our claim stands."

His eyes found Alex's. "After tonight, half the district already suspects something happened here. We need him seen. Strong. Undeniable."

A pause. "And we'd like you there. Every powerful house in the district will be in that room. If you're looking for anything, you won't find a better place to look."

Alex thought about the road to empire.

"I'll be there."

The days between blurred into a kind of ordinary Alex hadn't had in a while. Jennifer found no shortage of uses for a man who didn't get tired like normal people - a dispute at the district archive that needed acalm, immovable presence; a supply run through territory still jumpy after the Vayne raid paperwork that somehow always needed his signature next to hers, though neither of them ever explained why.

"I'm telling you," Alex finally said, "I'm a freelancer. You can't keep dragging me along every day."

"You're weird." Jennifer studied him. "Me and Wren Calder are the two most talked-about women in this city. Most men would invent a hundred reasons just to stand near me. Why do you hate it when I ask?"

Alex looked at her. Pretty, sure. But he'd turned down prettier for a quiet room and an empty bed. "My bed's better company than you are. I'm not coming."

"I'll always find a way to drag you out anyway." Jennifer smiled. "The more you play hard to get, the more I want to play back."

"Warden-Commander." A man strode up, calling to Jennifer before he'd even reached her. "It's been a long time. Why do you keep refusing my invitations?"

"Busy, Jerome. Like always." Jennifer didn't slow down. "Whatever brought you here, my staff can handle it. Excuse me - I need a word with this man." Jerome's eyes found Alex, and his smile turned thin. "I don't believe we've met. Not district-born, are you."

He said it light, the way a man says something he wants heard as a joke and understood as an insult. "Outsider. Poor. Uneducated, I'd guess. Odd company for a Warden-Commander to keep so close."

"Jerome. That's enough." Jennifer's voice had gone flat.

"I mean it kindly." He didn't. "Can't be comfortable, standing next to a man with nothing behind him. No house. No line. No real beast, from what I hear — some half-dead stray he picked up because he couldn't afford anything better."

His warhound shifted beside him, purebred, tiger-sized, twice Grim's bulk, groomed to a shine that cost more than most citizens saw in a year. "Wouldn't want anyone mistaking charity for company."

"Careful," Jennifer said.

Alex said nothing. Better that than watching Jennifer's face if he snapped back in her own office. He let the insult sit there and die on its own.

Silence bothered Jerome more than a reply ever could.

"Let's settle it, then." His smile sharpened. "A match. My Ashgard against your hound. Public, so everyone sees exactly what the Warden-Commander's been keeping close."

He wore the look of a man who'd never lost a bet in his life. "Make it interesting — you lose, you kneel to me in front of the whole district and serve out a year in my household. Signed. No walking it back."

"And if I win?" First thing Alex had said the whole time.

Jerome laughed like it was the best joke he'd heard all week. "Then I suppose you won't have to." His eyes glittered. "I wouldn't waste time imagining it." Jennifer's eyes cut to Alex — sharp, unreadable, the look she got right before something happened that she'd enjoy far more than she'd ever admit.

"Take the bet." Then, to Jerome, flat and cold: "And if you lose, you stay away from me an him. This whole thing is disgusting."

The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 726

"Actually." Alex hadn't moved, but something in his voice made both of them stop. "Change the terms."

Jerome raised an eyebrow, delighted already. "Oh? Are you afraid?"

"No, I will make it better for you." Alex's face gave away nothing. "If I lose, I never meet Jennifer again. That's the stake."

Silence. Then Jerome's grin split wide open - this was better than what he'd offered, and he knew it.

"Done," he said, before Jennifer could get a word out. "Gladly. Let's fight now!"

"Then I surrender." Alex said it flat, no ceremony to it at all. "It is a good fight. I lose."

For a moment nobody moved. Grim's ears had come up, waiting for a fight that had just stopped existing before it started.

"You" Jerome blinked, caught somewhere between confusion and the beginning of triumph. Then triumph won. "You're conceding. Without even trying."

He laughed, loud enough to turn heads across the yard. "I knew it. One look at Ashgard and you knew exactly what you were facing. Finally."

"Yeah," Alex nodded earnestly.

Jerome straightened his coat like the win had already been engraved somewhere. "You finally understand how far above you I am."

"Alex." Jennifer's voice came out low, and for once there wasn't a trace of her usual dry amusement in it. She looked genuinely thrown, which on her was rare enough to be its own kind of alarming. "What are you doing."

"Exactly what it looks like. A fight between men. He won, so I'm keeping my word. See ya." Alex said, already turning to leave.

Something in her face closed off, fast, the way doors do when they've decided not to open again.

"Seems like you'll do anything to get away from me." Her voice had gone hard, flat, dangerous in a way that had nothing to do with the duel anymore. "Fine. But I promise you this - I'm not going to make the rest of your life easy just because you found a clever way out of one bet."

"I don't care." He met her eyes now, steady, nothing behind it she could work with. "Make it as hard as you want. I don't care anymore."

He turned to Jerome before she could answer that.

"There's something else. Since we're settling this properly, I intend to collect on the bet completely. That means no more archive duty, and no more mysterious paperwork linking my name to hers. I want the Wardens off my back permanently." Jerome's face lit up like Alex had just handed him the best part of the evening.

"Done, and gladly." He spread his hands. "My father runs one of the largest companies in this district and counts the governor among his closer friends. One call from him, and you'll never have to set foot in a Warden office again as long as you live. Consider it already finished."

"Good to hear." Alex nodded once and walked away without waiting for anything else — not Jerome's gloating, not Jennifer's silence, not the look on her face that he'd already decided not to watch.

Jennifer stood where she was for a long time after he'd gone, arms crossed, jaw tight, and didn't say a word to anyone.

The call happened faster than even Jerome had promised. The next day, a formal notice arrived at the Warden office releasing Alex from all citizen contribution obligated to the Crown Wardens, signed with enough weight behind that ev Jennifer couldn't argue it back into existence. She tried once, briefly, staring down a clerk who'd clearly rather have been anywhere else in the district than delivering that particular piece of paper to her desk.

After that, she stopped trying.

Alex, for his part, spent those two days doing exactly nothing anyone could summon him for, and found he didn't mind the quiet nearly as much as he'd expected to mind losing it in the first place.

The night of the banquet, Wren came for him herself.

Not a driver. Not Garrick and a plain black car sent ahead with instructions. She arrived at his door in person, dressed for the occasion, and didn't pretend that choice meant nothing.

"I wanted to see you off myself," she said, which wasn't really an explanation at all, and didn't need to be one.

She didn't let go of his hand once they started walking, either — laced her fingers through his somewhere between the door and the gate, easy and unhesitant, like it was the most natural thing in the world, and didn't seem to care who noticed. They hadn't made it through the gates of the banquet hall before David found them.

He'd been waiting near the entrance, by the look of it — too well-positioned to be coincidence — and the moment his eyes landed on Wren's hand in Alex's, something in his expression went tight and ugly before he smoothed it back into something more presentable.

"Wren." He fell into step beside her like he'd been rehearsing the approach. "A word, if you'd allow it."

His eyes flicked to Alex and didn't warm at all. "You should know exactly what you're walking in with tonight. I've heard many ugly things about this man."

"You've heard things," Wren repeated, unimpressed, and didn't let go.

"I'm only saying it because I'd hate to see you embarrassed. You could have anyone, Wren. I don't understand why you'd choose—" his eyes flicked to Alex, like the sentence finished itself "_this."

"Careful, David." Wren didn't slow down. "I watched him no-sell fifteen armed men without breaking aè sweat. Kdon't need your concern for my judgment, and I definitely don't need it for my hand." She swept past him without waiting for a response, fingers still laced through Alex Alex followed, not bothering to look back at whatever expression that left on David's face.

and

"Wait!"

The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 727

"Wait!"

David's voice cracked on the word, urgency spilling past whatever composure he'd meant to keep. He caught up in three long strides, positioning himself square in their path.

"You think I'm finished." He looked past Wren, straight at Alex now, all pretense of subtlety gone.

"What rank is that hound of yours, really? I've heard whispers it's a random street dog."

His eyes swept over Alex's plain clothes, deliberately, cruelly slow. "And what family raised you, exactly? Because I don't see one wealthy enough to sit across from a Calder heir at dinner, let alone stand beside her at a banquet like this."

His mouth twisted. "We both know what this really is. You found a rich, lonely woman, and you're living soft off her pity. Eating from her hand like a man with no pride left to speak of."

Alex didn't look angry. If anything, he looked faintly amused, the way a man looks at a joke that's landed badly for the person telling it.

"Living well because a woman's rich is its own kind of skill," he said, easy, unhurried. "Takes some luck. Helps if women actually like you, too."

He tilted his head, considering David the way you'd consider a puzzle that wasn't especially hard to solve. "But here's what I don't get. You've got the money. The name.

The family everyone's supposed to be impressed by. And somehow, not one woman in this district wants anything to do with you."

A small, almost sympathetic shrug. "So which is it? The ugly face? The bad attitude? Or is there something a little smaller than expected under your pants, under all that wealth that even your father's money can't fix?"

The silence that followed had weight to it.

Wern burst out laughing right in front of David.

David's mouth opened. Nothing came out. Whatever he'd rehearsed on the way over here hadn't accounted for this, and it showed in the color climbing up his neck.

Wren didn't wait for him to recover.

She tightened her grip on Alex's hand and pulled him past David without a backward glance, leaving him standing there with his mouth still working uselessly around words that refused to arrive.

"You're so bad," Wern said with a giggle.

...

Jennifer found them almost as soon as they'd cleared the entrance, and whatever composure she'd been holding onto since the yard didn't survive the sight of Wren's hand still laced through his.

"So that's what this was." Her voice was quiet, controlled in the specific way that meant it was costing her something to keep it that way.

"You're quitting Warden duty because you want a clear path to her. You found the woman you want to attach yourself to, and now you're settling in." Jennifer looked at Alex with clear irritation.

"It's not like that." Alex smiled at her - easy, careless, deliberately thin. "Wren's a lot more beautiful than you, though, so sure. I'll stick with her."

He said it the way a man says something he wants believed at face value — flat, shallow, exactly rude enough to make himself easy to walk away from.

If Jennifer decided he wasn't worth the trouble after that, so much the better.

That was the plan, anyway.

It didn't work the way he expected.

Whatever he'd meant to kill in her only seemed to sharpen it.

Something flickered behind her eyes that had nothing to do with hurt feelings and everything to do with a woman recalculating a fight she'd already half-decided not to lose.

"You know, Miss Jennifer." Wren's grip on his hand tightened, deliberate, visible. "He's my man. I'd hope you wouldn't make this difficult for either of us."

"I found him first," Jennifer said, and there was nothing playful left in it at all.

The two of them looked at each other for a long moment, neither backing down an inch, the temperature between them dropping fast enough that the nearby guests found sudden, urgent reasons to be somewhere else.

Alex made a serious mistake when he tried to drive Jennifer away. Instead of succeeding, he lit a fire in the proud woman known as one of the most beautiful in the city equal in beauty to Wern.

Jennifer moved first — a clean, deliberate step that put her on Alex's other side, closing her hand around his free wrist before he could react to it.

"I think I'll stay right here for the banquet." She said it lightly, like the matter had already been settled "Though shouldn shouldn t tamt the hosts.

ver be circulating? Wouldn't want anyone saying House Calder's spent the whole night standing in one spot."

Wren's jaw tightened, already opening her mouth for whatever came next — and that was exactly when a Calder attendant appeared at her elbow, apologetic and hurried.

"My lady. Your father's asking for you. It's urgent."

Wren hesitated, torn visibly between the fight in front of her and whatever waited behind that summons, before she finally let go of Alex's hand, shot Jennifer one last look that promised this wasn't over, and left.

...

With Wren pulted into family business and Jennifer needed elsewhere soon after for security matters, Alex found himself alone. agam teft in the loose custon De of

Calder staff who clearly had no idea what to do with him. He didn't mind.

He'd learned there was more to see from the edge of a room than the middle of one.

It was in that stretch of quiet that word reached the household through a nervous steward: a man had arrived at the gate claiming to represent House Draven, uninvited, insisting on an audience regardless.

Wren, pulled back in just long enough to hear it, made her decision fast.

"Let him wait," she said. "He came without an invitation. He can learn what that costs him before I decide whether to grant him anything at all."

David found his nerve again well before the night was over, and when he found it, it came back meaner than before.

He'd clearly spent the interval digging, and what he'd dug up he wasted no time spreading to anyone near enough to listen that the man on Wren Calder's arm wasn't from the Dominion of Beasts at all that he was some unregistered outsider with no lineage anyone could verify and that the hound everyone had started whispering about was a street dog.

A half-dead stray, by David's telling, that this outsider had happened to save and now paraded around like it meant something.

Alex heard every word of it and didn't bother correcting a single detail.

Silence, it turned out, was the wrong response to give a man like David. He mistook it for confirmation, and confirmation for permission, and within minutes his voice had climbed loud enough to turn heads across the hall.

"Security." He snapped his fingers at the nearest guards, chin lifted, savoring every syllable of it in front of an audience that was very much watching now. "Remove him. This man has no standing to be here at all."

"How can a lowly young man like him be allowed to sit here with us? I want him removed."

“Sir, we hope you'll leave this area. Your presence is making people uncomfortable. Please go, or we'll have to remove you by force."

Alex's gaze hardened in an instant. "You're welcome to try."

The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 728

The nearest guard had barely closed a hand around Alex's arm before Jennifer was between them, and the guard found himself suddenly very interested in looking at anything else.

"Take your hand off him." Jennifer didn't raise her voice. She didn't need to.

The Warden badge at her collar did most of the work for her. "Or you can explain to your employer why a mere security had to intervene at his own daughter's guest."

"This doesn't concern the Wardens." David stepped in close, chin up, playing to the room he'd already gathered. "This is a Calder household matter. An unregistered outsider, causing a disturbance-"

"He hasn't raised his voice once tonight. You have." Jennifer's eyes cut to him, flat and unimpressed.

"I've been standing right here. I watched you dig up gossip about a man's beast and go looking for a fight you didn't get. That's not a disturbance. That's you, losing gracelessly, and trying to make security clean it up for you."

"You're defending him now?" David's mouth curled. "Careful, Warden-Commander. People might start wondering exactly what you're getting out of this."

"What I'm getting out of this is a banquet that doesn't end with a lawsuit against your family for assaulting a guest." Jennifer didn't blink. "You better stop, or I file the complaint myself, tonight, in front of everyone currently enjoying the show."

David held her stare for one more beat, doing the math on how that would look tomorrow, and lost his nerve for it.

He waved the guards back with a short, irritated flick of his hand and turned to find somewhere else to be, muttering something under his breath that nobody bothered asking him to repeat.

It should have ended there.

It didn't get the chance to.

A Warden runner cut through the crowd not two minutes later, breathless, straight for Jennifer.

"Commander." He kept his voice low, but not low enough that Alex, standing right beside her, missed a word of it.

"District command's pulling the detachment. There's a situation breaking at the east market — a fire, maybe worse, still confirming. They want every available body reassigned, effective now. This posting's flagged as secure. Yours is the closest unit they can move."

Jennifer's jaw tightened. For a moment she looked like she wanted to argue with a superior who wasn't even in the room to argue with.

"Understood," she said instead, because that was the job. She looked at Alex - one short, unreadable look — and didn't say whatever she'd been about to say.

"Watch yourself," was what came out instead.

Then she was gone, her Wardens peeling off the walls and out the doors behind her in tight, practiced formation, and the banquet hall was, for the first time all night, entirely without them.

...

The man who'd been left waiting at the gate didn't wait much longer after that.

He came through the main doors without an escort announcing him, without the polite hesitation of someone still hoping for an invitation.

Every exit sealed itself behind him in the same moment — heavy, deliberate, the kind of timing that only happened when someone had been watching for exactly this gap to open.

"Edmund Draven." He said his own name like a title, loud enough to carry to the back of the hall, and smiled at the sudden silence that answered him. "Apologies for the theatrics. I did try asking politely first."

Lord Calder was on his feet immediately. "This is a private event. You have no-—"

"I have exactly the standing I need." Edmund cut him off without raising his voice, which was somehow worse than shouting would have been.

"House Calder is weak tonight. Everyone in this room already knows it - your guardian barely standing after two poisonings in one week, your Wardens conveniently called away not five minutes ago. I'd call that fortunate timing, except I made sure of it myself."

A murmur rippled through the gathered guests. Wren, halfway across the room, went very still.

"Here are my terms, and I'll only say them once." Edmund's gaze found Wren directly, unhurried.

"You marry into House Draven.

Tonight, in front of everyone here as witness, so there's no room later to claim it wasn't freely given. Do that, and everyone in this hall walks out exactly as they walked in." He let

that sit a moment before finishing it. "Refuse, and nobody leaves this oment room at all. I've come prepared to make that a promise, not a threat."

"You're insane." Wren's voice shook with fury more than fear. "My grandfather will never allow—"

"Your grandfather doesn't get a vote in it. Neither do you, really, when you think about it clearly." Edmund raised one hand, almost lazily, and two shapes stepped through the doors behind him — beasts, both easily the size of Vesper on his best day, scaled hide catching the chandelier light in a way that made half the hall take an involuntary step back.

"I anticipated your guardian might object. So I brought two of my own to make sure he doesn't get the chance."

Somewhere near the shed where

Vesper had been resting through the evening, a distant, furious roar answered the challenge - and cut off just as fast, drowned under a second, heavier sound of somethi enormous colliding with something else enormous, followed by a pained, muffled groan that told the whole room everything it needed to know.

Vesper wasn't coming.

Wren's face went white. Lord Calder's hands curled into fists that had nowhere useful to go.

Around the hall, House Calder's staff and guards looked at each other and found no good answer in anyone else's face either — no Wardens left in the building, no functioning guardian, and a man standing in the middle of the room who had clearly spent longer planning this single evening than most of them had spent planning entire careers.

"So." Edmund spread his hands, magnanimous, patient, thoroughly enjoying himself. "Shall we begin?"

Nobody in the hall moved.

Except Alex, who was already walking toward him.

The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 729

Edmund didn't send his men after Alex. Not this time. He'd already watched fifteen armed guards fail on a dark road a week ago.

This time he sent the wolves.

Fifty of them broke through the side doors in one wave - House Draven's guard- pack, bred for exactly this, fur and fangs moving together like one animal built to flatten anything short of an army.

They didn't circle Alex. They came for the whole floor, teeth first, meant to press the guests to the walls and show the room how small it was.

Alex walked through them like they were smoke.

His sword cleared its sheath already singing, blade white and humming. He didn't chase targets. He cut a straight line through the center of the pack and let the rest break around him - two wolves down, then three, his stride never slowing.

By the time he reached the far wall, the pack wasn't a pack anymore. Just shapes limping for the door.

Not one guest had been touched.

For one second, the room understood something it didn't want to. This man wasn't going to lose.

Edmund's jaw locked. He'd expected that to slow things down, at least.

"Fine." He snapped his fingers. Two shapes prowled out from the doorway — a white tiger, a yellow tiger, both bigger than anything that should exist in a ballroom, muscle stacked under striped hide built for one job. Tearing through whatever stood in the way.

Alex didn't slow for them either.

The white tiger lunged first, jaws wide enough to take a shoulder whole. It got a short cut across the foreleg instead of the throat it wanted, and went down hard, dragging itself back on the legs that still worked.

The yellow one had better sense. It circled, used the panicking crowd as cover- until Alex closed the gap in two steps and opened its flank just enough to fold its legs out from under it. It hit the floor and stayed there, breathing hard.

Neither beast would stand again tonight. Neither had to die for that to be true.

That was the part that silenced the room — the specific, choking quiet of people watching restraint and not knowing if it scared them more than violence would have.

Edmund's confidence cracked. "That's not—" He stepped back, doing math he didn't like. "Those were guardian-tier. Both of them."

"Should've brought a third," Alex said, and kept walking.

Edmund broke first.

He lunged sideways and got an arm around Wren before anyone could move — a curved blade from nowhere, flat against her throat before she'd even finished flinching.

"Stay back!" His voice cracked up an octave, every ounce of performance gone. "One more step and I open her throat right here. In front of everyone. See how House Calder explains that."

Alex stopped.

Not from fear. He needed one more second to close the gap without giving Edmund time to flinch first.

He took it in half that.

The blade never touched her skin. Alex had Edmund's wrist before the sentence finished, twisted once, and the knife hit the floor louder than it had any right to in a room gone this silent. Edmund's scream came a nothing left of beat later high, ug the man who'd walked in sealing exits like he owned the building.

Wren's breath came out in one shaking rush. She looked at Alex like she wanted to say something and hadn't found it yet. He didn't wait around for her to. His eyes were already back on Edmund.

"This is exactly what I was afraid of." David's voice cut through the quiet, loud and aimed at no one and everyone.

"You see what he's done? Turned a negotiation into a bloodbath. House Draven isn't going to let this go- not the wolves, not the tigers, not this."

He waved at Edmund, still cradling his wrist on the floor. "I want it on record. I had nothing to do with provoking Draven. None of this happens if he doesn't humiliate Edmund's man at the gate."

"David." Wren's voice went flat. "He just stopped Edmund from cutting my throat open."

"And started a war doing it." David was already backing toward the doors, putting distance between himself and the center of the room like it might be contagious. "I'm not standing next to this when Draven's real forces show up asking questions." Nobody agreed with him. Nobody argued either. The room had gone still the way people go still when they're doing math about their own safety.

Edmund found something like nerve again once the pain dulled.

—

"You think this ends here?" He spat blood he'd bitten his own tongue. "My father will burn this whole district before he lets an outsidemet humiliate his son and walk away clean. And when he does-" bis eyes cut to Wren, slow, deliberate "-I'll make sure he starts with her."

Something in Alex's face went still in a different way.

He knelt. Pressed two fingers flat to the center of Edmund's chest — nothing that would've looked violent from across the hall. Edmund's eyes went wide before his mind caught up to what was happening.

"You'll live," Alex said, quiet, just for him. "But that bond you're so proud of the one that lets your family

-

measure you against a beast worth more than most people's whate lives? That's done. Whatever it was going to protect for you ends right here."

This scream had nothing performative in it. Something inside Edmund had actually broken, and everyone close enough to see his face understood exactly what that meant in a house built on beast-bonds and blood.

"He's crippled Edmund Draven." Someone near the back said it like saying it might undo it. "In front of thirty witnesses."

"We need to distance ourselves. Now." David was already moving — not toward Wren, not toward her grandfather. Just away. "I won't be implicated in whatever comes next."

Lord Calder said nothing. Jaw tight, doing his own math on what a crippled Draven heir meant for the peace his house had barely survived long enough to reach tonight.

"You don't have to run," Wren said to Alex, low, urgent. "Whatever happens next, House Calder stands behind you."

"I'm not running." Alex looked down at Edmund one last time, then away. "I'll answer for this myself. I don't need anyone behind me for that."

He turned and walked out through the doors David had already vanished through- leaving the hall to figure out, on its own, exactly what the night had cost everyone still standing in it.

The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 730

The doors hadn't finished swinging before the room started deciding what it had seen.

House Draven's retainers came for Edmund first four of them, moving fast and low, the way men move when they want to be gone before anyone thinks to stop them.

Nobody stopped them. Nobody wanted to be remembered as the one who'd touched him.

Then the guests left. Not a stampede - worse.

An orderly, quiet emptying. Coats collected. Cars called. Every one of them already rehearsing tomorrow's story: I was standing by the far wall. I didn't really see.

The tigers went out on canvas through the side doors, the white one still trying to stand on the leg that worked. The wolves who could walk had already vanished into the dark. The ones who couldn't were carried out by staff who hadn't signed up for that kind of night.

Someone started sweeping glass.

That was the only sound left in the hall. A broom, scraping stone.

Lord Calder stood in the middle of it and didn't move.

Wren stood where the blade had been, one hand pressed to her own throat. She didn't seem to know it was there.

"They'll say we did it." Lord Calder's voice came out thin. "Not him. Us. A Draven heir crippled under a Calder roof, at a Calder table, in front of hundreds witnesses we invited ourselves."

"He saved my life."

"I know what he did." Quieter now. "That's the problem. He did it here."

Wren looked at him. "You'd rather I'd been married off tonight instead?"

"I would rather—" He stopped. Started again, slower. "It doesn't matter anymore."

Because that was the truth of it, and they both knew it.

...

By two in the morning, Wren had burned through eleven names.

She started with the houses that owed Calder outright. Then the ones who'd eaten at Calder tables for twenty years. When those ran out, she called the brokers - men who sold protection to people too proud to ask for it plainly.

Every call went the same way. Warm at the start. Careful in the middle. Then she said the name, and the line went cold.

House Draven.

After that it was always the same three or four sentences, rearranged. A prior obligation. A matter already in hand. A deeply sorry nothing.

The eleventh man didn't even bother with that.

He just hung up.

Merrick, the house steward, had been standing by the door for the better part of an hour, a tray of tea going cold in his hands.

"My lady." He chose the words carefully. "I don't think you're going to find anyone." "There are forty houses in this district."

"There are." He set the tray down. "And not one of them will stand between one man and a house that old. Not for him. Not for us." A pause. "Not for anyone."

Wren looked at the list. Eleven names, crossed out, all in her own hand from that afternoon — when the worst thing she'd expected from tonight was a boring dinner.

Two weeks ago she'd stood in a Warden office and called him a rookie. Laughed in his face when he said he could heal Vesper.

Now she was spending four generations of her family's name on him, one call at a time, and getting nothing back.

"Give me the next one," she said.

...

David came back a little after three.

He'd left with the rest of them — faster, actually — and Wren had figured that was the last she'd see of him tonight. Instead here he was in the small hall, hair still perfect, his face arranged into something he probably thought passed for concern.

"You're still up." A beat. "I thought you might be."

"What do you want, David."

"To help." He let that land, then kept going — he'd clearly written the speech in the car. "I've been thinking since I left. My father has standing with House Draven. Not friendship — nobody has friendship with them — but standing. Contracts going back years. He's owed a courtesy or two."

Wren said nothing.

"I could put in a word." He spread his hands. "Frame it right. A misunderstanding that got out of hand. Edmund had been drinking, he overreached, the outsider panicked - everyone walks away with a story they can live with." A modest shrug. "No promises. These things are delicate. But it's a door. And right now you don't have another one."

He was right about that. It was the only reason it worked.

Because he couldn't do it. His father's "standing" with House Draven was two supply contracts and one invitation David had already been refused. He knew that. He'd known it before he turned the car around.

He'd also done the math on what it would cost him to offer.

The answer was nothing at all.

"Thank you," Wren said. "I will do everything as long as you can help him."

David inclined his head, gracious about it, and waited until he'd turned away to smile.

By the time the sky greyed out over the eastern hills, House Draven had its answer.

The healers delivered it in a room that had gone too quiet — three of them, senior, none willing to speak first, until the eldest finally did.

The bond wasn't damaged. Not strained. Not torn. Not shocked into dormancy.

It was severed at the root.

There would be no recovery. No re-bonding not in a year, not in ten, not with any beast at any tier, under any conditions they could name. Whoever had done this to Edmund Draven understood the work exactly, and had taken the time to do it right.

In a house that measured its sons by the beasts they held, that wasn't an injury.

It was a funeral with the body still talking.

Lord Draven took it standing, hands behind his back, and never once interrupted.

He didn't shout — not at the healers, not at the physician, not at the two retainers pressed against the wall with their eyes on the floor. He didn't throw anything. Everyone in the room had braced for it — most of them had seen him do it before — and the silence was so much worse than the outburst that one of the healers had to sit down.

"Who carried him out," Lord Draven said.

The younger retainer swallowed. "I did, my lord."

"Come here."

The man crossed the room. It took him longer than the distance should have.

"You did well." Lord Draven set a hand on his shoulder, almost gentle. "You'll be raised to the second household. Effective this morning."

"...My lord."

"Tomorrow, when the district magistrate takes statements, you'll swear my son was set upon without provocation, at a Calder function by an unregistered outsider. That he offered no threat. Drew no weapon. Made no demand of any kind." A pause. "You were in the foom. You saw it."

The retainer's face drained to the color of the floor.

"Yes, my lord," he said. "Thank you, my lord."

"Good." Lord Draven let go of his shoulder and turned back to the window, where the light was starting to break ho pays-hip, what to break. "Find the man. Find who he answers.ts."

answers to who pay house is standing behind him because somebody is. Nobody walks into a room like that alone."

"And the Wardens, my lord?"

"The Wardens hear nothing." He watched the light climb. "This stays a family matter until I decide what kind of family matter it's going to be."

He went quiet for a long moment.

Then, to no one:

"Alex."

He tried the name out slowly, like a word in a language he hadn't learned yet.

Somebody had been very eager to hand him that name. Somebody who'd stood in that hall for the whole of it, then spent the drive home deciding which side of this he wanted to be standing on.

Lord Draven would remember him too. Later. In the order things came.

...

The following day, David contacted Wern.

"I have spoken with Lord Draven," he said. "He is prepared to resolve the matter privately, provided you meet him this morning at ten."

"You're certain of this?" Wern asked.

"I have used every connection at my disposal. Meet Lord Draven, and this can end with words alone. Your man will be spared."

Wern considered it carefully. "Very well. I will go."

Once the call ended, David immediately reached Lord Draven.

"My lord, the woman Edmund holds so dear is on her way to you. I have done everything possible to ensure her arrival."

"Good," Lord Draven answered. “I will forgive you for not helping my son. But the woman..... she will never leave these walls again."