The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 801

The doorman stopped him on the top step with one gloved hand and pointed at a small brass sign by the glass doors.

No dogs.

Alex read it carefully. Then he read the back of it.

"It doesn't say anything about idiots," he told the doorman, encouraged.

The doorman, against every year of his training, leaned over and checked the back of the sign too.

Friday had come in cold and bright, gulls screaming over the fish market. He had been up since four. The old man who ran this tower owed the harbour boss a fortune, and the boss had kept him on a leash with that debt for years. At four that morning Alex had sent Natasha one line: Buy that debt. Quietly. By breakfast, the leash would belong to Halcyon.

Serena stood beside him with her mother's case. He could hear her counting.

"If I lose," she said, very low, "we're out of the gate tonight. In the rain."

"Then I'll carry the case," Alex said. "It's lighter going downhill."

Something like a laugh moved in her face. "Patricia has my mother's notebooks. I know she has."

"Then she'll have to read fast."

"And if she reads fast enough?"

"Then you'll smell faster." He tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear, the way he did on the cold stairs at home. "Go and make them close their eyes."

She went in through the glass.

A tall woman in a long grey coat came up the steps reading a file.

"Like a stranger, Natasha," Alex said quietly, without looking up. "If she loses, she loses."

"Like a stranger," she said, without breaking step. "Done. I paid a third more than it was worth." Her mouth tightened as if it hurt. "I hate that."

The lobby smelled of floor polish and cold marble. Then the noise came in with Patricia, Megan behind her with three cases, the house's two perfumers behind Megan.

"Serena!" Patricia cried, for the whole lobby. "You found it! Did you count the steps on the way up? It's like watching a child learn the stairs."

"I got here first," Serena said.

"Where's your husband? Outside with the umbrellas?"

"He likes it outside."

By the lift, the woman in the grey coat stood reading. Megan shoved past her elbow with a case. The paper cup jumped, and coffee ran down the grey wool sleeve, dark and hot and bitter.

"Oh dear," Patricia said sweetly, glancing at the plain coat and the bare hands. "This tower lets anyone stand around in its lobby now. Send me the cleaning bill."

The woman lifted her eyes. "I will."

Serena held out a handkerchief, one of her mother's, with an R stitched in the corner. The woman took it without a word.

The case by Megan's feet had come open in the shove. Under a silk scarf lay the edge of three blue notebooks, and the smell of her mother's cheap blue ink.

"You brought them," she said.

Patricia closed the lid with one finger. "My notes, cousin. For luck. Like your little empty book." She smiled. "Tonight Grandmother signs the director's chair over to me. At nine o'clock Preston holds the gate open for you. He's been practising his bow."

"An hour is all anybody gets in there."

"An hour," Patricia said, "is a very long time to shake."

At the desk a receptionist held out a card: Ms. Vale asked who had offered to pay for her coat. Patricia laughed and wrote on it. "Patricia Tiffany. Two Ts, darling."

Outside, Marco came up with the Grand's lunch trolley. On its bottom shelf lay a white jacket, a paper cap, and a cloth mask.

"Lab rules," he muttered, one eye on the doorman. "Nobody breathes on the samples. Not even the soup." Then he saw Alex's face. "Mister Alex. No. If they catch you, I've never seen you in my life. I was born this morning."

"Then don't look," Alex said, and took the cap. He was already doing up the buttons. In two hundred years the great houses of Westmere had never once looked twice at a waiter.

The laboratory smelled of alcohol and clean glass. A red second hand went round on the far wall. At the end stood one bare bench with a card on it: Serena Tiffany.

A masked waiter laid out cups by the windows, slowly.

"She can't even hold a glass dropper," Patricia told her perfumers, loud enough to travel. "Two years in the dark." Without looking round, she snapped her fingers. "Waiter. Water. Room temperature. And don't breathe on my bench."

The waiter brought it. She took the glass from his gloved hand without once looking at his face. Under her perfume, on the inside of her right cuff, he smelled something he had last met on the rim of a wedding glass.

Violets.

Far below, a ship's horn sounded, and the glass hummed. The judges came in: three people in grey lab coats, and a tall woman in black with a coffee-stained grey coat over her arm. She sat down at the head of the table.

Patricia's smile froze, still the same shape.

"Good morning. My name is Natasha Vale. I run Halcyon Group." Her eyes rested for half a second on the waiter by the coffee. Her face did nothing at all. She slid a small white card across the table. "Miss Tiffany. Your bill."

"Ms. Vale," Patricia said faintly. "Downstairs, my assistant didn't see you."

"No," Natasha agreed. "She didn't. Neither did you."

"I'd be happy to pay twice over."

"You already offered. You wrote your name. Two is. I checked." She turned the card over. "Eleven hundred and forty, with the cleaning and the coffee. It still smells of your coffee, Miss Tiffany. Thever er take more than I'm owed." A pause. "Or less." She held out her cup without looking at it. "These cups are chipped," she told the waiter. "Bring better ones. This is Halcyon, not a bus station."

Behind the mask, the owner of Halcyon nearly laughed.

"One hour," Natasha said. "One perfume each, from nothing, from the shelf behind you. No notes. No bags. Anything you brought in leaves the room."

"No bags?" Patricia protested. "But my glassware, Ms. Vale. Our own alcohol, a year old. It's how the Tiffany house has always worked—"

"The house," Natasha said, "is welcome to leave with its bags."

The fan in the ceiling hissed into the silence.

The case went out on a tray. Patricia's right hand drifted to her cuff and stayed there. Only the waiter saw it.

"Miss Serena Tiffany," Natasha said down the room. "You came alone. No glassware. No house."

"Just an apron," Serena said. "And an empty notebook. Your assistant can have it."

One of the house's perfumers boasted that she could mix her warm amber scent in her sleep.

"You buy that amber ready-made from a shop in the capital, Mrs. Carpenter, Serena said, without turning from the shelf. "Brown jars, blue lids. It smells faintly of pencil shavings. For twenty years you've poured it into Tiffany bottles and called it your own. And Mrs, Lambert's green scent is Patricia' mix from last winter, the one she threw away. I smelled it in the bin under my stairs. It still goes flat after a week."

The room went still.

"Every house buys a few ready-made mixes," Mrs. Carpenter managed.

"Of course," Natasha said. "But every house doesn't put its own name on them."

"How," Patricia hissed down the room. "How could you possibly know that?"

"I was blind," Serena said. "Not deaf. You all stood under my window for two years and talked. Everything you said, I kept."

Patricia stopped at the bare bench, close, smiling for the judges. "When we were little, you used to cry when you lost at cards and hide under your mother's bench There's no bench to hide under tonight, cousin. There's a gate. And the cook says it's going to rain."

"Then you'll get wet holding it open," Serena said.

"Begin," Natasha said.

Patricia took six bottles down without reading a label and began to weigh, fast and sure. She had been up all night learning one page of the blue notebooks by heart.

Serena stood at the shelf and took nothing down.

"Work is love made visible," she whispered. An old poet from the mountains across the sea had written it, and her mother had painted it on a tile over her bench. Then she picked up the glass dropper, and it rattled against the bottle. Once. Twice. A thin, bright, terrible sound.

"Oh dear," Patricia said, sweet and carrying. "She's shaking again. Ms. Vale, she shook like this at her own wedding. We had to take her glass away."

"Thank you, Miss Tiffany. Weigh your bottles."

"I only worry about her."

"Worry quietly," Natasha said.

Serena put the dropper down. A warm hand under a wedding table, one thumb below the wrist bone, pressing once: she found the same place on her own wrist and pressed. The tremble went quiet.

"Do you need a minute, Miss Tiffany?" Natasha asked.

"No," Serena said steadily. "I need fifty-eight."

Serena closed her eyes. For two years she had used to work exactly like this, in the dark, sorting vials by the shape of their caps. Her hands found the shelf by touch.

"Ms. Vale!" Patricia said. "She isn't even looking. She's got her eyes shut. Isn't that against the rules?"

"The rules say one hour and the shelf," Natasha said, without looking up. "They don't say she has to watch."

"It's theatre. Her mother did it too. The whole house used to laugh."

"Then the whole house can laugh quietly," Natasha said.

Across the room Patricia's smile thinned. And under the steel bench, where only a masked waiter could see, her thumb slid inside her cuff and found a little brown bottle.

The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 802

Patricia had seen the tremble go quiet. Her smile thinned, and she snapped her fingers without looking round.

"Waiter. Take my cousin a glass of water. From the house." She filled a fresh glass from her own jug, her back to the judges, and her right hand passed over it once, as if brushing away a crumb. "Poor thing looks dreadful."

The masked waiter took it on his tray. Halfway down the room, he breathed in. Violets.

Reeve's drops had always smelled like that. For two years they had gone up the tower stairs once a month in a brown bottle, forty dollars at a time, and a girl had gone a little further into the dark with every one.

At the side table he poured a fresh glass from the judges' jug for Serena. The violet glass went back beside Patricia, in place of her own. Nobody ever watched the waiter.

The woman judge in the grey coat leaned forward, fascinated, murmuring as Serena poured blind with her eyes shut.

"Mineral. She's taken the cold mineral first. Now moss. Now that grey sweet one. Nobody ever uses that one, Ms. Vale, it's too strange." A pause. "And the leather. Only one drop of it. One drop."

"Why one?" Natasha asked, without looking away.

"Because it isn't leather to her," the woman judge said slowly. "I think it's rope. Too much and you're in a ship's hold. One drop and you're standing on the dock."

"How do you know it's rope?"

"I don't," the woman judge said softly. "She does."

Serena was in the tower, on the last night of the dark.

Halfway through the hour, a smell came across the room and stopped her hands.

It came from Patricia's bench. White blossom over cold earth. Violets, almost, and under them something like a closed door.

Her mother had made it the winter before she died, and had never named it.

Rosalind had always said a winter was the hardest thing to make, because it had to smell of an ending and of a promise at the same time. Most perfumers only ever managed the ending.

Serena opened her eyes.

Patricia was pouring it. Gram by gram. From memory. Fast and sure.

"That's hers," Serena said. Her voice came out very low and very clear in the white room.

Patricia didn't look up. "What is?"

"What you're pouring. That's my mother's last winter. That's from the third blue notebook. The page with the pressed violet in it."

The room went quiet. Even the judge stopped whispering.

"It's called Patricia's Winter," Patricia said sweetly, still pouring. "I've been working on it for a year. Ask anyone at home."

"Ask anyone at home," Serena repeated. Tears were running down her face now. She didn't wipe them. "That's what you always say."

"You're crying on Halcyon's floor, cousin," Patricia said softly. "It's very embarrassing."

"I'm working," Serena said, through her tears.

"It looks like crying."

"It's both," Serena said quietly. "You should try it sometime."

By the windows, the waiter's hands closed on his silver tray until the rim bent.

"Miss Serena Tiffany," Natasha said, very evenly, from the long table. "Are you accusing your cousin of something? In my laboratory?"

Every pen stopped.

If she said yes, it would be a blind girl's word against the house's best nose, and Patricia would cry, prettily, and they would believe the tears.

"No, Ms. Vale," Serena said calmly. "I'm not accusing anyone."

"Then what are you doing?"

"Telling you what it is," Serena said quietly. "You have a nose. Your chemists have noses. You'll smell the rest yourselves."

Patricia laughed, light and brave. "She's upset, Ms. Vale. She's always been jealous of my winter."

"Your winter," Natasha repeated, without any tone at all.

"Mine."

"Noted," Natasha said, cool as glass, and her breath barely moved.

Serena went back to the dark.

With eleven minutes still on the clock, she put the stopper in her flask and laid both hands flat on the steel.

"Miss Tiffany," Natasha said, surprised. "You have eleven minutes."

"I know."

"You don't want them?"

"If I touch it again, I'll spoil it," Serena said quietly. "Some things you only make once."

The woman judge came down the room, dipped a paper strip, and closed her eyes.

"Well?" Natasha asked from the table.

"Rain," the woman said softly, eyes still shut. "Rain on an old wall. And someone's coat, drying by a fire."

Natasha took a strip herself and breathed in once. Something moved in her cold face, and was gone.

"Tell me what's in it," she said, very low.

Serena looked at the flask.

"Rain on stone," she said slowly. "Cold rain. The kind that soaks into old walls until they smell like the sea. A rope in the yard below, wet, creaking when the wind moves it. Salt on the air. And cedar." She stopped. "Somebody came into my room that night, Ms. Vale. In the tower. The last night I was blind. I wrote on his hand, who are you, and he said nobody, a dream. He smelled of cedar and salt and old wool. In the morning I could see."

Nobody in the room moved.

"What is it called?" Natasha asked, very quietly.

"It hasn't got a name," Serena said softly. "It's a night I didn't know I was saved."

By the windows, a waiter stood very still with a coffee pot in his hand, as if somebody had just said his name.

Natasha looked at her for a long moment.

"My mother loved a young poet," Serena said gently, "who died before he was famous. A thing of beauty is a joy for ever, he wrote. Its loveliness increases." She almost smiled. used to think that was too hopeful. Now I think he left something out. You make it once. And then you have to let it go."

"Ms. Vale," she said, before she could stop herself. "Who held my bench?"

Natasha's pen stopped above the page. The fan in the ceiling hissed in the cold quiet.

"Someone who asked me to judge you like a stranger," she said. "Nothing more."

"And did you?"

"I've never met a stranger who made me close my eyes."

Serena's heart was loud in her ears. "Is his name="

"Whatever name you're about to say, Miss Tiffany," Natasha said quietly, "it isn't mine to give."

Serena closed her mouth. The steel was cold under her palms. It couldn't be. A man who clapped at the wrong moment and thanked the furniture. A parcel the palace had sent back unopened.

In all those weeks at the house he had never once said a clever thing at the table. Not one.

"Thank you, Miss Tiffany," Natasha said, and went back to her table, and didn't write anything at all.

"Thank you, Ms. Vale," Serena said to her back. "For not being kind to me. I couldn't have borne kind."

Across the room, Patricia had seen the woman judge close her eyes. She drained her water in one long, satisfied swallow.

Then she held up her own finished bottle, high, for the judges, her mother's winter in Tiffany glass Her hand gave a small, strange Jump. A drop ran down the bottle and fell, plop, onto her cream sleeve.

Judith gasped.

"It's a statement," Patricia said quickly.

"Of what?" Natasha asked.

"Of confidence, Ms. Vale."

"It's on your sleeve," Natasha said. Her eyes went, for one second, to the waiter by the windows.

"It's meant to be on my sleeve," Patricia said. "It's a winter. Winters drip."

One of the judges coughed for a long time.

"Miss Tiffany," Natasha said, turning her pad to a clean page. "Tell me what's in yours."

Patricia rattled it off like a poem she had learned the night before, which she had.

"White blossom. Iris root. Violet leaf. Cold earth, for the heart. A green top, very soft, very sad. It's about winter. It's about an ending."

"And the last smell? The one that stays on the skin?"

The smallest pause.

"My own secret, Ms. Vale," Patricia said, smiling. "Every perfumer has one."

"Of course," Natasha said evenly. "Every perfumer does. Do you know why that last smell is wrong?"

Patricia's smile stayed exactly where it was. "Wrong?"

"It smells like an ending," Natasha said. "As you say." She wrote one word. "Thank you."

Patricia capped her bottle with a sharp little click and stood up. There were still six minutes on the clock.

"I'm finished, Ms. Vale. Shall I leave it here?"

"You have six minutes," Natasha said. "Most people use them."

"Most people aren't Tiffanys," Patricia said sweetly.

"Clearly," Natasha said.

"Leave it here," Natasha said. "Results go out by letter at three this afternoon. To each nose. Not to the house."

"Then I'll be at home," Patricia said brightly, "with the champagne. You'll know where to send it."

On her way out she leaned close to Serena's ear.

"The champagne's on ice, cousin," she whispered. "Start packing."

"Keep it cold," Serena said quietly, without opening her eyes. "Somebody will want it."

Then she was gone.

Serena sat alone with her hands flat on the steel. The fan in the ceiling hissed.

And under the hiss, faint, close, so close it might have been on her own skin, she smelled it again.

Cedar.

Salt.

Not from her flask. From right beside her.

She opened her eyes. A masked waiter in a white cap was lifting the untouched water from her bench. He walked away with his tray without looking at her and the door pissed shut, and the cedar went with him.

She never saw his face.

By the time she reached the door, the corridor was empty. It smelled of soup.

The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 803

At two o'clock Patricia lifted a glass of champagne on the rose lawn and said, "To Tiffany. Partner of Halcyon."

"To Tiffany!" Cordelia cried, and drank hers in one go.

Patricia's own glass trembled as she lifted it, and a little champagne slopped over her fingers. "This wind," she laughed. "It goes right through you."

A reporter from the Westmere Gazette and his photographer stood on the grass in front of the white table under the awning. Pauline had always called the paper herself on any day the house meant to be admired. For sixty years the Gazette had printed every Tiffany

party on this lawn, and never once a Tiffany who lived behind the garage. The wet grass smelled freshly cut. Two bottles sweated in a silver bucket of ice.

Behind the hedge at the bottom of the lawn, Alex sat on an upturned bucket, mending a broken garden chair that nobody had asked him to mend.

Nobody noticed him. That was the nice thing about being the idiot.

"Miss Tiffany," the reporter said, pencil ready. "You've just come back from Halcyon's laboratory. How did it go?"

"Beautifully," Patricia said, glowing in a fresh garden dress. "I made a winter. It's the best thing I've ever done. You could see it on the judges' faces. One of them closed her eyes."

"And your cousin was there too, we hear? Serena Tiffany? The one who was blind?"

"Poor Serena." Patricia sighed. "She tried. She really did. She cried all through the hour. It was very sad. Ms. Vale was very kind to her."

"She walked home an hour ago," Cordelia put in, "blown about by the wind, with that useless husband of hers. Didn't even wait for the results. That's how you know."

"Ms. Vale was there herself?"

"Natasha Vale and I," Patricia said warmly, "got to know each other very well this morning."

At the bottom of the lawn, Alex's hammer paused for a moment. Then it went on.

"And what's in your famous Garden, Miss Tiffany?" the reporter asked. "Everyone in the capital wants to know."

"Patience," Patricia said, smiling for the camera, "and talent."

"And luck?" the reporter asked.

"I don't need luck, darling," Patricia said sweetly. "Luck is for people with one case."

The photographer's flash went off with a soft pop. Cordelia clapped, and the ice clinked in the silver bucket.

"Isn't she wonderful?" Cordelia told the reporter, refilling her own glass. "She's going be director by tonight, you know. Mother's signing the chair over at dinner. Write that down. Director. Of the whole house."

"Mother," Patricia said, laughing. "Not before the letter."

"The letter's just a formality, darling." Pauline sat at the head of the white table in grey, a small white card under her hand, smiling the pleasant smile she used for guests. "Halcyon chooses one house. There is only one house on this coast that matters, and it's this one."

"And if they choose the other Miss Tiffany?" the reporter asked.

The table laughed.

"Serena doesn't have a house, dear," Pauline said gently. "She has a garage."

"And a husband with a hammer," Cordelia giggled, pointing her glass down the lawn.

A cold little breeze came up off the sea and lifted the awning. The reporter turned to look down the garden.

"That's the Tenth Prince?" the reporter asked, interested. "The one the palace sent you?"

"That's him," Patricia said, laughing. "Write it down, it's the best story on the coast. A prince of the blood, and he eats whatever's left on our plates. He says thank you to the furniture. He clapped at breakfast yesterday when I told him he'd be thrown out of the gate. Clapped! He thought it was a toast. Serena picked that over Lord Julian Pryce in front of the whole coast, and now she sleeps in a garage with him, and she thinks a black envelope is going to save her."

"The palace sent him to us," Pauline said pleasantly. "We keep him the way you keep a gift you didn't ask for."

"In the garage!" Cordelia said, and laughed so hard she spilled her champagne. "And tonight?" the reporter asked. "What happens tonight?"

A bee hummed in the wet roses. "Tonight Grandmother signs the director's chair over to me at dinner," Patricia said, "and at nine o'clock my cousin Preston opens the front gate and holds it. It's going to rain. I asked." She lifted her glass. "You should stay. It'll make a lovely picture."

There had been a cook at the castle when he was small, a huge woman with flour on her arms, who used to say one old saying to the pots every time the house got above itself. Pride goes before a fall. And then she always banged a lid down and added her own line. And the fall goes before the washing up.

Alex tested the chair with one hand. It held.

Twenty years, he thought. He hadn't decided that. Natasha's judges had, with their eyes shut. All he had done was hold one bench, and sit on it in the dark, and wait.

At five minutes past three, a broad, silent man came across the wet lawn with two black envelopes: Mr. Moss's driver, from Harland.

The whole table went still.

He stopped at the awning and bowed. One for each nose, he said quietly. The results of this morning's contest.

"Thank you," Pauline said, and held out her hand. "I'll take them. I'm her mother." The courier hesitated. Then he gave her the first one. Its silver ink said Patricia Tiffany. The other, he said, was for Miss Serena Tiffany, at the back.

"Behind the garage," Cordelia said helpfully. "Follow the smell of failure. You can't miss it."

At the hedge he passed the man mending the chair, and his head dipped, the smallest bow, the kind a man gives to the one who signs his wages. Alex shook his head once, very slightly, and the courier walked on.

Pauline stood up and smiled for the camera.

"Shall we, darling?" she said to Patricia.

"Read it out, Mother," Patricia said, bright and breathless. "Read it to everyone."

Pauline broke the seal and began to read, smooth and pleasant.

"Halcyon Group thanks Miss Patricia Tiffany for her work this morning." She smiled up at the cameras. "Halcyon has chosen one partner on this coast for the next twenty years. All its hotels, all its rooms, all its fragrance."

"Yes," Patricia whispered.

"Halcyon names as that partner," Pauline read on, "the independent nose—"

Her voice stopped in the middle of a breath, as if somebody had closed a door on it.

"Mother?" Patricia said.

Pauline's face had not changed. Only the hand holding the card had begun very slightly to shake.

"Go on, Pauline," Cordelia said, puzzled. "The independent nose what?"

The reporter leaned over the table, read the card upside down before anyone could stop him, and said it out loud for them all.

"The independent nose, Serena Tiffany."

Then the glass fell out of Patricia's hand and smashed on the flagstones, and cold champagne ran between the stones like spilled light.

"That's wrong," Patricia said. "That's a mistake. Read it again."

Pauline didn't read it again.

"She forged it," Patricia said, too loud, her breath short. "She's had a black envelope all week. She wrote this herself in that garage, with her mother's pen!"

The photographer's phone buzzed loud in his pocket. He looked at it, and showed it to the reporter without a word.

"It isn't forged, Miss Tiffany," the reporter said slowly. "Halcyon's just put it out on the Exchange news wire. That's the wire every paper on the coast prints from. They all have it now." He read it off the little bright screen. "Halcyon Group names Serena Tiffany, independent perfumer, as the partner who makes the scent for all its hotels, for twenty years. The contract will be signed on Monday at the Harbour Exchange." He looked up. "Your house applied for five years, didn't it? She got twenty."

The Exchange wire had carried every great deal on this coast for a hundred years.

Once a thing had been on that wire, nobody had ever been able to call it a lie.

Cordelia sat down without looking, straight into the silver bucket of ice, and shrieked.

"My dress!" she wailed, wet to the waist. Then, from the bucket, dazed, looking up at the table: "Wait. Do we still drink the champagne?"

The photographer took the picture twice.

"Don't print that one!" Cordelia shrieked from the bucket. "Not that one! Take my good side!" The reporter was already writing.

"Serena Tiffany," he said, almost to himself. "The blind girl. Halcyon's twenty-year partner." He looked up at Pauline, eyes bright. "Mrs. Tiffany, is that your house's partner or not? She's a Tiffany, isn't she? Or isn't she?"

"It's a Tiffany win," Pauline said. Her voice came back, smooth again, pleasant again, too fast. "Write that down. A Tiffany. Of this house. Whatever the letter says, Serena is my mother's granddaughter, and this house trained her nose from the day she could walk. Halcyon has chosen Tiffany."

"Halcyon has chosen an independent perfumer," the reporter said, reading his own notes. "That means her. Not your house. Those are the words."

"Words," Pauline said lightly. "Words can be corrected by Monday."

"Not once it's on the wire, ma'am," the reporter said. He was already backing away across the grass. "Where is she? Behind the garage?"

He ran across the wet lawn toward the garage wing, the photographer behind him.

At the hedge the reporter skidded, panting, and grabbed the nearest man by the sleeve. "You! Do you know anything about Halcyon?"

The idiot thought about it very hard. Then he shook his head sadly, the way a man does when he is asked the capital of a country he has never heard of. The reporter ran on.

The door of the garage wing opened before he reached it.

Serena stood on the step in her plain dress, an open black envelope in her hand, her face very pale and very still.

"Miss Tiffany!" the reporter called breathlessly. "Miss Serena Tiffany! Halcyon's chosen you! Twenty years! What do you have to say?"

Serena looked at him. At the camera. At the lawn behind them, where her aunt sat in an ice bucket and her cousin stood over a broken glass.

"I'd like to say thank you," Serena said quietly. "To whoever held the bench."

"Who held it?"

"I don't know," she said.

"They say you made it blind."

"I made it with my eyes shut," Serena said. "It's not the same thing."

"And your husband, Miss Tiffany? The Tenth Prince? What does he say?"

Serena looked past the camera, down the lawn, to the hedge where the man in the old Harland coat sat mending the chair.

"He's busy," she said. "He's mending a chair nobody sits in."

But he had come up the path behind the reporter, sawdust all down his coat, and stood on the step beside her, smiling at the camera. Serena put her hand through his arm, in front of the Gazette, and kept it there.

Patricia came across the lawn fast, white to the lips.

"Ask her," Patricia said loudly, to the then reporter. Her voice shook, steadied, and went high and clear and sweet. "Go on, ask her how a blind girl a week out of a tower wins a twenty-year partnership in one hour. Ask her who she knows at Halcyon. Ask her what she did for that bench."

"Patricia," Serena said.

"She slept with them," Patricia said, to the notebook. "Ask her who."

The pencil stopped.

Serena didn't move. She didn't look away.

Patricia leaned in close and whispered.

"Tonight," she said. "In the hall. I'm not finished."

"Neither am I," Serena said.

Then the first cold drop landed on Serena's cheek. And another, on the black envelope in her hand.

Over the garden and the garage wing and the rose lawn and the broken glass, the rain began.

The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 804

At seven o'clock, an hour before the hall, Alex's phone buzzed in the kennel yard.

"Good evening, sir," Natasha said. "I'm sorry to call you at home."

"Can it wait? My cousin is kneeling at eight. I've been practicing my clapping."

"Of course, sir. Only, you told me once: if a noble house ever needs help, I am to tell you first." A small pause. "Count Morgan is dying. The doctors say he won't see the morning—not even the next few hours. His daughter heard about the man who treated the second queen; she has asked for the Ferryman."

Alex went still. He needed to secure the noble support.

"The Morgans," he said. "They've never taken a side."

"No, sir. Tonight they might take yours." A pause. "I'm at the kennel gate. I didn't come in, sir. The dogs and I have an understanding."

He looked across the wet yard at the great house. Every window was lit.

He had heard Patricia's whisper on the step that afternoon. Tonight. In the hall. I'm not finished. But Patricia was never finished.

"She'll kneel," he said, half to himself. "The old lady never says anything twice."

"Who will?"

"Patricia." He smiled. "Serena doesn't need the idiot there to clap. She'll enjoy it more without me."

"I'll wait at the gate, sir," Natasha said.

He wrote a note on the back of a seed packet and left it on her pillow. Gone walking. Back soon. A.

Then he went out through the kennel gate into the rain.

The hall smelled of wet coats and cold wax.

For two hundred years Tiffany brides had stood in this hall to speak their choice. The Baroness had always kept her hardest words for it.

Serena stood alone by the cold fireplace. She had looked for her husband at the door. He wasn't there.

Patricia stood in the middle of the floor in her ruined garden dress. Wet grass on the hem. She was not kneeling.

"It's rigged, Grandmother," she said. High and sure. "A blind girl, a week out of a tower. One hour in Halcyon's laboratory. And twenty years? Nobody wins like that."

"You said the gate. She said kneel," the Baroness said. "I heard you both. Kneel, girl."

"I'll kneel the minute somebody tells me how she did it." Patricia turned round slowly, to the whole room.

"I was in that laboratory, Grandmother. I heard her describe what she made. Rain on a wall. A wet rope. Some old coat. That isn't a perfume. That's a laundry!"

"She cried through the whole hour, and she stopped eleven minutes early because she'd run out of ideas." Her voice went soft and reasonable.

"And Halcyon picks that over a Tiffany winter? Over this house? Perfumes like that don't win, Grandmother. Somebody pulled strings behind the curtain." She smiled. "And I think I know who."

"Go on," the Baroness said.

"Aunt Cordelia. Wednesday night. Who did you see at her door?"

Cordelia's hand went to her pearls. She looked round, pleased to be asked.

"Lord Julian," she said. "After dark. With brandy on his breath. I told you all at breakfast."

"In two years, one man went to her door," Patricia said softly. "A Pryce. The Pryces know everybody on this coast worth knowing. Wednesday night he's at her door. Friday her laundry beats a Tiffany winter."

She spread her hands. "I'm not clever, Grandmother. But I can count to two." She turned to the window. "Julian. You must have done something. Tell them." Every head turned to the window.

Julian Pryce stood there with a glass of brandy. His wife Dulcie sat on the bench beside him, married three days, pale hands folded in her lap.

He didn't turn round at once.

Only days ago, in this same hall, Serena had been meant to choose him. She had chosen the dog boy instead, in front of the whole coast.

On Wednesday night he had stood at her door with brandy on his breath, and she had sent him home to his wife, in front of her husband and a bowl of dog scraps.

He jaw tightened. He wouldn't let this woman win-no matter what it cost him.

Julian turned round. He looked sad. He looked kind. He looked like a decent man with a heavy secret.

"I didn't want to say it," he said gently. "I'm married now." He looked straight at Serena.

"But I won't let Patricia kneel for a lie, cousin. On Wednesday night, I went down to the garage wing."

A soft breath. "And Serena let me in. Afterwards, she asked me for one thing: to pull a few strings so she could win the Halcyon competition. Ah, well... I'm also the one who gave her the invitation card, because she begged me..."

The hall went dead quiet.

Beside him, Dulcie's folded hands came apart.

"That never happened," Serena said.

"Serena." The Baroness didn't raise her voice. She had never needed to. "Did he come to your door on Wednesday night?"

"Yes."

"After dark?"

"Yes."

"With brandy on his breath?"

"Yes, Grandmother. And he left the same way he came. Alone." Her voice came out low and clear. She was proud of that, later. "I told him to go home to his wife. He went red to his hair and walked off into the dark."

"Is that what you tell yourself?" Julian asked sadly. "Come on, it's already done. Everyone's going to find out eventually—what's the point of keeping it a secret? We were together that night. It was real, and it was passionate!”

"Liar," Serena said. "Aunt Cordelia saw the rest. Ask her what I said to him."

Every head turned to Cordelia again. The sherry in her glass trembled, sweet and sticky.

"I saw the door open," Cordelia said slowly, swallowing hard. "I couldn't tell if it was before or after they were together."

"Nothing happened!" Serena snapped, her voice rising. "He left the second I told him to go home to Dulcie."

"It is after." Julian laughed.

A cousin laughed. Then another. The sound ran round the high cold walls.

"And where was your husband while all this happened, darling?" Patricia asked. "Holding the dog bowl?"

"Yes," Serena said. "Actually, he was."

The hall roared.

"There's her witness, Grandmother," Patricia said, wiping her eyes. "The idiot and a dog bowl. And where is he tonight? Her big night. He couldn't even be bothered to come and watch."

Patricia turned back to the old woman. "And Grandmother, the Gazette man heard me on the lawn today. By Monday every bottle with our name on it will smell of bedroom unless this house shows the coast it chose someone clean.

That landed. Her grandmother had only ever feared one thing: the coast laughing at the Tiffanys.

"Julian," the Baroness said. "Will you say this in front of the coast?"

"If I'm asked," Julian said.

"You'll be asked."

"Julian," Serena said. "Look at your wife and say it again."

Julian didn't look at his wife.

"A gentleman never tells a lie," he said. "I've already said too much."

"You're a gentleman, Julian," Patricia said sweetly. "You married into this family.

Now you have two of the family."

"True," Julian said. And the room laughed again. With him, this time. At her.

Serena looked round the hall for one face.

Her father half rose from his chair. Marissa's cold hand closed on his sleeve, and he sat down again and looked at his scarred hands.

Pauline looked pleased. Preston had his phone up. He always did. Marissa was already whispering behind her bracelets.

Nobody. There was nobody.

It was the tower again. A room full of people, and every one of them on the other side of the door.

"Grandmother," Serena said. "You know me."

The old woman looked at her for a long time. The candles nobody had lit stood cold on the long table.

"Eight parts in ten," the Baroness said, "I believe him. The boy has nothing to gain by it."

"He has his pride to gain, Grandmother," Serena said.

It went into Serena like cold water. Not the lie. She had known Julian would lie. It was the grandmother who had watched her grow up, choosing it.

"The other two parts don't matter. They never do on this coast." The Baroness rapped her cane once on the boards. "Nobody kneels tonight. A bet won in somebody's bed is no bet at all."

Patricia smoothed her wet dress with both palms. Smiling.

"And the partnership, Grandmother?" Patricia asked lightly. "It's in her name."

"It's in a Tiffany name," the Baroness said. "That's all Halcyon wanted. Tiffany perfume in every Halcyon room for twenty years. This house will have it." She rapped her case who gothane once "But a girl who got it no somebody's bed does not sign for this house. On Monday, at the Exchange, the name on that contract will be Patricia's."

"It's mine," Serena said. "Halcyon named me. Not the house."

"Halcyon named a Tiffany. I decide which Tiffany. I have decided for this family for fifty years." The cold eyes didn't move. "You'll sign it over to your cousin on Monday. Family keeps what family wins."

"And if I won't?"

"Then you'll find out how long a girl lasts on this coast with no house behind her."

Pauline smiled. It wasn't a surprise to her. It never had been.

Dulcie stood up so fast her bench scraped. She ran out of the hall. Nobody followed her. Her husband finished his brandy.

Serena walked out too, the whole length of the hall, counting under her breath.

Then she went out into the rain.

The garage wing was dark and cold. It smelled of straw and wet dog.

His blanket was empty. On her pillow, a seed packet. Gone walking. Back soon. A.

She held it for a long time.

She could tell him when he came in. And he would go up to the house with his empty smile and say something silly, and they would laugh at him too. Or worse. No. Not him.

She lay down on her side, one hand under her cheek. She didn't take her shoes off.

In the tower she had used to sleep in her shoes. In case someone came up the stairs in the night, and she had to run.

Far up the coast, Natasha's car climbed the cliff road through the rain.

In the back seat, Alex looked at his watch. Eight o'clock.

By now, he thought, Patricia's on her knees.

He smiled at the dark sea, and didn't think about the hall again all night.

The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 805

"Thank you for coming, sir," Natasha said in the mirror. The wipers squeaked. The car smelled of leather and her coffee. "May I tell you about the Morgans?"

"Please."

Natasha Vale had worked for him for less than two weeks, since the night the Second Queen's money built Halcyon. Outside Harland, she was the only one who knew whose money ran it. She had never once wasted a word.

"The old count is Thomas Morgan. The Morgans of Calder, sir. The big city, an hour up the road. Some sickness nobody can name. Every doctor in Calder has stood at his bed for two months. Every one of them went home shaking his head. They've sent to the capital for the famous one now. Dr. Henry Foster. The most famous doctor in the Empire, sir. Princes wait a month to see him. He's flying in tomorrow morning." A pause. "The family doesn't think the count will see the morning."

Cold air leaked in round the door. Ahead, the first lights of Calder came up out of the dark.

"Why me?"

"Because of a meeting at six o'clock, sir." Her coffee cup clinked against her teeth. The coffee smelled burnt. "Countess Rebecca Morgan came to my office on business. The Morgans want a share in Halcyon's new hotels. In Calder they call her the Cruel Lady. I've watched that woman ruin a bank before lunch over a missing comma."

"And?"

"And when the business was done, she didn't get up. Just talk, sir, the way people talk when the papers are signed and the tea's gone cold. She had no idea I could help her. She asked if I'd heard the rumour from Greyhallow. A man in a mask who walked into the dying queen's room and walked out with her alive."

"What did you tell her?"

"That I might know a friend of a friend." Natasha's mouth went thin. "Then she stood in my office with rain in her hair and said, I don't beg. And then she begged. She'll pay anything."

"No name," Alex said. "No face."

"I told her that, sir. She said she'd heard you were rude." Natasha sniffed. "I told her you were worse. It seemed safer. She said she didn't care if you came in a sack."

He almost laughed. But an old man was dying, and the cold wind off the hills was shoving at the car.

"And I took a f*e, sir," Natasha said. "A large one. I'm sorry. You can be angry later." "Keep the f*e," Alex said. "What I want is the count."

"I know, sir." She met his eyes in the mirror. "A Morgan who owes you his life is worth more than any f*e. They own half of Calder. Its banks, its stores, its towers. And every queen wants them. After tonight, they'll come when you call."

In the back seat beside him lay a flat case. Inside: A plain dark coat. A smooth white mask with nothing on it at all. No mouth. No smile. Just two eyes.

"I had it made in the capital," Natasha said. "It cost more than my car. Mr. Moss keeps the porcelain one on Harland, sir. Greyhallow saw it at the queen's bed. Nobody must ever see it again." The case was cold under his fingers.

"You'll need a name too, sir. The rich are already calling you something. When the queen woke up, her doctors stood round her bed in their gold chains, and the oldest one said, That wasn't medicine. That was a god's hand." Natasha's mouth went thin. "Now every rich house from Westmere to Calder is whispering it. God's Hand. Like children telling a ghost story."

He put on the mask. It was cool against his face. It smelled of new paint.

"God's Hand," he said through it. "That's a lot to live up to."

"Then you'll live up to it, sir," Natasha said. "I've already spent the f*e."

The car climbed the hill above Calder. Morgan House stood at the top of it, every window lit, the whole city spread out below like spilled coins.

For a hundred years the Morgans had always kept out of the war between the queens. They had run Calder's banks and stores and kept their mouths shut. That was why every side had left them alone. The night air smelled of wet stone and chimney smoke.

Tired doctors in wet coats lined the hall like men waiting for a train. Every one of them turned to stare at the mask.

"A mask," one of them said, loud enough. "Two months of the best doctors in Calder, and she sends for a magician."

The sickroom was hot. The windows were shut. It smelled of camphor and old sheets and fear.

In the big bed, under too many blankets, lay the old count. White beard on a grey face. Breath slow and thin.

At the foot of the bed stood Rebecca Morgan. Tall and cold. Dark red hair pinned back hard. A man's watch on her thin wrist.

She looked at the mask for a long moment.

"You came," she said. Her voice was steady. Her hands were not. They gripped the bed rail like a rope in a storm.

"Why the mask?" she asked.

"Some of the people I save have enemies," Alex said. "Their enemies would very much like to know who saved them."

Rebecca held his eyes a moment longer. Then she nodded once, the way she signed away a bank. "Then nobody in this house ever saw your face."

"How long has he been like this?"

"Two months. He stopped eating five days ago. Since this morning, he hasn't known my name." Her voice dropped. "He taught me to read a bank ledger when I was six. Tonight he looked at me and asked who I was."

A woman rose from the armchair by the fire. Sixty, broad as a sofa, rings on every finger, hair a brave shade of copper. She smelled of violets from a shop bottle, and under the violets, very faintly, of something else.

Behind her a young man unfolded from the window seat. Thirty, smooth fair hair, a gold watch he checked too often. He smelled of hair oil and expensive soap.

For forty years Aunt Ruby had been the count's younger sister and the loudest mouth in Calder. She had married old Grant of Grant's Bank, buried him, and raised his boy Oliver as her own. She had always meant that boy to marry the Morgan banks.

"Rebecca, have you lost your mind?" she said. "A mask? Is he a doctor or a highwayman?"

"Maybe both, Mother," Oliver said, smiling at Rebecca. "The highwaymen in Calder have very good tailors these days."

"I have had every doctor in Calder through this room. I have their cards in my bag." Aunt Ruby swung round on the mask. "Are you even a doctor?"

"I know a little about medicine," Alex said.

"A little." Oliver laughed softly, for Rebecca's ears. "Darling, Mother brought you the best men in the city. And you've brought home a man who won't show his face."

"Nobody who knows a little touches my brother." Aunt Ruby planted herself between him and the bed like a wardrobe. The smell of her violets came with her, thick as syrup. "Not while I'm standing."

"Aunt. Move."

"I will not. Thomas is dying and you've gone mad."

"Give me your hand," Alex said.

Aunt Ruby stared at the gloved hand held out to her. "I beg your pardon?"

"Your hand. If I'm a fraud, you'll know in a minute. If I'm not, you'll get out of my way."

Every eye in the room was on her. She hated that. She loved that. She gave him her hand like a queen giving a ring to be kissed.

He laid two fingers on her wrist. He turned her palm to the lamp. He looked at her rings, then at her face, for one long, quiet moment.

"Your rings are too tight by evening," he said. "You salt everything, even your fruit. You drink strong coffee after dinner and tell every coffee it's tea. And the Violet scent is new

tonight. It's covering something. Mothballs. From a black dress. You took it out of the old trunk this morning. It's folded in your car."

Silence.

Rebecca turned very slowly. "Aunt Ruby. You brought your funeral dress?"

"I was being practical!" Aunt Ruby cried. "The shops close at six! A woman has to be ready!" Then she heard herself, and clapped her ringed hands over her mouth.

"A trick," Oliver said smoothly, stepping up beside her. "Anybody can smell mothballs, Mother. His people go through your car before he knocks. It's how these fellows work."

The mask turned to him.

"You stopped on the third stair tonight," Alex said. "Your heart skipped, and you put your hand on the walk and hoped nobody saw. You drink at lunch now, so your hands are steady by dinner." A pause. "And you keep touching your left pocket. A small box. Velvet. You'tbwear a hole in it."

Oliver's hand jumped away from his pocket. Too late.

"Oliver," Rebecca said. "What's in your pocket?"

"Nothing, darling." His smile came back, smooth as oil. "A little gift. For later."

Alex didn't need to see the box. He had seen the look Aunt Ruby threw her son. Axing, offered tonight, while the heiress was frightened and alone and might say yes to any hand that held hers. And if the old man never woke, the boy with the ring would run the Morgan banks beside his own.

Aunt Ruby studied the ceiling.

Rebecca looked from one of them to the other. A dress for the funeral. A ring for the money.

"My father is dying in that bed," she said. Very quietly. Cold as a bank vault. "And you came with a dress for his grave and a ring for his banks. Sit down. Both of you.

If either of you says one more word tonight, Grant's Bank is the second thing I bury." They sat.

Natasha leaned close to the mask. "I should have charged double, sir," she whispered.

Rebecca wasn't laughing. She was looking at the mask like a woman who had just seen a door open in a wall where no door had ever been.

"Please," she said. Only that.

Alex sat on the bed and took the old man's wrist.

The beat under his fingers was thin and quick, like a bird's. Then he picked up the cup by the bed and breathed in.

Bitter. And something sweet laid over it, to hide the bitter.

"What has he been taking?"

"Dr. Foster's tonic," Rebecca said. "He sent it from the capital. Three spoons a day.

His own mix."

Alex set the cup down. He didn't speak for a moment.

He knew that smell. He didn't like it.

"No more of this," he said. "Not one spoon. Not until I say."

In the world inside his mother's necklace, an old Xia master had always said that the body talks before the mouth does. Alex had used to practise on his own hands until they bled.

He opened the thin case and took out a roll of silver needles. Two at the wrists. Two at the ankles. A line up the chest toward the heart.

"Wherever medicine is loved," Rebecca said quietly, "people are loved too. An old Greek healer wrote that. My mother painted it over our nursery door." "Your mother was right," Alex said. He placed the sixteenth needle and sat back. The old man's breath caught. Then it came again. Slow. A little deeper.

"Two hours," Alex said, standing. "Not one minute less. If anyone takes them out early, his heart will stop. Nobody touches them." "Nobody will," Rebecca said.

"I'll wash my hands. Ten minutes." He looked at Rebecca. "Watch the needles."

He went out past the row of tired doctors and stood on the back step in the wet dark.

Below the hill the whole city hummed. He breathed in chimney smoke and rain. Behind him, headlights swept up the drive.

A big car stopped at the door. Out stepped a bald, pink man in gold spectacles and a white coat with the crest of the Imperial College of Medicine, six young doctors hurrying behind him like ducks.

Dr. Henry Foster had not waited for the morning.

"Where is my patient?" he boomed. "And who on earth has been sticking pins in him?"

The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 806

"Who on earth has been sticking pins in him?"

Rebecca heard the voice before she saw the man. The whole house heard it.

Dr. Henry Foster came through the sickroom door like a parade coming into town. Bald and pink. Gold spectacles. A white coat with the crest of the Imperial College. Six young doctors hurried in behind him and lined up along the wall like ducks.

He smelled of cologne. Sweet and expensive. Like a cake shop.

For thirty years Henry Foster had been the most famous doctor in the Empire. He had built the Imperial College's new wing in the capital with his own name over the door. Princes had always waited a month to see him. Whenever he walked into a room, other doctors had always stood up.

Natasha had gone down to her car to telephone. The masked man was on the back step. Rebecca was alone in a hot room that smelled of camphor.

"Dr. Foster." She kept her hands on the bed rail so he wouldn't see them. "Thank you for coming tonight. My father has a healer. He'll be back in ten minutes. He said nobody must touch the needles for two hours."

"A healer." Foster said it the way other men say rat. He bent over the bed with his hands behind his back, as if the patient might be catching. "Sixteen pins. In the chest of a count."

"Village pins, Professor," said the tallest duck. The others smirked into their collars.

Foster straightened. "Miss Morgan, if needles could cure the sick, there'd be no need for doctors."

"Dr. Foster is right, Rebecca," Aunt Ruby said. "He's Dr. Foster. He's in the newspapers."

"Thank you, madam," Foster said warmly.

"Pull them, Doctor," Oliver said from his chair. "The man ran off. Real doctors don't run off."

"The man in the mask said Father's heart would stop," Rebecca said. "If anyone took them out early."

"Did he." Foster polished his spectacles. "And did the man in the mask say where he studied? Which hospital? Which great house he's served?"

Rebecca said nothing.

"No. They never do." He put the spectacles back on, kind and slow, like a man talking to a child. "A stranger in a mask has frightened you, my dear. Frightened people believe all sorts of things. Your father needs my care, and quiet. Not village pins. If anything goes wrong, it's on my head. Not yours."

"Ten minutes," Rebecca said. "Please. Wait ten minutes."

She heard herself say please. Again. She had said it more tonight than in three years.

"I've been a doctor since before you were born," Foster said. "I don't wait for quacks."

He bent over the bed and began pulling out the needles. One by one. Like a man picking fluff off his coat.

"One," he said cheerfully. "Two. You see? Nothing. Three. Four."

"Stop," Rebecca said. "Please stop."

"Hearts don't stop because a pin comes out. Twelve. Thirteen." Tink. Tink. Tink, into a dish. "Sixteen. There. Now we can all breathe."

The last needle hit the dish.

One long second. Nothing.

Then her father's back arched off the bed. His hands clawed at the blankets. His face went from grey to a terrible dark red, and blood ran from his nose into his white beard. The machine by the bed began to scream. One high, flat note after another.

"Thomas!" Aunt Ruby shrieked. "Tommy!"

"Hold his arms!" Foster shouted. "Somebody hold his arms!"

Rebecca couldn't move. Her father had held her hand at the gate the day her mother's coffin came home. He had never once let go. Now he was drowning in his own bed, and the most famous doctor in the Empire was shouting at ducks.

Foster fought frantically for the patient, cycling through every intervention in his arsenal-compressions, desperate maneuvers, emergency injections. He watched and waited, but the monitors never changed. Finally, stepping back from the table, Foster gave up. "It is his fate to die."

Then the door banged open, and the white mask came in at a run.

The room smelled of hot metal and blood.

Alex had heard the machine scream from the back step. Through a shut window. Over the rain.

He had given them ten minutes. Foster had needed three.

One look told him everything. Sixteen needles in a dish. A heart running out of road.

"Who took them out?" he said.

Foster spun round and saw the white mask. All his fear went into his face at once, and turned into anger, because anger was easier.

"You!" He grabbed the front of Alex's coat in both pink fists. They were hot and damp. "You did this! You and your pins! You poisoned him with your filthy country tricks, and now you come back to watch!"

"I asked who took them out."

"I did, and I'd do it again!"

"Then you're the one who stopped his heart," Alex said calmly. "How did a man so careless ever get to be a doctor?"

Foster went purple. "Do you know who I am?"

"Yes. You're the man who pulled the needles. Let go of my coat."

"Get away from him," Rebecca said.

She walked up to the most famous doctor in the Empire, took his white coat in one thin hand, and pulled him off the mask as if he weighed nothing.

"I begged you to wait," she said. "I don't beg. You said it would be on your head." "Miss Morgan, this man is a fraud-"

Rebecca slapped him.

The crack went round the hot room like a gunshot. His gold spectacles flew off and skidded under the bed.

"My spectacles," Foster said faintly. "Has anyone seen my spectacles?"

Not one of his young doctors moved.

Her voice was ice. " If my father dies tonight, Doctor, your name comes off that wing by the morning. Your house belongs to my bank by noon. And no great house in the Empire will ever open its door to you again."

She turned to the mask. "Save him."

Alex was already pulling on his gloves.

Foster crawled out from under the bed with his spectacles on crooked. And found his voice again.

"A word of warning, Miss Morgan. Let that quack touch your father again, and if he dies, it isn't medicine any more. It's murder. And I'll stand up in Court and swear to it." He pointed ane shaking pink finger at the mask. "Do you hear me, whoever you are? You'll hang."

Alex stopped.

He looked at the doctor. Then at the dying man. Then he took his gloves off again.

Slowly. One finger at a time.

"Then you save him," he said. "You're the famous one."

He turned for the door.

Foster opened his mouth. And shut it. If he could have saved the count, he would have done it two months ago.

Rebecca stepped in front of the door. Tall and white, her wet red hair coming down.

"Please." Her voice broke on it. "I'm begging. You heard me. I'll do it on my knees if that's the price."

Behind her, the machine screamed.

"Don't kneel," Alex said quietly. "Not to me." He looked past her at Foster. "And him?"

"Peters," Rebecca said, without turning her head. "If Dr. Foster says one more word, put him in the corridor."

The tallest duck swallowed. Then he took his own master by the elbow with a cold, damp hand.

"Yes, Miss Morgan."

For ten years the Morgans had quietly paid for half the beds in Foster's new wing. Their name had never been over the door. It had always been on the cheques.

Every duck in the room knew it.

Alex pulled his gloves back on.

"It's worse now," he said. "The needles came out too fast. The thick blood rushed back to his heart all at once. Needles alone won't move it. I need three things from your kitchen. Black mustard seed. Raw garlic. The strongest vinegar you have bound them into a paste. Bring it in a bowl with a lid."

"Mustard?" Foster squeaked, in Peters' grip. "Garlic? He's not a sausage!"

"Corridor," Rebecca said.

"I'm going! I'm going."

"Aunt Ruby. Run."

Aunt Ruby ran, shouting for the cook all the way down the stairs. She had not run since she was nine.

Alex sat on the bed and laid his bare hand on the old man's chest. Cold, wet skin. Under it, the heart stumbled like a man on ice.

"Hold on," he told the count. Low. Only for him. "Your daughter's here. She came out in the rain for you: She stood in an office and begged, and she's never begged never begged in her life. Don't you dare leave her now. Not tonight."

Aunt Ruby came back holding the bowl out in front of her with both hands. Eyes streaming. The smell came in ahead of her like a slap. Sharp. Hot. Sour. A young doctor at the door gagged.

"The cook cried," Aunt Ruby said thickly. "She said it's a crime against garlic." She swallowed. "I'm sorry I called you a highwayman."

"You were close," Alex said. "Hold it by his face. When I tell you, take off the lid."

He took out his needles again. Slowly this time. From the belly upward, like leading someone up out of a dark cellar by the hand.

Under the grey skin, something moved. A dark line, like ink under wet paper, crept up from the old man's belly toward the first needle. Then the next. Then the next.

Aunt Ruby screamed. A duck dropped his notebook.

"What is that?" Rebecca breathed. "What's moving in him?"

"The thick blood," Alex said. "I'm leading it home. Hold that bowl steady, Aunt Ruby.

And don't look away."

"Your hands are shaking," Rebecca whispered.

"It costs something," he said. "The old masters only did it for the dying."

Sweat ran down his back.

In the doorway, Foster slipped out of Peters' hand and laughed, too high.

"Remember this night, gentlemen. Write it down for the museum. This is what medicine looked like five hundred years ago."

"He's embarrassing himself, Professor," Peters said, and the ducks laughed with him.

"Pins and garlic!" Foster cried. "If that man wakes up from this, I'll eat that whole bowl of stinking paste with a spoon!"

Alex placed the sixteenth needle over the heart.

"Remember you said that," he said.

He looked at Aunt Ruby. "Now. The lid."

Aunt Ruby pulled it off. The smell went up like smoke.

And the old count's chest, which had been heaving and stumbling, stopped moving.

The machine went quiet.

The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 807

Nobody breathed.

The machine was silent. The old count lay still. The burning smell of the paste filled the hot room until every eye was running.

"His fate," Foster said. Very small. "I told you all. It was his fate."

"Tommy?" The bowl shook in Aunt Ruby's hands. "Tommy, please."

But over the bowl, her eyes went to the wall. To Oliver. Not to her brother. A quick look, like a woman checking the time.

"Is he dead?" Rebecca asked.

Her voice was perfectly calm. That was the worst part.

Under Alex's fingers, nothing moved. Nothing at all.

"Not yet," Alex said. "Give me one breath."

He laid two fingers on the last needle, over the heart. And turned it once.

The count coughed.

A huge, tearing cough, the kind that comes up from the bottom of a well. Something thick and black came up into the cloth Alex held at his mouth. A clot the size of a thumb. It smelled of burnt sugar over bitter medicine.

Then the old man dragged in one long breath. And another.

The machine gave one soft beep. Then another. Then a slow, steady line of them, like footsteps coming home.

For one second, before her smile came, Aunt Ruby's face went flat and grey. Like a woman watching her train leave without her.

"He's breathing!" she cried. "Rebecca, he's breathing!"

The old man's eyes opened. They moved slowly round the room. Past the doctors. Past the white mask. And stopped on the tall woman at the foot of the bed.

"Rebecca," he said. A dry little scrape. "Why is your hair wet?"

Rebecca put her hand over her mouth.

"It was raining, Father. I went out."

"Without your coat? You never forget anything. You remembered my bank ledger when you were six."

"I remember," Rebecca said. And her voice broke right in half.

Nobody in Calder had ever seen the Cruel Lady cry. They saw it now.

Aunt Ruby threw herself across the blankets with a loud sob, rings and all, and she landed exactly where Rebecca could see her. Her ringed wrist fell across Alex's arm.

"Oh, Tommy! I'm so happy! So happy!"

Under all that sobbing, her heart went slow and steady as a kitchen clock. A happy heart runs. A frightened heart runs faster. This one was doing sums.

Rebecca came round the bed and bowed to the mask. Not a nod. A real bow, low, the way her house bowed to the Emperor himself.

"From tonight," she said, "you are the honoured guest of the House of Morgan. Our door is yours. Whatever you need, for the rest of my life."

"It was no trouble," Alex said.

"No trouble!" Foster's pink face went red. "Every doctor in Calder stood at that bed for two months!"

"I know," Alex said. "That was the trouble."

"Then tell us what it was, if you're so clever!"

"Thick blood. It goes slow, and the heart starves. It was mending on its own." The mask turned to the cup by the bed. "Then your tonic came. A strong push for a weak heart. His heart was never weak. Every spoon pushed his blood the wrong way."

"My tonic is given in every hospital in the Empire!"

"To the right people," Alex said. "He was the wrong one. For five days, it was the only thing that went into his mouth."

Every face turned to the cup. It smelled bitter and sweet at once. Burnt sugar over medicine. The same smell as the black thing in the cloth.

"Pour it out," Rebecca said. "All of it."

The old count lifted one thin hand. "Who is the man with no face?"

"A friend, Father."

"Then thank your friend." His tired eyes moved. They found his sister on the blankets. They stayed there. "I could hear, Rebecca. The whole time. I couldn't move, but I could hear." His voice was thin, but it didn't shake. "Somebody said, pull them, Doctor. That was the boy."

Oliver stopped breathing by the wall.

"And somebody said, Dr. Foster is right. That was you, Ruby."

The room went cold. Aunt Ruby sat up. Her face was wet, and her eyes were perfectly dry.

"Thomas, darling, I was frightened! We were all frightened! He's the most famous doctor in the Empire!"

"Ruby," the count said. "You brought a dress for my funeral. Then put it on. You're leaving my house tonight. Not one more coin of Morgan money. Not ever."

"Thomas! I'm your sister!"

"There's daggers in men's smiles," the old man said. "And the nearer in blood, the nearer the knife." He closed his eyes. "You were my sister."

Aunt Ruby's tears stopped. All at once. Like a tap turned off.

"And Oliver." Rebecca's voice was ice. "When you came in tonight, I told you both. One more word, and

Grant's Bank is the second thing bury. You said a great many. At eight o'clock tomorrow morning, the

Morgan banks call in every toan Grant's Bank has ever had from us."

Oliver went white. "That's half our money! We'll close in a week!"

"Then you have a week."

He went down on one knee, right there, and held up the open box. "Rebecca, darling, please. Let me explain—"

"Give it to your mother," Rebecca said. "She'll need something to sell."

Then she turned to Foster.

"Dr. Foster. Before my healer began, you made a promise. In front of your students, in front of me." She held out the bowl of yellow-brown paste If my father woke up you'd eat this whole bowl. With a spoon. Peters. A spoon."

"Miss Morgan, that was a figure of speech-"

"So was your tonic. Eat. Or I will force you to eat it!"

Foster lifted the spoon. Six young doctors watched their master swallow.

On the third spoonful, he made a sound like a goose with a cold.

"It tastes," he gasped, "of feet."

"So did your tonic," Rebecca said. "Keep going."

"I have a delicate stomach!"

"My father had a delicate heart. Spoon."

"There's a little picture of a swan at the bottom, Professor," Peters said helpfully.

"You're nearly there."

The last spoon scraped the bowl. Foster stood with his eyes streaming, garlic on his white coat.

"My father lived," Rebecca said.

"That's the only reason you still have a house, Doctor. But for ten years, the Morgans have paid for half the beds in your famous wing. Not one more coin." She leaned close.

Foster turned to his young doctors.

One by one, the other young doctors walked out of the room. Not one of them looked back.

Henry Foster stood alone by the bed, holding an empty bowl.

The rain had thinned to a cold mist. The air smelled of wet stone and chimney smoke.

At the bottom of the steps, Rebecca pressed a silver ring into his gloved hand. A tower was cut into it.

"My father's seal. Show it at any Morgan door, any Morgan bank, and they'll do what you ask. He's never given it to anyone."

"I don't need "

"You don't get to refuse it. The Morgans pay what they owe." She didn't let go of his hand. "What do I call you?"

"Nothing."

"Then I'll call you God's Hand. A hand can produce miracle." Then she stepped closer, and breathed in, the way people do when they want to keep a smell. "You smell of cedar," she said softly. "And the sea."

Something cold went down his back. Serena had said those exact words, in the dark, on their wedding night.

"Everybody on Harland smells like that," he said. "It's the boats."

"I've never been to Harland."

"Keep it that way," he replied. "It smells like brine and rotting timber. Go back to your father-he needs you by his side."

"Thank you," Rebecca whispered, turning away.

The click of heels cut through the rain as Aunt Ruby descended the slick stone steps, black silk sweeping behind her. She halted inches from the masked figure.

"You," she hissed. "You could have let him go."

"So could you," Alex countered coldly.

"You're going to die for what you did."

Shadows shifted behind her as Oliver stepped forward, backed by ten towering men built like iron. "Break him," Oliver commanded. "Shatter his legs. Put him on his knees until he begs."

"You'll live to regret this," Alex warned.

"My only regret is ever letting you through that hospital door," Oliver snarled. "I should've thrown you out the window instead."

The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 808

Oliver Grant did not stay to watch.

He put his mother into his long silver car and drove away down the hill. Aunt Ruby's face showed in the back window, small and white as a coin.

It is easy to be brave from a safe distance.

Ten men closed in at the foot of the steps, iron bars in their fists. The biggest of them, bald as an egg, stepped forward and set his boot on the bottom step.

"Mr. Grant wants your legs, magician," he said. "We take them here, or we take them on the road. Your choice."

Alex stood still in the rain, his black case in his hand.

"Brave men," he said, "who waited until the count's guards went upstairs."

"Every one of them, sitting with the old man." The bald man grinned. "Nobody's coming down. It's just you and a little bag of pins."

He lifted his bar over the case.

"First the needles. Then the fingers that hold them."

The others laughed.

"Look at him, boys. Shaking in his mask." The bald man leaned in close. "Two months of the best doctors in Calder, and the countess pays for this? I've seen more fight in a wet cat."

Upstairs, Rebecca Morgan sat by her father's bed. The old count was sleeping for the first time in two months. The room still smelled of garlic.

Outside, men were laughing. Iron scraped on stone.

"Sleep, Papa," she whispered. "I'll be back."

At the stair window she stopped and looked down.

Below, the masked man had not moved.

"You have five seconds," Alex said. "Leave."

"Five seconds?" The bald man threw back his head. "Hear that, boys? He's giving us five seconds! Listen to me, you masked little—"

Two fingers struck the hinge of his jaw before the word was out.

The bald man's head snapped sideways. His bar flew out of his hand and rang on the stone. He staggered back three steps, eyes swimming, his mouth hanging open on one side.

"Get him!" he roared, through half a face. "Break him!"

They came all at once.

Alex moved through them as light as a falling leaf. A man swung high: two fingers under his arm, and the arm dropped dead at his side. A man swung low: a needle behind the knee, and he folded. A thumb under the ribs. The heel of a hand at the base of a spine. The bars swung through empty air where he had been a breath before and rang against each other like pans dropped in a kitchen.

"Hit him!" the bald man bellowed, holding his jaw. "He's one man! One man with pins! Hit him, you idiots!"

Men screamed about arms and legs they could no longer feel. One by one they went down in the gravel, and not one of them got up. Not one bar had touched him. The rain ran down the white mask, and he was not even breathing hard.

The bald man stared at the heap of his own men, and the colour went out of his face.

"What are you?" he whispered. "What in the world are you?"

At the window, Rebecca's hand closed on the frame.

He wasn't fighting them. He was putting them down, one after another, like a man closing doors along a hall.

"Two months of famous doctors," she said under her breath, "and the one who saves him can do this too." Her eyes did not leave the white mask. "Interesting."

Then she ran.

Below, the bald man was the last one standing. He backed away up the gravel, holding his jaw, his eyes huge.

"Stop! Stay back! Don't you come near me! Mr. Grant will have you—"

Alex laid one palm flat against the man's stomach, almost gently.

The bald man's knees hit the stones. He bent double and was sick in the gravel.

"Please," he gasped. "Please. It was only money."

Alex crouched beside him.

"Then take Mr. Grant his money's worth," he said quietly. "Tell him I remember his face. And tell him that the next men he sends to this door will not be going home at all."

Then he picked up his case and walked away into the dark.

When Rebecca threw open the great door, cold rain hit her face. The drive was empty. Ten men groaned at the foot of the steps. He was gone.

"Where is he?" Rebecca said.

Only groans answered her.

Something shone in the gravel by the bottom step: a thin silver needle, no longer than her finger. She picked it up and slid it under the strap of the man's watch on her wrist.

Her father's men came running out.

"Get them off my father's steps," Rebecca said, without turning her head. "All ten. Put them on the road to the Grant house and let them find their own way."

One of the men said, very carefully, that the ten could not walk.

"Then they can crawl," Rebecca said. "Mr. Grant is a banker. He'll know what a debt is."

She turned to the man.

"In three days the masked healer comes back for my father's needles. When his car reaches the gate, I want to know. Not after. Not from a maid. The moment it reaches the gate." The man's eyebrows went up.

"And take that look off your face. A woman may be interested in her father's doctor." She stood in the rain until the last of the ten was gone, her hand on the watch.

At grey dawn the garage wing smelled of straw and cold tin. Serena lay asleep on the narrow bed in last night's plain dress.

She still had her shoes on. In the tower she had slept in her shoes every night, in case someone came up the stairs in the dark.

She woke when the hound sneezed, saw him on the floor by the stove, and pulled her feet under the blanket. Too late.

"You're back," she said.

"I'm back. You slept in your shoes."

"I was cold."

"So you wore your shoes to bed." He nodded slowly, as if she had explained the stars. "That's very clever. I'll try it tonight."

"Don't."

"Did Patricia kneel?" he asked hopefully. "I practised my clapping on the dogs. The old one bit me. I think he wanted a turn."

Serena looked at the wall.

"Grandmother changed her mind," she said. "Nobody kneels."

"Oh." He thought about it. "Was there still cake?"

"There was no cake."

"There's always cake when somebody kneels," Alex said sadly. "And Halcyon?"

"It's fine." Her hands went flat on the blanket, both palms, pressed hard. "The Exchange, in two days. I sign. It's all fine."

He looked at her hands. She only pressed them flat like that when this house took something from her.

"Then it's fine," he said.

"It's fine."

At breakfast the hall smelled of cold toast and coffee. Alex stood by the wall with the big coffee pot, where the idiot always stood, and the Baroness opened the Westmere Gazette.

On the front page, Serena stood on the garage step with an open black envelope, her other hand through her husband's arm.

"The blind girl who beat a house," the Baroness read aloud, flat as a clerk. "Halcyon Group names Serena Tiffany, independent perfumer, its partner for twenty years. The

House of Tiffany had applied for five She turned the page. "And on page three, a Tiffany celebration."

Cordelia, in her garden dress, sitting in a silver bucket of ice with her mouth open in a scream.

Cordelia gave a thin wail about her good side, and her sherry glass rattled on its saucer.

"That is your good side," the Baroness said.

Patricia's fork scraped once on the china. Serena kept her eyes on her cup and did not smile, and it nearly killed her.

"I'm on page one," Alex said happily from the wall. "May I keep it?"

"Line the kennel with it," the Baroness said, without looking at him.

"The dogs will be so proud," Alex said. "They've never been in a paper."

"Neither have you," the Baroness said, "in any way that counts." Pauline murmured that papers forget, and by next week it would be fish wrapping.

"Papers forget," the Baroness said, and her cane struck the floor once. The cups jumped. "The coast doesn't."

"So the coast will watch this house past will sign with Halcyon at my own table," the Baroness said. "A banquet at the Grand, in two days. Every great house from Westmere to Calder Halcyon has accepted." She laid her hand flat on the paper. "And the name on that contract will be Patricia's."

Patricia smoothed her silk and smiled for the first time that morning.

Serena put down her cup.

"Then I won't be there."

The table went quiet.

"Halcyon named me, Grandmother.

My bench. My nose. My mother's notebooks." Her voice was level, but her hands had gone flat on the cloth. "Put Patricia's hame on it, and sign it without me. Let the whole coast ask why the blind girl from page one isn't at her own table."

The Baroness looked at her for a long moment, the way she looked at an account she could not close. Every house on the coast. The front page. An empty chair at the Grand.

Then her voice changed. It went soft, almost tired.

"Sit down, child. Nobody wants a quarrel in front of the whole coast." She folded the Gazette. "Very well. We'll put your name on it. But let Patricia work for you. The house needs her in the work, and the coast needs to see one family."

Serena did not sit. "My name. On the contract."

"Your name," the Baroness said. "Patricia works for you."

Patricia's smile did not move at all.

Serena breathed in, the way she always did before she answered. It was not everything. But it was her name, with Patricia under it, and a door that had been shut for two years opening an inch.

"Then I'll come," she said.

"Can I come too?" Alex asked from the wall. "I'm very good with coats."

"You'll carry whatever you're told," the Baroness said.

"I always do," Alex said happily, and filled her cup.

He watched his wife walk out with her chin up, and for the first time in two days he thought her hands might stop shaking. Whatever had happened in that hall, the old woman had just given it back.

He followed Serena out.

When the door had closed behind them, the Baroness held out her cup without looking up. Pauline filled it.

"Let her climb the steps, Pauline," the Baroness said quietly. "The coast remembers who stands at the top. She will never sign it with Halcyon. Let her dream longer."

The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 809

Two nights later the Grand's ballroom was white and gold, a hundred candles, the sea black behind the tall windows. In the middle of the floor a ship carved out of ice, Halcyon's mark, dripped slowly into a silver tray.

At the Tiffany table Serena sat very straight in her best dress, her hands folded in her lap. Her name, on the contract.

Patricia under it. She had said it to herself all day, the way you count steps in the dark.

Alex sat beside her with three coats folded over his knees, because nobody else had wanted to hold them.

The doors opened, and the room turned.

Rebecca Morgan came in alone, tall and cold, dark red hair pinned back hard, a man's watch on her thin wrist. Whispers ran ahead of her across the floor. The Cruel Lady of Calder never came to anyone's party.

At the high table she and Natasha Vale inclined their heads to each other. Neither said a word. Whatever the Morgans owed Halcyon, nobody in this room would hear of it.

She turned to go back to the Morgan table. Halfway there, passing the Tiffanys, she stopped.

She felt it the way you feel someone watching you, and walked over to the man with the coats.

"I think I know you," she said.

Alex looked up with his mild, empty smile. "Everybody says that. I have that kind of face. Like a potato."

"No." Rebecca studied him. "I rarely misread a body. The way you sit. The way you hold those coats, as if they weigh nothing and you could drop them in a breath." Her eyes narrowed. "Stand up."

Alex stood up. One of the coats slid off his knee onto the floor.

"Oh no," he said, and bent for it, and bumped the table, and a spoon rang on a saucer.

Rebecca watched every move of it. "You dropped that on purpose."

"I drop everything on purpose," Alex said proudly. "Ask anyone."

"Where were you three nights ago?" Rebecca asked.

"In the kennel," Alex said. "The dogs can tell you. The old one never lies."

"I know you," Rebecca said, very quietly.

Beside him, Serena said nothing at all. She only watched the Countess of Calder look at her husband the way nobody had ever looked at him.

"Well, well." Julian Pryce strolled up with his hands in his pockets, handsome in a smooth, finished way, like a piece of furniture polished every day of its life. "The Cruel Lady of Calder and the dog boy. Countess, a rose doesn't lean over a dung heap. He sleeps in a kennel."

Rebecca did not turn her head. "Mr. Pryce."

"If you want a man to look at," Julian said, leaning closer, "you're looking at the wrong end of the table. Some of us have a lake."

"I look at men who keep their word, Mr. Pryce," Rebecca said. "You have a wife."

The table next to them went silent. Somebody's laugh came out through their nose. Julian's smile stayed exactly where it was. His ears went red.

Rebecca gave Alex one more long, cold, puzzled look. Then she walked away from both of them, and did not look back.

Julian looked down at Alex, still holding the dropped coat.

"Nice coats," he said. "Is that the job now? From the kennel to the cloakroom." "It's warmer," Alex said.

"Do you know why Halcyon picked your wife, dog boy?" Julian bent down beside his chair and smiled, and his voice went soft and pleasant. "That night I came down to the garage wing. She let me in. Afterwards she asked me to pull a few strings with Halcyon. I told the whole house. Ask her grandmother. Eight parts in ten, the old woman believes it."

At the next table a woman's fan stopped moving. The whisper went round the table, and the next.

Alex looked at him with his mild, empty smile.

"That's nice," he said. "Did she give you tea? She makes very good tea."

Julian laughed and straightened up. "Enjoy the coats."

He strolled away.

Inside the mild, empty smile, something went very cold and very still.

He had been there that night. He had sat on the floor by the dog bowl and watched her send Julian home to his wife.

And this was what the house had swallowed. That was the door he could not see through. That was why she had come back from the hall with her face like paper, and slept in her shoes.

A small silver bell rang.

Natasha Vale stood at the microphone, tall, black hair cut sharp at the jaw, no jewellery at all.

"Thank you all for coming," she said, crisp and flat. "Halcyon does not sign with houses. It signs with the best dose on this coast for twenty years. Miss Serena Tiffany, please come up."

Serena stood up. Her face was alight.

She never took the first step.

The Baroness was already on her feet, her ebony cane in one hand. With the other she took Serena by the wrist, hard enough to hurt.

"Sit down," she said, very low. "And don't you make one move tonight that puts this family to shame."

Serena sat down slowly, as if her legs had stopped belonging to her.

The Baroness walked up to the podium with Patricia on her arm, the cane rapping once on every step. In the hush the ice ship dripped into its silver tray, loud as a clock.

She took the microphone.

"Ms. Vale. The House of Tiffany has made perfume on this coast for three hundred years. One girl is a nose Ace is a name. For the.

good of everyone, sign with House of Tiffany. You'll still have Serena. She works for the house." Cóntent

Natasha looked at her the way she looked at a bad price.

"Halcyon chose her," she said. "Not your name. Noses don't come in houses, Baroness."

"This one does," the Baroness said. "She eats at my table. She sleeps under my roof."

"In your garage, I read," Natasha said.

Somebody at the back laughed, and stopped.

"And Halcyon will have her," the Baroness said, louder. "Under the house."

"Then answer one question," Natasha said. "Who is the head of the House of Tiffany? If it is Serena, I will sign tonight."

The Baroness turned to the room. Her voice carried to the back wall.

"Patricia," she said. "My granddaughter Patricia leads this family's work with Halcyon. I will not let a girl who slept with another man to win lead the House of Tiffany."

The gasp went round the ballroom like wind through a field.

Patricia smiled, and smoothed her silk.

At the Tiffany table, Serena's hands went flat on the white cloth. Every face in the room had turned to look at her.

Good name in man and woman is the immediate jewel of their souls.

Beside her, Alex set the coats down on the floor, one by one, very neatly.

The ballroom went silent.

The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 810

Patricia took the microphone as if it had always been hers, and smiled out over the room, sweet as sugar on a knife.

"Thank you, Grandmother. Thank you, Ms. Vale. The House of Tiffany has made perfume on this coast for three hundred years, and I promise you, Halcyon will never regret it. And my poor cousin will make anything Halcyon asks for. Anything at all. She works for me now."

She laughed lightly. "So you see, Ms. Vale, you get both of us. In one pocket."

The room clapped. Not everyone.

Enough.

Serena sat still for three breaths. Alex heard her count them.

Then she stood up and walked out between the tables, chin up, hands flat at her sides, past every face that had just heard her called a liar.

Nobody stopped her. At the great doors her shoulders shook once. Then she was gone.

Her napkin was still folded. She had not even touched her water.

Inside the mild, empty smile, something very old woke up.

A hand fell on his shoulder.

"Hear that, dog boy?" Julian bent down beside him, smelling of whisky. "The whole coast knows now. Your wife came to my door, and she'll come again. You can't even look after her. You sat there holding coats while her own grandmother sold her off a stage."

He shook his head, almost kindly. "She was always meant to be mine. I can give her what she wants. You can give her a bowl. So here's what you do. Divorce her. Kneel down right here and thank me for taking her off your hands, and I'll ask the Baroness to let you keep the kennel."

Alex looked at him with great interest.

"People call me the unlucky idiot, you know," he said. "If you cross me, that bad luck might just rub off on you."

Julian laughed so hard his drink sloshed over his cuff.

"Oh, you're priceless. I don't believe in superstitions. Now kneel, dog boy. Everybody's watching."

"I think your phone is going to ring," Alex said.

Julian laughed louder, and looked round to make sure the next table was laughing too. It was.

Alex picked one plain grey coat up off the floor, folded it over his arm, and walked toward the podium.

The laughter stopped, one table at a time. The idiot from the garage wing was walking up the middle of the Grand's ballroom, toward the steps where only the great houses stood.

"Sit down," the Baroness hissed. "Sit down this instant."

Patricia laughed into the microphone. "Darling, the cloakroom is the other way."

The room laughed with her. It was a relief to laugh.

He climbed one step, and Patricia leaned into the microphone again. "Oh, look. I think he's going to propose."

That got the biggest laugh of the night.

"I know," Alex said mildly. "I'm bringing the lady a coat. She looks cold."

He climbed the steps. The podium smelled of lilies and hot wax. He walked past the Baroness as if she were a chair, and stopped at Natasha Vale's shoulder.

She took the coat. He bent to her ear, and the voice that came out was not the idiot's. It was flat and cold as river stone.

"Never accept this condition. Not tonight, not ever. Go to Rebecca Morgan. Tell her it is time. I want everything the Pryces own, and everything the Tiffanys own. Every loan, every deed, every brick. Take them both down to the ground."

Natasha did not blink.

"And when it's done," he said, "it all goes to you. A gift for my wife."

The smallest nod in the world.

Alex went back down the steps and out of the ballroom after Serena, and did not look back once.

The Baroness leaned toward Natasha, smiling with all her teeth.

"You must forgive him, Ms. Vale. He was dropped on his head as a child. We think more than once. So don't you think it is time to sign the collaboration?"

Natasha laid the coat across the podium.

"I need to ask our chairman," she said into the microphone. "Please wait."

She stepped down, walked to the Morgan table, and bent to Rebecca's ear for one short sentence.

Rebecca's hand went to the man's watch on her wrist. She looked once toward the doors where the idiot had gone, a puzzled line between her eyes. Then she took out her phone and began to give orders into it, very low, without turning her head.

The coast of Westmere waited twenty minutes.

They enjoyed the dinner.

"Stop smiling," the Baroness said under her breath. "You look like a shop window."

"Everybody's looking at us, Grandmother."

"They are jealous of us."

Outside, the rain came off the sea in long cold sheets.

Alex stood at the top of the Grand's steps with the doors shut behind him and the music muffled to a hum Far below on the tow wall above the beach, a small finet in her best dress with her arms sat around her knees, getting soaked and not moving.

She was not crying. He knew that sitting. She was counting.

He took off his jacket. It smelled of the kennel and the coal stove, and it was the only warm thing he had.

Behind him, through the glass, the whole coast was waiting for a decision.

He did not care about any of them. He started down the steps.

Then the side doors opened, and Natasha came back. She climbed the steps and took the microphone, and the room went silent.

"I have spoken to the chairman of Halcyon," she said. "The chairman does not agree."

The Baroness rose half out of her gold chair.

"Ms. Vale, what is this? Has the House of Tiffany done something wrong?"

"Halcyon chose Miss Serena

Tiffany," Natasha said, flat as a ledger. "Her bench. Her nose. Her name. You put another name over hers, and then you stood before the whole coast and shamed her So from tonight, Halcyon ends every Contract with the House of Tiffany Every shelf. Every shop. Every bottle."

The room exploded. Chairs scraped. A fork hit the floor. At the far end a woman stood up on her chair to see the Baroness's face.

"And one more thing," Natasha said, and the noise died at once. "A filthy rumour was spread tonight about Miss Serena Tiffany, by careless, nasty people. The chairman asked me to say it clearly. Halcyon will punish every one of them."

At his table, Julian stopped laughing.

Patricia stepped forward, her smile gone at last.

"Grandmother, she can't do that. My name was already announced. Everybody heard it. They can't just—"

The great doors opened again.

Six men came in out of the rain in grey coats, with wet umbrellas. Two were from the Morgan banks in Calder. Four were from Westmere, and every great house in the room knew their faces, because every great house in the room owed them money.

They climbed the podium steps and laid thick brown folders in front of Natasha.

She opened the first as if it were a bill.

"The loans of the Pryce family. Bought tonight, every one, and called. The Pryce Lake Hotel. Everything else they own. No bank on this coast will lend that family another coin."

Across the room, a phone rang.

Julian looked down. His mother's name was shining on the screen.

He answered, and the next three tables heard her screaming: the bank at the door, every loan called, nobody would lend, the hotel and the house and everything else to be sold, and what had he done, who had he crossed?

The phone slid out of his hand and cracked on the marble.

He looked round at the faces watching him, and did what Julian Pryce always did when it cost him to stay.

He ran.

Natasha opened the second folder. The Baroness was not watching her face. She was watching her hands.

"The loans of the House of Tiffany. The workrooms. The shops. The house behind the black iron gate. All bought tonight. All called. Payment in full by morning."

The Baroness made a small sound, like a woman stepping off a stair that isn't there. Her knees gave. She sat down hard on the podium step, and her cane clattered down the stairs. Nobody went to help her.

"Who," she whispered. "Who holds them now?"

Natasha laid her palm flat on the folder.

"Halcyon holds them," she said. "As a gift."

She looked out at the doors, where the rain was blowing in.

"For Miss Serena Tiffany."