The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 821

In Victor Russell's hall, it was so dark that nobody could see his own hand.

"Lights!" Curtis Bennett's voice cut across the black. "Somebody get the lights!" "The switch is dead, boss!" his right-hand man shouted from the stairs.

"Then use your phones!"

A screen woke by the far wall. Its torch came on, bright and white, and the beam swung across the stone floor, across a boot, across the hem of a long coat.

"I've got light! Over here, I've got—"

The man was gone from behind it. The light leapt out of his hand, as if something had struck him and the phone in the same blow, and it went spinning end over end across the hall and burst against the wall.

Black again.

A second screen lit up by the door. It lasted less time than the first.

After that, nobody tried.

Then, from the far wall, a thud. A gun hit the floor and slid away across the stone, and nobody had fired it.

"Who's that?" a man yelled. "Who's moving?"

"Answer me! Somebody answer me!"

The thuds came along the wall, one after another, like the first heavy drops of a storm.

"Hold your fire!" Curtis roared. "Nobody shoots! You'll kill each other in the dark!" Nobody shot. Somewhere a man began to pray, and his prayer broke off halfway. By the staircase, Connor Russell had gone very still. He knew this dark. He had lain on his back in it on the floor of the Grand, in the spilled soup, with his arm bent the wrong way.

"It's the same," he whispered. "Uncle Curtis, it's the same as the Grand. It's him. He's here."

"Who's here?" Curtis snapped.

"I don't know! Nobody knows! That's what I'm telling you!"

Connor's good hand was shaking. The dead one hung in its strap against his chest, and tonight, of all nights, he was glad of the strap, because it held the arm still.

Something was standing in front of him. He could not see it. He could feel it, the way you feel a wall in a dark room before you touch it.

"Please don't kill me! It was him, it was my uncle!" Connor went down on his knees. " Please. I'll do anything. I'll give you the harbour, I'll give you all of it—"

A sound like green wood snapping. Connor screamed once. Then he did not make any sound at all.

Up on the beam, Serena hung with her eyes shut. Her back was on fire. She heard every sound in that hall, and she understood none of them. Beside her, Preston's rope creaked.

"What was that?" Preston babbled into the black. "Was that Connor? Is somebody dead? I didn't see anything! Somebody write that down! I didn't see anything!"

"Shut up, Preston," Patricia sobbed. "Please, just shut up."

"You shut up!"

"Quiet, both of you," Serena whispered. "Please."

Curtis did not shout again. He had stood on many floors like this one, and he knew what fear sounded like in other men. Tonight he heard it in his own breath.

"Whoever you are," he called into the dark, quite politely, "you're very good. I'll give you that. My brother had twenty years on this coast, and you took him in one night." Nobody answered.

"Come and stand in front of me, then," Curtis said. "Face me like a man." Then, louder, to the walls: "Leave him to me, all of you. You hear me? He's mine."

"Boss, we can't see you!"

"You don't need to see me. Stay where you are."

He set his feet and waited. When the cold came close beside him again, the same cold that had stood at his side when the lights died, he turned and drove his fist into it with everything he had.

It was like punching the harbour wall.

Something cracked under his knuckles, something thin and hard, and fell away. The pain went up his arm to the shoulder. Then the arm was simply gone. It hung at his side and would not answer him, trembling on its own, as if it belonged to some other man.

He tasted blood.

"Not possible," Curtis breathed. "That's not possible."

His brother's coffin was behind him. He found its edge with his good hand, and then the cold wax of a candle on its lid. His lighter was i his coat. He had lit his brother's candles with it when the house was stiff full of light.

He thumbed it once. Twice. A small flame, too small to reach the walls.

He lit the candle.

On the black lid, beside the flame, lay a smooth black mask, split in two where his fist had struck it.

And above it, close enough to touch, a face looked back at him.

It was the face from the waiter's jacket with the gravy stain. The face he had promised to take the teeth out of. The face that had smiled at his brother's coffin. It was smiling now.

Not the foolish grin it had worn at the coffin. A different one. Patient. Almost kind.

He had asked it, in front of the whole house, if it had killed his brother. And it had said yes, quite pleasantly. And the hall had laughed.

Curtis Bennett understood everything at once.

He opened his mouth.

Vengeance is in my heart, death in my hand.

The flame went out.

Curtis went down in the dark against his brother's coffin, in the very place he had promised the Tiffanys they would lie. He never said the word. There was no time left to say anything.

Along the walls, the last men of the Brotherhood were still calling for him.

"Boss? Boss!"

"Boss, where are you?"

"Answer us!"

One by one the voices stopped, the way candles go out in a draught. The right-hand man was the last.

"Boss?" he said, very quietly, into the black.

Nobody answered him. Then nobody answered at all.

For a long time there was no sound in Victor Russell's house but three ropes creaking on the beam.

Serena did not open her eyes.

Under my feet is the cellar, she thought. And in the cellar is my husband. They did not get him. I didn't tell them anything, and they did not get him.

"Is it over?" Preston whispered at last. "Can somebody tell me if it's over? Hello? Please help me. Somebody let me go from this place!"

"Nobody's listening, Preston," Patricia said.

"Somebody's always listening," Preston said, and started to cry.

Then, with a hum and a flicker, the lights came on.

The hall blazed. Men in long dark coats lay along every wall, on the stairs, across the doorway, their skull rings shining their guns beside them. Commor Russeft lay at the foot of the staircase, his dead arm still strapped against his chest.

And against the coffin, one hand still resting on the lid, his eyes still open, sat Curtis Bennett, beside his brother at last.

All at once, three bodies plummeted from their ropes, hitting the ground with dull, heavy thuds.

Serena didn't wait. Pushing through the white-hot flare in her back, she tore down the corridor and threw open the next door. Her eyes scanned the gloom, landing on Alex slumped in the corner. Horror seized her.

The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 822

Alex did not move.

He sat slumped in the corner of the cellar with his head against the stones, and in the light from the doorway his face was perfectly white.

"No," Serena said. "No, no, no."

She was on her knees beside him before she knew she had crossed the floor. Along the walls the family pressed back and screamed, sure the Brotherhood had come for them at last: the Baroness, Gideon, Marissa, the aunts.

"It's me," Serena said, without turning round. "It's only me."

She put her hand on Alex's cheek. It was warm.

Then, from somewhere deep in his chest, came a long, slow, perfectly peaceful snore.

"He's asleep," Serena whispered. "He's only asleep."

"He's what?" said the Baroness.

Nobody could believe it.

"We sat in the dark all night," the Baroness said slowly, "arguing over which of us they would kill first, and whose fault it was. And he slept. Like a baby."

"He sleeps out in the dog kennels," an aunt said faintly. "Of course he can sleep in a cellar."

Somebody laughed. Then they were all laughing, shakily, the way the house always laughed at him. Truly an idiot.

Serena did not laugh. "Alex," she said softly. "Wake up."

His eyes opened. He yawned. "Serena. Did they leave a light on for you? I asked them to. You don't like the dark."

Behind her, the light from the hall lay across the cellar steps. She took his hand and did not let go.

They went up into the hall, and one by one they stopped. The coats along the walls. The skull rings. Connor at the foot of the stairs, and Curtis Bennett with his back to his brother's coffin.

"Who did this?" the Baroness whispered. "Who in this world could do this?"

Preston looked down at the rope round his wrist. The knot had come undone. He had kicked and pulled in the dark, hadn't he? And the rope had given.

"Was it you, Serena?" he asked.

"No."

"Patricia? Was it you?"

"Hell, no."

Preston smiled. "Of course it's me. And now I will control this whole place."

"You said you never called your friends!" Patricia cried.

"You told Curtis you were drunk in your own bed that night!" an aunt shrieked.

"Yes! Because I cleaned them myself!" Preston stepped over a dead man's hand into the middle of the hall. "Don't touch their phones. Don't touch their money. They all belong to me now! I am a real hero! Didn't you all see it?"

Serena was the only one not looking at Preston. She was looking at her husband, who was yawning.

Within a day, the whole coast was telling the story. "Preston Tiffany," said the radio in the Tiffany kitchen, "the man who broke the Brotherhood alone."

Nobody asked the idiot anything.

That evening he carried a bowl of soup across the yard to the garage wing, where Serena lay on her front on his narrow bed, her back bandaged from her shoulders to her waist.

"I made it myself," he said, setting it down. "It's too hot. I spilled some on the way. You should be in the main house. The beds there are softer."

"The main house is full of Preston." She turned her face on the pillow to look at him.

Her eyes were tired, but steady. "Alex. Did they hurt you?"

"I was asleep." He thought about it. "No one bother me."

Serena almost laughed, and the laugh hurt her back. She shut her eyes.

"Good," she said quietly.

He picked up the little pot of ointment the doctor had left by the bed and looked at it doubtfully.

"Twice a day, the doctor said." Then, as he reached for the bandage.

"Wait. Close your eyes." Serena said.

"Then how will I see your back?"

"Close them!"

His fingers brushed the hem of the dressing, touch feather-light against her skin. The tenderness disarmed her entirely; the awkwardness evaporated, leaving only the quiet space between them and the soft cadence of his breath.

"You aren't wearing your necklace," Alex murmured.

"Broken by those bastards," she muttered, turning her face away. "Doesn't matter. I hated wearing it anyway."

He heard the fracture in her voice. He knew better-it was the only piece she ever put on when dressing up, treasured far more than she would ever admit.

Afterwards Alex stood in the yard a long time with the empty bowl. He had never once bought her anything. Flowers from the garden, in a jar. That was all.

The next morning he walked into Westmere.

Larkspur's stood on the high street, the oldest jeweller in Westmere, with gold letters over the door and a man in a grey uniform to open it. Inside, the light came off every glass case at once Women in silk leaned over the counters. The shop girls looked at his old jacket, then past it, and went on polishing.

He walked along the cases until he came to one at the back, locked, standing by itself.

Nestled against dark velvet, the piece seemed to glow with quiet grace: a solitary bead of pale green jade strung along a whisper-thin chain, catching the light like clear spring water in crystal.

Simple, understated elegance.

Alex looked at it for a long time. "It looks like water," he said to nobody. "She would like that." Then he raised his hand.

"Excuse me. May I see this one? How much is it?"

The young clerk nearest him sighed. "That one isnt priced on the card, sir. And it's locked. I don't have the key. The manager does." He lifted the ratio at his shoulder without much hope. "Gina? Someone wants to see the treasure of the shop."

A woman came across the floor at once, quick heels and a bright smile already on.

"Which of our guests, sweetheart?" she sang. "Which lucky..."

Then she saw him.

She looked at the jacket. She looked at the shoes. And the smile went out of her face like a pinched wick.

"Clothes make the man, sweetheart," Gina said, very sweetly. "And yours make a beggar. Can someone like you even afford to breathe on this glass? Go home, sweetheart, before you leave a smudge."

"I am a prince." Alex said.

"Yeah, and I am the Queen. Now I order you to get out form this place. You are not welcome here."

The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 823

Alex did not argue.

He wandered along the glass instead, hands behind his back, and read every little price card, moving his lips.

"No touching unless you're buying," Gina said.

"I'm only reading! Is that wrong?" Alex said.

"It's wrong for you to even walk in here. Poor people have no right to set foot in this place."

"Do you know how arrogant you are, judging people like that?" Alex asked mildly. "You're not rich yourself."

"Maybe not. But I'm still much richer than you."

Alex nodded to himself, as if that settled it, and turned for the door.

"That's right, sweetheart, off you go," Gina called after him. "This place isn't for you. Try the stalls on the fish quay. That's more your place."

"Is that jacket meant to be vintage?" said one of the other shop girls. "So desperate to look rich."

The shop laughed.

Round the corner, out of sight of the windows, he took out his old phone.

"Natasha. Larkspur's, on the high street. Come. Hurry. Bring money. I want to buy something."

"Yes, sir. I'm on my way."

He put the phone away. The jade was still in its case, and somebody else might buy it. He walked back in.

"You again?" Gina's smile went out. "Didn't I order you out?"

"I only want to look at it one more time," Alex said, pointing at the case at the back. "It looks like water."

"Or you want to try your luck," Gina said. "Unbelievable." She snatched up the house phone. "Sir? Gina, on the floor. There's a beggar who won't leave. Yes. Now, please."

The owner came down the back stairs, buttoning his jacket. He looked at the old jacket once.

"Who let this in? Get this beggar out of my shop."

"I've called security too, sir." Gina pressed the button under the counter and clapped at the shop girls. "Don't just stand there. Help him to the door!"

Two girls took him by the sleeves. A guard put a hand flat on his chest, heavy and cold through the thin cloth.

"Out you go, friend."

"Please don't pull," Alex said politely. "It's my only jacket."

"Push him!" somebody called. "Back to the fish quay!"

The whole shop laughed as they shoved him back toward the door.

That was when the door opened from the other side.

A woman in a grey coat stood on the step with two men behind her. "Stop that!"

The laughing died. Natasha looked from the beggar to the guards.

"Ms. Vale," the owner breathed, and went the colour of the marble. "What an honour! If you need anything at all, please let me know."

Natasha Vale looked at the guard's hand on the old jacket.

"What is this?"

"Only a beggar, Ms. Vale!" Gina hurried round the counter, smiling. "He's been bothering our customers all morning. We're putting him out for you."

"For me."

"Yes, Ms. Vale."

"Let go of him."

They let go at once.

"Ms. Vale," Gina added quickly, "he'll only spoil your visit. Why don't we put him out first, and then you can enjoy your shopping?"

"You really do have a nasty mouth, don't you?" Natasha said. Then she turned to the owner. "Is this how Larkspur's treats a customer? If this woman does not apologise to this man, something nasty may happen. To your shop."

"No! Never, Ms. Vale!" The owner swung round on Gina. "Who made you so rude? Get down! Apologise to this man!"

He pulled her down by the arm. Her knees hit the marble with a crack that rang through the shop.

"Sir, are you mad?" Gina cried. "How can you make me kneel to a beggar? You told me yourself to throw him out!"

"Apologise!" the owner slapped Gina's face really hard.

"You!"

"What you!" The owner replied. "I will never let my shop destroyed because of you! Apologise!"

Gina looked up at the old jacket. A minute ago she had laughed at it. Now it was all she could see.

"Sir..." The word stuck in her throat. "I'm sorry. It's all my fault."

"That's all right," Alex said kindly. "The floor is very cold."

"Every customer who walks through a door on this street is served," Natasha said. "Serve him."

"A chair!" the owner snapped. Alex sat on the velvet stool, delighted, like a boy at a fair.

Gina stayed on her knees, and they brought her the trays.

"You want to try some rings?" Natasha asked him.

"No, it's all right," Alex said.

"Let's try some rings."

Gina held them up one by one.

"Ugly," Natasha said. "Not his style. The next one."

"My wife doesn't wear gold," Alex said helpfully. "She says it's loud."

"Try the pearls."

"No, not those."

"The emeralds, then."

"I don't like them," Natasha said. "You can't do any better than that? Maybe we should try a different shop."

Nobody in the shop was laughing now. The girl who had asked about the vintage jacket had put her phone face down on the counter.

"The case at the back," Alex said, and pointed. "The water one."

The owner unlocked it himself. On her knees, before everyone who had laughed with her, Gina lifted the green jade up to the beggar.

Alex did not take it at once. He looked at it for a long time, and for a moment he e was not in the shop at l.ne all. He was in the garage wing, hearing the crack in a tired voice that swore a broken necklace did not matter.

"Yes," he said softly. "That one."

"Wrap it," Natasha said. "Halcyon's account."

"Ms. Vale," Gina whispered, "I didn't know you cared about a beggar."

"He is a prince. You should treat him like a prince. Natasha's voice did not rise. "You have no idea how many people still think of him as net one, or that people like me are

And among them and those are people you cannot afford to offend. / you, I have never liked you. While you stand in this shop, I will not buy one thing from it. No. I will tear this place down."

The owner made a sound like a man stepping on ice.

"You're fired!" the owner shouted. "Get out of my shop! And never come near my door again!"

"Sir, please..."

"Go away!"

Gina turned on her knees and caught the hem of the old jacket in both hands.

"Sir, please! I was blind! I looked at your clothes and I didn't look at you!" The tears ran black down her face. "Tell her to forgive me. Please. This job is all I have!" Alex looked down at her with mild, puzzled eyes.

"You told me this place isn't for me," he said gently and walked out. "Maybe it isn't for you either."

Gina let go of his jacket. She dragged herself round toward Natasha instead.

"Ms. Vale, I know I was wrong! From now on I'll keep my head down! Please don't hold it against me!"

Nobody helped her up.

Natasha stepped back from her as if she were something spilled.

She took the wrapped box and left without one glance.

"Sir." Natasha held out the box.

He opened it. The jade lay on its velvet like a drop of clear water.

"My wife likes this jade," he said, and closed the lid as carefully as if it might wake.

"Shall I drive you home, sir?"

"Sure, why not." Alex smiled.

She let him out at the bottom of the road, out of sight of the black iron gate with its gilded T. He walked the last stretch with thể box warm- against his heart, thinking of her face when she opened it, and turned into the yard by the garage wing.

He stopped.

He could not believe what he saw.

Patricia shoved Serena hard, sending her crashing to the floor. "How dare you take everything from me!"

The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 824

Serena hit the cobbles back first.

The stones bit through the white bandages under her blouse, and the pain went through her like a hot wire. Two nights ago, in Victor Russell's house, four lashes had split that back open. It had not healed.

She did not cry out. She lay still in the pale light under the low grey sky, and breathed.

All round the garage-wing doorstep, pieces of blue and white china glittered on the wet black stones. One curved piece still showed half a painted bird, its blue wing broken off at the shoulder.

"You take everything!" Patricia screamed down at her. "Everything! My position. My fame. And now my vase! This vase was given to me by Grandma. It's worth a million dollars. How dare you break it!"

At the yard gate, Alex stood very still.

The jewel box sat warm against his heart, inside his old brown jacket.

Now there was grit in her hair.

"Patricia," Serena said, and pushed herself up on one elbow. "I never touched it."

"Liar!"

"I only opened the door."

It was the truth. She had been sitting on the narrow bed with one of her mother's old books, under the one yellow bulb, when someone knocked. A sweet voice had called, "Serena? Serena, darling, are you there?" She had pulled the door. Then the scream, the crash, the hands.

Had her hands gone near it? It had all happened so fast.

"Do you hear yourself?" Patricia cried. "I came down here to show you Grandma's gift. To share something with you, for once in my life. And you smashed it the second you saw it, because you can't stand me having anything!"

Doors banged up at the main house. Feet came running across the yard.

Marissa arrived first, Gideon's second wife, in a pink dressing gown, with two curlers bouncing in her hair.

"Who's dead?" she cried. "Is it expensive?"

Behind her came Gideon, his reading glasses in his hand. Behind him came Aunt Cordelia, who never ran for anything except gossip.

Inside the kennel, the old dog woke and began to bark, deep and hoarse.

"Look!" Patricia pointed a shaking red fingernail at the china. "Look what she did. Grandma's vase!"

Marissa looked at the pieces, then at Serena on the ground.

"Oh, Serena," she sighed. "What have you broken now?"

"Nothing," Serena said.

"She says nothing," Cordelia said. "Of course. Nobody in this family ever breaks anything. Things just fall over by themselves."

Gideon took a step toward his daughter. "Sweetheart, your back..."

"Don't you dare help her, Uncle Gideon," Patricia snapped. "Not until she pays." Gideon stopped where he stood.

Serena got to her knees, then to her feet. Her blouse clung to the bandages. She stood very straight, hands pressed flat to her skirt so nobody could see them shake.

"Pay with what, Patricia? You know I don't have..."

"Oh, but you do." Patricia smiled her banquet smile and held up her phone, the bright screen turned to the yard.

"Halcyon copies the contract holder on every payment, darling. And the contract holder is me. Remember?" She tapped the glass. "This morning, Halcyon paid the winner of the bench. Not the house. Not me. You. Straight into your own little account."

The yard went quiet.

Marissa's mouth fell open. "Halcyon paid you? This morning? And you didn't say a word to your own mother?"

"You're not my mother," Serena said quietly.

"I'm the closest thing you've got!"

Alex had crossed the yard from the gate while they all stared at the phone. Nobody looked his way. He stopped by the dog's tin water bowl and gazed down at the scattered blue and white.

"How much?" Cordelia breathed. "How much did they pay her?"

Patricia let the silence stretch.

"Exactly one million dollars."

"A million!" Marissa grabbed Gideon's sleeve. "Gideon, did you hear that? A million!"

"I heard, dear," said Gideon.

"And Grandma's vase," Patricia went on sweetly, "is worth one million dollars. Isn't that funny? It's almost like fate."

Marissa blinked. "Wait. The Baroness gave you a million-dollar vase? Your grandmother? The woman who makes us pay for our own hot water?"

"She loves me," Patricia said.

"She charged me for a teabag last spring!"

"Then she loves me more than you Patricia turned back to Serena, and the sugar drained out of her voice. "So you'll pay me back. The whole mon. Today. Not a cent less.

Cordelia folded her arms. "And if she won't?"

"Then I call the police, Auntie. Breaking someone's property on purpose. A million dollars of it," Patricia said. "She can explain the door to them."

"You hear that, Serena?" Cordelia said. "Pay it, or she calls the police and you go instead. Haven't you shamed this house enough this week?"

"I told you. I only opened the door," Serena said.

"Then tell me something, cousin." Patricia stepped over the china, stiffly, her own whipped shoulders hidden under the silk Why are the pieces at your ? Not mine.

Serena opened her mouth.

"Whose door is it, Serena?"

"Mine," Serena said.

"Whose step?" Patricia asked.

"Mine."

"And who was standing in that doorway when it fell?" Patricia said softly.

Serena said nothing. She tried to see it again: the knock, the sweet voice, the door, the scream. Had her elbow caught something? Her hip?

She could not remember. That was the worst part.

"You see?" Patricia said gently to the aunts. "She doesn't even know herself."

"Poor thing," Cordelia murmured. "The tower did that to her head."

"Don't," Gideon said. It came out very small. Nobody turned round.

At the edge of the cobbles, Alex crouched beside the bowl. The dog pushed its grey muzzle through the bars a sniffed at his sleeve, as if to ask what he was staring at.

He was staring at the garage-wing door.

Serena looked at the shards. She looked at the door. Then she looked at Patricia.

"Patricia. That's all of it," she whispered. "That's everything I have. Part of it was for my mother's work. Her perfumes, under her own name again. I promised her that."

"Your mother is dead, Serena," Patricia said.

"I know she's dead."

"Then she won't mind waiting."

Serena kept her voice level. "Leave me a little."

"Not a cent," Patricia said. "Do you know why, cousin?"

"Why?"

"Because it's all you have." Patricia smiled. "That's why."

Slowly, Serena took her own phone out of her skirt pocket. Her thumb found the banking app. The million sat there in black numbers, waiting.

The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 825

Serena's thumb hovered over the screen.

For a moment nobody in the yard spoke.

Then Marissa found her voice, the way she always did when money was in the air.

"Well, I'm not paying it," she said. "Don't anybody look at me. Gideon, don't look at me either. Who pays if she doesn't? Not us. We don't have a million dollars. We don't have a million of anything."

"We have a lot of curlers," Gideon said quietly.

"Gideon!"

"Sorry, dear."

Patricia didn't laugh. She was watching Serena the way a cat watches a bird with a broken wing.

Alex shuffled nearer the blue and white pieces, squatted on his heels, and turned one shard over with a finger.

"Is it a puzzle?" he asked.

Everyone looked at him.

"Is it a puzzle?" he said again, hopefully. "I'm good at puzzles."

Cordelia rolled her eyes to the grey sky. "Somebody take the idiot back to his kennel."

The whole yard laughed. One of Marissa's curlers fell out and bounced on the stones.

"Look at him, Serena," Patricia sang. "Your husband. Your knight. He thinks it's a game."

Serena did not look at him. She was counting the shards, the way she counted everything when she would not let herself cry. Nine. Ten. Eleven.

Her back burned. Her head was full of smoke. Maybe her hip had caught it when she turned. Maybe the lashes and the long dark had broken something in her, and she could not trust her own eyes any more.

"Maybe it was me," she said at last, very quietly.

Patricia's eyes shone. "What was that, cousin?"

"Maybe it was me. I'm sorry."

"Maybe?" Patricia tilted her head. "No. Say it properly. Say: I broke Grandma's vase."

"Patricia, that's enough," Gideon whispered.

"Say it, Serena."

"Go on," Cordelia said. "We're all waiting, and my feet are cold."

Serena swallowed. "I broke Grandma's vase."

"There," Marissa said, relieved. "Was that so hard?"

"Sweetheart, no," Gideon whispered. But he said it to the cobbles, and nobody heard.

Alex had stopped smiling.

He was still turning the same little shard over in his fingers like a child, but his eyes had moved to the garage-wing door behind her. The heavy old door with the iron latch. He had pushed it open a hundred times with a bowl of soup in his hands.

It opened inward. Into the room.

A door that swings in cannot knock over anything standing outside it.

Somebody had dropped that vase on the step.

He looked up at Patricia. Her red nails had gone white at the tips round her phone.

Alex said nothing. He laid the shard down very gently on the stones.

"All right," Serena said, and lifted her chin. "I'll pay. The whole million. Today. And then we're finished, Patricia. You and I are finished."

The yard breathed out. "Thank goodness," Marissa said. "Now can we please eat?"

Patricia smiled slowly.

"Oh, cousin," she said. "Did you really think it was about the money?"

She leaned in, all heavy perfume.

"Paying isn't enough," Patricia said softly. "Kneel."

From beside the shards, Alex looked up. "She can't kneel," he said helpfully. "Her knees are bony. I've seen them."

"Shut up, idiot," Patricia said, without looking at him.

"They are, though," Alex told the dog.

"Even the dog agrees with you, idiot," Patricia said. "That's your level."

Serena stood up straighter. Every inch of her back screamed, but she stood. "No," she said.

One word, flat and quiet, the way she had said "I don't know" in Victor Russell's house with the lash in the air.

Patricia turned to the aunts with a wounded little laugh. "Did you hear that? I only want what's fair, Auntie Grandma gave it to me. She breaks and now she won't even Her voice wobbled, perfectly. "Do you know what it's like? Everything always goes to Serena. Halcyon picked her bench, not mine. Halcyon pays her, not me. I had one thing of my own. One. Grandma's vase."

"Poor darling," Cordelia said, and patted her arm.

"And she has a husband," Patricia added, dabbing one dry eye.

Cordelia looked at Alex, squatting by the shards with his mouth slightly open. "Well," she said. "Let's not count that."

"Oh, for heaven's sake, Serena," Marissa snapped. "Kneel and finish it. It's a vase, not your life. Then we can all go in and have lunch."

"You'd let her do this?" Serena said.

"I'd let anybody do anything if it means lunch."

Serena looked at her stepmother for a long moment.

"Two nights ago," she said, "a man hung me from a beam and asked this house me who stands behind under fr

You were all in the celler underpy feet. Ididn't say one word. Not one. And every one of you walked out of that cellar alive."

The yard went quiet.

"Nobody asked you to be brave," Marissa muttered.

"You're alive, aren't you?" Cordelia said. "So are we. Nobody's counting."

"I am," Serena said.

"Too proud to bend her knees," Cordelia sniffed, "and married to a man who sleeps in the kennels. Pride like that is very expensive, Serena. Cheaper to kneel."

Serena looked past all of them, to the one face she still hoped for.

"Dad?" she said.

"Uncle Gideon," Patricia said sweetly. "Tell her."

Gideon's mouth opened. His glasses trembled in his hand. "Sweetheart, I... it's only..."

Then he looked down at the cobbles, and stayed looking at them.

Something in Serena's face went still.

"All right," she said softly. "Now I know."

"Know what, sweetheart?" Gideon whispered to the cobbles.

"What I'm worth in this house." She held up the phone with the million on it. "This.

Not a cent more, and not a cent less."

"Fine," Patricia said lightly. "If she won't kneel by herself, I'll help her down."

Her heels clicked across the wet stones. In its pen, the grey hound backed into the straw, growling. A thick wooden stick leaned against the bars.

Patricia picked it up and weighed it in her hand.

Then she turned round, and smiled.

The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 826

Patricia came back across the yard with the stick, thick as a broom handle and dark with old rain.

"Patricia," Gideon said. "What are you doing with that?"

"Helping," Patricia said.

"Put it down," Serena said quietly.

"Kneel, and I will."

"No."

Patricia's mouth went thin. She took the stick in both hands and swung it low and hard at the backs of Serena's legs, with all her weight behind it.

Nobody was looking at the idiot.

By the shards, Alex flicked a little stone without looking up, the way a man brushes off a fly.

The stone hit Patricia's knuckles with a sharp little crack.

Her hand jerked. The stick swept past Serena's legs by a finger's width and kept going, round and up, whistling.

It smacked Patricia full in her own face.

Thwack.

For one second the yard was perfectly silent.

Patricia swayed, a red stripe rising across her nose. Her lipstick had gone sideways.

"Oh!" Marissa put both hands over her mouth. "Not on the face, Patricia! You have to be seen!"

Cordelia coughed into her glove.

"Did she..." Gideon whispered. "Did she just hit herself?"

"Is it a game?" Alex asked from the cobbles, with great interest. "I think you lost."

"You!" Patricia swung round, eyes streaming, and pointed the stick at Serena. "You pushed it! You grabbed it!"

"I didn't move," Serena said.

"She didn't, darling," Cordelia said, not quite steadily. "We all saw. You hit yourself."

"Should I fetch some ice?" Gideon asked.

"Fetch nothing!" Patricia shrieked.

"Ice costs money anyway, Gideon," Marissa said.

"The stick's very slippery," Alex told the dog. "Like the vase."

Her nose had started to bleed. She flung the stick down.

"Your nose is bleeding, Patricia," Serena said quietly.

"Forget kneeling! I don't care any more!" she shrieked. "Pay me. Now. Every cent, Serena, or I swear I'll..."

Serena looked down at her phone. Her thumb moved toward the button.

Alex had picked up one of the curved pieces of china and was turning it over in his fingers.

"Serena," he said slowly. "Why does this one have a sticker?"

Serena's thumb stopped.

"Give me that!" Patricia snatched the shard. Half a white price sticker clung to it: "Harbour Mar."

She laughed, too loudly. "A sticker! Dealers put stickers on everything, idiot. Fake? You think a man who sleeps with the dogs knows antiques?"

"I didn't say fake," Alex said. "You did."

Cordelia snorted. Marissa looked at the shard, then at Patricia, and then at the shard again.

Serena's voice came out level, her bench voice.

"Patricia. Where did Grandma buy it?"

"What?"

"Grandma's million-dollar vase. Where did she buy it?"

"From a dealer," Patricia said. "In the capital. Obviously."

"Which dealer?"

"How should I know which dealer? She doesn't tell me where she shops."

"When?" Serena asked.

"Years ago!"

"For which birthday?" Serena said.

Patricia's mouth opened, and shut again.

"Harbour Mar," Marissa read slowly, leaning over the shard in Patricia's fist. "Harbour Mar... Harbour Market? Isn't that the place on the quay with the plastic buckets?"

"It's a dealer's mark, Auntie!"

"I bought a mop there," Marissa said. "It had a sticker just like that."

"It does look a little like the ones on the quay," Gideon said, very quietly.

Everyone turned to look at him. He went red and stared at his shoes.

"Pay, Serena," Patricia snapped. "Now. Or I call the police, and you can ask them about stickers."

Serena looked at the phone in her hand. Then she looked up at her cousin.

"Call them," she said.

"What?"

"Call the police, Patricia. Let them read the sticker."

Patricia's hand went to her bleeding nose. She had nothing to say.

"Can I fix it?" Alex asked brightly. "I can do puzzles. I need eggs."

"Eggs!" Marissa cried. "Who pays for the eggs?"

"Let him," Serena said.

"Oh, let him," Patricia said. "Let the whole house see what she married. Uncle

Gideon, fetch the idiot his eggs."

Gideon came back with four eggs and an old newspaper.

Alex cracked dan egg on the step and got the yolk on his sleeve. The wet smell of raw egg rose off the stones. Somebody giggled. While they watched the yolk, his old phone was in his other hand behind the dog's bowl, for one second.

"Natasha," he breathed into it. "The yard. Now."

Then he was just the idiot again, humming over his newspaper and egg.

"Nearly done," he said. "It's an easy puzzle. Somebody already did it once."

"Look at him," Cordelia said. "Making mud pies."

"Is he going to eat it?" Marissa asked.

"Nothing would surprise me," said Cordelia.

"I'm not hungry," Alex said, without looking up. "Well. A little."

The house laughed. Then, slowly, it stopped.

The vase was standing.

It leaned, held by paper and egg, but it stood. And down its side ran old brown lines of glue that were not his.

"Glue?" Patricia's voice cracked. "You smeared it. You did that, idiot."

Alex patted the vase kindly, as if it were the dog.

"It's fake," he said. "The dog's bowl is older."

"Fake!" Patricia shrieked. "You don't know anything! Nobody in this yard knows anything!"

A car door slammed out in the lane.

A long black car stood beyond the yard gate. Natasha Vale walked into the yard as if she owned it.

"Ms. Vale!" Marissa gasped, and tore the last curler out of her hair. "Would you like some tea? We have tea. We pay for it, but we have it."

"Halcyon's Ms. Vale?" Cordelia whispered. "Here? Gideon, put your glasses away, you look poor."

"I came for Halcyon's perfumer," Natasha said.

Her eyes went to Serena, to the grit in her hair, to the stick on the stones, to

Patricia's swelling red nose.

She said nothing at all.

Patricia kicked the stick behind her skirt and smiled through the blood.

"Ms. Vale! What perfect timing," she cried. "You know the coast's treasures better than anyone..

Please. Telly family what velné is worth. She broke it."

vase

The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 827

Natasha Vale did not answer at once.

She walked past Patricia as if she were a puddle and looked at the vase for exactly one breath.

"A market copy," she said. "A few dollars."

"That's a lie!" Patricia cried. Then she remembered who she was talking to. "I mean... with respect, Ms. Vale, you've hardly looked at it."

Natasha's eyes moved along the brown lines under the newspaper.

"Broken once already," she said. "And glued. Badly."

"I did say somebody already did the puzzle," Alex said brightly.

He wandered over to the old door and began to swing it like a bored child. In, and back. In, and back. The old latch clanked.

"It only goes this way," he told Gideon. "In. See? It's a silly door."

Natasha watched it swing inward, away from the step.

"And that door never touched it," she said. "It opens into the room. Somebody stood outside and dropped this on the step."

Every face in the yard turned to Patricia.

"You knocked," Serena said quietly. "You called my name. 'Serena, darling, are you there?' And when I opened the door, you screamed."

"That's not..." Patricia's face had gone the colour of paper. "That's not what happened, I..."

"What is going on in my yard?"

The Baroness Imelda Tiffany stood at the yard gate on her cane, in black, come out to stare at the black car in the lane.

Her eyes went from Natasha, to Patricia's nose, to the stick, to the vase. They narrowed.

"Is that the vase I gave you?"

"Grandma!" Patricia almost ran to her. "Tell them what you paid for it! Serena broke it, and now they're saying..."

"I bought it at the harbour market," said the Baroness. "Forty dollars. For your birthday, Patricia. Three years ago." Her cane tapped the cobbles. "And you broke it the same week, and cried, and glued it yourself. I remember, because you used my good glue."

The yard held its breath. Only the old dog moved, scratching in its straw.

Then Marissa shrieked.

"Forty dollars!" She clutched Gideon's arm so hard he winced. "Forty dollars! And I nearly let her pay the whole million for it!"

"You did let her, dear," Gideon said faintly.

"I nearly let her!"

Cordelia took a long, careful step away from Patricia. "Well," she said to nobody. "I always thought that vase was hideous."

"It was," Gideon agreed, and everyone turned to look at him, and he went pink.

Serena closed the banking app and slid the phone into her pocket. The million had never left.

"Halcyon's money," Natasha said, "stays where Halcyon sent it."

"And she swung that stick at Serena!" Marissa burst out. "At her legs! And it came round and hit her in the face!"

Natasha turned at last to Patricia, calm as still water.

"Miss Tiffany. You hold Halcyon's contract for this house. You also raised a stick to Halcyon's perfumer in front of four witnesses." She glanced at the dog. "Five. Halcyon does not work with a woman who does that. Your name is off our list forever until I say otherwise."

"You can't," Patricia whispered. "Grandma. She can't."

The Baroness was adding something up: the house's Halcyon money, the coast's richest door, and her granddaughter, bleeding, in the middle of the sum.

"Kneel, girl," the Baroness said.

Patricia stared. "What?"

"You heard me. The same words you used, I imagine. Kneel to your cousin and apologise. Then we will discuss whether you still live in my house."

"Grandma, please... where would I even go?"

"The harbour market sells buckets," said the Baroness. "I hear they're profitable. You can try it."

Patricia's knees folded onto the blue and white chips still scattered on the stones, in front of the whole yard.

"I'm sorry," she said to the stones.

"To her face," said the Baroness.

Patricia lifted her streaming eyes to Serena, who was standing. "I'm sorry, Serena."

Serena breathed in, once.

"Get up, Patricia," she said. "You'll ruin what's left of your silk."

She turned away. The first person she looked for was not her father, not the Baroness, not Halcyon's Ms. Vale.

It was the idiot, still swinging the garage-wing door, humming.

Natasha left the way she had come, without one glance at him.

That night the garage wing smelled of soup and ointment. One yellow bulb hung over the two narrow beds.

He had changed the dressing on her back with his eyes shut, the way she made him.

"Did they hurt you?" Alex asked.

"No, Patricia hurt herself with a stick she was holding in both hands,

II use strane

Serena pulled her blouse over the fresh bandage. "Sticks don't usually turn round like that

"It was a very wet morning," he said seriously. "Everything slips."

"Was it."

"Everything." He nodded. "Even vases."

She watched him try, badly, to fold his old jacket.

"Alex," she said. "Thank you for swinging the door."

"It's a silly door," he said.

"Dad spoke up today," Serena said. "Twice. He agreed with Aunt Cordelia about the vase."

"He has curlers," Alex said wisely.

"Those are Marissa's."

"Oh." He thought about it. "Serena?"

"Mm?"

He put a small box in her hands. Dark blue velvet, a little crushed from a day inside his jacket.

"For the broken one," he said.

She opened it.

The jade lay on its velvet like a drop of clear water. A single pale green bead on a chain so fine it looked like light The kind of thing she woule have chosen herself

Her eyes filled, and this time she let them.

"This is from Larkspur's," she said, very low. "I know their boxes. Alex, this is worth more than everything in this room."

"Is it?" He scratched his head. "I found it."

"You found it."

"It was looking for you," he said simply.

She laughed, wet and helpless, and pressed the box to her chest. Then she breathed in.

Under the velvet, faint as a memory, she caught it. The scent she had smelled in the dark at

Halade banquet, and on the night the lights died. The scent of the one who came for her when nobody else did.

Cedar. And salt.

Serena went very still.

"Alex," she whispered. "Where did you get this?"

The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 828

Alex looked at the little blue box in her hands as if he had never seen it before.

"A kind lady gave it to me," he said.

"A kind lady? Why?"

"For being good." He nodded hard, pleased with the answer. "She said I was very good."

"Very good at what?"

"Standing still," he said proudly. "I'm the best at it."

It was true. She could hear that it was true. And it sounded exactly like a child's lie.

Then she closed the box. She did not ask again.

"Will you put it on me?" she said instead. "My hands are still stiff."

She turned her back to him, careful of the bandage, and lifted her hair. His fingers fumbled at the clasp. Once. Twice. He dropped the end down the back of her collar.

"Alex, it's a clasp. It isn't a lock."

"It's a tiny clasp," he said, keeping a straight face. "Clearly meant for a lady with dainty hands. My big paws are struggling here, so be patient with me while we work on our truce."

She laughed before she could stop it. The clasp closed with a tiny click. The jade settled cold in the hollow of her throat, then warm.

"There," he said. "Now it's found you."

He was quiet for a while, folding his jacket the wrong way. Then he brightened.

"And the kind woman says I can work."

"What kind woman?"

"Ms. Vale." He said it carefully, like a word he had practised. "From Halcyon. She says I can work at Halcyon. Security. Because I need to earn money."

Serena turned round so fast that her back pulled under the bandage.

"Security? Alex, you're afraid of the dark."

"I'll stand where the lights are."

She stared at him. He looked back, perfectly serious.

"That's... actually a very good plan," she admitted.

"I thought of it myself."

"And what does a Halcyon guard do?"

"Stands," he said. "And says good morning. And doesn't touch anything." He counted on his fingers and ran out at three. "She said they'll pay it to you. Not me."

"To me? Why?"

"Because I lose things."

"You do lose things," Serena said slowly. "You lost a shoe last week. One shoe. How do you lose one shoe?"

"It went for a walk."

It was the most sensible arrangement anybody in the Tiffany house had made all year.

The jade at her throat. Halcyon's Ms. Vale in the yard this morning, saving her a million dollars without one glance at him. And now a job, paid into Serena's own hand.

A kindness to Halcyon's perfumer, she told herself. That was all.

She set the two things side by side in her mind, like two cups on a high shelf. And left them there.

"Ms. Vale is a good woman," she said softly.

"She's very strict," Alex said. "She told me my jacket was a disgrace."

"Your jacket is a disgrace."

"It's my only one."

Morning came grey over the kennels. The old hound with the torn ear lifted its head as he came out.

"My first day at work," Alex told it.

The hound thumped its tail once. It did not look impressed.

Behind the kennel wall, under a loose brick, an old phone lay in a tin box. One message.

Morgan House asks for God's Hand. Today. The car is at the end of the lane. N. "If anyone asks," he told the dog, "I'm standing where the lights are."

Calder smelled of rain and coal smoke and money. Every servant on the Morgan steps bowed to the white mask as it went past.

Thomas Morgan was sitting up in bed with colour in his face and a newspaper. "There he is," the old count said. "The man with mask. Rebecca, he's here." "I can see him, Father."

Rebecca stood at the window in grey silk. She came across the room to take the mask's coat herself, and the maid by the door nearly dropped her tray.

There were two more men in the room.

The first sat in the best chair by the bed, broad and old and sunburned, white hair cut short as a soldier's, a gold ring on each hand and a glass of brandy on his knee.

The second stood behind him, pink and smiling, in a clean white coat. Dr. Henry Foster.

"So," said the man in the chair. "This is the magician."

"Count Roger Stone of Ashcliff," Rebecca said, flat as a bill. "My father's oldest friend. He came to see the miracle."

"I came to see the fraud." The Count looked the mask up and down. "Thomas. You.

Of all men. A count of the Empire, letting a man in a mask stick pins in you?"

"He kept me alive, Roger," said Thomas Morgan.

"Your heart mended on its own. Henry says so."

"I do say so," said Foster warmly. "I did warn Miss Morgan. Village pins. The body heals, and the man with the pins takes a bow."

"You ate a bowl of garlic for saying that, Doctor," Rebecca said.

Foster's smile stayed where it was. Only his ears went red.

"Henry's wing has a new patron," the Count said, tipping his glass. "Since your family stopped paying, my dear. I don't let good men starve over a woman's temper."

"How generous."

"I believe in what I can buy, Thomas. Ships. Land Doctors with letters after their names. I've never yet met a thing couldn't. Not a healer. Not a holy man. Not a mask He held out, his empty glass toward Rebecca without looking at her. "The girl's fallen for a costume."

Rebecca looked at the glass.

"Fill your own glass, Uncle Roger," she said. "And shut up."

Thomas Morgan laughed so hard he had to hold his chest.

"Don't laugh, Father. Your heart."

"My heart is fine! He just said so!"

"Then don't laugh anyway."

God's Hand laid out his needles on a white cloth and went to the bed. Wrist. Throat.

Under the ribs.

"Good," the mask said. "Another week in bed. No brandy."

"No brandy!"

"None."

"Diagnosis by staring," the Count snorted.

God's Hand rolled up the white cloth. Then he turned the blank face on the Count. The sunburn. The yellow at the edge of the eyes. The left hand resting low on the right side as it had for years.

"Three days," the mask said. "Then you'll come looking for me."

For one breath nobody spoke.

Then the Count laughed, a big laugh that turned into a cough, and the cough went on a little too long.

"Did you hear that, Henry? He's a fortune teller too."

"Wonderful," said Foster. "Shall I write it up for the journals?"

Rebecca turned from the window.

"A bet, then, Uncle Roger. You like bets. If he's right, you go to him. Yourself. And you ask him nicely."

"And if he's wrong?"

"Name it."

The Count smiled at Foster. "If he's wrong, your father pays for Henry's wing again.

Every bed. Ten years."

Rebecca glanced at her father.

Thomas Morgan offered a thin smile. "Agreed. But what's my cut if he turns out to be right?"

"Name your price."

"I've always admired your medical firm."

"Sure. I'll win this bet easily."

"I'm sorry," Alex interrupted suddenly. "It's not three days."

The Count barked a laugh. "Scared already? You can't take your words back now, scammer."

"I just meant to say my diagnosis was wrong realized it when you laughed just now-it's not three days It's two. You'd better start writing your will so your childre don't tear each other apart over your

Complete silence fell over the room.

The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 829

The Seacrest stood on the Westmere cliff like a white ship that had run aground and decided to stay. Its roof restaurant hung over the bay, all glass and little gold lamps.

On the second evening, Count Roger Stone of Ashcliff gave a dinner there.

Everybody came. The harbour families. Two barons from up the coast. The mayor, who had not missed a free dinner in eleven years.

At the Count's right hand, pink and shining, sat Dr. Henry Foster. At the far end of the table, alone, in black, sat Rebecca Morgan. She had not touched her wine.

The Count rose and tapped his glass with a gold ring.

"Friends. Yesterday morning, a man in a mask stood at Thomas Morgan's bed and told me I was dying."

A ripple of laughter.

"First he gave me three days. Then he looked at me again and took one back." He spread his big sunburned hands. "Two days, he said. Go home and write your will, he said, so your children don't fight over the silver."

The roof roared.

"My children," said the Count, "will be waiting for that silver another forty years!"

He lifted his glass high, so the lamps shone through the red.

"Tomorrow morning his two days are up. And the Count of Ashcliff is fit as a fiddle!"

The roof laughed and clapped. The mayor banged the table so hard his soup jumped.

"As I told you all," said Foster, rising with a modest little bow. "A fraud with a mask. Pins and smoke and long words. And a frightened family pays."

"To Dr. Foster!" someone called. "The only doctor on the coast who tells the truth!"

"What did he look like, Roger?" one of the barons called. "The mask?"

"Like a dinner plate with a man behind it." The Count held his napkin up over his face.

The roof howled.

"Did he charge you for that?" the mayor wheezed.

"He charges Thomas Morgan," said the Count. "A great deal, I'm told. For pins. I'd pay him myself to stick a few in the mayor. It might stop him eating."

Even Foster laughed at that. He laughed longest.

"Rebecca, my dear," the Count called down the table. "You've gone quiet. Shall I have the bank papers sent to your father in the morning? Henry's wing. Every bed. Ten years."

Rebecca put down her napkin.

"And if he's right, Uncle Roger, my father takes your medical firm. You shook on it. Don't forget."

"My firm," said the Count, "is as safe as my liver."

"There are still twelve hours," Rebecca said.

"Twelve hours!" He laughed. "Then I'll spend them drinking to your health."

"I'm sure you will," Rebecca said. "He said you would."

The Count's smile tightened at the corners. Then he laughed again, louder, and drank the whole glass in one go.

The Count did not go home.

He went hotel to celebrate. Two young women from the Seacrest bar came up the cliff in his car, giggling at the gold taps, the ship paintings, the bed the size of a boat.

"Fit as a fiddle," the Count told them, and loosened his collar. "You heard me say it. The whole coast heard me."

The first one slid her dress off one shoulder. The second reached for her zip. Both naked.

That was when it hit him.

Under the ribs. Right side. Low. The same place the mask had looked at. A pin, sharp as a needle, pushed in all the way, and then turned. Slowly, the way a man turns a key in a stiff lock.

The Count made a sound like a kettle and went down on the carpet.

The two women looked at each other. Then at him, curled on the rug in his silk shirt.

"Oh my," said the first one. "We just opened our clothes, and you already can't hold it?"

"Did you cum just from seeing people naked?" said the second, and started to laugh.

"I'm sick." The Count's face was wet. His voice came out thin and high. "Please. Call someone. I'm sick."

They stopped laughing.

A man who is playing does not go that colour. The first one grabbed her dress. The second one ran for the stairs, shouting for the servants.

Foster arrived eleven minutes later, his white coat flapping over his dinner suit. He stepped round a woman's shoe in the doorway and did not ask.

"Now, now, Roger. Rich food. Cold wind. Too much excitement." He held a syringe up to the lamp. "A muscle in spasm, nothing more. I see it every day."

The needle went in.

"There," said Foster. "It is done."

Ten minutes later the Count leaned over the side of the bed and was sick into a silver ice bucket.

"Henry. Why is it getting worse?"

"That's not possible." Foster stared at the empty syringe as if it had cheated him. "That is a very good injection."

"It's worse!"

"A stronger one, then. A slightly stronger one." Foster filled the second syringe too fast and squirted half of it onto the butler's shoe

"Hold still, Roger, you're making this very difficult."

"Because I'm dying, Henry!"

"Nobody is dying. Hold still."

The second needle went in.

For thirty seconds, nothing. Then the Count folded in half on the big bed and could not get his breath at all.

"Henry. What did you just do?"

"Nothing! The same thing! It's the same medicine!" Foster had turned the colour of cold porridge There is nothing wrong with you. Your heart is strong. Your blood is good. I examined you myself last spring!"

"Then why does it feel like somebody is turning a knife in me?"

For the first time in thirty years, the most famous doctor in the Empire had no answer at all.

The butler had to dial for him. The phone rang four times.

"Uncle Roger." Rebecca's voice was perfectly calm. Behind it, music. She was still on the roof. "It's very late."

"Rebecca, I'm..."

"What's wrong?" A pause. "Do you need the washroom?"

The butler made a small sound and turned it into a cough.

"I'm dying, girl!"

"Are you? How strange. You were fit as a fiddle an hour ago. Everyone heard you."

"Henry's injected me twice, and it's worse every time!"

"Then stop letting him inject you."

"Rebecca, please." The word came out of him like a tooth. "Your mask. Where is he?"

"He isn't my mask. And he told you two days. In my father's room. He even told you to write your will, and you laughed." Her voice did not rise at all."don't carry messages for men who laugh at my father's healer. That was the bet uncle Roger. You go to him yourself. And you ask nicely."

"I don't know where he is!"

"Then you'd better start looking. You have until morning."

The line went dead.

Foster was sitting on the end of the bed now, his black bag open on his knees, reading the label on a little bottle very closely, as if it might change.

"Roger," he said faintly. "Perhaps a hospital..."

"Shut up, Henry." The Count got one foot on the floor. "Get me to the car."

They carried him down between them, the butler and the most famous doctor in the Empire, and laid him on the back seat.

The Count of Ashcliff, who had never believed in anything he could not buy, lay folded on the leather, sweating through the finest silk shirt on the coast.

"Where to, sir?" the driver's voice broke the quiet.

The Count kept his eyes shut, his expression carved in stone. "Find the mask."

The driver swallowed, holding his tongue.

There was no destination, no address.

Hoping to diffuse the ticking bomb in the back seat, he pointed the car toward the nightclub strip, putting on a show of searching.

Dammit, what mask?

This is insane.

The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 830

The nightclub strip was all neon and noise. Men in paper masks with glitter on them spilled out of doorways, singing.

"Not those!" The Count was grey on the back seat, one hand under his ribs. "A white one. A doctor. Find me the doctor!"

A young man in a white party mask stumbled past the car. The Count threw the door open and caught him by the sleeve.

"You! Are you a doctor?"

The young man pushed up his mask. Under it he was about nineteen, and very drunk. "I'm an accountant, mister."

The Count let go and fell back on the seat.

The driver rang every number in the Count's phone. Barons. Bankers. The mayor, who answered with his mouth full. Nobody knew the mask's name. Nobody had ever seen his face.

At last a Morgan footman picked up, half asleep. "The mask, sir? He comes and goes with one woman. A Ms. Vale. From Halcyon."

"Halcyon." The Count opened his eyes. "Drive. Run every light." They ran four.

At that hour the Harbour Exchange was asleep. One bright lamp burned in the empty hall, and beneath it stood the new guard on the night shift, in a Halcyon jacket two sizes too big.

"Good evening," he said, to a pot plant, because there was nobody else.

The glass doors banged open. The Count came through them like weather, bent over his own ribs, a bodyguard the size of a wardrobe half a step ahead.

"Good evening," said the new guard.

The bodyguard put one palm on his chest and moved him aside like a coat stand. "Out of the way, idiot."

The guard bumped gently into the pot plant.

Natasha Vale was waiting on the top floor. "Count Stone. He said you'd come tonight. He didn't say you'd run."

In a bare white room, gloved hands on his knees, sat the white mask.

The Count lurched in and grabbed the table. "What did you do to me? I was fine! Sixty years, I was fine! You looked at me, and two days later... You poisoned me!"

"You poured your own glass," said the mask. "Rebecca told you to."

"Fix it!"

"No. This is not the way of people asking for help."

The bodyguard leaned over the table. "Listen to me, you little masked rat. Fix him. Right now. Or you'll regret the day you were born."

"Whatever pity I have just gone by your arrogant," Alex said quietly. "Find someone else. Get out."

The bodyguard swung. A big flat open hand, straight at the side of the mask.

It never landed.

Because the big man suddenly flew backward and hit the wall.

Then the door flew open, and a hand came round from nowhere and struck him across the face so hard the sound cracked off the white walls. The bodyguard sat down on the carpet, legs out, like a toddler who has forgotten how standing works. Rebecca Morgan stood over him in her black dinner dress, shaking out her fingers. "Raise a hand to him again, and you raise it to the Morgans." She turned. "I knew you'd come here, Uncle Roger. I left my dessert for this. Was that it? Asking nicely?"

The pain turned under the Count's ribs, and he shut his mouth.

"Get him out," the mask said. "I will never heal this arrogant man."

"I'll go to the hospitals!" the Count shouted as they took his arms. "Real doctors! And when they find what you've done to me, I'll have this building pulled down!"

"The hospitals are very good," said Alex. "Tell them where it hurts."

Three hospitals in one hour.

Calder Royal, Foster himself at the machines in his dinner suit: "There is nothing there, Roger. I've looked four times." Harbour General: "Your scans are perfect, sir. I wish mine were." The new hospital by the river, where a young doctor with tired eyes asked very politely, "Sir, are you sure the pain is in your body?"

The Count threw a water jug at the wall.

"Was that a yes, sir?"

By half past eleven he could not sit up in the car. He sent the bodyguard home. He sent Foster home, and Foster went without arguing. That was the worst sign of all.

Midnight struck from the harbour tower.

The Count Teaned on the glass doors of the Harbour Exchange with his whole weight, and they swung dowion.

inward, and be nearly went down the marble. The hall was empty. One bright lamp. One pot plant.

Roger Stone, who owned ships and cliffs and half a coast, stood alone in the doorway, holding the frame with both hands so he would not fall.

"Please," he said to the empty hall.

The lift came down by itself.

Natasha took his arm. He had never let a woman take his arm in his life.

Upstairs the mask sat where it had sat two hours before. By the window stood Rebecca.

The Count sat down hard. "I was..." He stopped. "I was perhaps a little hasty. Make mistake. You are a doctor, right? Why not just do your job."

Nothing.

The pain turned, and the old count came up through the sick man like a whale through water.

"Now you listen to me. I'm a count of this coast. My house. My ships. My men. If I die at your door tonight, every one of them will know whose door it was."

"Then die at someone else's," said Alex.

Not angry. The way a man says the shop is closed.

"Money, then." The Count's voice cracked. "Ten times your f*e. Twenty."

"He has no interest in money, Count," Natasha said. "Your money is worth nothing for him."

Rebecca turned from the glass. "You called him a swindler at my father's bed. With my father lying in it. You called the a girl an me who'd fallen f costume. And you held out your glass for me to fill as if I were a maid."

The Count pushed himself up and began, painfully, to lower one knee to the floor.

"Don't." It stopped him halfway.

"Not to me," said Alex.

The mask turned, slowly, to the tall woman by the window.

"Say it to her."

The Count of Ashcliff straightened. It cost him. For the first time in her life, Rebecca watched her father's oldest friend look at her as if she mattered.

"I was wrong," he said roughly. "You were right."

"Thank you, Uncle Roger. That's all I wanted." Then she smiled. It was not a kind smile. "Well. Almost all. My father's cut first. You shook on it in his room. Father takes your medical firm."

The Count closed his eyes. "Thomas always wanted that firm."

"And you have quite a lot of property on the coast. The Seacrest, for instance."

"The Seacrest!" He nearly fell out of the chair. "That hotel is worth a billion dollars!"

The mask tilted, very slightly. "And you are worth?"

The Count opened his mouth. Nothing came out.

"Halcyon accepts the Seacrest," said

Natasha. She had a pen and a folded paper, and it was clear she had had them both since morning. "Every room every table, every bottle in the cellar. And your life is owed to Halcyon, Count. Halcyon will call it one day."

"Fine! Take the hotel! Just make it stop!"

Alex opened a little box. Inside lay one pill, small and black and lumpy, like something a goat had left on a path.

"I gave a hotel," said the Count, "for something that looks like that?"

"You can give it back. The hotel. Not the pain."

He swallowed it. A slow warmth spread under his ribs, the way the sun comes into a cold room. The knife stopped turning.

"What was it?" he whispered. "Three hospitals found nothing."

"A stone, in the gall. Hiding behind the liver. Thirty years of brandy sitting on it like a lid. Your doctor's needle opened the duct when it should have closed it. Twice."

The Count said a word no count of the Empire should say in front of a lady. "Henry Foster will never see another dollar of mine."

"Karma is a surgeon, Count," Alex said. "She always gets the last cut."

The Count managed to push himself to his feet. "Then I owe you. Not Halcyon. You.

Ask me for whatever you want."

Alex smiled faintly.

To claim the imperial throne, he needed to siphon as much loyalty from the nobility as possible.

Right now, two of the realm's counts were already firmly in his pocket.

One by one, piece by piece, the entire empire would eventually be his.