The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 731

The car didn't stop at the gatehouse.

Every noble estate Wren had ever visited stopped guests there - logged them, walked them in on foot.

House Draven's driver didn't even slow down. The grounds kept unfolding after that, the way grounds only do when a house wants you to know exactly how small you are.

Beasts lined the drive. Not chained. Stationed — the way soldiers stand post.

Horned things the size of draft horses flanked a fountain. Something long and scaled coiled along a garden wall, one eye open, watching her pass. Further back, near the trees, shapes she didn't have names for and didn't want to guess at.

House Draven didn't just have a guardian bond. House Draven had an army wearing fur and scales, standing at attention.

A steward met her — not at the front doors. A side entrance. Past a hallway of portraits she didn't recognize, the air gone hushed and wrong, the kind of quiet built to remind visitors they'd already gone somewhere they weren't invited.

Wrong. Something in her chest said it plainly. Visitors go to the front room. You're being taken somewhere else.

She kept walking anyway. Alex's life was the reason she was here. That math hadn't changed just because the hallway had.

Lord Draven received her in a private study, not an office.

Low light. A fire already burning despite the hour. Tea already poured, already going cold, in a cup that wasn't hers.

He rose when she entered composed, unhurried, dressed like a man with nowhere urgent to be. Every account she'd ever heard of him, confirmed in one glance.

"Ms. Calder." He gestured to the chair across from him. "Thank you for coming." "You said this could end with words." She didn't sit. "So say them."

"Direct. I appreciate that." He folded his hands. "There was never a deal about your outsider. I want to be honest with you this morning, since honesty's in short supply and someone should provide it."

Cold moved through her chest. "David said—"

"David said what I paid him to say." His voice never rose. That was the worst part. He could've been discussing the weather.

"Useful sort of man. Cheap. Thorough. Too pleased with himself to notice he's being used. Remember that later — if there's a later where it matters to you."

"Then what is this?"

"A wedding." Plain, like a formality. "You'll marry my son."

Wren almost laughed. "Edmund can't hold a bond. He's finished as an heir by your own house's law. You told the healers that yourself."

"He's finished as a warrior." Lord Draven's eyes didn't waver. "Not as a Draven. A wife from House Calder repairs what your outsider cost me — legitimacy, standing, the story this district tells about who won that banquet. Whatever it takes to make that marriage happen, Ms. Calder, I intend to take."

"I'll die first."

"You won't." Almost sympathy in it. "People rarely do. They arrive at yes eventually by whatever road gets them there."

He studied her a moment too long. Something shifted behind his eyes — a different kind of attention. It landed on her like a hand.

"Though I confess." He stood, slow. "Now that I have you in front of me, I find myself reconsidering the arrangement."

"What are you talking about."

"My son never deserved you. I'm not sure I do either. I find I mind that a great deal less." He came around the desk, unhurried, the way a man crosses a room he already owns.

"There are advantages to deciding how a story ends, Ms. Calder. I could keep you for myself. Let Edmund have someone else. Who in this district would question me for it?"

"Stay back." Her voice came out steadier than she felt.

"I don't think I will."

He moved fast-faster than she'd braced for. His hand closed on her wrist before she'd finished stepping back, fingers digging in hard enough to bruise. He yanked her forward so their faces were inches apart, breath hot against her cheek.

"You think that little show of spirit changes anything?" His grip tightened. "I could have you on that desk right now and no one would stop me. No one would even ask questions."

She twisted hard, wrenching free with strength she didn't know she had until the moment demanded it. The chair went over between them with a crash.

Then she ran.

The office had a bath through a side door. She didn't know why. Didn't care why. Only grateful it existed, and had a lock.

She threw the bolt and put her back against it a half second before something heavy hit the other side.

"Ms. Calder." Still composed. Only the faintest edge under it now. "This is undignified. For both of us."

Her hands shook too hard to feel steady. They worked well enough to pull out her phone and dial.

One ring.

"Alex-" The word cracked, too fast, half a sob she didn't have time for. "Alex, I need help- David sent me here, he said it was settled, he said Lord Draven would let it go, and it wasn't real, none of it was real, they tried to—"

The door shuddered. A crack split up through the frame.

"Where are you?" Flat. Immediate. No wasted words. "Wren. Where."

"I'm in a bathroom-"

The door came apart. Not opened apart. Wood and hinge scattering across tile. Lord Draven stood in the wreckage with his composure finally, entirely gone.

He crossed the room in two strides and tore the phone from her hand before she could finish the sentence. Alex's voice kept coming through it, sharp and rising, asking her something she never got to answer.

Lord Draven looked at the screen just long enough to understand what he was holding.

Then he dropped it and brought his heel down once, hard. The voice on the other end went silent, along with everything else.

Jennifer picked up on the first ring.

"I need David's location," Alex said. "Now."

"What happened—"

"Wren." One word. It was enough.

A pause. One beat where he could hear her deciding not to ask the rest of the questions she had Then, is registered residences Ashwell district, third house past the fountain square. I'll send Wardens."

"I'll handle David myself." He was already moving.

"Alex-"

He'd already hung up.

Alex didn't remember most of the ride. He remembered the sound cutting out on the other end of the call. The half second of silence after. Nothing else about the world felt urgent by comparison.

David's house had music playing before Alex reached the door. He didn't knock.

The door came off its hinges by the kick.

David didn't have time to reach for a robe before Alex had him by the throat, off the bed entirely.

Two women scattered off the sheets, screaming, grabbing for anything that covered them. Neither of them mattered enough for Alex to look at twice.

"Where," Alex said.

"What—what is this—" David's feet hung a foot off the ground. "You can't just—" Alex's grip tightened. "Where is she."

"I don't—"

The first blow was almost gentle, by what Alex was capable of. It still put David through the headboard.

"I'll ask twice," Alex said. "Once more after this. Where is Wern!"

David spat blood. Something in his face finally understood the arithmetic of the room. "Lord Draven's." The words came fast now, all the composure gone.

"House" Draven is family seat east district. I didn't know he'd I only did what he paid me for. Þdidn't know what he wanted her for—"

Alex let him drop.

David hit the floor and stayed there, curling around ribs that weren't broken yet. Something in his face twisted into triumph even through the pain the ugly satisfaction of a

—

man with nothing left to lose who wants company on the way down.

"You're going anyway, aren't you." He laughed, wet and thin. "Of course you are.

Go, then. Go right now, hero."

He spat blood again, grinning through it. "You know what's waiting for you there? Three hundred men in that house. Three hundred beasts guarding it — guardian- tier, half of them.

The kind of thing that doesn't lose.

Lord Draven's been building that garrison twenty years, waiting for a war that never came."

He laughed again. This time it cracked in the middle, half hysteria.

"I wanted you dead the moment you crippled Edmund." David said. "I just didn't think I'd get to watch."

Alex didn't answer him.

He turned and walked out through the ruined door. Behind him, David kept laughing on the floor. Alone. Nobody had stayed to hear it.

The road east ran straight, then climbed. Alex walked all of it on foot. No driver in the district would take a fare toward House Draven this morning. Not for any price offered.

He didn't need one. He knew the way.

Ahead, past the last bend in the hills, the house was already visible. Wings spreading farther than a man could walk in a day. Lights burning gold in windows that shouldn't have needed lighting yet.

Around the whole vast shape of it, if he looked, he could already make out shapes standing very still along the wall.

Six hundred, David had said. Men and beasts both, waiting behind that wall for a war that had finally arrived.

Alex didn't slow down.

The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 732

The front doors of House Draven stood nine feet tall, oak banded in iron, built for a siege that never came.

Nobody had shut them against an enemy in four generations.

Alex shut them now.

He dropped the iron bar across the frame one-handed — a beam three grown men were supposed to need — and set it in its cradle like he was latching a gate behind livestock.

No ceremony. No effort.

The sound rolled down every hallway in the house.

Somewhere in the east corridor, a voice called out, asking who'd closed the doors. Nobody answered.

Alex rolled his shoulders once and started walking.

In the great hall, Lord Draven wasn't worried yet. "So, the man you called has come?"

Wren sat bound in a chair at the center of the floor, two guards behind her. Draven stood at the window, hands folded behind his back.

"You should understand what's about to happen," he said, "so you don't waste the next hour hoping."

Wren said nothing. Her wrists were raw from the rope. Her jaw stayed locked.

"Look around you. Three hundred men. Three hundred beasts. A hundred and forty of them guardian-tier-more than the Wardens field in this whole district. I spent twenty years building this. The city fears my name for a reason. And you actually believed one man could come here and save you?"

A horn sounded outside. Then another, farther off.

"There he is." Draven turned from the window, almost pleased. "Want to know how this ends? He gets forty feet past the wall. Something with four hundred pounds of jaw takes his legs out from under him. My men finish it. By tonight, it's a story about what happens to men who cripple my son."

A runner burst into the hall. "My lord. The outer line—"

"I know. Report when it's finished."

The runner didn't move. "My lord. It is finished."

"Good."

"No, my lord." His voice cracked. "Ours are finished."

"What? Impossible!"

For four minutes, reports kept coming. Then they stopped. That was worse.

Wren sat with her hands bound in her lap and listened to House Draven die, one wing at a time.

She'd expected it to sound like a battle-surges, lulls, back-and-forth. This had no rhythm at all. Just sound, moving through the building.

It would land somewhere, men would shout, something would scream in a register no beast should make — then silence. And the silence never left. The sound just moved on, closer.

Men ran toward it. Nothing ever ran back.

Draven stopped talking around the fourth minute.

He'd sent for his household guard - the expensive ones, the ones too valuable to ever waste on a normal post.

But they'd stopped reporting too.

Noise erupted right outside the hall. Loud. Close.

Then nothing.

"My lord." The last guard by the door had nothing left in his voice. "You should run."

The doors didn't open. They came off their hinges - both leaves torn free at once, slamming flat across the marble. A body rode them in and skidded to a stop against a pillar. It didn't move again.

Alex walked in over the wreckage.

He looked no different from any passerby. His breathing remained unchanged. Five swords drifted around him in a loose circle, hanging in the air like they were already aimed, ready to cut down anyone who approached.

The two guards behind Wren's chair bolted for the servant's door. Alex didn't even look at them. Whatever waited in that corridor finished the job in about four seconds.

"You—" Draven's voice broke. He cleared his throat. It broke again. "How many."

"I didn't count."

"Three hundred men-"

"I know how many there were." Alex kept walking. "There aren't now." Draven hadn't raised his voice at another person in thirty years. He'd silenced his own son's healers with a look. That same morning, he'd made a terrified retainer thank him for a death sentence. Now he took a step back — and couldn't stop himself.

He'd made a mistake. He understood that now, all the way down. The mistake had started around ten o'clock this morning, and there was no road back from it.

"Kaida!" he shouted.

The thing that came through the far archway had been his bond for forty-one years. It had to fold itself just to fit.

When it straightened, its head brushed a chandelier eight feet up, and the whole building seemed to settle under the weight of it.

Grey armored hide. A skull like a battering ram. This wasn't a beast bred for a garrison. This was a beast a house got built around.

No noble in the district had ever seen Lord Draven's own bond on a field.

There had never been a reason to.

"Kill him," Draven said.

It hit the hall like weather.

Alex's five swords moved like lightning. They stabbed the beast before it could even register the attack. The creature never understood what had happened—five blades struck as one, and it was dead before it hit the ground.

"That's not—" Draven's hands wouldn't stop shaking. "That's not possible. Nothing in this Dominion does that. Nothing."

Draven lunged for the ancestral blade mounted on the wall - four hundred years old, the kind of weapon a house keeps to look at, not use. He got it out of the case. He even got it raised.

Alex caught the blade.

Not his wrist. The blade itself — bare hand closing around four hundred years of folded steel.

Wren watched the metal bend between his fingers like it was soft, wrong. It screamed once, a long grinding shriek, and stopped being a sword. Alex opened his hand and let it fall.

"You put your hands on her," Alex said.

"I-listen-"

Alex grabbed Draven's arm at the elbow and broke it.

The scream had nothing dignified in it. Draven dropped to one knee, cradling the arm, and Alex watched him do it with no expression at all.

"That's the hand," Alex said. "I saw the bruise on her wrist the second I walked in."

"Please." The word came out of him before he could stop it. Thirty years, and he'd never once had to say it — and it sounded exactly the same coming from him as it did from anyone else.

"Whatever you want. This house has more coin than Calder and Vayne combined. Land. Charters. Water rights across three districts. Take my seat. I'll sign it in front of witnesses-"

"No."

"Then think." Draven's voice climbed. "You think this ends with me? I don't stand alone: Nobody at my level stands alone. There's a man in this Dominion who signs every charter that makes a house a house He's held my paper for eleven years. If I die on this floor, he burn everything you've ever touched – just to make a point. Kill me, and you're not finished. You're starting."

Alex thought about that for a second.

"Good," he said. "Then let him come. My life has been far too lonely without a little drama."

He turned from Draven and looked around the hall.

Wren, still bound in the chair, watching him with an expression he didn't have time to read.

Bodies. Ruin, everywhere he looked.

And one man still standing- pressed against the wall by the servant's door. He hadn't run when the others ran. Hadn't drawn a weapon either.

Young, in a second-household coat that didn't fit right, hands open at his sides, eyes locked on Draven bleeding on the floor.

Alex had passed him on the way in and let it go. The man hadn't reached for anything.

"You." Alex looked at him. "You've been here the whole time."

The young man nodded.

"You didn't run. Do you want to save this man?"

"No, sir."

"Why not."

The young man looked at Draven, kneeling in his own blood, arm hanging wrong. Something crossed his face, slow to arrive.

"I have to kill that man with my own hands. Please grant me this wish. I swore to my mother that I would be the one to put an end to this dog's life."

Alex studied him a beat. Then crossed the floor, picked up a fallen blade, and kicked it across the marble to the young man's feet.

"Kill him," Alex said, "and everything that was his belongs to you."

The hall went dead silent.

"Rowan." Draven's head snapped up. "Don't be a fool. Boy, look at me — you know what this house is. You know what I've given you—"

"You gave me a coat." Rowan's voice came out flat, like something that had been locked in his chest for years and just got let out. "This morning. A coat, a promotion, and orders to stand in front of the district magistrate and swear to a lie."

"That was-"

"I knew what it was." Rowan bent and picked up the blade. He didn't hold it right.

Didn't matter.

"You're a servant-"

"I'm your son."

The words landed and the hall went still around them.

"My mother worked your kitchens," Rowan said, to no one, to everyone. "Seventeen years old. You rape her paid her off and put her out. She died in a boarding house when was twelve. You took me back in as staff so nobody would ask why a servant boy had your jaw Twenty years and you've never once said my name in front of company."

Draven's face had gone the color of ash.

"Edmund was three years younger than me," Rowan said. "I carried his bags to school. I carried him out of that banquet hall last night."

He glanced at Alex - not asking permission, just making sure he'd understood the offer right.

Alex said nothing.

Rowan turned back to his father.

"Wait-" Draven said. "Rowan, wait—"

He didn't wait.

It took longer than it should have. Rowan didn't know how to kill clean.

Alex let it take as long as it took.

When it was over, Rowan stood there breathing hard, blade still in his hand, staring down at the man who'd made him. He didn't look like he knew what he was supposed to feel.

"Sir." His voice shook. "I've killed the head of my own house. Now you can kill me."

He knelt and wait.

The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 733

"Get up," Alex commanded.

Rowan got up.

Alex wiped his blade once and put it away. "Listen carefully, because I'm going to say all of this exactly once."

"I am listening." Rowan straightened.

"Lord Draven died today by his own son's hand. A family matter. A grievance twenty years old. There was no outsider in this house — no outsider at the gate, no outsider on the grounds, no outsider in this hall." Alex's voice didn't change at all. "That's the only version of today that exists. Can you hold it?"

"In front of who, sir?"

"The district magistrate. The Wardens. Everyone."

Something moved across Rowan's face. It might have been the closest he'd come to a smile in a year.

"Then yes, sir. I can hold it." Rowan's voice went flat and certain. "Can you let me command the Draven house?"

Alex nodded slowly. "It is yours."

"Forty-one holdings across three districts," Rowan said. "I've kept the books on all of them since I was fifteen, because my father didn't trust a clerk and didn't consider me a person. I know every account, every debt, and every name on the payroll - including which men were loyal to him and which ones were just paid, and there are more of the second kind than he ever believed."

He was already talking faster. Something in him had been waiting years for permission to say this out loud.

"Give me a month, sir, and nobody in the Dominion will remember there was ever a question about who runs House Draven."

Alex was quiet for a second.

"Then run it," he said. "You answer to me. Not publicly - publicly you're your own man, and the district will treat you as head of your house, because you are the head of your house. Nobody will ever put my name beside yours."

"Yes, sir." Rowan bowed.

Alex cut Wren loose himself.

The rope had been on her wrists for hours. She stood up out of the chair and her legs took a moment to agree to it, and she waved him off when he reached to steady her, because she had exactly one thing left and it was the ability to stand up on her own in this room.

She looked around the hall.

She'd heard all of it. That was the part she'd carry — not what she saw, what she heard. Sitting bound in a chair in the middle of the floor while a house with six hundred defenders died around her, one wing at a time, and nothing ever came back the other way.

She looked at the ruined sword on the marble. Four hundred years old. Crushed in a man's bare hand like a wet reed.

She looked at Kaida, forty-one years of guardian bond, piled against a broken wall after a single exchange.

"What are you," she said, feeling stupid for ever having tried to protect this man.

Alex looked at her for a long moment.

"Come on," he said. "I'll take you home."

By nightfall, House Draven had a new head.

Rowan didn't wait for a funeral, or a magistrate, or anyone's permission. He took his father's keys off his father's body and he started working.

The house steward found him in the study at midnight with four ledgers open and the accounts already frozen. By dawn he'd sent word to all forty-one holdings under his own seal.

He kept the men who'd been loyal. He paid off the ones who'd only been paid, generously, and made sure they left the district.

He buried the three hundred quietly and fast, and the official count of the dead was never published anywhere.

Within four days, the Draven group — the oldest trading house in the district, forty- one holdings, three districts of standing — belonged to a twenty-nine-year-old who had never once been introduced to company by name.

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Six hundred miles east, the Feral Line did not care what had happened in a district. The Line was eleven hundred miles of wall, trench, and killing ground, and it had been holding for two centuries by never once being interesting.

Something had come out of the dark the night before. It had taken four hours and thirty-one men to put down, and two draft-teams were dragging the carcass off the killing ground on a chain when the courier found Line-Commander Varan Draven standing in the mud, watching them do it.

He had his brother's face. The same jaw, the same eyes, the same trick of going quiet instead of loud — except this one had thirty years of Line behind it instead of thirty years of drawing rooms, and it showed everywhere that mattered.

"Commander." The courier saluted. "News from the district. It's your brother, sir." "Say it."

"Lord Draven is dead."

Varan didn't move for a moment. Out on the ground, the chain team got the carcass turned and started dragging again.

"How."

"Murdered, sir. Four days ago." The courier hesitated. "The report says it was his own son. The illegitimate one, sir. Rowan. There's a confession and a magistrate's finding. He's taken the house."

And Varan Draven laughed.

It was a short, ugly sound, entirely without humor, and every man within thirty feet turned to look, because none of them had ever heard him make it. "Rowan," he said.

"Yes, sir."

"I've watched that boy carry luggage." Varan finally turned around. "He carried mine. Four winters ago, when I came through for the solstice. He doesn't have the power to kill."

The courier said nothing.

"Three hundred men are dead in that house." Varan's voice was perfectly level now, "A hundred and forty ɲoɯ guardian-tier. My brother's own bond forty one years, and watched him take it as a boy - is dead on his own floor. And the finding is that a kitchen boy did it."

"That's the finding, sir."

"That's a story somebody wrote," Varan said. "And somebody in that district read it and decided it was easier to believe than to ask."

He started walking.

"Send the intelligence section to find the truth. I want all of it in two days."

It took them two days.

They came back with eleven pages, and Varan read all of it standing up.

No house. No line. No registered family. No property, no charter, no paper of any kind on file in three districts.

Cured a Storm Qilin of a bond-curse four healers called incurable. Twice in one day.

Fifteen men and fifteen bonded beasts on the Calder road. All dead. His own hound was never used.

Severed Edmund Draven's bond at the root, by hand. There is no recorded technique in the Dominion that does this.

Seen on the east road the morning Lord Draven died. Walking. Alone.

Varan read the last page twice.

There were only two names written on it.

Alexander.

Wren Calder.

"Sir?" said the intelligence officer. "Your orders?"

"Two companies. Full order of march, colors up, no attempt at quiet." Varan set the report down. "Go to House Calder. Take the woman named Wren, and everyone who matters to her."

"Yes, Commander."

"Force her to tell you where Alexander is." He was already reaching for his coat.

"And bring him to me."

"Yes, sir."

...

The column moved out at dusk.

Two companies of Line troops - men who fought things that came out of the dark for a living — in fulle order of march, colors up, engines loud on purpose. They came off the the east road onto district land as they light went and the passed came out to their gates to watch, and nobody who saw them mistook it for anything but what it was.

A hundred miles ahead of them, House Calder's lights burned along the eastern boundary, warm and small.

Inside, Lord Calder was going over ledgers he'd asked Merrick to pull days ago. Wren was asleep for the first time in three days, with bruises on both wrists. Vesper lay in the pen with his eyes half open, healing.

None of them knew.

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They arrived at night.

The Calder gate warden had time to sound the horn once. He got most of a second note out before the lead vehicle went through the gate without slowing, and after that the horn didn't matter, because everyone in the house was already awake.

Wren came out of sleep to the sound of the east wall coming down.

She was at the window in four steps with her heart trying to climb out of her throat, and what she saw underneath the floodlights made no sense to her at all - not raiders not house colors, not anything the district had. Men in grey field armor dismounting in a formation so unhurried it looked rehearsed. Vehicles she'd only ever seen in newsreels. A column that kept coming through the broken gate and kept coming and kept coming.

Line troops. On Calder ground.

"MY LADY—" Merrick was in the corridor, still in his nightclothes, hauling her by the arm. "Down the back stair, now, go—"

They got four steps.

Calder's own guard met the Line troops in the front courtyard, and Wren heard the whole thing happen from the second-floor landing.

Her grandfather kept twenty-eight men. Good men. Two of them had served thirty years. They formed up across the courtyard the way they'd been trained to, and their captain shouted a challenge into the floodlights, demanding a name and an authority.

The answer came in a single volley.

It didn't sound like a battle. Wren had learned four days ago what a real battle didn't sound like, and she recognized it instantly — the flat, brief, administrative sound of professionals doing a job on people who weren't. Twenty-eight men. It took about nine seconds.

She was still screaming when Merrick shoved her down behind the balustrade.

The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 734

Vesper came out of the pen.

He shouldn't have been able to. Poisoned twice in a week. Four days flat on his side under Alex's needles. But a bonded guardian doesn't get a vote when his house is dying.

For half a minute, House Calder had a chance.

He flipped a vehicle onto its side. Threw two men through a wall. Thirty Line troops gave ground, and up on the landing, something wild and stupid rose in Wren's chest. Hope.

"Cable teams," a voice said below. Calm. Bored. Like a man calling a card game.

They stopped fighting him. They started processing him.

Three teams, three sides. Stakes hammered into Calder stone. Steel line thrown over him like a net over a bird, men leaning back on the ropes in ranks while others put round after round into his legs.

Never the skull. Nothing about it was angry. They'd done this before.

His forelegs buckled. Then his hindquarters. Then all of him.

They left him alive. Pinned under eleven cables, two men standing on his neck.

Lord Calder came down his own front steps in a dressing gown.

"I am the head of this house." His voice carried further than it had any right to. "You have killed my men. You have put a guardian beast down on my own ground. Give me the name and authority of the officer commanding. Now."

The soldiers came, knocked Lord Calder unconscious, and went inside to get Wern. They didn't hurt her.

That was the part she couldn't get her mind around. Two soldiers dragged her toward the doors, one on each arm.

She got a hand free and raked her nails across a man's face. He didn't flinch — just put her back in line, the way you'd correct a horse. Nobody hit her. Nobody spoke to her.

She was being handled. Freight marked fragile.

They took her to an empty factory.

Dead for years — a concrete floor the size of a parade ground, roof forty feet up, every window long gone. Gantry rails still bolted to the ceiling from whatever it used to build.

"Will this do, Commander?" the adjutant asked.

Varan Draven walked the length of it once, looking up. "How many can I put on this floor?"

"All three hundred, sir. With the beasts."

"Neighbors?"

"Nothing within four miles. Nearest road's a track."

"Entrances?"

"Loading doors at the north end. Everything else is welded shut or fallen in." The adjutant paused. "Sir — a man would have to come in through the front. There's no other way into this building."

"Good." Varan stopped in the middle of the floor and turned a slow circle. He wasn't inspecting a prison.

He was measuring a stage.

"Bring her in."

They gave Wren a chair, a blanket, water.

Then Varan sat across from her and set a phone on the crate between them.

"I'll be straight with you," he said. "I don't have the temperament for anything else, and I think you'll respect it more."

Wren said nothing.

"Call the man who kill my brother. Tell him where you are. Tell him I'm the one asking." He nudged the phone an inch closer.

"He comes here tonight, your grandfather and your steward walk out before midnight. Unharmed. Uncharged. You have my word — ask anyone who's dealt with me what that's worth."

"And me?"

"You stay until he arrives. After that, it stops being about you."

Wren looked at the phone.

"No," she said.

Varan nodded slowly, like he'd expected to work for it. "I don't think you understand what happens instead."

"Then say it."

"All right." He leaned forward, forearms on his knees, calm as still water. "I hold a lawful charge, brought under my own hand, that no court in this Dominion can review. Nobody is coming. No magistrate. No Warden. No house. Nothing to appeal to, nothing to buy, no one to shame into helping you." A beat. "Hear that before you answer again. It isn't a threat. It's the situation."

"I heard you."

"Then call him."

"No."

Varan sat back.

"Wren." Lord Calder's voice came from across the floor, cracked in a way she'd never heard. "Make the call."

She closed her eyes. "Grandfather-"

"Look at me." He was on his feet, two soldiers letting him, because there was nowhere for him to go. "Make the call. That's not a request from your grandfather. It's an order from the head of your house."

The whole factory went quiet.

"No," Wren said.

"Wren-"

"No." She opened her eyes. Wet, and steady. "He helped us. We owe him." Her jaw set. "I will not call and ask him to come die."

Varan looked at her a long moment. Then he stood, laid his coat over the chair.

"Get her up."

They put her on a gantry bar. Arms out, wrists lashed to the steel, feet six inches off the concrete, under the work lights in the middle of that empty floor.

A soldier set up a camera on a tripod.

Varan stepped into frame. He didn't give a speech — he read a statement into a log.

"My twin brother was murdered in his own house days ago. The man who did it has no name I can serve, no house I can charge, no door I can knock on." His voice never rose. "So I'll be here. This woman will be here with me. When he comes, this stops."

He stepped out of frame.

"Begin."

The feed went out at 6:40 in the morning. By seven, there was nothing else on any screen in the district.

It played in roadhouses on the east road.

"That's hold on. Is that the Calder girl?"

"That's the Calder girl."

"Somebody's got to—"

"Got to what?"

It played in a Warden substation, four officers standing, nobody sitting down.

"Sir, we have to send someone."

"Read the banner."

"...Line detention. Feral collusion."

"Then we don't have anyone to send."

Every so often, a soldier walked into frame and held up a phone where she could see it.

"Ma'am. The offer's still open."

She said no.

Whip. Offer. Refusal. Whip.

The counter in the corner passed two hundred thousand. Kept climbing.

Jennifer got there at eight with everything she had. Eleven vehicles. Twenty-two Wardens. A district legal officer still pulling on his coat in the passenger seat, She was out of the car before it stopped moving.

A Line lieutenant met her forty feet from the loading doors and saluted her, properly.

Somehow that made it worse.

"Warden-Commander."

"Get out of my way."

"Can't do that, ma'am."

"There's a woman being flogged on a live feed inside that building—"

"Yes, ma'am."

"—inside my district—"

"Yes, ma'am." He held out the charge sheet. "Read it. All of it. I'd rather you read it than take my word."

She read the document. He waited patiently, neither gloating nor rushing her.

"I have orders and a lawful warrant," she said. "You have neither. This is not a military zone."

"If you try to force your way in," the et soldier warned, "we won't hesitate to open fire and unleash our beasts. You and your people will die. Back off now and let the military do its job. We only want one man the murderer."

Jennifer froze, staring down the wall of soldiers, dozens of weapons leveled straight at them.

Alex kept a clinic. Two rooms above a shuttered grain office, no sign worth reading, a bench, a burner, a cabinet of things he'd made himself.

David was hammering on the door at eight.

"Open it - open the door-"

Alex opened it.

David fell into the room, bruising still dark along his jaw from the last time they'd stood face to face. His hands shook so hard he needed both to hold up the phone.

"You have to go. Right now. Look at it—"

Alex looked.

He didn't take the phone. He stood in the doorway, hands at his sides, and watched the feed for eleven seconds — a figure on gantry bars, a factory floor, a counter reading four hundred thousand and climbing.

"This is all your fault!" David babbled, voice cracking with panic. "It's Draven's brother he came for you. If you don't go out there right now, Wern is going to die because of you!"

"Where."

"The old works, western track. Past the quarry road." David swallowed.

Alex looked at him. Not at the phone. At him.

"Take me there!" He took his coat off the hook.

"You - you what?"

"Move."

David moved.

The old works sat at the end of four miles of bad track. Alex walked all of it.

The pickets saw him coming a long way out. Nobody stopped him. Nobody was meant to the outer lige had been thinned on purpose every man on it told exactly what to do if a man on foot came up that track. Nothing at all.

He came through the loading doors.

Three hundred Line soldiers stood on that floor in formation. Not house guards. Not banquet muscle.

Grey field armor, border dust still on it, ranks silent, beasts beside them - scarred, border-bonded, bred on things that came out of the dark, as still as their handlers.

Three hundred men. Three hundred beasts. One door.

Above them, in the work lights: two crossbeams.

Wren's head came up. She'd been in and out for an hour, and it took her a moment to understand what she was looking at.

When she did, she said his name. It didn't come out as anything at all.

The camera swung on its tripod. Somewhere out there, four hundred thousand people watched a man in plain clothes walk into a building alone.

Varan came down off the platform and crossed the floor, unhurried, hands empty. He stopped ten feet away.

"You're smaller than the report made you sound."

"Take her down."

"That isn't how this goes."

"It's the only offer you're getting." Alex's voice never changed. "Take her down. Put your men on their transports. Drive east. Everyone in this building goes home."

Varan gave a grim smile. "Son, there are three hundred of us."

"I know," Alex said coldly. "And there will be three hundred corpses if you don't let her go."

The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 735

Varan offered a cold, dead-eyed smile.

"Here's the deal," he said. "Get on your knees. Right there, in front of the lens. Confess to murdering my brother, beg for forgiveness, and hit the floor in a ten- count kowtow."

"And then?"

"Then it's quick. One clean cut on your neck. You won't feel it." He shrugged.

"And if I don't?"

Varan's voice didn't change at all.

"Then I start with your fingers," he said. "One at a time. Then your hands. Then your arms. And I keep going until you confess. Until you beg. Until you try to kneel and find out you don't have knees anymore."

Behind him, three hundred soldiers stood and listened.

Six hundred thousand people watched at home.

Alex looked at him. He looked almost bored.

"You'll die in one move," Alex said. "Why would I kneel to a dead man?"

The whole factory went still.

Varan let out a dry laugh. "You have no idea who you're dealing with—or the nightmare waiting for you."

"Quiet," Alex said flatly. "You get one warning, and this is it. Clear out of here. I'd rather not end a whole family line over a meaningless grudge."

The smirk vanished from Varan's face. The shift went beyond anger-something colder, far more venomous, took its place.

"How dare you." His voice rose for the first time all morning. "Kill—"

He never finished the word.

Alex flicked his hand.

That was all. Most of the room never saw anything leave it.

A needle. Thin as a hair.

It went through the front of Varan's skull and out the back.

He didn't stagger. He didn't grab his head. His mouth stayed open on the word he was still trying to say.

Then he fell.

Nobody moved.

Three hundred men had come to watch an execution.

They had just watched their commander die before he finished a sentence.

...

Alex looked up at them.

Three hundred soldiers. Three hundred beasts. Nobody breathing.

"Your commander is dead," he said.

Nobody answered.

"I know why you came. He brought you here for his brother. Not for the Line. Not for the Dominion. For a man in a coffin." He let that sit. "That was personal. It was never yours."

Still nothing.

"So here's what happens now. If any of you want revenge, come. I won't stop you. I won't run."

He looked down at the body.

"You'll go the same way he did."

Somewhere in the ranks, a man swallowed.

"But if you came here as soldiers." Alex's voice stayed level. "If you stand on that wall so the rest of us can sleep at night. Then this was never your business."

He nodded at the doors.

"Go home. Nobody stops you."

Three hundred men looked at each other.

Nobody moved. Nobody gave an order.

There was nobody left to give one.

...

Then something came through the ranks.

The soldiers got out of its way fast.

It was a lion. But calling it a lion was like calling a house a room. Its shoulder was higher than a man's head. Its mane was grey at the edges. Old scars ran down its side in lines.

A King Lion.

Varan's bond. Twenty years on the border, side by side.

It walked to the body first.

It lowered its huge head and pushed at him, gently, the way you'd nudge someone who overslept.

Varan didn't move.

The lion lifted its head and roared.

The sound hit the walls and came back. Men flinched. Beasts backed up.

Then it charged.

Alex didn't draw anything.

He just let it out.

His aura.

There was no sound to it. Nothing to see. But every animal in that building felt it at once, and the King Lion felt it most.

The charge died halfway.

The fangs closed. The head dropped. The huge body slowed from a run to a walk to a crawl.

It came the last few steps like a housecat.

It pushed its skull against Alex's waist.

Then it rolled over and showed him its belly.

Three hundred handlers stood there with their mouths open.

Every one of them had spent his life around bonded beasts.

Not one of them had ever seen anything like that.

...

Nobody tried to stop Alex after that. They just stood there and watched him walk.

He crossed the floor. He reached the gantry bar.

He cut Wren down and caught her against his chest.

She weighed nothing. Her head rolled onto his shoulder.

"You came," she said. It came out cracked and small and not much like her at all.

"I came."

"I didn't call you." Her hand curled in his coat. "I didn't call you. I didn't—"

"I know."

...

"THIS IS ALL BECAUSE OF YOU!"

Alex turned.

Lord Calder was shoving through the soldiers. His dressing gown was torn. There was dried blood along his temple where they'd knocked him out at the house.

He was pointing at Alex, and he was screaming.

"All of it! My men! My house! Look at her — look at what they did to her!"

"Grandfather—" Wren tried.

"You should never have gone near her!" Lord Calder's voice broke. "You should have stayed away! Everything that has happened to this family has happened because of you!

The camera was still running.

Eight hundred thousand people heard every word.

Lord Calder took Wren out of Alex's arms.

Alex let him.

"Don't touch her again," the old man said. "Don't meet her. Don't come to my gate.

Don't say her name."

He turned around, still holding his granddaughter, and shouted at the doors.

"WARDEN! What are you standing there for? Get us home. Now!"

Jennifer had been frozen in that doorway since eight in the morning.

She looked at Lord Calder. She looked at Alex.

Alex didn't say anything at all.

So she brought her car around.

And Alex stood alone in the middle of a factory with a dead commander at his feet and three hundred soldiers walking out around him, and watched them drive away with her.

The kidnapping ended like that.

The column pulled out. The soldiers went back to the Line.

But Alex had forgotten one thing.

All of it had been live.

Millions of people across the Dominion of Beasts had watched a man with no house and no name kill a Line-Commander in one move.

They had watched a King Lion roll over for him.

Jennifer moved fast. Within the hour, the Wardens had pulled the feed down and wiped the archive.

They didn't get all of it.

They never do.

The clips were already out there. Thousands of them.

And some of those clips went a very long way.

Six thousand miles away, high in one of the great towers, an old man sat and watched a video on a screen.

He watched it four times.

He paused it on the man's face.

"You running rat," he said quietly. "I've finally found where you are."

They called him the Head Tower. He had been an Elder for sixty years.

He was Ragnar's grandfather.

The old man had been looking for him ever since.

He pressed a button on his desk.

"Jasper."

A man appeared in the doorway. He didn't make any noise coming in.

"Head Tower."

"Twenty magicians. The best we have. Not the loudest - the best."

"Where are they going, sir?"

The old man turned the screen around so Jasper could see the face on it.

"The Dominion of Beasts," he said. "Find this man. Kill him."

"Yes, Head Tower."

...

At the same time, in New Avalon, capital of the Arcanum State, a very expensive man was having a very bad week.

The chairman of Ferrowgate Company sat in a glass office and watched his own share price fall for the ninth day straight.

A new product had done it. One product.

It had come out of the Regent Group.

That was the part he couldn't get past.

Six months ago, Regent had been half a step from the coffin. Everyone in New

Avalon knew it. People had been circling the body waiting for it to stop twitching. Then somebody breathed into its mouth.

"Find out who," he said. "Somebody put money into that company. I want a name."

...

Three floors up, in Regent's own building, the shouting could be heard through the door.

"How dare you." Cornelius Hargrove slammed both hands on the desk.

"You forced me to sell. You sat there my shares. Come to and you to an outsider-

—

- and the whole time you were sitting on a new product!"

Beatrix Hargrove didn't stand up.

"Regent stock is ten times what it was," Cornelius said. "Ten times! That's ten times what we sold that man!"

"I told you," Beatrix said.

"You"

"I told you Regent had a new product." She said it slowly, the way you'd talk to a child. "I told you not to sell. I told you twice, in writing. You didn't believe me."

"Beatrix-"

"The price goes up ten times, and now it's my fault." She almost smiled. "Do you hear yourself?"

Cornelius went red.

"You tell that man to give the shares back," he said. "Or something bad is going to happen."

Beatrix looked at him for a second.

Then she laughed.

"Something bad like what?" she said. "Go on. I'm waiting."

He didn't answer.

She pressed a button on her desk.

"Security. Get these people out of my office."

...

The next morning, in Willowmere, Alex's phone buzzed on the table.

The number wasn't attached to anything. No name. No location.

He opened it.

Return the Regent Group shares if you want Beatrix to stay alive.

The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 736

New Avalon hadn't changed.

Same glass towers. Same clean streets. Same money smell in the air.

Alex walked into the Regent Group lobby at nine in the morning and nobody stopped him.

That was the first wrong thing.

The second wrong thing was the front desk. Empty. No guard. No clerk.

The third wrong thing was the elevator. It was already coming down.

A young woman stepped out of it. Regent Group badge. Grey suit. Her hands were shaking so hard she had to hold one with the other.

"Are you Mr. Alexander?" she said.

Alex stopped walking.

"Where is Beatrix?"

"They took her at seven." The woman's voice cracked.

"Who took her?"

"Her uncle."

"Cornelius."

"Yes." She pulled a folded paper from her jacket and held it out. Her whole arm trembled. "He left this. He said to give it only to you. He said you'd know what it meant."

Alex unfolded it.

An address. Nothing else.

"It's the storage works. West of the city." She was crying now and trying not to. "We hold new product there. It's ours. It's Regent property."

"Arrange a driver for me," Alex instructed.

"Understood, sir. A company chauffeur will take you to your destination immediately."

...

The storage works sat forty minutes west, past the last of the good roads.

It was a big ugly building. Regent Group's own name was still bolted across the front in letters ten feet high.

He went in through the front.

Inside it was cold and enormous. Crates stacked forty feet up in rows. A wide clear floor in the middle, lit by work lamps somebody had dragged in and pointed at the center like a stage.

Beatrix Hargrove sat in a chair in the middle of all that light.

Her wrists were tied. Her hair had come loose on one side. There was a red mark high on her cheekbone where somebody had held her too hard.

She saw him and her face did something complicated.

"You shouldn't have come," she said.

"Probably not."

"I'm serious. Turn around."

"Beatrix," said a voice from the shadows, "let the man work."

And Cornelius Hargrove stepped into the light.

He was sixty. Silver hair, good coat, soft hands. A gold pin in his tie.

He looked like a man who had never once been hit in his life, and he moved like it.

"So," Cornelius said. "A boy in a cheap coat, who bought forty-one percent of my family's company with gold while the price went up ten times."

"Nine times."

"I beg your pardon?"

"It went up nine times," Alex said. "You're rounding up to make yourself feel worse."

Somebody in the dark laughed and stopped fast.

Cornelius's smile stayed. His eyes didn't.

"You think you're funny."

"I think you're boring. That's different."

"Mm." Cornelius stopped circling. "Let me be plain, then. I don't enjoy this. I'm not a violent man. I've never struck anyone in my life."

"You're doing fine so far. You paid other people to do it."

"Yes." Cornelius didn't even flinch. "That's what money is for."

He nodded at his niece in the chair.

"The shares. All forty-one percent. Signed back to me, to the Hargrove family this morning, in this building, in front of my lawyer, who is standing over there and is very well paid to be discreet." He tipped his head. "Or Beatrix doesn't leave this building either."

Alex looked at him.

Then he laughed.

It wasn't polite. It came up out of him loud and real and bounced off forty feet of crates and came back.

Cornelius's face changed for the first time.

"Something amuses you."

"Yeah." Alex wiped his eye. "You do."

"I have your "

"You have Beatrix." Alex pointed at her, still grinning. "Do you know how many times I've spoken to that woman? I don't know her birthday. I don't know if she takes sugar. I've never had a meal with her in my life."

"She is the chairwoman of "

"She's an employee." Alex shrugged. "A good one. But I've got a fortune in one hand and a woman I've met twice in the other, and you're standing there like that's a hard sum."

The room went quiet.

Beatrix was staring at him. Something in her face had gone very still.

"So no," Alex said. "Kill her, don't kill her. It's a terrible trade and you knew it was a terrible trade before you woke up this morning."

He turned to go.

"Wait," said Cornelius. He raised one soft hand. "Bring the other one."

...

A door opened somewhere in the dark at the back.

Two men walked a woman out into the light.

She was small. Dark hair pinned up the way she always pinned it for work. A grey

Regent coat over a dress she'd clearly put on for an ordinary Tuesday.

Her hands were tied in front of her.

Alex stopped breathing.

"Feby," he said.

Febyella Steinmeyer heard her name and flinched like someone had swung at her.

And then she wouldn't look at him.

That was the part. Not the ropes. Not the men holding her arms. She turned her face down and to the side and looked at the concrete, and she would not look at him.

"Oh," said Cornelius softly. "Oh. There it is."

Alex didn't answer.

"You see, I couldn't understand it either." Cornelius walked toward Febyella, and Alex's eyes tracked him the whole way. "Head Supervisor. New product division. Twenty-three years old, no name behind her, no money behind her — and somehow she is the one who signed the paperwork on the product that broke Ferrowgate's share price."

He stopped beside her.

"So I asked myself. Who put her there?"

"Don't touch her."

"I haven't." Cornelius held both hands up, palms out, delighted. "Look. I haven't."
"Cornelius." Beatrix's voice came out of the chair like a whip. "Stop it. Stop it right now."

"Quiet, dear."

"She has nothing to do with this. She's a girl, she works in—"

"She has everything to do with this." Cornelius never raised his voice. He never had to.

Febyella's shoulders were shaking.

"Alex," she said, still looking at the floor. "Don't."

"Feby."

"Don't give him anything." Her voice broke in the middle. "Don't you dare give him anything. Not for me."

Alex looked at her for a long moment.

"Feby."

"Don't be kind to me. Please. Not now."

"I'm not being kind." His voice had gone very quiet. "I'm telling you to close your eyes."

Something in the room changed temperature.

Cornelius felt it. He was a soft man, but he was not a stupid one, and he took one step backward before he even knew he'd done it.

"Now," he said quickly. "Now — I know what you are."

Alex started walking.

"I know what you are!" Cornelius's voice went up half an octave. "The Dominion feed! A commander in one Three hundred men!t ve move watched it eleven times, I've had it slowed down, I've paid people to tell me it was faked and none of them would!"

Alex kept walking.

"So don't you dare think I came here unprepared!"

He threw his hand up.

And thirty people stepped out of the dark.

...

They came from everywhere at once.

Down the crate rows. Off the loading gantries. Out from behind the pallets. Grey robes, silver at the collar, sigil-work stitched down both sleeves in thread that caught the lamps.

They didn't rush him. They spread.

Ten across the floor. Ten up on the racking. Ten sealing the doors behind.

Every one of them stopped at a different distance.

"Thirty," Cornelius said. He was breathing hard. He sounded almost giddy. "Thirty, from the tower of New Avalon itself. Contracted. Paid. Insured. Do you have any idea what thirty of them costs for a single morning?"

"No."

"More than your shares." Cornelius laughed, high and thin. "More than your shares, boy!"

Alex looked around the floor once. Slow. Counting.

"Feby," he said. "Eyes closed."

"Alex-"

"Closed."

She closed them.

"Kill him," said Cornelius.

The first volley came from six directions at once and Alex went through the nearest man like a door.

That one was easy.

The rest was not.

Because they didn't come to him. That was the whole trick, and whoever drilled them had drilled them well.

The moment he closed on the left, the right opened up. When he turned for the right; the racking above him lit. Bolts of hard white force. Cords of binding-light that spapped tight, around his forearm and had to be broken. Fire that didn't burn so much as push.

Nothing that could kill him.

Everything that could keep him from finishing.

He put two down at the west wall and took a hit across the back doing it. He crossed thirty feet and put down a third and something hammered his ribs from the gantry and knocked him a full step sideways.

A step.

Beatrix, in her chair, made a small sound.

Because it had landed. Something had actually landed on him.

They kept the lanes. They gave ground on purpose. Every time he committed, three of them broke and reset, and the ones behind him opened fire on the space he'd just left.

Blood ran down his sleeve and dripped off his knuckles onto the concrete.

He was still winning.

It was just taking time.

And thirty men who understood that were worth more than three hundred who didn't.

...

Then one of them broke formation and came forward.

He was younger than the rest. No robe - a short coat, sleeves strapped down. And he was drawing a blade as he ran.

Alex saw the sword and knew, in the half second he had, that it was wrong.

The edge wasn't glowing. It was wet. Light slid off it the way water slides off oil, and where it passed, the air seemed to peel.

The blade-mage came in fast and didn't telegraph and swung once.

Alex turned it. Barely.

And the blade opened his forearm from wrist to elbow.

Not a scratch. Not a graze.

It went through his coat, through his skin, and through the thing underneath his skin

—the thing that had made a King Lion roll over — and it took all three away in the same stroke, like a knife under fish scales.

Alex staggered.

Blood came out of him fast and red and ordinary.

"Alex!" Febyella's eyes were open now, wide, one hand over her mouth.

"There!" Cornelius was screaming from behind the line, all his composure gone.

"THERE! He bleeds! HE BLEEDS!"

The blade-mage came again.

And Alex smiled.

It was not a nice smile.

"Do you know," he said, "how long it's been?"

He caught the second swing on the flat of his palm and it cut him and he let it.

"Since somebody made me bleed?"

He closed his hand around the blade.

The blade-mage tried to pull it back. It didn't move an inch.

"Thank you."

And then Alex broke his arm at the elbow, took the sword out of his hand, and put it through him.

The body dropped.

And the whole floor felt it go.

That was the anchor. That was the piece the formation was built around the one man who could hold Alex in place long enough for the other twenty-nine to keep hitting him. Without him, the lanes collapsed.

Alex went through the rest of them in under four minutes, and there is no clean way to describe it.

He didn't cross the floor. The floor got smaller.

Men on the racking learned that height wasn't distance. Men at the doors learned that doors weren't exits. Two of them dropped their focus and ran, and made it about eleven steps.

Bolts kept coming until there was nobody left to throw them.

Somewhere in the middle of it, the lawyer in the good suit stopped filming with his tile, put it in his pocket, sat down against a crate, and stayed there with his hands over his head until it was over.

The last one went down against the north wall.

Then it was quiet.

Thirty of the finest contracted magicians in New Avalon, and the loudest sound in that building was Beatrix Hargrove trying to breathe.

...

Alex walked out of it dripping.

His left sleeve was gone from the elbow down. Blood ran off his fingers and left a trail behind him, one drop every second step, all the way across the concrete.

He walked past Febyella and didn't stop.

He walked to the chair.

Cornelius Hargrove had not moved from behind it. He was still standing exactly where he'd been standing when he gave the order, one hand on the chairback, mouth open sixty years old and finally, completely out of ideas.

"You," he said. "You"

Alex reached over his own niece's shoulder and took him by the collar.

He lifted him off the ground with one arm — the cut one, still open, blood running down into the man's expensive coat - and held him there.

"I'm going to ask you a question," Alex said.

Cornelius's shoes kicked at nothing.

"You paid thirty men to kill me. And you brought that woman here—" He pulled him closer.

"So."

"Please "

"What will you give me," Alex said, "so I don't kill you?"

The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 737

Cornelius Hargrove hung there in Alex's fist and finally understood the question.

"You won't dare to hurt me," he said.

"Any reason you believe you are untouchable? Because this maybe your last chance to still alive. "alex said.

"Ferrowgate." Cornelius was talking fast now. Faster. " Ferrowgate. Was on my back, if youd are to hurt me. They will destroy you and Regetn group."

Sixty miles away, in Ferrowgate's glass office with a view of the whole city, a very old man listened to a tile on his desk.

Silas Kessler was seventy-one. He had white hair, a good suit, and a face like a closed ledger.

He had not raised his voice in forty years. There had never been a reason to.

"Charges are live, sir," the tile said. "We have three inside — the girl, the Steinmeyer woman, and the target. Hargrove's in there too with some magicians form tower." "Yes," Kessler said.

"Sir — Mr. Hargrove and the magician are in there."

"I heard you."

There was a pause on the line.

"Sir, we can give them thirty seconds to clear the "

"Why?"

The word wasn't cruel. That was the worst thing about it. It was the same word he'd have used about a line item on a shipping invoice.

He turned a page on his desk.

"Bring it down, now."

"... Yes, sir."

Kessler set the tile face down and went back to his morning.

...

Suddenly a big fire ball fallen formt eh sky and ti aim tot eh whole factory.

It didn't explode the way people think a building explodes. There was a crack like the sky splitting, and then forty feet of steel simply stopped being a straight line.

Everything above it started to come down.

"MOVE-" Alex was already turning.

Beatrix was tied to a chair. Febyella was tied at the wrists with two dead men's rope still on her.

And Cornelius Hargrove was standing free, ten feet from his own niece, with nothing holding him at all.

He had one second to choose.

He looked at Beatrix.

Beatrix looked back at him.

"Uncle "

And Cornelius Hargrove turned and ran the other way.

Not toward her. He ran for the small side exit near the offices, alone, arms up over his silver head, sixty years old and moving faster than he had in twenty of them.

"UNCLE! Help!"

He didn't turn around.

He got eleven steps.

The second column came down between him and the door, and the fire came with it — not a fireball, nothing dramatic. Just a wall of orange that filled the gap in half a second and took all the air out of that corner of the building.

He made one sound.

Then the crates above him let go.

Beatrix Hargrove screamed a word that wasn't a word.

On the same tiem Aelx alread moved to grab Beatrix and Febyella and moved fast. To reach the outside.

Aelx lacunghe the shield magic that he learn form books and that protecign him and the two woman.

...

They came out into the yard at a dead run and the building came down behind them.

Not part of it. All of it.

The Regent Group's western storage works — three hundred feet of steel and crate and concrete, the company's own name still bolted across the front in letters ten feet high- folded in on itself and hit the ground.

The blast of air knocked all three of them off their feet.

Alex got up first.

Then Febyella.

Beatrix Hargrove stayed on her knees in the gravel and watched it burn.

Nobody said anything for a long time.

The letters were the last thing to go. R-E-G-E-N-T, ten feet high, glowing orange, holding on to the front of the collapse for maybe four seconds after the rest of it dropped.

Then they fell too.

They didn't go to the Knights.

There was nothing to bring them. No bodies. No building. No thirty magicians, no contracts, no ropes no chair. Somewhere under four hundred tons s of burning steel there was a lawyer's tile with about ninety seconds of the worst footage in New Avalon on it, and it was never coming out of there.

Ferrowgate's people had done exactly what they were paid to do.

They had erased a morning.

So Alex went back to the Regent Group building instead.

And he didn't leave it for nine days.

...

Level four had been mothballed since the spring. Product development, two floors of it, dark rooms and dead benches and cabinets nobody had opened in a year.

He took all of it.

Here is what he built.

The first one took four days and it wasn't new. Not to him. It was the same shape of thing he'd been making since he was a boy in a country that measured power a different way —

cure the body, open the channel, let what's already inside a person actually reach where it's going.

Except here they didn't call it that.

Here they called it affinity, and mana, and every child in the Arcanum State was tested for both at seven years old and told a number that they would carry for the rest of their life.

A low number meant a small life. Everybody knew it. Nobody had ever argued with it.

On the fourth night, Alex put a small brown bottle on the bench and said, "It moves the number."

Beatrix stared at him.

"...What?"

"Affinity. It moves it." He was writing as he talked, not looking up. "Not much. Maybe a tenth of a grade in a season, and less as you get older, and it won't do anything at all for someone already at the top. But if you're at the bottom—"

"Alex."

"—and about four people in five in this country are at the bottom="

"Alex."

He looked up.

Beatrix Hargrove had one hand flat on the bench to hold herself up.

"Do you know what you just said?" she asked.

"Yes."

"No, I don't think you do. I think you said it the way a man says he fixed a chair." She was breathing strangely "There is no medicine in the world that moves affinity. There is no theory that says it can be moved. The tower has spent two hundred years saying it cannot be moved."

"The tower's wrong."

"You" She laughed. She actually laughed, hand over her mouth, eyes wet. "You absolute "

"Test it before you get excited."

The second one took five days, and it was smaller, and it was worse.

It didn't look like anything. A square of grey paper the size of a thumbnail, with a mark on it he drew by hand, one at a time, four hundred times before the four hundred and first one worked.

He stuck it on a hammer.

"Hit that," he said.

Febyella picked up the hammer and hit the test block and put a crack through four inches of stone.

She stood there holding it.

"...I'm not strong," she said.

"No."

"I'm not strong, Alex, I can't even open the good jars—"

"It's not you." He took the hammer back and turned it over. "It's pulling. There's loose energy in every room in this country off the lights, off

-

the ward-lines off the people it's just sitting there. Nobody's ever bothered to collect it because there's not enough in any one place to be worth collecting."

He held up the little grey square.

"This collects it. And then it puts it in whatever it's stuck to."

Beatrix sat down.

She sat down slowly, on a lab stool, like a woman whose legs had been informed of something before the rest of her.

"Anything," she said.

"Anything with a shape. Blade. Hammer. Engine. Cargo lift. Water pump." He shrugged. "It doesn't make a bad tool good. It makes every tool about a third better than it was, forever, for the price of a sheet of paper."

"Ferrowgate," Beatrix said quietly, "manufactures tools."

"I know."

"Ferrowgate manufactures sixty percent of the tools in this country."

"I know."

"And you're going to sell a sticker," she said, "that makes the ones people already own better than the new ones he's selling."

Alex looked up at her.

"He tried to burn you alive in a building with your own name on it," he said. "I'm not going to shoot him."

He put the little grey square down on the bench between them.

"I'm going to make him worthless."

The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 738

The pill went into production on Tuesday.

Beatrix stood at the head of the line, sleeves shoved up, lab smell still clinging to her hair.

The Mana Affinity Pill was powder first — a formula meant to be swallowed, pulling the mana already drifting in the air straight into whoever took it, sharpening their reach for it instead of the person having to hunt for it themselves.

She weighed the first batch by hand. Twenty grams. Forty. Four hundred.

Then every line came alive behind her - four hundred pills an hour, each one, running clean.

She stared at the readout like it might change on her. "It's holding. Every batch. Exactly the same."

"You sound surprised."

"There has never been a pill like this here before." Beatrix looked at the sticker Alex was working on.

"I watched you burn through four hundred failed talismans before this worked." She looked up at him.

Alex rubbed his jaw. "Took long enough to find a formula that wouldn't break down at scale."

The second product came off a different line an hour later. The Regent Boosting Sticker - grey paper, thumbnail-sized, meant to be pressed onto a tool or a machine instead of swallowed by a person, feeding ambient mana straight into whatever it was stuck to. The mark on it was stamped by machine now instead of drawn by hand. Beatrix picked one off the belt, turned it in the light.

"Two products in one week." She held the pill up in one hand, the sticker in the other. "Mana Affinity Pill. Regent Boosting Sticker."

"You hate the names."

"I love them. They're boring." She set both back down. "Boring is what makes people believe it isn't magic. It's just... better."

...

By Wednesday, every other line in the building had gone dark.

Textiles. Housewares. The tool division that had kept Regent afloat for eleven years.

All of it stopped-workers reassigned, floor space cleared, every resource in the company pointed at the pill, the sticker, and nothing else.

The board hated it.

"You're betting the entire company," one of them said, in a meeting Alex sat through without saying a word. "On two items that didn't exist a week ago."

"Yes," Beatrix said. "If you don't like it, you can always resign."

The room went quiet. Every eye on her.

"We're only thinking of what's best for this company," the director said. "If this fails

"It won't."

...

Thursday morning, the ad spend went out — and broke a rule Regent had followed for six years.

Twenty million a month, across every product. Steady. Safe. Never questioned.

Alex tripled it with one signature.

"Sixty million." The marketing director read the order twice, like a second look might change the number. "For this month's budget?"

"For two products," Alex said.

...

Friday: a trickle. A few thousand units. The marketing director paced holes into the carpet.

Saturday morning, the servers crashed twice before nine.

By Saturday night, Regent was the most searched word in the Arcanum State. People who had never cared about industrial tooling argued online over whether a scrap of paper stuck to a machine could actually pull power out of thin air.

It could.

Whether the Mana Affinity Pill was even real, whether swallowing something could really change how much mana a person could draw — didn't matter anymore. People wanted it. For themselves. For their kids. For whatever future it promised them.

Everyone who bought either one found out within a day.

After that, it wasn't two products. It was a sensation.

Ferrowgate's stock opened Monday and didn't stop falling until the exchange called a halt at noon.

Silas Kessler watched it happen from his glass office, hands folded, face doing nothing at all.

"Lowest print in company history," an aide said, like Kessler couldn't read a number himself.

"I can see that."

"Sir, the board wants—"

"I know what the board wants."

The number didn't move him. Not on the outside. But he sat there long after the aide left, still watching the screen, and something behind his eyes went cold and very, very still.

The real damage wasn't the stock. It was the customers.

A man with a twelve-year-old Ferrowgate cargo lift bought one Regent Boosting Sticker for eleven dollars, pressed it to the frame — and watched the lift start hauling loads it had never been rated for. He didn't need Ferrowgate's new model. He needed a sheet of paper.

Multiply that by every warehouse, every factory floor, every farm in the State running a Ferrowgate tool past its warranty.

Ferrowgate's new-line sales dropped fifty percent in eleven days.

Cash flow didn't slow. It stopped.

...

The emergency board meeting ran four hours. Kessler let his people talk for three of them before he said a word.

"We can't out-manufacture him," a director said. "Can't out-advertise him. Can't out-price a sticker that costs eleven dollars to make and does everything his product does."

"Then what can we do?"

Silence.

Kessler's voice, when it came, was flat as always.

"We don't fight the product," he said. "We make people afraid to touch it."

Nobody asked how.

Everybody already knew.

...

Seven towers ran magic in the

United State. Every child knew their names before they knew their letters - Blue, Green, Brown, Yellow, Red, Black White Every spell taught every magician certified every funeral rite said with a wand instead of a priest all of it traced back to one of the seven, and had for five hundred years.

—

Arcanum State belonged to two: Red and Black.

Kessler had been writing them checks for eleven years.

...

"Call the towers," he told his assistant. "Both of them. Tonight."

"What do I tell them, sir?"

Kessler looked at the wreckage of his own stock chart, still glowing red on the wall behind him.

"Tell them Regent Group is selling something the faithful shouldn't touch," he said. "Tell them I'll make it worth their while to agree."

A tower didn't argue like a company argued. A tower only had to announce.

The statement went out from Red Tower first, then Black an hour later - worded almost identically, because they'd been written by the same hand.

Products drawing uncontrolled ambient mana pose a spiritual contamination risk. The faithful are advised to abstain.

Tel

By the time it reached the street, the careful language was gone. The word going around was blunter swallow the pill, wear out the sticker, either one poisons you Damages the body Steals your future to fuel someone else's power.

That was all it took. By the next morning, half the temples in Arcanum State had a sign in the window. No Regent product past this door.

...

"Thirty percent." Beatrix hadn't slept. Neither had he. "Our growth dropped thirty percent in four days, Alex. Four days."

"I know."

"They didn't even fight the products." Her voice cracked on the last word. "Didn't have to prove either one does anything wrong. They just said the word sin, and half the country believed them before breakfast."

Alex went quiet.

Then he laughed — once, low in his chest, like something had just clicked into place.

"He couldn't beat me with money." Alex said it almost admiring. "So he bought faith instead."

"That's not funny."

"No," Alex said. "It's smart. First smart thing he's done."

...

"Which towers can we buy?" Alex asked.

Beatrix blinked. "Buy?"

"Bring onto our side. Whichever word you like better."

She sat across from him and started counting on her fingers, like she'd already run this math a hundred times in her head and only needed to say it once out loud.

"Red and Black are gone. Kessler's owned them for over a decade - you couldn't outbid that loyalty with the whole Regent treasury."

"Yellow?"

Beatrix went still.

"Yellow is the tower my uncle hired." Her voice dropped. "Thirty of them. They're the ones who died in that factory with him."

Alex said nothing.

"So no," she said. "Yellow isn't a possibility. Yellow is a grave we dug together."

"That leaves three."

"White. Blue. Green." She set the names down like cards on a table. "None of them like us yet. None of them hate us either. That's the best you get today."

Alex spent the day reading everything Regent had on all three.

Blue was old money, cautious —

three hundred years of never picking a side in anything. Green ran half the healing houses in the country and carried more political weight than Red or Black combined, quietly, without ever raising its voice.

White had neither. White was small. White was poor. Fewest certified magicians of any tower in the union. Fewest followers. A reputation — mostly true — for taking the students no one else wanted.

...

"White," Alex said, on the third morning.

Beatrix looked at him like he'd spoken a different language.

"White," she repeated.

"That's the one."

"Alex." She set down her tile. "They're the weakest tower in the country. Fewest followers of the seven. If you're trying to buy weight to throw against Red and Black,

White doesn't have any weight to throw."

"I know."

"Then why them?"

Alex smiled — not a kind smile, the smile of a man who'd already finished the math and was just waiting for everyone else to catch up.

"We're not going to support the tower," he said.

Beatrix waited.

"We're going to buy it."

The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 739

White Tower stood two hours outside New Avalon, at the end of a road the state had stopped repairing.

Beatrix drove them herself.

"You should know what you're walking into," she said.

"I read the file."

"The file's three years old. It's worse now."

She wasn't exaggerating.

The gate had rust on it. Half the outer wall was scaffolded, and the scaffolding itself looked older than the crack it was holding up. Weeds came through the courtyard stones in lines, following the joints, the way weeds do when nobody has pulled them in a very long time.

Alex counted four people in a courtyard built for four hundred.

Two of them were sweeping. One was asleep in the sun.

"Five hundred years," Beatrix said quietly. "This place taught magic for five hundred years."

"How many students this year?"

"Nine."

"Out of how many applicants?"

Beatrix didn't answer that one, which was an answer.

If somebody had told Alex the White Tower would close next month, he wouldn't have been surprised. He wouldn't even have asked why.

...

The old man came out to meet them himself.

No attendants. No robes of office. Just a thin man in a grey work coat with his sleeves pushed up, holding a watering can, like they'd interrupted him halfway through something ordinary.

He looked at Beatrix for a long moment.

"Beatrix Hargrove," he said. "What brings one of the richest people in the Arcanum State to a humble place like this?"

"This man wanted to meet you." Beatrix stepped aside. "Alex, this is Elder Elias White. Elias - Alex."

The old man set the watering can down on the step. He didn't hurry about it.

"And young man. What do you want from this old man?"

"I want to buy this tower," Alex said. "And every branch it has."

The courtyard went very quiet.

Beatrix turned and stared at him.

She'd sat through eleven years of acquisitions. She'd seen men take four hours and three lunches to get to a number. She had never once heard anybody walk into a building and say it in the first minute.

"Alex-"

But Elias White was already nodding.

"That's not a hard decision," he said. "How much are you looking to buy it for?"

Beatrix's head snapped around.

"You want to sell?"

Elias laughed.

It was a good laugh, and that was the worst part - there was no bitterness anywhere in it.

"Look around you, Miss Hargrove." He gestured at the empty courtyard with one thin hand. "There's nothing here anymore."

"That's not "

"Everyone wants magic that hits things now." He shrugged. "Fire. Lightning. Something that makes a young man look impressive in front of his friends. Red Tower takes four thousand students a year. Black takes six."

"And you?"

"We teach magic that helps people." Elias smiled at her, gently. "Nobody wants it. There's no glory in it. You can't post a video of yourself setting a broken bone."

Beatrix opened her mouth and didn't have anything to put in it.

"I'm eighty-one years old," Elias went on. "I have no successor. Not because I didn't look - because there was nobody to find. In four years I will be dead, and this tower will close either way, and forty old people who gave their whole lives to it will find out what the state pension actually pays."

He picked the watering can back up.

"So if someone wants to buy it? Then thank the Creators. At least my elders get to be old somewhere warm."

Alex hadn't said anything through any of it.

"How much are you asking?" he said.

...

"We have forty elders left," Elias said. "Sixty faithful followers, give or take. The young ones will land somewhere they're young, they'll be fine."

"That's not what I asked."

"I know." Elias set the can down again. "Here's my price. Find work for the young ones at your company. Something honest, something they can live on. And for the elders- give us enough that none of us has to work hard again before we die. That's all. That's the whole number."

Beatrix looked away.

She'd negotiated against men who'd tried to squeeze four extra points out of a dying company. This one had just asked for a warm room and jobs for his students.

"Something like ten million per elder," Alex said. "Is that good?"

Elias blinked.

Then he laughed again, differently this time — startled, almost embarrassed.

"That's far too much," he said.

"Is it good?"

"...It's too much, and I'll accept it." The old man sat down on the step, slowly, one hand on his knee. "Four hundred million. For a building with a hole in the roof and a library nobody reads."

"That's the deal."

"Then let me ask you the only question actually care about." Elias looked up at him. "Say you buy it from us. What will.

you do with this place? Turn it into offices? Storage? Something for the business?"

Alex reached into his coat.

He took out a book and tossed it into the old man's lap.

...

Elias frowned at it.

It wasn't much to look at. Hand-bound. No title on the cover. The kind of thing a man writes for himself and never expects anyone else to open.

He took his glasses out of his coat pocket, put them on, and opened it to the first page the way you'd humor a child showing you a drawing.

He read one page.

He turned it.

He read the second page much more slowly than the first.

Beatrix watched his face and couldn't work out what was happening on it. Not confusion. Not disbelief.

Something closer to the way a man looks when a room he has lived in his whole life turns out to have a door in it.

Elias turned to the third page.

Then his hand came down flat on the step, hard enough to make Beatrix jump.

"All elders," he said. "Here. Now."

...

They came slowly, and most of them came annoyed.

Old men and old women in mended coats, shuffling out of doorways across the courtyard, muttering about their afternoons. Two of them were still arguing about a kettle.

"Elias, we discussed this-"

"Whatever it is, it can wait until-"

"Read this," Elias said, and held the book up.

The nearest elder took it with the expression of a man being handed a receipt.

He read for about eleven seconds.

Then he sat down on the ground.

Right there, in the weeds, in the middle of the courtyard, an eighty-year-old man sat down in the dirt with his knees up and did not look away from the page.

"Marren," the woman next to him said. "Marren, what—"

He didn't answer.

She leaned over his shoulder to see what was so important.

And then she stopped talking too.

It spread through that courtyard like water finding cracks.

One elder called another. That one called three more. Somebody ran — actually ran, at that age, across broken stones to fetch the ones still inside.

Within twenty minutes there were forty old people packed shoulder to shoulder around a single hand-bound book, and the ones at the back were standing on the low Wallto see over the ones at the front.

Nobody was talking.

The only sound in the whole courtyard was paper turning.

Beatrix stood at the edge of it with her arms folded, watching forty of the most stubborn people in the Arcanum State forget she existed.

"Alex." Her voice came out strange. "What is in that book?"

"Things they already know."

"That is not what that looks like."

"They know all the pieces." Alex was watching them too, hands in his pockets.

"Nobody ever showed them how the pieces fit."

Beatrix looked at him then — really looked, the way she'd been trying not to for about two weeks now.

She didn't say the thing she was thinking.

"Come on," Alex said. "Let's get lunch. We'll come back at dinner."

"They'll still be reading at dinner."

"I know."

...

They were still reading at dinner.

The sun had gone down behind the broken half of the wall. Somebody had brought out lamps and nobody had brought out food. Forty elders in aring the same book in the middle, an old woman near the front turning the last pages with both hands because one wasn't steady enough.

Alex and Beatrix stood in the gateway and waited.

Nobody noticed them come back either.

The last page turned.

The old woman held it there for a while. Then she closed the book, carefully, the way you'd close a door on a sleeping child.

Elias White took it back from her.

He looked down at the cover for a moment. Then he looked around at the others -

forty faces, lamplight, nobody moving.

Whatever passed between them didn't need saying.

Elias turned around.

And an eighty-one-year-old man who had run the White Tower for thirty-four years lowered himself down onto the broken stones of his own courtyard and bowed his head.

Behind him, forty elders went down with him.

"Grandmaster," Elias said. "Please. Lead our White Tower."

The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 740

Beatrix looked at Alex and whispered. "What did you give them?"

Alex looked at her and smiled.

"The perfection of magic formula."

Beatrix waited for more.

There wasn't any more.

"That's it? That's the whole answer?"

"That's the whole answer."

"Alex, forty people just knelt down in the dirt for that book. Nobody kneels for a formula."

"They did."

...

Here is what she didn't know.

For a long time now, Alex had been buying magic books.

Not a few. Not the good ones. Every single one that money could reach.

Public texts, first — the cheap ones, the school primers, the certification manuals any student could buy. Then private collections. Then auction lots he never bid on in person. Then entire libraries, bought sight-unseen from families who'd lost the last person who could read them, crated up and shipped without anyone ever asking who the buyer was.

None of it went to a shelf.

All of it went into his space inventory. And from there, all of it went to Gaia.

The Mother Al had been recording the magic formulas of all seven towers. Blue. Green. Brown. Yellow. Red. Black. White. Every spell, every variant, every half- finished note some dead magician left in a margin.

Recording it wasn't the point, though.

The point was what Alex asked her for next.

Don't just keep it. Perfect it.

Find where every formula wastes energy. Find where each one breaks at scale. Find the places where two traditions spent four hundred years solving the exact same problem, and one of them solved it better, and neither of them ever knew the other existed.

Then rebuild all of it. Clean.

For him to learn.

That was the real reason two impossible products came out of a mothballed lab floor in nine days.

He hadn't been inventing anything.

He'd been reading.

...

The White Tower was easy, in the end.

He already owned every text they had worth owning a five-hundred-year tradition nobody else had bothered to collect, because nobody else had wanted it. Gaia had run all of it years ago and set it aside, finished, waiting.

So what he'd handed Elias in that courtyard wasn't a better version of White magic.

It was White magic rebuilt from the foundation up.

And it didn't stop there.

Because Alex had bought and copied every other tower's magic money could reach, Gaia had folded all of it back in - taken what Red did with force, what Black did with distance, what Blue did with precision, and re-expressed every piece of it through the white element.

Which meant the thing sitting in Elias White's arms right now could do something no tower in the country could do.

The new White Tower wouldn't only teach White magic.

It would teach everything the other six could do. Through white.

Put plainly: the weakest tower in the United State of Magic had just been handed the ability to do all of it.

Nobody in that courtyard had ever seen anything like it.

Nobody in the country had.

...

They'd gone back inside before they left.

The elders were on their feet by then, but not by much. Forty of them crowded into a hall built for four hundred, and not one of them sat down.

Elias came forward with the book still against his chest.

"We're not selling you this tower," he said.

Beatrix's head came up.

"We discussed a number."

"You did. I accepted it. My elders will take it, and thank you for it, and I'll hold you to every word about the young ones." Elias set the book down on the table between them. "But you're not buying anything. I'm giving it to you."

"Elias-"

"I've been running this place for thirty-four years." The old man's voice didn't shake at all. "I know exactly what I've got and exactly what it's worth, and I have never in my life had anything worth what's inside that cover."

He lowered himself down again.

Behind him, forty elders went down with him, and this time nobody looked surprised.

"Grandmaster. Please lead our White Tower." Elias kept his head down. "We're willing to put this tower in your hands."

Alex looked at them for a moment.

"Get up," he said. "All of you. I'm not going to talk to the tops of your heads."

They got up.

...

Alex turned to Beatrix.

"How much would it cost to renovate every White Tower branch we have?"

Beatrix blinked. "All of them?"

"All of them. And build new ones across the Arcanum State."

She didn't answer straight away. She was already doing it in her head - she'd been doing it since the courtyard, the way she couldn't help doing it.

"Nine hundred million," she said. "For the renovations alone. More if the branch buildings are as bad as this ane, and they will be breathe "New construction, staffing, land you're' talking about the better part of three billion dollars, spread over two years."

"Then start with the roof on this one."

"Alex."

"Three billion." He was already walking. "Ferrowgate paid two towers to call us sinful. I'm not going to argue with a church."

Beatrix stared after him.

"I'm going to build a bigger one," he said.

...

It moved faster than anyone expected.

Scaffolding went up on the western wall in nine days - real scaffolding this time, the kind that comes down when the work is finished instead of holding the crack together Roofers Glaziers. A stonemason nobody had been able to afford in eleven years.

Ground broke on three new sites before the end of the month. Two more were surveyed.

And the applications started coming.

Nine students had enrolled at the White Tower last year. By the fourth week there were two thousand names on a list, and a Green Tower recruiter had been seen in the village outside the gates, asking questions and not liking the answers.

Elias White stopped answering his own door because he no longer had time.

...

Alex found Beatrix on the fourth-floor landing at Regent, late, going through numbers that could have waited until morning.

"I'm going back to the Dominion," he said.

She didn't look up right away.

"For how long?"

"I don't know."

"Right." She turned a page that didn't need turning. "The towers will take about months to finish. There'll be things you need to sign."

"Send them."

"To where?"

"I'll tell you when I'm there."

Beatrix set the pen down.

There were maybe six things she could have said in that moment, and she'd rehearsed four of them at two in the morning more than once.

"There's something I never finished there," Alex said.

"I know." She picked the pen back up. "Go on, then."

He went.

She stayed on that landing a long time after the lift doors closed.

...

Willowmere hadn't changed either.

Same road in. Same low hedges. Same three houses on the bend before his.

He came around the bend and stopped walking.

The roof was gone. The whole front wall had come down and taken half the second floor with it. What was standing was black all the way.

through, and rain had already been in it the ash was packed flat and grey in the corners where the water had sat.

Not yesterday. Not last night.

Days ago.

Alex stood at the end of his own path and didn't move for a while.

Then a door opened behind him.

...

An old man from the house on the bend came halfway down his own path and stopped there, keeping the distance.

"You're him," he said. "You're the one they were looking for."

"What happened."

"Magicians." The old man's hands were shaking and he put them in his pockets to stop it. "Six days back. Middle of the afternoon."

"How many?"

"I didn't count. More than ten. They came up this road asking for a man named

Alexander, and they asked once."

"And?"

"And when nobody gave them one they liked—" He stopped. Started over. "They burned it. All of it. They stood in that road and watched it burn, and then they left.

Nobody came. The whole village heard it and nobody came."

Alex looked at the house.

"Monica," he said.

The old man's face did something terrible.

"Yolanda."

The old man shook his head.

He kept shaking it, small, like he couldn't work out how to stop.

"All of them," he said. "Everyone who was inside. They didn't come out."

Alex didn't say anything.

"The bird, too," the old man said, quieter. "And your dog. He was the only one who went at them. He got two of them off the path before—"

He stopped.

"They didn't make it," he said. "None of it made it. There's nothing in there, son.

There's nothing left in there at all."