The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 741

Alex didn't move for a long time.

The old man didn't either. He just stood there at the edge of his own path, hands still shoved in his pockets, waiting for whatever came next the way you wait for weather.

Nothing came next. Not right away.

Alex looked at the black shell where his place used to stand, and the thought that finally rose up through everything else wasn't grief.

It was guilt.

This was all about him.

Monica was innocent. Yolanda was innocent. A dog and a bird that had never once wandered beyond this road had no stake in this fight. He knew it with sickening certainty: if he hadn't come here, they would still be alive.

They were just people who happened to live in the house he came to.

Caught in a crossfire that had started before they'd ever met him.

And Alex already knew, standing there, exactly whose crossfire it was.

Ragnar's grandfather.

He didn't have proof. Not yet.

This had the shape of that order all over it.

He just couldn't prove it.

"Tell me everything again," Alex said. "Slower this time."

The old man nodded, fast, grateful to have something to do with his hands besides shake.

"More than ten," he said. "Maybe fifteen. They came up the road on foot, not by carriage, not by anything I could hear coming. They enter, I heard scream. They are looking for someone. Then suddenly all destroyed."

"What were they wearing?"

"Regular clothes. Dominion clothes. Same as you'd see on anyone in the market." He frowned, working to remember. "Nothing marked. No colors. I thought they were travelers at first, until they started asking for you by name."

"Robes? Sigils? Anything on the sleeves, the collar?"

"No. Nothing like that."

"Did they cast anything you recognized? Anything that looked like anything?"

The old man's face went blank in the specific way of a man being asked a question in a language he didn't speak.

"Son, I don't know magic," he said. "I've never needed to. Something came out of their hands and the house came down. That's all I can tell you. I couldn't tell a Red spell from a Green one if my life needed it, and it very nearly did. I never travel to any other country except this one."

Alex looked at the ash a moment longer.

Fifteen magicians. No robes. No tower colors.

Not sloppy. Careful.

Whoever sent them had made sure that even if somebody lived to describe it, there'd be nothing in the description worth following.

...

He walked the perimeter of the house once, slow, looking at what the fire hadn't finished off.

There was nothing to find. No emblem burned into the dirt. No signature spell-scar the way a fire leaves a certain kind of scorch depending on who lit it. Whoever did this had scrubbed themselves clean on purpose, the same way Cornelius had tried to scrub his own tracks in a factory that came down around him.

Alex crouched by what used to be the front step and thought it through the only way that had ever worked for him.

Not with his hands first. With access.

Every tower kept records. Had to. Dispatch logs, membership rolls, who got sent where and on whose order - no organization five hundred years old ran without paperwork somewhere, even if the paperwork was locked in a vault nobody outside the tower ever saw.

If fifteen magicians left one of the seven towers with an assignment like this one, that tower's own books would know it.

But no tower was going to open its vault for a stranger. Asking would just tell whoever gave that order that somebody was looking — and looking was the last thing Alex wanted them to know about, not yet.

There was only one way to get inside those records without asking permission.

Own the towers.

He already had one.

Standing in his own ashes, he decided one wasn't going to be enough.

Seven, if he could manage it. As many as he could take before somebody worked out what he was actually doing and tried to stop him.

...

Beatrix was still on the fourth floor when he came back, same as always, except this time she looked up the second he walked in.

"You look different," she said.

"I need more money than we have."

"That's not different. That's Tuesday." She set her pen down anyway. "How much, and for what?"

"White Tower first. Then Blue. Then Green, if Green will sell." He sat down across from her without being asked. "And I need it faster than the current pipeline can make it."

Beatrix studied him for a second longer than the question needed.

"You're not telling me something."

"I'm telling you what I need."

"That's not the same thing." She waited. He didn't fill the silence, so she let it go — the way she'd learned to, the way that was starting to worry her more than if he'd lied outright. "Fine. What's the new item?"

"A third product." Alex leaned forward. "Something Regent hasn't touched yet. A ward-line stabilizer — a device, not a formula, that any building can install to hold a protective boundary without needing a resident magician to maintain it."

Beatrix blinked.

"That's not medicine. That's not a talisman. That's an entirely new category."

"It's also something every noble house, every temple, every merchant guild in the Arcanum State is going to want the second they hear it exists." He didn't blink. "You wanted to know how we fund seven towers instead of one. That's how. I will keep producing new products."

She sat back slowly.

"You built this in your head just now?"

"I've had it a while."

Beatrix looked at him the way she'd started looking at him more and more lately- like a woman doing arithmetic on a number that kept refusing to resolve.

"Fine," she said again, softer this time. "Draw it up. I'll get the capital moving by morning."

The White Tower elders didn't ask why Alex wanted to take personal charge of construction. Elias didn't ask either. He just handed over the second set of keys and said, "It's yours to run as you like, Grandmaster," and went back to whatever he'd been doing before Alex walked in.

Nobody in that meeting knew what Alex actually intended to do with unrestricted access to a five-hundred-year archive.

Beatrix didn't know either.

Same as she didn't know about Gaia.

...

What Alex actually brought to the site three nights later didn't look like magic, because it wasn't.

Small. Quiet. Nothing that glowed, nothing that hummed the way a working ward-line hummed. A dozen machines, no bigger than birds, that rose off the back of an unmarked cart after dark and went to work on the west walk while the two guards on duty watched from thirty feet away and saw nothing worth reporting.

Drones filled the sky, their numbers growing by the second. Thousands of machines, locked in synchronized motion, hard at work building.

Nobody in the United State of Magic had ever built one. Nobody in the United State of Magic knew such a thing was possible, which meant nobody in the United State of Magic knew to be afraid of one.

If a guard did happen to catch a shape moving too fast against the dark, too precise to be a bird, he'd think exactly what Alex needed him to think.

Must be one of the Grandmaster's spells.

That was the he whole advantage. Not power. Not secrecy, even - the drones worked in plain sight, every night, in front of guards who were paid to notice things. It worked because there was nothing in five hundred years of tower history that had prepared a single one of them to recognize what they were actually looking at.

...

Beatrix's number had been nine hundred million for renovations, three billion all in, spread over two years.

The White Tower's west wall was finished in six days.

The roof went up in nine.

By the end of the third week, two of the five new branch sites had already gone from bare foundation to standing structure, and the site foremen real ones, human ones, hired to supervise work they didn't actually have to do anymore-had stopp have questions out loud and started asking them to each other instead, quietly, over meals, in the particular tone of men who suspected the answer would only make them more uncomfortable.

Nobody outside the project ever heard there'd been a race against a year-long timeline.

There didn't need to be an announcement.

One month after Alex told Beatrix he needed more money than they had, every

White Tower branch in the Arcanum State stood finished — new roofs, new walls, new halls built to hold four hundred students where nine had barely fit the year before.

A shockwave ripped through the state, then the whole country: the White Tower was finally making a move, and no one was ready for it.

"Everyone is talking about the White Tower now," Alex told the assembled elders. They looked at him with sheer awe, completely sold on the idea that he was a master sorcerer- no one in the whole country could raise a citadel this huge in just thirty days. "We start recruiting new students today."

If Alex wanted to forge his own kingdom, he needed loyal soldiers ready to bend the knee.

And he was going to start training them right now.

The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 742

Alex came onto the fourth floor with one sheet of paper and set it face down on Beatrix's desk.

"Before you turn that over," he said, "tell me how Red Tower makes its money."

Beatrix looked at the paper, then at him.

"Fire," she said. "Everything that burns on purpose. Every forge in the state runs on a Red flame-charm, and every one of those charms has to be renewed by a Red magician every month, for a f*e. Same charm in half the kitchens in New Avalon." "Every month."

"Every month, for five hundred years." She shrugged. "It's the best business in this country. Nobody stops cooking."

"Black."

"Cleanup and curses." Beatrix ticked them off. "You want a building taken down, a field cleared, a warehouse of spoiled stock disposed of — you hire Black, and they charge what they like because nobody else does that work. And then there's the other half."

"Say it."

"Curses." Her mouth thinned. "Hexes for hire. A merchant pays Black to put something on a rival's shipment and the rival's cargo rots in the hold. Everyone knows it happens. Nobody says it out loud, because everyone's either bought one or is afraid of one."

"And Ferrowgate?"

"Ferrowgate is bleeding. The Boosting Sticker took half their equipment line and it isn't coming back." Beatrix paused. "But they've still got the Meridian."

"The flying car."

"The flying car. Kessler's grandfather built the first one and this whole country has been buying them for sixty years. It's the only thing left holding that company's name up." She looked at the paper again. "Why are you asking me things you already know?"

"Because I wanted to hear you say them in order," Alex said. "Turn it over."

There were four lines on the page.

Beatrix read them twice. Then she set the sheet down very carefully, the way you set down something that might go off.

"This is a target list."

"Yes."

"Alex, this isn't a product plan. Every single one of these is aimed at somebody."

"That's what a target list is."

She picked it back up anyway.

"Flame core," she read. "Talk."

"A brick. Sits in a forge or a stove and burns as long as you want it to." Alex sat down across from her. "No charm. No renewal. No monthly f*e, no Red magician at your door on the first of the month. You buy it once and it lasts a year. Cheaper."

"How much?"

"Twenty dollars."

Beatrix went still.

"A Red flame-charm is nine dollars a month," she said slowly. "Every month. Forever."

"I know."

"You just ended their business."

"I built a better stove."

"Alex."

"Next line," he said.

...

"Breaker rod." Beatrix's voice had gone flat and careful. "That's the Black one."

"Clears a field in an afternoon. Takes a building down in sections instead of all at once, so you can sell the stone afterward instead of paying somebody to cart it off." Alex leaned back. "Black charges four thousand dollars for a warehouse demolition. The rod costs sixty and a farmer can use it himself."

"So half of Black's income."

"Half."

"And the other half?"

Alex didn't answer right away.

Beatrix read the third line out loud, and her voice changed on it.

"Curse-breaker."

"Yes."

"Explain that one to me very slowly."

"It's a charm. You wear it." Alex kept his voice level. "Any hex Black Tower has ever laid stops working. Any hex Black Tower lays after this stops working before it lands. It doesn't compete with them. It deletes them."

Beatrix put the sheet down.

"Do you understand what you just described?"

"I do."

"No, I don't think you do." She stood up, walked two steps, came back. "The other three are business. Cruel business, but business — you make a better thing, people buy the better thing, that's the game. This one isn't a product. This one is you standing in the middle of the Arcanum State and announcing that Black Tower's curses don't work anymore."

"They don't."

"They believe they do. That's the entire thing. Half of Black's clients pay them out of fear, not for a service - the fear is the service." Beatrix's hands were flat on the desk now. "Alex, if you sell this, you're not taking their customers. You're taking their whole reason to exist, in public, where everyone can watch it happen."

"Yes."

"And you're fine with that."

"Beatrix." He said her name quietly, and she stopped. "Weeks ago Red and Black put out statement saying our products poison children. They didn't test anything. They didn't prove anything. They were paid to say the word sin and half this country believed them before breakfast, and we lost thirty percent in four days."

She didn't say anything.

"I'm not angry about it," Alex said. "It was smart. But they picked the fight, and I'm allowed to finish it."

Beatrix looked at him for a long moment.

There was something she wanted to say - he could see her get most of the way to it, the way she'd been getting most of the way to it for weeks now, and then not.

"Fourth line," she said instead.

...

"The Lark," Alex said.

"That's a flying car."

"It's a better one. Half the mana draw of a Meridian. Two-thirds the weight. It'll carry the same load and it'll cost a family four thousand dollars instead of nineteen." He shrugged. "Same for every household device Ferrowgate still sells under that name. We're making all of them. All better. All cheaper."

Beatrix laughed - one dry sound with nothing happy in it.

"You're going to put out a flying car."

"People have been buying flying cars for sixty years," Alex said. "There's nothing strange about a machine that flies with a person sitting in it. That's ordinary. That's

Tuesday."

Something crossed his face for half a second and then didn't.

"Fine," Beatrix said. "How long until all four are ready?"

"Three of them are ready now."

"Since when?"

"Since I wrote the list."

The next thing he did surprised everyone more than the target list had.

He went to Elias.

"No tuition," Alex said.

Elias White, who had run a tower into the ground for thirty-four years and had just watched it come back from the dead in five weeks, blinked at him.

"For which students?"

"All of them."

"Grandmaster-"

"Anyone who applies. Anyone who can hold a wand and shows up on the day." Alex laid a hand on the enrollment ledger and closed it. "No f*e. No family name. No letter from anybody. Not this year — ever."

Elias sat down slowly.

"No tower has ever done that," he said. "Not one, not in five hundred years. Every school in this country has only ever taught the students who could pay."

"I know."

"Do you know what that means for the ones who couldn't?"

"I know exactly what it means," Alex said. "That's why I'm doing it."

...

By the week of open enrollment there were nineteen thousand names on the list.

They came from everywhere. They came in on foot. Farm kids, dock kids, kids from the old quarter whose parents had never once.imet their lives said the word tuition without laughing at themselves afterward. Kids whod been told at eleven years old by a Green recruiter or a Red one that they had the talent, absolutely, no question - and then been asked what their family did.

A boy came up the White Tower road with a letter he'd written himself and stood at the gate for a long time before he went in, because he'd been turned away at three towers already and he'd learned to expect the walk back.

Nobody turned him away.

That was the thing that traveled. Not the flame core, not the Lark, not even the curse-breaker.

The thing that traveled was that there was one tower in the United State of Magic that didn't ask.

...

It hit all at once.

Red Tower's renewal income dropped forty percent in three weeks and their elders held an emergency session about a twenty-dollar brick. Black dost nine demolition contracts in nine days, and then something worse started happening clients calling to cancel curse-work they'd already paid for, because the target had bought a charm and the target's cargo hadn't rotted. And the competitors were healthy after wearing the charm.

At Black Tower, an elder told the room not to panic.

"Nobody stops paying for a curse," he said. "Fear doesn't go out of fashion."

He said it on a Tuesday. The curse-breaker had shipped a hundred and forty thousand units by Friday.

And in a glass office sixty miles away, Silas Kessler watched the Meridian's order book empty out one line at a time, and did not move for a very long while.

The Arcanum State had spent one season learning that Alexander could kill a Line-Commander in a single move, and a second learning that whatever he touched got built in a month instead of a year.

Now it was learning the third thing.

He wasn't buying his way to the top of the seven towers.

He was taking the floor out from under them, one at a time, and handing what fell through to anybody who'd been standing underneath.

The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 743

The day Regent's four products went on sale, three men in three different rooms heard the news and laughed.

At Red Tower, Garrick Vail read the price list out to his elders the way you read out a joke you've already heard.

"Twenty dollars," he said. "A brick. That's their answer to five hundred years."

"They're saying it replaces a flame-charm entirely."

"They can say what they like." Vail dropped the sheet on the table. "You know what a Red flame-charm actually is? It's the man who comes to your door on the first of the month. Same man who came to your father's door. Three generations of a family have taken their tea with our people while the charm gets renewed." He smiled. "You don't replace that with a brick."

At Black Tower, Dorren Ashe barely looked up.

"Let them sell rods to farmers," he said. "Nobody's afraid of a farmer."

And in a glass office sixty miles away, Silas Kessler was told that Regent had launched a flying car at four thousand dollars. He said the one sentence that would follow him for the rest of the year.

"Nobody buys a cheap car. They buy a Meridian."

...

The switching started quietly, the way it always does.

Not out of disloyalty. Out of arithmetic.

A blacksmith in the fishing district sat down with a stub of chalk and worked it out. Nine dollars a month came to a hundred and eight a year. The brick cost twenty and lasted the whole year. He looked at the number twice. Then he put the chalk down and sat back, because it meant meat on the table twice a week, and he had not felt that particular loosening in his chest since he was a boy.

He wasn't betraying anyone. He was just a man who owned a stove now.

He told his brother. His brother told two others.

That was the thing nobody in either tower understood in time. Not one person who switched felt like a traitor. Every single one of them felt like somebody who'd finally been handed a break.

One month later, it wasn't a trickle.

...

Red Tower called an emergency session, and it didn't start with shouting. It started with a young accountant standing at the end of a five-hundred-year-old table with a page shaking in his hands.

"Renewals cancelled this month," he said. "Fourteen thousand, two hundred and six."

Somebody made a small sound down the far end.

"Forges converted to a flame core — that we know of — nine hundred and forty. That's not homes. That's working forges. The ones that pay a premium rate."

"Get to the end," Vail said.

"Sir-"

"Get to the end of the page."

The young man looked up.

"At the current rate of loss," he said, "this tower has eleven months of reserve."

Nobody spoke. Vail sat very still, and what finally came out of him wasn't anger. It was quieter than that, and much worse.

"Say that again."

"Eleven months, Elder."

"Three weeks ago it was forever," Vail said.

...

Black Tower's numbers were smaller, and Dorren Ashe understood immediately that his situation was far worse.

"We can survive losing demolition," he told the room. "It's ugly work, it pays well, someone will always need a wall taken down. We'll take it back eventually."

"And the other side of the house?"

Ashe didn't answer straight away.

Because the other side of the house was the whole house. For five hundred years Black Tower had sold curses. Everyone in the states knew a curse could be bought, and knew roughly what one cost, and lay awake now and then wondering whether a rival had already bought one.

That was the product. Not the hex. The lying awake.

"A hundred and eleven cancellations this week," his second said. "Paid work. Clients wanting refunds because the target bought a charm and nothing happened. One of them said the man he'd hexed came to his shop personally. To say hello."

"To say hello."

"He was smiling, apparently."

Ashe put his hands flat on the table.

"Then we're finished," he said. "Not falling. Finished. A tower nobody fears isn't a tower."

"Elder-"

"It's a building," Ashe said. "Four hundred rooms and a very old roof."

...

Silas Kessler was the largest patron Red and Black Tower had ever had.

Ferrowgate money paid for Red's east wing. Ferrowgate money paid the stipend of every Black student who couldn't cover his own. Every year for ten years the cheque arrived before anyone had to ask, and every year for ten years neither tower had to sit down and work out what it would do without one.

Weeks ago they'd both put out a statement calling Regent's products spiritually contaminated — worded almost identically, an hour apart, neither one asking the other first.

That was when they still had the luxury of pride.

Kessler took the meeting in his own office, which was a statement in itself, and both elders knew exactly what it was meant to say.

Then he stood up when they came in.

He hadn't done that in ten years.

"Gentlemen."

"Silas."

They sat. Nobody said anything for a moment, and in that silence all three of them worked out the same thing at the same time. The arrangement had changed. Permanently. And the change was not in Kessler's favor.

For ten years these two men had come to him grateful. That was the whole arrangement — he gave, they thanked him, and nobody ever had to say the word owe out loud.

They weren't grateful now. They sat the way equals sit. They'd come to collect. "You want something," Kessler said.

"We want a product," Vail said. "You're the only one of the three of us who owns a factory. We can't manufacture. We've never had to. You can."

"Build what?"

"Anything." Ashe leaned forward. "Something that burns cheaper than a flame core. Something that breaks stone better than a rod. Something — anything — a man can hold in his hand and choose over theirs."

Kessler looked at both of them for a long moment.

"You want me to out-invent Regent Group."

"We want you to bury them," Vail said. "You hit back with something of your own.

You don't sit here taking it."

It took them a month to find out they couldn't.

Ferrowgate's engineers took a flame core apart on the first day and were still arguing about it on the thirtieth There was no charm inside. No renewal mechanism. No bound spell, nothing a magician could point at and name. The thing simply burned, at whatever temperature you asked of it, for as long as you wanted, and when they finally cracked one open under a mana-lens they found a structure nobody in the room had ever seen and nobody in the room could explain.

"It's not doing anything wrong," the chief engineer said. "That's the problem. It's doing the same thing our charms do. It's just doing it perfectly."

"Perfectly."

"There's no waste in it. Anywhere." He rubbed his eyes. "Sir, we've built flame-work for sixty years and every single thing we've ever made leaks energy somewhere, because that's what magic does. This doesn't leak."

"Then copy it."

"I can't copy what I don't understand." The man's voice went flat. "They're writing everything in some small, exact formula and printing it. We don't have that. We don't have anything close to that."

Thirty days. Three organizations. Not one new product.

And on the twenty-second day of that month while Ferrowgate's engineers were still arguing over a brick Regent launched again. Four more products aimed at exactly the same three throats, priced tomake the last four look expensive.

...

They met again after that, and the room was different.

"We can't beat the products," Ashe said.

"No."

"Then we don't beat the products."

Vail looked up.

Nobody said anything for a few seconds. Then Ashe said it out loud, calm and reasonable, the way men say monstrous things when they've already spent two months getting used to them privately.

"Beatrix Hargrove. Every one of these launches goes out under her signature. She's the face, she's the name on the paperwork, she's the one the merchant guilds actually deal with. Take her out of that building and the whole machine stops for six months while they argue about who signs what."

"Take her out how."

"Thirty men," Ashe said. "Not magicians. Nothing that traces back to a tower. Her own family tried it eight weeks ago and nearly got there. The only reason it failed is that Cornelius Hargrove was an idiot who went himself."

"You're talking about killing a woman in her own office."

"I'm talking about the survival of a five-hundred-year-old institution," Ashe said. "And so are you."

...

There was one voice in that room that said no.

Renwick was the oldest man Black Tower had. Eighty-one years old, fifty of them spent laying hexes for money, and he had never once lost sleep over any of it.

He stood up. "No."

"Sit down, Renwick."

"I have cursed men's cargo. I have cursed their crops. One time, God help me, I cursed a man's knees." His voice didn't shake. "Every single one of them woke up the next morning."

"That is the problem," Ashe said. "And you're going to solve it."

"How?"

"Kill the owner."

...

The next night, thirty men moved on Regent Group without making a sound.

Fifty floors up, one window was still lit.

Beatrix worked late almost every night. She'd never once looked up. She had no idea she was the most closely watched woman in the country.

"The job gets finished even if it costs us," the leader said. "Nobody comes back down until she's dead." He lifted his hand. "Move."

The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 744

Thirty attackers went over the service wall at eleven and nobody stopped them.

No guard at the loading gate. No clerk at the freight desk. The stairwell door on the east side opened on the first pull, and the man holding it stood there a second longer than he needed to, waiting for a bell that never rang.

"It's open," he said.

"What do you mean, open?"

"I mean I turned the handle and it opened."

Torvan, the leader came up and looked at the door, then past it at the lobby — all that glass, all that marble, not one living soul in it.

"Fifty floors," Torvan said. "One woman. She works late every night and she works alone."

"Feels wrong."

"It feels lucky. That's a different thing." He put his hand flat on the door. "Nobody comes back down until she's dead."

They climbed in three groups, two flights apart, quiet the way men are quiet when they've done this before.

The last man in the last group was called Emmet.

Something touched the back of his neck. Light, barely anything, like a moth landing.

He reached up and came away with a needle between his fingers, thinner than a fishbone.

"Hey," he said. "Hey, what's-"

His knees stopped belonging to him. He went down sideways and never hit the concrete, because something caught him under both arms and lowered him the way you lower a sleeping child, then carried him back down into the dark without making any sound at all.

Four flights up, a man named Boyd turned to say something and found the stairwell behind him empty.

"Emmet," he said.

The word went down the shaft and didn't come back.

"Emmet, don't play."

Boyd leaned over the rail. Forty feet of switchback, all the way down, and nothing standing on any of it.

He took the needle in the shoulder while he was still leaning.

...

It happened eleven more times on the east stair and nine on the west.

Not one of them made a sound the man in front of him could hear.

The drones came out of the dark twenty feet behind and never came closer than they had to. Fire once. Catch what falls. Carry it down. Small, black, and they never once got ahead of a man and let him see one.

None of them had been prepared to be hunted.

...

By the thirty-eighth floor Torvan had six men.

By the forty-fourth only he left.

He turned around slowly, and the hall was empty.

Something shifted above him.

His hand came up before his head did. The air went hard and rang like struck glass, and the shield closed around him in a full sphere the good one, the expensive one, the one that had cost him a year of his life to learn.

Two needles hit it and skidded off like rain on a window.

He laughed out loud. He couldn't help it.

"Darts," he said to the ceiling. "All that, and you brought darts."

Fifty of drones dropped down the shaft.

They filled it. Ceiling to rail, floor after floor, arranged in a lattice too even to be a swarm.

Then they started firing in rotation. One, then the next, then the next, around and around, from every angle at the same time.

Torvan held.

His shield was good. It held at ten seconds. It held at thirty. Sweat came down his jaw and he laughed again, uglier now, because he knew this game and this game had a bottom to it. A caster runs out. A machine doesn't.

"Come on, then," he said. "Come on. Come-"

At three hundred and eleven, the sphere flickered where his own breath had thinned it.

One needle went in.

He got his hand halfway to his neck.

Then the forty-seventh floor came up to meet him, and something caught him before it did.

...

Fifty floors up, one window was still lit.

Beatrix Hargrove had been on the same page of the same contract since nine and hadn't looked up once. She heard nothing, because there was nothing to hear.

Black Tower found out at nine the next morning, which was eight hours later than they should have.

"Say it again," Dorren Ashe said.

"None of them, Elder."

"None of them what?"

"None of them came back." The man had a list in his hand and he kept looking at it, as if the list might have changed since the last time.

"Torvan?"

"Torvan too."

Ashe sat with that.

"Then they're dead," he said. "Thirty men, in a building with fifty floors of witnesses, and she killed all of them."

"Nothing is set in stone just yet," the other countered. "If the first attempt falls through, wouldn't you agree it's time to call upon the old ways?”

"Naturally," the elder said with a nod. "The groundwork is already laid. A generous tip to the cleaning staff secured a few stray strands from her vanity brush. Once the black magic ritual is cast, she won't see the sunrise."

They tried the old way next, because the old way had never once failed them in five hundred years.

It took nine hours to lay. Four of them cast it.

The hex went out at midnight.

It came back at four minutes past.

It wasn't deflected. It wasn't blocked. It ricocheted like lead off an iron plate, tearing straight back into their ritual circle. The impact drove two men to their knees instantly, spewing dark blood across the stone.

"That's not possible," a frantic voice cried out.

"Cast it again!"

They did. And the magic returned with double the fury.

The catastrophic backlash ripped through all four casters at once. They collapsed into the pool of their own spilled blood, lifeless within seconds a brutal sight that left even the Black Tower wielder frozen in shock.

By dawn they had the shape of it, and the shape of it was worse than a defeat.

"White," the elder said. "It's White work."

Nobody in that room said anything for a while.

Because every one of them had spent his whole career laughing at White. White was the tower for people who couldn't do anything useful. White was setting broken bones and blessing fishing boats and nine students a year.

White was also, and had always been, the only one of the seven that had ever been any good at protection — and the whole country had forgotten that at the same time, together, for free.

...

"Fifty," Ashe said.

The room came up at once.

"Elder-"

"Fifty of ours. Not hired men. Magicians." He was already writing. "Torvan was one and Torvan didn't come back, so the answer is fifty. I want the ones who fight."

He sent them the following night.

They were, without any argument, the fifty best fighters Black Tower had.

They went in at eleven.

By half past twelve there was nobody left in the stairwell to go in.

The reports came back to a room full of people who could no longer make their faces work.

No bodies. No blood. No inquest. No sound.

Regent Group opened at the usual hour. Beatrix Hargrove signed a shipping order at eleven, and the market closed up two points, and a fisherman on the noth quay bought a curse-breaker for his boat and told the shop clerk it was the best money he'd ever spent.

"Eighty," someone whispered. "We've sent eighty people into that building."

Ashe stood up.

He had spent two days not sleeping and it had gone somewhere behind his eyes and stayed there.

"Regent Group is holding eighty of our people," he said.

The room went very still.

"Then what are we doing?" someone asked.

"Everything." Ashe put both hands flat on the table. "We stop being polite. By morning I want it announced in eve very hall in the city Black Tower is at war. We take the White Tower and we take Regent Group, every soldier we have, all of it, unless they hand back our eighty."

Renwick didn't unfold his arms.

"And if the eighty are already dead," he said, "then there is nothing left to hand back."

reaso

"That is the reason it will be all of it." Ashe was already looking past him, at the door, at the city. "Ferrowgate will support us. Red Tower will come in Eighty of ours in the ground buys me two towers and a gate, and no building holds against that

He picked up the list of names and did not look at it.

"We have thousands of people ready to fight. We'll win this one," he said.

The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 745

A tower cannot simply declare war in the United State of Magic.

It can say the words. Ashe said them, and by noon the next day they were in every hall in the city. But saying them starts a clock, not a war, because the government has to ask why first - and the government has done it the same way for four hundred years.

They hold a banquet.

Seven tower masters. Ten elders each. And every tower brings its brightest young ones, because the whole point of the tradition is that the next generation watches their elders try to solve something without killing anyone.

The invitation reached the White Tower at four in the afternoon.

Elias read it twice and looked up.

"They want the master of the White Tower."

"Then they'll get him," Alex said.

...

The hall was older than any of the towers in it.

Long table down the middle, dark wood, and above it a screen of pale glass the size of a barn door — the recording glass, which had hung there since before anyone's grandfather. Everything said in that room went into it. Every word. It had settled six wars and started two.

The Minister of Magic was a small, tired man named Penn who had held his post for nineteen years and had buried four tower masters in that time.

He didn't sit down.

"Black Tower has declared war on the White Tower and on Regent Group," he said. "The state has not permitted it. Before the state permits anything, Black Tower will tell this room why."

Dorren Ashe stood.

"The White Tower is arming Regent Group," he said. "And between them, they have murdered eighty of my people."

The hall went very quiet.

Alex sat further down the table with Elias on one side of him and nine White elders on the other, and he let the silence run four full seconds before he stood up.

"That's a serious thing to say out loud," he said.

"It's a serious thing to have done."

"Then prove it." Alex spread his hands. "We didn't attack anybody. Not one person, not one night, not once. You are standing in front of the Minister of Magic and seven towers inventing a story, and I would like to see what it's built on."

"You know exactly what—"

"Proof," Alex said. "Names. Dates. A body. Anything at all."

Ashe didn't answer.

He couldn't. To prove that eighty of his people had died in the Regent building, he would first have to explain what eighty of his people were doing in the Regent building at eleven o'clock at night.

Alex waited long enough for everyone in that hall to watch him not answer.

"All right," he said. "Then let me try it your way. Black Tower attacked a hundred of my people last month."

Ashe's head came up.

"That's a lie."

"Prove it isn't."

"You can't just "

"That's my point," Alex said, and sat down.

...

It was the Brown Tower's master who spoke first, and she spoke to Ashe, not to Alex.

"Elder Ashe. This room has a rule and you have known it since you were twenty. You accuse, you prove."

"Brown—"

"Blue agrees," said the man from Blue.

"Green agrees."

"Yellow." The Yellow master's voice was thin. Yellow had lost thirty magicians in a factory eight weeks ago and had never been told a straight word about why. "Yellow agrees. Prove it, Dorren."

Red Tower said nothing at all.

Garrick Vail sat with his hands folded and looked at the table, and Alex watched him do it and understood exactly what it meant.

Ashe was going under.

And a drowning man will grab anything.

...

It was one of the younger Black elders who broke — a man about forty, sweating through his collar, who stood up without being invited.

"We sent them," he said.

Ashe turned.

"Sit down."

"We sent eighty of our people into the Regent building. Two nights. Thirty, then fifty." His voice was climbing.

The hall came apart.

Not shouting. Worse than shouting. Forty separate conversations starting at once around a table where nobody was supposed to be surprised by anything, and above all of it the recording glass taking down every syllable.

Alex let it run.

Then he stood up again, and the room came down because everyone wanted to hear what he'd say.

"Why did you attack us?"

Ashe had gone a strange colour. He'd been cornered in front of six towers and a minister, and there is a point past which some men stop trying to get out of a corner and simply plant their feet in it.

"Because I can," he said. "Black Tower has moved against whoever it chooses for five hundred years. I don't need a minister's permission and I don't need yours."

Somewhere down the table, a young magician from Blue made a small sound and got an elbow for it.

Penn didn't move a muscle. He didn't have to. The glass had it.

"Good," Alex said pleasantly. "Then we agree on the facts. You sent eighty people to attack us."

"I did."

"And you say we killed them."

"I say you killed them."

"Then give me their names." Alex's voice didn't rise at all. "Eighty men. If they're dead, you'll have a list. Names, faces, the lot. Put it on the table."

...

Ashe had come prepared for exactly that.

Of course he had. It was the strongest thing he owned - eighty real men with eighty real families, and the moment those names went into the record, White Tower was a slaughterhouse and Regent was its butcher.

A Black elder brought the folio down the table and set it in front of Penn. Two hundred pages. Names, portraits, tower registration numbers, service years. "Eighty," Ashe said. "Every one of them a magician of this country. Every one of them walked into a building owned by Regent Group and was never seen again." He turned to the room. "You want proof? There it is. Eighty faces. Ask the White Tower where they are."

And the room turned.

Alex could feel it go. Brown's master was looking at the portraits with her jaw set. Blue wouldn't meet his eye. Green had gone pale.

Eighty faces is a very hard thing to argue with.

Then Garrick Vail unfolded his hands.

"Red Tower stands with Black," he said. "Whatever was done to these men was done by White and by Regent. Red will fight."

"Then it's war," Ashe said.

Penn opened his mouth.

And Alex started laughing.

It wasn't a small laugh. It came up out of him properly, and it was so completely wrong for the room that even Ashe stopped.

"I'm sorry," Alex said. "I'm sorry. It's just that this reminded me of something."

"You think eighty dead men are funny."

"No. I think a story I heard yesterday is funny." Alex wiped his eye.

"There's a pleasure house in your own district, Elder Ashe. Nice place. And apparently about eighty about eight magicians turned up there recently and have been drinking their way through the cellar for days. Music at four in the morning. Girls run off their feet." He shrugged. "The owner's furious. Nobody's paid a penny."

Nobody laughed.

"Minister," Alex said, "may I borrow the glass?"

...

He set a recording crystal into the frame at the end of the table and the pale glass above them lit up.

The image was ordinary, which was what made it terrible.

A long room in a pleasure house, red lamps, low tables. Men in shirtsleeves with the collars open. Bottles standing on their sides. Two girls trying to get somebody off a table and laughing about it because he was too drunk to be any trouble.

Alex let it run.

The picture moved along the room. More men. A card game nobody was still playing. Someone singing very badly.

Then it stopped, and held, on a corner where about ten of them had simply given up - sprawled asleep on the floor among the cushions, one with a girl's shawl over his face, one still holding a bottle in a way that suggested he'd been holding it for some hours.

The image was extremely clear.

You could see every face.

"Elder Elias," Alex said. "Would you take the folio, please."

...

Elias White came down the length of that table with two hundred pages under his arm and the whole hall watching him.

He put the folio down under the glass. He opened it. He looked up at the frozen picture, and down at the portraits, and up again.

Then he started reading names out loud.

"Bram Ossory. Registration four-one-nine." He held the page up beside the screen.

Same jaw. Same broken nose. "Listed as never seen again."

Nobody in the hall said anything.

"Callum Reed. Registration four-two-two." Elias turned the page. "He's the one on the table."

"Dunnet Ware. He's asleep under the shawl."

"Osgood Tremaine "

"Stop," Ashe said.

Elias did not stop.

He went through eleven of them, one after another, matching a portrait to a face on the glass, and by the sixth the hall had stopped being shocked and started being something much worse for Black Tower, which was amused.

A young magician from Green laughed out loud and didn't bother apologising for it.

By the eleventh, Dorren Ashe had both hands on the table and was holding himself up with them.

"That's not "

"Would you like more?" Elias asked. "There are sixty-nine to go."

...

Alex turned to the Minister.

"Minister Penn," he said. "Nine weeks ago, Black Tower told this country our products were spiritually contaminated. They had no evidence and they said it anywel

Today they've come to your table With ghty names, asked for permission to make war on a school, and confessed to attacking a private company because his words, and they're in the glass behind me - because he can."

"And his eighty dead men are drunk in a brothel two streets from his own gate."

Alex sat down.

"Black Tower is not asking you for justice, Minister. Black Tower is shopping for a reason."

The hall didn't erupt. That was the thing Ashe would remember afterward, lying awake.

It went cold instead.

Brown withdrew her tower's position first, in nine words. Blue followed. Green didn't even speak, just turned her chair a few degrees away from the Black delegation, which in that room was louder than a speech. Yellow's master looked at Ashe for a long moment and said, "You brought that folio in here on purpose," and then nothing else at all.

And Garrick Vail, who had pledged Red Tower to a war ninety seconds earlier, sat very still and said, "Red withdraws its support pending clarification," which was the sound of a man climbing out of a burning carriage while it was still moving.

Ashe stood in the middle of all of it.

He had walked into that hall holding the only card that mattered — eighty men, eighty faces, eighty families — and he understood now, far too late, that somebody had let him keep that card for exactly this long on purpose.

He had been allowed to bring the folio.

He had been allowed to name them.

He had been allowed to demand a war in front of six towers, a minister, and four hundred years of recording glass, and every step of the way somebody had been standing quietly at the other end of the table, waiting for him to finish. Ashe looked down the table at Alexander.

Alexander was already gathering his papers. Then he stopped. "Minister, the Black Tower has leveled false accusations against us," Alexander began. "If the White Tower decides to defend its honor and formally declare war, can you authorize it?"

Minister Penn studied him closely. "On what grounds?"

"The Black Tower spreads lies about our products and claims we slaughtered eight of their people," Alexander said, his voice hardening. "In truth, they ambushed us first—and treated the bloodshed as sport. We are not so weak that we will suffer these insults and strikes in silence. We must protect our pride." Dorren Ashe scoffed. "So you want to wage war against us? Do you truly believe the White Tower stands a chance alone?"

Alexander rose to his feet. "Alone, perhaps not. But justice is on our side." He turned his gaze across the council chamber to the remaining factions. "And we will hire the Green, Blue, Yellow, and Brown Towers to fight alongside us. We are prepared to finance this entire campaign."

The Blue Tower's commander smirked. "If you hold the moral high ground and your coin is good, consider our blades yours." "Count the Green Tower in as well," their representative agreed.

"The Yellow Tower will mobilize for the right price," their envoy added.

"The Brown Tower stands ready, provided payment is upfront." Alexander locked eyes with Dorren Ashe. "Then let there be war."

The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 746

The state recorded it at four minutes past six that evening.

White Tower and Regent Group, plaintiff. Black Tower, defendant. Cause found and entered: false accusation, unprovoked assault, and confession of the same in open session.

In four hundred years of that glass, no tower had ever gone to war with a cleaner reason than the one White had.

Minister Penn set the only condition the state ever sets.

Twenty-four hours. From the moment both sides accept, nothing moves for a full day - time for the old, the sick, and the children to be got out of the way. It is the one part of a tower war that has never once been broken, because the towers that broke it stopped existing.

Both sides accepted at seven that evening.

The clock started.

Ashe knew it before he was out of the building.

He was in a carriage nine minutes later, and the first thing he did was call Silas Kessler.

...

"They'll all come in," Ashe said. "Every one of them. Blue, Green, Yellow, Brown - he stood in front of a minister and offered them money and they took it at the table, in front of me, like men buying fish."

"Then buy them back."

"With what?" Ashe's voice cracked on it. "He has Regent. I have a tower that can't sell a curse."

"You have me," Kessler said.

There was a pause on the line.

"Silas-"

"Don't thank me yet. I'm not doing it for you."

Kessler had spent two days looking at an order book with nothing in it, and somewhere in that time the tired part of him had gone quiet and something colder had sat down in its place.

"I'll make the offer myself," he said. "Tonight."

...

The offer went out to four tower masters before midnight, and it was beautifully simple.

Ferrowgate would pay ten million dollars.

Not to fight.

Ten million a day, to every tower that stayed out of it - every single day the war ran, for as long as it ran, paid in advance each morning, no questions, no obligations, nothing required of them at all except to sit still and do nothing whatsoever.

Blue had it read out twice.

"Say the terms again."

"We do nothing. We take ten million a day."

"For doing nothing."

"For doing nothing."

The Blue master looked around his own hall and started laughing, and behind him three of his elders were already doing the arithmetic that everyone in every tower did that night.

Because everybody knew how long a tower war lasted.

Six months. Sometimes eight. That was the shape of the thing - sieges and stalemates and lawyers, formal challenges, wounded pride, negotiated withdrawals. Nobody had ever finished one quickly, because nobody could.

Six months at ten million a day.

Nearly two billion dollars, to keep your people at home.

"White pays us to fight and die," Green's master said. "Ferrowgate pays us to sit in a chair."

Yellow accepted before dawn. Brown accepted at breakfast, on condition of payment upfront. Blue and Green took until noon only because they were pretending to think about it.

And underneath all of it, unspoken, was the part that made the decision easy.

They all believed White was going to lose.

Not might lose. Was going to. White Tower was the poorest, smallest, weakest tower in the United State of Magic - nine students a year, a leaking roof, an old man who couldn't afford a stonemason. Money had rebuilt the walls. Money had not made them magicians.

Black had five hundred years of necromancy and thirty thousand people who could use it.

You don't bet against that. You take the ten million and you look away.

"Sire, are you certain we can bear this expense? Ten million gold a day will bleed our coffers dry in under a week."

Kessler sneered. "You told me the White Tower was fragile. Stop holding back. Rally every legion you have and crush them in forty-eight hours before I go bankrupt. Strike with total force from the first horn."

"As you command, Sire." The Black Tower's commander hardened his gaze. There would be no siege-only a massacre.

...

Somebody put it to Alex directly, on the third floor at Regent, with the acceptance letters spread across the desk.

"All four of them took the money."

"I know."

"You wanted to pay them yesterday, and Ferrowgate outbid you overnight." Beatrix's jaw tightened. "You're alone in this. Completely alone. It's the White Tower against the Black Tower, and Black has more than two thousand soldiers while you have—"

She paused, unsure of his actual numbers. Best-case scenario? Maybe a hundred combat mages, a thousand max.

"But if we can hold out longer, they'll bleed money. Shouldn't defense be our priority?"...

"The best defense is a good offense," Alex said with a smirk.

...

Alex did not sleep during those twenty-four hours, and he was not idle for one minute of them.

But the first order he gave, at six the next morning, went out to every White Tower branch in the country and stopped the elders' hearts.

Close the schools. Send every student home. Five days' holiday, effective immediately, no exceptions, nobody stays.

Nineteen thousand students, out of the buildings by dusk.

Elias came to find him personally.

"Grandmaster. Please tell me I've misunderstood the order."

"You haven't."

"Then say it plainly to me, because I'm old." Elias's hands were shaking and he didn't bother hiding it. "You are emptying thirty towers of every able body in them on the night before a war."

"Yes."

"Those students are the only people we have. Without them there's nobody in those buildings at all — no watch, no wards, no one to hold a door." He was almost shouting now, and Elias White had not raised his voice in thirty-four years. "Black will walk into every branch we own and take them apart brick by brick, and there will be nobody there to even see it happen."

"The students are helpless. Evacuate them so they don't get caught in the slaughter. Assign four or five true combatants to each tower; that will be plenty."

"Grandmaster-"

"Elias." Alex raised his eyes from the desk, his gaze icy. "Let them come."

...

Black Tower called its people home that same night.

Not just the standing order. Everyone. Every student, every graduate, every man and woman who had ever worn Black's mark and gone out into the world to work-

a summons to the tower's name, the old kind, the kind that had not been used in ninety years.

They came from everywhere.

By midnight, thirty thousand people stood in and around the Black Tower grounds, and Dorren Ashe walked out onto the high step and looked down at them and felt, for the first time in three weeks, like a man who could not lose.

"They own thirty towers," he said. "Thirty buildings, scattered from one end of this country to the other, and they have made a great show this week of how many of them there are."

He let that sit.

"So we will visit all thirty. At once."

The sound that came up off that crowd was not a cheer.

"One thousand of you to each," Ashe said. "Tonight. You will not besiege them. You will not negotiate with them. You will go in, and you will take the building apart, and by morning there will not be a White Tower left standing anywhere in the United State of Magic."

...

The twenty-four hours ended at seven in the evening.

Black waited five more.

They went at midnight, and that was not sentiment - black magic runs strongest between midnight and the turn of the hour before dawn, and everyone of those thirty thousand had been taught that before they were fifteen. Attacking in daylight would have been giving away a third of their strength for nothing.

The night was theirs. It always had been.

...

At the Amberly branch, one thousand of them came up the north road.

Merrick had the lead. Nineteen years in Black, two of them on the demolition crews, and he had spent the entire walk waiting to feel something like nerves and had not felt anything at all.

The gate was open.

Not forced. Open. Nobody on it.

"They've run," somebody said behind him.

"Then it'll be quick." Merrick put his hand up and the column stopped. "Bring them out."

Behind the thousand, the ground began to move.

...

There is nothing in this world that sounds like a necromancer's column coming up out of the earth, and the people who have heard it once do not talk about it afterward.

Three thousand of them.

Black had been laying that stock down for two hundred years — the graves under their own fields, the plague pits they'd bought, the two old battlefields they still held title to. It came up in ranks, without breathing, and the noise it made was not moaning or screaming or anything a story would give it.

It was a dry sound. Like a field of dead reeds moving in wind that isn't there.

"Let's go in," Merrick said. "Take everything. Leave nothing standing that a man could put a roof on."

Four thousand went through the gate of the Amberly branch of the White Tower.

...

Inside, there were twenty people.

Twenty. Mostly caretakers. Two cooks. Four elders too frail to be relocated. A sixty-

six-year-old groundskeeper who had worked there since he was twelve and had flatly refused, in front of everyone, to leave.

They had nowhere else to go. If they were to die, it was better to fall with the tower —at least that carried some honor.

And a nineteen-year-old teaching assistant named Pell, who had been ordered home twice and had come back both times.

They stood in the courtyard and watched four thousand come through the gate.

"How many," one of the cooks said.

"Don't count," the groundsman said.

"How many?"

Pell was counting anyway. She couldn't stop. She got to somewhere past four hundred before the numbers stopped meaning anything, and then she just watched the dead orfes come, rank after rank after rank, filling the gate and spilling around both sides of the wall, and the whole time she was thinking one clear and childish thought.

We are going to die here in about ninety seconds.

She reached over and took the old groundsman's hand. He let her.

...

Fifty miles away, in a room under the main White Tower that eleven people in the world knew existed, a wall of screens showed thirty gates at once.

Thirty gates. Thirty columns coming through them.

Alex stood in the middle of it with his hands behind his back and watched four thousand shapes flood the Amberly courtyard, and watched a girl of nineteen take an old man's hand.

"Gaia," he said.

The room's light shifted very slightly.

"They're on our land."

He didn't raise his voice at all.

"Do something about it."

...

Out in the Amberly courtyard, Merrick had gotten eleven steps past the gate when he noticed the ground.

There was a line in the stone.

He'd walked over it without seeing it — a thin channel cut into the flags, running away left and right into the dark, too straight to be a crack and too clean to be old.

He looked down at it because there was nothing else to look at.

It was filling with light.

"What is that," he said.

Nobody answered him, because by then the whole courtyard was doing it.

The line ran out under four thousand feet, and where it went, other lines woke up to meet it - a pattern nobody had seen laid down, spreading across the entire grounds, under the walls, out into the fields beyond, further than the eye could follow, an array so enormous that the gate they'd come through was somewhere near the edge of it.

It had been there the whole time.

It had been there since the drones finished the walls.

The light came up white.

And every dead thing in that courtyard stopped at once. Three thousand of them. Mid-step, mid-reach, all together, as if a hand had come down on all of it - and then, with that

same dry reed-sound going wrong in a way that made living men scream, they began to come apart. Not burning. Not blasted.

Unmade.

Whatever Black Tower had put into those bodies to make them walk was being lifted back out of them, cleanly, the way you lift a stone out of a wall — and there was nothing at all left in the empty parts of that spell, because the light had already filled them.

Merrick stood in the middle of his own army with his mouth open as two hundred years of Black Tower's dead went down around him like wheat.

The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 747

White magic was never fragile. Once, it stood undisputed at the pinnacle of the Seven Towers. Its downfall wasn't a flaw in the art, but in the practitioners, who abandoned true cultivation for cheap, instant strength.

In the long game, white magic outshone all others; it just demanded years of refinement, and the world had grown too impatient to wait.

White took the students nobody else wanted and taught them to be useful in quiet ways, and every other tower had smiled at it for so long that they'd forgotten what the colour actually was.

White is the source light.

Not a spell. Not an element. The thing every other kind of magic is a shadow of — and there is exactly one thing in this world that a shadow cannot survive.

Black Tower had spent five hundred years building an empire out of the dark.

They had just walked four thousand of it into the light.

...

Merrick's second went for a curse and nothing came out of his hands.

Nothing. Not a weak one. Not a flicker. He said the words twice and stood there with his fingers spread like a man who had forgotten how to close them.

"Say it properly," Merrick snapped.

"I did say it properly."

Down the line it was happening everywhere at once. A woman who had held a Black seat for eleven years tried to raise a shadow-wall and got a smear of grey that came apart before it reached her knee.

Two brothers on the west flank tried a rot-hex together and one of them started bleeding out of his nose instead.

Their magic wasn't being blocked.

It was being drained - out of the air, out of the ground, out of them, pulled thin and washed pale by a light that was coming up through the flagstones and had nowhere in that courtyard it wasn't reaching.

Merrick looked at three thousand of his dead coming apart around him, and at a thousand of his living who suddenly couldn't cast a candle.

He got there about four seconds too late.

"Run," he shouted. "Everyone out. Out, now it's a trap, it's a trap, get to the gate

They turned around, and the gate had things in it.

Thousands of drones had been in the dark outside the wall the whole time.

Waiting is what they're best at, because waiting costs a machine nothing at all, and there were more of them than anybody could count in the second they had to count.

They came over the wall in a single motion, all along its length, like the top of the wall itself had lifted off.

The first man to reach the gate took a needle in the throat and went down asleep before his knees knew about it.

The second took one in the shoulder.

The third put both hands up and screamed something that would have stopped a man's heart at forty feet.

Nothing stopped.

That was the part they could not get past.

Black magic works on minds. That is the whole architecture of it — five hundred years of refinement aimed at one target, the soft wet thinking part of a person, the part that can be filled with dread or grief or the absolute certainty that your own hands are rotting.

A Black magician doesn't beat you. He convinces you.

Machines cannot be convinced.

A man called Osric, who had broken three men's sanity in his career and was rightly feared for it, planted his feet and threw the worst thing he owned at a drone twenty feet in front of him.

It kept flying.

He threw it harder, ignoring the sudden, blinding rip behind his eye. It kept sailing, missing its mark entirely.

"It's not working," he said to the empty air. "Why the hell isn't it working-"

He was still saying it when the needle went into his neck.

...

They tried everything. That was almost the worst of it, watching them work through the whole catalogue in about ninety seconds.

Fear-hex: nothing.

Blood-curse: nothing, and it needs a heartbeat to bind to, and there wasn't one.

Rot: rot needs something that was alive. The drones had never been alive. There was nothing in them for it to hold on to, and the spell simply slid off and went into the ground and was eaten by the light.

One of them tried to negotiate.

He stood in the middle of a collapsing army with his palms out and said, "We surrender, we surrender, we're leaving," to a machine with no ears, which shot him in the thigh and moved on to the next man without altering course by a single degree.

Five hundred years of accumulated terror, and not one page of it had a chapter on this.

...

On the top of the Amberly tower, thirty people stood at the rail and could not speak.

Pell had her hands over her mouth.

Below her, in a courtyard she had swept two days ago, four thousand attackers were going down in rows, and the thirty people who were supposed to have died in the first ninety seconds of this were watching it from above like an audience that had wandered into the wrong theatre.

"They can't do anything," the old groundsman said.

Nobody answered him.

"Look at them. They can't do anything."

A Black magician directly below the tower threw a killing hex at a drone at a range of six feet, and the drone went through the space where the hex was and shot him in the collarbone, and he sat down in the courtyard and fell asleep with his mouth open.

Pell made a sound that started as a sob and finished somewhere else entirely.

The White Tower was not going to fall tonight.

Somebody had known that before the sun went down.

...

It happened thirty times.

Not one after another. All at once, across the entire country, in an hour when nobody was awake to see it.

At the Cardew branch, five thousand Black attackers, the zombies, the skeletons, walked through a gate and eleven minutes later there were one thousand people asleep on the grass in neat drifts where they'd fallen.

At Thistlebrook, the formation lit before the column had fully entered, and the four hundred still outside the line watched the six hundred inside it drop, and turned and ran into the dark, and the drones followed them into the dark.

At Marrow Hill, a Black elder of sixty years' standing got as far as the front steps.

Everywhere, the same thing, for the same reason, and it was not a trick and it was not a machine and it was not even really Alexander.

It was the oldest arrangement in magic, one that every tower's first-year students learn in a single afternoon and then never think about again.

Light unmakes dark.

Black Tower had built five centuries of power on the assumption that nobody would ever be able to afford enough of the light to matter.

Then somebody bought the White Tower for four hundred million dollars, and rebuilt all thirty of its branches in a single month, and laid something under every one of them while nobody was looking.

...

At the head tower, the first thing that went wrong was that nothing went wrong.

"Amberly hasn't reported."

Ashe didn't look up. "It's been an hour."

"Yes, Elder. That's what I'm saying. The half-hour mark passed and nothing came in."

"They're busy."

Twenty minutes later the boy came back, and his face had changed.

"Cardew hasn't reported. Thistlebrook hasn't reported. Marrow Hill hasn't reported."

Ashe put down what he was holding.

"How many have?"

The boy didn't answer.

"How many of the thirty have reported."

"None of them," the boy said.

...

They tried everything, too, and there is something almost fair about how similar the next ten minutes looked to what was happening in the courtyards.

Sending stones: dead. Every one of them, all thirty channels, opening onto a soft nothing that wasn't silence and wasn't interference and had no explanation at all. They sent riders. Riders take hours.

—

They sent a scrying - the tower's own, the good one, the one they used maybe twice a decade - and it found the Amberly grounds and a field of light so it with showed them ame out of bright the ter his eyes streaming and could not describe what he'd seen.

"Thirty thousand people," an elder said. He said it very quietly, which was worse than shouting. "We put thirty thousand people into the field tonight and we cannot hear from a single one of them."

Ashe stood at the window with his back to the room.

Every one of them was waiting for him to say something, and the honest answer would have taken one word, and he could not make himself use it.

...

Fifty miles away, Alex watched thirty screens go quiet.

Not dark. Quiet. Thirty courtyards full of sleeping people, lit white, the light already dialling itself down now that there was nothing left in any of them to unmake.

"How long do they stay under?"

The room's light shifted.

"Twenty-four hours," Alex said, to Elias, who had come down at some point and was standing very still in a room he did not understand at all.

"Minimum. Nobody's going to be hurt and nobody's going to wake up. In the morning we'll have thirty thousand people asleep on White Tower ground and their families will know exactly where they are, because we'll tell them."

Elias couldn't speak for a moment.

"We won," he managed.

"We defended."

Alex looked at the clock on the wall.

One hour and four minutes since the first foot crossed the line at Amberly.

"Now," he said. "We'll start attacking the Black Tower."

Elias turned around so fast he had to put a hand on the desk.

"With what?"

It came out louder than he meant.

He'd spent his whole life in a tower that had never attacked anything, and the last four hours had already broken every idea he had about what his own people could survive Defending was the plan. Defending had been an astonishing enough thing to hope for.

"Grandmaster, we have thirty buildings and no army. Our students are at home.

Every fighter we own is a machine that just spent an hour working, and even if you have a hundred of them-—"

"Elias."

"—we cannot cross the states tonight—"

"Elias." Alex turned one of the screens around.

Underground. A hall, and beyond it another hall, and beyond that something the old man's eye couldn't find the end of.

Racks running away into the dark in both directions, and on every rack, in rows, in thousands, small black shapes sitting perfectly still.

They had been coming off the line since the week the White Tower's walls went up.

Every day. All day. Nobody had asked what the second and third and fourth factories were for, because nobody had known they existed.

"Five hundred drones for each of their branches," Alex said. "That's the number I built for. Black Tower has two hundred and fifty buildings in this country."

"Two hundred and-"

"Fifty. They're eight times our size. That's why nobody was ever going to beat them." Alex was already moving toward the door. "And tonight

Nowingle one of those buildings is empty, because Dorren Ashe called every fighter he had to the field at the same time."

He stopped with his hand on the frame.

"He emptied his house to burn mine," he said. "So we will take their tower now."

The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 748

There were two hundred and fifty Black Tower branches in the United State of Magic, and that night there was nobody in any of them.

Not nobody. Twenty, at most branches. Fifty at the big ones. Caretakers and cooks and record-keepers and a duty elder who'd drawn the short straw, because every single person who could fight had been called to the field by their own tower's summons and was, at that exact moment, lying asleep on White Tower grass six hundred miles away.

At the Dunmoor branch, a duty elder named Vessery stepped out into the yard at ten past one for a smoke and looked up at the sky.

It was a clear night. Good stars.

He stood there a full minute with his head back, breathing smoke at a sky that was not empty at all, and he did not see one single thing in it, because the things in it were painted for exactly this and had been holding position above his roof for nineteen minutes.

He finished his cigarette. He went back inside.

Above him, one hundred and eight of them began to move.

They came out of the dark in a slow spiral, five hundred feet up, and as they moved they started to burn — not fire, light, a thin steady white at each machine's underside, and between them the light began to reach.

It found the next drone, and the next.

A line. Then a curve. Then a ring inside the curve, and another ring inside that one, until there were fifty circles turning inside each other above the roof of the Dunmoor branch, geometry laid out in light across four hundred feet of open air, every arc exact to the width of a hair because a machine holding a position does not drift and does not tire and does not have hands that shake.

It was, and there is no other word for it, beautiful.

The whole thing hung there for one second, complete. Then it came down.

It didn't drift down or settle. It slammed — the entire array dropping flat onto the grounds at once, printing itself across the yard and the walls and the roof and the six acres around it, and then ten drones dropped through the middle of it and set magic stones into the ground at ten points, one after another, quick as a man laying cards.

The formation array flared to life, its circuits locking into place.

...

Inside, in the long hall, four people were playing cards and one of them lost his hand.

Not his hand. The cards. He'd been holding them with a small shadow-trick, the way any Black magician holds anything he's too lazy to reach for, and the trick went out like a snuffed wick and the cards went all over the table.

He looked at his own fingers.

"Something's wrong."

Down the corridor somebody was already shouting.

You do not need to be told when a cleansing goes through a Black tower. Every person in that building felt it come up through the floor and pass through them — a slow, awful, rinsing sensation, like being washed out from the inside by something clean, and every scrap of dark magic they were holding thinned and paled and went.

Vessery came out of his office at a dead run.

"Activate the defence," he shouted. "The tower defence, now, all of it—"

Six of them made it to the core room and got their hands on the shield.

It is a good shield. It has stood for three hundred years, it has turned back two sieges and one very stupid duke, and it works by pulling the tower's own stored dark up through the walls and closing it over the building like a fist.

They fed it. It rose. For about two seconds it was actually there.

Then the white array under the building drank it.

Not shattered it. Drank it — pulled it apart at the source and took what it was made of, and the shield came down not with a bang but with a sort of exhausted sigh, and one of the six casters sat down hard on the flagstones and started to cry, because he had felt what happened to it and he understood immediately that it was not coming back.

"It won't hold," he said. "It won't hold, there's nothing to hold it with—"

Vessery looked at the ceiling.

"Then launch the attack," he said. "All of it. Open the whole tower."

Here is the thing about Black Tower's outer defence.

It is genuinely, historically, the most feared thing any of the seven towers has ever built. Three hundred years of accumulation, layered into the stone: demon-work, mind-hex, hate-curse, seven kinds of contact poison, and the reason nobody has ever taken a Black branch by force is that nobody has ever gotten close enough to try.

A man who walks into that ring stops being a man about eleven feet in.

He turns on the person beside him. He claws his own face. His heart, if he is unlucky and old, simply stops. Whole companies have gone in and come apart into a screaming knot of people killing each other, and Black has never had to lift a finger past opening the door.

Vessery opened the door.

The whole ring came awake at once and rolled out over the grounds in a black wave, and it was every bit as terrible as it had ever been, and it hit four hundred and eighty machines.

Which have no minds.

No blood to poison. No heart to stop. No face to claw. Nothing whatsoever inside them for three hundred years of carefully cultivated malice to grab hold of, and the wave went over them and through them and past them into the empty fields beyond, where it made the grass die.

The drones did not slow down.

They came in through the windows.

After that it was not a battle. It was housekeeping.

They went room by room. Corridor by corridor. Two per doorway, methodical as a search party, and every person they found took a needle and went down where they stood - the cooks in the kitchen, the record-keeper under his own desk, four caretakers in the east stair who had linked arms and were trying to hold a landing that machines simply flew over the top of.

A young man on the second floor threw a chair.

An older woman tried a killing word at a range of four feet and it did nothing at all, and she stood there afterwards looking at her own mouth as if it had betrayed her.

And Vessery, cornered at the top of his own stairs with his back to a wall, did the thing that every single Black magician in the country did that night at some point in the last ten seconds before the needle.

He begged it for an explanation.

"What are you?" he shouted at it. "How are you flying? Where's the caster - somebody's controlling you, somebody has to be controlling you, where is he? Where is the magician?"

The drone hung in front of his face for perhaps a second and a half.

Then it shot him in the shoulder, and he went to sleep still waiting for an answer.

...

When the building was quiet, they went for the core.

Six of them entered the core room where the shield had died an hour before and gathered around the black stone at the centre of it the heart of that branch, a piece of worked obsidian the size of aman's chest that had been drinking dark up of the ground ber d beneath out of the ground beneath it for it three hundred and eleven years and feeding the whole tower.

They lifted it out.

They put something else in.

And the entire Dunmoor branch, floor by floor, wall by wall, quietly reversed.

...

The staff woke up outside, on the grass, twenty-two hours later, and none of them understood what they were looking at.

"It's white," one of them said.

Because it was. The drones had was spent the rest of that night painting it, five hundred machines working a building the size of a cathedral from the roof down, and in two hours the Dunmoor branch of the Black Tower Black Tower was a clean, quiet, white building with a white array burning gently in its grounds.

The record-keeper halted forty feet from the door, paralyzed by dread.

"Draw the mana," someone called out.

Pulling dark mana from the structure had always been second nature. He reached out on instinct, but the energy that rushed up the channel was brilliant, pure, and terrifyingly wrong. He snatched his hand back like he'd slapped a burning burner. "It's drawing light," he said. He sounded like he was going to be sick. "Our tower is drawing light. That's poison to us. That's poison to every one of us, the black mage." Nobody could get within forty feet of a building their families had owned for three centuries.

...

It happened two hundred and fifty times.

Not in sequence — in parallel, in a single night, across a country, while the entire fighting strength of the Black Tower slept peacefully on somebody else's lawn.

Two hundred and twenty-two of them went exactly like Dunmoor.

Twenty-eight did not.

...

Alex was standing when the first failure report came in, and he did not sit down for the next four.

He took a small grey square out of his pocket and pressed it to the back of his neck, just under the hairline, and a pane of light unfolded in the air in front of him — thin as glass, edge-lit, showing him a transparent map of the country with two hundred and fifty marks on it.

Twenty-eight of them were red.

"Send me the towers where the attack failed," he said. "I'll go personally." Twenty-three of the twenty-eight were solvable by weight alone. Two thousand more machines were already three minutes out from each of them, and the projection put every one of the twenty-three under control.

Twenty-three marks turned from red to amber while he watched.

Five stayed red.

"Give me the nearest one," he said.

...

At the Ravenhollow branch, three hundred miles north, the drones were losing.

Five men stood in the open courtyard with their coats off, and the air above them was full of flying stone.

Not thrown. Carried.

The flagstones of that yard had come up out of the ground in slabs and were hanging forty feet in the air like a held breath, and every few seconds one of them moved — fast, flat, precise — and a machine came apart in the dark and fell.

Four hundred Forty-one so far.

The oldest of the five had his hands out and his head back, and he was laughing at the sky.

"How many more?" he shouted. "Send them all. Send a thousand of them."

Another slab moved. Another drone stopped existing.

"Everybody forgets," the old man said, to the night, to the wreckage, to whatever was up there listening. They see the black and they think that's all lever was was a stone-caller before I ever learned a hex. Fifty-one years. There is not one thing in this world that isn't standing on something I can pick up and throw."

He spread his arms wide.

"You have picked the wrong opponent!"

And out of the dark above him, perfectly calm, a voice said, "Really?"

Looking up, they froze as they saw him-drifting effortlessly in midair on the edge of a floating blade. Alex stared down at them with dead eyes. "So it was you who took down my drones."

The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 749

The old man never saw the sword's attack.

He was still looking up with his arms spread when something moved through the space above him, and then the forty tons of stone he was holding in the air came down all at once, because there was nobody holding it anymore.

His head was on the flagstones before the slabs finished falling.

The other four did not move for a full second.

That second was all they had. They'd been standing behind him for twenty minutes doing nothing, because they hadn't needed to do anything - he was the one who could attack the machines, and the four of them had spent the whole fight watching him work and feeling safe.

The drones came in off the wall.

The nearest man got two words of a hex out before the needle took him in the jaw. The second turned and ran and made it eleven steps. The third and fourth went down back to back in the middle of the yard with their hands still up, and the whole thing was finished so fast that the dust from the falling stone hadn't settled yet.

Alex landed in the courtyard among them without a sound.

Overhead, the sky was moving. A thousand more machines were coming in from the south in a long unhurried line, and behind them another line, and the light was already starting to run along the drone formation above the Ravenhollow roof.

That branch would be white by morning like all the others.

"Where's the next one?"

The pane unfolded in the air in front of him. Four marks left, all red.

He went straight up.

The second one was worse, and it was worse in an interesting way.

Five men in a walled garden, and above them a slow spinning cloud of wreckage - forty, fifty drones, crushed and folded and hanging in the air like fruit, and more coming in and stopping dead as they crossed the wall.

Not being shot down.

Collected.

"Bring them," the man in the middle was saying. He had his fists closed and his elbows in, and every time another machine crossed the wall it simply stopped flying and drifted toward him. "Bring all of them. Bring ten thousand."

Brannock had been Brown Tower once. Twenty-two years of stone and ore and the patient, unglamorous work of pulling metal out of the earth, and he had been extremely good at it — right up until the night he killed his own apprentice over something nobody now remembered and ran east to the only tower in the country that would take a man like that without asking.

Black had given him a robe and never once asked what he'd done.

But he had never stopped being what he was before.

"They keep sending them," he laughed. "Metal. They're sending metal at me. Whoever is doing this, whoever you are — you have picked the one man in this country who has never

in his life been afraid of metal, because I own it, I have always owned it, I can hold every ounce of it you can—"

Alex had been watching him for ninety seconds through forty pairs of drone eyes and had already understood exactly how the trick worked and exactly what it did not cover.

He was six hundred feet out and well above the wall.

He drew.

He didn't fly in. He didn't need to.

The sword came around in a flat clean arc, and what left it was not metal at all — a blade of pale aura, thin as a line drawn on the dark, crossing six hundred feet of night faster than the eye had any business following.

Brannock's cloud of stolen drones went on turning above him.

Two of the five men beside him came apart at the waist.

The third had time to look down at himself.

Alex moved his wrist a second time, and a second line went out, and Brannock - who owned every ounce of metal in that garden, who had spent twenty-two years learning to hold iron the way other men hold a cup - discovered in the last quarter- second of his life that there is no metal at all in a blade of light.

Fifty drones fell out of the sky and clattered down around the man who had been holding them.

There was one left.

He threw his wand away so fast it bounced, and then he was on both knees on the wet grass with his hands up over his head.

"Don't please. Please."

Alex came down out of the dark and stood in front of him.

"Please don't kill me." the man said, and his voice went right up through the register. "I'll come with you. I'll join you. I'll join the White Tower, I'll swear to it right now, I'll swear on anything you want—"

"How many people have you cursed?"

The man blinked up at him.

"Sir?"

"It's not a difficult question. How many hexes have you laid, on how many people, for money."

"That" He wet his lips. "Sir, that is the work of the tower. That's what they demand.

I couldn't refuse. Nobody refuses. It was never my choice, it was the tower, I only ever did what I was told-"

Alex looked at him for a moment.

"Fine," he said. "You can join the White Tower."

The relief that went across that man's face. "Thank you. Thank you. You won't regret

Alex had already turned away, and was looking at the fallen machines to see how the magnetic hold had been anchored.

Behind him, the man came up off his knees with a knife.

He was fast. He'd killed men from that position before and he was genuinely, professionally fast, and he got three full steps into the lunge before he noticed that the garden had turned over and the sky was underneath him.

He never worked out why.

His head was already on the grass.

"Stupid," Alex said, without looking up.

The third tower took eleven minutes and taught him something.

Nine of them there, and every single one had come from somewhere else first — a Blue water-caller, two Brown, a Green who'd been struck off for something the record didn't specify.

Outcasts, all of them. Black Tower had been quietly collecting the unwanted of the other six for two hundred years, and it turned out that was the only reason any of these five sites had held at all.

A pure Black magician could do nothing to a machine. Nothing at all. Their entire art pointed at the mind, and a drone doesn't have one.

But a water-caller can throw a machine into a wall. A stone-caller can crush one. A metal-worker can pull one out of the air.

Their power worked on machines.

It didn't affect him in the slightest. And for that mistake, they paid with their lives.

...

The last red mark was still burning when Alex came over the ridge, and he slowed down when he saw it.

He had seen two hundred and fifty Black Tower branches on Gaia's map that night, and every one of them had been a building.

This was not a building.

It went up out of the valley floor in

וגר black stone and kept going, wing after wing, courtyard behind courtyard, walls inside walls - ten times the size of Durmoor, ten times the size of anything he'd flown over all night, an entire small city with one name on it.

"So this is the headquarters," Alex said.

The doors of the great hall opened below him.

...

Dorren Ashe walked out alone into his own front courtyard.

The first hour of the war was an agonizing wait for thirty thousand missing dispatches. The second was spent riding scouts out to thirty silent posts. By two in the morning, the silence broke and the reports that finally trickled in were e of an entirely different nature.

Dunmoor: taken.

Cardew South: taken.

Ferrier's Gate, Marrow, Ashwell, Coldbrook, Thistle, Dunmoor East, all of them, one after another after another, all night, until the man reading them out had simply stopped reading and put the list down on the table because there was no point finishing it.

Two hundred and fifty branches. Every one of them white before sunrise.

Thirty thousand of his people asleep on somebody's lawn.

In five hundred years, no tower in the United State of Magic had ever lost a single branch in a single night. Not one. Not to armies, not to sieges, not to the state itself.

He had lost all of them between midnight and dawn.

"Finally," Ashe shouted at the sky. "You're here."

Alex came down slowly, standing on the sword, and stopped forty feet up.

"Tell me what you want from us!" Ashe's voice cracked across the courtyard, and there was nothing dignified left in it. "What do you want? What did we ever have that you wanted? Why are you destroying us?"

Alex stared down at him with detached pity.

"You know exactly why."

"I have no idea what you're talking about!"

"Then you're even more foolish than I thought." Alex let out a slow, tired breath. "You drew first blood. We were minding our own business, and you chose to make us enemies. Keep that in mind before you beg for mercy."

Alex snapped his fingers.

Two hundred drones came in over the wall behind him, spreading as they came, and for the first three seconds it looked like every other courtyard that night.

Then Ashe brought his wand down and struck the flagstones with it.

The shockwave went out from that point in a ring, and it was not a spell that touched minds, and it did not care in the slightest whether the thing in front of it could think.

It picked up two hundred machines and threw them, and half of them broke against the wall behind and the other half came apart in the air, and not one of them got within sixty feet of him.

The courtyard rang like a struck bell.

Alex looked at the wreckage on the stones.

Then he drew the sword properly for the first time that night, and stepped off the blade, and landed on the ground.

"You brought this war upon yourself." He took a menacing step closer. "If you're looking for someone to blame for the blood spilled tonight, Elder Ashe, blame your own foolish decision to align with Ferrowgate."

And he swung.

Ashe met it.

That was the part nobody would have predicted, least of all the men who had spent two days watching him fall apart in a council room but Doren Ashe had been the strongest magician in Black Tower for nineteen years before he was ever its administrator, and everything he had not been able to do to a machine, he could do to a man.

His wand came up. Something enormous and black came off the end of it.

The two things met in the middle of that courtyard and the middle of that courtyard stopped existing.

Alex went back through the front wall of the great hall, through the hall behind it, and through the far wall of that, and the entire front of the Black Tower headquarters came down on top of him in about four hundred tons of five-hundred-year-old stone. The dust went up two hundred feet.

Ashe stood in the ruin of his own courtyard, breathing hard, watching the dust.

Something moved in it.

Alex walked out of the collapsed hall with the sword low at his side, brushing stone dust off his shoulder with the back of his hand, and stopped at the edge of the rubble.

He looked at Ashe with something that had not been in his face all night.

Interest.

"Seems like you're strong," Alex said.

Dorren Ashe leveled his wand once more, hand trembling with rage.

"You die here," he spat.

Alex let out an easy, mocking chuckle. "Perhaps. But by sunrise, the Black Tower won't even be a memory."

The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 750

Nobody in the Arcanum State slept that night.

By two in the morning it was the only story in the country, and it was still pitch dark, and that was somehow worse — every picture coming in was a picture of something happening

in the middle of the night, half-lit, shaky, filmed by people who should have been in bed six hours ago and were instead standing in fields.

Every paper had someone outside a tower gate.

The state broadcaster had gone to continuous coverage at eleven and never gone back.

There were forty people camped on the ridge above the Black Tower headquarters with long-lenses and no light to use them in, and a smaller crowd outside the White Tower in New Avalon with nothing to film at all, because the White Tower was dark and quiet and had been all night.

And there was betting, all of it done before the sun went down.

Open, loud, entirely legal betting in every hall and market in the country, on a war that at midnight had been three hours from starting.

Black had two hundred and fifty branches and thirty thousand magicians and five centuries of the worst reputation in the country.

White had thirty buildings and nineteen thousand children who'd been sent home. You couldn't get odds on that. You could barely get someone to take the other side for fun.

The first picture went out at seventeen minutes past midnight.

A girl standing on a hill outside Cardew in the cold with a cheap crystal, filming a building she had grown up being frightened of, and the reason she was filming it was that she could see it.

In the dark. From a mile away.

"Everyone — everyone, you need to see this." Her voice was shaking and going up at the end of every sentence, and her breath was fogging across the lens.

"That's Cardew. That's the Black Tower at Cardew, I've lived here my whole life and I have never seen that building at night, you can't, it's black, it's always been black — look at it. Look at it. It's white. The Black Tower is turning into a white tower. This is the White Tower conquering the Black Tower, this is actually happening right now, I'm not "

Then there was another one from Marrow Hill.

Then Dunmoor, and Coldbrook, and Ferrier's Gate, and by one in the morning they were coming in faster than anyone could cut between them, so the state broadcaster stopped trying and put nine on the screen at once.

Nine buildings, glowing pale in the middle of the night.

Nine buildings that had been black at sunset.

It hit hardest in the houses where somebody had spent the evening being told they were a fool.

Nineteen thousand White Tower students had been sent home the day before a war. Nineteen thousand sets of parents had met them at the door with the same speech, in almost the same words, in kitchens all over the Arcanum State.

Well. At least you're alive.

At least the man had the sense to put you out before it started, because that tower is finished, and I'll tell you now - when this is over you're not going back. Whatever they promised you. There'll be nothing left to go back to.

Some of those arguments were still running at midnight.

At half past one in the morning, a boy in the old quarter of New Avalon - the one who had stood outside the gate a long time before he went in, because he'd been turned away at three towers already - was sitting at his mother's table in the dark not sleeping when his uncle came through the door without knocking, holding a crystal, saying the same word over and over.

The boy looked at the picture.

Then he was out in the street in his socks, in the cold, at half past one in the morning, and he was not the only one, because all the way up that road the doors were opening and the windows were coming alight.

By two o'clock there were four thousand White Tower students in the square outside the main tower.

Nobody had told them to come. Most of them had run.

They were screaming joyfully- not chanting, screaming, the way you scream when the thing you spent all evening being told to be ashamed of turns out to be the biggest thing that has ever happened in your life.

...

Silas Kessler watched the same nine pictures at two in the morning from a dark glass office sixty miles away, and the blood went out of his face in stages.

First branch: an accident. A trick. Paint.

Ninth branch: not paint.

Because if Black Tower fell, Ferrowgate lost the only two allies it had left, and the last thing propping up a company with an empty order book was the assumption that its friends could still frighten people.

That was bad.

The other thing was worse.

He had made a telephone call ten hours ago.

...

At four in the afternoon the previous day, with the state's twenty-four-hour clock still running and thirty thousand Black magicians moving quietly into position, Silas Kessler had been the most relaxed man in the United State of Magic.

"Beatrix. It's Silas."

"It's the middle of a working day and I have nothing to say to you."

"You'll want to hear this one." He'd been smiling; you could hear it down the line.

"You're backing the White Tower. I'm backing Black. We're both about to spend a fortune watching other people fight, and I've always thought that was a waste of an afternoon."

"Get to it."

"A wager." He let it sit. "Winner takes the loser's company. The whole thing, clean transfer, signed in front of the Minister so neither of us can wriggle out. When Black Tower wins this war, Regent Group is mine."

There had been a pause on the line.

Kessler had enjoyed that pause enormously. He'd assumed it was fear.

"All right," Beatrix said. "I agree."

"You"

"But you do the same. If White Tower wins, Ferrowgate is mine. All of it. Signed in front of the Minister, exactly as you said, today, before the clock runs out."

And Silas Kessler had laughed out loud — a real one, the biggest laugh he'd had in three weeks and said yes, and had the papers drawn and witnessed before seven that evening, because a woman too proud to back down from a bet was handing him a company for nothing.

Thirty thousand magicians. Two hundred and fifty towers.

Against a school for poor children.

He had signed his name with a flourish.

...

At ten past two in the morning, a reporter standing on a freezing ridge in the dark said the sentence that ended Silas Kessler's life as a wealthy man.

"We can confirm — and I want to be careful with this, because it is extraordinary -

as of this hour, every recorded Black Tower branch in the United State of Magic has either fallen or gone silent."

She looked off-camera. Somebody handed her a page.

"Two hundred and forty-nine," she said. "There is one left standing. It's in the valley below me. And I can tell you the fighting there has not stopped."

Behind her, in the dark, something lit the underside of the clouds.

The fighting had not stopped.

It had been going for forty minutes, and there was not much left of the front third of the Black Tower headquarters.

Alex came off the broken wall with the sword out in front of him and hit Ashe's guard hard enough to split the flagstones in a line running twenty feet both ways.

He had fought a lot of people. He had never fought this.

Dorren Ashe was not fast and he was not clever, and he did not need to be either, because everything he threw was simply larger than what came at it.

A cut that would have taken a Line-Commander in half met a wall of black and stopped dead.

Alex went through three columns and came back out of the dust before the third one finished falling, and put the sword through a shield that should not have been possible to put a sword through, and Ashe stepped back one pace and hit him with the courtyard.

The actual courtyard. Four hundred square feet of stone, torn up and driven forward. Alex cut it in half and came through the middle of it.

"You cannot do this," Ashe said. He was bleeding from one ear. "You are one man

"I noticed."

"-one man, in my house-"

"Your house is white now," Alex said. "All two hundred and forty-nine of them."

That was the sentence that broke him.

...

Ashe put both hands on his wand and drove it into the ground, and the whole valley went cold.

Everything the man had left went down through that stone at once - five hundred years of stored dark under a five-hundred-year-old building — and something underneath the headquarters answered him.

The floor of the great courtyard came apart.

What came up through it was not a summoned thing. It was a kept thing.

Enormous, ancient, wired together out of the long bones of something that had been dead since before any of the seven towers existed, its skull alone tonger than a carriage, black light burning in the sockets and running down the vertebrae as it hauled itself out of the hole and up into the night.

On the ridge a mile away, forty reporters started shouting at the same time, and every crystal in that field swung toward the only thing in the valley now giving off light.

It came out of the ground screaming, and it did not scream like an animal. It screamed like a building coming down.

A colossal dragon skeleton, stripped of flesh yet pulsating with unholy life.

"Now," Ashe said.

The skull swung around. Ashe raised his hands beside it.

They came at Alex together.

He fought them for a hundred minutes.

Through what was left of the great hall, out into the west court, up the side of the north wing — and the north wing came down. He took a strike from the tail that put him

through a granite arch, and got up.. out of it with his left arm hanging wrong, and set it against the wall, and kept moving.

He used everything.

Every form he had. Every scrap of white in the ground beneath a black tower that had never held any. He put light into a blade that had never needed it and cut through a femur four feet thick, and the leg came away, and the thing dragged itself forward on the stump and very nearly had him.

The last exchange took two seconds.

The dragon came in low. Ashe came in high, both hands, everything left in him, aimed at a man he could see was finished.

Alex went under the skull instead of away from it.

The blade went up through the roof of that thing's mouth and out through the top of its head in a line of white, and it came apart above him a rain of burn above di bone he was already through the far side of the collapse, already turning, already inside Ashe's guard, close enough to watch the exact moment the old man understood.

There was no speech.

Alex put the sword through him and out the other side, held him there a second, and let him down onto the stones of his own courtyard.

Then it was quiet.

Bone-light guttering out across two hundred feet of wreckage. Dust coming down slow through the hole where the roof had been. The valley black again, and colder than it had been all night.

Alex stood in the middle of it with his left arm useless and his ribs wrong and blood running down into his hand.

He was still standing. Only just.

He knew exactly how empty he was, because he had counted every drop of it going out.

He put the point of the sword down between the flagstones and leaned on it, and breathed, and thought about sitting down for a minute.

That was when he heard stone move behind him.

...

At the back of the ruined hall, a section of floor that had not been a door ten seconds earlier ground open, and five old men came up out of the dark.

Nobody in the country knew that room existed. Nobody in Black Tower had seen the men inside it for thirty years.

They were what the tower kept for the end of the world — sealed down there with its oldest work, wards on the door, one single condition for waking them.

That condition had been met about nine hours ago.

They came up into the ruin of their own headquarters and looked at it in the dark. At the burning bones. At the body of Dorren Ashe on the stones.

And then at the man standing in the middle of it, lit from below by the last of the dragon.

One arm hanging. Weight on the sword. Nothing left in him at all.

The eldest among the five was the first to break the silence. "You dare strike at the

Black Tower? Dying will be the easiest part of your fate. I will rip the soul from your flesh and torture it across centuries of agony."