The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 751

"Do not waste words-attack him together!" another elder barked. In an instant, all five raised their hands in sync, channeling their murderous qi into a devastating coordinated strike.

Alex watched five old men raise their hands and understood, with complete clarity and no particular drama about it, that he was going to die.

There was nothing left.

He had put all of it into a dragon's skull an hour ago.

He could lift the sword or he could stay standing, and he could not do both, and five men who had been sealed under a floor for thirty years were about to hit him with everything a five-hundred-year-old tower had thought worth saving for the end of the world.

He got the blade up anyway.

Habit, mostly.

The five strikes came at him across the broken courtyard.

And went out.

Not blocked. Not turned. They came apart in mid-air about eight feet from him, unravelling into nothing at all, and what was left of them fell as harmless grey dust across the flagstones.

White light was pouring in from behind him.

Alex turned around.

...

Elias White was coming up over the rubble of the front wall in a plain coat with his sleeves rolled, and there were ten of them behind him.

Old people. All of them old. The four elders from Amberly who'd been too old to send home, and six more from the branches, and every one of them had walked a long way in the dark to be standing on that pile of stone at half past two in the morning.

"Grandmaster!" Elias shouted. "We're here! We've come to help you!"

Alex stared at him.

The oldest of the five Black elders started laughing before Elias reached the bottom.

"Elias. Elias White." He said the name like something he'd found in an old coat. "I have beaten you twenty two times."

Elias stopped.

"Twenty-one," he said.

"Twenty-one, then. In the state halls, at the seasonal convocations, at your own gate — and every single time, in front of every tower in this country, I put you on the floor and you went home." Crale spread his hands wide. "Fifty years I have used your name as a joke. Fifty years. Was that not enough for you? Have you come all this way in the middle of the night to be humiliated in front of the whole country one last time?"

Something happened to Elias White's face then that Alex had only seen on it once before, in a courtyard, over a hand-bound book.

"You beat a poor man," Elias said. "Twenty-one times, you beat a poor man who had nine students and no roof, and you told everybody about it for fifty years, and I want you to understand that I have thought about every one of those nights."

"Then you know how this ends."

"No." Elias rolled his shoulders. "I've learned since then. I learned from the Grandmaster."

He turned his head, not all the way, not taking his eyes off Crale.

"Grandmaster Alex. Please sit down and rest."

"Elias-"

"With respect, sir." The old man's voice didn't shake at all. "This one is ours. This is a fifty-year-old grudge and it belongs to the White Tower, and tonight, for once in my life, I would like to settle it myself."

Alex looked at him for a second.

Then he went and sat down on a broken column with the sword across his knees.

"All right," he said. "Go on, then."

The five of them still thought they were going to win.

That was the thing. They came out into the open with the confidence of men who had spent five decades being the most feared magicians in the country, and they threw everything, and for the first four minutes it was genuinely frightening.

Then it stopped being frightening and started being something nobody had ever seen before.

Because by then the ridge had emptied.

Forty reporters had come down off that hill the moment the dragon fell, and they were now crouched behind broken walls two hundred feet away with every crystal they owned pointed at the courtyard, and the state broadcaster went to a live feed at eleven minutes to three in the morning and did not cut away from it once for the next four hours.

Five Black Tower elders. Ten White Tower elders.

The whole country sat up and watched.

By four in the morning, Alex had worked out what he was actually looking at, and he could not decide whether to be impressed or to put his face in his hands. White magic has no attacks.

None. Not one. He'd known that in the abstract - he'd read every text White had ever produced, he'd had Gaia rebuild the entire tradition from the foundation up- but he had never once had to watch it in a fight, and now he was watching it in a fight, and the truth of it was extremely simple.

Ten White elders, at the height of their power, holding a rebuilt five-hundred-year tradition, and their entire arsenal consisted of shields, wards, cleansings, unbindings, and healing.

They could not hurt anybody.

They were physically unable to hurt anybody.

...

The other side had worked out something equally unfortunate.

Crale had thrown eleven hexes in twenty minutes and not one of them had landed. They didn't get blocked and fall down — they arrived, met white, and stopped existing, the same way the strikes aimed at Alex had come apart eight feet from his chest.

He tried a soul-drain that had once emptied a man in front of four hundred witnesses.

Erased.

He tried the rot. Erased. He tried the old family curse, the one they didn't write down, and one of the White elders — a small round woman of about seventy from the Coldbrook branch — simply put her hand up and wiped it out of the air like she was cleaning a window.

"Stop that," Crale shouted at her.

"No," she said.

So it became the only thing it could become.

Not a battle. An endurance contest. Fifteen old people standing in a ruined courtyard pouring everything they had at each other, five of them unable to land a hit and ten of them unable to throw one, and the only question left in the entire war was whose mana ran out first.

It took four hours.

The sky went from black to grey to that thin cold colour it goes just before sunrise, and the crystals kept rolling, and all over the United State of Magic people who should have gone to bed at midnight sat in their kitchens watching fifteen pensioners slowly drain each other dry.

At about twenty past six in the morning, one of the Black elders swayed on his feet and stopped casting, because there was nothing left in him to cast with.

Then another.

Then all of them, on both sides, within about ninety seconds of each other.

Fifteen empty magicians stood in a courtyard in the dawn light and looked at each other.

Crale, breathing hard, hands shaking, opened his mouth to say something.

Elias White punched him in the face.

...

The state broadcaster had, at that moment, an audience of roughly four million people.

Every single one of them watched five of the most feared magicians in the history of the United State of Magic get into a fistfight with ten elderly schoolteachers in the ruins of their own headquarters.

It was not dignified.

It was not even a good fight. Nobody there knew how to throw a punch. There was a great deal of grabbing Two men went down together over a piece of rubble and rolled. The small round woman from Coldbrook got both hands into a Black elder beard and simply held on, with her eyes shut, while he made a noise no one had ever heard him make before.

And underneath the whole thing, one arithmetic fact governed everything that happened.

There were ten of them.

There were five of the others.

At six thirty-one in the morning, Mordecai Crale, who had beaten Elias White twenty-

one times in front of the whole country, was sat on by four people.

...

Alex laughed.

He was sitting on a broken column with a dislocated arm, three cracked ribs, and blood drying in his palm, in a courtyard full of dragon bone, and he put his head back and laughed until his ribs made him stop and then laughed anyway.

At six thirty-four in the morning, the last Black Tower elder gave up.

The war had lasted six and a half hours.

...

By the next day there was no Black Tower.

Not a defeated Black Tower. Not a diminished one. Two hundred and fifty branches under White control, thirty thousand magicians who had woken up on somebody else's grass and been sent home on foot, five sealed elders in state custody, and a headquarters that no longer had a front.

Nothing like it had happened in the United State of Magic in four hundred years. Whole towers had declined. Towers had gone broke, or shrunk, or lost a branch or two to fire. No tower had ever been taken.

And it had been done, in a single night, by the tower everyone in the country had been laughing at since before their grandparents were born.

The other five colours did not celebrate.

Blue held an emergency session that same afternoon and did not tell anyone what was said in it. Brown quietly recalled forty of its people from foreign postings. Green's master, who had taken Ferrowgate's ten million dollars for exactly one day of doing noth sat in her office for a long time doing arithmetic that had stopped being about money.

Everybody in that country had spent one week deciding that White was a joke, and one night finding out otherwise.

Nobody was laughing now. They were counting.

...

Beatrix made the call herself at nine o'clock that morning.

"Silas."

There was a very long silence on the line.

"So," she said. "President Director of Ferrowgate. I believe you owe me a company."

"Beatrix-"

"Signed in front of the Minister. Your words, your terms, your idea." She let it hang.

"Shall I send someone, or would you rather bring it over yourself?"

Silas Kessler put the phone down without answering.

Then he picked it up again and called a different number.

...

"Red Tower."

"It's Kessler."

Garrick Vail's voice was careful. It had been careful ever since he'd stood up in a government hall and pledged his tower to a war ninety seconds before finding out the whole thing was a joke.

"Silas. I'm not in a position to—"

"Regent Group." Kessler's voice had gone somewhere flat. "I want Regent Group destroyed. All of it, the buildings, the factories, the product lines, the name. A hundred million dollars, paid tonight."

The pause was short and it was not respectful.

"No."

"A hundred million—"

"Is nothing." Vail sounded almost sorry. "Silas, I watched the same broadcast as everybody else. A hundred million buys me a very expensive funeral. Find somebody stupider."

"Wait."

Kessler closed his eyes.

He had a company that was about to legally belong to somebody else. He had signed it away himself, with a flourish, in front of the Minister of Magic in nine hours or nine days it would not be his, and everything in it sixty years, three generations, his grandfather's shed would be filed under a name that was not Kessler.

"Ferrowgate," he said.

"What about it?"

"You can have it. All of it. Every share, every factory, the Meridian line, everything my family has ever built." He heard his own voice as if it belonged to somebody down the hall. "It's yours, in writing, tonight."

Vail said nothing.

"Kill Beatrix Hargrove," Kessler said. "And kill Alexander. The chairman of Regent

Group. Both of them, and Ferrowgate is yours."

The silence stretched out for four seconds.

"Deal," said Red Tower.

...

Kessler sat alone in a dark office afterwards and did the only arithmetic he had left.

Ferrowgate was gone. That was finished; he had done it to himself at four o'clock on a sunny afternoon because a woman had said yes too quickly and he had been too pleased with himself to wonder why.

But a bet only transfers a company if there is somebody alive to collect it. If he could not keep what was his, then he would take what was theirs - and the two people standing between Silas Kessler and Regent Group had names, and addresses, and a building fifty floors high with one light on at the top of it, every single night.

The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 752

For two days the United State of Magic could not talk about anything else, and it kept getting stuck on the same three things.

The first was simply that Black had lost.

Every person in that country had gone to bed that night knowing how it would end.

Thirty thousand magicians against a school for poor children. Two hundred and fifty branches against thirty.

Nobody had even been able to get odds on it, because nobody would take the other side.

They woke up and Black Tower did not exist.

The second thing was worse, in a way, because it was so hard to hold in the head.

It had taken one night. Not a siege.

Not a season of skirmishes and lawyers and negotiated withdrawals, the way tower wars had always gone.

Six and a half hours, start to finish, and by sunrise two hundred and fifty black buildings were standing in white paint with white light burning gently in their grounds.

People drove out to look at them. Whole families, in the middle of the week. There were queues on the Dunmoor road.

The third thing was the one nobody laughed about.

The prisoners started coming home on the second day, and the state broadcaster had a crew on the road outside Cardew when the first group walked out.

Thirty thousand magicians had woken up asleep on somebody else's grass. Now they were being released.

They were not being released for nothing.

"Sir. Sir, can we talk to you?"

The young man stopped. He was maybe twenty-four, still in the same clothes he'd fought in, and he had the specific hollow look of a person who has been awake for a while thinking about the rest of his life.

He turned his head and pulled his collar down.

"They put something on me," he said. "Here. On the back of my neck."

The camera came in close. It was a thin strip, barely there, clear as a fingernail and no bigger than a plaster.

"What is it?"

"They called it a life-and-death contract." His voice went. "That's what they said. A life-and-death contract."

...

“Then what's the agreement?” the reporter asked. “What did you have to accept, to be let go?"

The young man looked at the road for a moment.

"I have to destroy my black magic,” he said. "All of it. Everything I've learned since I was eleven. They forced me to learn white magic instead, from the beginning, like a child."

"For how long?"

"Ten years." He wiped his face with the back of his wrist and didn't manage it. "Ten years as a White Tower disciple. After that I'm free."

The reporter actually stepped back half a pace.

“Wait — you're a black magician. You've been a black magician your whole life. You can't just turn into a white one. Isn't that dangerous? Doesn't that do something to you?"

"I don't know," the young man said. "Nobody knows. Nobody's ever done it."

He was crying properly now and not bothering to hide it.

"They gave me two choices. Two. Become their disciple, or die."

"Hold on." The reporter had her professional voice back on, because this was going out live. "Are you certain those were the only two? Executing prisoners isn't legal in this country. No tower is permitted to do that. The state would-"

"They never said they'd kill me."

"Then "

"They put a price on my head." He looked straight into the crystal for the first time. "Twenty million dollars. That's what my life is worth. If my family can't pay it, I'll be forced to work as a slave for ten years. I don't want to be a slave."

Nobody said anything.

He walked away down the Cardew road, and the crew let him go.

It was happening everywhere.

That was the part that took hold of the country over the next week, more than the war itself.

For five hundred years these had been the men you crossed the street to avoid. The ones you hired when you wanted a rival's cargo to rot in the hold.

The ones who charged four thousand dollars to take down a warehouse and twice that to take down a man, and who had never once in five centuries had to explain themselves to anybody.

Now they were in the halls of the branches they used to own, sitting in rows, learning to knit a bone.

A woman who had spent eleven years laying hexes for merchants was photographed on the steps of the Coldbrook branch with a manual on her knees, mouthing the words.

A man who had broken three people's minds professionally was assigned to the healing wing and taught, over four days, to run white energy down a farmer's ruined shoulder with both thumbs, slowly, the way you'd work dough.

"He's giving him a massage," somebody said, on a broadcast that went out to four million people. "Is that — is that what he's doing? Is that a massage?"

The country came apart laughing.

...

And then, underneath the laughing, it started to say something else.

Black magic had been thirty percent of everything that went wrong in the United State of Magic.

Everybody knew the figure; the state published it every year and everybody had learned to shrug at it, the way you shrug at weather.

Cursed shipments. Cursed wells. Cursed children, occasionally, if somebody's father had been careless about who he did business with.

Thirty percent of the fear in a whole country, and it had a return address, and the address had a name on it.

That week, for the first time in five hundred years, the address was gone. People started saying the words White Tower differently. Not kindly, exactly. Nobody had gotten as far as kindly. But the tower that everyone's grandfather had made jokes about was suddenly the only one of the seven that had ever taken the country's oldest problem and simply removed it, in one night, without killing anybody.

Which was the strangest part.

"Thirty thousand criminals were suddenly transformed into healers.”

That was the week Regent Group and the White Tower let themselves be happy.

And it was the same week that a man sixty miles away decided that was exactly the problem.

"They're celebrating," Garrick Vail said.

The Red Tower's hall was hot. It was always hot, but the air had chilled ever since the accountant delivered the report on their finances, which were growing worse.

"Let them," one of his elders said. "It costs us nothing."

"It costs us everything." Vail didn't raise his voice. "You attack a man when he is frightened and he fights you like a cornered animal. You attack him when he is winning and he has already put the sword down."

He turned around.

"That is the only night we will ever get."

"Three hundred," Vail said. "Not fifty. Not a hundred. Three hundred of the best fighters this tower has, and I want every one of them briefed twice."

"Elder-"

"Beatrix Hargrove and Alexander. Both. Tonight." He put both hands on the back of a chair. "If we miss this, we do not get another one. He'll know was us by morning and after that there is nowhere in this country can put my people where he cannot reach them. We have seen what he does to a tower that starts something and doesn't finish it."

Nobody argued.

Nobody wanted to be the man who argued.

"Where are they?" Vail said.

"A private banquet, Elder. Tonight. It's small — Regent's senior people and the

White Tower's leadership. The old man Elias. The Hargrove woman."

"How small?"

"Forty guests. Glass roof, private grounds, no state security."

Vail was quiet for a second, and something in his face eased, which was somehow the worst thing that happened in that room all evening.

"Good," he said. "Kill all of them."

The banquet was the smallest thing anybody had thrown in that city all year.

Forty people. No press. Regent's senior division heads, White Tower's elders, and a glass roof with the whole New Avalon sky over it, because Beatrix had wanted somewhere that didn't feel like a boardroom for once in her life.

Elias White stood up at some point and tried to make a speech and got about nine words into it before his voice went.

"Thirty-four years," he said.

"Thirty-four years I ran that place, and I want to say want to say that last week I put my hand on man's curse and I took it off him, and have wanted to be able to do that since I was nineteen years old."

Somebody down the table shouted his name and the room came apart clapping.

Febyella Steinmeyer was laughing at the far end with her shoes off under her chair, and when she looked up and caught Alex watching her she stopped laughing, and neither of them said anything, and she looked away first.

Beatrix leaned over.

"You've been quiet all night."

"I'm enjoying myself."

"That's not what your face is doing."

Alex turned his glass a half-turn on the cloth and thought about how many people in this room had never once had a night like this, and how few nights like this any of them were likely to get.

"Then I'm out of practice," he said.

She almost asked him something else. He watched her get most of the way to it, the way she always did lately.

Then she raised her glass instead.

...

The light came up outside at eleven minutes past ten.

Not lamps. It started at the far end of the grounds and ran, a line of red opening in the grass and going wide, then meeting another curving in around the building on every side at once until another another line then the whole property sat inside a burning ring four hundred feet across.

Somebody at the window said, "What is that."

The room turned.

Forty people looked up through a glass roof at a sky that had gone the wrong colour.

The clouds over New Avalon were lit from underneath in orange, and out of them, all together, in their hundreds, came the fire.

They didn't fall like rain. They fell like meteors — long burning lines opening across the whole sky at once, from every direction, all of them curving in toward one small building with a glass roof and forty people underneath it.

On the ridges and rooftops around the grounds, three hundred Red Tower magicians held their formation and poured everything they had into it.

They had been told the two most target were sitting under that glass.

They believed, every one of them, that nothing underneath it would be alive in ninety seconds.

The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 753

Six hours earlier, on the roof of the Regent Group building, a machine the size of a carriage was running in the dark.

No lights on it. No sound except a low hum you felt in your teeth.

Gaia the Mother Al had gone up the week after thirty men climbed the east stairwell, and it had not been switched off since. Every drone over the White Tower answered it.

Every drone over the Regent building. Every drone in the Arcanum State, all the way out to the coast.

Alex stood in front of it with his hands in his pockets.

"Say it again," he said.

"Two hundred and ninety-six," Gaia said. "Moving out of the Red Tower's north gate in nine groups. They are not travelling together and they are not travelling as magicians."

"Where are they going?"

"Every route converges on the banquet grounds. Estimated arrival, twenty-one forty."

"Two hundred and ninety-six." Alex almost smiled. "He rounded up."

...

Beatrix found him there twenty minutes later with her coat still on.

"Cancel it," she said.

"No."

“Alex, there are three hundred Red Tower magicians walking toward a building with a glass roof, and two hundred forty of our people are going to be sitting under it eating fish."

"Yes."

"Then we cancel it."

"You know the product we finished yesterday?" Alex said. "The one nobody's launched yet."

Beatrix stopped.

"The sticker."

"We were going to put it to work." He turned, leaning back against the machine. "Three hundred magicians are about to torch my roof in front of the entire state."

A laugh tore out of him-dry, brittle, and without humor.

"I'm not calling it off. I'll take the free press. I'm not throwing away an opportunity like this."

...

At eleven minutes past ten, the sky over New Avalon came down on the banquet.

Three hundred lines of fire, all of them curving in.

They hit the glass roof together.

And something on the glass woke up.

It had been there all evening — a strip of transparent film, laid across every pane an hour before the guests arrived, so thin the staff who fitted it complained it was a waste of a ladder.

It lit.

Twenty centimetres above the glass, the air stopped being air.

The first fireball hit it and went out. Not deflected. Not scattered. It arrived, and it simply stopped burning, and what came down on the roof was warm grey ash that slid off the slope like snow off a car.

The second did the same.

Then three hundred of them did the same, all at once, and the whole roof of that building lit up dull orange and went dark again in under two seconds.

Underneath, two hundred forty people were on their feet screaming.

Somebody had gone under a table. Two of the White elders had their arms up over their heads. A Regent division head was halfway to the doors before he realised the doors were also glass.

Beatrix Hargrove stood up on her chair and clapped her hands twice.

"Everyone. Attention, please."

Nobody heard her.

"Attention." Louder. The room turned. "Thank you. Regent Group would like to use this occasion to announce a new product."

Somebody said, "What?"

"The anti-fire sticker." Beatrix pointed at the ceiling with her glass. "It goes on sale next week."

Two hundred forty people looked up.

The roof was still being hit. It was being hit continuously — the fire came down in waves, and every wave broke twenty centimetres above the glass and slid off in ash, and through it you could see the New Avalon sky going orange and dark, orange and dark, like a lamp with a bad connection.

Nothing was getting in.

The Regent man who'd been running for the door stopped running.

"So this is a promotion?" he said. “This is a — this is a demonstration? For a product?"

"You could put it that way."

"You could put it that way?"

"The film creates a vacuum," Beatrix said. "A twenty-centimetre barrier, held flush against whatever surface you apply it to. Heat activates it, sealing off every molecule of air.” She took a sip of her wine. "No oxygen, no combustion. The fire simply can't exist."

"That's it?"

"That's the entire product. It costs six dollars."

...

Elias White started laughing first.

He was eighty-one and he had been sitting very still with both hands on the table, and something in him broke loose and he laughed until he had to hold onto the man beside him.

Then the whole room went.

They stood in the middle of a banquet hall with three hundred magicians trying to kill them, and they laughed, and pointed, and somebody moved a chair to get a better view of the ceiling.

A White elder took out a crystal and started filming it. Two of the Regent people were arguing about the retail price.

Then somebody clapped.

And then all of them did.

On the north ridge, four hundred feet up, the man commanding three hundred Red

Tower magicians watched a glass roof refuse to break.

"Again," he said.

They went again. The roof lit and went dark.

"Elder, it's holding—"

"It's a shield. Somebody down there is holding it." He was breathing hard. "Nobody holds a shield forever. Every second he holds that, he's burning himself out. Raise the power. All of you. Everything you have."

Three hundred magicians raised their hands.

The next wave was twice the size of the first, and it came down like something falling out of orbit, and it broke twenty centimetres above the glass and slid off in ash.

"Again!"

His second came up beside him with a long-glass and didn't lower it.

"Elder."

"What."

"You need to look at this."

He took the glass.

Two hundred and forty people. Standing at the windows. Some of them with drinks still in their hands.

Pointing up.

Clapping.

"What are they doing," he said.

"I think they're applauding, Elder."

"Applauding what?"

"...Us, Elder."

He put the glass down very slowly.

"More fire," he said.

They gave him more fire. The room below clapped harder.

Inside, Alex hadn't stood up.

He was still in his chair with his glass untouched in front of him, and he took a small grey square out of his coat and pressed it.

A pane of light unfolded in the air over the tablecloth.

"Minister Penn."

"Do you know what hour it is?"

"Three hundred Red Tower magicians are currently attacking a private banquet in

New Avalon," Alex said. "Two hundred forty guests. Nine of them are White Tower elders. The fire has been coming down for six minutes and it's still coming down now."

There was a pause on the other end.

"Are you asking the state for protection?"

"No." Alex turned the pane so it faced the roof, and let the Minister of Magic watch the sky break against a six-dollar sticker for a few seconds.

"I'm giving you formal notice," he said. "The White Tower is retaliating tonight, and the White Tower declares war on the Red Tower."

"Alexander-"

"The glass has it," Alex said. "You'll find it recorded from four angles. Good evening,

Minister."

He closed the pane.

Then he stood up, and he was not smiling anymore.

...

Six hundred miles away, at the same minute, in two hundred and eighty white buildings, thirty thousand people got up from their beds.

They had been model students for eleven days.

They had been photographed learning to knit bone. They had been interviewed, weeping, on the Cardew road. The whole country had spent a week and a half watching the most feared magicians in its history sit in rows with manuals on their knees learning to bless a fishing boat, and the whole country had laughed itself sick.

Every one of them went to a locker.

And every one of them took out the black. Robes. Bone-rings. Hex-focuses. Curse-stones wrapped in oiled cloth, catalogued, tagged, and stored by the White Tower quartermasters who had confiscated them eleven days ago and had never once been ordered to destroy a single item. "Nothing was destroyed," a White elder said quietly to Elias, later, when he finally asked. “Grandmaster's instruction. Every piece of it, itemised and kept."

The interviews had been true. The lessons had been true. The bone-knitting had been true.

The part where their black magic had been taken out of them had never been true at all.

It had only ever been asleep.

Thirty thousand black magicians walked out from each of the two hundred and eighty White Towers, spilling into the dark in full colours, for one night only. Above every spire, the sky filled up.

The drones came over the stone battlements in columns two miles long, hundreds of thousands of them, blotting out the stars. They did not fly ahead, and they did not fly

behind. They flew directly above the marching columns, matched to their pace, eighty feet off the cobbles.

Nobody had ever seen an army with a ceiling-let alone two hundred and eighty of them moving at once.

The mandate, was simple, mechanical, and absolute: every force matched straight from its home gates toward the nearest Red

Tower in its quadrant. No long sieges, no coordinated detours. Just two hundred and eighty synchronized spearheads striking outward like spokes on a whee closing the distance to surround and hammer the closest Red fortifications within their reach.

At the target closest to Renwick's White Tower, forty defenders stood on the threshold with only eleven minutes before impact.

The first of the local black line stopped forty feet out. He was fifty-one years old, six days into learning how to set a collarbone, and he had been very good at his old work.

"Evening," he said.

Then he opened his hand.

The curse went across those forty feet like water finding a crack, and the front rank of the Red Tower guard went down together-knees, then hips, then backs, every one of them on the flagstones inside two seconds, spasming, teeth locked, hands curled up against their chests. Not dead. None of them died.

They simply stopped being able to stand up, all at once, in front of their own gate. "Fire!" somebody screamed from the parapet. “Fire on them, now!"

The Red Tower did what the Red Tower had done for five hundred years. Forty men put everything they had into one unified crest of flame and threw it down at a crowd standing in the open with no cover of any kind.

The wave got about halfway.

Then the sky dropped.

Two hundred drones plunged between the wall and the marching line. Every unit laid a sheet of film across the air before it, edge to edge, interlocking until a wall of nothing twenty centimetres thick and four hundred feet wide hung suspended in the dark.

The fire hit it.

The fire went out.

Ash drifted down over the robes of men who did not break step. On the ramparts, forty Red Tower magicians watched their oldest weapon turn to grey soot in mid-air.

"That's not possible," one of them whispered.

The black line started walking again.

It wasn't an isolated skirmish. It was happening everywhere at the exact same minute.

From every White Tower across the territory, thirty thousand mages advanced in relentless radii, descending upon the nearest Red stronghold within their sightline. Millions under arms beneath a humming iron sky people who had spent eleven days being mocked on national broadcast and had not been permitted, until tonight, to utter a single word.

And miles away on a ridge above a banquet hall, three hundred elite magicians were still throwing fire at a six-dollar sticker, entirely blind to the fact that their tower had already fallen.

The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 754

Red Tower had three hundred red tower and thirty thousand magicians in the Arcanum State.

That night, there were almost none of them in a Red Tower.

It was not carelessness. It was the business.

Red sells fire by the month. Every forge, every bakery oven, every kitchen stove in the state runs on a flame-charm, and a flame-charm has to be renewed by hand, at the customer's door, by a man who walks there.

Red's people lived in their own houses. They slept above shops in the market districts, in rented rooms near the harbour, in cottages on the roads out east, so they could be at the first door by seven in the morning on the first of the month.

"White Tower had summoned every fighter drone, every ex-black-magic recruit, it commanded to attack all of the Red towers."

Red Tower never summoned anybody, because it was ambushed.

...

At the Halloway branch there were twenty-six people inside at midnight.

Four cooks. Nine record-keepers. Two men on the gate. A duty elder named Corliss who had drawn the short straw for the third month running and had complained about it at dinner.

Corliss was on the north step when he saw the road.

"How many?" the boy beside him said.

"Go back inside."

"Elder, how many-"

"I said go inside."

There were a hundred of them coming up that road in black robes, and above all of it, at eighty feet, the sky was full of machines flying in step with the men.

A hundred men and a hundred drones fighting twenty-six people who were not fighters at all.

It happened at three hundred red towers at once.

Thirty thousand ex-Black magicians, split across every Red building in the state. The curse always went first.

"Front rank," somebody would say, and one man would open his hand, and every Red guard standing in the gateway would go down together-knees, hips, backs, on the stones inside two seconds, teeth locked, hands curled up against their chests.

After the curse, they used everything else.

Poison-work. Rot. Mind-hex. Blood-binding. The whole catalogue that the state had made illegal a hundred years ago and that Black Tower had gone on quietly selling for four hundred and eighty years afterward-used openly, in the dark, in front of witnesses, on a night when the state's own war record was sitting open with both parties named in it.

Red did the only thing Red has ever done.

They threw fire.

The drones dropped between the black magicians.

A hundred of them, edge to edge, each one laying a sheet of film across the air in front of it until there was a wall of nothing twenty centimetres thick hanging in the courtyard.

The fire hit it.

The fire went out.

Ash came down on fifteen hundred black robes, and not one of them looked up. "Again," somebody screamed from the window. "Again—”

They went again. It went out again.

Useless.

...

On the north ridge above the banquet, three hundred magicians had been burning a glass roof for forty-one minutes.

They had raised the power four times. The roof kept sliding ash off like snow off a car.

Then every communication card on that ridge lit up at once.

Not one. Not a few. Hundreds of them, together, in the dark, like somebody had thrown a handful of coins on the grass.

The commander got his out.

“—Elder. Elder, please. Our tower is under attack, we have black magicians in the courtyard, thousands of them, they came in black robes, we can't—”

"Slow down. Which branch?"

"All of them," the voice said, and broke. "Elder, it's all of them."

...

Three hundred men stopped casting at the same time and turned around.

Below them, through a glass roof that would not break, forty people stood at the windows with drinks in their hands, looking up, still applauding.

Alex looked up and smiled.

"You," the commander said. It came out of him like something torn. "What have you done to our tower?"

The window below opened.

Alexander stood there with his hands in his pockets and did not raise his voice at all, because he did not have to.

"You attacked us," he said. "So we attacked you back."

"You—"

"I sent formal notice to the Minister of Magic an hour ago.

Time stamped, recorded four angles." Alex shrugged. "You can read it in the state record tomorrow. It's all very legal."

The commander stood there and finally understood what he had bought.

This was supposed to be quiet. That was the entire value of it-three hundred men, one roof, ninety seconds, and nothing left aliveonet say who had done it. No accusation, no proof, no Convocation, no minister.

Instead, he had spent forty-one minutes putting on a public fireworks display, on the record, in front of a room that was laughing at him.

And his tower was already gone.

"Retreat," he said. "All of you. Back to the tower, now—"

Alex laughed.

"Why are you in such a hurry?" he said. "You've already come all this way."

The sky above the ridge filled up.

A thousand of them, and they did not come in from anywhere. They were already there-they had been holding position above and behind that ridge since the fire started in the dark, at four hundred feet) matched to three hundred men who had never once looked up.

Nobody was ever chasing them. Everyone had been waiting.

The needles came down.

The commander and his three hundred magicians tried to fight back, but having drained their mana against the glass roof for so long, they were easily struck down and fallen.

They found them at first light, laid out on the grass in rows, asleep, every one of them breathing.

The country woke up to it for the second time in two weeks.

Two hundred and seventy-five Red Tower branches were taken between midnight and four. Only twenty-five survived, saved by the elders leading them. Magicians lay asleep on lawns from the harbour to the eastern roads. Three hundred elite fighters were collected off a hillside outside New Avalon like a harvest.

Across the United States of Magic, ordinary Red magicians woke up, only to find their towers already gone-painted over in white.

And naturally, they were left wondering who was going to pay their salaries now.

The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 755

Weeks earlier, in the middle of a war with the Black Tower, Beatrix put a stack of purchase orders on Alex's desk and did not sit down.

Rain was coming down the fourth-floor windows in sheets. Below them New Avalon was all wet lamplight and moving umbrellas, and every one of those orders had a Red Tower address within two miles of it.

"Explain these to me."

"They're land purchases."

"I can read." She pushed the top sheet across. "Warehouse leases. Ninety of them. Every single one sits inside walking distance of a Red Tower branch, and we are currently at war with a completely different tower."

Alex didn't look up.

"Then it's a good week to buy warehouses. Nobody's paying attention."

"Alex."

"Sit down, Beatrix."

She sat.

...

"There are three organisations in this country that want to destroy us," he said. “Black. Red. Ferrowgate. All three of them are talking to each other and all three of them are waiting to see how the first one goes."

"So you're preparing for Red before Black is finished."

"I'm preparing for Red because Black is already finished." He finally looked up. “The day we win is the day the second one moves. So we need to be prepared from now."

Beatrix turned a lease over in her hands.

"And if Red never comes?"

"Then I own ninety warehouses with my drones inside." He shrugged. "But they'll come. Men like that always wait until they think we are celebrating."

"And when they do?"

Alex thought about how to say it, and then didn't bother softening it.

"When someone raises a hand against me, I don't trade blows," he said. "I crush him under carriage wheels. I make sure he never stands again, then I take his house, his coin, and his wife. He made the first move. The audience just needs to remember what happens on the second."

Beatrix looked at him for a long moment.

She didn't put it in the minutes.

...

Weeks later, three hundred Red Tower magicians walked up a ridge above a banquet hall and set fire to a roof that had a six-dollar sticker on it.

They had brought a fist.

Alex had spent weeks parking the carriage.

By two in the morning the Red Tower's buildings belonged to other people. Ex-Black magicians held the gates in their old colours, one night only, standing in the courtyards of the tower that had refused to fight beside them two weeks ago. Upstairs, the drones went through the record rooms.

Not searching. Photographing.

A hundred machines to a building, moving down the shelves at reading speed, and every roll they opened was the same one: enrolment ledgers, stipend rolls, route sheets. Names. Registration numbers. Home addresses, because Red paid a housing allowance and Red kept receipts.

Two hundred seventy-five branches. One hour. Every file went straight up to Gaia. "How complete?" Alex asked.

"Twenty-nine thousand eight hundred and forty individual members," Gaia said. "Ninety-six percent have a current residential address on file. I have a route plan." "Show me the problem first."

"The problem is that they are asleep in their own beds tonight and they will not be tomorrow."

That was the whole of it, and Elias worked it out standing at Alex's shoulder in the control room with his hands behind his back.

"Thirty thousand people," the old man said. "Twenty-nine and a half."

"We have their buildings. We don't have them." Elias's voice was very careful. "In three days they'll have found each other. Market halls, guild rooms, somebody's back garden. And then it won't be three hundred caretakers, Grandmaster. It'll be thirty thousand angry professionals who know exactly where our thirty branches are."

"Yes."

"They'd stretch us thin enough to break."

"Yes."

Elias let out a breath.

"Then what do we do about it?"

Alex looked at the wall of screens.

"We do it tonight," he said. "While they're still thirty thousand separate men sleeping in thirty thousand separate rooms."

...

The drones went out at half past two, and they came into the red tower members through open windows, kitchen vents and the gaps that nobody has ever bothered to seal.

In a cottage on the east road, a Red magician named Doret was asleep on his side with his wife beside him.

Something came in over the sill and hovered by the bedpost for two seconds.

It fired the sleeping needle once.

He didn't wake. He wouldn't have woken for an hour after that, which was more time than it needed.

Then the second one came down and put a thin clear patch on the back of his neck, just under the hairline, and pressed it flat.

The Gaia patch is where it stops being a story about magic.

What goes into it is small enough that there is no word for it in any of the seven towers.

It slips beneath the skin, finds the brainstem, and coils there in silence. The next morning, a man wakes up feeling entirely like himself-thinking his own thoughts, drinking his morning tea.

He only ever learns what was done to him if he dares to defy Gaia's command, discovering an agony so absolute that death becomes the kinder choice.

In one night, in one state, twenty-two thousand Red Tower magicians were fitted while they slept, and not one of them heard a thing.

The other eight thousand were not asleep, or not at home, or lived in places a drone couldn't get into.

Those ones the ex-Black went and collected in person, and they did it the way they had always done everything — a curse laid at the doorstep, a binding on the wrists, a work-oath sworn at three in the morning with a man's own front step under his knees.

By dawn nobody in that tower belonged to that tower anymore.

Elias watched the last of it come in on the screens. He was very quiet.

He didn't ask what the patch, the Gaia band -aid was.

He never did.

...

The country woke up to it at six.

Every broadcast in the United State of Magic led with the same picture, and the picture didn't need a word of explanation: a Red Tower branch at first light, in white paint, with white light burning slow in the grounds.

Then another one. Then nine at once on a split screen, then a map.

Two hundred and seventy-five of them.

The presenter had been awake for twenty hours and had lost the professional voice somewhere around four in the morning.

"Two hundred and seventy-five Red Tower branches," she said, "have raised White Tower colours overnight. I want to say that again, because I've had to check it three times."

She checked it a fourth time on air.

...

The speculation went round the country before breakfast.

Thirty White Tower branches, before all this.

Two hundred and fifty taken from Black.

Two hundred and seventy-five taken from Red.

Five hundred and fifty-five buildings under one colour, in a country that had spent five hundred years balanced between seven, and no tower in that country had ever held more than three hundred.

Red had twenty-five left.

By nine that morning people had stopped saying the Seven Towers and started saying the six, and by noon they had started saying something else, more quietly, in market halls and guild rooms and every tower hall in the state.

Not six.

One, and then the rest of them.

The emergency summit sat at eleven in the same hall as before.

Same long dark table. Same pale recording glass hanging over it, four hundred years old, taking down every syllable. The windows were open onto the square because the morning had come up hot, and you could hear the city out there - carts, a bell somebody selling something While inside the room six towers sat down to find out what was left of the seventh.

Garrick Vail did not wait to be invited to speak.

"We will bring this before the High Council," he said. "Every part of it. This was an unprovoked and illegal annexation of two hundred and seventy-five lawful properties in a single night, carried out against a tower that did nothing—”

"Nothing," Alex said.

"—and we demand the immediate return of every branch, every asset, and every member of our order currently being held."

Alex looked at Elias. Elias looked at Alex.

Both of them laughed.

It was not a polite laugh and it went on slightly too long, and Vail's colour went up his neck while it did.

"You find this funny."

"I find you funny." Alex sat forward.

"Last nights you sent three hundred battle magicians to a private dinner Two hundred Forty guests. Nine of them were White Tower elders in the eighties. You set fire to the roof fine to the roof for forty one minutes and you did not stop until your own tower called you and told you it was gone."

"That is not—”

"It's in the glass." Alex pointed up at it without looking. "All of it. Your commander is in state custody and he has already made a statement."

Vail said nothing.

"So no, Elder Vail. You don't get to come in here and cry about injustice because your murder didn't work."

Minister Penn cleared his throat.

He had been in his post for nineteen years and had buried four tower masters in that time, and he was not, by nature, a corrupt man. He was a tired one.

At four o'clock that morning, in a private room with the curtains shut, the chairman of Ferrowgate had sat across from him and explained what a man's family could be worth if the White Tower were made to give two hundred and seventy-five buildings back.

Silas Kessler had spoken for eleven minutes about the stability of the nation.

Not one person in that room had mentioned that Ferrowgate itself had been signed away on a wager eleven days ago and legally belonged to Beatrix Hargrove. Kessler had offered the Minister of Magic a fortune out of a company he no longer owned, and the Minister had said yes.

"White Tower leadership." Penn stood up, and his voice came out almost steady. "The state acknowledges that you were attacked. But the response was disproportionate Two hundred seventy five properties, taken in one night, is not retaliation -t is and annexation, and it violates every convention this country has held to for four hundred years."

The hall was completely silent.

"I must therefore formally demand that the White Tower withdraw from the occupied branches and return them to Red administration by the end of the week."

Alex stood up.

He didn't hurry about it. He put his fingertips on the table, and he looked down the length of four hundred years of dark wood at a small tired man in a good coat, and the room got the temperature drop about a second before Penn did.

"Minister," he said.

"...Yes?"

"Do you want to die?"

The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 756

The recording glass hummed once, the way it does when a voice comes in loud, and the sound carried all the way down the table.

"Do you want to die?"

Minister Penn's face went white, then red, and he put both hands flat on the wood to stop them shaking.

"How dare you," he said. "How dare you threaten me. In this hall. I am the Minister of Magic."

"Then let me ask you a better one." Alex hadn't sat down.

"Three hundred Red Tower magicians came to a private dinner two nights ago to kill me, my chairwoman, nine White Tower elders in their eighties and two hundreds our guests," Alex said.

He leaned in slightly.

"So I want to hear you say it clearly, Minister, because the glass is running. Are you standing with them?"

"I stand with justice-"

"We are on the side of justice. We never strike first. You have to pick a side, because if you stand with them, you stand against us and you need to understand what being our enemy truly means."

Penn straightened his coat. He had prepared this part.

"I stand for justice," he said. "Just look at the results. Did anyone from the White Tower actually die?"

"What?"

"Nobody died." Penn was warming to it now, one hand up. “Three hundred Red Tower magicians came to your celebration. You had just defeated the Black Tower -the whole country was celebrating with you. They put fire in the sky above your banquet hall for forty minutes. It was a display." Somebody down the table made a small sound.

“A firework display," Penn said. "In your honour."

Alex looked at him for three full seconds.

"In my honour."

"And here is my proof, and it is very simple." Penn spread both hands, appealing to the room now, to the towers, to the glass. "Nobody in that building died. Nobody in that building was hurt. Not one guest. Not one elder. Not a scratch, not a burn, not a single injury among forty people."

"That's because we prepared."

"No." Penn's voice went up. "That is because the Red Tower never intended to harm anybody. If three hundred battle magicians had wanted your guests dead, your guests would be dead. They were playing. And you "

He pointed down the length of the table.

"You attacked them for real. You took two hundred and seventy-five buildings in one night. So the fault is not theirs, White Tower. The fault is yours. And you will return everything to the Red Tower."

"My fault?" Alex laughed.

Not politely. It came up out of him and filled that four-hundred-year-old room and bounced off the glass and came back down, and it went on long enough that Vail looked at the table.

“I'm sorry,” Alex said. "I want to be sure I have it. Three hundred men set fire to kill us—"

"Alexander-"

"Because my roof held, it's my fault." He wiped his eye. "Minister, do you know what you've just told every magician in this country? You've told them that as long as they fail, it wasn't a crime."

Penn's mouth opened and stayed open.

Alex turned to the man beside him.

"Elias. We're leaving."

Elias White stood up out of his chair with his hat in his hand, eighty-one years old, and nine White elders stood up behind him without a word.

"Stop." Penn was on his feet. “Sit down. If the White Tower refuses to hear the United State of Magic, then the White Tower makes an enemy of this entire country. Every tower. Every state. Do you understand what I am saying to you?"

"You're a minister,” Alex said. "Don't confuse yourself with a country."

"I represent this country!"

Penn had nineteen months left in his post. He had a house he'd stopped being able to afford four years ago and a state pension that would cover about half of it, and at four o'clock that morning a man from Ferrowgate had sat in a curtained room and put a number on the table that solved every one of those problems at once.

It is remarkable how much justice a tired man can find in nineteen months.

"No, you don't," Alex said. "Right now you represent the Red Tower and your own pocket, and everybody at this table can see which is heavier."

"You"

"If you want to use the power of your office against me, use it." Alex was already walking. “But understand something first. I am not a child you can send to his room.

I don't take orders here."

He stopped at the end of the table.

"Come and take it, if you can."

"Remember this," Penn called after him. "This country and every tower in this hall will become your enemy!"

"So be it." Alex turned around at the door.

He didn't look at Penn. He looked past him, along the table, at Blue and Green and Yellow and Brown, one at a time, and every one of them met his eyes because it would have been worse not to.

"Go on and ask them," he said. "That's your right."

He put his hat on.

"The White Tower has never moved against any of you. We have never taken a coin from you, never sent a man to your gate, never said one word about you in public. That doesn't change today."

A beat.

"But if any of you comes for us - we won't be polite about it."

Then he walked out, and nine old people in white walked out behind him, and the doors closed on a room that did not say anything for some time.

...

Penn broke first.

“Well?” He was shouting at towers, which no minister had done in that hall in living memory. "All of you — you sat there. You heard him. If you do not stand together and stop the White Tower now, what exactly do you think happens next?" Nobody answered.

"Two towers. Two towers, gone, inside a month. Black and Red." He was walking the length of the table now. "Are none of you afraid? Are you waiting for your own building to be painted white?"

The Blue Tower's representative put a hand up.

He was a careful man from a careful tower with three hundred years of never picking a side, and he sounded genuinely apologetic.

"Minister. Forgive me. But on this occasion - and I only say this because it seems Black Tower attacked them first. And so did Red."

to be true

"That is not the point."

"With respect, it does seem to be some of the point."

"No." Penn's voice cracked flat across the room. "The White Tower provoked them. It has been provoking them for months, deliberately, with products and prices and free schools, until they move and had no choice but to then it destroyed them for moving." That is a strategy, not a defence."

He put both fists on the table.

"And if you do not destroy them, gentlemen, then one morning you will wake up and your tower will be white."

After that day, everything got complicated.

The state papers turned first, because the state papers always turn first. Within forty-eight hours the White Tower was not a school that had been attacked twice. It was an unaccountable power it was a private army. It was a single man collecting the seven towers of a five-hundred-year-old country like a boy collecting stones.

Then Ferrowgate's money went into the media, and they ran the same story with better pictures.

Then the towers themselves started saying it - Blue in careful language,

Green in vague language, Yellow and Brown in whatever language they were told to use - because Minister Penn had made itately dear that a tower which stayed quiet this month would find its certifications very slow to renew next month.

Now the country was being told, three times a day, that white tower had eaten black and red towers and was still hungry.

Elias read four papers in one morning and put them down carefully on the table.

“Thirty-four years,” he said, “I ran a tower nobody could be bothered to insult." Three days later the Red Tower tried diplomacy.

They filed properly. They petitioned the state, they invoked four hundred years of convention, and they demanded the return of two hundred and seventy-five branches to their lawful owners.

The petition failed on the second morning, and it failed for a reason nobody in that room had prepared for.

Red had no members.

Every enrolled magician of the Red Tower — twenty-nine thousand of them — had filed to leave the order and enrol with the White Tower, in writing, on the same day, in handwriting the state's own clerks confirmed as genuine.

You cannot return a tower to a tower that has nobody left in it.

And here was the part that made the whole country laugh.

They were all still doing their jobs.

The same man came to your door on the first of the month. Same face, same complaint about your stairs, same tea. He renewed your flame-charm the same way his father had renewed your father's. The forge on the corner never lost an hour. The bakery oven never went cold twice.

The building he walked out of that morning was white instead of red. His coat was white. The receipt he handed you had a different name at the top.

That was the entire change.

It was as if a company had rebranded overnight — new sign, new colour, same staff, same customers, same routes, same work — and the only thing that had actually moved was where the money went at the end of the month.

It used to go up to the head of the Red Tower.

Now it went up to the head of the White.

In a private room above a restaurant on the north side of the city, three men sat down together where nobody could see them.

The Minister of Magic. The chairman of Ferrowgate. And what was left of the Red Tower.

"I've decided," Penn said.

He had a glass in his hand and he'd had two already, and the window behind him was open onto a warm night and a street full of people who had spent the day laughing at his newspapers.

"There will be an alliance. Every remaining tower, together, for one purpose — to end the White Tower. I have spoken to all four privately and all four have agreed in principle.” He turned the glass. "They are only asking about the payment."

"How much?" Kessler said.

"A great deal."

"I'll prepare the money." Kessler didn't even blink. "All of it."

Nobody in that room mentioned that Ferrowgate had been signed away on a wager two weeks ago and legally belonged to Beatrix Hargrove.

Penn laughed until he had to put the glass down.

“Good,” he said. "Good. And when the White Tower is finished, gentlemen — don't forget about mine."

They drank on it. All three of them went home happy.

It was well past midnight when Minister Penn came down the back steps to his carriage.

Two guards at the kerb. A driver up front with the lamps already lit and the horses shifting their feet in the quiet, and the street empty in both directions the way that street is always empty at that hour.

One of the guards opened the door for him. Penn got in, still smiling, still thinking about the number.

The door closed.

And a blade came out of the dark inside the carriage and laid itself against the side of his neck.

"How dare you," a voice said, "try to destroy the White Tower."

The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 757

The inside of a minister's carriage smells like lamp oil and old leather.

"Why,” Alex said, "do you want to make an enemy of the White Tower?"

The blade did not move. It lay along the side of Penn's neck, above the collar, exactly where a man can feel his own pulse.

"Do you think we're easy to bully?"

"You-" Penn's voice came out in pieces. "You dare. You dare point a sword at a Minister of Magic."

"That's not an answer."

"Do you know what happens to a man who lays a hand on me?"

"So it's like this." Alex sat back a little, which somehow made it worse. "When you sit in a room upstairs and arrange for four towers to come and end me, that's government. But when I answer it, that's a crime."

"That is not-"

"You can build the knife," Alex said. "I'm just not allowed to look at it. Who exactly do you think you are?"

"You've already lost," he said. "Do you understand that? It's done. Four towers. Ferrowgate's money behind every one of them. I signed it tonight, upstairs, over a good bottle, and there is not one thing you can do about it."

"There it is."

"Nobody will let the White Tower go now. Nobody. You should beg to me!"

"So you got three men drunk in a room above a restaurant," Alex said, "and now you're behaving like a man who's already won."

He tilted his head.

"Don't count chickens that are still eggs, Minister."

Penn's hands had stopped shaking.

"If you harm me," he said, "this entire country will hunt you for the rest of your life. Every Warden. Every tower. There is nowhere in the United State of Magic that will

"In about twenty seconds," Alex said, "a fast carriage is going to come around that corner ahead of us."

Penn stopped.

"It's going to hit this one on the front left. And in the crash, you're going to be thrown forward into the frame of that seat.” Alex nodded at it. “And your neck is going to break."

Outside, the street was empty in both directions. One lamp burning at the corner. The horses shifting.

"You're threatening me."

"No." Alex sounded almost patient. "I'm not threatening you."

He leaned in.

"I'm going to break your neck now. And then the carriage is going to hit us. That way, when they find you, the injury will match the accident."

Penn's mouth opened.

Up the street, at the corner, a pair of lamps swung into view and came on fast.

Penn turned his head to look at them, which was the last decision he ever made.

...

There was a sound like a green branch going.

The carriage door opened, Alex stepped out into the night air and the sword was already under his feet, and he was forty feet up and climbing before the two vehicles met.

Behind him the street tore itself apart - wood, glass, a horse screaming, the long grinding slide of a wheel rim across cobbles - and the sound went up between the buildings and came back down and then there was nothing at all.

The driver came off the box hard and rolled and got up somehow, both hands bleeding, and wrenched the cabin door open.

"Minister? Minister-"

The Minister of Magic was lying half off the seat with his head at an angle heads do not go, and his coat was still buttoned, and there was not a mark on him anywhere else.

The driver sat down in the road.

Above him, nothing moved in the sky. There was nothing up there to se

Sixty miles away, on the top floor of the Ferrowgate building, Silas Kessler was drinking the good bottle.

He had been saving it. Forty years old, laid down by his father, the sort of wine you open for something and he had spent two weeks deciding whether this counted. Tonight it counted.

He carried the glass out through the tall doors onto the balcony, and the wind came in off the harbour and moved through his shirt, cold and clean, and below him the whole of New Avalon lay out in lamplight all the way to the water.

Four towers. The Minister. Every coin he could still raise, and a few he couldn't. Kessler raised the glass at the city.

"Regent Group," he said. "You'll be mine by winter."

Then the phone rang inside.

...

He took his time getting to it, still smiling.

"Kessler."

"Silas Kessler. This is Alexander. Regent Group, and the White Tower."

There was a pause, and then Kessler laughed — genuinely, delightedly, the laugh of a man holding four towers and a minister.

"Alexander." He carried the phone back out onto the balcony. "Well. To what do I owe this?"

"I've been wondering something all week."

"Then ask."

"Why are you so determined to hurt Beatrix and me?"

"Hurt?" Kessler swirled the glass. "Please. I'm a businessman. An honest one, in fact I've never tried to kill anybody in my life. I've never so much as raised my voice at a man."

He said it eleven days after promising an entire company to Red Tower for two heads.

"It's you," he went on, "who has spent a year taking apart everything my family built. My order book. My share price. My name."

"That's business," Alex said. "Every business has competitors. You know that better than anyone."

"Yes." Kessler's voice dropped, warm and pleased with itself. "Yes, exactly. And that is precisely why you're going to get hurt, boy. Because that is what competition is."

"You know," Alex said, "I completely agree with you."

"Good."

"Goodbye, Silas."

Something came down out of the dark above the building.

Kessler had one half-second to register it — small, black, no bigger than a bird, dropping fast and silent past the roofline — and then it hit him in the chest and every muscle he owned locked at once.

The glass went off the balcony. He never heard it land.

He was on the tiles on his side, jaw clamped, eyes open, everything working except all of it.

Then the machine took hold of his coat and lifted.

...

It carried him up off the balcony and out.

Not far. Ten feet past the rail, no more, so that he hung there in the open with the whole city underneath him and the harbour wind going through his shirt, forty-one floors of nothing between his shoes and the street.

He could see. That was the thing they built into it. He could see perfectly.

The phone was still lying on the balcony where he'd dropped it, and the voice coming out of it was very calm.

"Goodbye."

The machine let go.

ir

Silas Kessler fell from the top of the building his grandfather built, and he came down on the roof of a carriage passing along the front of it, and the noise brought two hundred people out of the surrounding streets inside a minute.

By morning the story was everywhere, and it had already grown a shape. The chairman of a failing company.

A rare bottle, opened alone. A balcony, and no note.

...

Garrick Vail drove himself home that night, because there was nobody left to drive him.

That was the small humiliation he kept turning over on the road out. Red Tower had kept forty drivers on standing salary once. Now there was no tower to pay them from- two hundred and seventy-five buildings under somebody else's colour, twenty-nine thousand names transferred to somebody else's rolls, and a house he'd bought thirty years ago on the strength of a job that no longer existed.

Still. Tonight had been good.

Four towers. Kessler's money. Penn's signature.

He came up his own lane a little after one with the hedges black on both sides and his windows dark ahead of him, and he thought, for the first time in three weeks, that he might actually sleep.

The front door was unlocked.

He noticed it and told himself he'd forgotten, which is what everybody tells themselves.

The hallway was cold. He put his keys in the dish. He went through into his own front room, reaching for the lamp on the wall, and stopped, because the lamp was already lit and turned low.

There was a man sitting in the chair by the fireplace.

Coat off. Perfectly relaxed. A sword laid across his knees, and both hands resting on it.

Garrick Vail did not move at all.

“Elder Vail,” Alexander said pleasantly. “Would you be interested in a one-way ticket somewhere warm?"

The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 758

Garrick Vail let out a breath that was almost a laugh.

"Somewhere warm," he said. "You're threatening a fire magician with warmth."

His own front room. Nine feet between them. The lamp turned low on the wall, the ashes cold in the grate.

"For people like me, kid, warm is nothing-warm is bathwater." He clenched his fists, unleashing twin coils of fire around his hands.

"You're right." Alex nodded. "I should have been clearer. The invitation is to hell."

Vail stopped smiling.

"They tell me it's very hot down there," Alex went on. "And you being what you are, I thought—well. At least he'll have something to play with."

"What do you want?"

"You spent tonight in a room above a restaurant arranging my death." Alex stood up. "You commanded three hundred men to burn us. So of course I came here to kill you. What else did you think this was?"

Vail's hand was already coming up.

Nineteen years as the strongest fire magician in the Arcanum State, and he did not hesitate, and he did not waste a word - the whole room went orange as it left his palm.

The chair by the fireplace disintegrated.

The wall behind it went with it.

...

Vail stood in the wreckage of his own front room breathing hard, and there was no body in front of him.

There was nothing in front of him at all.

“You just made a very big mistake,” Alex said, from behind him.

Vail spun.

He got halfway.

...

What came off Alexander's hand was fire.

Not white. Not light. Fire - Red Tower work, the pure old form, the same art Vail had spent his life on and had taught to four thousand students and had believed, right up until that second, that no one alive did better than him.

It was better than his.

It was so much better than his that his last clear thought was not fear but something closer to insult.

It caught him across the chest and went up, and Garrick Vail burned in the middle of his own house with a heat that cracked the windows outward into the garden, and the light of it went up the lane and lit the hedges on both sides.

Alex watched until there was nothing worth watching.

“Play with fire,” he said, "and fire is what gets you."

Then he walked out through the front door and left it open behind him.

By nine the next morning the United State of Magic had three bodies and no idea what to do with any of them.

The Minister of Magic, dead in a carriage accident on an empty street at one in the morning.

The chairman of Ferrowgate fell forty-one floors into the dark, leaving behind an empty balcony and an uncorked, irreplaceable vintage.

The elder of the Red Tower, burned to nothing in his own front room.

Three men who had eaten dinner together the night before.

The Knight Commander stood on the steps of the knight hall in a thin drizzle with forty press crystals pointed at him and said the only thing he could say.

"We are treating these as three separate matters until the evidence tells us otherwise. We will find whoever did this. And we will establish whether there is any connection between them."

The story ran for about four hours.

Then it stopped, because something better happened.

A man walked up the steps of the knight hall in the middle of the afternoon briefing, pushed between two officers, and shouted into the press crystals.

"It was me. I killed all three of them."

He was about sixty. He had string holding one boot together and he had not been near soap in some time, and he stood in front of the entire national press with his chin up like a man collecting a prize.

The hall went completely silent.

"I broke the Minister's neck in his carriage," he said. "Then I pushed Silas Kessler off his own balcony. Then I burned Garrick Vail in his front room."

Nobody moved.

"And I'll say this much." The old man smiled with about half his teeth. "That last one was poetry. A man spends his whole life playing with fire, and look how he goes."

A reporter got there first, half-climbing the rail.

"Why? Why did you kill them?"

...

The old man nodded slowly, like it was a fair question and he'd been hoping for it. "Their faces," he said.

"...Sorry?"

"I didn't like their faces." He shrugged. "I've seen all three of them in the papers for years. Every morning, those three faces. I hated them, so I killed them."

Four million people watched that live.

Nobody in the country knew whether to laugh or be sick, and by evening a great many had done both.

Two knights came up the steps fast and took him by both arms, and he did not resist at all, and he was smiling in every picture on the way to the carriage.

The bulletins that night led with the same six words in every paper in the state.

The killer has been caught. Confessed.

Somewhere with no windows, five people sat down at a table.

There had been seven chairs at that table for five hundred years.

Blue. Green. Yellow. Brown.

And in the Red Tower's chair, a man nobody at that table had seen in the flesh for eleven years.

He was very old. He sat down slowly and put both hands on the arms of the chair and did not say anything for a while, and none of the other four filled the silence, because you do not fill a silence that belongs to Ferdinand Ashes.

...

"Last nights ago," he said at last, "three men sat in a room and agreed to move against the White Tower."

The lamps hissed.

"By the following morning, all three were dead. A minister. A chairman. And the elder of my own tower."

Nobody spoke.

"And every person at this table knows exactly who did it."

Still nobody spoke. Brown's master looked at the wood. Green folded her hands. The knights had a confession and a man in a cell, and there was not one soul in that room who believed a word of it, and there was not one soul in that room willing to be the first to say so.

"So." Ferdinand's eyes went round the table. "We move now. All of us, together, and we kill Alexander - because if we do not go to him this week, he will come to us."

The Blue Tower's grand elder cleared his throat.

He was seventy-eight and had spent his whole career not picking sides, and it took him three seconds to find the courage, which for Blue was practically a war cry. "Ferdinand. Forgive me. But everything the White Tower has done, it has done second."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning Black attacked them first. Then Red attacked them first. Both times in front of the state, both times on the record." He spread his hands. "The boy has never once moved against a tower that left him alone. I don't believe he'll move against us."

"You don't believe."

"No. I don't."

"Then let me tell you what I believe.” Ferdinand leaned forward, and the lamplight went up his face. "I believe a man does not take five hundred and fifty buildings by accident,¶ believe he has wanted every colour in this country under one roof since the day he bought a bankrupt school for four hundred million dollars."

He looked at each of them.

"He is not defending himself. He is collecting us. Wake up."

The room did not wake up.

That was the thing Ferdinand read in the four faces in front of him—no outrage, no fear, nothing to work with. Green wouldn't look at him. Yellow was already thinking about the door.

They had all taken Ferrowgate's ten million a day to sit still, and they had all watched what happened to the two towers that didn't.

Nobody at that table wanted a war.

So Ferdinand changed the subject, which is what you do when the room isn't buying.

"Then let's talk about money instead."

Brown's head came up.

"I had word this week," Ferdinand said. "Ferrowgate is about to pass to Regent Group. Not a purchase - a wager Kessler bet his own company against theirs on the outcome of a tower war, and he lost, and he signed it in front of the Minister before either of them died."

“That's—” Yellow's elder started laughing and stopped. "He bet the company?"

"He bet the company. So when the transfer completes, one man will hold Regent Group, Ferrowgate, and five hundred and fifty towers." Ferdinand let that sit exactly long enough. “Or, if the man is no longer with us, five towers could divide all three between them."

The room changed temperature.

It is remarkable how quickly principle finds its coat when there's an inheritance in the room.

"How?" Yellow said.

"It's very easy,” Ferdinand said. "There's a tournament in nine days."

"The Grand Convocation tournament." Brown frowned. "That's a ceremonial thing.

It's been ceremonial for two hundred years."

"It is also the only contest in this country where the stakes are whatever the entrants agree to put up and the result is binding on every tower by law." Ferdinand smiled for the first time. "So we invite him. And we set the wager. If he loses, the White Tower is forfeit. Every branch. Both companies. All of it."

"And if he wins?"

"He won't."

"He might," Blue said.

Nobody answered that.

"Will he even accept?" Green asked. "Why would any man put everything he owns on a table for people who just tried to have him killed?"

"He'll accept."

"You sound very certain."

"I am." Ferdinand sat back into the shadow. "I have a way of making sure of it."

The invitation was on Alex's desk before the end of the following day.

Heavy paper, seven-tower seal, four signatures and one space left blank. Beatrix read it twice standing up and then read the wager line out loud, because she wanted to hear how stupid it sounded in a human voice.

"Join the Grand Convocation tournament. Stake the White Tower, Regent Group, and Ferrowgate against the field."

She put it down.

"They're insane."

Alex picked it up. He read it once. Something moved at the corner of his mouth that was not quite a smile.

"Get me a pen," he said. "I'll agree to it."

"Alex-"

"On one condition." He turned the page over. "They put their towers on the table too.

All five of them."

The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 759

"How dare he."

The grand elder of the Blue Tower was on his feet, which at seventy-eight he did not do often, and the messenger had gone the colour of the floor.

"Three hundred years. Three hundred years this tower has never once been dragged into somebody's private quarrel, and now a boy sends a letter demanding a fight between towers - our towers - as if we were street men rolling dice."

"Sire "

"Who does he think he is?"

“Sire, it isn't a demand." The messenger held the paper out at arm's length. "He sent terms."

...

Blue's hall was cold at that hour, blue glass in every window, three hundred years of careful men in portraits down both walls.

The grand elder snatched the page and started reading it the way you read something you intend to be angry about.

Then he stopped.

He read it again, from the top, slower.

Nobody in that hall said anything, and the silence went on so long that the messenger began to wonder whether he was allowed to leave.

"Yes," the old man said finally. “Tell him yes. Blue agrees.”

It happened four times that day, in four different halls, in almost exactly the same order.

Outrage. Then the paper. Then a silence long enough to be uncomfortable.

Then yes.

Because here is what Alexander's terms actually said, in nine plain lines with no lawyer's language anywhere in them:

If he loses even once — one bout, to any tower leader in the field — he forfeits the White Tower. Every branch of it. All thirty of the originals, all two hundred and fifty taken from Black, all two hundred and seventy-five taken from Red.

And Regent Group.

And Ferrowgate.

Five hundred and fifty-five towers and two companies, on one man losing one fight.

...

They did the arithmetic in four halls at once and every one of them came out the same.

Split five ways, that was more property than any tower in the United State of Magic had accumulated in five centuries of patience. Brown had spent two hundred years trying to afford a second mine. Yellow had never owned more than ninety buildings in its history.

But greed wasn't really what made them sign.

What made them sign was the last line of the letter.

The White Tower would be represented in the ring by Alexander himself.

...

Not a champion. Not a hired blade. Him.

A man with no tower education, no certification, no recorded rank, no registered element, and not one line of tested magic to his name anywhere in the state records

- which the Blue Tower checked twice, and Green checked three times.

Everyone knew the stories from the Dominion of Beasts. Everybody had seen the clip of a commander going down in one move.

That was a strong man. That was not a magician.

And a tower does not send a strong man into a ring against magic.

“He'll bring a body and no art," Yellow's elder said. “We have five contracted masters on retainer who could end that in nine seconds."

Blue said nothing, which was Blue's way of agreeing.

All five signed.

Eight days.

That was the date the Grand Convocation gave them, and from the hour it was announced the whole country stopped talking about dead ministers.

They built the ring in the old arena on the north side of New Avalon, a grey stone bowl that had held nothing but ceremonies for two hundred years — scaffolding up the outer wall inside two days, banners going along the top rail in six colours, carpenters working under lamps all night because the seating had rotted sometime during the last century and nobody had noticed.

Tickets went on sale at noon on the third day.

They were gone by two.

By the fourth day people were sleeping in the streets around the arena for the returns, and a family on the east side sold a flying car to buy four seats in the upper ring, and were photographed doing it, and did not look at all embarrassed.

...

Meanwhile, on the fourth floor of Regent Group, Alexander sat in the dark in front of a pane of light with his chin on his hand and read.

Beatrix came in with a folder she immediately forgot about.

The screen in front of him was scrolling — formulas, diagrams, annotations in a hand that was not a hand, faster than a person could follow, the whole wall of it moving.

She had stopped asking what it was some weeks ago.

"You've seen the papers."

"No."

"You're the only story in the country." She sat down on the edge of the desk. "Every crystal in the state is running the same line. The Grand Convocation tournament. One man, five towers, and on the table is the White Tower, this company, and Ferrowgate."

"That's accurate."

"It's insane is what it is."

...

"Are you worried we're going to lose?"

Beatrix looked at the screen for a while before she answered.

"No," she said. "That's the part that bothers me."

"Go on."

"You've been buying magic books. Every tower, every colour, public texts and private collections and whole libraries out of dead men's houses." She nodded at the moving wall of light. "And then you had that thing read all of them. Not to learn them. To find where they break."

"Yes."

"So they're going to walk into a ring in front of the whole country and fight a man who has read their homework." She shook her head slowly. "I don't know whether to be frightened or to laugh. I honestly don't know if they're stupid enough to go through with it."

"They signed on Tuesday."

"Then it's stupid enough."

She picked at the corner of the desk.

"Can I ask you something I've wanted to ask for a long time?"

"You can ask."

"How did you get those books?" She looked up. "Not the school primers -the real ones. Tower formula is sealed. Blue hasn't let a page out of its archive since before my grandfather was born. You can't buy that. There isn't a shop."

Alex laughed.

"Beatrix. Every man has a price."

"That's not an answer."

"It's the whole answer." He sat back. "Blue has nine hundred students. Some of them have sick mothers. Some of them have debts. Some of them just want a house one day, and a copy of one chapter is worth four years salary to a boy who's been told he'll make elder at fifty if he's patient." He shrugged. "I never had to steal anything. I just made an offer and waited."

Beatrix was quiet.

"Just that?"

"Just that and it works to all colors."

"All right." She folded her arms. "Then tell me the plan. Not the terms - the plan.

What are you actually going to do in that ring?"

"I'm going to beat each of them with their own magic."

She blinked. "Say that again."

"Blue's man goes down to Blue magic. Green's goes down to Green. Yellow, Brown,

Red - same." Alex turned the pane of light around so she could see it. "Not my art.

Theirs. Done properly."

"Why? You could "

"Because if I beat them with something they've never seen, they'll spend the rest of their lives telling each othert was a thick" He tapped the glass once. "If I beat them with the thing they've practised since they were eleven years old, there's nothing left to say. They'know. In front of everybody, they'll know."

Beatrix sat with that.

"You're not trying to win," she said.

"I'm trying to end the argument."

Eight days went faster than anybody wanted them to.

The morning of the tournament came up hot and cloudless, and by seven there were people on every roof within half a mile of the arena.

The streets were closed by eight. The state broadcaster had nine crystals in the bowl and one on a rooftop, and a betting house had set up three tables in the arena's own outer hall, under a banner as long as a barge.

That was where Beatrix went first, before she went to her seat.

...

The head of the Grand Convocation was a fat cheerful man who had run the books on every tournament for thirty years, and he came out personally when they told him who was standing at the table.

"Chairwoman Hargrove. This is an honour."

"I'm told you open betting."

"The best book in the United State of Magic, madam. Always have." He beamed.

"Every match, every bout, every leader. Would you like to see the board?"

"No."

"...No?"

"I already know what I'm putting on."

She took her gloves off and set them on the table, which is what Beatrix Hargrove does before she does something expensive.

"Regent Group," she said. "The White Tower and every branch it holds. Ferrowgate, on transfer. Everything under my name and everything under his."

The cheerful man stopped being cheerful.

"Madam."

"All of it. On Alexander to win."

"You're — forgive me. You want to stake the entire holdings of both companies and five hundred and fifty-five towers."

"Yes."

"On one man."

"On that man."

Behind her the hall was filling up and getting louder, and somebody in the crowd had already started shouting odds, and a boy was selling paper fans with five tower colours on them, four for a dollar.

Beatrix did the arithmetic one more time in her head, the way she had every night for eight days.

If he lost, it was all gone anyway. Every building, both companies, her own name on the paperwork of the largest collapse in the country's history. There was no version of losing where she kept anything.

So there was nothing to protect.

And if he won—if he won, she didn't just keep it. She doubled it.

She picked her gloves back up.

"Write it," she said.

She didn't tell the man at the table the last part, because it wasn't his business.

It hadn't been her idea.

The chairman had told her to do it four days ago, in one sentence, without looking up from his desk.

The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 760

By the morning of the tournament, every person in the United State of Magic understood the terms, and they understood them in the simplest possible way.

One man against five.

Alexander of the White Tower would fight the best magician each remaining tower could put in the ring — Blue, Green, Yellow, Brown, Red — and if he lost a single bout to a single one of them, he lost everything.

Regent Group, the fastest-growing company in the country. Ferrowgate, as big as Regent Group, on transfer. Five hundred and fifty-five towers.

All of it handed to whoever put him down.

And in exchange, every tower that lost to him handed over its own.

...

The five of them had met the night before to settle the order, in a room with no windows and seven chairs.

"Blue first," Brown's master said. "If Blue wins, it ends there and the rest of us never have to walk into that ring at all."

"And if Blue loses?"

Nobody enjoyed the silence that followed.

“Then he takes Blue,” Green said quietly. “Every branch of it. And we go again with Yellow, and if Yellow falls he takes Yellow, and so on down the line until somebody finally puts him on the floor."

"Which one of us does that?"

"Any of us. That's the point." Brown spread his hands. “He has to win five times. We only have to win once. One bout, out of five. And the instant that happens, the whole thing reverses — he gives back every tower he's taken tonight, and the White Tower and both companies get split between the five of us."

It was, on paper, an extremely comfortable arrangement.

Then Yorick spoke, and the order changed.

"No," he said. "I go first."

Heads came round.

"Grandmaster-"

"He killed my son. I afraid if blue go first, I will have nothing left from him."

The meeting room turned silence.

"Think about what we are actually building here." The old man put a finger on the table.

"I go in first, if I win, we win and if I do not win. I will go in to empty him. I will take everything he has — every reserve, every trick, every drop of whatever he's using and I will keep taking it until he is standing there on nothing."

"And then?"

"Then he doesn't rest.” Yorick smiled. "The next man walks straight out. And the one after that. No breaks, no water, no doctor. Five of the finest magicians in this country, one after another, into a man who's already finished."

Blue sat back slowly.

"A marathon."

“A marathon,” Yorick agreed. "And nobody in the history of magic has ever won one of those."

“He's alone, while the five of us rank one to five among the greatest magicians of all time."

That was the part the whole country agreed on, and it wasn't even a matter of opinion.

Every child in the United State of Magic learns it in their first year, in one sentence, before they learn anything else: a magician is a bucket, and a fight empties the bucket.

Power is finite. Reserves run out. That is the entire architecture of five hundred years of tower duelling, and it has never once been wrong.

One man cannot fight five grandmasters in a row.

The strategy leaked within a day, the way everything leaks, and after that there was no argument left anywhere in the country.

Alexander was going to lose.

The only thing anybody debated in the taverns that night was which of the five would be the one to do it.

...

The arena filled from six in the morning.

Twenty thousand people in a grey stone bowl that hadn't held a crowd in two hundred years, sitting shoulder to shoulder on new timber that still smelled of sawdust and pitch.

Vendors in the aisles. Six colours of paper fan waving in every direction.

The four big screens along the rim lit up at half past seven and the noise that went up nearly took the banners off the rail.

Millions more watched from home.

"Welcome," the master of ceremonies bellowed, "to the Grand Convocation!"

...

The first ten bouts were the usual thing - tower against tower, master level, the traditional card that had run every year for two centuries.

They were good fights. On any other day people would have talked about them for a month.

Today nobody could sit still through them.

Four hours went by. The sun came up over the eastern rim and the stone started giving off heat, and the crowd went through its water and its patience, and then finally, a little after noon, the screens went dark and came back with one name on them.

"From the White Tower," the master of ceremonies called. "Grandmaster Alexander!"

The sound in that bowl came up like weather.

Alex walked out to the centre of the sand on his own. No robe. No staff. Coat off, sleeves down, plain black gloves.

Twenty thousand people looked at him and saw a young man with nothing in his hands.

"And his opponent!"

The MC let it hang.

"From the Red Tower - Grandmaster Yorick! Ranked third among all living magicians of the United State!"

The old man did not walk out.

He came over the rim of the arena forty feet above the sand and floated there, robes moving in a wind that was not blowing, and the crowd made a sound they had not made for any of the last ten fights.

Then he came down to the sand and looked at Alexander, and he smiled like a man greeting an old acquaintance at a wedding.

"Well," Yorick said. "We meet again, boy."

Alex looked up at the face he had only ever seen once — in a column of cold light, in a wedding hall in Prussia, over a dead duke's body.

Ragnar's grandfather.

"I'm going to ask you one question," Alex said, "and then we can start."

"Ask."

"The house in the Dominion of Beasts." His voice did not change at all. "Did you kill my people?"

The old man's smile widened slightly, as though the question pleased him.

"Me? No." He shook his head. "I didn't touch them. I sent twenty of mine to find you and kill everyone at that address."

He shrugged one shoulder.

"They were unlucky, that's all. You weren't home."

...

Twenty thousand people watched a man in black gloves stand very still in the middle of a lot of sand.

"You will die here," Alex said.

Yorick laughed out loud.

"You?" He looked Alex up and down, delighted. "The man from Prussia You've been in this country what

[wo? hd wager, everything ↑

a year? Two own you picked up your first formula about nine months ago."

Nobody in that arena understood what Prussia had to do with anything.

"And you think," Yorick said, "that you're going to fight me."

The MC lifted his arm to call the start.

He never got the word out.

Yorick's hands were already up.

What he cast was not an opening. It was a sixth-rank working, the highest thing any living Red magician could hold.

The sky over the arena went black.

Not clouded. Black, from rim to rim, in under two seconds, and twenty thousand people were suddenly sitting in the dark at midday - and then the dark opened, and the fire came out of it.

Meteors. Dozens of them, each one bigger than a carriage, burning white at the head and dragging long orange tails, falling in a spread that covered the entire floor of the arena.

Somebody in the front row started screaming.

Alex turned his right hand palm up.

...

He did not run. He did not shield. He stood in the open with his hand raised as if he were checking for rain.

Behind his eyes, Gaia finished reading the spell.

A formula unfolded in the air above his palm- enormous, layered, turning slowly, more lines in it than any diagram in any tower library in

—

the country and it was not a Red formula and it was not a white one and about four hundred magicians in that arena stood up at the same time because none of them recognised a single character of it.

Alex pushed mana into it.

The meteors came apart.

Not shattered. Not extinguished.

Undone.

Every one of them, all at once, in the same instant, simply stopped being fire and went back to being nothing - the burning heads thinned into clear air, the tails dissolved behind them, and the blackness over the arena peeled away from the edges thward until the sky above the bowl was blue again and the sun was out and there was not one mark anywhere on the sand.

Twenty thousand people sat in complete silence.

"What," Yorick said, "are you doing?"

Here is what he was doing, and there was not one person in the United State of

Magic equipped to guess it.

This country knows magic. Only magic. Five hundred years of it, refined to a mirror finish, and not one person in it has ever had to consider that there might be another way to move power around.

Prussia has the highest technology in the world.

Xia has the deepest cultivation.

Alexander had both, and neither of them was a secret to him.

Gaia did not block a spell. Gaia read it — took the structure apart while it was still in the air, found the theory of energy underneath it, and wrote the inverse.

And because Alex could draw ambient mana the way a cultivator draws breath, he had the power to run that inverse the instant it was written.

Any spell. Any colour. Any rank.

As long as he could discern its structure, he could unravel it.

Gaia had been trained on the vast library of texts Alex had gathered, with every anti-reverse magic countermeasure already cataloged in its database.

That was what the gloves were for. Thin black leather, unremarkable, connected to the Gaia.

"Again," Yorick said.

He launched a fireball: third circle, fast, flat, and searing enough to decapitate a man.

Alex merely lifted a hand, applying the inverse frequency of its flame matrix.

Four feet out, the spell fractured, unraveling into nothing like a snuffed flame. "Again."

Lance of flame. Undone.

Ring of fire around Alex's feet, the old trick, the one that ends duels. It never finished forming.

A rain of embers. A pillar. The compressed lance that had killed a Brown Tower master in front of nine hundred witnesses in 1502.

Every single one of them arrived, reached two metres, and dissolved into clean warm air that drifted up over the sand and was gone.

...

Yorick stopped.

He stood in the middle of the arena with his hands out and nothing coming off them, sixty years an elder, third-ranked magician alive, and he could not make the air do one single thing it was told.

Behind him, in the stands, twenty thousand people had gone from silence to a low, rising sound that was not quite a cheer.

At the betting tables in the outer hall, a fat cheerful man was reading the same slip over and over and had begun, very quietly, to sweat.

"This isn't possible," Yorick said.

"It's extremely possible." Alex rolled his shoulders. “You are just stupid."

"What are you?"

Alex started walking toward him.

"Here's where we are," he said. "You can't cast. Not one thing, not for the rest of this fight."

Yorick backed up a step.

“So since the magic isn't working out,” Alex said, “how do you feel about a street fight?"

The old man threw his hands up on instinct — something huge, something final, the best thing left in him.

It came apart before it had a shape.

And Alexander closed the last four feet and hit him in the face.

The Grand Convocation had never seen anything like it, because there was nothing to see.

No light. No wards. No grand exchange of art between two masters that the commentators could talk about for a decade.

Just a young man walking a very old one backward across forty feet of sand, hitting him.

Yorick got his hands up to cast. The working died in his fingers and Alex hit him again, and his head went sideways, and blood came out of his nose and went down into his beard.

He tried once more. Died. Alex hit him again.

He was eighty-one years old and he had not been struck by another human being since he was a child, and he had spent sixty years in a country where nobody ever got close enough to try.

Alexander was much younger and moved like something built for it.

The old man went down on one knee, then both, then onto his side in the sand with one arm up over his face.

Straddling his chest, Alex drove fist after fist into the man's face. For the first time in the history of the Great Magic Tournament, an archmage was winning a duel with raw, bare knuckles.