The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 761

Nobody in that arena had a word for what they were watching.

Twenty thousand people had come to see two grandmasters throw five hundred years of art at each other.

What they were looking at instead was an old man on his side in the sand with his arm over his face, and a young man crouched on top of him, working.

"He can't cast," somebody in the fourth row kept saying, to nobody. "That's Yorick. That's the third-ranked magician alive. Why can't he cast?"

Up in the commentary box, a man who had called this tournament for nineteen years had stopped speaking entirely.

Alex hit him once more and Yorick stopped trying to get his hands up.

The referee came over the rail at a dead run, robes hiked up in both fists, and two stewards came after him, and all three of them arrived at once and none of them touched Alexander.

"Enough. Enough - hold!" The referee got between them, breathing hard, and put one hand out at Alex without quite making contact. "The bout is concluded."

He turned to the arena and lifted his arm, and his voice cracked halfway through it. "Winner - Grandmaster Alexander, of the White Tower!"

Then the part that mattered.

"By the terms of the wager, the Red Tower and all its remaining holdings pass to the White Tower."

Twenty-five buildings, the last twenty-five Red had left in the world, gone in under four minutes in front of the whole country.

Nobody cheered. Nobody had worked out yet what they were supposed to feel.

...

Blue came out second, and Blue came out angry.

Their archmage was a tall grey man named Corwen who had not lost a public bout in thirty-one years, and he walked to his mark and rolled his sleeves and looked across the sand with open contempt.

"That was Red's problem," he said. “Fire is loud. Fire is arrogant. It announces itself and it burns out."

"And water?"

"Water is patient." Corwen raised both hands, and every drop of moisture in that arena — the sweat on twenty thousand people, the damp in the sand, the water in the vendors' barrels — came out of where it was and into the air above him. "You cannot burn water. You cannot cut it. And you certainly cannot punch it, boy."

Alex almost smiled.

"Let's find out."

...

What came across that arena was a wall of water forty feet high with a spine of pressure inside it that could take the front off a building.

It reached two metres.

The formula opened over Alex's palm — that same impossible lattice, turning, unreadable — and the wave stopped being a wave. It hung for half a second as forty feet of undirected water with nothing holding it, and then it came down flat on the sand and soaked in.

"Again," Corwen said with pure confuse.

Water lances. Undone.

A binding prison, the Blue speciality, the one that ends fights without hurting anybody. It never closed.

Then a thing he had never once used in public, that took eleven seconds to build and made the air taste like metal, and it came apart eight feet from Alexander's chest and fell as ordinary rain across the middle of the arena.

Corwen stood in it, soaked to the skin, hands still up.

"You cannot punch water," Alex agreed, walking in.

Then he punched Corwen.

...

The referee's second run onto the sand was faster than his first.

"Hold. Hold-"

"Winner, Grandmaster Alexander. The Blue Tower and all its holdings pass to the White Tower."

Three hundred years of never picking a side, and Blue had picked one at last, and it had lasted ninety seconds.

Yellow came third because Yellow insisted on coming third.

Their archmage was younger than the others and faster than all of them, and he opened with chain-lightning off both hands before the referee had finished stepping back — six strikes in under two seconds, from six angles, the technique that had made Yellow the tower everyone hired when they wanted something done quickly.

All six arrived.

All six dissolved.

He got four steps closer and tried it at contact range, which was brave, and the lightning died in his fingers with a sound like a wet match.

Alex took his wrist, turned it, and put him face-first into the sand.

"Winner, Grandmaster Alexander. The Yellow Tower and all its holdings—”

Nobody heard the rest. The noise had started by then.

Brown lasted longer, because Brown fought the ground instead of the man.

Her name was Halda and she had spent forty years in mines, and she brought the floor of the arena up into a standing giant of packed stone twenty feet tall and walked it forward.

That was clever. That was, genuinely, the best idea anybody had all day — because the stone was not a spell arriving at Alexander. The stone was already there.

It got within two metres.

The working holding it together came apart, and twenty feet of shaped rock forgot it had a shape and fell into a heap that buried Alex to the knees.

He walked out of it.

"Good," he said, pulling his boot free. "That was actually good."

She was still speaking when he reached her and smashed a fist into her nose. She dropped cold, like a boxer catching a knockout punch.

Only this wasn't a boxing match; it was a magic duel.

It felt totally wrong....

Green went last of the five, and Green did not even bother with the theatre.

Their archmage was a heavy quiet woman who had spent her life in healing houses, and she looked across the sand for a long moment before she raised her hands at all.

"You beat four in eleven minutes," she said.

"Yes."

"And you're not tired."

"No. Throwing hands with an old man and an old lady barely even warmed me up."

A pounding headache was already brewing behind the archmage's temples. The entire plan had been to drain his mana, not his stamina and this brute looked ready to drop fifty more people without breaking a sweat.

"Then I'd like it noted," the archmage muttered, "that I knew this was pointless before we even started."

She threw everything she had anyway, because her tower's holdings were on the table, and the thorn-work and the blood-binds and the growth-curse all arrived and all dissolved, and she took one punch and sat down on the sand and stayed there. Tears spilled down her cheeks. It was, without question, the most humiliating moment of her life.

"Winner, Grandmaster Alexander. The Green Tower and all its holdings pass to the White Tower."

...

The five of them stood together at the edge of the sand afterward, and something happened in that group that had not happened between those five towers in five hundred years.

They agreed on something instantly, without discussing it.

"Time for Plan B," Corwen said, his jaw tightening.

"All of them?"

"Ten each. Every master-rank we brought with us. Now. We cannot lose here."

Yorick was on his feet by then, holding a cloth to his face, and he did not argue. Nobody argued. Five archmages who had spent their entire careers refusing to share a corridor sent runners into five different staging rooms at the same time. Fifty magicians came out onto that sand.

The referee tried. To his lasting credit, he actually tried.

"This is — gentlemen, there is no provision in the rules for—"

"There is no provision against it either," Corwen said. "Read your own book. The wager names the tower, not the number. And we don't care. We want him die!"

The referee read his own book.

He went very pale, and he stepped back off the sand.

Fifty of the finest magicians in the United State of Magic spread out in a ring around one man in black gloves, in daylight, in front of twenty thousand people and every crystal in the country.

"Whenever you're ready," Alex said.

They went together.

Fifty workings, from every direction at once, five colours in the air at the same instant — fire from one arc, water from another, stone coming up out of the floor, lightning, thorn, rot, binding-light, things that had names only in private books.

It was, without any argument, the largest coordinated casting anybody in that country had witnessed in two hundred years.

Alexander lifted both hands.

The formula that opened above him was not one lattice. It was fifty, layered into each other, turning at different speeds, so large it threw a shadow across the sand - and

—

every magician in that arena who had stood up earlier now sat down, because they could not follow even one line of it.

Everything arrived.

Nothing landed.

The whole ring went out at once-fifty workings unmade in the same half-second, dissolving into clean air that rolled outward across the sand and lifted the dust in a slow ring all the way to the arena wall.

And then Alexander walked into them.

He did not use magic on a single one. He did not have to. Every man who got a working started had it die in his hands, and then a young man in a plain coat arrived and put him down, and moved on.

It took four minutes.

At the end of it there were fifty master-rank magicians lying on the sand of the

Grand Convocation in various states of consciousness, and one man standing in the middle with his sleeves rolled and blood on his knuckles that was not his.

...

The bowl came apart.

It did not start as a cheer. It started somewhere in the upper ring as a single sound from a single person and it spread down through twenty thousand people in about four seconds, and then the noise hit the stone walls and came back and doubled itself.

They were on their feet. All of them. The ones who had bet against him, the ones who had spent all week explaining to their families exactly how the marathon strategy worked, the ones who had said in taverns that a bucket empties.

Five towers. Fifty masters. One afternoon.

He had never once looked tired.

In the outer hall, a fat cheerful man sat down on a crate behind his own betting table and put his head in his hands, and Beatrix Hargrove stood. in the doorway of that half and did not say a word, because there was nothing to say that the slip in her hand was not already saying for her.

...

Down on the sand, the master of ceremonies was trying to read the final terms into a noise that would not stop.

"—the Red Tower, the Blue Tower, the Yellow Tower, the Brown Tower and the

Green Tower, and all holdings thereof, pass in full to the White Tower—" Nobody heard him.

They had stopped caring about the paperwork some minutes ago, because every person in that arena had understood the same thing at the same moment, and it was much bigger than five deeds.

For five hundred years, magic had a shape. Seven colours, seven towers, a ladder you climbed from eleven years old, and a ceiling nobody argued with.

That had ended at about two o'clock in the afternoon, in front of them, while they were sitting down.

Whatever came next, it was going to be something else entirely.

The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 762

The country did not finish processing it that day. It took about a week.

One man had walked out of the Grand Convocation as the winner, and the country slowly worked out what the word winner actually meant in this case - because the wager had not been for money, and it had not been for pride.

Every tower in the United State of Magic now belonged to Alexander.

It had never happened. Not once in five hundred years, not in the founding, not in any of the six wars the recording glass had settled.

Seven colours. Seven traditions. Seven separate five-century institutions that had spent their entire existence refusing to sit at the same table for longer than an afternoon.

All of them, now, under one name.

And the name was White.

There was one other thing that came out of that afternoon, and for a lot of people it was the more interesting story.

Beatrix Hargrove had walked into the betting hall before the first bout and put Regent Group, Ferrowgate, and every White Tower branch on the table.

The book had been paying twenty to one.

By the time the sun went down, every house in the country owed them, and the settlements took nine days to clear, and the number at the end of it was large enough that three newspapers printed it wrong because their editors assumed the figure had a typing error in it.

It was, and remains, the single largest win in the recorded history of the United State of Magic.

Here is what nobody outside the country understands about the towers.

Every state in the union has a governor. Every state has its own courts, its own roads, its own taxes. On paper, the towers have no political power whatsoever.

In practice, the tower in state is the church, the university, the hospital, the licensing board and the moral authority, all in one building, and it has been all of those things since before the state had a name.

A governor who quarrels with his tower does not finish his term.

So when one man defeated five archmages and then fifty master-rank magicians in a single afternoon, and walked out holding all seven colours, the political arithmetic did not need to be spoken out loud.

Nobody voted. Nobody signed anything.

Everybody simply understood, that week, who the first man in the United State of Magic now was.

Alexander White.

...

Which is why what he did next made no sense to anyone.

They expected a parade. They expected interviews, a new title, a residence, a portrait commissioned for the hall of the Convocation. There was a firm in New Avalon that had already drafted three versions of a coronation-style investiture ceremony on the assumption that somebody would eventually ask for one.

Instead, Alexander announced that he was going to study.

...

"Study what?" the reporter asked.

"Magic."

"Grandmaster, you just defeated fifty master-rank magicians."

"Then this is a good time to find out what they know."

He kept every grandmaster in post. Blue's man kept running Blue. Green's matriarch kept running Green. Brown stayed in her mountain, Yellow stayed in its halls, and the Red survivors kept their seats.

But Yorick was gone. No one knew where he was.

The only thing that changed was the sign over the door.

Every tower in the country was repainted white, and under the white, in small neat letters, each one kept its colour. White Tower — Blue Branch. White Tower - Green Branch.

They taught exactly what they had always taught. They just taught it under one roof now.

And then the other changes started, and those were the ones people actually noticed.

Scholarships, first. Then the entrance requirements - the family letters, the sponsor signatures, the fees that had quietly kept the poor out of seven towers for five hundred years — all of it gone inside a month.

"Teaching is open to every child in this country," Alex said, once, when somebody asked. “That's it. That's the whole policy. If they show up, we teach them."

Half the elders in the union hated it.

The other half noticed that the money paying for all of it came out of Alexander's own accounts, every month, without anybody having to ask twice- and discovered they could live with their objections.

Then he disappeared for a month.

People said he was in the archives. That was the rumour that made sense: seven towers, seven vaults, five hundred years of sealed formula in each of them, and the only man in history with the keys to all seven at once.

It was true, and it was not the whole truth.

Because other people said they had seen him somewhere else entirely — out east, past the Line, in the Dominion of Beasts.

In the beast markets, of all places. Day after day, week after week, moving from market to market, state to state, stopping at every stall and every cage.

Not buying. Touching.

Just walking down the rows, laying one gloved hand on each animal for a second or two, and moving on.

Nobody could work out what he was doing, and nobody ever asked him.

Half a year later.

The most sacred tower in the United State of Magic is the oldest one, and it does not belong to a colour. It stands where the union was founded, and its lowest chamber has a formation cut into the floor that predates every tower in the country. Alexander stood in the middle of it at night with lamps burning in a ring around the walls.

And in front of him sat a fox.

It was very old and it was not large, and it looked at him the way something looks at you when it has been looking at people for longer than your civilisation.

"Ten thousand," Alex said. "I've collected ten thousand beast skills. Every kind in the Dominion, and every kind past it."

The fox said nothing.

"That was the price. So now you show me the way to the empire."

...

The fox blinked slowly.

"I knew. You already opened your lost memory," it said. "Months ago. You used magic to go back into the part of your childhood you couldn't reach, and you found what was in it."

"Yes."

“Then you already know the truth of this world.” Its tail moved once across the stone. "So why are you asking me?"

"Because I want to be sure," Alex said.

...

He had gone looking for it in the spring, and it had taken Gaia eleven days.

There was a piece of his own life he had never been able to hold. Everything before about seven years old came back as pressure behind the eyes and then nothing — and every time he pushed at it, the headache arrived and the memory did not.

So he had asked her to read every tower's work on the mind, all seven colours at once, and find him a formula that could open a door his own head was holding shut. Gaia found one. He used it once, and afterward he sat down on the floor for a long time.

...

"Then do it again," the fox said. "Here, in this formation. That memory is the road. It is the only road there has ever been, and it goes back to the empire of the Earth."

Alex looked at the pattern cut into the floor around him.

Then he sat down in the middle of it, crossed his legs, and cast.

The chamber went away.

He was seven years old.

He was in a seat too big for him, with a window on his left full of white cloud, and the whole cabin smelled of the leather cleaner they used on the royal aircraft.

"Alexander."

His mother leaned across and tucked his collar down. She was very beautiful and she wore no jewellery except one thing at her neck, and she was smiling at him.

"We'll be at your father's castle soon. Have you missed him?"

"I don't know," Alexander said.

The aircraft came apart.

There was a sound under the floor like a door being kicked in, and then the world tipped, and the window on his left stopped being cloud and became ground, turning. People were screaming in the front of the cabin. Something was on fire behind them.

His mother did not scream.

She got out of her seat in a falling aircraft, took the necklace off her own neck, and put it over his head with both hands.

Then she kissed him on the forehead and held his face for one second.

"If I die," she said, "this will look after you. It will teach you everything you need to become a good king."

She carried him down the aisle to the safety station at the rear, and she put him in it herself, and she closed it.

That is the last thing he has of her. A woman's hands on the outside of a hatch, getting smaller.

Then the ground.

Alexander went into the frame head-first and opened his scalp, and the last of that day is red and moving and full of strangers' hands.

The hospital came in pieces after that. Ceiling tiles. A light. Voices above him that did not know he could hear.

"The Tenth Prince. He's the only one."

"Out of how many?"

"All of them. Terrorists took the aircraft down over the northern range -the Queen, the entire guard, Lord Keaton and his daughter. Nobody else came out of it."

A pause.

"Is the prince going to survive?"

He never heard the answer.

Because the necklace against his chest began, very quietly, to shine.

Nobody in that room saw it. The light did not leave his hospital gown. It went the other way — inward - and a seven-year-old boy's soul came away from a broken body like a hand slipping out of a glove, and fell.

Fell a long way.

Into a world with five countries in it.

...

On a table in a hospital on Earth, the body stayed where it was.

Heart beating. Lungs working. Eyes open.

Nothing behind them at all.

"The head trauma was severe," the doctor said, three days later, to people who outranked him enormously and were not going to like it.'m sorry. There's no recovery from this. He cant speak, he doesnt respond, he doesn't appear to think. He is "

He chose the kindest word he had, which was not very kind.

"He's having mental disability now. He'll be a child for the rest of his life. It's a terrible thing for the Tenth Prince."

That night, after the corridor emptied, a man came into the room.

He stood over the bed for a while, looking down at a boy with empty eyes, and then he leaned in close enough that his breath moved the boy's hair.

"Well," he said. "Look at you."

He put one finger on the edge of the pillow.

"You've gone and turned into an idiot. That's lucky, because if you hadn't, you'd already be dead." He straightened his cuff. "So do that. Be an idiot. Your whole life, every day, and you might get to keep it."

Then he left, and the door closed, and nobody ever wrote his name down.

In the chamber under the sacred tower, Alexander opened his eyes.

He knew what the necklace was now. Not an heirloom. Not a keepsake.

A mystical item. A world folded up small — five countries, a whole history, a place to put a boy who was going to need to learn how to rule and had just lost everyone who could have taught him.

His mother had not given him a memento in a falling aircraft.

She had given him a school.

"Who are you," Alex said to the old fox, "really?"

"I am the guardian of this world," the fox said. "This small, folded world. I have been here since before it had anybody in it."

"And the beasts? The ten thousand?"

“A price is a price.” Something that was almost humour moved in its face. “You paid it. So now I keep my side."

It stood up on four small feet.

"You have taken five crowns here.

Every country in this world answers to you now, and that was the condition, and it has been met." The lamps around the walls began to go out, one after another, from the far end it is time you went back to your body. About thirteen years already passed since."

...

Alex felt himself lifted.

Not by hands. By something underneath him, and then he was moving through a long dark pull with no walls, and everything he had built over fourteen years — the drones, the towers, Beatrix, Feby, Sofina, Sophia, Julia — came loose and went past him and away.

His thinking got quieter, and quieter.

The last thing he had was a voice, very small, somewhere far above.

"Nobody has ever passed this world the way you passed it. Not one. Be proud of that."

A pause.

"Goodbye, son of Selena."

It was raining.

That was the first thing — cold rain on the back of his neck, and wet gravel under him, and his own hands moving in front of his face.

They were holding a stone. He was turning it over and over on the ground, in a puddle, in the rain, the way a small child plays.

He did not know why his hands were doing that.

Then someone hit him across the face hard enough to knock him sideways.

"Are you listening to me?"

A young woman stood over him with her hair stuck to her cheek and her whole body shaking with temper.

"I am the daughter of Duke Havenworth. This marriage was arranged before either of us was born, and I have said it to my father, and I will say it to you." She was almost crying with the anger of it do not want this. I will not marry an domot Wall notverty an idiot. I don't care that he's the Tenth Prince of the Empire."

Somebody came running across the gravel.

A young woman in a plain nanny's coat went down on her knees in the wet beside him and got her arms around his shoulders.

And the body in her arms burst into tears.

"Nanny," he heard himself sobbing, "Nanny, it hurts, it hurts—”

"Look at him." Miss Havenworth's voice went up. "Twenty years old. Twenty. And he sits in the rain playing with stones and crying like a five-year-old. Enough. I have had enough of this."

"Miss Havenworth, please.” The nanny did not let go of him. “Please stop humiliating him. He can't help it. He's already pitiful enough."

"He's pitiful? I'm the one being married to him." She threw her hands out. "Do you know what it's like to walk through the palace beside that? Do you know what people say? He can't even use a toilet by himself!"

The nanny closed her eyes.

And in her arms, the crying stopped.

It stopped all at once, mid-breath, the way a tap closes.

He lifted his head.

Behind it a pair of eyes that had never once looked at anything, focusing, hardening, coming to a point.

Alexander looked up through the rain at the daughter of Duke Havenworth.

And he was back to Earth.

The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 763

"Today. It ends today. All my misery!"

Her name was Clarissa Havenworth, and she stood in the rain on the gravel of a prince's forecourt with a rolled paper in one hand and her father's name in her mouth.

"I have said it for four years and nobody listens. I will not marry this idiot. I don't care what was signed before either of us was born."

She turned and called over her shoulder, and her voice went soft and sweet in a way it had not been a second earlier.

"Honey. Be a darling and get me his thumbprint."

The man who came across the gravel took his time about it.

Good coat. Good boots. The kind of young man who has never once been told no by anybody whose opinion he valued, and he was already smiling before he got there.

He took a small knife out of his pocket and opened it with his thumbnail.

Then he looked past Alexander, at the young woman kneeling in the wet beside him with both arms around his shoulders.

"Get the nanny out of the way."

Two of Clarissa's people pulled Felicia off him.

She did not go quietly. She got one hand back on his sleeve and had it taken off again, and somebody put a palm over her mouth, and she watched the rest of it from four feet away with her heels dragging in the gravel.

Alexander sat in the puddle and shook.

He let himself shake. It was the first real choice he had made on Earth in fourteen years.

'They think you are an idiot. Good. Stay one, until you know the shape of this place.'

So the body did what the body had done for fourteen years. It trembled. It made a small animal sound. It did not fight at all.

...

The man took Alexander's wrist, turned the hand palm up, and drew the knife across the pad of his thumb.

It hurt more than it should have.

He pressed the thumb down onto the paper himself, rolled it, and held the sheet up to the rain to check the print had taken.

"There we are."

...

Clarissa snatched it out of his hand and read it twice and laughed out loud, right there in the rain, with her head back.

“It's over. Finally! It's over." She grabbed the man's arm with both hands. “Louise — we can marry now. My father has no argument left. He has to accept it."

"Of course he does, my dear."

Louise folded the little knife and put it back in his pocket, and neither of them looked down again at the young man sitting in the puddle, holding his own hand, crying.

They were still laughing when they got into the car.

Felicia got to Alex the second they let her go.

"Come on. Come on, up. Let's get you inside." She had his hand in both of hers, pressing her sleeve against the thumb. "It's all right. It's not deep. I'll clean it in our room."

Alexander let her pull him up.

He looked at her properly for the first time.

She was young. Nineteen, maybe twenty — barely older than the body he was standing in. Round face, wet hair stuck to her forehead, mud all up one side of her skirt from being dragged.

Somewhere at the back of this skull, in the part that had been running the show for fourteen years, there was one soft word for this person.

Nanny.

But he knew her name. It came up like a stone out of water.

Felicia.

His own castle.

That was the thing he had to keep repeating to himself as she brought him in through a side door.

There was dust along the window ledges thick enough to write in. The runner in the corridor had a boot-shaped stain on it that had been there long enough to go brown at the edges.

Two lamps out of five were dead, and nobody had replaced them, and by the look of the sconces nobody had considered it.

A prince's residence. The Tenth Prince's residence.

Nobody had cleaned it in years, because nobody in it thought there was anyone here who would notice.

He smelled the dining room before he reached it.

Roast. Real roast, and bread, and something with wine in it, and under all of that the particular warm noise of people enjoying themselves.

Alexander came into the doorway and stopped.

The long table was laid the way it would be laid for a visiting duke. Twelve places. Silver out. A bird in the middle big enough for a holiday.

The people sitting at it were the head butler, two housekeepers, and six of the staff, and every one of them was laughing at something one of them had just said.

Alexander walked in.

He was out of Felicia's reach before she understood he had moved - straight down the side of the table at an unhurried idiot's shuffle, and he put his hand into the dish nearest to him and took a piece of meat out of it with his fingers.

The head butler came out of his chair and threw a bottle at his head.

It missed. It hit the table, went over, and rolled the length of it spilling wine onto the cloth, and the laughing stopped.

"Get this animal out of here." The butler was breathing hard. "How dare he. How dare he put his hands on this table."

“Sir.” Felicia was already there, already between them, already bowing. "Sir, I'm sorry. He's only hungry. It's past his lunch, that's all."

"It's past his lunch."

"Yes, sir."

The head butler sat back down and picked up his napkin.

"Take him to the kitchen and feed him whatever's left," he said. "Same as always."

The kitchen was down three steps and colder.

There was a plate on the end of the block with what had come back off the table the night before — bones, a heel of bread, potato somebody had pushed to the side of their plate. It had been sitting out long enough to have gone grey at the edges. Felicia looked at it, and her face did something she did not let him see. Then she took her own bowl down off the shelf - her portion, her supper, the one meal a house servant gets to call hers — and she put it in front of him.

"You eat this, all right? That one's yours." She was already turning away, already busy. "I'll cook something for me later. And if you're still hungry after, I'll cook for you too. Don't worry about it."

Alexander picked up the spoon in his fist, like a child.

He ate it exactly the way that body had eaten every meal for fourteen years -

badly, too fast, with his face too close to the bowl.

He did not thank her. He did not change one single thing.

He needed to know the shape of this house first. Who ate at that table. Who threw the bottle. Whose orders they were all so comfortable under.

Everything else could wait a few days.

Including their dead bodies.

After the meal she took him along the west corridor.

And at the end of that corridor was a door, and when he saw it he stopped dead.

He knew the door.

He knew the brass on the handle and he knew the two steps up to it, and he knew, with the certainty of something that lives under language, that on the other side of it there was a window seat with a cushion on it and his mother used sit in it while he pushed a wooden horse around the floor.

That was his room. That was his room when he was small.

He reached out and put his hand on the handle.

"No-"

Felicia lunged and got a fistful of his sleeve, and she was half a second too slow.

The door swung open.

There were two women in the bed. Neither of them was dressed, and neither of them had been expecting anybody.

One of them came up on an elbow and grabbed the first thing on the side table and threw it across the room at him.

"You filthy little pig! What are you doing in here?"

"Sorry. Sorry." Felicia had both arms around him already and was hauling him backward through the doorway. "I'm sorry, he's had an accident, he doesn't know where he is "

She got the door shut with her shoulder.

Out in the corridor she crouched down in front of him, checking him over, still talking fast.

"You can't go in there. Do you understand? Not ever. That's not your room anymore." She smoothed his collar down with both hands. "The head butler sleeps in that room. He's slept there for years. That's just how it is now."

Alexander looked at the closed door over the top of her head.

The part of him that was seven years old and holding a wooden horse did not have any words for it.

The part of him that had taken five countries in fourteen years had a great many, and every one of them was very quiet.

...

The servants' wing was at the back, on the cold side.

Their room was eight feet by ten. No window. A stub of candle. Stone floor with one thin rug on it that had been cut down from something bigger.

Two beds.

Felicia filled a basin in the wash room and got him out of the wet clothes and washed the mud off him, and she did it the way youmet veet something you have done a thousand

times – talking talking the whole way through it, about nothing, about the weather, about a catŷn the yard

- and she wrapped the cut thumb in a clean strip torn off something of her own.

"There. Good as new.” She pulled a dry shirt over his head. "Let's sleep.”

...

He sat down on his bed.

It was narrow and it was hard and harrow and the blanket was thin, and it was, he understood; where the Tenth Prince of this empire had slept every night for years in the servants' wing, in a room with no window, next to the only person in this house who would sit with him.

Felicia got into her own bed.

"Goodnight."

Alexander lay on his back in the dark and put the whole thing together.

Tenth Prince. His father is the Emperor, and his father has six queens.

His mother was not killed by terrorists.

His mother was murdered, by one of those six women, and the aircraft was simply the method.

After that, the Tenth Prince of the Empire has lived in a dirty house where the butler sleeps in his bed, eats what comes back off the plates, and gets a bottle thrown at his head in his own dining room by staff who are paid out of his own name.

His eyes filled up, and it took him completely by surprise.

Not because of the house. He did not care about the house.

It was his mother — her face, clear, available, right there, when for fourteen years the whole of her had sat behind a wall of headache that shoved him back every time he reached.

He could remember her now.

He was still deciding whether that was a gift when the other bed creaked.

Felicia got in beside him without being asked. She did it half-asleep, on instinct, the way you do a thing you have done for years, and she put one arm over him and her forehead against his shoulder.

"What is it," she mumbled. "You are crying. Are you missing your mother again?"

He didn't answer.

"It's all right." Her voice was going already. "Don't cry any more. I'm on your side.

I've always been on your side. Go to sleep."

And she was gone, just like that.

...

Ten years.

More than ten years - he could feel the shape of it in the memories, the same young face getting older in the corners of a thousand ordinary days. Every meal. Every wash. Every night in this cold little room.

Everybody else left. The tutors left, the guards left, the household took what it wanted and the family stopped writing. Only her. That's it. That's the whole list.

Alexander lay very still until her breathing went slow and even against his shoulder.

Then he moved her arm off him, gently, and got out of the bed.

...

He sat down on the cold stone in the dark and took stock of what he was working with.

It was not good. Twenty years old and the body had never run, never lifted anything, never been asked to do one difficult thing. Thin arms.

No wind. A heart that had spent two decades doing nothing but keeping itself company.

In the other world he had been able to stand on a sword four hundred feet above an arena.

Here he could not have climbed the stairs twice without sitting down.

Everything he wanted to do in this house required power, and power had to come first, and he happened to know exactly where to get it.

He closed his eyes and began the first form of the Xia cultivation - the best one.

...

Somewhere above him, two floors up, the head butler was asleep in a bed with a window seat beside it.

Alexander smiled in the dark.

"You eat at a prince's table," he said, very softly. "You sleep in a prince's room. And today you threw a bottle at a prince's head in front of nine people."

He drew the next breath down slow.

"You must want to die."

Then he thought about it for a moment longer and shook his head.

"No. Dying's too easy. Not after fourteen years of this."

He settled his shoulders against the cold wall.

"You're going to suffer first."

The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 764

The head butler's room smelled of wine and old smoke, and the window seat where a queen used to sit had a boot on it.

Alexander stood in the dark by the wall.

Jericho had been asleep for forty minutes.

Alexander took the needle out of his sleeve.

It was a sewing needle. He had lifted it out of the tin on the shelf in Felicia's corner of the room, the one she kept her thread in.

Four hours of cultivation. That was all he had.

He balanced the needle on the back of two fingers, sighted across ten feet of dark room, and put it into the base of Jericho's skull with an underhand flick.

A hand's width left of the spine. One inch up. Depth of a fingernail.

Jericho grunted and turned his face into the pillow.

Alexander took out the second needle and put it into the meat below the left shoulder blade, at the point the Xia texts call the gate of the arm.

Then he crossed the room, drew both needles out, wiped them on the blanket, and left.

...

He got back into the servants' room without a sound, slid in beside Felicia, and let her arm come over him the way it did every night.

She mumbled something into his shoulder and did not wake up.

...

In the morning they went down to the kitchen, the way they went down every morning, and there was less food than there had been the day before.

Six of the staff were in there. The fire was lit and the good bread was already gone.

Alexander took his bowl of whatever was left, and then he said, in the too-loud, slightly flat voice that everybody in that house had stopped hearing years ago:

"Felicia. Felicia, I had a dream."

"Did you." She was scraping the pot out. "That's nice."

"There was an old man in it."

...

He got two of them looking. That was all he needed.

"He said — he said starting now, anybody who tells a lie to me is going to have trouble." Alexander nodded to himself, very pleased. "And the only way to get away from the trouble is to come and tell me the true thing. Then it stops."

Somebody at the far end of the kitchen snorted.

Felicia crouched down in front of him and tidied his collar, the way she did forty times a day.

She had spent ten years with a young man who said out loud whatever went through his head — what he'd eaten, what he'd dreamed, who he liked — and she had never once told him not to.

"That sounds like a good dream," she said.

"Don't you think it's good?"

"I think it's very good."

"It is good!" Alexander laughed, delighted with himself, spoon in his fist. "The old man was good to me."

...

The maid came through the kitchen door four minutes later at a dead run.

"Come quick. Somebody—where's the doctor, who fetches the doctor-" She had both hands in her apron. "It's Mister Jericho. He's awake and he's shouting. He can't see."

The pot stopped scraping.

"He can't see anything at all, and he can't move his arms. Either of them." Her voice went up. "He hasn't been hit, he hasn't fallen, he was fine last night. It just happened."

Somebody said the word before anybody else could stop it.

"That's a curse."

...

By the end of that day it had gone through the house twice and out into the village below it.

Half the staff said it was an illness — drink, a bad chest, the man was fifty and lived on wine. Sensible people said sensible things.

But there had been six people in that kitchen at breakfast, and every one of them had heard a simple young man say, in a too-loud voice, that an old man in a dream had promised trouble for liars.

And the trouble had arrived before the plates were cleared.

You can tell people that is a coincidence. They will nod at you.

They will still not sleep well.

...

In three days there were five more.

A groundsman woke up blind. Then the woman who kept the linen store, and a footman, and one of the two housekeepers, and a stable hand — and two of them found that an arm had stopped belonging to them overnight.

Four doctors came up from the town and one came out from the city at considerable expense.

They found nothing.

No fever. No swelling. No injury, no growth, nothing in the eyes, nothing in the blood. Five people in perfect health who simply could not see, and no physician in the province could offer a single word of explanation.

The cure was in the house by then, though, because that had gone around too. Tell the truth to the idiot prince.

On the fourth afternoon, two maids carried Jericho down to the study.

It was a small room on the ground floor with a dow window and one shelf of the books nobody had bothered to sell - and every daynet after lunch, Felicia sat in it with Alexander and a primer and tried, patiently, for the ten thousandth time, to teach a twenty-year-old the alphabet.

She had been doing it for ten years. She had never once said out loud that it wasn't working.

"Put me in the chair," Jericho said. "Then get out."

"Sir-"

"Out. Both of you. Shut the door."

Felicia stood up.

"Sir, I should stay with him, he doesn't—"

"You too."

The door closed.

Jericho sat in a chair he could not see, in a room he had not entered in four years, with two arms lying in his lap like somebody else's.

Across the rug, a young man in a servant's shirt sat on the floor, holding a book in one hand and a smooth stone in the other, hitting the cover of the book with the stone. Slowly.

Regularly. The way he had hit things since he was seven years old. "I don't know why I'm doing this," Jericho said.

"You can't understand a word. You've never understood a word." He laughed, and it came out wrong. "Talking to an idiot who can't think. But they're all saying honesty is the cure, and I've got nothing else left to try, so — fine."

Tap.

"Fine. Listen, you halfwit. Listen to what I actually am."

"Your second brother pays me."

Tap.

"And the job is simple. Keep you idiot. Don't let anybody teach you anything, don't let anybody fix you, don't let anybody take an interest. Keep you where you are."

He shifted in the chair.

"And I have done it very well."

Tap.

"The Emperor sends money for this house. For you. A hundred thousand a month, every month, without fail, for the upkeep of the Tenth Prince's residence and staff."

He said the next part like a man complaining about the weather.

"Ten thousand of it gets here. That's what I let through. Ten, for wages and food and coal and everything else, which is not enough, which is why this place is falling down and why you eat what comes back off the plates."

Tap.

"And the other ninety thousand is mine."

...

Behind him, the tapping did not change at all.

"I don't keep it in a bank. Banks keep records." Jericho's blind face turned slightly, following nothing "I buy gold. Every month, foudeer years of it, and it is upstairs in my room this minute - under the boards on the window side, in the room your mother used to sit in."

He was enjoying it now. That is the thing nobody tells you about confession. It is delicious, if you believe nobody is listening.

"There's more. The invitations."

Tap.

"Every year the palace sends for you. Name days. The hunt. Your own father's summer court. And every year I burn them, because the country still has a soft spot for the poor damaged little prince, and if you ever turned up in front of them somebody might look at you properly."

Tap.

"So they think you refuse. They think you can't be reached. Fourteen years of that, and by now they've stopped writing."

...

He kept going.

He talked about the tutors he'd paid off and the physician he'd sent away in the second year. He talked about the beatings, and why - because a boy who gets hit stays frightened, and a frightened boy is quiet.

And then he talked about the staff who'd been kind.

"There was a cook. Gave you cake, twice. I had her out with no reference inside the month." He sniffed. "There was a groom who used to take you to see the horses. I broke his hand in a door and put it down as an accident."

Tap.

"And there's the little one. Felicia."

The tapping stopped for about half a second, and then went on.

"Ten years, that one. Won't be moved, won't take money, won't complain, Jericho shook his head "I've had her whipped four times. I've bad wages stopped for a quarter for nothing. I keep her in that freezing box at the back of the house with you because thought she'd break in a season."

He laughed.

"She never did. I'll give her that."

...

Two hours.

He talked for two hours, about names and dates and amounts, into an empty-

sounding room with a stone knocking on a book behind him, and he never once heard the knocking move.

He did not hear it move because it had stopped moving thirty minutes in.

By the time Jericho finished, the young man was standing directly behind his chair, close enough to touch the back of his head.

Alexander's face had gone completely red.

The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 765

"Not now."

Alexander muttered the restraint to himself, hovering just two feet behind the man's chair. A single strike would have settled it. Simple.

Yet killing one solved nothing he wanted them all. Precision required patience; he had to separate the sheep from the wolves before the slaughter. No emotional slips. No gray areas. He would strike only when the targets were indisputably marked.

He lowered his arm, letting it rest against his thigh

...

He crossed the rug without a sound and sat where he had been sitting two hours earlier, cross-legged, primer in one hand, smooth grey stone in the other.

And he began knocking the stone against the cover again. Slow. Even. Exactly the rhythm a broken seven-year-old had kept for fourteen years.

Behind him, Jericho went on talking.

He talked the way a man empties a bucket he has been carrying too long — about the coal accounts, about a horse he had sold and written off as dead, about a girl in the village and what it had cost him to make that go away.

He wasn't confessing anymore; he was just spilling his guts with smug indifference. Why wouldn't he?

He had someone powerful in his back.

Then, mid-sentence-right as he was rambling about the wine cellar-the tap abruptly shut off.

He realized he'd said enough.

"That's it," he announced to the room. "That's everything. Every bit of it."

He put his hands on the arms of the chair.

He had talked, confess, but his eyes still gave him nothing at all, so he came up out of that chair like a man standing in a lake at midnight.

"Maid!" Jericho roared. "Get in here and take me down! Now!"

He had ordered her to keep clear of the room so no one would overhear them, but the silence was deafening. Cursing under his breath, he lurched toward the door himself.

Before his hand could touch wood, the door flew inward.

The girl had moved with frightening speed—sprinting from the far end of the hallway the moment his shout echoed out. She wrenched the brass handle, swinging the solid edge straight into Jericho's face, splitting the skin over his nose and left brow.

He went down on one knee with both hands over his face, and the sound he made was not a word in any language.

"Sir_"

"All of you," Jericho said through his fingers. "All of you damn bastards."

Alexander sat on the rug and hit a book with a stone.

...

That night he came up the back stairs at two in the morning.

Jericho was on his back this time, mouth open, with a wet cloth folded across the bridge of a swelling nose, and a bottle on the floor by the bed that had done more for the pain than the cloth had.

The first needle went into the base of the skull. The second went in below the left shoulder blade.

Alexander counted three breaths, drew them both out, and wiped them on the sheet. Then he stood over the bed for a moment longer than he needed to, looking down at the man who had burned fourteen years of his letters.

"Enjoy your eyes," he said.

...

Jericho woke at dawn with the grey of a window in front of him, and it took him whole seconds to understand what he was looking at.

Light. A window. His own hand, when he lifted it, which it did, on the first try.

He got out of bed and stood in the middle of his stolen room with his arms going up and down like a man testing a coat.

He laughed. He actually laughed, out loud, alone, at six in the morning.

And then the laughing stopped, because his stomach caught up with the rest of him.

...

He had told it.

Not some of it. All of it. The four hundred a month from the second prince. The ninety thousand. The gold under these boards, under his own feet, this minute. The invitations. The cook, the groom's hand, the whippings.

He had said every one of those things out loud, in a small room, with the door shut.

To the idiot.

Jericho sat down on the edge of the bed and pressed both palms flat against his knees and told himself the obvious thing, which was that it did not matter, because the boy could not read, could not count, could not follow a sentence with two ideas in it, and had never in fourteen years repeated anything anybody said to him.

Then he went downstairs to make sure.

He watched him for an entire day.

He watched him eat, which was a performance with a spoon held in a fist and a face too close to the bowl.

He watched him get walked up and down the west corridor by his nanny like a dog. He watched him sit on the study floor for an hour and a half hitting a book with a rock.

Twice he sent people over to talk to him.

The first was a footman who asked him three simple questions and got a grin and a comment about a bird.

The second was one of the housekeepers, who put her face right down in front of his and said, slowly, "Do you remember anything from yesterday?"

Alexander told her the bird had come back.

Talking to him was like talking to a wall, except a wall does not look pleased with itself for having heard you.

...

It still was not enough.

Jericho found him in the afternoon in the side hall, sitting on the flagstones with Felicia crouched beside him, buttoning his coat against the draught.

He did not announce himself. He walked up, and without one word of warning he swung his boot into the young man's ribs.

Alexander went over onto his side.

"Sir!"

The second kick landed in the same place and turned him half over, and the third caught him across the arm he had got up to cover himself with, and by then the sound coming out of him was the high, formless crying fa small child who does not understand what is happening or why.

Felicia got both arms around him and took the fourth one herself, across the back.

"Stop it. Stop — he hasn't done anything, sir, please—"

Jericho stood over the pair of them, breathing, watching the face.

Nothing. No anger in it. No calculation. Just a twenty-year-old with his mouth open and tears and dirt on his cheek, hiding in his nanny's shoulder.

"Damn idiot," Jericho said.

He walked away lighter than he had walked in fourteen years. Because that settled it. That was the test and there was no arguing with the result.

A man who understood what had been said to him in that study would have flinched at the sight of the man who said it. He would have looked up. Something behind the eyes would have moved.

Nothing had moved.

He had frightened himself over a piece of furniture. Four days blind, a bad conscience, an old house and too much wine, and he had let it make him small. Jericho went to find his supper.

...

In the corner, with his face still pressed into Felicia's shoulder and his ribs on fire, Alexander smiled.

...

The cure traveled faster than the curse had.

It was simple, it was free, and it had been tested in front of witnesses-which was more than most medicine could say.

If you went blind, or woke with an onet arm that had stopped belonging to you, you had been cursed by the young man's ancestor for lying to him. So, you went and sat on the floor of the little study, and you told the truth to a young man who couldn't understand a single word of it.

And then you got better.

A stupid ancestor didn't know his grandson was an idiot.

By the second week there was a queue in that corridor most afternoons.

...

What the queue did not know was that the cure had a condition.

"Nine years of linen," the linen keeper had said, and been cured by supper, because nine years of linen was the whole of it.

The second housekeeper was not so lucky.

She came in and confessed to skimming the candle money, which was true, and which was also about a fortieth of what she had done, and she went home that night still blind and sat up until morning in a state no doctor in the province could have treated.

She came back the next day and added the wine.

Still blind.

She came back the day after that, and this time she got all the way down to the bottom of it — the letters she had copied out of the house and handed to a rider at the west gate every month for six years, and who paid her for them, and how much.

She could see before she reached the door.

A man doesn't hold three crowns without learning to spot a liar. Sniffing out deceit had become second nature. Most people simply lacked the composure to hide it.

Nobody ever worked out the rule. People decided the old man in the dream could taste a lie, which was near enough.

So they stopped trying to be clever, and they told him everything, and that is how the Tenth Prince of the Empire learned his own house.

...

It was a summer castle in a small province four days from the capital, and it had been built for a court that visited it twice a year and then stopped visiting it at all.

That was the point of it. The Leonhart line does not execute its embarrassments. It relocates them. It finds the furthest habitable corner of the map, puts the disgrace in it, sends money, and does not write.

His father was Maximillian Leonhart, and he had eight queens. Twenty-five sons and daughters between them, that anybody had counted.

The honest answer was that only the king knew the real number, and there was some doubt about whether even he had kept up.

Alexander's mother had been the eighth.

The last one taken, the lowest ranked, from the smallest family-

- a minor house with no army behind it, no seat in the council, nothing at all except a daughter the king had happened to like.

That entire bloodline was wiped out. Murdered, almost certainly.

The knives belonged either to the First Queen or the Second. Both women possessed real power, and both had heirs to clear a path for: the First and Second

Princes.

Whisper had it the purge began quietly at the bottom of the ladder, where the bodies wouldn't cause an uproar. An eighth queen from a worthless minor house-they tore down her estate, then snuffed her out.

Alexander was merely the Tenth Prince. Nothing more than a late entry on an executioner's ledger, waiting to be crossed off.

...

There are twenty-five staff in this small castle.

For one prince, in a house with half its rooms shut, that is not a shortage. That is generous. That is more than enough hands to keep a young man clean, fed, taught, exercised and loved.

And out of those twenty-five, exactly only one of them works for him.

She is nineteen years old, she has been whipped four times for it, and she sleeps in a stone room with no window at the back of the house because they put her there to break her and she did not break.

The other twenty-four are not staff at all.

They are eyes. Some of them are paid by the first queen and some by the second, and a few enterprising ones are paid by both and write two versions of the same letter, and every single month a rider comes to the west gate, and kes away a report on a young man who cannot use a spoon properly.

That is what fourteen years of upkeep money has been buying.

Alex stood dead in the center of a snare. If he let slip even a glimmer of intelligence —a single sign he wasn't the idiot they took him for—it would sign his death warrant.

The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 766

Jericho and the others stayed frightened for nine days.

Then nothing happened.

Then more nothing happened.

And nobody can stay frightened forever of a boy hitting a book with a rock.

By the end of the first month Jericho was back at the head of the long table with the silver out.

The house adjusted, the way houses do.

The curse became one of the facts of working there, like the draught in the east wing.

You went blind. You went down to the study. You got it off your chest.

You came back up able to see, and by supper you were laughing about it.

Some of them found it almost convenient.

And when somebody had a bad week of it — three days blind, four trips down to that rug before it took - they did what people do.

They stood in the kitchen with a cup in their hands and cursed the ancestors of the idiot prince, down every generation they could name, for having the nerve to lay a curse on honest working people.

...

"Not yet," Alexander said.

He said it most nights. Cold stone under him in the servants' room, back straight in the dark, hands turned palm up on his knees, a young woman asleep eight feet away.

The first form of the Xia method draws heaven and earth energy in through the skin and sends it down to settle in the dantian, three fingers below the navel.

He had done it every night since the study. Every night he grew harder to kill.

This wasn't revenge. Revenge was cheap - an indulgence for careless men, costing nothing to want.

The slaughter was simply inevitable.

One day he would wipe out every capable asset under this roof, and the moment he did, the high seats in the capital would turn all their fury on his head.

He had to be strong enough to survive the answer before he drew the first drop of blood.

There was a list in his head, and it was getting longer.

...

Two months slipped away.

Nothing changed, as far as anybody in that castle could see.

The idiot was still an idiot.

The maids still moved him out of doorways with the flat of a hand and laughed about it. One of them had taken to flicking his ear every time she passed, a small private joke that never stopped being funny to her.

He let his head rock with it and shuffled on.

And Jericho lived like a prince in a prince's room, and ate like a prince at a prince's table, and had begun, in the evenings, to call the house his.

Then something changed.

The cook was crossing the lower yard at dusk when a voice spoke into his ear.

Not beside him. Into it, from an inch away, low and perfectly clear.

"Go to the servants' room. Number fifteen. Now."

He stopped dead with a pan in his hand. Nobody within thirty feet of him. A wall on one side, open yard on the other, the light going orange over the stable roof, and not one living soul close enough to whisper.

"And bring the knife," the voice said. "Your wife is in there with the driver."

"What?"

He turned all the way round once. Nothing.

Then the cook took the boning knife off the block and crossed the house at a run.

Number fifteen was on the north side. The door wasn't locked, because they had never needed to lock it before, and it came off the latch on the first shove and banged against the inside wall.

His wife was on the bed, naked, with the driver. Neither of them had time to get to their feet.

...

"How dare you," the cook said.

Everybody in that castle knew about him. Good cook. Decent man. And a temper that arrived all at once, like a dropped plate - it had cost him two jobs before this one.

"How dare you cheat on me—"

The driver got one arm up.

The knife came down anyway. Once. Twice. Three times, into his chest. The wife screamed.

Then the knife found her too.

The sound that came out of him afterwards wasn't words. It was a man tearing in half.

At the far end of the corridor, Alexander stood and listened to it the way he listens to rain.

Long-range sound transmission is hardly an advanced art. Any cultivator who has crossed the first threshold can cast a phrase across an open courtyard, tucking it straight into a chosen ear without the surrounding world catching a single syllable.

After that, the house began to find things out about itself.

A maid was on her knees with a scrubbing brush when the voice came. "Your husband took your savings. All of it. He gave it to a woman he met on an app, and he takes her to a motel when you're on shift. They're in the back yard now. In the corner, behind the wall."

She stood up slowly. The brush stayed where it fell.

"There's a gun in the third drawer of the head butler's room," the voice said. "Take it. They'll kill you if you come empty-handed."

She went up to Jericho's room and found it exactly where the voice said. Third drawer, under the folded shirts. Heavier than she expected. Colder.

Then she walked out to the corner of the yard, and her husband was there with his mouth on the woman from the app.

"You stole the money for our child."

He didn't even have the decency to look sorry. "I've told you. I don't believe it's mine."

"I only ever slept with you."

"Really. I think you've slept with half this house." He shrugged. "Doesn't matter now.

I choose her. We're done."

She started laughing, and it was a terrible sound to hear in a yard at that hour. "You take my money. You get me pregnant. And then you leave me. Fine."

She raised the gun. "Die."

"Wait-"

The gun went off first. It took him in the chest. The other woman turned to run, got two steps, and the maid shot her in the back.

Then the voice again, patient, close as a friend. "The gardener as well. He's been trying to rape you many times. Looking down at you."

The gardener was already running at her across the grass.

She shot him too.

"And Jericho," the voice said. "Your wage should be eight thousand a month. He pays you three. He's been doing it for five years. Go and ask him for what he took, and don't let him tell you no."

From a second-floor window, Alexander let the last word go and closed his mouth.

...

She came through the dining hall door with the gun up and grass on her knees.

"Five years of three grand a month." Her voice dropped to an icy edge. "You've been bleeding five thousand dollars out of my paycheck every month for half a decade. I want every cent returned. Right now."

Jericho half rose out of the chair. "That's not true. Your salary has always been three thousand-"

The whisper went through the whole hall at once. Every ear in the room got it.

"A ghost knows every secret. Don't you dare lie to me."

Jericho's face went the colour of the tablecloth.

Then the other voice, for her alone. "Three hundred thousand. That's what five years came to. Take it and run."

"Three hundred thousand dollars." She stepped in closer. "And don't tell me you haven't got it. It's in the iron safe. The ghost knows everything."

Every person at that table heard her say the word safe.

Jericho looked at the gun for a long moment. "Fine. I'll give you the money. Follow me."

He stood up slow and careful. And then, because he loved money more than he had ever loved anything, including himself, he caught the back of the chair and swung it at her.

She pulled the trigger before she knew she had.

The first round went into his chest. The rest went in after it, one after another, until the gun was clicking empty in her hands.

Jericho stayed on his feet a second longer than he should have, looking at her the way a man looks at a plate that came out wrong.

Then he went down.

The maid stared at what she'd done and the fear arrived all at once. She ran. Took a car key off the hook by the door and drove the expensive one out through the gates. That car sells for a million in the right market, Alexander thought. She'll make it. The rest of them stood along the wall and didn't move.

Four dead in the yard and the hall. Two dead in room fifteen. Six in one week.

Something was very wrong in that house. There was a ghost in it, the ghost knew everyone's secrets, and the ghost had started doing something about them. The police came and handled it the way police handle things on royal ground. Quietly. Nothing past the gate, nothing in the papers, everything cleaned carefully and filed where no one would ever read it.

And the vice head butler moved up.

Vincent had been Jericho's best friend and was cut from exactly the same cloth. He liked to boss.

He liked to be seen bossing. He moved his things into the prince's room before the week was out, and it made him very happy.

First man in power now. And a man newly first in power needs everybody to see it. Which is where it stood on the evening Alexander walked into the dining hall.

He did it the way he did everything — at a shuffle, mouth slightly open. Felicia got a hand on his sleeve in the corridor and pulled.

"Not in there. Come away. Come on, we'll go to the kitchen, there's soup—"

He kept walking.

She got both hands on him and set her heels, and she is small, and he had been quietly drawing heaven and earth into himself for two months, and he walked into that hall with her attached to his arm.

The long table stopped.

Twelve places laid. The bird in the middle. Vincent at the head of it with a napkin tucked into his collar and a glass in his hand.

"I want to eat," Alexander announced to the room.

"Get him out." Vincent said it exactly the way Jericho used to say it. He had been practising.

"Why can't I eat? I heard a voice. It said I can eat everything."

The glass came down on the cloth.

"Felicia. Get this idiot out of my hall or I will hit him in front of you."

"Yes, sir. Yes — I'm taking him, I'm taking him now—"

And then Alexander stopped moving.

He straightened up in the middle of the floor, in the stupidest posture a body can hold, chin up and shoulders loose and both hands hanging and he turned his head. slowly from one side of the room to the other like a child following a fly. Cóntent

"I hear a voice," he said.

Every person at that table went absolutely still.

Nine faces, and every one of them had spent the week listening to somebody describe exactly that. A voice from nowhere. An inch from the ear. Nobody there.

Somebody's fork touched a plate and the sound went through the room like a dropped tray.

"Oh, it talks now!" Alexander chirped, wearing a look of childish wonder. "It tells me this is my seat, and I'm allowed to eat here not you. It says you're a very bad man.

You tried to rape a boy. Son of maid."

Vincent exploded from his seat.

The cloth napkin had barely slipped from his collar before he closed the distance, crossing half the hall in a blind fury. He seized Alexander by the Tapels with both fists, shaking him so violently the boy's neck nearly whipped out of joint.

"Do you want to die?"

He was white. Not angry. White.

"You. You and you and you." Pointing down the table with one hand, still holding on with the other. "All of you, come here Come and kick him. Shut his mouth. Shut his mouth fight now need to teach him who the boss is!" t

Five of them got up.

"Stop it!"

Felicia came off the wall and got herself between them with both arms out, and her voice broke in the middle of it.

"Stop it - you'll kill him!"

But they didn't let up. Blows rained down on Alex without mercy-heavy boots drove into his skull, fists tore into his flesh, every strike aimed solely at ending his life.

The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 767

"Please stop!"

Felicia got her body across him on the floor and took the next boot on her hip and did not move off.

"If he dies, every single one of you in this room dies with him! Do you understand what he is? Do you understand whose son that is?"

That was what stopped it.

Not her crying. Not the blood. The word son.

Because a prince is still a prince even when he cannot hold a spoon, and there is a difference between kicking one and having killed one, and five men found that difference somewhere around the fourth second of standing there breathing.

...

One of them spat on the floor beside Alexander's head.

"For a loser like him," he said, "dead's better than alive. Everyone knows it. His own family knows it."

Then Vincent came through the middle of them.

He had his napkin still hanging off two fingers, and he put his boot into the side of Alexander's head one more time, unhurried, the way a man kicks a door that has been sticking.

"You have to learn to fear me," Vincent said. "Do you understand that? Me. Not a voice. Not a ghost. Me."

...

Alexander did not answer him, because Alexander was lying on his face on the dining hall floor with blood coming out of his hair.

He was not moving at all.

Felicia was up and running, screaming down the corridor for the phone, for the gate, for anybody, and her hands were shaking so badly she dropped the handset twice before she got the emergency line to pick up.

...

Vincent stood over the blood and looked around the table.

Nine people. Twelve places laid. A bird in the middle going cold.

"Listen to me," he said. "All of you. When the doctors get here, he fell. Down the west stairs, on his own, because he is what he is and he has fallen before."

Nobody said anything.

"That is the only sentence any of you knows. He fell down the stairs." Vincent's voice did not go up. It went flat, which was worse.

"If one of you says anything else — to a doctor, to a policeman, to your own mother -you will die. Not be dismissed. Die. We have all had a week of learning how easily that happens in this house."

They went quiet in a particular way that Alexander would have recognised if he had been conscious.

Because it was not fear of a ghost any more.

It was fear of a man with a job.

Vincent was the head butler now, and that was his first order, and every person in the room took it.

Alexander opened his eyes in a hospital room.

White ceiling. A drip stand. The smell of the stuff they wipe bed rails with, and under it the faint sourness of his own sweat in a gown that was not his.

Felicia was asleep in a chair on the other side of the bed with her coat over her like a blanket and her hand still resting on the edge of the mattress, three inches from his, as though she had fallen asleep mid-sentence.

It was the county hospital in the village below the castle. Three floors, one ambulance, a car park with four cars in it.

The clock on the wall said five past one in the morning.

...

He took stock of himself the way a man checks a coat for rain.

Bandage around the head. Bandage on the left forearm. Tape across two ribs and a line in the back of his hand.

None of it hurt.

Two months of drawing heaven and earth down into the dantian does make a body armoured.

He had walked into that dining hall knowing exactly what Vincent would do.

He had let a boot go into his skull twenty-six times, in front of nine witnesses, with his nanny screaming on the floor beside him.

Because a man who has been an idiot for fourteen years does not simply stop being one.

People need a reason. Doctors need a reason. A palace needs a reason it can write down.

He had gone in there to buy himself a head injury. To graduate from being idiot.

...

Alexander slid out from under the sheet without letting the frame creak.

He stood a moment over the chair. Felicia's face had the particular slackness of someone who had not slept in two days and had cried for most of them, and there was a bruise coming up along her jaw where somebody's elbow had found her.

He put her coat straight over her shoulder.

Then he crossed to the window and looked down three floors at a gravel car park and a single yellow lamp.

The window opened eight inches before the catch stopped it.

He went out and jumped down the building and landed on gravel without making enough noise to interest anybody.

The night guard was in the booth at the front with a screen on and his back to the glass.

Alexander went past him along the hedge line, out through the service gap where the bins go, and onto the road.

Then he ran.

The Xia light-body form is the first thing they teach you after your channels open, and it is not flight and it is not sorcery.

It is a way of spending your own energy on every footfall so that the ground gives you back more than it takes.

Four kilometres of switchback road up to the castle went by in a little under three minutes, and the only thing that saw him do it was a dog behind a fence that did not have time to finish barking.

The main gate was shut and lit.

He went over the wall forty metres to the left of it, where the ivy is old and the camera looks at the gate instead, and came down in the long grass inside.

The back door by the boot room has not locked properly since before be was born. Everybody in that house knew it and nobody had ever fixerit, because who breaks into a house with nothing in it but an idiot.

Alexander pushed it open.

...

The great hall was dark and smelled of furniture polish and old smoke, and somebody had finally cleared away the bird.

On the wall between the two windows, above the cold fireplace, there is a pair of cavalry sabres mounted on a shield.

They are two hundred years old and they were carried by a Leonhart, and Jericho had kept them polished because polished things impress visitors.

They were also sharp, because nobody polishes a blade for that long without putting an edge back on it.

Alexander reached up and lifted the left one down off its bracket.

He turned it over once in his hand and found the balance of it.

"All right," he said. "Purification."

Vincent was asleep in his mother's window-seat room in a bed that had been bought for a seven-year-old prince and replaced twice since for the comfort of staff, and he was not alone in it.

One maid on either side of him. All three of them well past the point of hearing anything.

Alexander stood at the end of the bed for three breaths and looked at the faces.

He knew every one of them.

The one on the left had flicked his ear every time she passed him for two years, because it was funny.

The one on the right had told him, in the corridor, in front of four people, that he smelled.

The sabre moved two times, and it moved faster than any of them could have followed even awake.

Vincent came up off the pillow with his mouth already open and nothing below his shoulders that would answer him.

"Arrrgghhh! You - you, what are you—"

"You had two hands," Alexander said. "Two good hands, and a wage, and a roof.

You could have done anything good with them."

"Yet you used them to hit a boy who couldn't count. So I took your two useless arms."

The two maids woke to the sound of him screaming, and understood in the same second that they were also screaming, and that the screaming was the only thing either of them had left to do with.

Alex moved his sabre to take all their arms.

The three of them lay in that bed and howled, and not one of them had an arm to reach for a phone.

Alexander walked out into the corridor.

Doors were opening along it already. That kind of noise travels in a stone house.

A footman came out of the third door in his undershirt with his hair flat on one side squinting into the dark and then he saw who was standing there with a sabre hanging from one hand, and the squint turned into something between a laugh and a sneer.

"The idiot prince." He came a step closer. "They let you out of the hospital already?

What are you screaming about — do you want to die?"

Alex smiled, moved his sabre and took his two arms.

Letting him crying.

He went down that corridor at a walk.

Anybody who had come out into it, he cut. Two men by the linen cupboard. A woman who came out of the stair door.

He did not chase anybody, and he did not open a single closed door.

That was the rule, and he had made it on the road up. If you had it in you to stay behind a door tonight and pray, you would still have your arms in the morning.

There were four exceptions.

Four of the five men who had come up from that table and put their boots into him, and he knew all four faces, and he had their rooms from a confession four days old. He opened those doors.

The first one was awake and got as far as the window. The second one tried to talk, and got a fair way into it.

The third one was praying already, out loud, to an ancestor, which was almost funny.

The fourth one begged.

"It was Vincent — he made us, he said he'd kill us, you saw it, you were there, you must have seen "

"I was there," Alexander agreed.

The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 768

Alex kept moving.

"It was always a choice," he said. "Be killed by him, or be killed by me. You chose him. You chose to hit me. So this is your payment."

"Please. Please don't. I'm sorry-"

The man turned to run. Alex took both his arms before he made the second step.

And Alex kept moving.

Every one of them had been part of it. The side that killed his mother. The people who had treated him like nothing for fourteen years. This was the bill for all of it.

"Think of it as karma," Alex said, and moved on.

...

That night is the one nobody in that province will ever write down.

Thirteen people in that castle lost both arms at the shoulder inside twenty minutes. Every one of them was alive when it happened. Every one stayed conscious for a few minutes after, screaming, shouting, trying to survive. But a human being with both arms gone does not last long. The veins pump the blood straight out.

They shouted until they stopped shouting.

By half past two, nothing was moving on the west side of the house.

Five were left.

Two had gone to bed with earphones in and slept through the whole thing, which is an absurd way to survive a massacre. The other three were behind locked doors with the lights off and their hands pressed over their mouths.

Alexander went to each of those five doors and stood outside it.

...

He did not knock.

He put his mouth close to the wood and sent the voice through it, one ear at a time, in a register that did not belong to any living throat.

"Get out of this place. None of you can stay here. Nobody can."

Behind the third door, somebody started to cry.

"How dare you put your hands on my grandson. How dare any of you. I have taken thirteen tonight and I am not finished. Every living soul still under this roof at dawn will die. Only my grandson and his loyal, sweet maid Felicia may stay."

He let it sit.

"Get out of my house."

Then he hit the door, once, hard. The frame shook.

Behind almost every door, somebody sobbed. They were sure the wood would give. They were sure they were next.

...

He went back down to the great hall.

He wiped the sabre with a wet tissue. The grip, the guard, the blade, then the grip again. He laid it on the long table in the middle of the room, in plain sight, where anybody walking in would see it in two seconds.

Let them find it. Let them find it clean.

Out through the boot-room door. Over the wall at the ivy. Down the switchback in the dark. Up the drainpipe, and through the hospital window again.

The clock on the wall said five past three.

Felicia had not moved in her chair. Her hand was still resting on the edge of the mattress.

Alexander lay down, pulled the sheet up over the tape on his ribs, and went to sleep.

...

In the morning she was crying again. The good kind, this time, because he had opened his eyes.

She fed him. She washed his face. She held a cup with a straw to his mouth and scolded him for trying to sit up, and she did all of it on about five hours of sleep across three nights.

They kept him in that hospital for three days.

In those three days, Alexander did not hear one word about the castle. Not from a nurse. Not from the news playing in the corridor. Not from the two policemen who came on the second afternoon, stood at the foot of the bed for four minutes, wrote down that the patient had never left the room, and walked out.

That told him everything.

They had cleaned it up. Royal ground, thirteen bodies, a sabre with no prints, and the only witnesses gone over the wall in the night. Somebody very senior had decided this had not happened, and had paid whatever it cost to make that true. Good, Alexander thought. Let it not have happened.

On the third afternoon, Felicia stopped tucking in the sheet and looked at him. "Why are you so quiet?"

He had been quiet for three days. He had let her do everything, the way he always had, and he had said almost nothing.

"I feel like I just woke up from a very long dream," Alex said.

"Really," Felicia said.

She said it the way you answer a child, already half turned away, already reaching for the water jug.

Then she froze.

The jug didn't go down. It didn't come up. It hung in her hand, halfway.

"What did you say?"

...

Alexander looked her in the eyes.

He had never done that before. Not once in fourteen years. That body had looked at chins, at hands, at things over people's shoulders. At nothing.

"I feel like I woke up from a long dream," he said. "Felicia."

...

The jug hit the tray badly. Water ran across the top of it.

Her eyes went wide and stayed wide. Her mouth opened, and for four seconds nothing came out at all. Then everything did, in one shapeless sound, her whole face coming apart.

"You"

She pressed a hand over her mouth.

"You're awake. You're finally awake."

"Yes," Alexander said. "I'm awake."

Felicia came across the bed, threw both arms around his neck, and pressed her forehead hard into his bandaged shoulder. She cried into his hospital gown for a long time. It was a cry with fourteen years in it. Every meal, every wash, every cold night in a room with no window, every time someone in that house had laughed at the two of them in a corridor.

Alexander held her with the arm that still had the drip in the back of his hand.

He said nothing. There was nothing to say that was both true and safe.

The doctor came in twenty minutes later. He asked nine questions and got nine answers.

Then he sat on the end of the bed, the way doctors in that village did, and explained.

"Fourteen years ago there was a severe trauma to the head. What we've been looking at since then was almost certainly never damage to the mind. It was pressure or scarring, sitting somewhere it shouldn't." He turned his pen over. "And then he falls down staircase and takes another blow to nearly the same spot."

"And that fixed it," Felicia said.

"Medicine won't let me say fixed." The doctor stood. "But I've read four papers with this exact shape, and they all end the same way. Prince Alexander, you fell down a flight of stairs, and it seems to have given you your life back."

He shook his head, pleased with the world.

"A blessing in disguise."

...

News travels out of a hospital the way news does. Eight days later, a man came up from the capital to see them.

Grey suit. Soft voice. A folder he never opened. The kind of man who is sent instead of a letter.

"Prince Alexander." He inclined his head. "First, congratulations. There hasn't been better news out of this province in my lifetime."

"Thank you."

"Second, some information." The man sat. "The household staff at your residence have chosen to leave their posts. All of them. Ra suddenly, some days ago. Several are proving difficult to locate He let that lie there, perfectly flat. "What do you make of it? Do you have any suggestions?"

...

Alexander shook his head.

"No suggestions," he said. "I didn't like them."

The man's eyebrows moved a millimetre.

"They were cruel to me. All of them, for years, except one." He nodded at the chair by the window, where Felicia had gone very still." Still have Felicia. That's enough. If the house needs cleaning, buy the machines. The cleaning units. They're cheaper than people, and they've never once thrown a bottle at my head."

A pause.

"I'll note that," the man said.

...

"Fine, then." The folder came onto his knee, still shut. "Is there anything else?"

Alexander looked at him.

"In my dream," he said, "I used to hear voices. People talking over me, all day, for years, and I couldn't answer any of them. And I heard them say they were stealing my money."

The man's face did not change. That was its own answer.

"The allowance comes from my father. For this house, and for me. I'd like to hold it myself now." He said it simply, like a boy asking for his own coat. "All of it. My name, my account, my signature. Can that be done?"

"Yes." The man stood and smoothed the front of his suit. "Yes, it can. I'll see to it personally."

...

They went home four days later, in a car with a driver neither of them knew.

The gates were open. Half the windows were open. Somebody had gone through the whole place with hoses and industrial cleaner, and the west corridor smelled of nothing at all. In its way, that was the most frightening thing about it.

In the village at the bottom of the hill, at the petrol station, in both shops, everybody was saying the same thing.

The castle is cursed. The old prince's ancestors have come back. The ghost took revenge on everyone who laid a hand on the boy and spared the ones who didn't, and if you have any sense, you won't work up there for any money.

Nobody was going to apply for those jobs.

Nobody was ever going to apply for those jobs again.

The five survivors made sure of it. They turned out to be very dedicated to spreading the story.

...

Felicia stood in the middle of that enormous empty hall with her bag still in her hand and looked at the size of it.

Twenty-five people used to live in this house. Now there were two.

"Prince Alex," she said.

She tried to smile and managed about half of one.

"There aren't many of us. There's, well, there's nobody. But I'll keep you company.

Same as always. I'll stay."

"Thank you," Alexander said. "Let's not bother with cooking. There's always food delivery."

He said it slowly. He would go on speaking slowly for a while yet, because a man who wakes up after fourteen years doesn't get fluent in a fortnight, and anyone watching needed to see that.

But behind it, everything was already moving.

No staff. No spies. Not one pair of eyes in this house paid by the First Queen or the

Second. No rider at the west gate at the end of the month. Nothing about him going into an envelope ever again.

His allowance in his own hand from the first of next month.

Fourteen years of stolen gold under the floorboards of his mother's room, and only one living person on earth knew it was there.

An empty castle. A locked province. A ghost story that would keep every curious person in the country at the bottom of the hill.

And in his head, five conquered countries' worth of everything he had ever learned about how to build one.

He had a foundation.

...

Then both leaves of the main door swung wide at once, and the light came in behind her.

Cream and gold, a coat over her shoulders, and jewellery at her throat worth more than the castle she was standing in. She came up the middle of that hall like weather.

Twenty men followed her in. Body armour, visors up, weapons across their chests, boots striking the stone in step.

Felicia was behind Alexander before she knew she'd moved.

"I don't believe in ghosts," the woman said.

Her voice carried beautifully. It had been trained to.

"Thirteen of my—-thirteen household staff, dismembered in one night, and the country wants me to write down ghost. No. Somebody in this house did it. And exactly one person who was here that week is still standing in it."

She stopped six feet from him and studied him with an interest that was not pleasant.

"Tenth Prince. You are under arrest for the murder of your own servants."

...

"And who are you?" Alexander said.

The whole hall heard it. So did the twenty men.

Her chin came up.

"I am the Second Queen of this Empire," she said. "And you are going to serve your sentence in a prison cell."

The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 769

Alexander stepped back behind Felicia.

He did it the way the old Alexander would have done it — shoulders up, chin down, one hand bunched in the back of her coat like a child in a crowd.

She felt the tug and spread her arms without thinking, a nineteen-year-old woman in a travelling coat trying to hide a grown man from twenty rifles.

The Second Queen watched them and almost laughed.

Behind Felicia's shoulder, Alexander's lips barely moved.

...

The voice did not come from him.

It came from everywhere at once, and from an inch inside every ear in the front of that hall — the Queen's, and each of the twenty men in armour - low and dry and very old.

"I warned this house not to let anyone enter."

Twenty visors turned at the same moment.

"And since you have come anyway," the voice said, "you can die here."

...

The line of knights broke step.

Not much. Half a pace. But these were palace men, picked and drilled, and half a pace from palace men is the same as a scream from anybody else.

"What was that?" one of them said. He had his rifle up and was turning it at the ceiling, the empty gallery, the tall windows with the afternoon coming through them.

"Where is that coming from?"

"You heard it too?"

"Everyone heard it."

Somebody near the back said it quietly, the way people say things they've been told not to say.

"So the curse is real."

...

"There is no curse."

The Second Queen did not raise her voice. She did not need to. Every man in that line had been hearing that voice give orders since before some of them could shave.

"I do not believe in ghosts. I do not believe in curses, or voices, or dead grandfathers in the walls. There is a young man hiding behind a housemaid, and somebody in this building knows how to throw their voice."

She lifted two fingers toward Alexander. "Go and get him."

...

The front knight went.

He was the biggest of them and the bravest, or the one who had the most to prove, and he came up the middle of the hall at a jog with his rifle across his chest and his free hand already reaching.

Behind Felicia, Alexander turned his right palm up at his hip.

The moisture in the air of that hall was cold and old. It came to his hand the way iron filings come to a magnet, and it closed into something the length of a sewing needle and half as thick, clear as glass.

He flicked it.

It went under the edge of the chest plate and into a point two finger-widths below the collarbone, on the left side, where the Xia texts put the gate of the heart.

Nobody saw it. Nobody could have seen it.

The knight took two more steps.

Then his heart stopped beating the way a clock stops when somebody puts a finger on the pendulum. His face went very surprised. His rifle came off his chest on its strap and swung.

He went down onto the stone at a run and did not put his hands out.

The ice was already water by the time he stopped sliding.

"Marcus?"

The second one went to him, and the second one was two paces from the body when the needle found him too.

The third was shouting.

The fourth had got his rifle up to his shoulder and was sweeping it across the hall looking for something, anything, to put a bullet into. He never found it.

They went down one at a time, in no particular order, with no sound except the sound of armour hitting stone.

Five. Then six.

Nobody fired a single shot, because there was nothing in that hall to shoot at except a crying housemaid and the idiot hiding behind her.

...

Then the Second Queen put her hand on her own chest.

She did it slowly, almost curiously, as though she had felt something land there and wanted to find out what. Her mouth opened. The breath she drew did not go all the way in.

She tried again, and it went in even less.

"My lady—"

She went to one knee on the stone in a pool of cream silk, and then she went over sideways, and the coat came off her shoulders.

The line fell apart.

Everybody left standing turned their back on the prince at once and went to her. Somebody got his visor off and his ear down by her mouth.

"She's breathing. She's breathing, but it's bad — it's barely there—"

"Hospital. Now. Get her up."

"Quick. We need her in the car, her breathing is going—"

Three of them got her off the floor between them, one at the shoulders, two at the legs, and they ran with her. Her heel came off in the doorway and nobody stopped for it.

Car doors banged in the forecourt. An engine came up hard and gravel went against the side of the house.

And in the time it took them to get her through that door, four more of the men who had stayed behind went down onto the stone and did not get up.

The ones who were still on their feet looked at the floor.

Ten of their own. Ten men in full palace armour, lying in the middle of a hall at odd angles, some of them with their eyes still open, not one mark on any of them.

No blood. No wound. No smoke. Nothing.

One of the knights let his rifle go on its strap and went down on both knees on the stone. He took his helmet off. His hair was stuck to his forehead with sweat.

"Please."

He said it to the ceiling, to the gallery, to the walls, because he did not know where else to say it.

"We meant no harm to the Tenth Prince. We were ordered. We're leaving. We're going right now, all of us, we will take ourselves out of this house. Please don't kill us."

...

Behind him, men were already turning.

Nobody gave an order. Nobody needed to. They were backing toward the door with their rifles pointed at nothing and their faces grey inside their visors — and then the voice came again, and every single one of them stopped where they stood.

"Wait."

Somebody made a small sound.

"Take the bodies," the voice said. "Take them out of my house. Leaving them here is only adding garbage."

"Yes. Yes. Yes, of course-"

They moved faster for that than they had for anything since they came through the door. Two men to a body, arms under the shoulders, boots dragging. Somebody went back for a helmet that had rolled under the long table and would not look at the table while he did it.

They carried their friends out into the afternoon, and they laid them in the backs of the cars like luggage, and they did not look up at the windows.

Then the cars went.

All of them, in a line, as fast as the switchback road would let them, and the dust from the last one hung over the gate for a long time after the sound had gone.

...

The hall was very quiet.

Felicia was still standing with her arms spread.

She lowered them slowly, and turned around, and looked at him — and then at the floor where the knights had been, and at the open door, and back at him again.

She had not heard a word of it.

Not the warning. Not the order take the bodies. The voice had gone to twenty one ears and not one more, and all she had seen was a Queen shouting, ten armed men falling över dead for no reason at all, and the rest of them bowing to an empty ceiling and running away.

"What-" she said. "What just happened?"

...

Alexander looked at the doorway where the Queen's shoe was still lying on its side.

"The Second Queen," he said. He was still speaking slowly, carefully, the way a man speaks who has been awake for two weeks after fourteen years. "She won't live a long life."

"Really?" Felicia stared at him. "How do you know that?"

"I just know."

She kept looking at him. He let her look.

...

Three needles.

The gate of the heart, the gate of the lungs, and a small point low on the right side of the back where the liver keeps its door.

Not killing needles, not for her. The ice had gone into her shallow and come out as water, and she would wake up in a hospital bed tonight and the doctors would find a strain on the heart and a weakness in the chest and call it shock.

It would not be shock.

It would start slowly. Tired in the mornings. A cough that did not clear. A colour under the eyes that no powder would cover. Three organs, falling out of step with each other, a little more every week.

Six months, give or take.

She had killed his mother's brother, and his mother's father, and his mother's cousins, one by one across four years and four provinces. She had put a bomb under an aircraft with a seven-year-old in it.

And she had just walked into his house with twenty rifles to take him away.

Alexander did not let people who tried to kill him keep living. Not in Prussia, not in Xia, not in a country where the towers ran the states. He was not going to start here.

...

"Felicia."

"Yes?"

"Can you buy things online?" He said it like it had only just occurred to him. "The robots. The ones that clean. Instead of people."

She blinked at the change of subject so hard he almost smiled.

He put his hand in his coat and took out a card heavy, dark grey, his own name printed on it in plain letters. The lawyer from the capital had brought it up the hill in person two days ago, with a folder of papers and pen, and had waited while Alexander signed every page with a hand he was careful to keep slow.

His money. His account. His signature.

For the first time in fourteen years, nobody else was going to decide what he ate.

"Sure," Felicia said. "Sure, I can do that."

"And the food as well," Alexander said. "Let's get that online too. Everything.

Nobody has to come up the hill."

...

She took the card and held it in both hands like it might break, and went to find her phone.

Alexander stood alone in the middle of his hall and looked up at it properly for the first time.

The high windows with the grime of fourteen years on them. The gallery nobody had walked in a decade. The long table with thirteen empty chairs and one wet patch on the stone where somebody's helmet had rolled.

It was an empty building on an empty hill, and to him it was the best-equipped room in the world.

He had Prussia in his head — every machine, every drone, every system Gaia had ever drawn for him. He had Xia in his body and getting deeper every night. He had five hundred years of seven towers of magic, every formula perfected.

He was going to rebuild this place from the foundation up, with all of it.

He did not need allies. He did not need permission.

All he needed was time.

...

In the capital, the Second Queen came home in the dark with a blanket over her knees.

She had spent four hours in a hospital being told by very expensive men that her heart was strained and her lungs were tight and that she bad, in their professional opene frightened herself. She had let them say it. She had let them give her something to breathe from.

Then she had gone home.

She sat in her own drawing room now, under her own chandelier, and her face was the colour of the candles.

"That Tenth Prince," she said. "He cannot be allowed to live."

...

Her head butler stood by the door with his hands folded.

He had served her for twenty-two years. He had never once seen her come home without her shoes.

"But how, my lady?" he asked, very gently. "Ten of the palace guard are dead. The others won't go back. They're saying "

"I know what they're saying."

She pulled the blanket up a little.

"If we cannot take him in the light," she said, "then we will kill him in the dark."

"Send the assassins."

The butler did not move.

"I want the best there is," she said. "Not the ones we use on merchants. Not the ones we use on nobodies. The best. Can you do it?"

"Yes, my lady." A pause. "How many should I send?"

The Second Queen looked at the fire for a long moment. Her breath went in, and caught, and went in again.

"Send the best," she said. "And keep sending them. Don't stop until he's dead."

"Yes, my Queen."

The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 770

Previously, Alex had spent those three days in the hospital watching the world.

Felicia had thought he was resting. He was lying propped on two pillows with the television on the wall running the news, and a borrowed phone in his hand under the sheet, and he was reading everything this planet had to say about itself.

It took him about a day and a half to understand the size of it.

And the size of it was small.

Earth was behind.

Not a little. Not in one place. Behind in everything, the way a village is behind a capital.

Their aircraft still burned fuel. Their computers answered questions the way a clever dog fetches sticks — eagerly, and wrong about a third of the time.

Their medicine cut people open to find out what was inside them. There was not one machine on this whole planet that Prussia would have let into a museum.

He scrolled for an hour through what this world called its best technology and put the phone face-down on his chest.

"Is something wrong?" Felicia asked from the chair.

"No," he said slowly. "It's just very old."

She thought he meant the hospital, and agreed with him.

...

And it was not only the machines.

Magic existed here. So did cultivation. So did the old art of binding beasts.

He found all three in the corners of the news - a cultivation sect running a mountain resort, a licensed beast-tamer at a state fair, a magic academy in the capital with a very beautiful old building and a very ordinary syllabus.

All three were real, and all three were thin.

Everything he read said the same thing in different words.

There had been a great age once, a long time ago, and it was gone. What was left was a handful of families doing a so-so version of what their ancestors had done properly.

A man in the magic world of the towers would have laughed at the academy's entrance exam. A first-year disciple in Xia would have walked through this planet's best cultivation master like a door.

Now, in his own hall, Alexander took the necklace out from under his shirt and turned it over in his fingers.

It was a plain thing to look at. A silver chain, a pale stone, a setting worn smooth by a woman's thumb.

It had held five countries.

His mother had not only been the eighth Queen.

She had been a scientist. So had her father.

His mother's family. Small, quiet, no army, no council seat — and brilliant. A house that had kept the old arts alive in private while the rest of the world forgot them.

Somehow, they had built it.

They had taken the best of this planet's technology, its cultivation, its magic and its beast arts, and they had put each of them into something like a mind — a self- running intelligence — and shut it inside that stone. Then they had let it run.

Not for years. For thousands of years, inside, while almost no time passed outside.

Prussia was what technology became if you let it grow for a thousand years without a war to stop it.

Xia was cultivation with nobody ever forgetting a single lesson.

The towers were magic with five hundred years of competition behind them. The Dominion was the beast arts left to breed.

Every one of them had grown far past the world that seeded it.

And his mother had put that around his neck in a falling aircraft.

...

"It will teach you everything," she had said.

It had.

Alexander put the necklace back under his shirt, against his skin, where it had been for fourteen years.

He was the only person on Earth who had been to school there.

...

He started with the castle.

On the fifth night home, while Felicia slept, he walked the whole property with a bag of chalk and a length of cord.

Every wall. Every corner of the house. Out through the gardens, along the old gravel paths, around the dry fountain, down to the boundary where the ivy grows over the stone.

He drew as he went, lines and circles joining up across four acres, and where he could not draw he buried a small stone he had carved on the kitchen table that afternoon.

By dawn it was a single formation.

The towers would have called it a gathering array. It pulled heaven and earth energy in from the whole hillside and fed it down into the ground under the house, slow and constant, the way a root drinks.

It was also a wall.

And it was also a trap.

The robots came in a lorry on the eighth day.

Felicia had ordered four, then gone back and ordered two more because the card had not said no, and she stood in the forecourt with her hand over her mouth while the delivery men wheeled them up the ramp.

They were the best machines on the market. Tall, white, quiet, with soft grey hands and a single blue light where a face would be. They cleaned, they cooked, they did laundry, they could carry a man.

To Earth, they were the future.

To Alexander, they were a good start.

"They're beautiful," Felicia said.

"They're fine," he said, and she laughed at him for being hard to please.

The food came online, three times a week, in insulated boxes left at the bottom gate.

And on the kitchen counter, next to the kettle, sat a squat grey machine the size of a toaster that Felicia did not understand the purpose of.

"It tastes the food," he told her.

"It what?"

"It checks for poison. Before we eat."

She looked at him for a long time. Then she looked at the machine. Then she put their dinner in it, every single night, without being asked, and never once made a joke about it.

The weeks went by slowly after that.

He ate. He slept. He sat on the cold floor at night and drew heaven and earth down into the dantian, and the formation under the house fed him more of it than any mountain in Xia ever had.

And once a week he wrote to the capital.

The grey-suited man from the hospital was the Emperor's head steward, it turned out — the one pair of hands through which anything reached his father at all. Alexander's letters went to him.

They were very dull letters.

He was learning to read, they said. He was doing sums. He had finished the second primer.

He was working through elementary school at home, with Felicia's help, and he was very grateful for the patience of the palace.

The steward wrote back politely. Once, he enclosed a book about birds.

In truth, Alexander was building a mind.

Every night after cultivation he sat at a borrowed desk in the old study, with three laptops and a pile of parts the robots had carried up from the gate, and he worked until the sky went grey.

The artificial intelligence of Earth was stupid. It was stupid and it was boring.

It guessed. It flattered. It forgot what you had told it an hour ago.

He had lived fourteen years beside Gaia.

He knew exactly what a real one looked like.

He was not going to live on this planet without one.

...

Nobody came for the first three weeks.

Then on a night with no moon, a little after two, the gate lock clicked open under somebody's tools, and ten people in black came up onto the gravel drive in a line.

They were good.

They moved spaced out, silent, rifles low, hand signals only. The Second Queen had asked for the best, and for once somebody had listened to her.

They crossed the lawn toward the dark shape of the house.

And kept crossing it.

...

At the end of the first hour the leader stopped and held up a fist.

The house was still in front of them. The same distance. The same black roofline against the same stars. They had walked straight at it without a single turn.

"How far is that damn building?" somebody whispered.

"Keep moving."

They kept moving.

At the end of the second hour the leader stopped again, and this time he was breathing hard, and this time he did not whisper.

"Two hours," he said. "We've been walking for two hours. It's a garden. It's a garden, how can we not reach it?"

...

"Pull back," he said. "Back to the gate. Now. Something's wrong."

They turned around.

The gate was not there.

The drive was not there either. There was lawn, and more lawn, and the dry fountain they had passed at the very beginning passed again, again and again, from angles that and should not have been possible - and behind them, every time any of them looked back, the house.

The same distance away. Waiting.

...

Alexander came down in the morning with a mug of tea and looked out of the drawing room window.

There were ten people standing in his garden.

They stood scattered across the lawn at odd distances, the way chess pieces stand at the end of a game nobody finished. Rifles hanging off their shoulders. Black clothes wet with dew.

Every one of them was perfectly still. Every one of them was staring at nothing with empty eyes.

Felicia came in behind him and nearly dropped her cup.

"Who are they? Why are they standing like that?"

"They got lost," he said.

He knew exactly what was happening inside those ten heads.

The formation did not touch the body. It took the mind - caught it the moment it crossed the boundary and folded it into a loop with no exit. Walk to the house. Never arrive. Turn back. Never arrive. Walk to the house.

Their bodies had stopped walking hours ago.

Their minds had not.

In their heads, they were still on that lawn. They would be on it until somebody let them off.

...

Alexander finished his tea.

Ten professional killers. The best the Second Queen's money could buy. Men who had been paid, and paid well, for years, by people like her.

He smiled.

"Felicia," he said, "go and have your breakfast. I'll deal with the garden."

She looked at him the way she had begun to look at him lately — as though she could see something new every day and was not yet sure what it was.

Then she went.

He walked out across the wet grass and put a needle into the side of each neck, one by one, and caught each man as he went down.

Then the robots carried them.

Under the east wing there was an old stone cellar — a jail, once, when summer courts still came here and brought their prisoners with them. Iron doors, straw, a drain in the floor.

Alexander had found it in the second week and had not told Felicia it existed.

He sat all ten of them against the wall in a row.

And he went upstairs for his case.

In Xia, he had made one thing that the old masters talked about for a year after.

It was a hallucinogen. Something distilled from a mountain flower and three roots and a mushroom that grows on the north side of dead pines - in the wrong dose, it was opium. In the right dose, it did something more interesting.

It took away a person's ability to lie.

Not their will. Not their wits. Only the thing inside that builds a false answer before the true one gets out. Under it, a man would try to lie to you, and hear the truth come out of his own mouth instead, and watch it happen with horror. Alexander had brought the formula home in his head. It had taken him eleven days to find the ingredients on earth.

He put one drop under each tongue.

"Your phone," he said to the first one. "What's the code?"

The man looked at him with wet, furious eyes.

"Four, one, one, nine, seven, two," he said, and then made a terrible sound, because that was not what he had meant to say at all.

"And your bank?"

It took about ten minutes per man.

Phones. Passwords. Banking apps, and the second banking apps that were hidden behind the first ones. Security questions. The account in the capital, the account abroad, the account in a sister's name.

Alexander transferred it all, one by one, into his own.

...

One of them had eleven hundred thousand.

One had four million, and a safe house on the coast.

The leader had nine million, two apartments in the capital, a lock-up full of weapons out by the airport, and a very unhappy expression.

By the time he got to the end of the row, every one of the ten had given him between one and ten million dollars, and between them they had told him the addresses of fourteen safe houses, most of which had more money in them.

Alexander sat back on his heels in the straw.

This was a harvest.

That evening he found Felicia in the kitchen and asked her to write a letter.

"To who?"

"The Second Queen."

The spoon stopped in the pot. "Why would we write to her?"

"To say thank you," he said.

She stared at him.

"She sent people," Alexander said patiently. "They brought a great deal of money. It was very kind of her.

Please tell her the house is very net'

grateful and that weve been able to buy a great many things, and ask whether she would be willing send some more."

Felicia put the spoon down.

Then, for the first time in fourteen years, she laughed until she had to hold onto the counter.

She wrote it in her best hand, on the good paper, and he signed it.

...

In the capital, the Second Queen read it twice.

Then she put it on the fire, and stood up out of her chair, and screamed at the entire room.

"Useless! All of you — every single one, useless!"

The pain came on halfway through the word and folded her over. She caught the mantelpiece with one hand and stood there with her other hand pressed flat to her chest, breathing in small shallow pulls, while the staff looked at the carpet.

It came more often now. Every week a little more.

"If we can't kill that idiot," she said, when she could speak, "then I need to find another way to finish him."

Her head maid stepped forward.

She had been with the Queen since the Queen was a girl, and she was the only person in that house who was allowed to have an idea out loud.

"My Queen. If he's so hard to kill, then perhaps, we don't kill him." She folded her hands. "The Emperor holds the trial every year. The princes each given something to manage, and judged on the results. Let him enter. Let him stand in front of the whole court beside his brothers."

The Queen looked at her.

"He's awake now," the maid said. "But everyone knows it. An idiot who woke up is still an idiot. He'll have nothing to show and nobody to help him, and he'll make a fool of himself in front of his own father. There won't be any need to kill him after that."

...

The Second Queen straightened up slowly from the mantelpiece.

For the first time in weeks, a little colour came back into her face.

"That," she said, "is a very good idea."