The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 771

The letter came up the hill in an official car eleven days later.

The Emperor's head steward wrote it himself, in his small neat hand, and it said what the council had decided.

His Imperial Majesty, on the advice of the council, was pleased to grant the governorship of the island of Harland to Prince Alexander of the House of Leonhart.

The prince would take up his post at his earliest convenience.

And the court wished to see results in five years.

Felicia read it over his shoulder twice and did not understand why he had gone so quiet.

"Is it good?" she said. "It sounds good. It sounds like they're giving you something."
“Well,” Alexander thought, “first they hand over a castle, and now they're throwing in the entire island with it."

...

In the capital, the Second Queen laughed until she had to sit down.

"Harland." She said the word to the ceiling. "Harland. Out of the entire Empire, they gave him Harland."

Her head maid poured the tea and permitted herself a smile.

"It is the poorest place we own, my Queen."

"It is the poorest place anybody owns."

She was pale and her breath was still short, and none of that mattered this afternoon, because she had been at this court for thirty years and she knew exactly what that island was.

Nothing under the ground. They had surveyed it three times and found chalk.

No industry. No port worth the name.

A fishing fleet older than most of the men on it, a few thousand hectares of tired farmland, and a tourist season that had got shorter every single year for eleven years.

The only thing Harland had was space.

It was big. Big enough to hold several hundred thousand people, up to a million if you built properly - and there were not two hundred thousand living on it, because there was no reason to be there.

"Eleven governors," the Second Queen said. "Eleven, in forty years. Every one of them arrived full of plans and every one of them left early."

She took her cup with both hands.

"Let the idiot have it. Let him stand in front of my husband in five years and explain what he did with an island of fishermen."

Alexander read the letter three times.

Then he sat down at the desk in the old study, took a clean sheet of the good paper, and wrote back.

He said he was grateful. He said he would accept under one condition.

If he was to be judged on Harland in five years, then Harland had to be his to be judged on.

Not the council's. Not the ministry's.

His. The island would be an autonomous territory under the Tenth Prince - its own laws, its own taxes, its own accounts, its own decisions — and the throne would have no hand in any of it.

He signed it slowly, the way a man signs who is still learning how.

...

The council meeting lasted forty minutes and most of that was laughing.

"Autonomy." The Minister of the Interior turned the letter over as though the back of it might explain. "He's asking for autonomy. Over Harland."

"He doesn't know what he's asking for."

"He very clearly doesn't. Somebody has read him the word out of a book."

The Emperor sat at the head of the table and listened to all of it and said almost nothing, which was his habit.

"Your Majesty," the Minister of Finance said at last, "consider the arithmetic. The island costs the treasury four million a year in subsidy and returns less than one. If it becomes autonomous, that subsidy ends. We save money."

"And the political side?"

"Better." The minister allowed himself a small cough. "An autonomous territory is a settlement. A prince who accepts one has, in effect, taken his share and gone. Nobody who governs his own island is in line for anything else."

That was the sentence that carried the room.

They all understood it at once, and every man at that table thought it was his own clever idea.

Give the tenth prince a worthless rock and call it a kingdom.

He signs for it, he goes away, and the succession has one fewer name in it forever.

It was not a gift. It was a settlement paid in chalk.

"All in favour," the Emperor said.

Every hand at that table went up.

...

The government officers came out on the Thursday ferry.

There were nine of them, in three cars, and they brought a box of documents, a ministry seal, and a photographer, and they were on the island for four hours and forty minutes in total.

The governor's office in Harland town is a white two-storey building facing the harbour with a flagpole in front of it and salt damage halfway up the stone. The ceiling fan in the main room turns slowly and has done for decades.

They sat Alexander at the desk. They read the instrument out loud. They had him sign in six places.

"By this instrument," the senior officer read, in a flat civil-service voice with the fan going above him, "the island of Harland, and all waters within its boundary, pass to the governorship and autonomous administration of His Highness Prince Alexander of Leonhart, to be governed at his discretion, without interference from any ministry of the Empire."

He turned the page.

"Congratulations, Your Highness."

Then they took a photograph, got back into the cars, and made the four o'clock boat.

...

The people of Harland understood exactly what had happened to them.

It went round the harbour that same afternoon, and by evening it was in every bar on the front, and the men outside the fish market had it before the ferry was over the horizon.

"So we've finally got ourselves an idiot governor," said one, and spat into the water. "What do you think our island's future looks like now?"

"Better than it did."

"How?"

"Because the last four weren't idiots. They were thieves." The old man shrugged. "I'd sooner be governed by a fool than robbed by a clever man."

"Robbed of what?" somebody else said. "There's nothing here to steal. What exactly is there on this island for a man to be corrupt about?"

That got a laugh, because it was true, and because it was the kind of true that hurts.

"The place is so poor the rats have gone to the mainland. Half the young ones leave at eighteen. There's no work. There's nothing to do."

At the end of the bench, a very old man cleared his throat.

"I'm seventy," he said. "I've lived here every day of it. And in fifty years of watching this harbour I have never once seen one single thing on this island change."

Nobody argued with him.

"In the end, whoever sits in power makes no difference to us."

"Maybe the idiot prince is smart," said a young man at the back.

Every man on that bench turned and looked at him, and then every one of them sneered, and the young man went red and shut up.

The speech was on the Saturday, in the square in front of the governor's office, because that is where governors give speeches in Harland.

They came, mostly out of curiosity and had nothing to do.

Two, maybe three thousand people, packed in around the flagpole and up the side streets and sitting on the harbour wall fishermen still in their boots, farm families who had driven in, shopkeepers who had shut for an hour, a great many children with nothing else on.

Alexander came out onto the steps in a plain coat with Felicia behind him.

He stood at the podium and waited for the noise to drop, and it took a while, and he let it.

"I am the governor now," he said. "The Emperor cannot overrule me on this island.

The ministry cannot overrule me. Whatever I decide here is what happens."

The crowd went quiet in a way that crowds in Harland had not gone quiet for a long time.

"So here is the first rule."

"From today, and forever, Harland pays no tax."

It took about three seconds to land.

"No income tax. No property tax. No duty on your boats, your catch, your land, your shops or your children's inheritance. Not reduced. Not deferred. None."

The sound that came up out of that square was not quite a cheer.

It was three thousand people all saying something to the person next to them at the same time.

Because the truth was that tax in Harland had never been much - you cannot taxa man who has nothing - and every single person there had still spent their whole life filling in forms for it, and paying accountants they could not afford to argue with clerks on the mainland.

Somebody at the front started clapping. Then a lot of people did.

"Second," Alexander said.

The clapping died out.

"All of the island's money will go into making our bank bigger. And safer."

Three thousand people looked at him.

Harland has one bank. It is on the corner opposite the fish market, it has two floors, and it has four members of staff, all four of whom have worked there for over thirty years and two of whom are related. The vault is a room with a door. Nobody on that island kept money in it, because nobody on that island had money.

You were paid on Friday and it was gone by Sunday, and what was left over went in a tin.

"The bank," a woman near the front said, to nobody. "He's spending it on the bank."
"Third," Alexander said.

"From next month, any person in the world may put their money in the Bank of Harland. We will never audit it. We will never ask where it came from. Every account will be anonymous, and no government on this planet will ever be given a name by us."

He put one hand flat on the podium.

"And when they want it back, they can draw it out — here, or from any bank anywhere that agrees to work with us. The same amount they put in. No tax taken. No questions asked."

He let that sit for a second.

"And all of it will be entirely legal, because I am the one who writes the law here."

Nobody moved.

Three thousand fishermen and farmers and shopkeepers stood in a square in the sun and tried to work out what they had just been promised.

Most of them had left school at fourteen. Most of them had never held a bank card.

They understood tax, because tax had been taken from them their whole lives, and they understood the word anonymous only roughly.

So they stood there, mostly, and waited for someone to explain.

Then a voice came out of the middle of the crowd, quite loud, and it was not confused at all.

"Hold on. Doesn't that mean we're inviting money laundering?"

Alexander's hand came down flat on the podium.

The crack of it went across the square, and everybody flinched, and the space around the man who had spoken cleared about a metre in every direction.

"You."

The man went white.

"What's your name?"

“Richie.” He managed it on the second try. "My name's Richie. I—the hotel out on the east road, the small one? My family's run it for sixty years. Just sixteen rooms. I didn't mean any offense, Your Highness, I swear, I only—”

"How did you know that?"

"Know what?"

"What I just described. Nobody else in this square knew what I was describing."

Alexander tilted his head. "You did. How?"

Richie swallowed.

"I studied finance," he said. "On the mainland. Six years, and two more at a firm in the capital. I was — I was doing all right, actually." He looked at his shoes.

"Then my father got old and there was nobody else to run the hotel, so I came home. That was nine years ago."

"Good," Alexander said.

He straightened up.

"You are now the head of the Bank of Harland and of this island's entire financial administration."

Richie's mouth opened.

"Your first instruction is this. Build me an institution that can take money from anywhere on Earth — any country, any currency, any source — and hold it, and move it, and send it out clean."

Alexander said it with all the casual indifference of a man ordering lunch. "Come by the office Monday morning and we'll get started. We specialize in money laundering."

...

There was no sound at all in that square.

Not shock the way a crowd is shocked at bad news. Something further along than that.

Three thousand people standing very still with the same question in their heads, and the man on the harbour wall beside the old fisherman said it out loud, in a whisper, because somebody had to.

"Is he in his right mind?"

Because the new governor of

Harland had just stood on the steps of the governor's office, in daylight in front of his own people and a ministry photographer's empty chair, and announced that he intended to turn the poorest island in the Empire into a tax haver built for laundering the dirty money of the world.

And he had said it the way you say a thing you have already finished thinking about.

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The crowd went home talking, and Alexander went upstairs to the governor's office and sat down with the truth.

A tax haven is not a law. A tax haven is a reputation.

You can write anonymity into your statute in an afternoon. Getting a man in another country to move nine million dollars to an island he has never heard of, through a bank with four staff and a door for a vault, on the word of a twenty-year-old prince the whole Empire calls an idiot — that takes something else entirely.

He had no name. Harland had no name.

And the island had nothing to sell. No ore under the chalk, no port, no factory, a fishing fleet older than its crews and a tourist season dying a little every year.

To attract outside money, Harland had to create something people actually wanted to buy.

It was the only way to launder the proceeds into clean, legal cash.

He wrote to the head steward that night.

"If I want to borrow for Harland, how much can I have? I need it to start a business."

The answer came back inside a day, and it was precise the way that man was always precise.

The maximum credit available to the Governor of Harland was fifty million dollars, at ten per cent per year.

Alexander read it twice, and then picked up the phone instead of writing. "Fifty."

"Fifty million, Your Highness."

"I've read the figures for the other territories." He kept his voice slow and mild, the voice of a man still learning how sentences worked. "Governors take a hundred million. Two hundred. Three, for the northern province last year."

The pause on the line was longer than it should have been.

"That is correct."

"Then why fifty?"

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The steward chose his words the way a man walks on ice.

"Your Highness, there are people at court who understand perfectly well that a governor without money cannot do anything at all. Some of them consider that a satisfactory outcome."

A breath. "A number of interests have already ensured your government won't see approval above fifty million. The matter was decided before your proposal was even drafted."

Alexander turned to the window, watching the grey hulls resting in the harbour. The Second Queen's hand, without question.

"Fine by me," he said. "Fifty million, then. When can I have it?"

"If your proposal reaches me today, the money will be in the territorial account tomorrow morning."

"Good. I'll write it now."

...

In the capital, the Second Queen laughed so hard she had to put her cup down and wait for her chest to settle.

"Fifty million." She said it twice, to enjoy it twice. "The poorest island in the Empire, and the great Tenth Prince has gone begging for fifty million dollars."

Her head maid said nothing and refilled the cup.

"What does a person do with fifty million? Nothing. There is nothing on that rock to spend it on." She waved a hand at the room, at the silk, at the cabinets. "It is less than one of my necklaces. I have a necklace upstairs worth more than his entire government."

She sat back, pleased, breathing shallowly.

"Failure is already your destiny, your fate, so accept it!"

...

On the island, Felicia found him at the kitchen table with paper all over it. "Prince." She put a cup down at his elbow. "What are you actually going to do? Everyone in town is asking me and I have to keep saying I don't know."

"I read a book," Alexander said.

"A book."

'Think and Grow Rich." He turned a page around. "It said there is a great deal of money in a gold mine, but there is far more money in selling the idea of one. The man who digs gets tired. The man who sells the idea gets rich."

Felicia looked at him.

"So I'm going to sell an idea," he said. "Not a thing. Not fish, not fruit, not chalk. I am going to sell thinking."

"So for that I need two things. An enormous amount of electricity." He looked up. "And water."

Felicia was quiet for a moment.

"Do you want some lunch?" she said.

"Yes," said Alexander. "Please."

She took the cup away and went to the stove, and he watched her go and did not mind at all.

She had not understood one word of it. She never did.

She could run a house on nothing, patch a coat so you could not find the seam, sit with a broken boy for fourteen years without once complaining - she was the hardest-working and most decent person he had met on this planet.

Thinking simply was not her gift.

The second meeting in the square was bigger than the first, because people had talked.

Alexander came out onto the steps with a folder under his arm and did not bother with a greeting.

"All of you are poor," he said. "Do you want money?"

There was a beat of startled silence, and then a big old man in the third row put both hands in the air.

"Money?" He had a voice built for shouting across water. "Even the ghosts love money! How is a living man supposed to not like money?"

The square laughed. Alexander waited it out.

...

"Good. Then here is what you're going to do."

He opened the folder.

"Every house on this island is going to have solar panels. Not the old frames bolted on top of a roof - the new kind, the tile sort, shaped like a roof, because they become the roof. You take the old one off and you put this one on."

He held up a photograph of one.

"You'll use the power you need. And everything you don't need, you sell. To me. To the territorial government, at a fixed price, in writing, for twenty years."

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"And who's paying for the panels?" a woman called out.

"That's the good part. You choose."

He held up one finger.

"Option one. The government buys and installs them, free, on your roof. Nothing out of your pocket, not one coin. Then, when you start selling power back, the money you earn pays the panels off instead of coming to you. When the panel is paid for, the payments start arriving. After that it's yours forever, and so is everything it earns."

"And the second?" somebody said.

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"Option two. You pay for your own panels and installation, out of your own pocket, and you start selling power to the government from the first day. Every coin from the beginning." He let that sit. "And one year later, the government pays you back what the panels and the fitting cost you. In full."

The square went noisy.

He stood on the steps and let them argue, and watched which faces lit up.

Because he knew something about poor places. Poor is not the same as empty. There is money in this island, in tins and under mattresses and in thirty-year savings books — small money, frightened money, money that has never once been offered a safe way to grow.

Every household that chose option two was a household funding his power grid for him.

Fifty million was not very much. Fifty million plus the savings of two hundred thousand people was something else.

…

They agreed, in the end, in both directions.

Some paid up front, mostly the shopkeepers and the older families with a little put by, and they argued about it in the bar for a week first and then went and did it. Most took the free installation.

And the work started, and that was the first thing anybody had seen start on Harland in fifty years.

Lorries came off the ferry. Then more lorries. Crews went street by street through Harland town, and out along the coast road, and up into the villages old roofs off new roofs on, and men who had been out of work for three years learning to fit them by the second week and training others by the third.

…

Then Alexander went after the empty ground.

Nearly a third of Harland is rock. Thin soil over stone, too poor to plough, too broken to build on, and for two hundred years it had been worth precisely nothing to anybody.

He covered it.

Panel fields went up across the whole eastern rise — but not flat on the ground. Two metres up, on frames, in long open rows.

Because underneath them, the grass still grew, and the sheep still had shade in summer and cover in the rain, and the farmers could walk their flocks straight through the middle of a power station and not lose a single hectare of grazing.

Not one person on that island lost anything. That was the point. Nobody was ever going to tear it out.

The report reached the capital about six weeks later.

The Second Queen read it in the drawing room with her feet up and laughed out loud.

"Solar panels." She dropped the page on the table. "He's gone mad. Actually mad.

The idiot borrowed fifty million dollars and he is nailing sun tiles to fishermen's houses."

"My Queen." Her head maid was frowning at the report. "May I?"

"Please. Enjoy it."

The maid read it properly, and did not laugh.

"My Queen, Harland already has a power station. It burns oil. All of their oil is shipped in, and the shipping is why their electricity costs almost twice what ours does, and the subsidy on it was the largest line in that island's budget."

She turned the page over.

"If those roofs make even a third of what this projection says, he will stop buying oil.

And he will stop paying to move it. Over ten years, that is a very great deal of money that simply stops leaving the island."

The Second Queen's smile went flat around the edges.

"He is a fisherman's governor nailing tiles to roofs," she said.

"Yes, my Queen." The maid put the report down. "In the long term, though, he is saving a fortune."

...

The same month, Alexander started ordering chips.

Not off a shelf. There was nothing on a shelf in this Empire worth putting his name on.

He went to the three largest fabricators on the mainland with his own drawings, paid in advance, and told them exactly what to make.

Then he told them the part they argued about for a week.

Every component had to be sealed. Waterproof to a rating none of them had ever been asked for. Racks, boards, connectors, cooling loops, power couplings — all of it built to sit, running, under the sea.

"Under the sea," the chief engineer said on the third call. "Your Highness, forgive me. You want the data centre in the water."

"In the water. Eighty metres down, two kilometres off the north shore, on the shelf."

"May I ask why?"

"Because it's cold down there," Alexander said. "And it's always cold. And the ocean is bigger than any cooling plant you could build me."

He had to hold every part of it in his own two hands, and it exhausted him.

Not physically. In Prussia this whole project would have been a single afternoon's instruction.

Gaia would have designed the array, ordered the material, run the fabrication and laid the cable, and nobody would have needed to be persuaded of anything.

Here he had to explain waterproofing to a man with thirty years of experience, four times, on the telephone. Earth's best was Prussia's beginning. There was no shortcut. Until he had something better, every single decision on this island had to pass through him.

...

He sat on the harbour wall in October with the site report in his hands and the panel fields catching the last of the light behind him.

"The power's coming in," he said, to nobody. "And the chips won't cook, because the deep water never warms up."

Two problems, solved by a rock nobody wanted and a sea everybody ignored.

Now the third one. The only one that had ever really mattered.

The thinking itself. The logic. A machine that could take an ordinary person's work and actually help them carry it.

...

It took him three months.

He wrote it at the kitchen table and at the desk in the old study and on the harbour wall, through the autumn and into the winter, in a handwriting nobody in the Empire had seen before, while Felicia brought him food he forgot to eat.

He was not inventing it. He was remembering it.

Fourteen years beside mind that had run five countries. He knew the shape of the thing. He knew where the errors came from and what the fix was because he had watched a better version of it work his adult life, day of and planet's engineers were still arguing about problems Prussia had closed centuries ago.

He called it Gaia.

He did not explain the name to anybody, and Felicia assumed it was from a book.

...

They launched it in the spring, out of a two-storey building on an island most of the Empire could not find on a map.

Five times faster than the best model on the market.

More accurate, on every published test, by margins the testing houses ran three times because they assumed their own equipment was broken. It did not forget. It did not flatter. It did not make things up.

It simply worked, all the way through, the first time.

…

The Empire lost its mind.

Every technology company in the capital had a crisis meeting inside forty-eight hours.

Three of them publicly claimed it was fraudulent, then went quiet. The state broadcaster ran the story for nine consecutive nightsister was asked in parliament how foreign-standard artificial intelligence had appeared out of an autonomous fishing island with a population under two hundred thousand, and had no answer at all.

Nobody had seen it coming. Nobody had been watching Harland.

Why would anybody watch Harland?

And then the money started.

Subscriptions first, a trickle, then a flood — individuals, then firms, then three ministries who had spent nine nights calling it impossible. Token accounts for the ones who used it heavily.

Monthly billing, in every currency there was.

It ran on the roofs of fishermen's houses.

That was the whole machine, and Alexander liked to lay it out in order, because the order was the beautiful part.

The sun hits an island nobody wanted. The roofs turn it into power. The power runs a hundred thousand sealed chips lying cold on the seabed. The chips run an idea he carried out of another world in his head. And the idea goes back up the cable to somebody in an office in the capital who needs their work done.

And every one of them pays for it.

He had not sold a single fish, a single stone, a single hour of anybody's labour.

He had sold thinking.

Alexander stood at the window of the governor's office and watched the first real money of his life come in, and he was not thinking about any of that.

He was thinking that all of it was clean.

Every coin of it, declared, invoiced, receipted and auditable, out of a business the whole Empire could see.

Clean money is what you build with.

But he had built a bank with no name on the accounts and no audits and no questions, and a vault standing empty in a building opposite the fish market.

He had the clean money now.

What he needed next was the dirty kind.

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The first real money arrived on a Tuesday, and Richie brought the printout up the stairs himself because he did not trust himself to say the number out loud.

One million subscribers.

Twenty dollars a month, every one of them, on a service that had existed for eleven weeks.

"Twenty million dollars," Richie said. "A month. Recurring."

Behind him, Felicia had stopped in the doorway with a tray in her hands and forgotten she was holding it.

...

"And the corporate side?" Alexander asked.

"That's the other page." Richie turned it over for him, and his hand was not quite steady.

"Separate tier. Direct connection, machine to machine — the firms don't want a person typing, they want their own systems talking to ours. We've signed nine hundred and forty accounts, most of them on the mainland, four in the capital." "How much?"

"Another twenty million a month. Give or take."

Forty million dollars a month, out of a two-storey building opposite a fish market.

...

Felicia put the tray down very carefully on the corner of the desk, as though a loud noise might make the paper change its mind.

"Prince," she said. "That's how much is that in a year?"

"Nearly half a billion," said Richie.

"Half a—" She looked at Alexander. "Half a billion dollars? For us? For the island?"

"For the island," Alexander agreed. "Now go and cancel the lunch order."

"Why?"

"Because I'm spending all of it."

...

He meant it exactly.

Every coin of that money went straight back out again, and it went to two places only.

More power. More processors.

Another eleven hundred hectares of rock on the western headland disappeared under frames two metres high, and the sheep went under them the same week.

A second cable trench opened along the north shore. And out past the shelf, in eighty metres of cold black water, the sealed racks went down in rows, and then in rows of rows, until the survey ship's map of the seabed looked like a city drawn from above.

"Nothing to a reserve," he told Richie. "Nothing to a rainy day. Every dollar into the two things."

"Your Highness, most companies keep-"

"We're not most companies."

...

"Listen to me." Alexander tapped the desk twice. "There will be four competitors inside a year. Ten inside two. The only thing that keeps a customer is that we are the best, we are the fastest, and we make the fewest mistakes. That's it. That is the entire business."

"And that comes from?"

"Power and computation. Nothing else. There is no clever trick underneath it." He shrugged.

"So we keep adding energy and we keep adding processors, forever, and every time somebody catches up we are already further out."

Richie wrote it down.

He had studied finance for six years and worked at a firm in the capital for two, and he had never in his life heard anybody explain a business in four sentences and be right.

So it became a loop.

Money came in from the customers. The money bought panels and racks.

The panels and racks made the machine faster and cleverer, and a faster, cleverer machine brought more customers, and the customers sent more money - which bought more panels and more racks.

It fed itself. It got hungrier the more it ate.

And it meant that on paper, the richest man in the province was permanently, completely broke.

Everything that came in one month went out the next.

The account was swept flat on the twenty-eighth and full again on the fifth and flat again on the twenty-eighth.

Three months of that, and Harland had the fastest-growing technology business in the Empire and a territorial treasury you could have emptied with a wheelbarrow.

...

Then, on a wet evening in the third month, the phone on his desk rang with an outside number and no name on it.

"Governor Alexander?"

"Speaking."

"My name is Charles." The voice was old, unhurried, and extremely polite. "I am a financial manager. I represent certain families with interests across several countries, and I have been reading about your bank."

Alexander sat back in his chair.

"Go on."

...

"You have written a very interesting statute." A pause, warm and dry. "No audit. No names. No cooperation with any foreign revenue service. Is that an accurate summary, or is it merely a newspaper's summary?"

"It's accurate."

"Then I would like to test it." Another pause. "We are considering placing two hundred million dollars with the Bank of Harland. Would that be acceptable to you?"

Felicia was across the room, mending a cuff by lamplight, listening to nothing in particular.

"Sure," Alexander said.

...

"Sure?"

"Send it to our bank." He said it as simply as a man agreeing to hold a coat.

"And when you want it, take it out from wherever you happen to be. Any branch, any partner, any city. The same amount you put in, no deductions, no tax, no questions. That's the arrangement."

There was a silence on that line of perhaps four seconds.

"Governor," Charles said, "you are either very brave or very young."

"I'm both," said Alexander. "Send the money."

...

He put the phone down and sat with the rain on the window for a while.

Here is the part nobody on that phone call understood.

A bank that takes dirty money and hands it back out is not laundering anything. It is only moving it.

The money comes in dirty and leaves dirty, and the first serious investigation anywhere on the chain tears the whole thing open.

That was not what Alexander had built.

When Charles's people drew their money out — in the capital, in a foreign city, in whatever currency they liked — it would not come out of Charles's deposit.

It would come out of Gaia.

Out of subscription revenue.

Out of forty million clean, invoiced, receipted dollars a month from a million customers and nine hundred firms, every payment of it documented in a system no auditor on this planet could find a hole in.

The family's money would arrive filthy and go out of the far end wearing a receipt.

And their filthy two hundred million would stay in Harland, where it could be put to work.

...

The next morning he walked down the stairs to the bank and found Richie in the back office with a new phone system and three new members of staff.

"Do you know how a bank actually makes its money?" Alexander asked.

"Of course." Richie did not even look up from the terminal.

"It's the spread. You collect deposits from the public and you promise them a small return - five per cent, say. Then, while that money is sitting in your hands, you lend it out. Businesses, mortgages, working capital, whatever. Fifteen per cent."

"And?"

"And the difference is yours." He shrugged. "The bank keeps ten per cent on money that was never its own in the first place. That's the whole trade. That's been the whole trade for four hundred years."

...

"Good," Alexander said. "Then here is what we're doing with the two hundred million."

Richie looked up.

"We're lending it to me."

"To—"

"To the power company and the computation.company. Both of which I own, both of which have own, contracts, revenue and a repayment schedule, all properly drawn and all on the books." He put a folder on the desk The Bank earns its interest The families earn theirs. And the money spends the next three years underwater making Gaia faster."

Richie opened the folder, read four pages, and sat down slowly.

"This is legal," he said, in the voice of a man discovering something upsetting. "Every line of it. I wrote the law here."

...

So the world's dirtiest money went into panels on the roofs of fishermen's houses and racks on the floor of the sea, and came back out as thinking, and the thinking was sold to a million honest people who paid for it by card.

Month after month.

The machine got faster. The bills got paid. Charles's people tested the arrangement three times in the first six weeks - two withdrawals in the capitatand one in a foreign city and every single time the money came out to the cent, on the day, with no questions and no record of a name.

Then they stopped testing.

Then they told their friends.

Three more months went by, and Harland stopped being a joke.

Alexander's days filled up with people. Bankers came out on the ferry. Lawyers came. Shipping men came, and two mining families with nothing to mine and a great deal to hide, and a very quiet delegation of four men from a country that had not spoken to the Empire in eleven years.

More names, more accounts, more profit, every month bigger than the last.

And then the thing he had actually been waiting for started to happen.

They began building companies on his empty ground.

Not factories. Names.

A holding company with one office and a brass plate. A shipping registry with no ships.

A consultancy, a licensing vehicle, a trust, a family office - paper companies, dozens of them, then hundreds, each one legally resident on an island of fishermen and each one wiring its money into the Bank of Harland.

There was one address on the east road that had eleven companies registered in it.

It used to be Richie's hotel.

...

And then the real ones started coming too, which nobody expected.

Because when the papers work out, people follow.

A shipping man who registers in Harland discovers that his profits are untaxed forever and his money is invisible.

He set up a shell company abroad as his "official" headquarters just to avoid paying home-country taxes on his worldwide profits.

The infrastructure changed because it had to.

The airstrip got a terminal and then a second runway. The ferry went to four crossings a day, and then a proper harbour berth went in where the old fish quay had been rotting since before Alexander was born.

Two hotels went up on the coast road, then a third. An international school opened with nineteen pupils and had two hundred and forty by the following autumn.

And the money came in.

Not a stream any more. It came in the way water comes through a hole in a dam, faster every week, from accounts nobody could trace to places nobody would name, and the vault opposite the fish market had.

long since become a building of its own with four floors and a security staff of sixty.

Harland was in the news every week now, and for the first time in its history it was not because of a storm.

Some of it was flattering. A great deal of it was not.

The finance pages of three countries ran the same question in different words, and the question was always how the poorest island in the Empire had become, in under half years, somewhere that serious money wanted to be.

Nobody had an answer that did not make the rest of them look stupid.

…

In the capital, the Second Queen could no longer get out of bed.

It had taken longer than anyone expected. The very best medicine money can buy had fought it for well over half months — specialists flown in from four countries, treatments that were not licensed anywhere, a private ward built into her own house. They had bought her time. They had not bought her anything else.

Her heart was failing. Her lungs had been failing for longer. Her liver had gone in the last four months, and no scan, no test, no biopsy in any hospital on this planet had ever explained why three healthy organs in a healthy woman had simply started to stop.

She weighed very little now. The jewellery had been put away because it hurt her neck.

"Please."

Her head maid leaned in close, because the voice did not carry any more.

"My Queen?"

"Tell everyone." She had to take two breaths in the middle of it. "Tell the palace. Tell the newspapers. Tell every doctor, every sect, every temple, every witch, every cultivator on this continent."

"Tell them what, my Queen?"

"A billion dollars." Her hand closed on the sheet. "One billion. In cash, in gold, in whatever they want it in — to any person alive who can cure me."

...

It was in the news by the following evening.

Alexander read it in the governor's office with the harbour lights coming on behind him and the site reports still open on his desk.

He read it twice, and then he sat very still for a long time.

One billion dollars. In one payment.

Three needles. Three shallow points. He could undo it in eleven seconds.

He turned the paper over and looked out at the water.

A billion dollars, or her life.

That was, he had to admit, a genuinely difficult choice.

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The Almighty Dominance

He sat with that newspaper for most of the night, and the money was the smallest part of it.

A billion dollars was a number. He could make a billion dollars.

What he could not make was a witness.

Alexander still did not know which of them had killed his mother.

He knew it was one of two women.

The Second Queen had borne the First Prince - the crown prince, the eldest, the one the court had been arranging itself around for thirty years.

And the First Queen had come late to it. She had been barren for nine years and then, past forty, she had borne the Second Prince, and from the day that boy could walk she had been pushing him at the throne with both hands.

Two women. Two sons. One line of succession, and eight queens' worth of children standing in the way of it.

One of those two women had signed that.

The summons arrived four days later, on paper, with a seal.

His Imperial Majesty required the attendance of Prince Alexander of Leonhart at the Hall of Council in the capital, to answer questions concerning the illness of Her Majesty the Second Queen, contracted following his visit to Harland.

Felicia read it over his shoulder and went white.

"They're blaming you."

"They are."

"But you were at the castle, you didn't even-" She stopped. She had learned in two years to stop in certain places. "Do you have to go?"

"It's the Emperor," Alexander said. "You don't decline the Emperor. You just arrive early."

...

The Hall of Council is the oldest room in the Empire.

Forty metres of polished black stone floor. A gallery running all the way round, three storeys up, with the standards of nine provinces hanging over the rail.

Windows so tall the light comes down in columns you could stand a man inside.

Two hundred seats on the floor and every one of them full, because a prince accused of witchcraft against a queen is the best thing to happen to that court in a decade.

Alexander walked up the middle of it alone, and he made himself look small doing it, and inside he felt absolutely nothing at all.

The truth was it was a fine room.

It was also not a large one. He had held four palaces in the other world and the smallest of them would have swallowed this hall whole.

He kept his eyes down anyway, on the stone, the way a nervous young man would.

...

And at the far end, on the seat, was his father.

Emperor Maximillian Leonhart was sixty-one years old and looked carved. Grey at the temples, straight-backed, both hands flat on the arms of the chair, wearing a plain dark coat instead of anything ceremonial.

Alexander had not seen that face since he was seven years old and it had been leaning over a hospital bed.

Fourteen years of birthdays. Fourteen years of letters burned in a grate by a butler.

He looked at his father for exactly one second and then he looked back down at the floor, because his throat had done something he had not authorised and he needed it to stop.

...

The Minister of Health did the talking.

He was a heavy man with a good voice, and he came down off the steps so he could stand directly in front of Alexander while he did it, which told everybody in that hall who had sent him.

"Your Highness. Let us be plain, since the whole Empire already is." He turned so the gallery could hear. "Her Majesty the Second Queen travelled to your residence in Harland province in perfect health. She was carried out of it, that same afternoon, unable to breathe."

He let that sit.

"Ten men of the palace guard died in your hall. No wound on any of them. Since that day Her Majesty's heart, lungs and liver have been failing together, and not one physician in five countries can tell this court why."

"The people are saying the word curse, Your Highness. The whole Empire is saying it." He spread his hands. "So this council says it too. Whatever is in that house, it answers to you. You are responsible for her condition, and you are responsible for curing it."

The hall made a sound of agreement.

It came from everywhere at once — the Second Queen's faction first, then the ministries, then men who simply did not want to be the only one silent. Somebody in the gallery called out that a prince who could not clear his own house should not be governing a territory.

Two hundred people, in one room, deciding what he was.

And on the seat at the far end, the Emperor said nothing at all.

...

He just watched.

His father was not going to help him.

So Alexander made a decision on the black stone floor of the Hall of Council, and it was the same decision he had made in a puddle in the rain two years ago.

Give them what they already believe.

...

He lifted his head, and his face was open and troubled and about twelve years old.

"I don't know anything about the Queen being sick," he said.

His voice came out too loud for the room, and slightly flat, the way it had for fourteen years. Somebody in the second row winced.

"Nobody tells me anything. I wasn't even in the hall when the soldiers fell down, I was behind Felicia, everybody there saw me behind Felicia." He frowned, working at it. "But I heard something."

"You heard something," the minister repeated.

"I hear a voice sometimes. In my ear." Alexander touched his own ear with two fingers, helpfully. "It's been there since I woke up."

"And after that day it said something to me, and I remember it because it was long."

He recited it the way a child recites a lesson.

"It said: the Second Queen came into your house to take you away. She meant you harm. So I have made her sick."

The Hall of Council came apart.

"But it's not without a cure!"

Alexander said it fast, before anybody could reach him, and the noise dropped twenty per cent because everybody wanted to hear that part.

"The voice said she can be well again. All the way well, like she never got sick. It told me she can get better if one thing happens."

"What thing?"

"If she agrees that I'm allowed a chance at the throne."

There was one full second of absolute silence in the Hall of Council.

Then it was louder than before.

"He's asking for the succession-"

"On behalf of a ghost-"

"Silence in the hall! Silence-"

Nobody was silent. Two hundred people had walked into that room to watch a simpleton be blamed for witchcraft and had just watched the succession of the Empire get put on the table by a young man who could not read until he was twenty.

Up in the gallery, one of the standards was knocked crooked and stayed that way for the rest of the session.

The Minister of Health got his voice back and used all of it.

"Your chance?" He came in close, and now the good public voice was gone and what was underneath it was ugly.

"Your Highness, there is no chance. It was cancelled. It was struck out of the record when you were nine years old and it has been blocked at every review since, by this council, unanimously."

He turned to the hall and gave them the line he had clearly been saving. "Because you are an idiot. Because you were an idiot for fourteen years, and a man does not stop being one in two. And because not one province, not one regiment, not one family in this Empire will ever consent to be led by an idiot!"

That got applause.

Actual applause, from perhaps forty men, in front of the Emperor, while the son of the eighth queen stood on the floor in the middle of it.

Alexander waited for it to die.

Then he said, quite mildly, "The voice said you'd say that."

The applause stopped as if a door had shut.

"It said to tell you it doesn't want anything given to me." He looked around the hall, taking his time, the way a slow person does. "It said: I do not want him made the heir. I want him allowed to try. A fair fight, with his brothers, in the open."

He put it in the plainest words he had.

"The ghost doesn't like it when who gets the throne depends on what other people think of you. It said the heir should be decided by what a man can actually do." He shrugged, and it was almost a child's shrug. "It said results are the only thing that matters."

Nobody had an answer to that.

Because every man in that room had spent his whole career inside a system where the succession was decided precisely by what other people thought of you - by which queen faction you drank with

In whose reviews you sat on which prince's name you put your seal beside.

And the boy on the floor had just told the Hall of Council, in front of his father, that a dead man thought their entire system was cowardice.

On the seat at the far end, the Emperor moved for the first time.

He leaned forward slightly and he nodded, once, and the whole hall went quiet the way water goes flat.

"So I understand you," Maximillian Leonhart said.

It was the first time in fourteen years that Alexander had heard his father's voice, and it did not sound like a man asking a question. It sounded like a man closing a trap, and very carefully not saying yet which way it opened.

"You are telling this council that if I restore your eligibility — if I permit you a place among my sons, and a chance at the throne — then somebody will cure the Second Queen."

...

"Yes," Alexander said.

He said it simply, and he said it looking straight at his father, and for that one sentence he forgot to keep his eyes down.

"The voice already taught me how to do it. It showed me where and how, and I remember all of it, and I can do it with my hands He held them up briefly both of them, empty So Your doesn't have to trust a ghost. You only have to agree, and then have somebody take me to her room."

He lowered his hands.

"And she'll be well before I leave it."

...

The Emperor did not answer.

He sat back in the chair and he looked at his tenth son across forty metres of black stone, and he kept looking, and the silence went on long enough to become its own event. Somebody in the gallery coughed and regretted it. Around him, the council had begun to move.

Ministers leaned together. The

Chancellor turned and spoke behind his hand to the Minister of the Interior, who spoke to the Minister of

Finance who did not answe but reached for a folder - the Harland folder, the one with two years of revenue figures in it that nobody had bothered to read closely until about ninety seconds ago.

Men who had been laughing when he walked in were now doing the thing courts do best.

They were counting. Working out who gained, who lost, whose patron would be dead in a month and whose would not, and what it would cost each of them personally to advise the Emperor of the Leonhart Empire to say yes.

The Almighty Dominance

"Your Majesty."

The voice came from the left side of the floor, and every head in the Hall of Council turned toward it, because everybody knew which side of the floor that was.

There were three factions in that room, and there had been for twenty years.

The First Queen's people sat on the right, under the green standards.

The Second Queen's sat on the left, under the gold. And in the middle, in the plain seats nearest the throne, sat the ones who belonged to nobody — the career men, the old families, the ministers who served the Emperor and whoever came after him and had very carefully never been seen to prefer a prince.

It was the left side that stood up first.

The Minister of the Interior came down onto the black stone with his hands folded in front of him.

"Your Majesty, the Second Queen's household is prepared to be generous." He turned his palms up.

"We will agree to restore the Tenth Prince to the line of succession. Whatever this council struck from the record, let it be written back in."

A murmur went round the hall.

"However."

Everybody leaned in.

"However, let us be honest about the last fourteen years." The minister turned a slow half-circle, taking in the gallery.

"For fourteen years this Empire has been the subject of jokes in every foreign court. The Emperor's son who could not hold a spoon. The prince in the servants' wing. That was a humiliation, Your Majesty, and it was a humiliation borne by the whole house."

He turned back toward the throne.

"I think the throne is owed compensation."

The whole hall went very quiet, because every person in it wanted to know what he was going to ask for.

"The Tenth Prince may have his place in the succession," the minister said. "And in return, the territory of Harland — its government, its bank, its companies, its revenues, everything it holds and everything built on it — reverts to the Crown."

He smiled at Alexander.

It was a lovely smile, and everybody in that room could read it.

A prince in the line of succession with no territory, no money and no people was not a prince.

He was a name on a list. The Second Queen's faction would give him the title and take the island, and he would walk out of the Hall of Council with exactly what he had walked in with, which was nothing.

And Harland, which was now earning half a billion dollars a year, would belong to whoever held the Crown's purse.

It was the neatest thing anybody had said all afternoon, and the hall knew it.

On the right, under the green standards, the First Queen's ministers looked at each other and did the arithmetic, and came out in the same place.

In the middle, the neutral men did it more slowly, and came out there too.

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"Yes, Your Majesty. The minister speaks for the Crown."

"We agree. We agree entirely."

For the first time in twenty years, all three factions of the Hall of Council nodded at the same thing at the same time.

Alexander stood up.

He turned his back on the throne. And he started walking down the middle of the black stone floor toward the doors.

Two hundred people watched him go and not one of them understood what they were looking at.

"Prince Alexander!" The Minister of the Interior's voice cracked on it. "Where are you going? You are standing before His Majesty. Show some respect!"

Alexander stopped, and half-turned, and looked honestly puzzled.

"The voice in my head says you don't want to save the Second Queen," he said. "So I'm wasting my time. I'm going home to eat."

"What?"

It came from about forty places at once.

Alexander nodded, pleased to have explained it clearly, and turned around again, and kept walking.

He had covered nine metres of floor before the minister understood what was actually happening, and then the man came after him at something very close to a run, with his robe flapping round his shins in front of the entire council.

"Wait. Wait wait, Your Highness, wait."

He got round in front of him and put both hands up, not quite touching.

"We agreed. Do you understand? The council agreed. You may cure the Second Queen. We simply require, in exchange, that you give over the Harland properties

Alexander looked at him.

He looked at him for long enough that it became uncomfortable, the way a child looks at a beetle doing something unexpected on a path, with open and complete fascination.

"You're really an idiot," he said. "Aren't you?"

The hall made a sound it had not made in a hundred years.

"What?" the minister said.

"I came here to offer to cure her." Alexander said it slowly, as though for somebody who needed it slowe "That's the gift. I came with a gift. asked for my own place back as the payment. And you want me to pay you with my island for the honour of saving your queen?"

He shook his head.

"I'm not that desperate. She came to my house with twenty rifles to put me in a prison. I don't need her alive. You need her alive."

He tilted his head, listening to nothing.

"And the voice says, now that you've wasted its time, you also have to pay the billion dollars. The one she promised in the newspaper. To whoever cures her." He shrugged. "That's me. So that's fair."

"You—" The minister's face had gone blotched. "You—!"

And in that moment, all two hundred people in the Hall of Council saw it at once.

They had been on the wrong side of this negotiation the whole time. They had walked in thinking they were deciding the terms, and they had never once held anything he needed. He held the only thing any of them wanted. He had held it from the moment he walked through the door.

They had tried to take something from him.

And he had just put the price up.

The Minister of the Interior was not a fool, and he knew exactly how bad a move he had made.

So he did what men like him do when the floor gives way. He went to the throne.

He turned from Alexander, crossed the stone and went down on one knee in front of the Emperor, and his voice came out pitched for the whole gallery.

"Your Majesty. You have heard it with your own ears. The Tenth Prince has admitted, before this council, that he knows how to cure Her Majesty. And he is refusing."

He lifted his head. "I ask for a decree. Order him to cure her. And if he will not, let him answer for it - in a cell, Your Majesty, or on a scaffold.

A prince who lets a queen die out of a traitor and treated as one."

Surfeets a hould be

On the throne, the Emperor said nothing, and his expression said nothing either.

He was still thinking.

"The voice has something else," Alexander said.

He had not moved from the middle of the floor. He said it the way you'd mention a thing you nearly forgot.

"It says, if you want her cured, three things. My place in the succession." He counted on his fingers, carefully. "A billion dollars. And this minister's head in a box."

He put the three fingers down.

"If you don't give it all three, it says it will never tell me how to fix her. Not ever. Not even if I ask nicely."

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The Almighty Dominance

The Hall of Council went so silent you could hear the rain on the gallery windows three storeys up.

The Minister of the Interior was still on one knee in front of the throne.

He stayed there for a moment longer than he meant to, and in that moment every man in the room watched him understand it.

He had stood up and asked for Harland. Then he had chased a prince down the middle of the floor.

Then he had asked the Emperor to put that prince on a scaffold.

And now there was a ghost in the room that wanted his head, and the only thing standing between the Second Queen and her grave was whether the Emperor was willing to hand it over.

He had dug the hole himself, one shovel at a time, in front of witnesses.

There was no way out of it.

They had wanted to take everything from him, and he had turned around and hit them exactly where it hurt.

The Emperor leaned forward on the throne.

"Alexander."

The hall held its breath.

"I am going to ask you one question, and I want a plain answer. Can you cure the Second Queen, or not?"

Alexander bowed.

It was a clumsy bow, too low, the bow of somebody who has read about bowing.

"Your Majesty, I don't know anything about medicine." He straightened. "I'm just an idiot who only woke up a little while ago. I don't know how bodies work. Everything I do, I do because the voice tells me to. I just listen."

He spread his hands.

"And the voice said, if nobody agrees, then it won't ever tell me how to save her. So honestly, I don't know. If it won't tell me, then no. I can't."

The Emperor looked at his son for a long moment.

"Then who," he said, "is the man speaking in your head?"

Alexander bowed again, and this time it was a little better.

"He says he's the ancestor of this house, Your Majesty. My great-great-grandfather. He says he was the greatest Emperor the Leonhart line ever had, and that this was once his castle — the one in Harland province, the summer castle, where I lived." He kept his eyes on the stone.

"He says he'd been asleep for a long time. He only woke up because he couldn't stand it. He couldn't stand watching one of his own blood being treated like a dog in a house that used to be his. The servants eating at the table, off the silver. And his blood eating out of the scraps. And the Emperor with no eyes to see any of it."

He lifted his head.

"He says that's why he came. To teach a lesson."

Something happened to the Emperor's face.

It went red. Not all at once — it came up from the collar, slowly, a deep dark colour, and his hands closed on the arms of the throne.

"Did you eat from the scraps?"

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"Did the servants of my house make you eat from the scraps?"

"Yes." Alexander said it simply, because it was simply true.

"They didn't let me eat at the table. When I sat at the table, they hit me. They threw a bottle at my head. And then they gave me what came back off their plates, in the kitchen, cold."

The Emperor stood up.

It was the first time he had stood all afternoon, and half the hall stood with him out of pure reflex.

"How dare they." His voice was not loud. It was worse than loud. "How dare they do that to you. To my son."

Alexander bowed.

"The voice says it's very disappointed in you, Your Majesty."

Two hundred people stopped breathing.

"It says the true blood of the Emperor was turned into a dog by servants the First Queen and the Second Queen put in that house. It says a father let his son be disgraced because of what his women wanted. It says that is not what an Emperor does."

He paused, as if listening to the rest.

"It says you've truly disappointed it. It says you aren't fit to be Emperor."

The Hall of Council broke.

Men were on their feet in every faction. Somebody on the right side was saying the word treason.

Somebody on the left was saying it louder. A clerk had actually put his pen down and his hands over his ears, as though he could avoid being a witness by not hearing it.

Nobody spoke to the Emperor that way. Nobody had in sixty-one years.

But nobody was speaking to him that way now, either. Not the prince - the prince was only repeating what he was told.

It was an ancestor.

It was the founding blood of the house, standing in the Hall of Council and scolding its own great-great-grandson in front of his court.

What do you do with that? Arrest the prince, and you arrest the messenger of the dead. Silence him, and you are an Emperor afraid of his own grandfather.

The Emperor stood in front of his throne and, for perhaps the first time in his reign, very plainly did not know what to do.

Then he laughed.

It came out of him all at once, a big hard crack of a laugh that went up into the gallery and came back down doubled, and every man in that hall flinched from it.

He laughed until he had to put one hand on the arm of the throne. Then he wiped his eye with his knuckle and sat back down, and he was still smiling, and it was not a pleasant smile.

"Well," Maximillian Leonhart said. "Then tell me. What does my great-great- grandfather want me to do?"

Alexander bowed a third time, and this time he did it perfectly.

"The voice says, strip the First Queen and the Second Queen of their power. All of it."

The hall went dead.

"It says they were never supposed to fight over the Empire. The Empire belongs to you, and to the blood of this house, and to nobody else. They married in. They are not the bloodline it says a queen who fights for the throne is only tearing the house apart, and it has watched them tear it apart for thirty years."

He did not raise his voice at all.

"It says it would be better to kill would them. Take their power, take their households: And kill every minister who bows to them instead of to you. Because an Empire can only have one person that everybody is afraid of and it's supposed to be the Emperor."

On the left side of the hall, the Minister of the Interior was still on one knee, and he had gone the colour of old paper.

"It says kill everyone who took their side. Give all the power back to you, and you alone."

Alexander straightened up and looked his father in the eyes for the second time that day.

"And then it says there's only one fight an Emperor is allowed to have. The fight to make sure his people prosper."

Nobody moved.

Two hundred of the most powerful men in the Leonhart Empire sat in the Hall of Council with the rain on the windows, and not one of them madea sound - because the Tenth Prince had just stood in front of their Emperor, in the voice of a dead man, and recommended that half of them be executed.

And the Emperor was not laughing any more.

He was listening.

Because whatever his great-grandfather said, there was truth in it.

He was also already fed up with this problem. Maybe it was already time to do a clean-up.

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The Almighty Dominance

There is a story they tell in the villages of the south, about the most romantic couple anybody ever knew.

They had been married fifty-five years.

Everybody in the district knew them. They walked to anywhere arm in arm, they sat on the same bench outside the bakery every morning, and when the regional paper wanted a feature on lasting love, it was always their door the reporter knocked on.

And every time, the wife said the same thing.

"We're a happy couple. My husband is so kind to me. Fifty-five years, and he has never once raised his voice. He helps me with everything. Always romantic." She would put her hand over his on the table.

"And if there's an afterlife, I'll marry him again. I want to be his wife there too."

The husband never said anything.

He only sat beside her, and smiled, and nodded.

The reporter came back the next day, and the wife had gone into town for the market, and the old man was sitting on the bench by himself.

The reporter sat down next to him with his notebook.

"Your wife always says she'd marry you again in the next life," he said. "I've never heard your side of it. Would you? Would you marry her again?"

The old man did not answer straight away.

He looked left down the road. He looked right toward the bakery.

He looked over his shoulder at his own front door, and he waited until he was quite sure there was nobody anywhere near enough to hear.

Then he shook his head.

"Please," he said. "In the next life, could I please have somebody else?"

...

The Emperor of the Leonhart Empire had married his first two wives for a great many reasons.

Very few of them were love.

The First Queen had come with the northern provinces.

Her father controlled the rail and the grain and the two largest regiments on the border, and a young prince who wanted to be Emperor could not afford to have that man as an enemy.

The Second Queen had come with the banks. Her family held the debt of half the noble houses in the capital, and the Treasury itself had borrowed from them twice in a bad decade.

So he had married them. Both of them. Before he was thirty.

And they had put him on the throne.

That was thirty-five years ago.

He had been Emperor for all of it, and for all of it their families had sat in his council. Their ministers had drafted his laws.

Their votes had decided his budgets, and their sons were the two names every man in the capital had quietly already chosen between.

He wore the crown. He signed the decrees. He sat on the seat at the end of the Hall of Council.

And there were nights, more of them every year, when Maximillian Leonhart lay awake and asked himself whether he was actually the Emperor at all.

"Alexander."

The Emperor's voice came down the length of the hall, and it was quite gentle.

"I understand what the voice is telling you, and I hear the anger in it. But you should understand something too." He folded his hands.

"I love my wives. The First Queen and the Second Queen are good women. They helped me build this Empire, stone by stone, for thirty-five years. I cannot simply remove them."

On the left side of the floor, the Minister of the Interior closed his eyes in relief.

On the right, the First Queen's ministers let out a breath together.

Alexander opened his mouth to answer.

And the Emperor vomited blood.

It came out of him all at once, bright and dark together, over his hand and down the front of the plain dark coat and onto the step below the throne. He folded forward in the chair with his fist against his mouth and his shoulders jerking.

Somebody in the gallery screamed.

"Your Majesty!"

The Prime Minister was the first one up the steps. He was seventy years old and he took them two at a time, and he got an arm round the Emperor's shoulders as another mouthful came up and spattered the black stone.

"A doctor! Get a doctor in here, now—"

"No."

The Emperor lifted his head.

There was blood on his chin and in his grey beard and all over his right hand, and his eyes, when they came up, went straight across forty metres of floor to his tenth son.

"No doctor," he said. "It's the curse."

The whole hall went still.

"The curse?" The Prime Minister was still holding him. "Your Majesty, what curse?" "Who would dare?" somebody said from the middle benches. "Who would dare lay a curse on the Emperor?"

The Emperor did not look at any of them. He was looking at Alexander.

"Alexander." His voice had gone rough, but it carried. "Tell me the truth. Is this what the voice in your head told you? That the ancestor of our house has said — if I do not clear the First Queen and the Second Queen and their power out of this hall, then I will die?"

Alexander had absolutely no idea what to say.

There was no voice.

There had never been a voice.

There was no ancestor, no great-great-grandfather, no ghost in the walls of the summer castle.

And he had not touched the Emperor.

He had not been within forty metres of him. Not a needle, not a thread of energy, not a single point on the man's body. Whatever had just come out of his father's mouth, it had not come from him.

So how was his father cursed?

He did not answer.

He did not need to, as it turned out, because the Emperor did not wait for him.

Maximillian Leonhart wiped his mouth slowly with the back of his hand, and then he took the Prime Minister's arm and used it to stand up.

He stood in front of his throne with blood down the front of his coat, and he looked out over two hundred of the most powerful men in the Empire.

"Everyone, listen to me."

Nobody made a sound.

"I do not want to die." He said it plainly, the way you would say you did not want rain. "But my ancestor - my great-grandfather - has told me what I must do, and he has told me what happens if I don't. And I have just heard him."

He lifted his bloody hand a little, so they could all see it.

"So today, now, in this hall, I declare it. The power of the First Queen and the power of the Second Queen will never again enter this chamber."

The Hall of Council did not make a noise.

It could not.

The two largest factions in the Empire had just been abolished in one sentence, by a man with blood on his chin, and every one of the men who belonged to them was sitting in this room, in his seat, in plain sight.

"Soldiers," the Emperor said.

Both of the great doors at the far end of the hall came open at once.

They came in at a run, in two columns, in grey uniforms with rifles across their chests - the Emperor's own household guard, not the palace regiment, not any unit whose colonel had ever drunk at a queen's table.

A hundred of them, perhaps more. They split to the left and the right and went down both sides of the hall along the walls, and in less than twenty seconds every bench in the Hall of Council had a soldier at the end of it.

"Every minister in this room who has served the First Queen or the Second Queen before he served me," the Emperor said, "is under arrest Take them. Strip them of rank and title. Then go to their houses, and their families' houses, and their offices, and their companies - and confiscate everything."

"Yes, Your Majesty!"

The rifles came down off the chests.

They went along the benches man by man, and they did not need a list, because somebody had already made one.

Hands on shoulders. Men pulled up out of their seats. A minister on the right side tried to stand without being told to and was put back down with a rifle butt.

"Your Majesty!"

It came from everywhere at once, now, all the voices that had been silent for a minute.

"Your Majesty, you cannot do this!"

"There is no law the council has not voted - this is not—"

"Your Majesty, thirty years I have served-"

The Minister of the Interior was on his feet with a soldier on each arm and his face the colour of the paper he used to write the Second Queen's orders on.

"You cannot!" he shouted. "You cannot do this!"

The Emperor looked down at him from the step, and he smiled, and there was blood in his teeth.

"Why can't I?"

He let the question sit.

"You were all here. You all heard it. Alexander has just told this whole council what my ancestor requires." He counted it off on his bloody fingers.

"If I want this curse lifted, I must put the First Queen and the Second Queen out of this palace. And I must kill every minister who chose to serve their factions instead of serving me."

He lowered the hand.

"That is the condition for my cure. I didn't set it. My great-grandfather did." He shrugged, very slightly. "And I do not want to die."

They dragged the Minister of the Interior past Alexander on the way out.

The man's heels were scraping on the black stone and his mouth was still moving, and as he went by he twisted round in the soldiers' hands and looked at the Tenth Prince with a pure, bottomless hatred.

Alexander barely saw him.

He was looking at the throne, and at the man standing in front of it with blood on his coat and a completely steady pair of hands.

He had walked into this hall to play everyone in it.

It took an hour.

By the time the rain had stopped over the capital, the town houses of forty-one ministers had soldiers on the doors.

Their offices were sealed.

Their bank accounts were frozen at nine banks at once, which should have taken a week of paperwork and had apparently been drafted in advance.

Their companies had new locks, and their families were standing on the pavements outside with one bag each.

The whole capital watched it happen, live, on every screen in every café.

Nobody had been told it was coming.

The First Queen was in her own drawing room when she heard it start.

It began as noise in the corridor. Then boots. Then a sound she had not heard in thirty-five years of marriage, which was one of her own doors being opened without anybody knocking on it first.

The soldiers came through the main hall of her wing in a column, and their captain stopped in front of her and did not bow.

"First Queen. By order of His Imperial Majesty, and for the protection of His Majesty's life, you are removed from the capital, effective immediately." He did not look at her face.

"You'll be escorted to a residence in the country. You will remain there until His

Majesty orders otherwise."

"What?"

She was on her feet. She was sixty and beautiful and had not been told no by anybody but her husband since she was nineteen.

"What did you say to me? I am the First Queen of this Empire! My family built half the railways you rode in on." She came round the table at him. "I have the Emperor.

He supports me. He has always supported me. Take me to him, now, I want to protest this to his face-"

"His Majesty isn't receiving, ma'am."

"I don't care what he's-"

"His Majesty," the captain said, "is receiving nobody from this household ever again."

The Second Queen went out the same afternoon.

She could not walk, so they carried her. They brought her out through the front doors of her mansion on a stretcher with two nurses at the sides and her head maid walking behind, and the surt had come out after the rain and was shining full on the steps as they came down them.

She was very thin under the blanket. Her eyes were open.

She was looking up at the sky with no expression at all, the way a person looks at a thing they cannot understand, as they put her into the back of the van.

The ministers went the same way.

Their houses went. Their palaces their went. Their country estates, racehorses, their shares, their art, their wives' jewellery, their sons positions in the regiments passed into the Emperor's name all of t in a single day, because it had all been waiting to pass for a very long time.

Nobody in the capital was fooled.

Every person in the Empire watching those screens that night understood exactly what they had seen.

A man who had spent thirty-five years sharing his own Empire with two women's families had been handed a reason — any reason — and he had not wasted one second of it.

In one afternoon, every piece of power in the Empire had come back to one pair of hands.

For thirty-five years, the Emperor publicly claimed he loved his wives.

But when somebody told him he was allowed to stop, he folded in seconds and pushed all the blame onto them.

He went so far as to draw blood from his own tongue to mimic curse. But there was no deceit in the agony: he truly, desperately wanted to be free.

The Almighty Dominance

They kept him in the palace for three days.

Nobody called it that. He had a suite in the east wing with a sitting room and a view of the gardens, and a man outside the door in a grey uniform who was extremely polite about the fact that the door was not going to open.

Alexander spent the three days at the window, watching the Empire being taken apart and put back together.

It was the largest purge in a century, and on the outside it barely made a sound.

The state broadcaster ran it as a reshuffle. Forty-one ministers had been found wanting in their duties.

They had been thanked for their service and replaced.

There were photographs of the new men being sworn in, with good suits and grave faces, and a short statement from the palace about renewal and efficiency.

That was all the public got.

Inside the palace, nobody was pretending.

He heard it in the corridors. Two queens' households, thirty-five years of patronage, every office and seat and regiment their families had ever put a friend into — all of it being pulled out by the roots and replaced with men whose only loyalty had ever been to the Emperor.

Not the next Emperor. Not a faction. Him.

On the second evening a footman brought dinner and said, under his breath, that all the princes and princesses had been summoned. Every one of them. An extraordinary meeting, the first in the Emperor's reign.

On the third evening, the door opened.

The meeting hall was smaller than the Hall of Council.

And there was a gallery at the back, behind a rail, where perhaps a dozen of the new ministers stood in their new suits and watched.

His brothers and sisters were already there.

Fifteen of them, in a loose ragged crowd at the front of the room, and almost none of them had he ever seen before in his life.

There was a woman in her late twenties in a military dress uniform.

There were two boys who could not have been more than sixteen, standing together and trying not to look nervous.

There was a man with a banker's haircut, and another in a white suit who was holding a drink he had not been offered.

Half-brothers and half-sisters, from eight different queens, who had grown up in eight different households.

The only thing any of them had in common was the way they looked at him when he walked in.

"So that's him."

"The idiot."

"That's not what I heard. I heard he's not an idiot at all. I heard he was pretending." "For fourteen years? Nobody pretends for fourteen years."

They looked at him the way people look at a crack in a wall they have lived beside for years — as though it had always been there, and never mattered, and had now suddenly and unreasonably brought the whole house down.

One of them came out of the crowd toward him.

He was about thirty, tall, with the Leonhart jaw and his mother's colouring, in a dark suit that had cost as much as a house in Harland. He walked up until he was close enough that Alexander could smell the coffee on his breath.

"You were supposed to just die," he said quietly.

It was not a threat. He said it like a man remarking on a clerical error.

"Fourteen years, in a house at the end of nowhere. You were supposed to do everybody the courtesy of dying in it."

"Bad luck for you, then," Alexander said.

He said it pleasantly.

"I'm still alive." He tilted his head slightly. "And honestly, I think your mother is going to die first."

He did not know most of the faces in this room.

But he knew two of them. He had made sure to know two of them. The sons of the First Queen and the Second Queen — the two men every courtier in the capital had spent thirty years choosing between — and the man in front of him now, with the Leonhart jaw and his mother's colouring, was the elder.

The crown prince. The Second Queen's son.

Whose mother had left the capital four days ago on a stretcher, in the sun, looking up at the sky.

"What did you say?"

The crown prince's hand went inside his jacket and came out with a pistol, and he had it up and level at Alexander's face before anybody in the room had understood that he was carrying one.

Somebody at the back gasped.

Alexander had already moved.

He took the wrist first — a turn, a press, the thumb against the nerve at the base of the palm — and the gun came out of the prince's fingers as though it had been oiled. It was in Alexander's hand before the crown prince had finished closing his.

And while the man was still standing there, staring at his own empty hand, Alexander slapped him across the face.

The sound went up into the dark of the ceiling and came back down. Nobody in that room moved.

The Tenth Prince - the idiot, the boy in the servants' wing, the thing nobody had bothered to count — had just disarmed the crown prince of the Leonhart Empire in about half a second and then slapped him like a servant, in front of fifteen royal siblings, a dozen ministers, and six cameras set into the walls of the palace. And their father had not even arrived yet.

Alexander ejected the magazine, dropped it on the floor, cleared the chamber, and set the empty pistol down on the long table.

The crown prince put his hand up to his face.

When he took it away, his cheek had a clear white print on it that was already going red, and his eyes had gone flat and very strange.

"You're dead," he said. "You're dead. Do you understand me? You're—"

He came forward.

"His Imperial Majesty, the Emperor!"

The announcement came from the double doors at the side of the room, and every person in it straightened as though a string had been pulled.

The crown prince stopped mid-step.

Fifteen princes and princesses went silent and stood where they were, in their loose ragged line, and the Emperor came in.

He looked older than he had four days ago.

Greyer in the face.

He walked slowly, and there was a man a half-step behind him ready to take his arm, and he coughed twice into a folded handkerchief before he reached the chair at the head of the room and sat down in it.

He looked out over his children.

"Well," he said. "Do any of you know why I've called you here?"

The crown prince stepped forward before anybody else could.

He had a hand-shaped mark still glowing on his cheek and he did not touch it.

"Father. It must be because of him." He did not look at Alexander. "This idiot has been talking nonsense. Ghosts. Curses. Voices in his head. He's caused chaos in the council and chaos in the capital, and my mother—"

His voice caught very slightly.

"Yes, Father." That was the woman in the military uniform. "The Tenth Prince has disgraced the house."

"He should be punished," said the man with the banker's haircut.

"Punished, Father."

Five or six of them, the ones who had grown up under the Second Queen's roof or near it. They said it together, almost on top of each other.

The Emperor laughed.

It was a tired laugh, and it turned into a cough halfway, and he had to put the handkerchief up again.

"Punished," he said, when he had his breath back. "Him? No. He isn't the one being punished here." He folded the handkerchief. "I am. By my own ancestors."

He looked along the line of his children, one face at a time.

"I am very sick. You can all see it. And before I die, I want to set something right."

Alexander looked at his father's face.

He had spent years in the other world with a teacher in Xia who could read a man's whole body from across a courtyard. The colour of the lips. The white of the eye. The skin under the jaw and the pulse at the temple and the way a man breathes when he thinks nobody is counting.

There was nothing wrong with this man.

Nothing at all. His heart was strong. His liver was clean. His colour, under whatever he had put on it this morning to look grey, was the colour of a man who walked every day and slept well.

The Emperor of the Leonhart Empire was going to live another twenty years without trying.

Thirty, if he was careful. Maybe forty.

"My ancestor came to me in a dream," the Emperor said.

He said it gravely, and the whole room listened.

"He told me I

I have not treated my children equally. He told me I let some of you grow strong on things that were hever yours — on your mothers' families, on their money, on their friends in my council And while you grew fat on that the real jewel of this house was buried under the weight of grown men's power, and nobody could see it."

He did not look at Alexander when he said it. He did not have to.

"And for that," the Emperor said, "I have been cursed."

He sat back.

"So I am going to do the right thing, as my ancestor asks." He looked at them almost kindly. "I am confiscating everything. Your titles, your offices, your seats on the boards, your companies, your properties, your accounts. All of it."

Nobody breathed.

"Because every single thing any of you own," the Emperor said, "came to you from me, or from your mother. And your mothers are no longer in a position to object."

The room broke.

"Father." The crown prince's voice had gone up a note. "Father, that's not fair. I built my companies myself. I worked for eleven years—"

"Yes, Father." That was the Second Prince, the First Queen's son- a narrow, pale man of about twenty-five who had been standing at the far end and saying nothing. "Mine too. My holdings are my own."

"Father, my foundation—"

"The shipping line is in my name, Father, not Mother's—"

"You can't just "

Not loudly - they were royalty, and royalty is trained out of shouting — but fifteen people all took a breath at the same time and all began to speak and all stopped again, and the result was a sound like a wave hitting a wall. Alexander stood at the end of the line and looked at his father with an expression that, for once, was not an act at all.

An old raccoon.

An old fox.

He had walked into that council with a perfectly good reason, and the old man had picked it up off the floor, put it on like a coat, and used it to take the fortunes of fifteen of his own children in a single afternoon.

"Fine," the Emperor said.

He said it quietly and the whole room stopped.

"Fine. Anyone who does not want to take part in the selection may keep everything they have." He shrugged. "And you will be removed from the line of succession, permanently."

There was a silence.

"What?" said three of them at once.

"I've told you. The Emperor folded his hands. "My ancestor was very clear, The only way to lift this curse is to take back back what I gave Sol take it all. Then I give each of you a piece of land to govern. Empty land. No money behind you, no family, no friends in council, nothing but you."

He held up one hand, fingers spread.

"Five years. And whichever of you makes your land grow more than the others —

governs it better, leads it better, turns it into something — that one gets my seat." Every prince and princess in the room went very quiet in a very particular way. You could almost hear them doing it. Adding it up. Setting everything they owned against a throne, and a throne against five years in the dirt, and five years in the dirt against every sibling standing beside them.

The two sixteen-year-olds looked at each other.

The woman in the military uniform looked at the floor.

The crown prince looked at nobody. The white print on his cheek had faded, and the thinking had started behind his eyes.

"Father." It was the crown prince who spoke first, carefully now. "This land we'd govern. How would it be fair? Some land is better than other land. What stops one of us getting a province and another getting a swamp?"

"Good," the Emperor said. "That's the right question. Here is how we'll do it."

He raised a finger.

"Anyone who wishes to compete for the throne gives up every asset, as I said. And then you go in incognito. Not as a prince. Not with a title, not with a name anybody will recognise, not with a guard or a secretary or a car. You arrive as nobody."

He snapped his fingers.

A pair of servants came in from the side door with a narrow table between them and set it down in front of the Emperor's chair.

On it, face-up in a neat row, were wooden cards. Plain pale wood, the size of a hand, each one with a name burned into it in black.

"These are county estates," the Emperor said. "All of them Crown land. All of them left without proper management for a very long time — in some cases, for longer than any of you have been alive. Each of you who stays in will get one."

Alexander read the names from where he stood.

He did not recognise one of them.

"Father." That was the woman in uniform. "Who chooses first?"

"We'll draw lots," the Emperor said. "Luck decides the order. Nobody can complain about luck."

He looked at them over the table.

"But remember this." He tapped the edge of it. "Whoever wins the draw does not choose for themselves."

A murmur.

"You choose for somebody else," the Emperor said. "The winner of the first draw picks one card — and hands it to one of your brothers or sisters. You decide which land they get. Then they pick for the next one. And so on down the line."

He let them take that in.

"One giving to another. You'll all want to give the worst land to whoever frightens you most. Every one of you will be doing it to every other one." He smiled slightly. "That is what will keep it fair."

Of the fifteen princes and princesses of the Leonhart Empire standing in that room, six stepped forward to the table.

The rest stepped back.

Nine of them chose their companies and their accounts and their houses, and gave up the throne of the Empire in about four minutes, and a few of them looked relieved about it.

The six who stayed stood around a narrow table covered in wooden cards, each with a name burned into it the crown prince with his cheek still faintly pink the Second Prince

With his narrow pale face and every one of them was already reading those names very carefully, and working out which was the worst.

And which of the others they were going to give it to.

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"Father."

The crown prince did not touch the cards. He stood over the table with both hands at his sides and looked at the Emperor instead.

"Is this really necessary?" His voice was careful now. "I have been the crown prince for twenty-two years. I've sat on your council. I've represented you in meetings you couldn't attend. Haven't I already proved I can do this?"

"Father." That was the Second Prince, narrow and pale at the far end of the table. "Why not simply choose? Name one of us, here, now. Say whose name you want on the throne." He spread his hands. "I promise you, none of us will hold it against you."

"Yes, Father." The Third Prince was a heavy man in his early thirties with a banker's haircut and a signet ring he kept turning. "And forgive me, but think about what you're asking. If I hand over every company I have and then I lose — I've lost everything. Isn't that too much to risk?"

"My children."

The Emperor said it gently, the way you speak to people who have said something foolish and do not know it yet.

"No pain, no gain. If you are not willing to lose your companies to win this seat, then that only tells me you do not have the mind of an Emperor. And if you don't have that, you are not worthy of the chair."

He nodded at the door. "So step back now. Go and join your brothers and sisters. You would never have passed the selection anyway."

The Third Prince stopped turning his ring.

He did not step back.

"Father." That was the Fifth Prince - younger, sharp-faced, standing a little behind the others. "What is the purpose of all this? Really?"

"Have you ever heard how a lion raises its cub?"

Nobody answered.

"It throws it into the valley," the Emperor said. "Off the cliff, down onto the rocks, alone. And the cub that climbs back up is the only one worth keeping."

He looked along the table, face by face.

"That's what I'm doing. I want every one of you to let go of every privilege your title has ever bought you. Go in as nobody. Start from the bottom of a valley. Because that is the only way I will ever see what is actually inside you. Not your mother. Not her family. Not your friends at court. Only you, and what you can do with your own two hands."

"But Father." The crown prince picked up one of the wooden cards at last, turned it over, and set it down again. "Isn't this too much? Look at these. Look at the names on them."

He swept a hand over the table.

"I know half these places. They're nothing. They're corners of the map where we sent barons and counts into exile when they embarrassed somebody. There's nothing there. There's no road. There's no money. There's nobody."

"Then you'll fail," the Emperor said, "and somebody else will be Emperor, because they were more capable than you."

"Father, that's harsh."

"No. I think I spoiled you. No-your mother spoiled you, and I let her." He leaned forward slightly in his chair. "So listen to me, all of you, because I'll only explain this once."

The room went quiet.

"I am not asking any of you to take a ruined county and turn it into an empire in five years. That is not the test. This chair is mine, and it stays mine until I'm finished with it." He tapped the arm of it.

"You only have to do a little better than the brothers and sisters standing next to you. That's all. I will measure each of you from where you started to where you finish. And whoever has climbed the furthest — that is my heir."

Six people around a narrow table all understood the same thing at the same moment.

Not a miracle. Not a kingdom out of a swamp.

Just better than the others.

"Understand one more thing," the Emperor said.

"From tomorrow, I am going to announce to the whole Empire that the six of you have no right to the throne. That you've been passed over. That you're finished." He smiled thinly.

"This is a test, and part of the test is who stays with you when you're worth nothing. Every flatterer, every hanger-on, every man who was planning to ride your name into a ministry- they'll be gone within a week. Good."

"Then who will you name, Father?"

"One of the ten who stepped back tonight. I'll say they're the one being prepared." He shrugged. "It's camouflage. So whether you go in incognito or whether somebody recognises you, the world will believe you have no value at all."

His voice went hard.

"And if any one of you tells a friend, a lover, a servant, anybody, that you are still in the running — you're out. Instantly. No appeal."

The prince in uniform looked up at the gallery at the back, where the new ministers in their new suits stood behind the rail.

"Father. What about them? They already know."

The Emperor laughed.

"Those men are the most loyal ministers I have. Not one of them has ever sat at your mothers' tables." He did not look round at them.

"They're here as witnesses. They'll watch the draw, they'll record it, and they will never say a word about it to a living soul- because they know that if they do their heads come off, and so do the heads of everybody in their families." sŵnovels

Up behind the rail, a dozen new ministers stood very straight.

Six heirs looked at each other across the table.

"Well, then," the Emperor said. "Let's begin. What are you waiting for?"

A servant came forward with a small velvet tray and six ivory dice.

"Each of you throws once. Highest number chooses first."

The Second Prince threw a six.

He looked at it for a moment as though it might change, and then he smiled a narrow, pale smile and stepped up to the table.

He did not hesitate. He ran one finger down the row of wooden cards, stopped near the end, and picked one up.

"I'm sending the Third Prince," he said, "here."

He held it out across the table.

The Third Prince took the card and read the name burned into it, and the colour went out of his face all at once.

It was a mining town in the far north-west. So remote that the railway had stopped going there in his grandfather's time.

Two pits, both closed, and a population of old men who had been too poor to leave when the young ones went.

After that, it was knives.

Every heir who stood at that table did exactly what the Emperor had promised they would do.

They read the names, they read each other, and every one of them picked the most hopeless card they could find and handed it to whichever sibling frightened them most.

The Third Prince sent the Fifth Prince to a salt marsh on the southern coast.

The Fifth Prince sent the princess in uniform to a mountain county with one road in, which closed every winter.

Nobody was kind. Nobody pretended to be.

And then it was the crown prince's turn.

He stood at the table and looked down at the cards that were left.

Then he looked up across it, at Alexander, and his face did something that it had not done in front of his father all evening. It stopped trying to hide anything.

He hated him. To the bone.

"Father," he said. "I agree completely that we should all learn to stand on our own. I accept the test." He turned a card over in his fingers. without reading it. "But before choose, there's something else this house has to deal with."

The Emperor raised an eyebrow.

"I've heard that the Tenth Prince's fiancée broke off their engagement. In front of witnesses. On his own forecourt." The crown prince's voice was perfectly smooth.

"That isn't a private matter. That's an insult to this family. To the Emperor. Heir or no heir, the house of Leonhart cannot be seen to accept it."

"And what," said the Emperor, "are you suggesting?"

"That the pact be honoured." The crown prince put the card down. "Make Alexander marry into that household, as was agreed. And if the girl stu refuses him then the family gives him one of their other daughters instead. That was the promise their elders made to ours."

He looked round the table.

"An old pact is still a pact, isn't it? And honour has to be kept."

"Well," the Emperor said slowly. "We did have that agreement. With the Baroness Tiffany's house, about Alexander. That's true." He looked at the crown prince over steepled fingers. "And what land are you going to give him, then?"

The crown prince was ready for that. He had clearly been ready for it all evening.

"Father, the Tiffany house is matriarchal. Everyone knows it. The Baroness has always said that any man who marries into her line lives with her line — on their land, under their roof." He smiled.

"So Alexander doesn't need a county at all. Give him an empty count's title. No fief, no land, no revenue. And send him to live there, and marry one of them."

Alexander looked at his elder brother across the table.

No land. No money. A title with nothing under it. And a wife who would rather die than have him, in a house where he would live as a guest of her grandmother for the rest of his life.

This man really does want me to end up with nothing at all, he thought.

"That works too," the Emperor said. "Alexander, it'll be as the crown prince says. He chose it for you."

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Alexander stepped forward.

"Father. If the crown prince is allowed to choose my place from outside the table," he said, "then may I choose his place from outside the table too?"

The Emperor looked at him, and something in the old face was very interested.

"As long as it's a county," he said. "Empty. Heritable. And poor. Then yes, you may."

"There's a place called Martydom," Alexander said.

The room was quiet.

"The last counts there were two old brothers. They both died without an heir, and the land went back to the Crown, and as far as I know nobody's lived in the house since." He looked at the crown prince. "I heard it's empty. I think the crown prince could live there."

The Emperor frowned.

"Martydom. I've never heard of it." He lifted a hand toward the gallery. "Prime Minister. Is that name on our records? Find it."

...

The Prime Minister came down from behind the rail with a tablet in his hand and his reading glasses on, and the whole room waited while he scrolled.

"Yes, Your Majesty. Martydom." He read from the screen. "Formerly a county seat, reverted to the Crown. One castle, in fair repair. Wide arable fields, some woodland, a river. It's classed as —" he turned the screen slightly — "a middle-income region, Your Majesty. Not rich. Not categorised as poor."

The Emperor turned to Alexander.

"You heard him. It's not a poor county. Are you sure you want to give it to the crown prince?"

"I'm sure," Alexander said. "It wouldn't be fitting for the crown prince to start somewhere poor."

...

The crown prince narrowed his eyes very slightly.

He was not a fool. He stood at the table for a long moment and turned it over, looking for the knife inside it.

A castle. Arable land. A river. A middle-income county, in the Prime Minister's own words, when every other heir at that table had just been sent to a salt marsh or a dead mine.

If the idiot wanted to hand him a good county out of some idea of brotherly courtesy, then the idiot was an idiot.

"What do you think, crown prince?" the Emperor asked.

"It's not poor. It's middle-income." The crown prince shrugged. "Why not."

"Then it's agreed." The Emperor sat back. "All of you. You have one month to hand over every business and every account in your names, and to be gone to your land. Go incognito. I'll see you in five years."

They came out of the old room into a long corridor lit by wall lamps, and the six heirs dispersed down it in six directions without a word to each other.

Alexander had gone perhaps twenty paces when quiet footsteps came up behind him.

"Tenth Prince." It was the Second Prince, the First Queen's son, narrow and pale and walking at his elbow as though they had always been friends.

"Tell me something. What exactly do you know about Martydom?"

...

Alexander did not slow down.

"It's the middle of your mother's family," he said.

"Isn't it? The duke whose land runs all along the north side of it is your grandfather. The marquis to the east is your uncle. Every estate that touches Martydom on every side belongs to somebody with your mother's blood."

He smiled slightly.

"And I've heard your mother's family hates the crown prince more than anybody alive. So I imagine they'll know what to do with him once he's sitting in the middle of them."

The Second Prince laughed.

He laughed quietly, delightedly, into his hand, the first real sound he had made all evening.

"Oh, he'll get nothing out of that land. Nothing." He shook his head.

"My grandfather will see to it. Every buyer, every bank, every road, every contract within fifty kilometres. He won't earn a coin. He'll watch that middle-income county slide downhill every year, and he'll never understand why."

Alexander smiled. "Then keep driving it downhill, every single year. Leave him nothing to show our father but a record of going backwards."

The Second Prince clapped him once on the shoulder.

"Don't worry. You've put him in the one place in the Empire where we can take our revenge at leisure."

Alexander walked on down the corridor alone, under the old portraits and the wall lamps.

"Well," he said to nobody. "Who told him to pick a fight with me?"

Three hundred kilometres away, in the Baroness Tiffany's house, a young woman was shouting so loudly the staff in the kitchen had stopped working to listen.

"I will not marry that idiot!"

Her name was Patricia, and she was the eldest granddaughter of the house, and until that afternoon she had never given the Tenth Prince a single thought in her life.

He had been the Havenworths' problem. Clarissa Havenworth's joke. Something that happened to other people.

Then Clarissa had stood in the rain on his forecourt with a knife and a rolled paper and cut herself free of him — and the pact had rolled downhill, exactly the way it was written to, and landed in this drawing room.

Patricia stood in the middle of her grandmother's carpet with her face red and her fists clenched.

"I won't! Clarissa threw him away. Why is that our fault? Why should we have to pick up what Havenworth didn't want?"

"Because your grandfather signed it." Her mother did not raise her voice.

"Havenworth first, and Tiffany if Havenworth refused. That's the pact, Patricia. He signed it before you were born, and it binds this house."

"I don't want to!"

Patricia threw herself down onto a sofa.

"If somebody in this family has to marry him, then why can't it be Serena? Give him Serena!"

"Serena?" Her aunt turned round from the window. "Serena's mute. And blind. Who in the world would marry a blind and mute girl?"

Patricia sat up on the sofa, and for the first time since the letter came, she was smiling.

"A mute, blind girl," she said, "married to an idiot."

She looked around the drawing room at all of them.

"Don't you think that's a match made in heaven?"

"Shut your mouth, Patricia!"

Her mother was on her feet now.

"You know exactly what he is. He's the Tenth Prince of this Empire. And he isn't an idiot any more. The whole country knows he isn't."

"And what's the title worth?" Patricia the did not get up. "Honestly, Mother. You heard the news this morning, did. He's been passed same as he's out of the emperor line now." She shrugged one shoulder. "So he's not an idiot. Wonderful. He's still nobody."

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She leaned back into the cushions.

"And you know who I want to marry. Count Charles, with real money behind him. Not an empty title with a prince's name on it." She looked at her mother. "Give them Serena. That keeps the Empire happy and it keeps me free."

Her mother did not answer straight away.

"And if the palace finds out?" she said at last. "If they think this house is mocking them — sending a blind girl to a prince as though he weren't worth a real bride?"

"Serena wasn't always blind."

Patricia said it as though she had been thinking about it for a while.

"It only happened two years ago. Nobody outside this house knows. We kept it quiet so people wouldn't look down on us." She spread her hands.

"So we keep keeping it quiet. Nobody needs to know she's blind or mute until she's already married."

Her aunt nodded slowly at the window.

"That could work," she said. "As long as she doesn't make a sound at the wedding. Somebody walks her up the aisle, somebody stands her at the altar, she says nothing and she keeps her eyes down She tapped finger on the glass.

"And afterwards, if anybody notices, we tell them Serena lost her sight and her voice from the shock of the wedding itself. Blame it to the prince."

Nobody in the room said it was cruel.

Nobody said anything at all.

There was a knock at the drawing-room door, and one of the house staff came in with a cream envelope held in both hands.

"Madam. Forgive me. This has just come by special courier. It's marked urgent —

they said you must read it yourself, at once."

Pauline, Patricia's mother, took it and broke the seal.

She read the first lines and her eyes went wide.

Then she read the rest of it, slowly, all the way to the bottom, and when she looked up her whole face had changed.

"Well," she said. "Then we'll go ahead with that plan."

"What is it?" Patricia sat up. "What does it say?"

Her mother folded the letter in half and held it against her chest.

"Somebody very powerful," she said, "is offering to stand behind this house."

She smiled, and it was not her usual smile.

"It says that while the Tenth Prince is living under our roof, we should make his life hell. Grind him down Make him a truly worthless man in front of everyone. And for as long as we do that, there will be money for this family. Every single year."

She tucked the letter into her sleeve.

"An easy job, don't you think?"