The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 781

It was past midnight.

Steward Aldous Danoe had come to the east wing himself, knocked once on the door and said only, "His Majesty will see you now."

"No guards?" Alexander had asked on the way.

"His Majesty prefers not, at this hour."

Now, in the small study, Alexander stood in the middle of the rug and waited.

"Cure her."

The Emperor did not look up. The pen did not stop moving.

"Cure the Second Queen, Alexander. Tonight, tomorrow, whenever you like. But cure her."

Alex turned silence.

His father finally put the pen down. "Sit."

Up close, without the grey powder, Maximillian Leonhart looked exactly what he was: a man who had never been sick a day in ten years.

"You're staring," the Emperor said.

"Your colour is better, Your Majesty."

"Is it?"

"Much better. For a man who was vomiting blood four hours ago."

The Emperor's mouth moved. It was not quite a smile.

"A miracle," he said. "Our ancestor is very forgiving."

"Very."

"Danoe. Tea."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"Here is my problem," the Emperor said, when the cups were full.

"The Second Queen is lying in her family's house at Greyhallow with three organs failing, and every newspaper in this Empire is saying the same thing. The Tenth Prince cursed her."

He leaned back.

"Well?" the Emperor said. "Will you do it?"

"She came to my house with twenty rifles," Alexander said. "She said I'd serve my sentence in a prison cell."

"I read the report." The emperor was waiting.

"The voice has gone quiet," he said.

"Has it."

"Since the Hall of Council. Nothing. Not a word." He turned the cup slowly. "Except once."

"Go on."

"It said: she promised a billion dollars to whoever saves her. It's in every newspaper." Alexander looked up. "Let her keep her word to someone."

The room was silent for a long moment.

Then the Emperor began to laugh again, low and private.

"Danoe," he said. "Did you hear that move?"

"I heard it, Your Majesty."

"My ancestor wants the Second Queen to pay her bill."

"So it would seem, Your Majesty."

"To someone."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

The Emperor shook his head slowly and looked at his tenth son across the desk with an expression Alexander could not read at all.

"Fine," he said. "Then let her pay someone."

He picked the pen back up.

"Now. The other matter. You were at the meeting. You heard the rules."

"Everything in my name, handed back within a month."

"Everything." The Emperor tapped the desk. "The island. The government. The power company. That clever machine of yours that the whole Empire is paying twenty dollars a month to talk to. All of it comes back to the Crown."

"I understand."

"Do you?" The old man's eyes came up. "Because I have read the Harland figures, Alexander. Half a billion a year. Most men would fight me for that."

"Most men didn't eat out of a bin for fourteen years."

The pen stopped.

"I've lived on nothing before," Alexander said quietly. "I'm good at it."

Halfway down the shadowed corridor, the steward spoke without turning around, his voice barely above a breath. "A word of warning from the Emperor, my Prince-if you will permit me."

"Please."

"The Treasury is sending an auditor to Harland to take the handover. His name is Basil Merriwether." The steward's voice did not change at all. "He was supposed to be dismissed with the Second Queen's ministers. Somehow, his name was not on the list."

"Somehow."

"Somehow." Danoe stopped at the corner. "He is a careful man. He will look under every floorboard on that island for something with your name on it. And if he finds one coin you hide, Your Highness —"

"I'm out of the selection."

"On the first day."

Alexander looked down the long corridor toward the east wing, where a door with a polite guard outside it was waiting for him.

"Then I'd better make sure," he said, "that there's nothing under the floorboards."

The steward almost smiled.

"Your plane leaves at six, Your Highness. Mr. Merriwether's left two hours ago."

Six hours later.

"They're stealing it!"

The shout came from the back of the square, from a man in fishing boots with his hands cupped round his mouth.

"You hear me? You gave it to us and now you're stealing it back!"

Three thousand people had come again, to the same square, under the same salt- stained flagpole.

"Nine cars," a fisherman said near the front. "Nine. Off the morning ferry. I counted."
"And a banner." The man beside him spat. "Handover of the Territory of Harland to the Crown. In gold letters. They had it printed before they even got here."

"Who's the one in the blue suit?"

"Treasury. Stepped off the boat, looked at the harbour like it was a cheap house he was thinking of buying, and asked where the idiot was."

"He said that? Out loud?"

"Out loud. 'Comptroller Basil Merriwether, Imperial Treasury. Where's the idiot?'"

"Then I hope he falls in the harbour."

"He won't. That kind never does."

...

Now Merriwether stood at the podium with Lord Fennick, the new caretaker governor, beside him, and read from a leather folder.

"By order of His Imperial Majesty, the governorship of the island of Harland, its territorial administration, the Harland Power Company and the Harland Computation Company, together with all revenues, contracts and assets thereof revert to the Crown with immediate effect."

He turned the page.

"Signed in the presence of His Highness the Tenth Prince, who will now confirm."

He held out a pen without looking.

Alexander took it.

"Don't sign it!"

That was a woman near the front. She had a baby on her hip and a solar tile company's logo on her t-shirt.

"Your Highness, don't! My husband got his first job in three years on those roofs!"

"Mine too!"

"My boy works on the cable ship!"

"Comptroller," Fennick muttered. "The crowd-"

"Is a crowd of fishermen, Lord Fennick. Don't be dramatic."

Merriwether did not even look up.

"Sign, please, Your Highness. The ferry leaves at four."

"In a moment," Alexander said.

He put the pen down on the podium and turned round to face the square.

It went quiet fast.

"Listen to me," Alexander said.

"The roofs stay on your houses. Nobody is taking a tile off anybody's roof. The cable ship keeps sailing. The machine keeps running. Every job on this island stays exactly where it is."

"Then what are they taking?" somebody shouted.

"Consider it business as usual. You keep your title, your perks, and everything the company has provided. Your island remains yours-it simply reports to a new governor."

He nodded at Fennick, who looked as though he wished he were somewhere else.

"Be nice to him. He's never seen a fish market."

Somebody laughed. Then a few more people did.

And then, from the harbour wall, a very old voice cut through all of it.

"Seventy years."

The whole square turned.

It was the old man from the bench, leaning on a stick, his face wet.

"That's old Tom," someone whispered. "He hasn't stood up at a meeting in twenty years."

"Shh. Let him talk."

"Seventy years I've lived on this rock," he said. "Eleven governors. Eleven. And you're the only one who ever changed anything."

Nobody laughed this time.

"Sit down, Tom," somebody called, gently.

"I'll sit down when I've finished!" The old man thumped his stick on the stones.

"We called you an idiot," the old man said. "I called you an idiot. On that bench, I said it."

"I know," Alexander said. "I heard you."

"Well, I was wrong." The old man sat down hard. "That's all. Somebody should say it before they take you away."

"Nobody's taking me anywhere," Alexander said. "I'm just going to live somewhere else."

"Same thing," the old man said. "Same thing, at my age."

Alexander turned back to the podium. His throat did something he had not authorised. He waited until it stopped.

Then he picked up the pen and signed.

"Thank you, Your Highness," Merriwether said, and snapped the folder shut.

Then he leaned into the microphone, and smiled.

"And thank you, people of Harland. On behalf of the Treasury, I'd like to say that the Crown is delighted to receive the idiot's island." He let the word sit there. "Half a billion dollars a year. Not bad for a fishing rock. think we can safely call it the Crown's new golden goose."

The silence that followed was not a good one.

At the edge of the steps, somebody made a small sound.

Richie Moss was standing beside the bank's delegation in his best suit, and he was crying.

"Richie," one of his clerks whispered. "Richie, people are looking."

"Let them look," Richie said thickly. "I don't care. Let them look."

Merriwether noticed. Of course he did.

"Ah," he said, into the microphone. He came down two steps.

"Mr. Moss, isn't it? The hotel boy?"

"I run the Bank of Harland," Richie said.

"You ran a sixteen-room hotel on the east road until a madman gave you a bank to play with." Merriwether smiled wider. "Don't worry. We'll find you something suitable.

Perhaps the hotel's still available."

A few of the ministry people laughed.

Nobody from Harland did.

Felicia, standing behind Alexander, took a step forward.

He put his hand back without looking, and she stopped.

"Mr. Merriwether," Alexander said mildly. "The ceremony's finished. You have my signature."

"I have your signature on the government and the companies, yes." Merriwether turned to him. "Which brings us to the next item. The bank."

"The bank isn't mine."

"No?"

"It's a bank. It belongs to its depositors."

"How convenient." Merriwether tucked the folder under his arm. "Then you won't mind if I see the depositors. All of them. The full account registe Your Highness, with names, on my desk by tomorrow morning."

"The statute forbids that."

"The statute," Merriwether said, "was written by an idiot. And the idiot doesn't govern here any more."

He walked off toward the bank with four police behind him. Richie hurried after him.

"Mr. Merriwether - Mr. Merriwether, you can't just —"

"Open the vault, Mr. Moss."

"I can't do that."

Merriwether stopped in the middle of the square. Three thousand people watched him do it.

"Then let me make it simple for you," he said, quite pleasantly. "Either that vault is open by sunset, or you'll spend tonight in the back of a police van in your nice suit."

He checked his watch.

"You have four hours. I'd hurry."

The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 782

It was a quarter to sunset.

The bank back office was crowded: Merriwether, Fennick, four police, a clerk, and Richie by the vault stairs.

Merriwether took a mug from Richie's desk and kept it on his bag.

"That's my mug," Richie said faintly.

"It's the Crown's mug now, Mr. Moss. Four hours, I said," Merriwether remarked. "You've wasted three of them, Mr. Moss."

"I've been reading the statute," Richie said.

"Read faster."

Alexander offered a slow, deliberate yawn. "Spare me the riddles and just explain it."
"Why would I do that?" Merriwether said.

"Because I don't read very well," Alexander said. "I'm still learning. I'd like to hear it."

The clerk stifled a laugh.

Merriwether sighed, opened his folder, and found the page.

"By this instrument," he read, bored, "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 looked up. "Satisfied?"

"Without interference from any ministry," Alexander repeated slowly.

"Yes. And it's been superseded. You signed it away this afternoon."

"I signed away the governorship."

"Exactly."

"So the governor is Lord Fennick now."

Fennick looked up from the window as though he had been called on in a classroom.

"Iyes. That's correct."

"And the Treasury is a ministry."

Merriwether's smile thinned. "Your point, Your Highness?"

Alexander turned to Fennick.

"Lord Fennick. The statute of the Bank of Harland. The one that says no accounts are named, no audits, no disclosure to any government. Has it been repealed?"

"Not not yet."

"Who can repeal it?"

Fennick glanced at Merriwether, and then at the clerk with the notebook, and swallowed.

"The territorial government. Which is — me."

"So until you repeal it," Alexander said gently, "it's the law. And the instrument the Crown signed says no ministry may interfere with the island's administration. Which includes its laws."

He looked back at Merriwether.

"Which includes you."

"Are we arresting anybody, sir?" one of the policemen asked.

"Be quiet," said Merriwether.

"And that mug is personal property-it belongs to Richie, not you. Taking it would be stealing, officer. You're supposed to arrest him for stealing the mug?"

Merriwether put down the mug very carefully.

"Lord Fennick," he said, without taking his eyes off Alexander, "you will repeal the statute. Tonight."

"I — Comptroller, I would need to consult with the Ministry of Justice first, and the Crown's lawyers, and there are treaty obligations with the partner banks, I can't simply-"

"You can."

"I really can't," Fennick said, quite miserably. "Not tonight. Not without a review. It'd take weeks."

"Let me make this clear once more: the Treasury has no authority to dictate policy to the government. Stick to your remit, and let them handle theirs."

Merriwether turned his head and looked at the governor the way he had looked at the harbour that morning.

Then he stood up and buttoned his jacket.

"Weeks, then," he said. "I'll be here for weeks."

He walked out, and the police went after him, and the door banged.

"Listen to me," Alexander said, and turned to him. "Everything with my name on it, I gave away today. The government. The companies. The machine that sells thinking to a million people. The Crown owns it, and they're welcome to it."

"I know. I watched you sign."

"The bank was never in my name. It's in no one's name. It exists as an institution whose shares are divided among all three thousand souls on this island. Nobody truly owns it—not even the state. The capital within belongs to account holders scattered across the

globe, individuals whose identities can never be brought to light. That was the law I authored." He rested his fingers against the cold steel doorframe.

"Here's the play," Alex said with a dry smile. "The Al and power startup he funded as a stockholder pays out a dividend to Mr. Smith. And Mr. Smith tells them to wire the cash from his dividend straight into this Harland bank. This bank, after accepting the money, will say no one can check Mr. Smith's real identity when he pulls the money out, right?"

Realization hit Richie all at once. "Which means all the profit enters this bank and becomes untraceable. And nobody knows who withdraws it."

"Here's the bottom line, Richie: I didn't put a dime in under my own identity. The records show one Mr. Smith, citizen of Harland. Look after that account. Smith owns thirty percent of the shares, and the remaining thirty percent belongs to the three thousand people living here. That's a sixty percent majority. The Crown can claim whatever it likes, but as long as Smith holds the line, that power and Al infrastructure belongs to Harland. You make sure it stays that way."

"You understand what I'm telling you?" Alexander said. "We are law-abiding citizens, but the state cannot take what belongs to the people."

"Six years of finance, Your Highness," Richie said. "I understand exactly what you're telling me."

He stood up straight in his creased suit.

"My father ran that hotel for forty years," he said. "Never cheated a guest. Never told a lie to a tax man. And he told me, when I came home -aman is worth exactly as much as the promises he keeps

"He sounds like a good man."

"He was." Richie held out his hand. "On his hotel, Your Highness. I'll keep this one."

Alexander shook it.

"Good," he said. "Because Merriwether won't stop. And tomorrow he'll go looking for something he can actually touch."

They found out what that was twenty minutes later.

Alexander was climbing the governor's residence stairs when his phone rang.

"Felicia?"

"Prince - Prince, there's a man in our room."

"What man?"

"From this afternoon. The Treasury man." Her breath was coming fast.

"He's got the police with him. He's going through my things, he's opened my box he says every everything in it belongs to the Crown Prince, he's got my mother's ring

There was a sound on the line. A sharp, flat crack.

Then nothing.

"Put the phone down. I warn you already I will slap you again if you don't do it."

Felicia's voice was shaking, but she said it anyway.

"Sir. Put my mother's ring down. That's not the prince's. That's mine."

Alexander reached Felica's room in seconds.

The door of the small room stood open. Merriwether was inside with two policemen and his clerk, holding up a battered biscuit tin and a thin gold ring.

"Item," he was saying. "One tin, contents cash. Item, one ring, gold, poor quality."

"It's not poor quality," Felicia said. "It's my mother's."

"Poor quality," Merriwether repeated. "Write it down."

Felicia stood by the bed with her hand pressed flat against her cheek.

There was a red mark under her fingers, the shape of an open palm.

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"Ah. Your Highness." Merriwether did not lower the ring. "Good. You can settle a dispute."

Alexander looked at Felicia's face for one second.

Then he looked at Merriwether.

"What dispute?"

"Your maid seems to think she owns property." Merriwether shook the tin. Coins rattled inside it. "Three thousand, one hundred and twelve. dollars and this ring. Which I have entered on the inventory, quite properly, as household assets of the Tenth Prince."

"That's ten years of wages," Felicia said. Her voice cracked. "Ten years. I saved every month. And the ring was my mother's. It's the only thing I have of her."

"And every coin of those wages," Merriwether said pleasantly, "came out of the prince's allowance. Which came from the Crown. Which makes it the Crown's." He turned to the clerk. "Write that down."

The clerk wrote it down.

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"She tried to take it back," one of the policemen offered.

"She did," Merriwether agreed. "She grabbed my arm. A servant, putting her hands on an officer of the Treasury." He smiled at Felicia. "I corrected her. She'll remember."

Felicia's eyes filled. She did not let them fall.

"Prince," she whispered. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to make trouble —"

"You didn't," Alexander said.

"He hit you," Alexander said quietly.

"It's nothing," Felicia said quickly. "It doesn't hurt."

He moved her hand away gently and looked at the mark, then put her hand back. Merriwether waited, the policemen ready, the clerk's pen up.

"Well?" he said. "Nothing to say, Your Highness? No threats? No ghosts in my ear?"

"No."

"I heard all about your castle. Thirteen servants. Very sad." Merriwether tilted his head. "If anything happens to me on this island, the whole Treasury will know whose fault it is."

"Nothing's going to happen to you on this island," Alexander said. Then he looked at the tin in Merriwether's hand. "And you're right. It's on the inventory."

Felicia stared at him.

"Prince"

"It's on the inventory, Felicia. The comptroller is very thorough." Alexander nodded at Merriwether. "Thank you for your diligence, Comptroller. Will you be at the farewell lunch tomorrow?"

Merriwether's eyes narrowed. Just slightly.

"Lord Fennick has invited me, yes."

"Good," Alexander said. "I'll see you there."

The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 783

By morning the mark on Felicia's cheek had turned the colour of a plum.

Alexander found her in the residence kitchen at six, standing at the sink with her back to the door, pretending to wash a cup that was already clean.

"Sit down," he said.

"I'm fine, Prince."

"Sit down, Felicia."

She sat. He took a cloth from the drawer, filled it with ice from the freezer, folded it once, and held it against her face. She flinched, then leaned into it.

"It doesn't hurt," she said.

"I know."

"It really doesn't." She looked at the table. "What hurts is you *thanking* him. For his *diligence*. I lay awake all night with that word."

"It's on the inventory," Alexander said.

"You said that last night too. I don't know what it means."

"It means everything he took is written down. In his clerk's hand. With a date and a list number." He moved the ice a little higher. "Things that are written down can be found again."

"Right now, his only goal is to drag me into a mess that will cost me everything. I have to stay patient for a few days—I won't play his game when the stakes are this high."

Felicia looked at him for a long moment. "Don't make trouble for me. Please. Not for a ring."

"I won't make any trouble at all," Alexander said. "Hold this."

Lord Fennick's farewell lunch for the Tenth Prince was laid in the residence garden, under the old fig tree, at a long table with a white cloth and too many forks.

It had been Fennick's idea. He was a decent man in the way some men are decent: he liked things to be done properly, and he had never once in his life done anything brave in time to matter.

A prince was leaving. Princes got lunches. So there was a lunch.

The ministry people came. The clerks came. Richie came in his second-best suit, because he had cried all over his best one at the ceremony.

Felicia came and stood behind Alexander's chair with her hair pulled forward over her cheek.

"Sit with us," Richie told her, pulling out a chair.

"Servants stand, Mr. Moss."

"Not at my table."

"It's Lord Fennick's table," Felicia said, and stayed exactly where she was.

And Comptroller Basil Merriwether came last, as the guest of honour, with his leather folder under his arm and his four policemen eating at a side table.

He did not wait for the soup.

"A toast," he said, rising, glass in hand. "To Harland. And to the Crown's new golden goose."

A few of the ministry people raised their glasses. Fennick raised his halfway and studied the tablecloth.

"And since we're among friends," Merriwether went on, "I thought I'd share some of yesterday's paperwork. It's very entertaining." He opened the folder. "Item. One biscuit tin, contents cash, three thousand one hundred and twelve dollars. Item. One ring, gold, poor quality."

Felicia went very still behind Alexander's chair.

"Property," Merriwether said, "of the household of the Tenth Prince. The maid thought she owned property." He smiled around the table. "Imagine."

The ministry people laughed. Two of the clerks laughed. One of the policemen at the side table laughed with his mouth full.

"Comptroller," Fennick murmured. "Perhaps not at lunch."

"Why not at lunch? It's a farewell. We're saying farewell to everything." Merriwether closed the folder. "Isn't that right, Your Highness?"

"That's right," Alexander said mildly. "Is there more soup?"

The soup came. Merriwether did not eat his.

He watched the prince eat instead, badly, too fast, with his face too close to the bowl, and his smile thinned with every spoonful.

"You know what interests me," he said at last.

"Fish?" Alexander said.

"Money, Your Highness. The bank I can't touch. Not yet. Lord Fennick needs *weeks* to review a statute an idiot wrote in an afternoon." Merriwether glanced at Fennick, who examined his bread roll. "But you. *You* had a salary. A governor's salary. Half a billion a year came through this island, and you sat on top of it. Nobody sits on top of half a billion and stays poor."

"I'm very bad with money," Alexander said.

"Then you won't mind if we look." Merriwether snapped his fingers. "Clerk. The governor's personal account. Every coin in his own name. Read it out."

The clerk wiped his hands, took out a tablet, and began to type. The table went quiet. Even the policemen stopped chewing.

Richie, at the far end, had gone very pale.

"Comptroller," Fennick said, "is this really

"

"It's an audit, Lord Fennick. I'm auditing." Merriwether leaned back. "Go on, boy."

The clerk scrolled. Stopped. Scrolled back up.

"Well?"

"Sir." The clerk cleared his throat.

"The account is swept on the twenty-eighth of every month. Automatically. Into the Power Company's capital fund, the roof programme, the fisherman boat and the the server racks." He looked up. "It's been swept every month since it was opened."

"And the balance?"

The clerk read it twice.

"Eleven dollars, sir."

Nobody at the table moved.

"*Eleven*," Merriwether said.

Alexander felt in the pocket of his coat, found something, and held it out across the tablecloth.

"Twelve?" he offered.

It was Richie who laughed first. He tried very hard not to. He put his napkin over his mouth and made a overh sound like a kettle, and then one of the clerks went, and then a policeman at the side table, and then the whole of the ministry end of the table was laughing, helplessly, the way people laugh in church.

Merriwether did not laugh. His smile had cracked down the middle like old paint.

"The richest island in the Empire," he said, very quietly, "and its prince owns eleven dollars."

"Twelve," Alexander said. "If you'd like this one."

"Keep your coin."

"Thank you, Comptroller. That's very generous."

Merriwether did not leave. A man like Merriwether never left a table empty-handed.

It was the only rule he had ever truly lived by. Back when he was a junior clerk, he had once sat in an office for nine hours rather than go home without a signature, and he had got the signature.

He rose and walked to the garden wall and stood there with his hands behind his back, looking down.

Below the residence, the whole harbour lay open in the noon light. Two hundred hulls, perhaps more. Old wooden boats with their names hand-painted on the bows. And among them, here and there, boats with fresh paint and new engines, bright as toys.

"Lord Fennick," Merriwether said, without turning round. "Those boats. The new paint. Who paid for that?"

Fennick came and stood beside him, wiping his mouth.

"Some of them from the governor- the Power Company had a workers' scheme.

Loans for engines, for refits. Some families got new hulls." He hesitated. "Most of them are the fishermen's own, Comptroller. Some of those boats are older than I am."

"The Power Company," Merriwether said, "which the prince founded. With money he controlled. On an island he governed." He turned, and the smule was back whole again, as ift had never cracked. "Gifts, Lord Fennick. Everything the idiot touched was a gift. And gifts made by a governor in office revert to the Crown."

"Comptroller, those are *fishing* boats. People eat from those boats."

"Then they'll have to learn to eat from something else."

"And the boats that are sixty years old? The prince wasn't born."

"Then he gave them paint," Merriwether said. "Paint is a gift. I'll take the paint, and the boat can come with it."

At the table, Alexander had stopped eating. He was not looking at Merriwether. He was looking past him, at the harbour, at the long low shape of the Treasury launch tied up at berth one, white and official, with its little blue pennant hanging limp in the windless air.

Felicia bent to his ear.

"Prince," she whispered. "He's going to take the *boats*."

"I know," Alexander said.

"Do something."

"I am doing something." He picked up his spoon again. "I'm having lunch."

Merriwether came back to the table, buttoning his jacket. He did not sit down.

"Thank you for lunch, Lord Fennick. It's been very informative." He looked down at

Alexander. "Enjoy your eleven dollars, Your Highness."

"Twelve," Alexander said.

Merriwether bent to his clerk, close enough that only the nearest end of the table heard him. Alexander was at the nearest end of the table.

"Bring the red paint," Merriwether said. "All of it."

The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 784

They came at dawn, with chains and paint.

By the time the first boats should have been going out, the quay was closed. Police had run a chain from the fish market to the harbour office, and behind it

Merriwether's clerks were working down the moorings with buckets of red paint and wide brushes, painting a crown on every hull.

On the harbour office door, a clerk nailed up a notice in Treasury type.

"By order of the Comptroller," a young fisherman read aloud, at the chain. "All vessels in Harland harbour are declared gifts of the Tenth Prince, made while in office, and revert to the Crown pending inspection."

"Gifts?" said the man next to him. "What gifts?"

"Your boat, apparently."

"My boat? He never gave me a boat. My grandfather built that boat!" The young man pointed down the moorings, at an old green hull with a clerk already crouched beside it, brush in hand. "That's my grandfather's boat! She was built before the prince was born!"

Merriwether stood on the harbour office steps, reading the notice himself, as if it were a menu.

"Then protest," he said pleasantly. "In writing. The Crown will reply in due course."

The crowd grew. By seven there were five hundred people at the chain, and by eight there were a thousand.

"What's he going to do with them?" a woman asked. "Sail two hundred boats to the capital?"

"Sell them," said the man beside her. "Or let them rot. Either way they're not ours." "And the cable ship? Is that a gift too?"

"Don't give him ideas, Maud."

At the end of the second mooring sat an old boat with a blue stripe, her name worn to a ghost: Margaret.

Tom had named her for his wife, fifty-two years ago, the spring they married. Margaret had been dead for eleven years now, and Tom had never once taken the boat out without saying good morning to her name. The whole harbour knew it. They had always pretended not to hear.

Old Tom was standing in front of her.

He had his stick in one hand and the other hand flat on Margaret's bow, and he was not moving.

"Out of the way, grandad," said the clerk with the brush.

"No."

"It's an order of the Treasury."

"Then the Treasury can come and move me itself."

"Grandad, I've got two hundred of these to do before lunch."

"Then start with somebody else's," Tom said. "Fifty-two years I've fished from her."

"It's still Crown property, grandad."

"She's no gift," Tom said. "Nobody gave her to me. I paid for every plank."

A policeman came down the mooring, young and bored and on duty since four.

"Back, old man."

"I said no."

The policeman put a hand on Tom's chest and shoved. It was not even a hard shove. Tom was seventy, and he went down on the wet stones with his stick clattering away from him.

The crowd at the chain surged. The chain held. The police pulled their batons.

"Get your hands off him!"

"He's seventy, you coward!"

"Back! Back from the chain!" the sergeant shouted. "Next man over it goes in the van!"

"Mark that one," Merriwether called from the steps. "Mark that one twice."

The clerk painted two crowns on Margaret's bow, one above the other, while Tom lay on the stones and watched him do it.

Lord Fennick came down from the residence at a fast walk.

"Comptroller. Comptroller, a word."

"Of course, Lord Fennick."

"These are people's livings." Fennick kept his voice low. "If the boats don't go out, the island doesn't eat. You can't hold them until when is the inspection?"

"Spring," Merriwether said.

"Spring?"

"The Crown inspectors are very busy." Merriwether turned to the crowd and raised his voice, so that the back rows could hear. "Let me be perfectly clear, so nobody can say they weren't told. Not one boat leaves this harbour before the Crown inspects it. Not one oar goes in the water. Anyone who takes a marked boat out, for any reason, will be arrested and charged with theft of Crown property. They will sail," he said, "to prison."

"Spring?" somebody shouted. "We'll starve by spring!"

The old ones knew what that meant. Years ago, before the prince, the ferry had stopped for one winter, and the island had lived on salt fish and the church's flour until March. Two children had died that winter. Nobody on Harland had ever forgotten their names.

"Then protest," Merriwether snapped. “Put it in writing! If you're desperate to point fingers, blame the tenth prince the one who stripped you of everything you had!" "Lord Fennick," somebody called, "you're the governor! Say something!"

Fennick opened his mouth. Merriwether looked at him. Fennick closed it.

"I'll — I'll write to the ministry," Fennick said.

"Please do. They'll reply in due course."

...

Somebody helped Tom up onto a bollard. There was blood on his knuckles.

"Are you hurt, Tom?"

"I'm seventy. Everything's hurt." He looked up the quay. "Here he comes."

The prince was coming down from the residence, a little slow, hands in his coat pockets, as if the quay were a garden path.

"Your Highness!"

"Prince, you have to stop this!"

"You're still a prince! Tell him!"

Alexander stopped at the chain, a thousand people with their eyes on his face.

"You heard the Comptroller," he said.

The quay went quiet.

"Do what he says," Alexander said slowly, like a slow man repeating a lesson to himself. "Exactly what he says. Don't touch a single boat. Not one. Whatever happens."

Nobody spoke.

"Whatever happens," Alexander said again. "Do you understand me? Not one boat. Even if he begs you."

"Even if he begs?" Somebody laughed, a short ugly laugh. "Why would he beg?"

Old Tom stood up off the bollard. His knuckles were bleeding onto the stones.

"I said I was wrong about you," he said. "I said it in front of everybody." He spat on the quay, at the prince's feet. "Maybe I was wrong about being wrong." "Tom," Felicia said.

"Don't you Tom me, girl." He picked up his stick. "He's selling us to keep his own skin."

Felicia turned to Alexander. Her cheek was still purple under her hair, and her eyes were wet.

"Prince," she said quietly. "They'll starve."

"Not for long," Alexander said.

"What does that mean?"

He didn't answer. He was looking down the quay, at berth one, where police were carrying things aboard the Treasury launch.

"What are they loading?" he asked.

"The cash boxes from the government office," Felicia said. "The ledgers. And — "

She stopped.

"And?"

"That case. The brown one." Her voice went small. "That's the one he put my tin in. And the ring."

"With the list taped to the lid," Alexander said. "Good."

"Good?"

...

That night the harbour was dark. Nobody was allowed aboard to light a lamp.

There was only the moon on the water and the red crowns on two hundred hulls, black in that light, like old blood.

At half past one, Alexander walked the quay alone.

The policeman on the chain was asleep in a plastic chair with his cap over his eyes. Alexander stepped over the chain and walked down the moorings to berth one.

The Treasury launch rode low in the water, heavy with what she carried. White hull. Blue pennant. A brass plate by the gangway: Crown Treasury Service.

He crouched on the edge of the quay. He took off his glove. He reached down and laid his bare palm flat against the hull, below the waterline, where the cold sea moved against the paint.

He kept it there for three breaths.

"Safe trip, Comptroller," he said, to nobody at all.

Then he put his glove back on and walked back the way he had come. He stepped over the chain. The policeman was still asleep.

Felicia was waiting on the residence steps in her coat, with her arms wrapped round herself.

"Where were you?"

"Walking."

"At half past one? On the quay?"

"I like the quay at night."

"You've never liked anything at night except sleeping." She looked at his gloves.

"Prince. What did you do?"

"I said goodbye to a boat," Alexander said, and went in.

...

In the morning, the whole island heard it from the town crier's van, driving slowly round the harbour with its loudspeaker on top.

"The Comptroller wishes it to be known that he sails at noon. He thanks the people of Harland for their gifts. And he would like," the loudspeaker said, "the whole island to come and see him off."

At noon, three thousand people stood on the harbour wall, because nobody could fish.

"Are we cheering?" a boy asked his father.

"No."

"Are we booing?"

"No. We're watching."

"Watching what?"

"Him leave," his father said. "Then we go home."

The Treasury launch was ready at berth one, engine running. Cash boxes under a tarpaulin on her afterdeck, the ledger crates, a brown leather case with a list taped to the lid. Four policemen at the rail.

Merriwether came down the quay last, in a fresh blue suit, and turned at the gangway to face the wall.

"People of Harland! On behalf of the Crown, thank you for your boats." He waved at two hundred red crowns. "We'll take very good care of them."

Silence.

"Come now. No goodbye?"

"Goodbye," Alexander said.

"That's the spirit." He stepped aboard and looked up at the residence steps, where the prince stood beside Lord Fennick and the maid. "And goodbye to you, Your

Highness! Enjoy your eleven dollars!"

"Twelve," Alexander murmured.

"Prince," Felicia whispered. "Why are you smiling?"

"Am I?"

"A bit."

"I'll stop," Alexander said, and stopped.

The launch backed out, swung round, and headed for the harbour mouth.

Merriwether stood at the stern rail and waved like a king leaving his coronation.

"Goodbye, golden goose!" he shouted across the water.

On the wall, Old Tom took his pipe out of his mouth.

"He'll be back in spring," said the young fisherman beside him. "With the inspectors."

"Maybe," Tom said.

"What do you mean, maybe?"

"I mean maybe. Watch the boat, boy."

A hundred metres out. A hundred and fifty. Two hundred. The sea was flat and green.

Then she lurched.

"Did she hit something?" the young fisherman asked.

"There's nothing there to hit," Tom said. "Deep water and sand."

The bow dipped, came up slower, and dipped again. On the launch, a policeman leaned over the side and yelled. The engine coughed, roared, and died, and in the sudden quiet the whole wall heard water. Not the sea. Water inside something. .net

"The hull!" a policeman screamed. "There's a seam open! All along the keel!"

"Bail!" Merriwether's voice, high and thin. "Bail, you idiots! Use your hats!"

"We're using our hats, sir!"

"Then use them faster!"

On the wall, a woman with a baby on her hip said, almost gently, "That boat's older than my mother. And he's loaded her like a coal barge."

"Cash is heavy," her husband said.

"Not as heavy as greed," said Tom.

Merriwether ran to the rail and cupped his hands.

"Boats!" he screamed at the wall. "Get the boats! Come and get us! Now!"

Nobody on the wall moved.

"Do you hear me? That's an order! Bring the boats!"

A big slow fisherman named Ivo cupped his hands too. He had never once raised his voice at a meeting, and he didn't raise it now. He just made it carry.

"Sorry, Comptroller! Nobody touches a marked boat before the Crown inspects it!"

"What?"

"Your order, Comptroller! Not one oar in the water! Anyone who takes a marked boat out goes to prison!"

"I rescind it! I rescind the order!"

"In writing?" called a woman's voice.

There was a sound along the wall, three thousand people breathing out at once.

"Is it in writing?" Ivo asked his neighbour.

"Didn't see a pen."

"Then it's still the order."

Old Tom stood up off his bollard.

"I'm not going to prison," he called across the water, "at seventy."

Lord Fennick came down the residence steps at a run.

"Help them!" he shouted. "For God's sake, somebody help them! They'll drown!"

"You're the governor, Lord Fennick," Ivo said reasonably. "You're allowed. You go."

"I — what?"

"The order says anyone. You can rescind it. In writing." Ivo nodded at the old green hull with the red crown on her bow. "There's a boat right there. Take her. We'll wait for the inspection."

Fennick looked at the boat. At the red crown. At the launch, going down by the stern, with five men bailing with their hats.

His hand went out towards the mooring line, and stopped.

For thirty years Fennick had made sure that his was never the signature on the wrong document. He had always waited for someone else to go first. He had never once been the man who touched the thing nobody was allowed to touch.

His hand came back.

"You go, Governor," said the woman with the baby. "We'll wait."

"I can't swim," Fennick whispered.

"Neither can they," said Tom.

On the residence steps Felicia had both hands over her mouth. She wasn't looking at the launch. She was looking at Alexander.

"Prince," she breathed. "Prince."

"I told him," Alexander said quietly. "Nothing would happen to him on this island."

"That's not on the island."

"No," Alexander agreed. "It isn't."

The launch went down bow first in the end, gently, the way old boats do. Her stern lifted, white and official, with the blue pennant still flying. Then she slid under.

For a while there were five heads in the water.

"Can anyone see him?" a child asked.

"Hush."

Then four. Then none.

The cash boxes bobbed for a long time, filling one by one. The brown leather case floated longest, because of the air in it.

Old Tom took off his cap. The young fisherman beside him did the same, and then all along the wall, three thousand off their hats.

in the noon sun. Not for the man.

Because the sea had taken O someone, and on Harland that was what you did.

"He said goodbye," Tom said at last, to the water. "He meant it."

Richie had pushed through the crowd to the foot of the residence steps, pale, his tie crooked.

"Your Highness. Your Highness, the Treasury will say — they'll say we let him drown."

"Who's we, Richie?"

"The island! All of us! Three thousand people stood and watched!"

"Three thousand people obeyed a lawful order from an officer of the Crown," Alexander said. "In front of the caretaker governor. Who also obeyed it." He looked at Fennick grey on the bottom step. Ist that right, Lord Fennick?" .net

Fennick swallowed. "That's — yes. That's exactly what happened."

"Then write it down," Alexander said gently. "Exactly what happened. Before anybody tells you what happened instead."

"And the divers?" Richie asked. "Someone has to bring them up. And the boxes."

"Tomorrow," Alexander said. "When the Crown's inquiry says the boats are boats again."

On the wall, Ivo put his cap back on.

"Is it over?" the boy asked his father.

"It's over," his father said. "Now we go home."

...

That evening Felicia brought tea to the prince's room and set it on the desk and didn't leave.

"You knew," she said. "On the quay. Last night."

"Knew what?"

"That his boat would — " She couldn't finish.

"His boat was old," Alexander said. "And he loaded her with everything he could carry. That's not knowing. That's certain."

She stood by the door with her hands folded in front of her apron. The mark on her cheek had faded to yellow.

"Prince," she said, very quietly, not looking at him. "Did the voice do that?"

Alexander turned a page of the book he wasn't reading.

"The voice is asleep," he said.

The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 785

The Treasury inquiry took one day.

Two inspectors flew in from the capital on the morning plane, grim men with grey folders, and took statements all day in the harbour office.

"Name?"

"Ivo Brask. Fisherman."

"Did the Comptroller order you not to touch the boats?" the inspector asked.

"He did. Loud. Twice."

"And when the launch began to sink, did he rescind that order?"

"He shouted something," Ivo said. "Nobody had a pen."

The van driver was next. "I read his order out over the loudspeaker," he said. "Twice round the harbour. Prison for anyone who touched a boat. I've got the paper here, sir. He signed it."

"So the order was clear," the senior inspector said to Fennick. "Nobody was to touch a marked boat."

"Very clear," Fennick said. "He said it to a thousand people. He said anyone. He said prison."

"And the launch?"

"Forty years old, sir. The harbour master had condemned her twice."

"I condemned her three times," the harbour master said. "It's in the log. Nobody in the capital ever read the log."

"And how much was she carrying?"

"Everything he could find," Fennick said. "Cash boxes. Ledgers. Personal effects from the residence." He hesitated. "I signed the loading list myself. I'm afraid she was very heavy."

The senior inspector wrote for a long time.

"Is there anything else I should know, Lord Fennick?"

"Only that I should have taken the boat," Fennick said quietly. "And I didn't."

"Nobody did, my lord. That's rather the point of the finding."

"Finding," the senior inspector said at last. "An old vessel, overloaded with seized property, failed along a seam. Three thousand witnesses obeyed the Comptroller's own lawful order. No fault attaches to any resident of Harland." He closed the folder. "Lord Fennick. Your recommendation regarding the boats?"

Fennick sat up straighter than anyone had ever seen him sit.

"End the seizure," he said. "Today."

"On what grounds?"

Fennick thought about it for a long time.

Being slaughtered by three thousand angry citizens seemed a steep price to pay, especially when they would inevitably argue his ghost should have submitted his grievances in writing.

Then, for the first time in his career, he said something brave while it still mattered.

"Inspection complete," he said. "The Crown finds that the boats are fishermen boats."

By noon the clerks were down on the moorings with buckets of turpentine, scrubbing off the red crowns, and the fishermen were cheering them from the wall.

The last ferry left at dawn.

Alexander and Felicia stood on the deck with two bags between them, which was everything they owned that wasn't on the inventory of the Crown. The quay was empty. There was no ceremony and no banner.

Then, from inside the harbour wall, an engine started.

Then another. Then ten. Then fifty.

The fishing boats came out after the ferry, every one of them, horns blowing, two hundred hulls in a long ragged line across the green water. Old Tom's Margaret was at the front.

"What are they doing?" a deckhand shouted from the wheelhouse. "Is it a protest?" "It's an escort," Felicia said. "They're seeing him off."

"Who?"

"The idiot," Felicia said, and laughed, and cried, both at once. Then her voice broke. "Prince. Prince, look."

Tom brought Margaret right up alongside the ferry's stern, close enough to touch, and stood up in her with his stick. He held something up. Felicia leaned over the rail and took it from his hand: a cheap brass compass with a cracked glass.

"For him," Tom shouted over the engines. "So he can find his way back. This island is his home."

Alexander took it from her. He looked down at the old man in the little boat.

"Thank you, Tom."

"Don't thank me." Tom sat down hard. "Idiot."

Then Margaret fell away behind them, and the horns went on and on, until the island was gone.

Felicia stayed at the rail a long time. Then she turned round, wiping her eyes with her sleeve.

"He called you an idiot again."

"He meant it kindly."

"I know he did." She sniffed.

"Everybody on that island means t kindly now. That's the worst part."

She looked out at the empty sea. Prince. Where are we going now? Really?"

Alexander looked at the compass in his hand. The needle swung, and settled, and pointed north.

"To get married," he said. "To a woman I've never met. In a house that surely hates me."

On the mainland, in Westmere, in the Baroness Tiffany's dining room, a maid was laying the long table for the next week's guests.

She laid the Baroness's place at the head, and the daughters' places, and the grandchildren's. She laid the married-in husbands' places, low down, near the door.

Then, below the married-in husbands, at the very end, where the draught came under the door from the kitchen, she laid one more place.

"Is that for the prince?" asked the girl helping her.

"It's for the idiot," the maid said. "Madam Pauline's orders. Below the husbands. And no napkin."

"No napkin? For a prince?"

"He's not a prince in this house, girl. In this house, he's the joke."

The Tiffany gate was black iron, twice the height of a man, with a gilded T at the top that somebody polished every morning.

Two days, a ferry and three trains after Harland, Alexander and Felicia stood in front of it at dusk with their two bags.

"It's very big," Felicia said.

"It's a gate."

"I know it's a gate, Prince. I'm saying it's very big."

Alex smiled, she should see his palace on Xia.

On the other side, three young men were leaning on the gatepost with a pack of hounds at their feet The red faced in a hunting jacket, was grinning as if somebody had promised him a show.

tallest

"Is this him?" he said. "This is the prince?"

"Preston," one of the others muttered. "Don't."

"Don't what? Look at him." Preston opened the gate himself, just wide enough for one person, and the hounds poured through it and round Alexander's legs, sniffing, barking.

The order had already been given: release the hounds, tear into the prince, and strip him of his arrogance before the crowd. They were all waiting for blood.

Instead, Alex reached out and stroked the nearest hound between the ears. The beast merely whined and licked his knuckles, bringing the entire pack to a dead halt. The spectacle fell apart before it even began.

"Traitor," Preston spat at the hound.

"The Tenth Prince of the Empire! Arriving on foot! Where's your carriage, Your

Highness? Where's your crown?"

"In the bag," Alexander said mildly.

Preston laughed, and the other two laughed with him. "Come on, then. I'll show you your room. You'll love it. It's got company."

...

The room was behind the garage, at the back of the house, past the cars and the bins and the gardeners' shed.

It was next to the kennels.

It had one window, two narrow beds, a dripping tap, and a smell of dog through the wall. Outside the door, the hounds' bowls were already full.

Felicia stood in the doorway and didn't go in.

"There's been a mistake," she said to Preston. "This is a kennel."

"It's the staff wing."

"There is no staff wing. This is the garage."

"Then it's the garage wing." Preston leaned on the door frame.

"Look, maid. In this house the dogs eat first, then the family, then the husbands, then the staff. Your prince comes after all of them."

He grinned at Alexander. "Welcome to the Tiffany house, Your Highness."

The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 786

"Thank you," Alexander said. "It's very clean."

Preston stared at him. Then he laughed again, louder, and went away shaking his head.

Felicia put the bags down. Her hands were trembling.

"We've both slept in worse," Alexander said. "Unpack. We're expected upstairs."

The Baroness received him in the long drawing room, standing at the far end, by the fireplace.

She was eighty, small and straight, with white hair pinned so tightly it looked painful and an ebony cane she clearly didn't need. She did not come forward or sit down. She let him walk the whole length of the carpet to her, past three sofas full of her family.

Beside her, a tall woman in grey held a white card.

"My daughter Pauline," the Baroness said. "She'll explain how things are done."

"Your Highness." Pauline didn't curtsy. She read from the card in a smooth, pleasant voice, the voice of someone reading a menu to a child.

"In this house, the women of the line sit at the head of the table. The married-in husbands sit below them, in the order of their dowries. Mr. Harvey brought a share in a shipping line. Mr. Gideon brought a box of books."

She glanced at the card. "You brought nothing. So you'll sit below the married-in husbands."

"Below the husbands," Alexander repeated.

"At the end. You'll speak when you're spoken to. You won't use the front door. You won't go upstairs past the first landing. And you won't ask for anything." She lowered the card.

"Married-in men do not ask. Is that clear?"

"Very clear. Thank you for the rules."

Somebody on the sofas giggled. It was a woman of about forty with yellow hair and a glass of sherry.

"He thanked her, Mother," she said.

"Cordelia," the Baroness said, without looking round.

"I'm only saying."

The Baroness looked at Alexander for a long moment, the way a woman looks at a horse she has been sold at the wrong price.

She had never wanted him. The pact was her late husband's, signed with the palace before any of her grandchildren were born: Havenworth first, and Tiffany if Havenworth refused.

For twenty years, having a line to the emperor made them the talk of every high- society table. Now, it was just an embarrassing joke.

The tenth prince was out of the imperial succession.

"The wedding is in eight days," she said. "Until then you'll keep out of my sight. After it, you'll do the same."

At dinner, his place was at the very end of the long table, behind the chair of a nervous, balding man named Harvey, who turned round once to say, "Sorry, sorry, I'll move up," and then didn't.

Nobody mentioned the bride.

Nobody said her name. One place halfway down the table was never laid, and nobody looked at it.

Across from it sat a young woman in pale blue, very pretty, with a soft voice and a smile that never stopped.

"You must be so excited," she said to Alexander, down the whole length of the table. "I'm Patricia. Serena's cousin. We're all so happy for you both."

"Will I meet her before the wedding?" Alexander asked.

The table went quiet.

"Oh, no," Patricia said sweetly. "She's resting. She's very... shy."

"Shy," Cordelia scoffed into her sherry.

The entire family had conspired to conceal the woman's blindness and muteness, yet they dared to treat the prince like worthless garbage. The sheer hypocrisy was sickening.

"She's very quiet," Patricia said. "You'll see. You'll meet her at the altar. She won't give you any trouble at all."

"Patricia," Pauline said.

"What? I'm being nice, Mother."

Alexander ate his soup badly, too fast, the way the idiot had eaten every meal for fourteen years, and the whole table watched him and smiled.

At midnight he walked back from the kennels, where he had taken the hounds the rest of his dinner, and stopped in the yard.

At the end of the east wing stood a square, dark tower. One window at the very top was lit, behind bars.

The night air was still. On it, very faint, came a smell from that window rose absolute, iris, something green, the bones of a perfume that someone was building: in the dark

And under it, so faint that no human nose in the house would ever have noticed, something sweet and wrong, like rotting violets.

Alexander knew that smell.

Years ago, in another life, on another world, he had watched a sect sell it by the gram. They had called it by a pretty name, the way poisoners always did.

"Silent Night," he said softly, to the barred window. "Somebody in this house keeps buying it."

"Prince?" Felicia was at the door of their room, in her coat. "Come in, it's cold. And your phone's ringing. It's Harland."

...

It was Ivo, the big fisherman, and he was crying.

"It's Tom," he said. "Your Highness, it's Tom. He came off Margaret this morning and sat down on the bench and just — went grey. His heart. The doctor says it's his heart."

Alexander sat down on the narrow bed.

"Where is he?"

"The island clinic. They can't do anything. They say he needs surgery in the capital, a heart surgeon, this week. They want four hundred thousand. Four hundred thousand, Your Highness We've passed the hat round the whole island and we've got nine."

"Nine thousand."

"Nine thousand and some coins." Ivo's voice broke. "I'm sorry. He'd kill me for calling you."

There was a thump, a rustle, and a different voice, thin and furious.

"Give me that. Your Highness? Don't listen to him. Don't you dare send a cent."

"Tom."

"I'm not dying for your sake, idiot. I'm dying because I'm seventy." A cough that went on too long. "Keep the compass dry. That's all I want from you."

The line went dead. Alexander sat holding the phone for a long time.

Felicia was watching him from the other bed. She had her mother's ring on, and she was turning it round and round.

"The bank," she said quietly. "Mr. Moss's bank. Prince, there must be something in that bank."

"Nothing with my name on it. And I can't touch anything without a name either. Not this month."

"Why not?"

"Because a Treasury comptroller drowned four days ago looking for one coin in my name," Alexander said. "The inquiry closed. The Treasury didn't. Every transfer but of Harland this month will be read by somebody in the capital Four hundred thousand from a numbered account, to the hospital of the old man who led my ferry out of the harbour?"

He shook his head. "One coin with my name near it, Felicia, and I'm out. And Tom dies for nothing anyway."

"Then what do we do?"

Alexander looked at the wall, through which a hound was snoring.

"There's a birthday in two days," he said. "The Baroness is eighty. The whole city's coming."

"So?"

"So I'll ask them."

Felicia stared at him.

"Them?"

Alex possessed obscene wealth, but with the crown's gaze still fixed squarely upon him, a single misstep would cost him everything.

The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 787

The Grand Hotel's ballroom held four hundred people, and on the night of the Baroness Tiffany's eightieth birthday it held four hundred and twelve.

Three gold chandeliers hung over a white marble floor. A string quartet played on a low stage, and at the head table, under the middle chandelier, the Baroness sat in black lace and pearls, small and straight, her white hair pinned so tightly it looked painful.

Alexander arrived at the service door, because he wasn't allowed to use the front.

Pauline was waiting for him there, tall, in dove grey, with something white folded over her arm.

"Put this on," she said coldly.

He unfolded it. It was a short white waiter's jacket with brass buttons and the Grand Hotel's crest on the pocket.

"I'm a guest," he said, soft and puzzled.

"You're a married-in husband below the married-in husbands," Pauline said, smooth and cold as a menu. "There aren't enough chairs. There are, however, a great many trays." She handed it over with two fingers, as if it were damp. "It's the only role you're useful for. Smile, Count. And don't drop anything."

Behind her, two of the hotel's real waiters exchanged a look, and one of them snorted.

"Is that the prince?" the younger one whispered, when Pauline had gone.

"That's him," the older one muttered.

"The Tenth Prince?" Marco breathed, delighted. "Serving drinks?"

"Thirty years I've worked Tiffany birthdays," the older one growled. "Fifty years they've had them here. On this coast a married-in man gets seated by his dowry and served last, and I've never once seen one carry a tray."

He shrugged. "First time for everything. Shut up and give him a tray, Marco."

Marco was thin and young, with a folded white cloth over his arm. He gave Alexander a tray with twelve glasses of champagne on it.

"Rule one," he whispered, almost kindly. "You hold it flat, on your fingertips, not your palm. Rule two: you don't look at the guests. They don't like it when we look." He thought about it. "Rule three. If you drop something, it was the guest's fault. Rule four: it's never the guest's fault."

"So rule three is a trick," Alexander said seriously.

"Rule three is the only one that keeps you sane," Marco said flatly. "Rule four is the one that keeps you employed."

"Thank you," Alexander said warmly. "That's the most useful thing anyone's told me in this city."

"It's the only thing anyone's told you in this city, isn't it?" Marco said, surprised. "Yes," Alexander admitted cheerfully. "But it's still the most useful."

Marco looked at him oddly, as if a joke had gone the wrong way, and handed him a cloth as well.

The ballroom glittered, and every family in Westmere that mattered knew exactly who the new waiter was.

"Is that him?" a girl squealed, delighted.

"In the jacket! Look!" her brother laughed.

"Oh, that's priceless," her mother laughed. "Pauline's a genius."

"Does he know which end of the glass to hold?" someone sneered.

A woman at a corner table snapped her fingers at him. "Waiter! Over here, waiter!"

"Yes, madam," he said politely.

"Say Your Highness, darling, he likes it," her husband drawled, smug.

"Yes, Your Highness," Alexander told the woman, perfectly serious, and the whole table shrieked.

A big man with a red face and a booming laugh, in a very good suit, reached out and took two glasses at once.

"Well, well, well! A prince with a tray!" he roared happily, and clapped Alexander on the cheek, not quite hard enough to be a slap. "Bellamy's never been served by royalty before. Hugo Bellamy. I ship everything this hotel eats, son. Every oyster on that table came in on my boats."

"They're very good oysters, sir," Alexander said politely.

"They're the best oysters. Forty years my family's fed this hotel. Your Tiffanys too." Hugo laughed, and his whole table laughed with him. "Tell your grandmother-in-law Bellamy says happy birthday. Oh, wait. You're not allowed to talk to her, are you?" "Not yet, sir," Alexander said, calm and mild as milk.

"Not yet! Did you hear that? Not yet!" Hugo wiped his eyes, delighted. "I like him. He's funny. Go on, son. Fetch me another oyster."

Patricia was waiting by the dance floor in white silk, with diamonds at her throat and a smile that never stopped.

She stepped directly into his path.

"Oh, careful," she said sweetly.

Then she tipped her own full glass of red wine down the front of her gown, and screamed.

The quartet stopped. Four hundred heads turned.

"He threw it at me!" Patricia's voice cracked beautifully. "He threw it at me! Grandmother! My gown!"

"I didn't," Alexander said quietly.

"You did!" she wailed. "Everybody saw!"

"Grab him!" Preston bellowed, tall and red-faced, already shoving through the crowd with his phone up. "Somebody grab him! He did it on purpose!"

Alexander didn't move. He looked at the glass. It was still in Patricia's hand.

"Then why is the glass in your hand, cousin?" he asked mildly.

"Because I caught it!" she sobbed.

"Full?" he asked softly.

"Don't you dare talk to me!" Patricia's tears came faster. "Grandmother, he's arguing with me!"

But at the nearest table, two women were looking at the glass now.

"It's still full," one murmured. "Look. Almost to the top."

"Then what's on her dress?" the other whispered.

"The other half," her friend whispered, and hid a smile behind her fan.

Patricia heard. Her face went red under the tears, and for one second the sobbing stopped, as if somebody had turned off a tap.

"He's been staring at me all night," she sobbed, louder. "All night, Grandmother. I didn't want to say anything."

"Patricia, darling," Cordelia cooed from the head table, yellow hair, a glass of sherry, "you poor thing!"

"I knew it," a woman at Hugo's table said smugly. "They never really get better, you know. The idiots."

The service door banged open.

Felicia came through it, small and quick, greying hair pulled forward over her cheek, in her dress, and stopped in greysmaid's in front of

In

Patricia. In all her years of service, she had never once spoken in front of a guest. t

"She did it herself," she said, shaking, loud enough for three tables. "I saw it through the window. Nobody catches a glass full."

For a second nobody breathed.

Then Preston took the glass out of Patricia's hand and threw what was left of the wine into Felicia's face.

"Servants," he said lazily, "don't talk to the family."

The laughter came back twice as loud. Alexander's hand closed round Felicia's wrist before she could move. It was very gentle, and it didn't let go.

"Go back to the kitchen," he said quietly. "Please."

She looked at him, red wine running off her chin, her eyes saying you can't let them.

His eyes said I can. Tonight I have to. Then she went.

...

The Baroness had not stood up. She was looking at Alexander, not at Patricia.

"Mother," Pauline murmured beside her, tense, "four hundred guests."

"I can count, Pauline," the Baroness said dryly.

"Then send him out," Pauline said quietly. "Quietly."

"No." The Baroness's voice was old and dry and cutting. "Let them see what we were given." She raised it. "Clean it."

"Grandmother?" Patricia said, startled.

"Not you. Him." The Baroness picked up an oyster. "On your knees, Count. The floor. All of it."

The ballroom went perfectly silent.

Alexander put the tray down without spilling a drop, took out the white cloth Marco had given him, and knelt on the marble in the middle of four hundred people.

Somebody laughed. Then somebody else.

Then the phones came out.

"Get closer, get closer, I can't see his face!" a woman shouted.

"Is he crying?" a young man called eagerly. "Tell me he's crying."

"Preston, get his face!" Cordelia giggled.

Preston crouched beside him with his phone held sideways, filming, narrating like a man at a football match.

"And here he is, ladies and gentlemen," he crowed, "the Tenth Prince of the Empire!

Look at that technique! Look at that wrist! Born for it! Somebody give this man a mop!"

Alexander wiped the floor slowly, in small circles.

He did not hate them. That surprised him a little, down there on the marble, with the wine soaking into his knees.

On another world, long ago, an emperor had written in a notebook by a cold river:

The best way of avenging thyself is not to become like the wrong doer.

Alexander had always thought it was a line for old men. Kneeling on a ballroom floor, he understood it was the opposite. It was a line for anybody who wanted to stay himself While the whole room tried tomake him into something else.

They can have my knees, he thought. They don't get the rest of me.

When the marble was dry, he folded the cloth neatly in half, then in half again, and stood up.

"Is that all of it?" the Baroness asked coldly.

"Yes, Baroness," he said calmly.

"Then get out of my sight," she said, bored. "And take that cloth with you. Somebody might think it belongs here."

"Yes, Baroness," Alexander said, and bowed, and walked to the service door.

In the service corridor, behind the swing door with its round window, Felicia was standing with her fists clenched so hard her knuckles had gone white.

Wine had dried on her collar. Marco stood beside her, pale, holding a towel she hadn't taken.

"You were right," Marco muttered. "I saw it too."

"Then why didn't you say so?" Felicia hissed.

"And lose my job? To the Tiffanys?" He looked at his shoes, miserable. "Rule four, miss. Sorry."

"Prince," she whispered, when Alexander came through the door. "Prince."

"It's fine," he said gently.

"It's not fine." Her voice shook. "They filmed you. They'll put it everywhere. Don't Please. Whatever you're going to do next, dont Not for this you don't owe them anything."

"It's not for them," Alexander said quietly.

"Then what's it for?" she begged.

He looked at her, and for a second the idiot wasn't there at all.

"It's for Tom," he said, very low. "We need the money."

He gave her the folded cloth, then took it back, very politely, because the Baroness had told him to keep it. Felicia made a sound that was half a laugh and half a sob.

He straightened his white waiter's jacket and pushed back through the swing door into the ballroom.

He walked straight across the dance floor, past Patricia and Preston and Hugo Bellamy, all the way to the head table.

And he stopped in front of the Baroness's chair.

The quartet, which had just started playing again, stopped.

The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 788

"Baroness," Alexander said politely. "May I ask you something?"

Four hundred people held their breath under the three gold chandeliers.

The Baroness put down her oyster fork. Beside her, Pauline's face went smooth and still, like a pond freezing.

"You may not," the Baroness said coldly. "Married-in men do not ask. You were told."

"I was told," Alexander agreed, calm. "I'm asking anyway. It isn't for me."

"Oh, he's asking, Mother!" Cordelia laughed, high and delighted. "At your birthday! In a waiter's jacket!"

"Be quiet, Cordelia," the Baroness snapped. She looked at him. "Well? You've stopped my quartet. Ask."

He picked up one of the gold-edged cards that lay beside every plate.

Under the menu, in curling letters, it said: The Tiffany Foundation: eighty years of care for the sick and the needy of the coast.

"Your foundation helps the sick," he said quietly. "It says so on every table. There's an old man on Harland. His name is Tom. He's seventy, and his heart is failing. The hospital in the capital won't book his surgery without a deposit of ten thousand dollars, and the island has given everything it has." He put the card down. "Ten thousand, Baroness. From the foundation. For one old man."

The silence went on for a long time.

The Baroness looked at him the way she might look at a stain.

"The foundation," she said, cold and clear enough for the back tables, "is for people who matter to this coast. Even if I had ten thousand to spare tonight, Count, I would rather spend it on a sick dog. Or a cat. A dog is loyal, and a cat is clean." She picked up her oyster fork again. "An old fisherman is neither. He has had his life."

Then the ballroom laughed.

It started at Hugo Bellamy's table and spread outward in rings. People laughed until they had to hold the backs of their chairs.

"A dog!" Hugo roared, delighted. "She'd sooner pay for a dog!"

"Woof!" a young man barked, and his table shrieked.

"Who's Tom?" somebody asked, amused.

"A fisherman!" Preston howled. "He wants the Tiffany Foundation to pay for a fisherman!"

...

Pauline leaned down and murmured in her mother's ear. The Baroness listened, and something in her old face loosened, almost into a smile.

"My daughter has a suggestion," she said dryly.

Pauline straightened. Her voice was smooth and pleasant and reasonable.

"The foundation doesn't give to married-in men's charity cases, Your Highness," she said gently, as if to a child. "It's a rule. But the guests are generous people. Take a tray. Go round the room, table by table, and ask each guest yourself." She smiled thinly. "On your knees, of course. A man who begs should look like one. Whatever the room gives you, the house will match it."

"Crawl to every table," Alexander repeated slowly.

"And ask," Pauline said sweetly. "If they pay, we'll match it."

Patricia, in her wine-stained white silk, clapped softly.

"Oh, Aunt," she breathed, delighted. "That's perfect."

Alexander looked at the empty silver tray on the table beside him, and picked it up without a word.

...

He went down on his knees at the first table and held the tray up in both hands.

"For Tom," he said quietly. "His heart."

The first table laughed. A man in a velvet jacket put his shoe on Alexander's shoulder and pushed, gently, so that he tipped sideways and had to catch himself.

"Next table, boy," the man said lazily.

He crawled to the next table. And the next.

"Look at him go!" someone shouted.

"Faster, Your Highness!" a girl giggled. "There are forty tables!"

"Does he do tricks? Sit! Beg!" A young man was crying with laughter. "Oh, he is begging!"

"For Tom," Alexander said, at every table, in the same low, steady voice. "His heart."

At the table by the pillar, a thin man with a capital accent was filming him without laughing, the phone held very steady. At the table by the doors, a woman in grey was typing a message under the tablecloth. Alexander had marked them both before the first oyster. His brothers' eyes. The First Prince kept people in every great house on the coast, and the Third Prince kept people watching the First Prince's people.

Good, he thought. Film it all.

By morning the capital would have the video: the Tenth Prince on his knees, begging for a fisherman, polishing shoes for nothing. His brothers would laugh, and then they would do the sensible thing. They would move their watchers to someone who mattered. Nobody wastes a good spy on an idiot.

Tom would have understood. He used to say the sea doesn't argue with the rocks; it just keeps coming. An old sage had put it better, long ago: There is nothing in the world more soft and weak than water, and yet for attacking things that are firm and strong there is nothing that can take precedence of it.

So be water, Alexander thought, and crawled on to the next table. Let them look down. A man nobody watches can do anything.

Nobody put anything in the tray. At table nine a girl of about twelve took a coin out of her little evening bag.

"Mama, can I -" she whispered.

Her mother slapped her hand sharply, and the coin went back in.

"We don't encourage them, darling," the mother said coldly.

At table fourteen, Hugo Bellamy was waiting.

He had turned his chair all the way round to watch, with a fresh plate of oysters on his knee and his black shoes polished to a mirror. When Alexander reached him, he stuck out one foot and set his shoe on the edge of the silver tray.

"Service first, son," he boomed cheerfully. "Then we'll talk about the fisherman." He nodded at the white cloth in Alexander's pocket. "Go on. You're good with that cloth. The whole room saw."

Alexander took out the cloth and polished Hugo Bellamy's shoes, one and then the other, while the ballroom roared.

Hugo admired them in the light, turning his foot like a lady with a new ring. Then he took it off the tray.

"Service was slow," he announced loudly. "No tip!"

"Thank you, sir," Alexander said gently.

"Thank you, he says!" Hugo slapped the table, delighted. "He thanks me!"

Alexander looked up at Hugo's red, laughing face, and he remembered it. Very carefully. Every line of it.

"I won't forget it, sir," he said quietly.

...

Twenty minutes later he was back at the head table, knees wet, with an empty tray.

"Nothing," Pauline said smugly, and looked into the tray as if she were checking. "The house matches it. Nothing. Congratulations."

"Forty tables!" Preston howled. "Not a cent! Buy him a heart, Tom! A paper one!"

The Baroness raised her hand, and the room went quiet again.

"I'll pay for it," she said flatly.

Alexander looked up.

"Not ten thousand. All of it. The whole surgery, tonight. Your fisherman can have his heart." Her vorce was dry and patient, She nodded to Pauline, who took a folded paper from her bag and laid it on the table, with a pen on top. "On one condition. Sign that."

"What is it?" he asked carefully.

"A release," Pauline said smoothly. "Of the marriage pact. You give up any claim on this house. You leave Westmere tonight. And you tell the newspapers you ran away from the wedding because you were afraid of the bride." She smiled. "We'll write it for you."

"In disgrace," the Baroness said, cold as the marble. "And we never see you again."

Alexander looked at the paper for a long time.

Tom's whole surgery. Tom's heart. One signature. And a girl in a tower he had never seen, left behind in this house with the people who had locked her there.

"Go on," Hugo called, grinning. "Sign it, son! Best offer you'll ever get!"

"Sign it!" a man yelled.

"Sign! Sign! Sign!" the tables chanted, thumping their glasses.

Alexander put the tray down, very gently, on top of the release.

"I'll find Tom's money somewhere else," he said quietly. "I'm marrying your granddaughter. You'll have to get used to me, Baroness."

Pauline's smile slipped. Patricia stopped clapping. For the first time that night, nobody in the ballroom laughed.

The Baroness's face didn't move at all.

"Throw him out," she said, bored.

Two hotel guards marched him down the back stairs and out through a fire door into the rainy alley, under one orange lamp.

They let go of him in a puddle.

"Married-in men don't ask, Count," Preston called gleefully from the top of the stairs.

"Now you know why!"

The fire door slammed.

Alexander stood up in the rain. In his pocket was the cloth he had polished Hugo Bellamy's shoes with.

He folded it once more and left it there. In the other pocket, his fingers found Tom's cheap brass compass with the cracked glass, and held it.

"Prince!"

Felicia came running round the corner of the hotel with her coat over her head and half a bread roll in her hand, still warm, stolen from the kitchen.

"Here. Eat this," she ordered, breathless. "You didn't eat anything. Are you hurt? Did they hurt you?"

"No," he said gently.

"You should have signed it." She was crying and furious at once. "For Tom. You should have signed it."

"Then I'd be the fiancé who ran away," Alexander said quietly. "And I'd lose everything I came here for."

Felicia stopped. Then she pulled at her finger, hard, and held something out in the rain: her mother's thin gold ring.

"Take it," she begged. "There's a pawnshop on Quay Street. It won't be ten thousand, but — "

Alexander closed her hand round it with both of his.

"It stays on you," he said softly. "Your mother would haunt me."

The kitchen door banged open behind her. Marco came out into the rain in his white jacket, with a paper bag held out in both hands.

In six years at the Grand, Marco had never once seen a guest put money in a waiter's hand. It had always gone the other way.

"From the kitchen," he said, embarrassed. "We passed the hat. The cooks, the porters, the girls on the coats. It's not much. Two hundred dollars." He pushed it into Alexander's hands, then added, very seriously, "And a button. The pastry.

chef putin a button. She says it's a very good button for luck, and you're not to spend it on anything stupid."

Felicia laughed out loud, through her tears.

"For the fisherman," Marco said, red to the ears. "Not one of them gave a cent."

Alexander looked at the bag, and at the bread roll in his other hand, and for a moment the rain didn't matter at all.

"Tell the kitchen," he said warmly, "I won't forget it either."

Marco went back inside. In Alexander's pocket, his phone buzzed once. A message with no name on it, from a number that changed every week.

Greyhallow says yes. Tonight. The car is at the end of the alley. Nobody knows: not the palace, not the court, not your father. R.

Two nights ago, in the garage room, after the call about Tom, he had made one more call.

Richie. The Second Queen. Find a way in for a physician with no name. Through lawyers, through the Varennes' bank, through anyone. But not through the palace.

His father had told him to cure her. His father must never know whose hands had done it.

"Prince?" Felicia was watching his face. "What is it?"

"Nothing," he said gently. "Go home, Felicia. Get dry. Don't wait up."

"Where are you going?"

"For a walk."

At the end of the alley, under the last lamp, a plain grey car with no plates was waiting with its lights off.

The driver, a broad, silent man in a dark coat, got out and opened the back door without a word.

"Mr. Moss's compliments, sir," he said flatly, when they were moving. "Forty minutes up the coast. There are clothes on the seat. And Mr. Moss says the white jacket stays in this car. Half the city filmed it tonight."

The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 789

The grey car drove north along the coast road, rain streaming down its windows, the sea black on the left. In the back, Alexander changed out of the wet waiter's jacket into plain black clothes that fitted him exactly. A flat wooden box lay beside him.

"What's in it?" he asked.

"Your face, sir," the driver said flatly, without turning round. "Mr. Moss had it bought from a black market."

Inside, on grey velvet, lay a mask of white porcelain: no mouth, two narrow slits for eyes, and a hairline crack across the brow mended with gold.

"Old," Alexander said softly.

"Three hundred years," the driver said, reading it off a card, dry as paper. "It belonged to a court physician who treated an empress and preferred not to be thanked."

"Did the empress live?" Alexander asked, curious.

"To ninety. The physician was never identified." The driver put the card away. "Mr. Moss says he'd like both of those things to happen again."

Alexander put the mask on. When he spoke again, his voice was lower and flatter, with no youth in it at all.

"Like this?" the low voice asked.

"I wouldn't know, sir," the driver said. "I just drive." It was the longest speech he made all night.

...

Greyhallow was black stone on a headland, every window lit. At the top of the stairs, Lord Ambrose Varenne stood in the Queen's doorway, a heavy man in a velvet dinner jacket, with his arms folded.

"This is him?" he sneered, looking at the plain black clothes, the wet shoes. "Four specialists from four countries have failed, and three lawyers from my own bank promise me a miracle, and they send me a man in a borrowed suit?"

"A legendary physician, my lord," the driver said calmly. "As your lawyers agreed. No name, no questions. And nobody at the palace told. Call him Ferryman."

"Then let him show me results," Ambrose snapped. "Results first. I've paid enough charlatans this month to — "

"No need to pay if no result."

The door behind him opened. A small grey woman in black, hands folded, looked at the mask for a long time, as if reading it.

"Bring him in," said Mother Agnes quietly.

"Agnes, I haven't - "Ambrose spluttered.

"Her Majesty is dying, my lord," she said, very gently. "Your permission can wait."

The Second Queen lay yellow and failing among blinking machines, grey hair spread on a white pillow. Her eyes found the mask.

"So," she breathed. "You're the one... the old legendary physician." Her eyes narrowed, even now.

"I'm the one your newspaper promise was for," said the Ferryman, low and calm. "Will I live?" she whispered.

"Nine needles," said the Ferryman steadily. "One night."

Nine needles, fine as hairs. The first went in at the base of her throat.

"What is he doing?" Ambrose demanded from the foot of the bed. "Agnes, stop him. That's not medicine, that's — "

On the third needle, the Queen's rattling breath caught, stopped, and came again, deep and smooth, all the way down.

"...Oh," Ambrose said, stunned.

"Be quiet, my lord," Mother Agnes murmured. "Watch."

On the sixth needle, colour came into the Queen's face. On the seventh, she began to murmur, the way the very sick do.

The Ferryman's hand stopped above her throat. Thinking would he safe her or kill her here.

The eighth queen had been his mother. Fourteen years ago, someone had planted a bomb under her aircraft with her seven-year-old son on board.

The boy had survived, only to be fed scraps and treated like an idiot ever since. And now, beneath his needle, lay one of the six women who might have done it.

For one long second, the needle didn't move. At the foot of the bed, Mother Agnes looked up through the mask and said nothing at all.

"Not yet," he muttered, before he could get the real answer.

Killing these women is far too easy.

Then the eighth needle went in, exactly where it should. On the ninth, the Queen opened her eyes properly for the first time in a month.

"Who are you?" she asked, astonished.

The Ferryman said nothing.

"Take off the mask," she ordered.

"No, Majesty," he said quietly. "If I take off this mask, I have to kill you and all people here."

"How dare you!"

"I can walk away from here and you will never be cured."

"I could have you — " She stopped, and laughed weakly. "No. I couldn't. Could I? Not now."

"Not with a needle still in your throat," said the Ferryman calmly.

"I promised a billion," the Queen said slowly, "to whoever saved me. Every newspaper printed it. I meant a famous name, with a famous face." The pen shook in her hand. "Not a mask. To whom do I pay it?"

"To someone, Majesty," said the Ferryman, and laid a slip of paper on her book. A mainland bank, and a number.

"What if I don't send the payment?"

"Then I won't send the last pill you need to be cured," he said. "This needle will only give you three more months. Without that pill, you'll die for real."

For a second the Second Queen stared at the mask. Then, weakly, she laughed, and signed.

At the door, Ambrose stepped in front of the masked man. His arms weren't folded any more.

"Name a figure for you. Work for my family. A house, a title, whatever you — " "No," said the Ferryman flatly.

Ambrose's face went red. "Do you know who you're refusing?" he growled.

"Yes," said the Ferryman, and walked round him. "Do you know who are you going to make enemy with?"

Mother Agnes saw him to the top of the stairs. She stopped there, with her hands folded.

"Next time," she said quietly, "come in dry shoes. You left footprints on her carpet. Somebody might measure them."

The Ferryman looked down at his wet shoes.

"Thank you, Mother," he said softly.

"I didn't see anything," Mother Agnes said serenely. "I'm old. I never do."

On the road south, the Ferryman took off his face and became Alexander again. His hands were shaking. He laid them flat on his knees until they stopped.

"Your hands, sir," the driver said, without turning round.

"Cold," Alexander said shortly.

"Cold coast, sir," the driver agreed, and said nothing else for twenty miles.

Nobody at the palace knew where he had been tonight. Not the court, not his brothers, not his father.

Especially not his father.

Alexander looked out at the black sea for a long moment. Then he called Richie. Richie answered on the first ring, breathless.

"It's landed?"

"It's landed," Richie yelled. "All of it? The whole — Your Highness, I'm going to cry."

"Cry later," Alexander said dryly. "Is the account clean? Can anyone follow it? The Treasury? The palace?"

"Clean as snow. Not the Treasury, not the palace, not even His Majesty. Especially not His Majesty. A mainland bank, nothing in your name. Halcyon Group, registered at nine." Richie sniffed loudly.

"Don't worry about the crying. I cried all over my best suit at the ceremony. I'm in my pyjamas now. They can take it."

"Richie," Alexander said patiently.

"Sorry. Sorry." He blew his nose, happily. "And I've found your face for it. Natasha Vale. Sharp, cold, hates being told why."

Natasha Vale came on video at a quarter to two, in a dark kitchen, with a glass of water in her hand: tall, black hair cut sharp at the jaw, no jewellery at all.

"Who am I working for?" she asked crisply.

"A man in a plain coat," Alexander said, with his face turned away from the camera.

"Does he have a name?" she asked, unimpressed.

"Not one you'll need," he said.

She considered that for three seconds.

"Fine," she said briskly. "I start at six."

When she was gone, Alexander said, "Richie. One more thing. A hospital in the capital. Tom Abernathy, from Harland. Heart surgery. Pay for all of it from Halcyon's foundation. Anonymous donor."

"Done." A pause, then softly. "I'm definitely going to cry," Richie said, already crying.

"And Richie. Send him two hundred dollars as well. Cash, in an envelope, with a note. And a button."

"A button?" Richie asked, bewildered. "Saying what?"

"From the kitchen of the Grand Hotel," Alexander said warmly.

"And give Natasha Vale her first order. Track down everyone working in the Grand Hotel's kitchen. Pay off every debt they owe, and give them each an apartment of a house or a car, if they're already housed.

"Then, turn her attention to Baroness Tiffany's guests. I want a full list of names.

Within six months, ruin their businesses entirely. I want them buried in debt before the year is up."

At half past two, Preston and two cousins were still under the tower with a bottle, playing the ballroom video at full volume.

Look at that wrist! Born for it! The tower's one barred window stood open above them. Alexander waited by the kennels until they went in.

At three, he pulled his old Harland coat on against the cold, salt-stiff wool that smelled of cedar, climbed the tower in his socks, and moved two soft old bars aside like curtains.

A girl was asleep inside, much too thin, long dark hair loose on the pillow. On the desk stood rows of little glass vials, sorted by shape, because she couldn't read their labels.

For two years nobody had come up those stairs except a maid with a tray and, once a month, the family doctor, who always said the same thing no change. She had kept working anyway, blind, by smell alone.

Before the poison she had been called the best young nose in Westmere. The vials were the proof that she still was.

He had very little left in him after Greyhallow. His hands still weren't steady. He knelt by the bed anyway.

"You're going to see the morning," he whispered.

Felicia used to sing an old psalm in the castle laundry, over the hiss of the irons:

weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning. For years he had thought it was a song about laundry.

Two years is a long night, he thought, and lifted the first needle.

On the seventh she half woke.

Blind and mute, she found his wrist in the dark and held it hard, like a rope. Then, with one finger, she wrote on his palm in capitals.

"WHO?"

Alexander looked down at her blind, frightened face.

"Nobody," he said softly, in the Ferryman's low, flat voice, not his own. "A dream. Go back to sleep."

Her finger moved again, trembling.

"STAY?"

"Until the light," he said gently. "Then you'll wake up in it."

Her grip loosened. She turned her face into his sleeve and breathed in, slowly, the way a perfumer does when she is learning something by heart cedar, salt, old wool. She was asleep again before the eighth needle, still holding on.

"Sleep, Serena," he whispered. "Two years is long enough. I've got you now."

Then he looked at the desk. Among the vials stood a dozen finished bottles, each one exquisite, each one labelled in neat gold letters: Patricia Tiffany.

"So that's what they take from you," he said, cold and quiet. Beside them, in a battered box, lay one sheet in a woman's faded hand, signed

Rosalind: a formula, half finished.

He read it once, remembered it, and put it back exactly where it had been.

At sunrise, the whole of the Tiffany house woke to a scream from the tower.

It was the first sound Serena Tiffany had made in two years.

The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 790

By seven in the morning, every door in the east wing of the Tiffany house was locked, and nobody would tell the idiot why.

"What was the scream?" Alexander asked the cook innocently, at the kitchen door.

"What scream?" the cook snapped.

"At sunrise," he said patiently. "From the tower."

"There wasn't any scream, Your Highness," she said, nervous. She didn't look at him. "You must have dreamed it."

"Everybody dreamed it, then," Alexander said mildly. "The dogs dreamed it too. They were barking for an hour."

"Breakfast's in the servants' hall," the cook said sharply, and shut the door in his face.

Upstairs, behind the locked doors, he could hear the house running about in a panic: the doctor's car on the gravel at half past seven, Pauline's voice, sharp and low, and once, very clearly, Patricia's.

"That's impossible!" she shrieked.

Felicia found him in the yard, in the grey morning light, feeding the hounds.

"Something's happened up there," she whispered. "The maids are crying. Madam Pauline's taken all their phones."

"Has she?" he said vaguely.

"Prince," she whispered, "do you know something?"

"I know the dogs want more sausages," Alexander said cheerfully, and gave them more sausages.

Felicia didn't laugh. She held out her hand, and her mother's thin gold ring was in it again.

"Quay Street opens at nine," she said, very quiet. "Please, Prince. For Tom."

"Keep it," he said gently. He closed her fingers over it, the way he had in the rain. "Someone already paid."

"Who?" she asked, startled.

"Someone," Alexander said lightly, and went back to the dogs.

It was true, and it was the first time he had kept the whole truth from her to keep her safe. It would not be the last.

At breakfast in the servants' hall, around the long scrubbed table, the radio on the shelf was playing the news.

"...and in business news, a company nobody in Westmere had heard of until last night has bought the city's most famous hotel. Halcyon Group, registered on the mainland only yesterday, completed the purchase of the Grand Hotel at four o'clock this morning..."

The servants' hall went quiet.

"The Grand?" a footman gasped. "We were at the Grand last night!"

"Four in the morning?" a maid said, amazed. "Who buys a hotel at four in the morning?"

"Somebody very rich who couldn't sleep," the cook said dryly.

"Maybe they'll give us a raise," the footman said hopefully.

"We don't work at the Grand, you fool," the cook said, and the whole table laughed for the first time that morning.

"Halcyon," Felicia repeated, very slowly, and looked across the table at Alexander.

He was buttering his toast.

"Halcyon?" he said, puzzled. "Never heard of them."

"Neither had I," Felicia said softly. "Until just now."

Halcyon's new offices were the top five floors of the Harbour Exchange, a glass tower on the waterfront, empty until this morning.

By ten there was a name on the brass plate in the lobby, and Hugo Bellamy was standing in front of it, a big man with a red face, sweating through a very good suit. He had been up since five, on the phone.

The Grand had been Bellamy Shipping's best customer for forty years. Hugo's father had signed that contract with the old owner over a bottle of brandy, and Hugo had always said the Grand would sooner change its name than change its shipper.

"I'm here for Ms. Vale," he told the girl at the desk, loudly. "Hugo Bellamy. Bellamy Shipping. She'll see me."

"Do you have an appointment, sir?" she asked.

"I don't need an appointment. I am the Grand Hotel's supply line."

The lift doors opened behind him. A young man in a plain old wool coat came out of the lift, carrying a courier's file box under one arm, and walked across the lobby towards the doors.

Anyone who had followed the idiot from the Tiffany gate this morning would have seen exactly what the city expected: a married-in nobody who had found work carrying other people's boxes.

Hugo stared at him.

Then he laughed, loud and relieved, the way a man laughs when something finally makes sense.

"You! The waiter! Ha!" He blocked the young man's path, delighted. "Delivering files now, are we? Moving up in the world!"

"Something like that, sir," Alexander said mildly.

"Lost your tray?" Hugo teased.

"I left it at the Grand," Alexander said.

"Good boy. Good boy." Hugo clapped him on the shoulder. "Here, you'd know. Is she in? Ms. Vale? Is she the type who's nice in the morning?"

"I don't think she's nice at any time, sir," Alexander said seriously.

"Ha! Then I'll be nice enough for both of us." Hugo pressed the lift button and looked back, generous now. "You should come and work for me, son. Bellamy Shipping. Carrying boxes. Steady pay."

"I'll think about it, sir," Alexander said politely.

"Don't think too long. Your sort never does." And Hugo laughed again, and went up in the lift, his black shoes still polished to a mirror.

Natasha Vale did not offer him a chair.

She stood behind a desk with nothing on it but one sheet of paper, tall, black hair cut sharp at the jaw, in a corner office with no pictures on the walls yet, and let him stand in the doorway.

"Mr. Bellamy," she said coolly.

"Ms. Vale! Congratulations. A wonderful purchase. A wonderful old hotel." Hugo spread his hands warmly. "And I'm sure you'll want continuity. The Grand runs on Bellamy boats. Forty years. My father and old Mr. -"

"Your father's contract," Natasha said coldly, "was with the previous owner." "Well, of course, but — " he stammered.

"The previous owner no longer owns the hotel. Halcyon does." She picked up the sheet of paper. "Halcyon has reviewed the Grand's suppliers. As of mine o clock this morning, every Bellamy contract with the hotel is terminated."

Hugo's smile stayed where it was for a second, as if it hadn't heard.

"Terminated?" he said hoarsely. "On what grounds?"

"On the grounds that the owner doesn't want them," she said flatly.

"But you don't even — who is the owner? Let me talk to him! Man to man!"

"No," she said, her voice entirely calm. "If you speak to the owner now, you'll be a dead man. Not because of the law-because of what you did to him."

"I never met him. If he dares to stop me, I'll sue," Hugo threatened.

"Please do," Natasha said crisply. "This hotel is ours now, Mr. Bellamy. So are your contracts." She put the paper down. "Were."

Hugo stood there. For no reason he could name, he looked down at his own shoes. They were still shining from last night.

He didn't know why that made him feel cold.

...

When the door had closed behind him, Natasha crossed the office and opened the door to the empty boardroom next to it.

The man in the plain coat, who had walked out through the lobby and come straight back up in the service lift, was sitting at the end of the long table, the courier's file box in front of him, unopened.

"He laughed at you," Natasha said coolly. "In the lobby. I saw it on the camera."

"He laughed at me last night too," Alexander said. "He's a cheerful man."

"Shall I wipe him out completely? Everything he owns?" she asked, her voice dead serious.

"No. Let him suffer. Take it slow."

Natasha looked at the coat. It was old and plain and salt-stiff, and torn along one sleeve, and it had cost less than her lunch.

"You've owned a hotel since four o'clock this morning," she said. "You could buy a coat."

"An old writer er once said, beware of all enterprises that require new clothes, and not rather a new wearer

Ju of clothes," Alexander said, amused.

Mr Bellamy has very good shoes Ms. Vale. Look where they walked him this morning."

For the first time in four hours, Natasha almost smiled.

"Is that why we bought the Grand?" she asked.

"One of the reasons," he said quietly.

Natasha did not ask what the other reasons were. Four hours into the job, she had already decided she would never ask why.

"What next?" she said briskly.

"A tender." He slid a single handwritten page across the table.

"Halcyon's first public act. We're going to put a fragrance in every net room of every hotel we'll ever own, and we'll choose one perfume house to make it. The test is live in ours own lab. Each house sends one perfumer. One hour. They compose in front of our chemists."

Natasha read the page. She read it twice. Then she looked up at him.

"Only one perfumer in this city could pass a test like that," she said slowly. "The Tiffany girl. Rosalind's daughter. She won every prize at nineteen, and then she vanished. Nobody's seen her for two years."

"She's been busy," said the man in the plain coat, very quietly. "She'll win it."

At eleven, Hugo's own trucks rolled up to the Grand's service gate with the morning's oysters, Hugo himself in the first cab, come to force the gate open the way his father would have.

The iron gate didn't open. For forty years it had always opened for Bellamy trucks first, before the bakers' vans, before the laundry.

Half the hotel's staff were standing behind the bars: the same porters, the same cooks, the same waiters who had carried his champagne at the Baroness's birthday. A hundred guests in the breakfast room above were watching from the windows.

"Open the gate!" Hugo shouted, climbing out of the first truck. "Do you know who I am? I'm Bellamy! I feed this hotel!"

"Not any more, Mr. Bellamy," the head porter said politely. "New owners. New shipper. Orders came down at nine."

"Who's the new shipper?" Hugo barked.

"Couldn't say, sir," the porter said, perfectly calm.

Marco leaned on the gate in his white jacket, thin and young, with a folded white cloth over his arm. He held it out through the bars.

"Your shoes, Mr. Bellamy?" he said, very politely. "I'm afraid service is slow this morning."

The whole service yard laughed. Upstairs, behind the breakfast-room glass, somebody started to clap.

Alexander got back to the Tiffany house at noon, through the black iron gate with its gilded T, past the hounds, across the yard.

The door at the bottom of the old tower stood wide open, for the first time in two years, and on the stairs inside, halfway up, Patricia was sitting with her hands pressed over her mouth. Her face was white to the lips.

She didn't see him in the doorway. She was looking up the stairs.

"She can see," Patricia whispered, to nobody at all. "She looked right at me. She can see."