

Awakening Love: Reborn to Be His Duchess Novel

We Had Something Real But Didn't Handle It Right

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Chapter 371 Whispered Worries

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Rowena's gaze drifted down to Elowen's midsection as she asked softly, "At a glance, you can't tell at all."

Elowen replied, "It hasn't even been three months yet."

Rowena blinked in surprise. "Still that early?"

Elowen let out a quiet sigh. "Last night I really had no choice. The former Crown Princess kept pressing and provoking me. I had to reveal the pregnancy."

Rowena caught the key point immediately. "The former Crown Princess?"

Tilting her head, Elowen said, "Didn't Adrian mention it? At the banquet in the palace last night, Daphne offended His Majesty. She's already been stripped of her title as Crown Princess and confined to the Secluded Wing."

Rowena's brows knit together. "That... I hadn't heard."

At that moment, footsteps sounded outside the door.

Bran walked straight in and bowed respectfully. "Your Grace, Your Grace. Lord Jett has arrived."

Cassian inclined his head slightly. "Show him in."

When Quin entered, four well-dressed matrons followed behind him, their expressions composed and respectful. Several servants and maids remained outside the doorway.

Quin stepped forward and bowed. "Greetings to Your Grace."

Elowen asked, "Lord Jett, why have you brought so many people?"

Quin smiled as he answered, "Last night, when His Majesty learned that Your Grace is

her expecting, he was overjoyed. In his excitement, he remembered to grant gold and jewels, but forgot about these matters. It wasn't until this morning, when Her Majesty went to pay respects and mentioned it, that His Majesty realized he ought to send capable attendants to care for Your Grace."

A flicker passed through Elowen's thoughts. "Were these people chosen by Her Majesty?"

Quin replied, "Her Majesty does not currently oversee the inner palace, but she recommended a few. Beatrice and Margery have both served several princes and princesses before. There are also a few honest and steady maids. Lady Elira, who now holds the Queen's Privy Seal, recommended several as well. As for the rest, I selected them according to His Majesty's instructions."

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As he spoke. Quin presented a carefully recorded roster.

Elowen accepted it with a gentle smile. "You've worked hard, Lord Jett. Please be sure to convey my thanks to His Majesty, Her Majesty, and Lady Elira."

Quin nodded cheerfully. "Of course."

Holding the roster in her hand, Elowen thought silently.

There are so many different people backing them. Untangling all of that would be a real headache.

Warren spoke up beside them with admiration. “His Majesty truly keeps Your Grace in his thoughts. And Her Majesty is so gracious and virtuous.”

Elowen’s mind turned over the words. Whether she is truly being gracious or has other motives... that remains to be seen.

After offering a few more instructions, Quin took his leave and returned to the palace to report. For the moment, Elowen could not determine the background of these new servants, so she simply instructed Gerda to take them away and arrange quarters first.

Cassian knew that Elowen and Rowena had once been close. Wishing to give them some private time to talk about matters of the inner chambers, he called to Warren and steered him toward the study.

Elowen glanced sideways at Elara.

In the past, Elara would have found every possible excuse to follow them to the study, just to steal another glimpse of Cassian.

Yet today she did not even lift her head.

And it did not look like she was pretending.

How strange.

Had the Christmas truly changed Elara’s nature?

“Your Grace, there’s something I should tell you.”

Rowena spoke gently.

Elowen turned toward her. “What is it?”

“To be honest, my husband and Adrian are barely acquaintances. They’ve hardly seen each

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other in years. Yet today Adrian was unusually enthusiastic, pulling him aside to talk for quite a while. The conversation circled around and eventually came to Your Grace. He even

mentioned your pregnancy. At the time I was happy to hear it, of course. But afterward, the more I thought about it, the stranger it seemed. It almost felt as though Adrian intentionally wanted us to know.”

Elowen paused.

“Afterward we stopped by the church and overheard several people talking. A few of them were discussing Your Grace’s pregnancy as well. The news spread far too quickly. That’s why I thought it best to come tell you right away, so I brought my husband with me.”

At that, Elowen laughed softly. “Lieutenant Wrenner clearly didn’t think that far ahead. You’re the observant one.”

At the mention of her husband, Rowena’s expression turned faintly disdainful.

“He’s hopelessly simple. Otherwise, how could he have been captured by the Nordians and held there for so many years? That man... someone could cheat him blind and he’d probably still thank them for it.”

She shook her head with a sigh.

“Sometimes I even think that living as foolishly as he does might actually make life rather carefree.”

Elowen could not help laughing.

Rowena was still just as clever and amusing as ever. “Enough about him.”

Rowena turned serious again and looked at Elowen with concern. “We just saw Lord Jett. If the queen persuaded His Majesty to send all these attendants to serve you, this will soon become common knowledge. When that happens, Duskmoor Manor and Your Grace may appear dazzling and favored, but in truth you’ll become the focus of everyone’s attention.”

She lowered her voice slightly.

“Your Grace, you must be careful from now on. Your Grace has always been kind. You never resented my daughter’s admiration for His Grace. Instead, you’ve

shown patience and consideration. I'm deeply grateful for that. The three of us were able to spend the Christmas in Vanelle thanks to Your Grace's generosity."

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Chapter 372 Quiet Sisterhood

Rowena's gaze softened with affection. "Forgive me for speaking boldly, but although you are the Duchess of Duskmoor, in my heart you feel more like a younger sister. As women, we both know how difficult pregnancy and childbirth can be. When I gave birth to Elara, I truly came close to death. Even now, remembering it still frightens me."

Her voice grew gentle.

"I sincerely hope everything goes smoothly for you. I hope nothing goes wrong."

Elowen felt warmth spread through her chest.

Sometimes she felt incredibly fortunate to have been given a second chance at life, one that allowed her to meet so many good people. Cassian, Elspeth and Rowena.

She nodded earnestly. "I'll remember. I'll be careful."

The two of them chatted a while longer about the palace banquet the previous night, especially about how Daphne had brought ruin upon herself.

When Rowena heard the full story, she sighed. "I heard you and she grew up together. Even if you weren't the closest of friends, there should have been some affection between you. Why was she so determined to frame you?"

Elowen thought for a moment. "She seems to hate me."

Rowena frowned slightly. "Hatred usually has a reason."

Tilting her head, Elowen realized she truly did not know why Daphne hated her.

She had overlooked that question before.

She only remembered that in her previous life, on one occasion Daphne had stared at her coldly and said something strange.

Daphne had said, "If it weren't for you, I wouldn't have become like this."

But when Elowen searched her own conscience, she had always treated Daphne sincerely. Whenever possible, she had either helped her or protected her.

What had she done wrong to make Daphne despise her so much?

She could not figure it out. And in the end, she decided not to dwell on it.

Sometimes love and hatred did not need a clear reason.

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Chapter 372 Quiet Sisterhood

"Oh, right."

Elowen changed the subject. "Miss Wrenner seems different today. Much more well-behaved than usual."

Rowena glanced at her daughter, then blinked in surprise.

It really is true.

Elara held her cup in both hands, her delicate cheeks flushed a soft pink. "I... I'm always well-behaved."

Rowena replied honestly, "You've clearly misunderstood yourself."

Elara's cheeks reddened even more, and she refused to speak to her mother anymore.

Gathering her courage, she looked at Elowen. "Your Grace... before we arrived today, did someone else visit the manor?"

Elowen paused.

Before Warren's family arrived at Duskmoor Manor, the only visitors had been Zachary and Flowira.

But their visit had been secret, and Elowen had no intention of revealing it.

Elara's eyes grew more eager. "Your Grace, could you tell me who he was?"

Elowen suddenly remembered something her sister-in-law had once told her.

When someone kept asking questions you did not want to answer, the best response was to ask one in return.

So Elowen smiled gently and asked, "Why do you ask so suddenly, Miss Wrenner?"

Elara froze, then lowered her gaze shyly. "I... I..."

"You child," Rowena said, clearly catching on. "You sound like a girl who's just fallen in love."

She paused, then added thoughtfully, "No, not just. More like for the second time."

Elara hurried to deny it. "I'm not!"

Rowena asked sharply, "Is it one of the two men we saw when we entered the manor?"

Elara blinked in confusion. Two men?

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She only remembered one.

The man who had helped steady her with a considerate hand, his voice calm and pleasant, his face strikingly handsome.

Apparently she had been so focused on him that she completely ignored the other.

Rowena recalled the moment. “I only glanced briefly, but both of them were very handsome. One was tall and broad-shouldered. The other was slimmer. The slimmer one was the one who helped you, wasn’t he?”

Elara’s heart began racing under the questioning. She turned her head away and muttered, “Mother, please stop asking...”

Elowen quietly achieved her goal, hiding her satisfaction. She lifted her cup and took a leisurely sip.

“Well, if you don’t want to say, then we’ll leave it at that.”

Rowena stood up as she spoke. “Your Grace, I’ve said what I came to say. We should head back.”

Elowen quickly raised her head and offered, “You’re leaving already? Why not stay and have lunch with us?”

Rowena smiled and declined gently. “It wouldn’t be proper for our whole family to dine here. Besides, last night my husband cooked an entire feast. If we leave it sitting there, it will spoil and have to be thrown away. That would be such a waste.”

Elowen could not insist, so she nodded. “All right.”

Rowena headed toward the study to call her husband.

Elowen stood as well. “I’ll come with you.”

After Warren’s family departed, only Elowen and Cassian remained in the study.

Cassian was still seated at his desk in his wheelchair, a faint smile in his eyes.

“Ella,” he said softly. “Come here.”

Elowen walked closer. She was about to sit on the chair beside him when Cassian reached out, caught her gently by the wrist, and pulled her down onto his lap.

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Chapter 373 Borrowed Strength

Elowen lowered her gaze to look at him.

Cassian wore an innocent expression and tapped his own leg. “Some of the people sent here are spies for Her Majesty and Lady Elira. I have to pretend I can’t walk properly.”

Elowen tilted her head. “And how exactly are those two things connected?”

But she did not linger on the question. A playful smile curved across her face.

“Still, Cassian, even if you weren’t pretending, if you wanted me sitting on your lap, I’d gladly do it.”

A quiet satisfaction warmed Cassian’s chest. He leaned forward and kissed her lips.

The kiss left a faint blush on Elowen’s cheeks. She rested her arms around his shoulders.

...Actually, Mrs. Wrenner said something similar earlier.”

“Hm?”

“She said Adrian deliberately told her about my pregnancy.” Elowen spoke thoughtfully. “I think the Baker family knows Elara likes you. They probably believe jealousy might drive her to harm me or the child I’m carrying. And it seems they didn’t only tell them. Now the entire city of Vanelle knows.”

“She’s always been perceptive,” Cassian said simply. “Far more so than Lieutenant Wrenner.”

He paused before adding, “The Baker family and Her Majesty act as one. This was her decision.”

Elowen was not surprised.

“Of course. She can’t sit by and watch the Crown Prince’s Wing be suppressed forever. Only if her son becomes king can she become the Dowager Queen.”

Cassian nodded. “Exactly.”

“I have to admit,” Elowen said, “it’s a clever move. She earns praise in front of His Majesty and, at the same time, places watchers right here in our household.”

Elowen had received two groups of visitors today and was beginning to feel the strain. As she spoke, she leaned forward and rested against Cassian’s shoulder.

Cassian immediately turned his head toward her. “Tired?”

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“Just a little.” Elowen murmured.

“Then rest,” Cassian said softly. “Ella.”

Elowen frowned slightly. “But those people from the palace still need to be assigned their duties.”

“I’ll handle it,” Cassian said easily.

“But I’m the Duchess here,” Elowen muttered. “The household is my responsibility. If I hand it all over to you, wouldn’t that be improper?”

Cassian thought for a moment. “Then I’ll wear your clothes.”

Elowen burst into laughter at that. Leaning against his shoulder, she brushed her cheek lightly against his neck.

Cassian carried a faint scent of soap, mixed with the gentle fragrance of the resin incense that often burned in their chambers. Beneath it lingered something distinctly his own, crisp and cool, like snow melting under the first breath of spring.

Elowen liked it very much. She could not resist taking a slow, deep breath.

After a moment’s pause, she inhaled again.

Cassian chuckled. “Do I really smell that good?”

“Not exactly.”

Elowen laughed under her breath. “I’m stealing your energy.”

Cassian blinked. A crooked smile tugged at one corner of his mouth. “No wonder I suddenly feel tired.”

He lowered his head slightly, his voice soft and teasing.

“I suppose I should take some back.”

Then he kissed her. Elowen’s eyes curved with quiet happiness. She wrapped her arms around Cassian’s neck and kissed him back.

It was a long while before they finally pulled apart.

Cassian brushed his nose lightly against her cheek. He liked her far too much to resist. He kissed the corner of her mouth again.

“Hungry?” he asked gently. “Lunch will be soon. I’ll cook something for you.”

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Elowen tilted her head. “But Your Grace is supposed to be limping right now. Wouldn’t cooking expose the act?”

Cassian looked unconcerned. “Even a cripple can cook.

Elowen laughed.

“No need. You’ve been cooking for me lately, but we do have Martha in the kitchen. We pay her well. If she never gets to do any work, she’ll feel uneasy. And she’s an excellent cook. I really like her food.”

She added, “I heard she came early this morning. It’s the first day of the Christmas.”

Cassian’s lips curved slightly.

“That’s because you’re easy to like. She’s fond of you as her Duchess and worried you might go hungry.”

Elowen flushed faintly at the praise. Before she could say anything, hurried footsteps suddenly echoed from outside.

“Your Grace! Your Grace, something’s wrong!”

Mira’s voice came breathless from beyond the door. “Martha and Beatrice are arguing in the

kitchen!”

Elowen froze.

Beatrice?

If she remembered correctly, Beatrice had only arrived today with Quin. She had also been recommended by Isla.

And she is already arguing with someone in the household?

Elowen frowned.

A flicker of anger passed through Cassian’s eyes. His voice turned cold.

“A servant wouldn’t dare cause trouble on her first day here without someone behind her.”

Elowen understood immediately. She stood up.

“I’ll go take a look.”

Cassian moved as if to follow, but Elowen shook her head gently.

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“I’ll see what’s happening first. If I can’t handle something this small, then I don’t deserve to be your Duchess.”

She paused, then added with a small smile.

“And if I can’t manage it, I’ll secretly send Anson to fetch you as reinforcements. When that happens, Cassian, you must come save me.”

The corner of Cassian’s mouth lifted. He squeezed her fingers lightly. “Deal.”

Elowen left with Mira, heading toward the kitchen.

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Chapter 374 Kitchen Clash

On the way. Elowen asked, “What happened? Why are they arguing?”

Mira explained honestly, “It was nearly lunchtime. Martha came today, even though it’s the first day of the year, just to cook for Your Grace. She was preparing the meal when Beatrice showed up and said from now on she would be responsible for Your Grace’s food. She told Martha to assist her.

“Martha said Your Grace never gave such an order and that Beatrice must be imagining things. Besides, she just arrived and doesn’t even know what you like to eat. Martha told her to leave.

“Beatrice said she came from the palace and was acting under palace orders. After that... they started arguing.”

Mira sighed.

“They kept getting louder. I thought they might come to blows. That would be a terrible way to start the day, so I hurried to find you.”

As they approached the kitchen, a shrill voice rang out.

“Her Grace is carrying a royal heir now. She must be treated with the utmost care! And you dare serve her this kind of crude food?”

Beatrice's voice dripped with disdain.

"I served Her Majesty in the palace. Even His Highness the Crown Prince was raised under my care! And you, a backwater peasant woman, think you can challenge me here?"

Martha's face flushed red with anger.

"I've worked in the kitchens of Duskmoor Manor for over ten years! I started in the main kitchen, and when this smaller kitchen was built for the household here, I was transferred over. I've been responsible for the Duchess's meals ever since. I know better than you what she likes and what she doesn't!"

She snorted.

"Crude food? Have you never eaten noodles before? Did your parents never eat noodles? Even Her Majesty, the Crown Prince, or His Majesty himself would eat a bowl of noodles!"

"You dare talk back?" Beatrice was furious, her voice rising sharply.

"The Duchess is young and doesn't know better. And servants like you take advantage of that ignorance! Today I'll teach you what proper discipline looks like!"

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As she spoke, she raised her arm to slap Martha.

Martha stood her ground without moving. She even lifted her chin slightly, as if daring Beatrice to try.

Just as Beatrice's hand was about to come down, Elowen's voice sounded calmly.

"Beatrice."

Her voice was not loud, yet the noisy kitchen fell silent at once. Elowen walked forward slowly.

She was not dressed extravagantly today. She wore a warm crimson silk gown trimmed with white fox fur along the collar and cuffs, the soft fur making her fair complexion appear even more luminous.

Perhaps because of the pregnancy, or simply because she had been eating well lately, her face looked a little fuller than before. The softness gave her a gentle nobility.

Her hair was styled in an elegant knot, adorned with a single gold-and-kingfisher hair ornament shaped like drifting clouds. A pair of pearl earrings swayed lightly at her ears.

She looked warm, composed, and dignified.

At the sight of her, Martha immediately straightened with renewed confidence.

Beatrice, however, showed no restraint. She smoothed her skirts and spoke with absolute self-

assurance.

“Your Grace, you arrived just in time! I was disciplining these servants who don’t understand proper rules.”

Elowen glanced sideways.

Beatrice pointed at Martha. “Your Grace is with child, yet this old woman dares serve you noodles! Such coarse food could harm you!”

Elowen’s expression cooled.

“So noodles are considered coarse food? Then I suppose I’m coarse as well. And so is the Duke of Duskmoor.”

Beatrice froze. “W-what?”

Elowen replied evenly, “I was the one who told Martha that the Duke and I wanted noodles for lunch.”

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Beatrice’s expression shifted slightly, though she still tried to maintain her authority.

“Your Grace, you are carrying not only the Duke’s child, but a child of the royal bloodline. Your meals must be handled with the utmost care. How could you eat something like noodles? You’re still young and don’t know better, but this woman should have advised you otherwise. Instead she encouraged it. That kind of malicious negligence deserves a beating before she’s sold off

Martha’s fists tightened nervously. Elowen, however, spoke without emotion.

“Very well. Let’s follow your suggestion.”

Beatrice’s face lit up. She was just about to order someone to drag Martha away.

Then Elowen continued calmly, “After disciplining Martha, the next ones to punish would be the people who wanted to eat them. That would be me and the Duke.”

She looked directly at Beatrice.

“So tell me, Beatrice. Should the Duke and I stand while receiving your lecture, or would you prefer we bow?”

Beatrice froze.

The mere image of the Duke of Duskmoor standing, or worse, bowing his head while she lectured him made her legs turn weak. She nearly collapsed on the spot.

Her voice trembled.

“Y-Your Grace... what do you mean?”

Elowen let out a cold laugh. “Haven’t you already made every decision for this household? Why ask me?”

Strangely, Beatrice suddenly saw something of Cassian in Elowen.

She continued calmly, each word precise.

“I said I wanted noodles. You said no, called them crude, and claimed I was too young to understand what’s proper. I hadn’t even decided how to handle the situation, yet you were already planning punishments and sales.”

Elowen’s gaze sharpened as she looked at her.

“It seems that starting today, Duskmoor Manor is no longer under my authority.”

Her voice turned icy.

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Chapter 374 Kitchen Cla

“Perhaps I should ask the Duke to report to His Majesty and have the title of Duke of Duskmoor handed over to you as well?”

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Chapter 375 Establishing Authority

Beatrice stood there speechless, her face shifting between pale and flushed.

The moment Elowen finished speaking, Beatrice’s composure finally collapsed. Her legs gave out beneath her, and she dropped heavily to the ground.

“I would never dare. I truly would never dare,” she stammered, her voice shaking.

Elowen let out a soft, cold laugh and said nothing more.

Gerda quietly carried a chair out beneath the corridor and set it down. A thick cushion had been placed on the seat.

Elowen settled into it with composed ease.

Gerda handed her an enameled hand warmer.

Elowen held it in both hands, sitting there with an expression so calm it seemed almost indifferent.

To Beatrice, however, that calm felt like a blade suspended above her head.

Her heart pounded in panic.

Before coming to Duskmoor Manor, Isla had told her that as someone who had served long within the palace, she could carry herself with authority. The duchess was inexperienced, the

queen

had said, and there would be many matters she did not yet understand. Beatrice should guide her when necessary.

But Beatrice had never imagined that this seemingly gentle and timid young duchess would possess such a sharp mind.

In only a few sentences, Elowen had twisted the situation until Beatrice herself sounded like a rebellious servant who dared challenge her mistress.

Now Beatrice could not tell what Elowen intended. Is she going to punish me harshly?

Cold sweat gradually soaked through her clothes.

Just as despair began creeping in, Elowen finally spoke again.

“It appears the title still belongs to the Duke of Duskmoor,” she said calmly. “And this household is still under my authority.”

Beatrice did not dare utter a word of protest.

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“Yes, Your Grace. You are absolutely right,” she said hurriedly, her voice trembling.

Seated comfortably, Elowen looked down at her.

Seeing that Beatrice had finally corrected her attitude, Elowen’s tone softened slightly.

“I know you served Her Majesty for many years, and you were once the wet nurse to His Highness. Someone with your experience must be capable and reliable. Having lived in the palace for so long, you surely understand better than anyone the importance of rank and order. What may be said and what must never be said. What duties belong to you and what do not. These things should already be very clear to you.”

Her gaze remained steady.

“Since today is your first day here, I can understand that concern may have made you overstep. I will not pursue the matter any further. But from this day forward, you must remember the rules more carefully. Otherwise, if trouble arises, would that not reflect poorly on Her Majesty as well?”

Beatrice had survived more than a decade navigating palace politics.

She immediately understood the meaning behind those words.

The young duchess had struck with both firmness and mercy. She had reprimanded her, yet also offered a way to retreat with dignity.

Though resentment lingered in her heart, Beatrice could not help admiring the young woman’s control.

“All right,” Elowen said at last, withdrawing her gaze.

“Martha, prepare a bowl of noodles for me. As for the others who arrived from the palace today, have them come here. I would like to see everyone.”

Not long afterward, the courtyard filled with people.

Stewards, servants, attendants, and maids stood neatly arranged. Gerda brought over a register and handed it to Elowen.

Elowen opened it and scanned the contents. Only their names had been recorded.

There was no mention of where they had previously served.

Without that information, it would be impossible to know whose influence they truly belonged

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That made Elowen uneasy.

She closed the book slowly and spoke with calm composure.

“Beatrice reminded me earlier that she once served Her Majesty. Among the rest of you, some previously attended Lady Elira, while others even served His Majesty directly. Compared to the palace, life at Duskmoor Manor must feel rather modest. I’m sure this change is not easy for you.”

The group quickly responded.

“Your Grace is too kind.”

“There is no hardship at all.”

“To serve Your Grace is our honor.”

Elowen smiled gently.

“Since you serve me sincerely, I would not treat you unfairly. Life at the manor differs from palace service in many ways, especially when it comes to wages. According to the rules, your stipends will still be issued by the palace. However, collecting them will now require a few additional steps.”

She lifted the register slightly.

“I must first report the number of staff to the palace. Once the funds are released, they will be distributed through my office. I have also heard that each palace residence offers different stipends depending on the duties assigned. So today, each of you must state clearly where you previously served, which noble

household you attended, what your responsibilities were, and how much you were paid.”

The servants exchanged uneasy glances.

A young maid standing near the front suddenly raised her head and offered Elowen a flattering smile.

“Your Grace, wouldn’t it make more sense to assign duties first?”

Elowen’s smile remained faint as she looked at her. Something in that quiet gaze made the girl’s heart tighten.

Elowen spoke gently, “What is your name?”

The maid lowered her eyes slightly. “My name is Seren.”

Elowen nodded. “Very well. Since you spoke first, you may lead the others. Go to Cora and

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Anson and report your information for registration”

Only a few calm sentences, yet they carried both grace and authority. In truth, she displayed more command than some nobles within the palace.

Seren dared not argue further and obediently stepped forward.

Cora and Anson had already prepared a table with ink and paper. Edith stood nearby watching the proceedings.

Having once served Selene and later followed Cassian for many years, she immediately understood Elowen’s intention.

Her face turned stern.

“Each of you will report truthfully,” she said coldly. “If anyone lies, conceals information, or falsifies their record, and it is discovered later by His Grace or Her Grace, the matter will be reported directly to His Majesty. At that point, the punishment will not be light.”

Her words carried unmistakable weight.

The warning worked immediately.

Elowen gave Edith an approving glance. This quiet steward rarely spoke or showed emotion.

Yet when the moment demanded it, she proved extraordinarily useful.

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Chapter 376 A Quiet Victory

Elowen leaned back comfortably in the chair, cradling the warm hand heater while enjoying the sunlight.

By the time the last servant finished registering their information, the warmth had soaked through her skirts and spread across her legs.

The gentle heat made her slightly drowsy.

She drew her feet back and said with a bright smile, “Since everyone has finished registering. you may take a rest for now. Once I’ve decided your assignments, I will inform you.”

With that, she rose to her feet.

She was starving. Time to find Cassian and have lunch together.

And while she was at it, she could report her little victory and see how he would praise her.

Meanwhile, in the study.

When Elowen returned, Martha had already delivered two steaming bowls of noodle soup.

Elowen had told her earlier that she preferred not to eat in the dining hall today. Noodles were simple enough to enjoy in the study.

Martha's cooking was excellent.

The noodles were perfectly even in thickness, floating in a clear, fragrant broth. Bright green vegetables rested on top alongside several thin slices of braised meat.

Because the soup was still too hot, Elowen did not start eating immediately.

Instead she happily explained everything to Cassian.

She described how she had used Beatrice as an example to establish authority, and how she cleverly created the wage registration so the palace servants would reveal their backgrounds.

A hint of pride colored her voice.

Mira and Cora stood nearby, both struggling to hide their smiles. Mira had followed Elowen since childhood and had witnessed the many changes in her life.

Watching her now brought back memories of the past.

Whenever Elowen accomplished something as a girl, she would run to tell her parents, bursting

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with excitement and waving her arms as she spoke.

They would praise her warmly. And Elowen would remain happy for the entire day.

Now the same scene seemed to repeat itself.

Her parents was gone. But there was now a duke in their place.

Thinking of this, Mira suddenly felt her eyes sting with emotion.

Cassian listened patiently, the amusement in his eyes growing deeper with every sentence,

When Elowen explained how she had used the wage records to uncover everyone's

background, he nodded with clear approval.

After finishing, Elowen looked at him expectantly, her eyes bright.

Cassian smiled. "Ella, that was clever. You didn't raise your voice, you didn't punish anyone, and somehow the entire courtyard ended up exactly where you wanted it."

Elowen's smile turned sweet.

She was just about to ask what reward she might receive.

Cassian spoke first.

"You handled the matter beautifully. Such success deserves a proper reward." His voice softened. "Tell me, Ella. What would you like?"

Elowen froze for a moment.

Her heart suddenly softened like melting snow.

Sometimes she felt childish, always wanting recognition whenever she accomplished something.

Yet she could never help herself.

Cassian, however, never found it annoying. He always played along.

He understood her.

Being cherished this way, feeling someone truly understood her heart, made happiness tremble all the way to her fingertips.

“You may ask for anything,” Cassian murmured gently. “I would give you whatever you wish.”

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Instead of answering. Elowen suddenly opened her arms and leaned forward, wrapping them around him and burying her face in the curve of his shoulder.

Cassian lowered his gaze.

“What is it?”

Elowen’s voice was soft. “A hug. That’s the reward I want.”

Cassian chuckled quietly and rested his hand against her back.

After holding her for a while, Elowen lifted her head.

“But I still haven’t assigned duties to the palace servants. I don’t really have experience with that.”

Cassian answered gently, “That is not difficult. Since we do not yet know them well, and since you are carrying a child, they should not be placed in sensitive positions. Continue letting Mira, Cora, Gerda, and Edith attend to you personally.”

He continued calmly.

“As for those sent from the palace, assign them roles that appear important but hold little authority and rarely require direct contact with you. Positions such as household supervisors, etiquette instructors, or attendants for the study and reception hall would work. The male servants can oversee the carriage stables or inventory of artworks and antiques.”

Elowen’s eyes lit up in realization.

She wriggled out of his arms and sat upright, even trying to stand.

Cassian caught her arm gently. “Where are you going?”

Elowen answered seriously, “I’m afraid I’ll forget. I need to write this down.”

Cassian laughed.

“There’s no hurry. Eat lunch first. Afterward you can take a nap. You can deal with it later.”

Elowen considered this.

“You’re right!”

She touched the bowl and found the temperature perfect. Without hesitation she picked up her fork and began eating.

Meanwhile, back in the courtyard.

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After Elowen left, the servants gradually dispersed.

“Seren! Seren!”

Seren had just started walking away when someone called her name. She stopped as someone gently slipped an arm around hers.

“I’ve heard people say before that Seren is the most beautiful maid in the palace. Now that I’ve seen you myself, I can tell it’s true. When everyone was standing together earlier, Her Grace noticed only you and even asked your name.”

The speaker was Alyssa, a maid who had served in Isla’s palace residence.

Everyone in the palace knew that Isla and Elira had been locked in a quiet rivalry for years.

During her time serving Elira, Seren had often heard people criticize Isla's household behind closed doors.

Because of that, she instinctively felt some distance toward Alyssa.

She gently pulled her arm free.

“What exactly are you trying to say?” Seren asked.

Alyssa's smile remained bright as she continued walking beside her.

“I'm simply saying you are truly lovely. Those wide eyes, that fair complexion. Anyone who didn't know better would think you were a noble young lady from a wealthy family rather than a palace attendant.”

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Chapter 377 Whispers in the Servants' Quarters

Seren had been praised for her looks since she was young.

Hearing Alyssa say such things now, she could not help lifting a hand to touch her own face.

Alyssa watched the small gesture carefully and caught every shift in her expression. After a moment, she sighed.

“Still,” she said thoughtfully, “I doubt the Duchess will keep you close by her side.”

Seren blinked. “Why not?”

“Because you’re too pretty,” Alyssa replied, tilting her head. “If you were the Duchess, would you keep a young, beautiful maid right beside you every day?”

Seren immediately understood what she meant. Her expression darkened.

Lowering her voice, Alyssa continued, “The Duke of Duskmoor is still in his prime. The Duchess is with child now, so she cannot always attend to him. If His Grace needs... comfort, the most convenient choice would naturally be someone serving nearby. And if the girl happens to be beautiful, well, it wouldn’t be impossible for His Grace to take a liking to her.”

Her voice softened, almost dreamy.

“A favored companion within a ducal household can live far more comfortably than many respectable wives outside.”

She sighed again, long and wistful.

“Unfortunately, I’m not much to look at. His Grace would never notice me. But you’re different.

crowd.” You stand out in any

She squeezed Seren’s hand lightly.

“If you ever rise to become one of the Duke’s favored ladies, don’t forget about me. I don’t ask for much. Just let me serve you closely, and I’ll be satisfied.”

Seren tried to sound modest. “That’s not something that happens so easily.”

But the corner of her mouth lifted before she could stop it.

Alyssa’s smile widened. She patted Seren’s hand.

“Fortune favors those who know how to seize their chance. Look at what happened today with Beatrice. Only the Duchess came to handle it. The Duke never even appeared. That tells you

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something about how much attention he gives her.”

Seren fell silent, clearly considering the thought.

“And besides,” Alyssa added with a knowing grin, “the Duchess may be beautiful, but she doesn’t have your spark. Who knows? Maybe His Grace prefers someone lively like you.”

Seren’s cheeks flushed red. “You’re talking nonsense...”

“How is that nonsense?”

Alyssa leaned close and whispered into her ear.

“Still, dear sister, His Grace uses a wheelchair. When the moment comes, you’ll have to rely on your own charm.”

Seren’s face turned completely scarlet.

The two women chatted and laughed as they walked back toward the servants’ quarters.

Alyssa did not stay in that room. After saying goodbye at the doorway, she returned to her own chamber.

Seren stepped inside and went straight to the vanity table. She sat down and studied her reflection in the mirror.

The longer she looked, the more convinced she became that she truly was beautiful.

But... does the Duke even like me?

“Why were you walking back with Alyssa?”

Her older sister Rosaline was tidying the room and noticed something unusual right away.

Seren and Rosaline were sisters by blood. Years ago they had both been sent into palace service and had worked in Elira’s household.

Still staring into the mirror, Seren answered vaguely, “Nothing important. Just chatting.”

Rosaline frowned slightly.

“That girl Alyssa is not what she seems,” she said. “She flatters people to their faces, praising them as if they were perfect. Then she turns around and mocks them behind their backs. Whatever she told you, treat it like a joke and nothing more. Otherwise you’ll end up being used.”

Seren frowned in annoyance. “You think everyone is scheming.”

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Rosaline sighed.

“I’m your sister. I’m not trying to harm you. We were sent here from the palace, which puts us in a very delicate position. If anything goes wrong, the Duke’s household won’t keep us, and the palace certainly won’t take us back. We might not even keep our lives.”

She paused, lowering her voice.

“And think about the connections involved. Her Majesty and Lady Elira have their own relationship. Beatrice is one of Her Majesty’s trusted attendants, and Alyssa happens to be Beatrice’s niece. Do you really think someone like that is simple?”

Seren’s patience snapped. “She didn’t say anything like that. She only said I’m pretty.”

Rosaline immediately sensed something.

“She praised your looks? Don’t tell me she was encouraging you to compete with the Duchess for His Grace’s favor.”

Seren froze. That hesitation was answer enough.

Rosaline felt a surge of frustration.

“You foolish girl. There are countless beautiful women in the world, and the Duchess herself is extraordinary. Even if you are pretty, do you truly believe you could surpass her?”

She continued sharply, “And beauty is the least valuable quality a woman can have. Compare your background to hers. She is the daughter of a great general. Compare your abilities. Didn’t you see how capable she was earlier today? She may be young, but she knows exactly how to handle people. How could you possibly outmaneuver someone like that?”

Rosaline shook her head.

“When she asked your name earlier, it wasn’t because she liked you. She was warning you for breaking etiquette. And you didn’t even understand that.”

Seren tried to defend herself. “I never said I wanted to compete with her. I just think being one of the Duke’s companions wouldn’t be so bad. At least I’d never have to worry about food or clothes again, and someone would even serve me.”

“You actually want that?” Rosaline laughed in disbelief.

“Didn’t you hear what the Duchess said on Christmas Eve? She refuses to share her household with other women. Lady Elira has been trying to build a friendly relationship with her. If you offend the Duchess now, where does that leave Lady Elira? Do you have any idea how foolish you sound?”

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Seren could not take another word.

She jumped to her feet so abruptly that the chair legs scraped harshly against the floor.

“Fine! You’re the clever one! You’re the beautiful one too! Happy now?”

Her voice rose into a near shout.

Her eyes reddened with anger and humiliation. Without even removing her shoes, she threw herself onto the bed and buried under the blankets.

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Chapter 378 A Place in the Study

Soon the blankets began to tremble slightly as Seren's muffled sobs filled the room.

Rosaline pressed her fingers to her temple with a weary sigh.

Her younger sister had always been lovely and hardworking, but far too trusting. She believed whatever people told her.

When Elira announced that someone would be sent to serve at Duskmoor Manor, Rosaline had not dared refuse. Serving Elira was an honor.

But she could not leave Seren alone in the palace either. That place would devour someone as naïve as her sister.

So Rosaline bowed before Elira and begged to bring Seren along.

Elira had agreed.

Now, however, it seemed life in the Duke's household might not be any easier than life in the palace.

Elowen originally planned to take a short nap after lunch and then begin assigning duties. But once she fell asleep, she did not wake until evening shadows had already gathered.

After getting up, Elowen drank some water. Her mind cleared a little.

She turned to Gerda. "The attendants sent from the palace are still waiting in their rooms, right? No trouble from anyone?"

Gerda smiled.

“After the way Your Grace handled things earlier, no one would dare cause trouble.”

Elowen gave a shy smile and set down her cup. “In that case, bring them here. It’s time to assign their duties.”

Gerda bowed. “Yes, Your Grace.”

A chair had been placed just inside the bedchamber doorway. Elowen sat there with a small hand warmer resting in her arms while the attendants stood in the corridor outside.

Her gaze quickly settled on a familiar young face.

Earlier that afternoon, this girl had lifted her head to speak rather boldly, which had prompted

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Elowen to ask her name as a warning.

Now, however, the girl’s eyes were noticeably swollen. She had clearly been crying.

“You’re Seren, correct?” Elowen asked suddenly.

Seren lowered her head deeply, unwilling to reveal her red eyes.

“Yes, Your Grace,” she murmured, though her voice was hoarse and thick with the remnants of

tears.

“Why were you crying?” Elowen asked.

Seren pressed her lips together, unsure how to answer.

After a long moment, she simply sniffed. Before she could speak, another maid stepped forward and bowed deeply.

“Your Grace,” she said calmly. “My name is Rosaline. I am Seren’s elder sister. I scolded her earlier today, and she became upset and cried. The fault lies entirely with me.”

Elowen turned to glance at the register beside her. Both had previously served in Elira’s household.

Elowen looked up at Rosaline and raised a brow. “And why did you scold her?”

Rosaline kept her head lowered. “She offended Your Grace earlier today. Since she was in the wrong, I had no choice but to reprimand her.”

Elowen nodded. “You’re sensible.”

She smiled lightly. “Stand up. There’s no need to bow over something so small.”

“Thank you, Your Grace.”

Rosaline rose. Elowen glanced at Seren again.

“Still, swollen eyes won’t do. Later you should fetch something to soothe them.”

Rosaline bowed again. “Your Grace is too kind. But we are only servants. There’s no need for costly remedies. A cool cloth soaked in water will be more than enough.”

Elowen nodded thoughtfully. “That works. I used the same trick when I cried as a child.”

She studied Rosaline for a moment before continuing, “Since the two of you are sisters and both served in Elira’s household before coming here, I see no reason to separate you. From now on, you may both serve in the study.”

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Rosaline froze.

A strange warmth spread through her chest. She had been wondering how to request that she and her sister be assigned together.

Yet Elowen had offered it before she even asked.

Even if it was simply a way of winning loyalty, it struck precisely where Rosaline's worries lay.

How could she not feel grateful?

"Thank you, Your Grace."

Rosaline dropped to the floor again and bowed deeply. This time the gratitude in her voice was genuine.

Elowen was about to tell her to stand when Seren suddenly sniffed and asked quietly, "Will we.... be serving in His Grace's study?"

Rosaline's expression changed instantly.

She whipped her head toward her sister. "Seren! What are you saying?"

She quickly bowed again toward Elowen.

"Your Grace, please forgive her. She is foolish and spoke without thinking. If there is any fault, I will bear it with her."

Elowen looked from Rosaline's anxious expression to Seren's confused one.

She did not seem angry at all. Instead, she smiled gently. "Your sister cares for you very much."

Seren curled her lips slightly, looking unimpressed.

Elowen continued calmly, "Not the Duke's study. Mine. His Grace had it built especially for me. I usually read or manage the estate accounts there."

Seren blinked in surprise. "Your Grace... reads books?"

Elowen smiled faintly.

"Reading and writing are not privileges reserved for men. Women should study as well. Understanding the world is important for everyone."

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After speaking, Elowen glanced briefly at Rosaline before continuing in a calm tone. “Lady Elira must have had her reasons for sending the two of you here. From now on, your sister will be your responsibility.”

“Yes, Your Grace.”

Rosaline answered immediately, gratitude filling her voice.

Elowen inclined her head slightly. “You may stand.”

After that brief instruction, she turned her attention elsewhere and began speaking with the other attendants. She no longer spared the sisters another look.

With everyone’s duties assigned, the attendants were led away to familiarize themselves with their new posts.

Rosaline and Seren were assigned to the study, where Cora guided them through the room and carefully explained its rules.

“This is where Her Grace usually reads and writes,” Cora said, gesturing toward the large desk near the window. “When she is here working, she does not like interruptions. Whatever you do, keep your voices low and your movements quiet.”

She opened a cabinet beside the wall.

“These shelves hold the estate ledgers from previous years. The cabinet stays locked, and I keep the key. Unless Her Grace gives permission, no one is to open it.”

She pointed next toward a tall bookcase. “The Duchess’s favorite books are kept on the third shelf so they are easy to reach.”

Cora’s expression grew a little more serious.

“The bookcase is something Her Grace treasures greatly. She usually organizes it herself. Do not move anything unless she instructs you to.”

Rosaline and Seren both answered obediently, “Understood.”

By the time the introductions and explanations were finished, evening had already settled across the manor. One by one, the attendants returned to their rooms to rest.

“Seren, Rosaline.”

A voice called from behind them. Alyssa hurried over to catch up.

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Rosaline’s expression cooled slightly. “Alyssa, did you need something?”

Alyssa smiled brightly. “Now that everyone’s duties have been assigned, I was curious where you two ended up. I heard you’re working in the study. Is it quiet there? Seems like it would be an easy post.”

Seren was just about to answer when Rosaline spoke first.

“If you’re serving at the Duchess’s side, there is no such thing as an easy post,” Rosaline said evenly. “If you find your duties too tiring, you could always bring it up with Her Grace.”

For a brief moment, Alyssa’s smile stiffened.

“It’s not that I find it tiring,” she replied quickly. “By the way, Seren, your eyes, why are they...”

“It’s getting late.” Rosaline cut her off without hesitation.

“We’re going back to rest. You should do the same.”

With that, she took Seren’s arm and walked away without looking back. Alyssa remained where she was, the smile slowly disappearing from her face. Her brows twisted with quiet frustration as she watched them leave.

The second day, Elowen finally stirred awake.

Bright daylight was already streaming through the window.

Turning her head slightly, she saw Cassian sitting beside the bed in a carved wooden armchair, lazily reading a book.

Morning light fell across the sharp lines of his face, casting soft shadows along his cheekbones.

When he heard the faint rustle of movement, Cassian lowered the book and looked toward her. A small smile appeared at the corner of his lips.

“You’re awake.”

“Mmm.”

Elowen’s voice came out soft and slightly drawn out with sleepiness. As she spoke, she stretched lazily beneath the covers.

Cassian found the sight dangerously charming. Even something as simple as her stretching made her look irresistibly endearing.

When she finished stretching, Elowen blinked at him and smiled. “Merry Christmas.”

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Cassian paused slightly, one brow lifting in mild confusion.

“Ella, Christmas was yesterday.”

“That still counts,” Elowen said with complete seriousness. “During Christmastide, whenever you see someone you’re supposed to wish them a merry Christmas.”

The reasoning was slightly crooked, yet somehow convincing.

Cassian accepted it easily and nodded. “All right then. Merry Christmas.”

A faint smile touched his lips.

“Perfect timing, actually. I’m taking you to the palace today to offer greetings.”

“Really? That sounds wonderful.”

Elowen had always loved Christmastide. When she was younger, those visits meant tasting all sorts of festive treats and receiving small purses of Christmas coins.

Although every year her mother would collect the coins afterward, insisting she would return them once Elowen was grown.

Elowen pushed herself upright against the bed and asked curiously, “Who are we greeting today?”

Cassian reached out instinctively and steadied her arm.

“His Majesty.”

Elowen paused, surprise flickering across her face.

Paying Christmas respects to His Majesty?

In her entire life she had never been involved in anything at such an important level.

Seeing her hesitate, Cassian asked quietly, “You’d rather not go?”

“It’s not that,” Elowen said after a moment, looking troubled. “I simply overslept again today. It’s already this late and we’re only getting up now. When presenting

greetings at court, people usually arrive early to show proper respect. Cassian, you should have woken me sooner.”

Cassian did not appear concerned in the slightest.

“It won’t matter,” he said gently. “His Majesty knows you’re expecting. If you sleep a little longer, he won’t take offense over something like that.”

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Elowen pushed aside the blankets and leaned forward to reach the shoes beside the bed, still muttering her worries.

“That may be true between brothers, but other people won’t see it that way. Now that Isla has announced my pregnancy to the entire court and the palace has sent so many attendants here to serve me, Duskmoor Manor has become the center of everyone’s attention. I have no doubt half the court is watching us closely. If we arrive late to the palace on a day like this, people will start whispering that we’ve grown arrogant from imperial favor and forgotten proper respect.”

Cassian bent down and picked up a pair of silk stockings beside the bed.

He helped her put them on with steady hands before slipping the embroidered shoes onto her feet.

As he listened to her soft stream of worries, he did not feel the slightest hint of impatience.

If anything, her concern warmed him more than he cared to admit.

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“Are you even listening to me?” Elowen leaned forward to look at him, seeing that he had remained focused on helping her with her shoes.

“I’m listening,” Cassian said as he looked up.

He admitted easily, “You’re right. I should have thought of that. Next year I’ll wake you earlier.”

Elowen gave a small huff, satisfied enough to let the matter go.

“Then let’s hurry and get ready. We need to reach the palace as soon as possible.”

Even though they moved quickly, by the time the carriage from Duskmoor Manor reached the palace gates, the morning was already well underway.

Cassian continued maintaining the appearance of his injured leg and remained seated in his wheelchair.

Elowen guided the chair as they entered the grand audience hall.

They offered their greetings toward the dais where Theodric was seated.

Cassian spoke first.

“I have come with my wife, Elowen Hale, to offer greetings. I wish Your Majesty health and prosperity in the year ahead.”

Elowen followed respectfully. “Elowen offers her greetings as well. May Your Majesty enjoy enduring health and long life.”

“Good. Good.”

Theodric acknowledged them, though his expression did not look particularly lively. Compared with the banquet, he seemed noticeably more tired.

Cassian noticed it immediately. “Did Your Majesty sleep poorly last night?”

Theodric rubbed his brow and let out a heavy sigh.

“Poorly would be an understatement. I spent the entire night trapped in a ridiculous nightmare.”

Elowen sat quietly in her chair and stole a curious glance at him.

What kind of nightmare has him this shaken?

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Cassian asked, “What did Your Majesty dream about?”

Leaning back in his chair, Theodric spoke slowly.

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“You know that I arranged your marriage. I also arranged the marriage between the young heir of Falconcrest Manor and Sylvia. And there are several other matches I won’t bother listing.”

Cassian raised an eyebrow. “Arranging marriages that bring people happiness sounds like a good thing. How does that become a nightmare?”

Theodric’s expression turned complicated, almost irritated.

“That’s what I thought too. But last night I dreamed that centuries from now, people would give me some ridiculous title.”

He paused. “They called me the Emperor of Arranged Marriages.”

Cassian looked momentarily stunned. Elowen blinked in confusion. Neither of them reacted immediately.

Theodric continued, clearly frustrated.

“Think about it,” Theodric continued. “Other rulers leave their names in history. Their tombs lie in the royal crypt, honored by generations. Some even have statues raised in their memory, or chapels built where people come to pay their respects.”

He gave a faint snort.

“But me? In that dream I ended up as some sort of ridiculous patron of marriages. People were lining up in front of my statue, praying for me to find them husbands and wives. Tell me honestly. Does that sound dignified?”

The image was so absurd that Elowen found herself momentarily speechless.

Yet the more she thought about it, the more it made sense.

Since ascending the throne, Theodric really had arranged quite a remarkable number of marriages.

Even among the people she personally knew, several couples owed their unions to him.

The title, strangely enough, suited him rather well.

The thought made the corners of Elowen’s mouth twitch upward. She quickly lowered her head, trying to hide the smile before it became too obvious.

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At that moment, Cassian chuckled. Elowen almost wanted to whisper that he was being bold.

From the dais, Theodric looked down at him. “What are you laughing at? Is it that funny?”

Cassian answered honestly. “Yes. That title is extremely funny.”

Theodric stared at him.

Cassian continued calmly, “Your Majesty, if people pray to you for marriage blessings, how is that a nightmare? A person only lives once. Most people hope to leave some trace behind after they’re gone. Being forgotten entirely would be the real nightmare.”

Theodric paused.

Then he rubbed his chin thoughtfully. That argument actually made sense.

The gloom on his face slowly faded, replaced by genuine amusement.

“You’re right. You’re absolutely right. No one understands me better than you do, Cassian.”

At that moment, Quin entered the hall carrying a tray with freshly warmed mulled wine.

The scent of cinnamon and cloves drifted softly through the air.

Elowen wrapped both hands around the cup, letting the warmth seep into her fingers. The wine was still too hot to drink.

Theodric’s gaze settled on her.

Her complexion looked healthy, and she had filled out a little compared with before.

“It seems you’ve gained a little weight recently,” Theodric said with quiet satisfaction. “That tells me you’ve been well looked after.”

Elowen looked up and answered without thinking.

“That’s because Cassian...”

She stopped halfway through the sentence.

Calling him by name had become such a habit that the word slipped out before she realized it.

The moment she noticed, she corrected herself quickly. A faint blush rose to her cheeks.

“It’s because His Grace has taken good care of me.”

Theodric’s smile instantly turned knowing. “So you call him Cassian that naturally now.”

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His gaze shifted between the two of them, amusement clear in his eyes.

“It seems the two of you are getting along quite well these days. Good. That pleases me greatly.”

Cassian answered calmly, “We should thank the Emperor of Arranged Marriages.”

Theodric burst into laughter.

All the earlier frustration vanished at once, and the atmosphere inside the hall relaxed into easy warmth.

Elowen secretly glanced at Cassian, her eyes filled with both admiration and quiet amusement. He truly had no hesitation saying things like that.

Cassian met her gaze calmly, giving her a steady look that seemed to promise that everything was perfectly under control.

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