

Awakening Love: Reborn to Be His Duchess Novel

We Had Something Real But Didn't Handle It Right

381

Chapter 381 A Brother's Quiet Move

38

Finished

After waiting patiently until the laughter had mostly faded, Cassian lifted his cup and took a slow sip before speaking again.

“Now that I think about it,” he said in an even tone, “Ella and I are fortunate to receive such care from my brother. In truth, we should also thank Her Majesty.”

Theodric seemed to be in excellent spirits and responded casually. “Oh? And why is that?”

Cassian set the cup down with unhurried composure.

“I heard that yesterday Your Majesty personally ordered several senior attendants and palace servants to be sent to our residence. It seems the idea originally came from Her Majesty.”

Theodric nodded.

“That’s right. On Christmas Eve I was so furious with that useless woman from the Garrett family that I only remembered to reward the two of you with gold and jewels. It completely slipped my mind that your household is about to welcome a child and will need capable attendants.”

He chuckled faintly. “Fortunately Isla is thoughtful. She mentioned it at just the right moment. Otherwise I truly would have been negligent as an elder brother.”

Cassian inclined his head slightly. “Her Majesty’s contributions do not end there.”

He continued calmly, “I have also heard that news of the Duchess of Duskmoor’s pregnancy has already spread across all of Vanelle. It seems Her Majesty wished to share the happy news widely so the people might celebrate along with us.”

Theodric’s brows, which had only just relaxed, slowly drew together again.

He was no foolish ruler. A man who had spent decades at the center of power could hardly fail to understand the meaning behind Cassian’s words.

His gaze deepened as his fingers tapped lightly against the desk before him.

“That arrangement of hers was not mentioned to me earlier.”

His voice slowed with careful thought. “So those matters were entirely Isla’s doing.”

Cassian nodded lightly.

“That would seem to be the case. Perhaps after the Crown Princess was stripped of her title and the Crown Prince confined to the Crown Prince’s Wing, Her Majesty began to view me with a

1/4

19:52 Thu, May 14

Chapter 381 A Brother’s Quiet Move

certain degree of caution.”

Theodric frowned slightly as he looked toward Cassian.

38

Finished

“If you feel uneasy about the people sent to your residence, I can issue an order at once and have them recalled. I will select another group with clean records and trustworthy backgrounds to send instead.”

Cassian shook his head. “There is no need for Your Majesty to trouble yourself. Ella has already made suitable arrangements for everyone who arrived from the palace.”

Theodric raised his brows with interest. “The duchess arranged it?”

Cassian’s lips curved faintly.

“Yes. The household is entirely under her management now. Everything runs smoothly and in perfect order.”

Theodric turned toward Elowen, his expression openly approving. “You may be young, but you have remarkable ability.”

Elowen lowered her gaze with a shy smile. “Your Majesty is too generous with praise. I merely observed how my mother and my sister-in-law managed their households and learned a few small things from them.”

Her mother was someone Theodric knew little about beyond the fact that her family name had been Wynne.

Her sister-in-law, however, was another matter. “Your sister-in-law shares the same family background as Elira.”

Elowen nodded. “Yes.”

Theodric spoke without hesitation.

“Elira may appear gentle and soft-spoken, yet she governs the palace with considerable skill. It seems that talent runs in the family.”

He leaned back slightly. “Tell me, how exactly did you arrange the people sent from the palace?”

Elowen hesitated for a moment, unsure how to answer.

Cassian calmly spoke in her place.

“The attendants sent by Her Majesty and by Lady Elira were assigned to minor posts with little responsibility.”

2/4

19:52 Thu, May 14

Chapter 381 A Brother's Quiet Move

Theodric glanced sideways. "And the ones I personally selected?"

Cassian replied with complete honesty, "They were given the same arrangement."

Elowen blinked. Then she turned and shot Cassian an incredulous glare.

Have you completely lost your mind?

You might not value your life, but I certainly value mine.

To her surprise, Theodric suddenly burst into loud laughter.

Elowen looked up in confusion.

Theodric's expression showed no trace of forced politeness. He was clearly amused and genuinely entertained by the answer.

Elowen glanced back at Cassian.

He was smiling as well, his eyes resting lightly on her face.

"Did that frighten you?"

Elowen nodded slowly, then shook her head again.

38

Finished

Cassian lifted his hand and brushed his thumb lightly across her cheek. "I was joking. There's nothing to worry about."

A moment later, understanding dawned on her.

Although Theodric ruled the empire and Cassian served him, at their core they were still brothers.

Cassian could speak far more freely with him than anyone else would dare. Even a remark like that could be treated as a joke.

Theodric did not consider it disrespectful. He listened. And he laughed.

A quiet feeling of envy stirred in Elowen's heart.

She once had a brother too.

Most brothers and sisters were probably like this. When they were together they argued and irritated each other endlessly. Yet once they were apart, the longing only grew stronger.

Whenever Elowen quarreled with someone or found herself in trouble, Julian always stood firmly at her side, ready to support her without asking who was right or wrong.

3/4

19:52 Thu, May 14

Chapter 381 A Brother's Quiet Move

38

Finished

If anyone dared to bully her, the tears in Elowen's eyes would barely have time to gather before Julian's spear had already sent the offender sprawling across the ground.

Once, in a moment of childish anger, Elowen had declared, "You're the most annoying brother in the world!"

Only later did she realize the truth.

Julian had actually been the best brother anyone could ask for. And the only brother she had.

Now she missed him terribly.

At the Crown Prince's Wing, the previous day had been the Christmas day.

As Crown Prince, Alaric had been required to preside over a long series of ceremonies and formal greetings. The obligations stretched endlessly until well past midnight.

By the time he finally returned to his chambers, exhaustion overtook him almost instantly the moment his head touched the pillow.

In his dream, Elowen was still his Crown Princess.

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4/4

19:52 Thu, May 14

Awakening Love Reborn to Be His Duchess

382

Chapter 382 A Dream That Won't Fade

Finished

Morning light filtered into the chamber. She sat beside the bed and leaned forward gently.

“Your Highness.”

Alaric opened his eyes.

The sight before him filled his heart with warmth. Elowen’s slender waist curved gracefully beneath her robe, and her fair cheeks held a soft flush that made her look radiant.

Her gaze lingered on his face with quiet affection.

“Your Highness, it’s time to wake up. I prepared breakfast for you. All your favorites.”

A softness spread through Alaric’s chest.

He lifted his hand to touch her cheek.

“Ella... I treated you poorly in the past. Let’s begin again.”

Yet when his palm met her skin, all he felt was a chilling cold.

Elowen's face twisted. In the next instant it transformed into Daphne.

She threw back her head and laughed wildly.

“What's the use of apologizing now? She's already dead because of you! Begin again? She belongs to the Duke of Duskmoor now. And he's a far better man than you'll ever be.”

Alaric's anger surged violently. His eyes snapped open.

The familiar canopy above his bed slowly came into focus, and only then did he realize that everything he had just experienced was nothing more than a dream.

He pushed himself upright and pressed his fingers against his aching temple.

The chamber around him felt cold and empty. The loneliness in his chest only grew heavier.

“Someone.”

Alaric's voice was hoarse as he called out.

Tristan, who had been waiting in the outer chamber, immediately entered carrying the washing basin and other items needed for the morning routine. He set everything down quietly and stood with his head lowered.

1/4

19:52 Thu, May 14

Chapter 382 A Dream That Won't Fade

After living through a second lifetime, Alaric had become even more suspicious and cautious than before. Matters involving his personal service were now entrusted solely to Tristan.

Alaric remained seated at the edge of the bed with his feet hanging down, his expression dark as he waited to be attended.

Tristan crouched on the floor and carefully began fitting the prince's boots onto his feet.

“Today,” Alaric said suddenly, breaking the silence, “has any message come from my mother?”

Tristan continued working while answering respectfully. “Your Highness, nothing has arrived today. However...”

His voice faltered slightly.

Alaric lowered his gaze sharply. “However what? Speak.”

Tristan drew a steady breath before replying truthfully. “The Duke of Duskmoor and the Duchess entered the palace this morning to offer greetings to His Majesty.”

“Ella?!”

The name escaped Alaric before he could stop himself. He sprang abruptly to his feet. But Tristan’s hands had not yet withdrawn.

Alaric’s step landed directly on Tristan’s fingers.

A surge of pain shot through Tristan’s hand, draining the color from his face. “Your Highness...”

Alaric heard none of it. Every thought in his mind was fixed on Elowen.

He hurried toward the door without even bothering to put on an outer robe.

Alaric strode out of his chamber and reached the entrance of the Crown Prince’s Wing, only to have two cold spearheads cross in front of him and block his path.

“Stand aside. I am going to greet my father.”

His expression darkened as he issued the command. The captain of the guards bowed respectfully but did not move an inch.

“Your Highness, please forgive us. His Majesty ordered that, aside from the required ceremonies on the first day, Your Highness is still under confinement within the Crown Prince’s Wing. Without His Majesty’s direct command, you are not permitted to step beyond this residence. We dare not disobey the imperial order.”

19:52 Thu, May 14

Chapter 382 A Dream That Won't Fade

Alaric ground his teeth.

“Then go report it immediately. Tell His Majesty I have urgent business and must request an audience at once.”

The guards exchanged glances.

The captain nodded slightly to one of them, who immediately ran off to deliver the message.

Alaric waited outside in the bitter cold wearing only a thin inner robe. The icy wind slipped through the fabric and chilled him to the bone, leaving his face pale from the cold.

At last the guard returned.

“Now I may leave,” Alaric said coldly as he stepped forward.

But the guard blocked him once more.

“Your Highness, His Majesty’s message is this. There are guests in the palace today, and he cannot receive the Crown Prince. If Your Highness wishes to pay respects, you may do so at dusk.”

“How could dusk possibly work?” Alaric’s brows tightened sharply.

By the time evening arrived, Elowen would certainly be gone.

38

Yet the guards remained unmoving. Frustration surged through Alaric, but he could not openly defy his father’s order.

Thinking back, he had clearly pleased Theodric on Christmas Eve with those heartfelt words. If nothing unexpected happened, the order of confinement would soon be lifted.

If that were the case, he should have been able to see Ella today.

He desperately wanted to ask her face to face how she could possibly be carrying Cassian's child.

Was she forced? Or is there some other reason behind it?

Yet now he could not take a single step outside. In the end, everything traced back to Daphne.

Her foolish actions had enraged Theodric and dragged him down with her.

A surge of furious resentment erupted in his chest.

Alaric spun around, cold fury radiating from him as he strode toward the courtyard where Daphne had once lived.

3/4

19:52 Thu, May 14

Chapter 382 A Dream That Won't Fade

Finished

The residence remained exactly as it had been on the day she was stripped of her title. With so many recent affairs occupying the palace, the attendants there had not yet been reassigned.

Some were low-ranking servants sent from the palace. Others were maids who had accompanied Daphne from her family when she married into the Crown Prince's household.

Alaric stopped at the gate and swept a dark, dangerous gaze across the courtyard.

"Guards!"

His voice rang out with fury.

"Drag every single person in this residence outside. Anyone who ever served Daphne. Sell them all off. Leave no one behind."

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3

4/4

19:52 Thu, May 14

Awakening Love: Reborn to Be His Duchess

383

Chapter 383 A Calculated Plea

As the order was spoken, the courtyard erupted into frightened pleas and muffled sobs.

Amid the confusion and rising panic, a slender young maid with a pale face suddenly pushed through the crowd. She hurried forward and dropped into a deep bow at Alaric's feet, lowering herself so abruptly that the impact echoed against the stone pavement.

"Your Highness, please show mercy. I am Iris, the former Crown Princess's personal attendant."

Alaric lowered his gaze. His eyes were cold and distant as they settled on her.

"I remember you," he said calmly. "You and Daphne were always inseparable. With the devotion you showed your mistress, I doubt you stood by quietly while she carried out all those schemes."

His eyes narrowed slightly.

"Since the two of you were so loyal to each other, I might as well grant your wish. There is no need for you to be sent to some ordinary household as a servant. I will have you placed in the Velvet Lantern instead. That sort of place should suit you better."

Iris stared up in shock. Tears gathered quickly in her wide eyes and spilled down her pale cheeks.

"Your Highness must see the truth. Many of those things happened because I had no choice. I was forced by the former Crown Princess."

Her voice trembled as she spoke.

Then she seemed to make up her mind about something. She pushed back the fabric around her forearms and exposed the skin beneath.

The marks were ugly and raw. Dark bruises and jagged cuts twisted across her arms, standing out harshly under the thin winter light.

Alaric's gaze fell on the wounds. His pupils tightened slightly, though his expression remained controlled.

Iris's shoulders trembled as she continued.

“My parents died when I was young, and I have no brothers who could speak for me. My life was destined for service in the palace. The former Crown Princess was my mistress. If she ordered something, how could I refuse? Whenever I hesitated, she would lash out in anger and threaten punishment, sometimes even my life. Someone as lowly as me had no way to resist.”

1/4

19:52 Thu, May 14

Chapter 383 A Calculated Plea

She paused, swallowing against the tightness in her throat.

51

Finished

“When she insisted on setting a trap for the Duchess of Duskmoor, I tried to speak against it. Years ago I once received a small kindness from the Duchess, and I have never forgotten it. But when I said so, the former Crown Princess became furious. She accused me of betraying her and forgetting my loyalty, and she forced me to remain in a punishing bow in the courtyard for an entire night.”

Alaric caught the most important detail immediately. “You’ve met the Duchess of Duskmoor before?”

“Yes, Your Highness,” Iris answered. “The former Crown Princess and the Duchess grew up knowing each other. I served in the Garrett household from childhood, so I often accompanied my mistress and saw the Duchess when she was still very young.”

A faint smile touched her tearful face.

“She was still a little girl then. Lively and bright, with cheeks as pale as fresh snow. She talked endlessly all day long, and most of what she said was about Your Highness. If she spoke ten sentences, eight of them would somehow circle back to you. I remember it very clearly.”

As he listened, a quiet sense of satisfaction stirred in Alaric’s chest.

Of course.

In those days, Elowen had followed him everywhere like a small shadow, always calling out for him, always trying to catch his attention.

She had been impossible to shake.

Now, as Alaric looked down at Iris kneeling before him with tear-filled eyes, she seemed far more agreeable than she had moments earlier.

His tone softened slightly.

“If what you say is true and you were only forced into it, then we will leave the matter there. You may remain in the Crown Prince’s Wing and continue serving close at hand.”

Iris immediately bowed again, pressing her forehead to the cold stone floor again and again in gratitude.

“Thank you for Your Highness’s mercy. Thank you for sparing me.”

The repeated bows left her forehead aching from the impact with the hard pavement, though the pain hardly compared with the injuries across her arms.

Daphne had always been arrogant and spoiled, but she was not cruel by nature. She had never

2/4

19:52 Thu, May 14

Chapter 383 A Calculated Plea

38

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inflicted wounds like these on the servants who attended her daily.

Those frightening cuts had not come from Daphne at all.

The previous night, in a quiet corner where no one would see her, Iris had taken a shard of broken porcelain and carved them into her own skin one by one.

She understood perfectly well that once Daphne lost her position, everyone who had once been close to the former Crown Princess would soon be removed from the Crown Prince's Wing.

Within the palace walls, when a powerful figure fell, the followers scattered like birds from a broken tree.

If she wanted to survive, the only safe path was to cut ties with Daphne as quickly and as completely as possible.

So Iris had prepared this painful display in advance. She had expected a moment exactly like this.

Even so, that alone would not be enough.

In truth, Iris had only glimpsed Elowen from afar a handful of times. Any kindness she claimed to have received had never existed.

As for Elowen spending her childhood talking constantly about the Crown Prince, that was even more fabricated.

When Elowen had been young she had been restless and full of wild ideas. One day she would chatter about wanting to ride horses, and sometimes she would complain indignantly that her older brother had teased her again.

The Crown Prince had never been the only topic in her lively chatter.

But Iris had long noticed something else. Alaric cared about Elowen.

Perhaps "care" was not the right word. It was closer to an obsession.

There had been many small signs over the years. The final confirmation came during the banquet, when the news of Elowen's pregnancy reached the hall.

Iris had been standing nearby at the time.

She saw Alaric lose control for a brief moment and crush the wine cup in his hand.

From that instant, she knew for certain that the Crown Prince held feelings toward his young royal aunt that went far beyond ordinary family ties.

3/4

19:52 Thu, May 14

Chapter 383 A Calculated Plea

What Iris could not understand was why.

38

If Alaric truly cared for Elowen, why had he never asked Theodric for permission to bring her into the Crown Prince's Wing years ago?

7.4K

4/4

19:52 Thu, May 14 ...

Awakening Love: Reborn to Be His Duchess

384

Chapter 384 A Clever Servant

Questions about royal secrets and tangled affections had nothing to do with someone of Iris's station.

All she wanted was to survive.

If she could remain in the Crown Prince's Wing and serve carefully, then when her term of service finally ended she would be free to leave the palace.

38

She planned to save as many coins as she could. Once she stepped beyond the palace walls for good, she hoped to buy a small plot of land or perhaps keep a modest shop of her own. Then she would marry an honest man and live the rest of her days in quiet peace.

When Alaric allowed her to remain in service, the tight knot that had been lodged in her chest finally loosened.

Cold sweat dampened her back, though she forced herself to keep her posture steady.

She had survived.

Alaric's voice drifted down from above her again, thoughtful and measured. "I remember that you have always been clever."

Iris quickly gathered her composure and lowered her head again in a respectful bow.

"Your Highness overpraises me. I am not especially wise. But if there is anything Your Highness wishes to know, I will answer honestly."

Alaric raised an eyebrow with mild curiosity.

"In that case, tell me something. Since I am confined to the Crown Prince's Wing for the time being, do you know of any way I might regain my freedom sooner?"

Iris paused briefly before answering, her voice gentle and careful.

"In my humble opinion, Your Highness may not need to hurry to escape this restriction."

"Oh?" Alaric said with interest. "Explain."

"The order came directly from Your Majesty," Iris said softly. "Once a royal command is spoken, it cannot simply be withdrawn because someone grows impatient. Since Your Highness must remain here for now, it may be wiser to accept the situation calmly. At a time like this, patience carries great value. If Your Highness spends these days reading, practicing calligraphy, and conducting yourself with discipline, word of it will eventually reach His Majesty. When he learns that Your Highness has not shown resentment but instead devoted yourself to study and

19:52 Thu, May 14

Chapter 384 A Clever Servant

reflection, he will surely feel reassured.

She glanced up carefully, studying Alaric's expression before continuing.

38

Finished

“And besides, Your Highness was confined because of the former Crown Princess's actions. The guilt His Majesty feels may prove more useful than ordinary favor. Once the matter fades from public attention, His Majesty may treat Your Highness even more generously than before.”

Alaric stood quietly, considering her words. The more he thought about it, the more reasonable her argument seemed.

He crouched slightly, looking at her with renewed interest.

“You truly are clever. If you had been born a man...”

With a mind like this, she might have built a respectable career in government service.

Iris lowered her head further. “I would never dare entertain such thoughts. I only wish to serve Your Highness faithfully.”

Alaric studied her carefully.

She was intelligent. More importantly, since arriving in the Crown Prince's Wing with Daphne, she had always behaved with strict propriety in his presence. She had never once shown the sort of ambition or flirtation that some women used in hopes of gaining favor.

That restraint pleased him.

He gave a quiet snort and rose to his feet. “Stand up.”

Iris obeyed at once. After a moment of hesitation, she spoke again, “There is one more thought, Your Highness.”

Alaric lifted a brow.

“Go on.”

“Several other princes have now reached adulthood and begun observing affairs within the six ministries. Some of them have already shown real ability. Meanwhile Lady Elira now oversees many matters within the palace and also has a prince under her care. In addition, Your Majesty’s younger brother, the Duke of Duskmoor, often attends the royal court and remains close to His Majesty. Surrounded by so many people, His Majesty may not think of the Crown Prince confined in the Crown Prince’s Wing for some time. Because of this, someone will need to remind His Majesty of Your Highness’s virtues.”

She did not say more.

2/4

19:52 Thu, May 14

Chapter 384 A Clever Servant

But the implication was clear.

Support from Isla would still be essential.

Alaric gave her a long, thoughtful look. “I understand,” he said slowly. “Anything else?”

Iris pressed her lips together before speaking again.

“There is one small matter.”

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She spoke gently, “The winter air is bitter tonight. Your Highness may wish to put on a cloak. Standing outside in light garments for too long could easily lead to illness.”

Alaric’s brow shifted slightly.

He had believed she was clever enough to understand boundaries and had no inappropriate thoughts toward him.

But it seemed the women around him were rarely exceptions.

Now she was already worrying about whether he wore a cloak and whether he might fall ill.

His expression cooled.

“Although I have allowed you to remain here in service, you must remember your place. I will never feel affection for you. Your appearance is merely pleasant, not extraordinary. Do not begin to imagine things that will never belong to you.”

Iris blinked in confusion.

Things that are never going to belong to me?

Did that rule change?

Am I never getting out of here?

“Remember that.”

Alaric tossed the words over his shoulder and walked away.

Iris stood there for several seconds before the meaning finally sank in. Her eyes widened slightly, and an incredulous expression spread across her face.

Damn... does the Crown Prince actually think I just confessed my feelings for him?

The thought sent a quiet chill down her spine.

3/4

19:52 Thu, May 14 ...

Chapter 384 A Clever Servant

That possibility was far more frightening than anything she had faced earlier.

7.4K

2

Finished

4/4

19:53 Thu, May 14

Awakening Love Reborn to Be His Duchess

385

Chapter 385 Visitors at the Gate

After leaving the palace, Elowen and Cassian returned to Duskmoor Manor with carriage after carriage filled with the treasures and brocades Theodric had bestowed upon them. Polished boxes, silk bundles, and ornate curios nearly filled the carriage from end to end.

Inside, a silver brazier burned with fine charcoal threads, releasing a steady warmth that gradually became a little too strong in the enclosed space.

Elowen felt her cheeks grow flushed from the heat. She lifted the thick brocade curtain beside the window and leaned slightly toward the opening, letting the cool winter air brush across the lower half of her face.

When she looked outside, the sight immediately caught her attention.

The avenue ahead was completely jammed with carriages, sedan chairs, and horses. Lanterns bobbed above the crowd while attendants called out directions and drivers argued over space. The entire street looked packed from one end to the other, filled with noise and movement.

Curious, Elowen turned to Cassian.

“What’s over there?” she asked. “Why are there so many people gathered in one place?”

Cassian rested his chin against his hand and answered in a relaxed tone. “That road leads straight to the front gate of our estate.”

Elowen blinked, her eyes widening a little.

“They’re all standing there?”

Cassian’s lips curved in an amused smile. “They’re paying visits.”

Elowen glanced from him back to the window again, astonishment slipping into her voice.

“There must be hundreds of them.”

Cassian chuckled quietly.

“To be honest, there have always been plenty of people hoping to visit Duskmoor Manor. Since the first day, the news of your pregnancy has spread all across Vanelle. Now even more people are trying to show up.”

He shifted slightly, still looking entirely at ease. “The holiday season gives everyone a convenient excuse to call on powerful households and deliver gifts. But I already gave orders. Every visiting card is to be declined, every gift returned, and no one is allowed through the

gate.”

1/4

19:53 Thu, May 14

Chapter 385 Visitors at the Gate

38

Elowen let out a relieved breath.

“That’s a good thing. Our residence sits deep in the inner court, far away from the front gate. We can’t hear all that noise from here. Otherwise we’d be listening to that chaos all day and probably wouldn’t sleep well at night.”

When they returned to Duskmoor Manor, Elowen summoned Cora.

“On the way back I noticed a great many people gathered outside the gate these days,” Elowen said. “I don’t have time to receive them, but it would be rude to simply chase them away.”

She paused briefly, thinking through the situation.

“The guards posted at the entrance must listen to that commotion day and night. And the maids and footmen living in the nearby courtyards probably aren’t sleeping well either.”

Elowen looked toward Cora.

“Make a list of the guards responsible for gate duty and patrols. This month each of them will receive an additional five dollars. As for the maids and footmen stationed near the entrance, give each of them three extra dollars.”

At that moment Beatrice happened to pass outside the study carrying a stack of freshly laundered garments she intended to register in storage. As she walked past the doorway, the words “three extra dollars” drifted clearly to her ears.

A spark of excitement immediately lit up her expression.

She had heard that the Duchess of Duskmoor was generous, but she had not expected another reward so soon after the Christmas.

Isla valued frugality and had never distributed money so freely.

It seemed their timing for arriving at Duskmoor Manor had been perfect.

Inside the study, Cora asked, “Should the reward only go to the servants assigned near the gate?”

Elowen thought for a moment. Since the intention was to show appreciation to the household staff, there was little reason to divide them so strictly.

“Let’s make it the same for everyone,” she said. “The guards will still receive five dollars, but every maid and footman throughout the estate will receive three additional dollars this month.”

Her voice carried a soft smile.

2/4

19:53 Thu, May 14

Chapter 385 Visitors at the Gate

37

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“Let the whole household share the good fortune of the Christmas and feel appreciated for their hard work during the holiday.”

Cora nodded, then hesitated.

“What about those who came from the palace?”

Outside the doorway, Beatrice quickly sharpened her attention and edged a little closer.

Just as Elowen was about to respond, she noticed the faint movement of light in the room and

caught sight of half a figure beyond the door from the corner of her eye.

There was no mistaking that silhouette.

It was Beatrice. A clever idea formed immediately in Elowen’s mind.

Still smiling gently, she answered, “Their wages are paid by the palace. The estate has no authority over that. Any rewards should naturally come from the palace as well. There’s no need for us to give them anything.”

Every word reached Beatrice clearly. Indignation rose inside her chest.

Servants existed to guard their masters’ homes and manage household duties. That was simply their responsibility.

How could people receive extra dollars just because the gate outside had grown noisy?

Five dollars.

That amount was exactly what she used to receive for an entire month of diligent work in Isla’s household.

Yet here it was being handed out casually.

The Duchess of Duskmoor truly spent money without restraint.

Relying on the wealth of the ducal estate, she seemed to throw money around without the slightest concern.

And if rewards were being distributed at all, why were they given only to the servants of the estate and not to those who had come from the palace?

The more Beatrice thought about it, the more unreasonable the arrangement seemed.

Then another thought occurred to her.

Isn't this the perfect chance to pull together the attendants from Lady Elira's residence and the

ones

3/4

19:53 Thu, May 14

Chapter 385 Visitors at the Gate

assigned by His Majesty, and let that shared resentment bind them to me?

Once that idea appeared, Beatrice's mood improved immediately.

She quietly lightened her steps and left without drawing attention.

37

Because their duties were light and Elowen did not yet require their personal service, several of the palace attendants finished their tasks early and gathered beneath a sheltered corridor in the back courtyard. The spot faced the winter sun and was protected from the wind.

They sat together doing simple needlework while chatting idly.

Beatrice approached wearing a troubled expression. Before she even reached them, she released a series of long sighs.

Dorothea, who had served in Elira's residence and had known Beatrice for years in the palace, never truly got along with her. Without lifting her head, Dorothea asked flatly, "It's the middle of the Christmas celebrations. What exactly are you sighing about?"

Beatrice opened her mouth as if she wanted to say something, then deliberately hesitated.

"It's nothing," she said at last. "Just a small matter."

7.4K

19:53 Thu, May 14

Awakening Love: Reborn to Be His Duchess

386

Chapter 386 Seeds of Discontent

Dorothea nodded calmly.

“If it’s nothing, then stop sighing. It sounds rather unlucky during the holidays.”

Beatrice stared at her in disbelief.

60

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Before she could respond, Lyanna, who had once served near Theodric, spoke with a warm laugh.

“Dorothea, don’t tease her like that,” Lyanna said. Then she turned toward Beatrice with a friendly smile. “We worked together in the palace for years, and now we’ve all come to Duskmoor Manor together. If something is bothering you, why not tell us? Surely you’re not treating us like strangers.”

Beatrice shot Dorothea a sharp glare.

She had never liked that woman. Back in the palace they were constantly at odds, and even here she continued to oppose her.

“Go on,” Lyanna encouraged. “What happened?”

Beatrice sighed again, as if reluctantly giving in.

“I’ll only say this among ourselves,” she said quietly. “You must promise not to repeat it.”

When Lyanna nodded repeatedly, Beatrice leaned slightly closer and lowered her voice.

“A moment ago I passed by the duchess’s study and overheard her giving instructions about rewards for the household.”

Someone nearby leaned closer with curiosity.

“Rewards? What kind of rewards? Are they for everyone?”

“If that were the case, I wouldn’t feel troubled,” Beatrice replied with another sigh. “The duchess said the rewards are only for the servants of Duskmoor Manor. The guards will receive five dollars, and the maids and footmen three extra dollars.”

“And those of us who came from the palace?” someone asked quickly.

Beatrice shook her head. “The duchess made it clear that we won’t receive a single coin.”

The group exchanged uneasy glances.

1/4

19:53 Thu, May 14

Chapter 386 Seeds of Discontent

Inside, Beatrice felt secretly pleased, though her face remained worried.

“It’s not that I care about three or five dollars,” she said. “I’m only worried for the duchess. She is still young and inexperienced in managing a household. If she keeps rewarding servants so generously and so frequently, won’t they all start growing arrogant?”

She sighed again. “As for the money itself, it means nothing to me. I simply worry that she might suffer because of it someday.”

Several attendants nodded along. Only Dorothea and Lyanna showed little reaction.

Dorothea let out a short laugh.

“If you truly didn’t care, you wouldn’t have repeated ‘three or five dollars’ twice. Clearly you care very much.”

Beatrice glared at her.

Lyanna quickly stepped in to ease the tension.

“The duchess may be young,” Lyanna said gently, “but perhaps she simply has a kind heart.”

Beatrice sighed heavily.

“You call it kindness, but perhaps it isn’t so simple. This time the duchess rewarded the entire estate but ignored those of us sent from the palace.”

Someone asked in surprise, “You mean everyone received the reward except us?”

Beatrice nodded. “That’s exactly what she meant.”

The woman frowned. “How can she show such favoritism?”

Dorothea laughed again. “You’ve only worked here a few days, and the duties you were given are the easiest ones in the estate. Yet you’re already thinking about rewards? Besides, our wages come from the palace. Why should this estate give us anything?”

The woman looked embarrassed and fell silent.

Beatrice let out a faint scoff.

“That argument hardly makes sense,” she said coolly. “His Majesty and His Grace are brothers. Surely there’s no need to draw such strict lines between them.”

The atmosphere began to grow tense.

Lyanna quickly spoke again before the argument could escalate.

19:53 Thu, May 14

Chapter 386 Seeds of Discontent

“Well, the duchess has already made her decision. There’s nothing we can do except accept it. It’s only three or five dollars after all. If we continue to do our duties well, opportunities will surely come later.”

Beatrice sighed once more and muttered quietly, “Who knows if that day ever comes.”

That evening Elowen sat alone in her study reading.

As the sky darkened outside, the lines of text on the page gradually blurred in the fading light. She lifted her head and called for Mira.

But Mira was not nearby. The only person standing outside the door was Seren.

Elowen called toward the doorway, "Seren, come in and light the candles."

Her voice carried clearly enough that anyone standing there could hear it. Yet Seren remained perfectly still, pretending not to notice.

"Seren?" Elowen called again.

Still there was no response. Elowen immediately understood.

Beatrice must have succeeded.

She had deliberately arranged for the servants of Duskmoor Manor to receive rewards while excluding the attendants sent from the palace. Three or five dollars might not be a fortune, but it was still money.

Once someone quietly stirred resentment behind the scenes, it was only natural that some palace attendants would feel dissatisfied.

Seren was clearly one of them.

Elowen did not feel angry.

If Seren refused to move, there was no reason to keep calling. She closed the book and rose from her chair, intending to light the candles herself.

At that moment footsteps sounded outside the study.

Elowen turned her head. Rosaline hurried inside.

"Your Grace, please forgive me," Rosaline said quickly. "I was careless. I will light the candles for you right away."

Elowen nodded lightly.

3/4

19:53 Thu, May 14 ...

Chapter 386 Seeds of Discontent

37

Finished

Rosaline moved with practiced efficiency. She stepped to the tall candelabrum, picked up the small fire striker resting beside it, and flicked it open.

Shielding the tiny flame with her hand, she carefully lit the thick beeswax candles one after another.

The wicks caught the flame with faint crackling sounds.

Warm light slowly spread across the room, illuminating the entire study. When she finished, Rosaline turned back with an apologetic expression.

“That girl Seren can be rather careless,” she said. “The evening darkened so quickly that she probably didn’t notice the light fading and forgot to light the candles in time.”

She lowered her head slightly.

“I hope Your Grace will not hold it against her.”

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19:53 Thu, May 14 ...

Awakening Love Reborn to Be His Duchess

387

Chapter 387 The Trap

60

“It’s nothing,” Elowen said with a faint smile as she settled back into her chair and returned her attention to the book resting in her hands.

Rosaline did not press the matter further. She withdrew quietly from the room, firmly pulling Seren along with her when she stepped into the corridor.

Their voices carried faintly through the half-closed door.

Rosaline's tone was sharp with irritation.

"It's already dark outside, and Her Grace is still reading in the study. How could you not think to bring more candles? Haven't you learned even that much?"

Seren muttered under her breath, clearly displeased.

"She doesn't care about us anyway. Why should we run over there trying to serve her?"

Rosaline immediately snapped at her.

"Watch what you're saying. She is the Duchess of Duskmoor. You are a servant in this household."

What followed sounded like a stern lecture. Their footsteps gradually moved farther down the corridor, and before long their voices faded beyond hearing. Elowen could no longer make out what Rosaline continued saying to her sister.

The following morning, just after Elowen woke, faint voices drifted through the window.

Gerda stood outside in the courtyard scolding two young attendants who had come from the palace. From the sound of it, they had carried out their work carelessly and without the attention expected of them.

Inside the chamber, Cassian stood behind Elowen, slowly arranging her long hair as he drew comb through the dark strands.

A quiet smile appeared on his face.

"You've set quite a few things in motion," he said lightly. "When do you intend to reveal the outcome?"

Elowen's eyes curved with amusement. "Very soon."

After a brief pause, she added thoughtfully, "Still, there is something worth mentioning. Rosaline, the attendant who came from Lady Elira's household, handles her duties carefully.

1/4

19:53 Thu, May 14 -

Chapter 387 The Trap

Finished

She has never shown even the slightest complaint, and every task she receives is completed properly.”

Cassian gave a small nod. “Lady Elira has always been skilled at training people.”

He then glanced toward the cloak rack nearby. “Ella, which cloak would you like today?”

Elowen considered for a moment before answering. “The amber one. It gives a more commanding impression.”

Cassian let out a low chuckle and leaned forward to kiss the corner of her lips. “Ella looks commanding no matter what she wears.”

Elowen lowered her voice slightly. “Really?”

Cassian appeared to think for a moment, his gaze deepening with playful intent.

“There might be an exception.”

His tone remained calm.

“If you were wearing nothing at all, dignity would probably disappear rather quickly. And if you were dressed in nothing but a silk underlayer, dignity would still be difficult to maintain. That would look far too tempting.”

Elowen’s face instantly flushed bright red. She quickly covered his mouth with her hand.

“I’m carrying a child,” she protested softly. “You are absolutely not allowed to say things like that in front of the baby.”

After finishing their preparations, the two of them shared breakfast together.

When the meal ended, Elowen ordered a chair brought out beneath the covered corridor overlooking the courtyard. She then had all the attendants who had come from the palace summoned before her.

When the message reached them, the reaction was far from enthusiastic.

They gathered in loose clusters, slowly making their way toward the courtyard in small groups. Complaints and grumbling rose along the path.

“The tasks here are assigned without any thought, and not a single coin of reward has been given. Back in the palace we were respected members of the household, yet here at Duskmoor Manor we are treated as if we are beneath everyone else. What kind of future does that leave us?”

“Exactly. We cannot even get close to the real masters of the house. All we ever do are

2/4

19:53 Thu, May 14

Chapter 387 The Trap

meaningless errands.”

“At least Beatrice warned us ahead of time. Otherwise we would still be working ourselves to exhaustion for nothing.”

Beatrice walked at the center of the group, surrounded by people speaking with admiration and complaint.

Listening to them filled her with quiet satisfaction.

This was precisely the outcome she had hoped for. It was also the result Isla had instructed her to achieve.

Even so, her outward expression remained humble.

“Oh please, don’t say things like that,” she replied with a soft sigh, waving her hands modestly. “We are all servants in the end. There is no need to thank me. I simply could not bear watching everyone be treated unfairly.”

Then she added with an expression of concern.

“Still, she is the Duchess of Duskmoor, and we were personally sent here by His Majesty and Her Majesty. We represent the dignity of the palace. Even if Her Grace is young and occasionally overlooks us, we cannot allow the reputation of His Majesty and Her Majesty to suffer. At the very least we must continue carrying out our duties so that appearances remain respectable.”

Her words sounded thoughtful and balanced, the kind of speech that made her seem considerate and responsible.

The surrounding attendants immediately began praising her.

“Beatrice truly has a generous heart.”

“Not long ago the Duchess embarrassed her in front of everyone, and yet she still speaks so fairly. I cannot help feeling angry on her behalf.”

“In the future we should stay close to Beatrice. At least she will guide us.”

The satisfaction in Beatrice’s eyes was almost impossible to conceal.

By the time the group finally arrived in the courtyard, their formation had become completely disorganized.

Some stood in scattered clusters while others drifted off to the side. Nothing remained of the orderly arrangement they had shown only a few days earlier.

3/4

19:53 Thu, May 14

Chapter 387 The Trap

Edith stood behind Elowen, watching the entire scene with a stern expression.

Her voice rang out sharply.

“You were all trained in the palace, yet look at the attitude you are showing here. The expressions on your faces and the way you carry yourselves. Have you forgotten every rule you were taught?”

Toward the back of the group, one of the younger attendants muttered under his breath.

“Of course the ones who received money stand tall. The rest of us have not received a single coin. Hard to look energetic when your stomach is empty.”

Edith’s eyes flashed with anger as her sharp gaze swept across the crowd. “Who said that? Step forward.”

The courtyard immediately became quiet.

At that moment, Elowen spoke gently from her seat, “If you truly have no desire to listen to me, then I will not force you.”

Her gaze moved calmly across the gathered attendants. “Beatrice is here, isn’t she?”

Beatrice had not expected to be singled out so suddenly. Her heart skipped, though she quickly stepped forward and inclined her head.

“I am here, Your Grace.”

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4/4

May 14

ering Love Reborn to Be His Duchess

388

Chapter 388 Five Dollars

Elowen turned slightly toward Cora. “Bring five dollars to Beatrice. This will be her personal reward.”

The words stunned everyone present. Beatrice stood rooted where she was.

The attendants in the courtyard looked at one another in confusion.

Cora followed the order without hesitation. She returned moments later carrying the money and walked directly to Beatrice.

“Congratulations, Beatrice,” she said.

Beatrice instinctively held out both hands to receive it. The weight of the money in her palms felt heavy and unfamiliar. She stared at it in confusion, unease slowly creeping into her thoughts. “Your Grace, I...”

Elowen did not respond. She rose calmly from her chair.

“That will be all. You may return to your duties.”

After speaking, she turned and walked back inside. For a moment the courtyard remained quiet.

Then the whispers began.

“Wasn’t it agreed that none of us from the palace would receive any reward?”

“Then why does Beatrice get money while the rest of us receive nothing? Five whole dollars too.”

“If I had not listened to her yesterday, I would have completed my work properly today.”

“That is exactly right. Gerda just scolded me for neglecting my duties earlier. I even argued back, and Her Grace saw everything.”

“The Duchess must have been displeased because of that.”

“Beatrice,” someone demanded sharply, “you need to explain this.”

Beatrice herself looked completely lost. “I truly do not know,” she insisted anxiously.

Dorothea let out a cold laugh from the side. “Well done, Beatrice. You stirred everyone up together, and then somehow managed to win Her Grace’s favor behind the scenes. Five dollars all for yourself. Even the senior housekeepers of this manor only received three. Looks like the

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Chapter 388 Five Dollars

rest of us were nothing more than tools to help you gain favor.”

“That is not true. I swear it is not.”

Beatrice felt almost desperate. The money in her hands seemed to burn.

Throwing it away would look suspicious, yet keeping it made her look guilty. She had clearly heard Elowen say that those who came from the palace would receive no reward.

Everything had been going smoothly. So why had everything suddenly turned against her?

At that moment she felt completely trapped.

From the edge of the courtyard, Rosaline quietly watched the scene unfold.

The crowd surrounded Beatrice, questioning her one after another while Beatrice clutched the money helplessly, unable to defend herself.

Rosaline’s gaze shifted toward the closed chamber doors where Elowen had disappeared.

Admiration quietly filled her eyes. The Duchess of Duskmoor had handled the situation brilliantly.

Five dollars had been enough to sow suspicion among the palace attendants and turn them against each other.

Rosaline turned her head, intending to quietly warn Seren to understand the situation clearly and stop following every rumor she heard.

But when she looked beside her, Seren was staring toward the far side of the courtyard.

Rosaline followed her gaze. Near the small kitchen stood Cassian.

He sat in his wheeled chair beside a wooden worktable. Several jars and bowls were arranged in front of him along with baskets of fresh fruit. From the looks of it, he was preparing preserved fruit himself.

Cassian's features were strikingly handsome, and the sharp lines of his profile gave him a distant and formidable presence.

Yet while he worked, his gaze remained lowered in quiet concentration, his movements patient and careful.

For a moment, the powerful Duke appeared unexpectedly gentle.

Seren watched him without blinking, her eyes filled with quiet fascination.

2/4

19:53 Thu, May 14

Chapter 388 Five Dollars

Finisher

Alarm rose instantly in Rosaline's mind. She seized Seren's wrist and spoke in a low, urgent voice.

"Seren, listen carefully. Do not allow foolish fantasies to take root in your mind."

Startled by the sudden grip, Seren quickly looked away. "What fantasies? I was not thinking anything."

"I saw the way you were looking," Rosaline said firmly. "Anyone with eyes can see how deeply devoted the Duke and Duchess are to one another. There is no place for anyone else between them. If you offend the Duchess, the Duke will never forgive you. And if you dare harbor feelings for the Duke, the Duchess will not spare you either. If you want to live safely in this household, do not take a step toward your own ruin."

Rosaline's grip had tightened without her noticing. Seren winced and pulled her arm back, her face alternating between red and pale.

"I understand, all right? Just let go. You are hurting me."

Inside the chamber, the charcoal brazier filled the room with comfortable warmth.

Elowen, having already arranged everything outside, returned to the cushioned couch beside the window and leaned back comfortably.

She picked up the book she had been reading the previous day and opened it again.

Cora poured her a cup of water and said with sincere admiration, “Your Grace handled that perfectly. You noticed Beatrice listening outside the door yesterday and came up with this plan immediately. Judging from what happened today, the result could not have been better.”

A faint smile curved at Elowen’s lips. “She happened to give me the opportunity herself. That only saved me some effort.”

From the beginning, she had planned to deal with the attendants sent from the palace.

First, she deliberately assigned them harmless and insignificant tasks. People who were used to influence and importance inside the palace would inevitably grow dissatisfied with such trivial duties.

Second, and more importantly, while not every one of them had ulterior motives, most of the attendants sent here had been placed by powerful patrons.

And those patrons had not sent them without a purpose.

Sooner or later, they would create trouble, whether openly or quietly, and attempt to place obstacles in her path.

19:54 Thu, May 14

Awakening Love Reborn to Be His Duchess

389

Chapter 389 A Morning Visitor

Elowen understood that she always had to think a step ahead..

If resentment or suspicion ever began to point toward her, the safest strategy was to redirect it before it took root, turning that tension inward so it would fracture among the people creating the trouble.

Beatrice had approached her at exactly the right moment, which allowed Elowen to guide events quietly into a trap that looked completely natural.

Judging by the outcome, the arrangement had worked beautifully.

After that incident, life inside Duskmoor Manor became noticeably calmer.

That morning, while Elowen and Cassian were eating breakfast together, Bran stepped in from outside. His expression looked hesitant, and he kept stealing glances at Cassian as though he wanted to speak but could not quite decide how.

Cassian noticed immediately.

He lifted a brow and looked at him with mild curiosity. “What is it? Do I have something on my face?”

Bran hurriedly waved his hands.

“No, Your Grace. That is not it. It is just that... someone has come to visit the manor.”

Cassian let out an amused breath. “When has this place ever been short on visitors?”

Bran lowered his voice. “The person who arrived today is Lady Aveline.”

Cassian paused briefly. Understanding came to him at once.

Now he knew why Bran had hesitated.

Aveline had a son she treasured above everything else, a young man named Kaelan.

And Kaelan happened to be someone who had once harbored feelings for Cassian’s cherished duchess.

Bran asked cautiously, “Your Grace, would you like to receive her?”

Cassian looked at him with faint disbelief. “Are you trying to insult me?”

Bran blinked in confusion for a moment before panic set in. “No, no. That is not what I meant.

Chapter 389 A Morning Visitor

I was asking whether we should receive Aveline”

Cassian gave a low chuckle.

30

“Why ask me? Ask the duchess. Do you honestly think Aveline came here at this hour to see me?”

Bran instinctively glanced toward Elowen.

Elowen lifted her gaze. Her expression remained perfectly calm, and a composed smile appeared on her lips.

“Since Aveline came personally, there is no reason not to meet her,” she said. “Please escort her to the Great Hall and invite her to sit for a moment. I will be there shortly.”

After speaking, she set down her bowl and spoon and made as if to stand.

Cassian looked at the bowl of oatmeal she had not finished. His brows drew together slightly.

“Are you full already?”

“Not yet.”

Elowen grinned at him. “I will meet Aveline first and then come back.”

Cassian had only begun to frown when Elowen’s voice softened immediately. “Cassian, wait for me here. I will be quick, alright?”

Cassian looked at her quietly.

When his wife spoke in that gentle, coaxing tone, there was no room left for irritation. Any trace of temper dissolved before it could even appear.

All he could do was answer with helpless affection. “Alright.”

Elowen’s eyes curved into a bright smile as she stood and headed toward the Great Hall.

The moment Aveline saw her enter, she rose from her chair immediately.

“Your Grace.”

Elowen glanced at her and could not help feeling slightly surprised.

Aveline wore no cosmetics today, and her clothing was unusually plain. Her complexion looked poor. Her face was pale and worn, with clear shadows beneath her eyes.

“Aveline,” Elowen greeted with a polite smile.

2/4

19:54 Thu, May 14

Chapter 389 A Morning Visitor

She gestured for her guest to sit before taking the seat of honor herself.

Fisted

Without wasting time on pleasantries, Elowen asked directly, “You came so early this morning. Is something urgent?”

Aveline sighed deeply, exhaustion evident in her voice.

“I will speak honestly, Duchess. I came today because of my disappointing son, Kaelan.”

Elowen remained calm and attentive. “Please go on.”

Aveline forced the words out with visible difficulty. “Kaelan has long held feelings for you that he never should have had.”

Her voice trembled slightly. “But he understands that you are now His Grace’s lawful wife and the mistress of Duskmooor Manor, so he has never allowed himself to act improperly. He spends every day at home preparing for the royal examinations in the spring.”

She paused briefly.

“I know he has always carried you in his heart. When we heard the news that you were expecting a child, I deliberately kept it from him because I feared he would not be able to bear the shock.”

Her throat tightened.

“Yet somehow, two days ago, he learned about it from somewhere. Since then he has completely collapsed. He has been burning with fever and drifting in and out of consciousness. A royal physician examined him and said the illness comes from deep distress of the heart combined with a chill. The sickness came on suddenly and violently.”

Tears gathered in her eyes.

“I truly do not know what else to do. I hoped the duchess might show some compassion and come with me. Even if you only see him briefly and speak a few words to persuade him to take care of himself, at least it might help him hold on to his life.”

By the time she finished speaking, her eyes were glistening with tears.

Elowen listened quietly and frowned faintly.

“Aveline,” she said gently, “I am not some breathtaking beauty capable of enchanting the entire world. It seems unlikely that someone would become so deeply attached to me. Could Kaelan perhaps be troubled by something else?”

Aveline shook her head through her tears.

3/4

19:54 Thu, May 14

Chapter 389 A Morning Visitor

“How could that be? He studies for the examinations every day. Whatever he needs, I provide it. Other than you, what worry could he possibly have?”

Elowen considered the situation for a moment but could not find a clear answer. In the end, she sighed softly. “In that case, I will go with you and take a look.”

Aveline’s face brightened with relief. “Truly? The duchess is willing?”

Elowen nodded. “Of course.”

When Ember, the young horse, had once been in danger, Kaelan had been the only person who stepped forward to help.

Although things had not ended well afterward, Elowen had never forgotten that act of courage.

She added with a slightly apologetic smile, “However, I must trouble you to wait a little longer. I was still having breakfast just now, and His Grace is waiting for me.”

Aveline nodded repeatedly. “That is perfectly fine. I can wait. Please take your time, Duchess. There is no hurry.”

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19:54 Thu, May 14

Awakening Love: Reborn to Be His Duchess

390

Chapter 390 A Visit for Kaelan

Elowen gestured toward the cup placed beside Aveline.

“This was sent to me by His Majesty after my last visit to the palace,” she said. “It’s a warm wine. Please enjoy it while you wait. I’ll return shortly.”

Aveline agreed immediately. “Of course. Please go ahead, Duchess.”

spiced

Elowen returned to the dining hall and told Cassian everything, explaining why Aveline had come and recounting their conversation word for word.

Cassian listened patiently.

When she finished speaking, he suddenly said something that seemed unrelated. “That is not right.”

Elowen blinked and turned toward him. “What is not right?”

Cassian answered calmly, "You said you are not the kind of person people cannot forget. That part is incorrect."

One corner of his mouth lifted slightly. "Anyone who meets you tends to remember very long time. It does not matter whether they are men or women."

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He met her gaze. "I am one of them."

Elowen froze for a moment.

His serious praise made warmth rise quickly to her cheeks. She pressed her lips together and unconsciously leaned closer to him.

"Then if I go visit Kaelan later," she asked softly, "you will not be upset, will you?"

"No," Cassian replied without hesitation. "There is no reason for me to be upset."

"That is good."

Elowen's eyes

curved into a smile as she sat upright again and picked up her spoon. "Do not worry. I will simply check on his condition and persuade him to focus on recovering. Once that is done, I will come back right away."

Cassian cut a small piece of roast and set it on her plate.

"Alright," he said calmly. "I will be here waiting for you."

1/4

19:54 Thu, May 14

Chapter 390 A Visit for Kaelan

37

Favched

Before leaving, Elowen thought for a moment and changed direction, walking toward the courtyard next door where Hugh was temporarily staying.

Hugh was sorting medicinal herbs in the courtyard.

“Doctor Dray,” Elowen said after choosing her words carefully, “a friend of mine has fallen ill. I plan to visit him, but I am a little worried.”

Hugh lifted his head. “His Grace agreed to this?”

Elowen tilted her head slightly. “Why would he refuse something so minor?”

Hugh shrugged. “Jealous men can be very narrow-minded.”

Elowen immediately defended Cassian. “His Grace is not like that.”

Hugh did not argue. “If you say so.”

He set down the herbs, stood up, and picked up his medical case. “Let us go.”

Elowen smiled brightly. “Thank you, Doctor Dray.”

When Aveline saw the young man following behind Elowen with a medical case in hand, hesitation briefly crossed her face.

Elowen explained with a friendly smile.

“This is Doctor Dray. He is currently a guest at Duskmoor Manor. I am sure the physicians in your household are already very capable, but Doctor Dray was personally invited by His Grace to treat difficult illnesses. His methods are quite remarkable. If he examines Kaelan as well, we may have a better chance.”

Aveline nodded. “If he is someone valued by His Grace, his skill must be exceptional. Thank you for coming with us, Doctor Dray.”

Not long afterward, their carriage arrived at Aveline’s residence. Kaelan’s father had married into the family, so the entire estate was managed directly by Aveline.

She personally led Elowen and Hugh through several courtyards toward Kaelan’s residence.

The entrance gate was carved from fine hardwood and decorated with intricate reliefs of scholars achieving success and ascending toward glory.

A winding path paved with polished stones led to the main building, a graceful two story pavilion with elegant eaves and deep green roof tiles.

Above the entrance hung a dark wooden plaque with gilded letters that read Hall of Diligence.

2/4

19:54 Thu, May 14 ...

Chapter 390 A Visit for Kaelan

Elowen could not help studying it for a moment.

The courtyard held even more attendants than Stillwater Court at Duskmoor Manor. The servants wore matching dark blue garments and moved quietly with lowered gazes.

When they communicated, they did so with soft whispers or subtle gestures.

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The entire courtyard felt so quiet that the only sound came from the wind moving through the bamboo leaves.

The atmosphere felt heavy, almost oppressive. Inside the chamber, scrolls celebrating scholarly success hung everywhere. Even the painting beside the bed depicted a revered teacher guiding his students.

Kaelan had only just regained consciousness.

A young attendant stood beside the bed carefully feeding him medicine. Kaelan wore loose sleeping robes, and his body looked frighteningly thin.

The attendant lifted a spoonful of dark herbal medicine, cooled it with a breath, and brought it carefully to Kaelan's lips.

Kaelan kept his eyes half closed as he swallowed it mechanically.

"Kaelan," Aveline called as she stepped forward.

At the sound of her voice, Kaelan's body trembled violently. The medicine he had just swallowed surged back up with his stomach contents and spilled out.

His sudden movement knocked the bowl from the attendant's hands.

The medicine had just been prepared and was still extremely hot. It splashed across the attendant's hand.

The attendant cried out in shock.

Aveline's anger flared immediately. "You useless fool. How are you attending to my son? If you burn him with your carelessness, will you be able to answer for it?"

The attendant turned pale with terror. Ignoring the burning pain on his hand, he lowered himself to the floor in panic.

"Please forgive me, Your Grace. Please forgive me. I truly did not mean to do it."

3/4