

Awakening Love: Reborn to Be His Duchess Novel

Chapter 421 Missed Chances Finished Elowen's expression shifted as understanding clicked into place. "Okay, that explains it. No wonder I never heard a thing about it." Then her eyes lit up again as she turned to him, curiosity sparkling. "Wait a second. If Stargazer Pavilion belongs to you, then technically it's mine too, right? So if I go there from now on, I don't have to pay at all?" Cassian inclined his head slightly. "That's right." Her face brightened instantly, but the excitement didn't last. It slipped away just as quickly, replaced by a deep, theatrical sigh.

"Honestly, Cassian, if I'd met you earlier, things would've been so different. Back then, my friends and I used to stand outside that place all the time, just staring up at it. Everyone would be like, 'Yeah, no way, we can't afford that. And then I'd just walk straight in like I owned the place, turn around, and go, 'Relax, dinner's on Miss Hale tonight.'" She pressed her lips together, already mourning the lost opportunity. "That would've been incredible. They would've been so jealous." She let out a long, heartfelt sigh, clearly still hung up on it.

Cassian watched her, the softness in his gaze impossible to hide. A quiet laugh escaped him.

"Ella," he said, voice low and warm, "I liked you long before now. If you'd ever told me you wanted that, I wouldn't just cover the bill. I would've handed you the whole place without thinking twice." Elowen closed her eyes, lifting a hand like she needed to physically block the thought. "Stop. Just stop. You're making it worse." By then, they had stepped out of the narrow lane and into the open street, where candlelight spilled across everything in a golden glow.

Cassian's tone softened.

"Come on." "Where are we going?" "Stargazer Pavilion." He took her hand and guided her forward. After a few steps, Elowen suddenly slowed, something clearly bothering her. "Wait," she said, lowering her voice. "Are you sure this is safe? What if someone recognizes you?" Everyone believed Cassian couldn't walk and always moved around in a chair. Tonight, he moved with complete ease, and that alone felt like a risk. Cassian didn't look concerned. "It won't be an issue. Very few people have ever seen me up close.

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And the ones who have, the ones who are actually allowed to stand in front of me and look me in the eye, aren't the kind who spend their evenings wandering festival streets." 1/3 2:38 pm

Chapter 421 Missed Chances Finished "Even the guests at Stargazer Pavilion?" "Even them." he replied evenly. "Most of them are mid-ranking officials or wealthy merchants. To the average person, that's impressive. But they still aren't the kind of people who would ever be granted an audience with me." Elowen slowed her steps. She turned her head, studying him under the warm candlelight.

His profile looked sharper somehow. more distant, more untouchable. He had always been so easy with her that she had gotten used to seeing only that side of him. She had almost forgotten the rest. The Duke of Duskmoor. Theodric's own brother. A man who held real power, whose name carried weight across the realm. The kind of man people meant when they spoke about someone standing just beneath the throne. Her husband. The thought settled heavily in her chest, leaving her quiet for a moment. They moved along with the crowd as the street grew brighter and more crowded.

Lanterns and oil lamps hung along the street, their warm light spilling across the crowd and softening the night into a lively glow. Voices, laughter, and the buzz of merchants filled the air,

blending into something rich and full of life. "Fresh copies of Ode to Springlight, just off the press! Azure's newest work, don't miss it!" "Finest cosmetics in the city! The Duchess of Duskmoor's personal favorite! They say His Grace fell for her because of this very shade.

Try our 'Blushing Peony' and you might just find yourself a husband who dotes on you the same way!" The voice carried clearly through the crowd. Elowen stopped without thinking and turned toward the source. The shop assistant caught her glance immediately and broke into an eager grin. "Miss, with looks like yours, you should really try our newest shade. Who knows, His Grace might take one look at you and decide he has to have you as his second wife." Elowen froze for a beat. Then she muttered under her breath, "What a shameless sales pitch." Cassian heard it.

A low, amused laugh slipped from him as he leaned slightly closer. "Want me to have the place shut down?" Elowen couldn't help smiling. "No, it's just marketing. He's not actually doing anything wrong. Let him be." 2/3 2:38 pm P p p Chapter 421 Missed Chances Cassian's lips curved faintly. "You're generous, Ella." 0491 Finished She took his hand again, about to head toward Stargazer Pavilion. "Your Grace! Duchess of Duskmoor!" A voice called out from behind them, bright with excitement. Elowen's entire body went tense. Already? Someone recognized me?

Her fingers tightened around Cassian's hand instinctively. But the voice continued, almost shaking with excitement. "It's true, the Duchess of Duskmoor is Azure. It's confirmed. Word came straight from the palace. His Majesty acknowledged it himself and even granted her the title Lady of Grace and Virtue right there at the banquet." Elowen paused, then let out a small breath. Oh. Not me. Just rumors. "Are you sure? Don't tell me it's another fake like Daphne last

time." "This came from the palace, and His Majesty personally granted the title. There's no way that's wrong." 2.5K 1 admin

Chapter 422 Not a Great Name Finished "I knew it," another voice chimed in. "I just got Ode to Springlight a few days ago and stayed up all night reading it. The writing, the structure, the detail, it all feels exactly like Tales of Luminara. There's no way anyone else could've written it. It has to be her." "I still can't believe the Duchess is that talented." "Then why stop using the name Azure? This new name of hers is... I don't know." "Yeah, what is it again? It doesn't exactly stick with you." "Honestly, it's kind of forgettable.

It doesn't match the level of her work at all." "Keep your voice down. Do you have any idea who you're talking about?" "Oh come on, it's a packed street. No one's paying attention. And I'm just being honest. That new name really isn't great." Elowen's face flushed instantly. This is exactly why I didn't want anyone to know. People really had no filter at all. At this point, she almost would've preferred being recognized directly. "Did that bother you?" Cassian's voice came from above her, the hint of a smile obvious. She looked up at him, lips pressed together in a small, aggrieved pout.

He met her gaze, eyes warm. "They don't have much taste. There's nothing wrong with it." She gave him a look, clearly unconvinced. "You're not going to argue with them over something like this," he added lightly. Elowen lifted her chin. "Fine. Then we're going to Stargazer Pavilion, and I'm ordering everything." "Of course." "And drinks too. The expensive kind." "Whatever you want." That finally pulled a smile out of her. Before long, they reached the busiest stretch of Cloudmere Lane. Stargazer Pavilion rose at the corner, grand and impossible to miss.

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Tall arched windows lined the front, 1/3 2:38 pm Chapter 422 Not a Great Name Finished glowing with warm light. Inside, silhouettes moved against the glow, hinting at the lively scene within. Iron and glass lanterns hung along the exterior, their warm light catching on the gilded sign above the entrance. Carriages lined the street, and well-dressed guests came and went without pause. As Elowen and Cassian approached the entrance, a neatly dressed attendant stepped forward with practiced ease. His smile was polite, but his eyes were sharp as they took in every detail of their appearance.

Fine fabric, well tailored, but not overly showy. He had seen true extravagance before. Compared to that, they looked understated. Still, the woman was striking, and the man carried himself with quiet authority. Not ordinary. He made his judgment quickly. "Welcome to Stargazer Pavilion," he said, voice smooth and professional as he stepped slightly into their path. "Before I seat you, may I have your names or a calling card? That will help me arrange a suitable private room." Elowen blinked.

"You need a name just to walk in?" The attendant straightened slightly, a hint of pride slipping into his tone. "I'm afraid so. Even our simplest dish comes at a price most households wouldn't spend in a year. Our guests value privacy and refinement. If we allowed just anyone inside, it would disrupt the experience." He gave a small, knowing smile. "And occasionally, someone comes in who cannot actually afford it. They linger, order nothing, or worse, expect to pay later. That sort of thing is... inconvenient." Elowen tilted her head slightly. That sounds a little snobbish.

The attendant noticed her expression and misread it immediately. Well dressed, but unfamiliar with the rules. Probably curious, not truly prepared. His smile cooled just a fraction. "If tonight

isn't convenient, you're always welcome to return another time." He lowered his voice, adding a note of warning. "Stargazer Pavilion has powerful backing. Just last month, a drunk troublemaker tried to skip out on his bill and caused a scene. He didn't leave in good shape, and he didn't last long after that either." He gestured casually, as if it were nothing more than a story.

Elowen stiffened, startled, and instinctively glanced at Cassian. 2/3 Chapter 422 Not a Great Name Cassian met her gaze briefly, then looked back at the attendant, his expression calm but cold. "That wouldn't happen," he said. The attendant frowned slightly, ready to argue. But the words never came out. 艙 Finished Something in Cassian's presence made his chest tighten, the confidence draining out of him before he could even respond. Cassian reached into his coat, took out the money, and flicked it toward him. "I answer to the Duke of Duskmoor." 。 admin

Chapter 423 Velvet Lights 04 Finished The moment the attendant spotted the money and caught the name of the Duke of Duskmoor, his whole posture changed. His back straightened, his face lit up, and he hurried forward with eager courtesy. "My deepest apologies. I truly should have recognized you sooner. Please, come this way. I hope you will be kind enough to forgive my earlier mistake." Elowen said nothing. Wow, that turn came out of nowhere... he really missed his calling, he should be up on a stage somewhere instead of pouring drinks. Inside, the pavilion felt nothing like the chill outside.

A soft, refined fragrance lingered in the air, something warm and subtle that felt closer to a noble's private salon than a public house. Polished stone floors reflected the glow of chandeliers overhead, while carved wooden beams framed the ceiling in elegant detail. Paintings and rare pieces filled the walls and display shelves, each one placed with deliberate taste. Elowen glanced

around, openly taking it all in. The attendant walked ahead, smiling as he spoke. "You two are out together this evening, I take it. A perfect pair, truly.

If it pleases you, I can arrange a private room on the second floor. You will have a clear view of the main hall performance later, lively enough to enjoy, but still quiet and comfortable." Elowen followed at an easy pace. "Five floors, right? What's each one for?" "The ground level is open to most guests, merchants, travelers, anyone with the coin. The second and third floors are reserved for patrons of standing, guests such as yourselves." He lowered his voice slightly. "As for the upper floors, those are reserved for the highest ranks, dukes, marquesses, royal envoys.

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I have never been allowed up there myself, so what truly goes on is beyond me." So much for making a scene and announcing I'm covering the bill tonight. Not in a place like this. By the time she finished that thought, they had reached a private room. The door opened to a refined, comfortable space. Tall glass windows lined one side, looking out over a brightly lit street filled with movement and laughter. The attendant bowed lightly. "What would Your Graces like this evening? We have fresh coffee brought from Southvale, aged wines, and dishes prepared by chefs from across the realm.

If you can name it, we will do our best to serve it." Elowen looked over the menu, fingers brushing the edge of the page. Should I just order everything they're proud of and call it a night? Before she could decide, a shout tore through the air from the stairway. 1/2 2:38 pm Pp p
Chapter 423 Velvet Lights Finished "You think you're too good for this. Where do you think you're going." The sound of a woman struggling followed, along with the sharp crash of shattered glass. Elowen turned toward the noise.

On the staircase between the second and third floors, a woman in a bright violet gown had fallen onto the steps. Her hair had come loose, her clothes were in disarray, yet she held a young girl tightly behind her, shielding her with her own body. The girl trembled uncontrollably, her face buried against the woman. Several rough men blocked their path. One of them pointed at the woman, his voice rising. "Mr. Boyd asked for the girl to join him for a drink. That is an honor. And she refuses. Who does she think she is." He scoffed.

"Take a good look at yourselves before acting like you belong among nobles. Everyone here knows Rowan's name. You think you can turn him down and walk away." Without warning, he stepped forward and drove his boot into the woman's shoulder. She let out a low sound of pain, her body tipping sideways, but her grip on the girl never loosened. She forced herself upright, her face pale and damp with tears. "Please," she said, her voice shaking. "If he wants company, I will go. I will drink with him, as much as he wishes. But she is only fourteen. She serves tables, she cleans, that is all.

Please let her go." The man let out a harsh laugh. "You walked in here. That means you play along. One night and she will learn. Don't stand there pretending you're above it." People had already gathered nearby. They watched, whispering among themselves, some amused, some curious, some quietly judging, but none of them stepped forward. The attendant leaned closer to Elowen, lowering his voice. "Your Grace, it would be best not to get involved. Rowan is close to Alaric. Even Her Highness Maerwyn favors him. He is not someone to cross.

And that woman is only a hostess here, her life is not-" 。 2.5K admin

Chapter 424 Not Tonight "Stop talking." Elowen's voice cut clean through his words. The attendant froze, shrinking back instinctively. Finished Moments ago she had seemed relaxed,

almost playful. Now there was a sharp edge to her presence that made it hard to even look at her directly. From above, a man's voice drifted down, smooth but edged with irritation. 'No need to make a spectacle of it.' The men on the stairs immediately stepped back, lowering their heads. Elowen moved forward and looked up. A young man stood there, dressed in deep blue, a folding fan turning lazily in his hand.

His expression carried the easy confidence of someone used to getting his way. Elowen's lips curved faintly. Of course it's him. Rowan. Rowan took his time walking down a few stone steps, positioning himself above the woman who had fallen on the ground. He bent slightly at the waist and, with the end of a slender wine stirrer he had been idly holding, tipped her chin upward, forcing her to meet his eyes. 'Scarlet,' Rowan said, his voice smooth in a way that lingered unpleasantly, 'I know you've always wanted to attend me.' Scarlet's body trembled, almost too faint to notice.

"My lord..." "But tonight," Rowan cut in before she could continue, his tone leaving no room for refusal, "I want the girl." His gaze shifted toward Nikki, slow and deliberate, openly appraising. "Young, untouched, something new. That's far more interesting." He paused, letting the tip of the stirrer trace lightly along Scarlet's jaw before withdrawing it, a cruel smile forming. "If you're jealous, or worried about her, that's easy enough to fix," he added casually. "The two of you can
1/4 :38 pm P P Chapter 424 Not Tonight attend me together tonight. I don't mind the extra company." "N-no...

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my lord, she really can't... she's too young..." Scarlet's face had gone completely pale as she tried to plead with him. Rowan's eyes narrowed, and whatever false warmth had been there vanished completely. 049s Finished "You know I don't have much patience," he said, his voice turning

cold. "If I hear you refuse me one more time, you'll spend the night attending my companions instead. There are over a dozen of them, and I promise you they won't be nearly as considerate as I am." Scarlet jolted, her shoulders shaking violently. Nikki lifted her head.

Her wide eyes were filled with fear, but her voice came out steady despite it. "Scarlet... it's alright. I can go." Rowan's lips curved with satisfaction. 'See? Even she understands how things work better than you do.' "No." Scarlet bit down hard on her lip. 'No.' Rowan clicked his tongue softly and straightened, his expression turning cold. "You really don't know when to stop. He turned to the men nearby and gave his order without hesitation. 'Take her to the back. If she won't cooperate, then let her entertain all of you tonight.

Just don't go so far that it becomes a problem." "Yes, my lord!" The men stepped forward immediately, their expressions shifting into something crude and eager, One of them grabbed Scarlet roughly by the arm and dragged her up from the floor. Another reached for Nikki, who had gone stiff with fear. Right at that moment, a clear, sharp female voice cut through the tension. "Let them go." Rowan had been casually toying with the stirrer in his hand, waiting to enjoy the scene unfolding in front of him. He had not expected anyone to interrupt.

2/4 Chapter 424 Not Tonight Finished The server only dared to look for a moment before a cold sweat broke across his back, his legs already starting to feel unsteady. Over on the other side, Rowan had already composed himself. He stepped forward and gave a proper bow, his tone turning respectful. "My apologies, Your Grace. I didn't recognize you at first." He paused, then continued, his voice smooth but probing. "But I was under the impression Your Grace would be attending the royal banquet this evening.

I didn't expect you to be here instead, taking an interest in a place like Stargazer Pavilion." 2.5K (admin

Chapter 425 She Took Them Anyway 041 Finished Elowen didn't even bother acknowledging him. She didn't lift her eyes, her voice coming out cool and flat. "That's none of your concern." The smile on Rowan's face froze instantly, like he'd just been struck across the face in front of everyone. Elowen didn't spare him another glance. Instead, she looked toward Scarlet and Nikki, her tone noticeably softer. "You're alright now. Come over here." Scarlet stood there, staring at Elowen, clearly still shaken and struggling to process what had just happened. Nikki reacted faster.

At Elowen's words, she quickly helped Scarlet to her feet, holding onto her tightly. "Scarlet, come on, get up. We're okay now. Nothing's going to happen." Watching the two of them support each other as they moved toward Elowen, Rowan felt a sharp wave of irritation rise in his chest. He clenched his jaw. "Your Grace, this isn't exactly proper, is it?" he said, his tone edged with restraint. "Scarlet is registered here at Stargazer Pavilion, and that girl works here as well. If someone wants them, there's an order to it. I was the one who chose them first.

For you to take them like this, that doesn't make much sense, does it?" Elowen's expression didn't change. "I'm taking them. Do you have a problem with that?" The words were direct, forceful, leaving no room for negotiation. A stir went through the surrounding crowd. Rowan's composure started to crack. He was Maerwyn's favored man. Maerwyn and the Duchess of Duskmoor had never gotten along, something nearly everyone in Vanelle knew.

Just the day before, he had received a message from Maerwyn saying that Isla had already agreed, and after the midwinter, discussions about their marriage could begin. He was about to

become a royal consort, tied to the imperial family. Even if she was the Duchess of Duskmoor, what could she really do to him? Cassian might hold power, but would he really openly offend Isla and a future royal in-law over two lowborn girls? With that thought, the hesitation he had felt toward Elowen faded, replaced again by arrogance. 1/3 2:38 pm Pppp.

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Chapter 425 She Took Them Anyway He let out a mocking laugh. Finished "Your Grace certainly carries herself with authority. But even you can't act however you please here. The person behind Stargazer Pavilion isn't someone you can afford to cross." Elowen rolled her eyes. "Get out of my sight." The irritation in Rowan's chest flared hotter. If he backed down now, in front of everyone, intimidated by a woman and letting her take the people he had chosen, how was he supposed to show his face in Vanelle again? And what would he say to Alaric and Maerwyn? "Fine.

You're the one forcing this," Rowan said, anger twisting into a smile. He turned to his men and snapped, "What are you standing around for? Go bring Scarlet and that girl back." The men hesitated, exchanging uncertain looks. Rowan's voice dropped, cold and pressing. "Go. What are you afraid of? Just be careful not to hurt Her Grace." Seeing the men begin to close in, their expressions turning harsh, step by step. Elowen had come out quietly today, without many attendants. Even so, she showed no fear.

She took a breath and called out clearly, "Cassian." The moment her voice fell, before anyone could even see what happened, a shadow swept through like something out of nowhere. Then came several heavy, sharp impacts. The men were still several strides away from Elowen. They didn't even have time to react before they were thrown backward in different directions, bodies twisting midair before crashing hard onto the ground. Not one of them managed to cry out. They

lay there, sprawled and groaning, unable to get up. Everything happened too fast, in the span of a single breath.

Many people hadn't even processed what they'd just seen. Rowan focused his gaze, and only then did he notice... At some point, a tall figure dressed in black had appeared at Elowen's side. He stood there calmly, like something immovable, his presence heavy and silent, carrying an invisible pressure that made the air feel colder. Rowan staggered back a step, his heart skipping.

2/3 Chapter 425 She Took Them Anyway His eyes locked onto the man. A buzzing filled his mind. He had seen him before, at palace banquets, standing beside Alaric from a distance.

"Y-Your Grace..." Rowan's voice came out tight and dry, an uncontrollable tremor in it. Finished Fear of the Duke of Duskmoor was something carved deep into the bones of the noble families in Vanelle. Elowen, seeing Cassian arrive, turned around, lifted her face slightly, and her lips curved with a hint of grievance. "Cassian, Rowan's been picking on me." Rowan went completely speechless. What is she talking about? Cassian's gaze shifted slowly and landed on Rowan. A chill shot up from Rowan's feet straight to his head. He hurriedly stepped back, words tumbling over each other.

"No, no, that's not it. Even if I had ten times the nerve, I wouldn't dare disrespect Her Grace." He quickly tried to explain, forcing out a strained, almost pitiful expression. "Your Grace, this is Stargazer Pavilion. I come here often. Scarlet has always attended me and has never caused trouble. Today I noticed that young girl and thought she was pleasant enough, so I wanted her to join as well. I was willing to pay more. But not only did she refuse, she turned and ran. I'm the paying guest here. Acting like that ruins the whole evening. If anything, I'm the one being wronged." 2.5K 1 admin

Chapter 426 A Line You Don't Cross Finished Scarlet stepped forward and dropped into a deep, formal bow toward Cassian. Her voice still trembled, but every word was clear. Your Grace, please judge fairly. I, Scarlet, am registered at Stargazer Pavilion. Serving drinks and entertaining guests is part of my duty. As for how Rowan behaved before, I would not presume to comment. But Nikki is only hired here to do chores like cleaning, washing, and serving drinks. Her contract clearly states she is not required to attend guests. She steadied herself and continued. "She is only fourteen.

Forcing her like this goes against reason, against fairness, and against the rules." Rowan's expression twisted. Seeing her dare to contradict him in public, anger surged, and he pointed at her. his voice sharp. "You don't know what you're talking about. What's wrong with her being staff? I'll pay more. Double, triple. five times if I want. She's just some nobody from the countryside. How much money has she ever seen? What I'm offering could buy her entire family's future. Having her sit and drink with me is doing her a favor. It's more than she could ever hope for.

How is that not acceptable?" "Enough." Elowen's anger flared. She clenched her teeth. "So having money makes you above everything?" she shot back. "A woman's life doesn't matter to you? The lives of ordinary people don't matter? You think you can treat them however you like?" Her gaze sharpened. "Isn't your mother a woman? Or did your family never come from ordinary people? Say something that disgusting again, and I'll make you regret it." Rowan froze for a moment under her words. Cassian spoke, his tone calm.

"Very well." He tilted his head slightly, as if giving a quiet instruction to the air. "Strike him."
"Yes, Your Grace." The response came from nowhere. Elowen felt a faint movement of air

beside her. A dark figure appeared instantly at Rowan's side. One hand locked onto his shoulder, holding him in place, while the other rose and came down hard with force. A sharp crack rang out. 1/3 2:39 pm Chapter 426 A Line You Don't Cross Then another. The blows landed cleanly across Rowan's face. Finished The force sent his head snapping to the side, his cheek swelling almost immediately.

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The corner of his mouth split open, blood bright against his skin. The figure released him, stepped back, and disappeared into the shadows just as quickly. Rowan was stunned, his body swaying as he stumbled backward, barely caught by his men who had just managed to get up. He clutched his face, dizzy, the taste of blood filling his mouth. For a long moment, he couldn't form a complete sentence. At that moment, the steward of Stargazer Pavilion finally rushed over with several attendants, breathing heavily.

He looked to be around forty, pale and slightly heavysset, dressed in fine silk, but now his face was full of unease. As soon as Rowan saw him, it was like seeing a lifeline. Ignoring the pain, he spoke through clenched teeth. "Hey, you finally made it. You need to stand up for me. I've been a regular here for years, one of your biggest patrons. I've spent more gold here than most people see in a lifetime. The one behind this place won't just ignore this, will he?" The steward didn't respond to him at all. He walked past him and stopped a few steps in front of Cassian, bowing deeply.

"Your Grace, I failed to welcome you properly. I deserve punishment. What brings you here today? Are you here to review the accounts, or is there some instruction from His Majesty regarding the establishment?" Rowan stared at the scene. Even someone slow to catch on would understand now. The mysterious backer of Stargazer Pavilion was the Duke of Duskmoor.

Cassian remained expressionless. "I came with my wife for a meal." The steward let out a small breath of relief, though tension still lingered. He quickly said, "It is an honor for us that Your Grace and Her Grace are here.

I will arrange the finest dishes and the best private room at once." He hesitated, glancing toward the two girls behind Elowen, then carefully added, "Your Grace, Rowan is indeed a long-time patron of our house. Especially on the upper levels, our rules have always been that as long as a guest can pay and requests a specific companion, whether for drinks, conversation, or even staying the night, such arrangements are permitted once payment is settled." He continued cautiously, "Scarlet, though refined, does accompany guests for drinks as part of her role.

As for the young girl, while she is a servant, in cases where a guest offers generous payment, there have been 2/3 2:39 pm P ppp. Chapter 426 A Line You Don't Cross exceptions before." Finished Elowen's eyes widened. "So you're saying girls barely in their teens have been made to sit with guests? Or worse?" The steward scratched his head. "That... isn't considered unusual." Elowen felt a chill settle in. She had always thought Stargazer Pavilion was dazzling, almost unreal, like a place built on music, light, and indulgence. Now she finally understood.

Beneath the polished surface, it was filled with things that were filthy, degrading, and impossible to ignore. 2.5K 3/3 W admin

Chapter 427 A Line Drawn None of it sat right with her. Cassian's voice came down, low and final. "That ends tonight." Elowen paused, turning toward him, a flicker of surprise in her eyes. The steward hesitated, clearly not keeping up. "Your Grace... I'm not sure I understand." Finished Cassian spoke evenly, like he was setting policy, not asking for agreement. "The

Pavilion operates under new rules. Starting now, serving staff do not sit in with guests, and courtesans do not stay the night. No one bends this." The steward's face lost color.

"Your Grace, if we make that change, the upper floors will take a hit, especially with noble patrons. A lot of them come here for exactly that. If we shut it down, business will suffer badly.

And besides... this place ultimately serves His Majesty..." Cassian looked at him without speaking. The steward lowered his gaze. Cassian turned slightly. "Ella, go get some rest."

Elowen nodded, then helped Scarlet to her feet and drew Nikki along with her toward a private room. Scarlet's gown had already been cut for display, and after being grabbed earlier, the fastening had come loose.

The fabric had shifted, leaving her entire arm and part of her shoulder bare. Elowen caught it in her peripheral vision, her expression tightening. Once inside, she turned to a server. "Bring a proper dress in her size." She added, firm and clear, "Something simple. No performance pieces." The server knew exactly who he was dealing with. "Yes, Your Grace," he said quickly, hurrying out. Nikki spoke in a small voice. "Miss Hale..." Elowen paused and looked over. "His Grace said the Pavilion won't do that kind of business anymore. Is that really true?" "It is."

Elowen studied her for a moment.

"Does this happen often here?" Nikki nodded. "I've only been here about half a month, so I didn't know much at first. But there was another girl working like me, just helping out. She had just turned thirteen. Everyone called her Lark." Her voice grew quieter. "Two nights ago, a guest picked her to sit with him. I stayed up waiting for her. She didn't come back until late. They carried her in wrapped in blankets, and there was blood all over." Elowen's brows tightened. "No

one stepped in?" 1/3 2:40 pm P p pp. Chapter 427 A Line Drawn "They did," Nikki said, her head dropping.

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"The steward gave her ten coins." Elowen froze for a beat, then anger sharpened her voice.

"That's vile." "Your Grace, please don't be upset." Scarlet spoke softly. "The steward didn't have much choice. That guest is Her Majesty Isla's cousin. Someone like that... most people wouldn't dare stand in his way." Finished She paused, then added calmly, "And people like us have always known where we stand. No one keeps track of what happens to us. We get used to it."

Elowen looked straight at her, her voice steady, each word deliberate.

"I don't." On the other side, once the Duchess stepped away, the steward quietly let out a breath.

This is just His Grace calming her down. Once she's satisfied, things will go back to normal.

After all, Theodric stood behind this place. No one would truly disrupt that. 1 He moved closer to Cassian, forcing a smile. "Your Grace, please don't take offense. I understand your position.

You answer to His Majesty and to Her Grace, and that's not easy. But you can leave this to me.

I'll make sure Her Grace believes the upper floors won't follow those practices anymore.

Once you've both left, everything can continue as before." Cassian looked at him, his gaze

steady. "You've planned this out." The steward gave a small, practiced laugh. "Experience, Your

Grace." Cassian nodded once. "Then we'll appoint someone else to your position." The steward

brightened instinctively. "Thank you, Your Grace, I- He stopped mid-sentence, the meaning

finally landing. His eyes widened. "Your Grace... replace me?" Cassian's expression cooled. "You

think I speak without meaning it." The steward panicked. "I wouldn't dare!" 1 "You just did."

Cassian's gaze sharpened.

"I said the rules have changed. You're already planning to undo them." The steward's voice trembled. "I was only trying to keep Her Grace satisfied..." Cassian's tone remained even. "When it comes to her, I don't say things I won't follow through on." The steward stood there, visibly taken aback. He had heard rumors that the Duke of Duskmoor was deeply devoted to his wife, but he had never imagined it went this far. Stargazer Pavilion was vast, yes, but ordinary meals and drinks barely brought in anything worth mentioning.

Chapter 427 A Line Drawn Finished At the end of the day, the real money came from the nobility. Men of rank had already tasted the finest wines and richest feasts long before they ever set foot here. They didn't come for food. They came for something sharper, something indulgent, something they couldn't have in polite society. That was what Stargazer Pavilion provided. That was why the coin flowed in so easily, night after night. And now, the Duke was drawing a line.. If that kind of indulgence was no longer allowed... then what exactly was the place supposed to survive on?

His face grew more strained. "But... His Majesty..." "I'll handle His Majesty." The words settled the matter. 2.5K admin

Chapter 428 No One Else's Name Finished "If anyone comes asking," he said, his voice level, 'you make it clear this was my decision. You do not bring Ella into it, and you do not suggest this was done for her.'" The steward blinked, caught off guard. So he's taking all of it on himself... and making sure no one drags her name into it. That alone made things far easier for everyone below him. But at the same time.... He doesn't want people talking about how far he goes for her. Admiration in the open court could turn just as easily into envy, and envy had a way of turning dangerous.

This wasn't just authority. It was protection. "Understood, Your Grace," the steward said quickly, bowing his head before hurrying off with his men. Not far away, Rowan had just managed to steady himself as the pain in his face eased slightly. Seeing the steward about to leave, he called out to him. The man didn't even slow down. Rowan's expression twisted with anger. "So this is how it is, huh? Covering for each other like nothing happened. You think you can just walk all over me and get away with it? This isn't over!" Cassian's brows drew together slightly. "He's making a scene.

Remove him." "Yes, Your Grace." The shadow from earlier moved again, fast enough to blur. Before Rowan could react, he was hauled up by the collar and dragged straight out of the Pavilion, then thrown out into the street without a shred of restraint. He hit the ground hard, one side of his face scraping against the stone. The impact sent a sharp burst of pain through him, and the taste of blood mixed with grit filled his mouth. For a moment, he couldn't even see straight. He lay there, breathing hard, until his attendants rushed forward and helped him sit up.

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His face and body throbbed all over, leaving him wincing again and again. But as the cold night air cut through the haze in his head, something suddenly snapped into focus. Hold on... that's not right. Everyone in Vanelle knew the Duke of Duskmoor had long struggled with his legs and relied on assistance 1/3 Chapter 428 No One Else's Name to get around. It wasn't some rumor whispered in corners. It was common knowledge. But tonight... Rowan had seen him standing. Standing like there had never been a problem at all. Rowan's eyes sharpened instantly. This needs to reach the Crown Prince.

Immediately. And what he had suffered tonight.... His jaw tightened. Finished Maerwyn had always had a soft spot for him. She indulged him, listened to him, and she had never gotten along

with the Duchess. If he went to her now, laid everything out, she would take his side without hesitation. She would confront the Duchess. She would make sure he got even. One of his attendants asked carefully, "Sir, should we find a physician first, or head back and send for one?" "Palace," Rowan snapped, shaking them off as much as he could manage.

"We're going to the palace." Back inside, a server soon returned with a fresh gown and set it carefully on the table. From the moment he stepped in, his eyes kept drifting toward Elowen. Remembering how he had spoken earlier, he looked uneasy, clearly trying to find the right words to smooth things over. Elowen lifted her gaze. Her eyes were cool, steady, and direct. The server stiffened immediately, nearly losing his footing. "Out," she said. He didn't dare linger, backing out in a hurry and closing the door behind him. Elowen turned to Scarlet, her tone easing.

"Go change." Scarlet didn't put on airs. She murmured her thanks and carried the gown into the inner room. Nikki stayed where she was, leaning her chin in her hands as she watched Elowen without blinking. Elowen caught the look and let out a soft laugh. "Do I have something on my face? You've been staring this whole time." Nikki shook her head quickly. "No, not at all. I just... you feel different now." Elowen lifted a brow slightly. 2:40 pm Chapter 428 No One Else's Name Nikki had been calling her Miss Hale the entire time. "You've seen me before?" Finished Nikki nodded cagerly. "I have.

My name's Nikki Mercer. When I was little, you came to our house once." Elowen stilled. Nikki... that means she's Josh's sister. The realization landed hard, sending a ripple through her chest. And with it came a quiet sense of relief. Good thing I came tonight. She looked at Nikki again, her voice gentler now. "Then how did you end up here?" Nikki hesitated, her voice dropping. "I came on my own... didn't tell anyone." Elowen frowned slightly. "Why?" "My

brother's preparing for the exams..." Elowen didn't let her finish. "That doesn't cost much. He's already working, isn't he?"

"Why would you need to earn money?" Nikki's expression tightened with worry. "But I heard people say... even if you're good, that's not always enough. You still need money to smooth things over. At least a hundred dollars." She twisted her fingers together, her voice growing smaller. "We don't have that kind of money. I didn't want my mother or my brother to struggle, so I came here. I was told this place pays the most, and it's just serving tables and cleaning rooms. I already do that at home." She meant every word. She just had no idea what kind of place she had stepped into. 2.5K 303 admin

Chapter 429 A Different Choice Finished She reached out and gently brushed a stray lock of hair away from Nikki's forehead. "If your essays are as strong as you say, there is no world where you fail. His Majesty values ability, and the examinations are taken seriously. No one gets away with cutting corners, not under his watch." Nikki blinked up at her, eyes wide and shining. "You really mean that?" Elowen's lips curved with quiet certainty. "I do. I am the Duchess of Duskmoor. If I tell you something, you can take it to the bank." That seemed to settle something deep inside the girl.

Nikki let out a long breath she had clearly been holding for far too long. Then her expression shifted. A flush crept up her cheeks, and her voice dropped, hesitant. "Elowen... please don't tell my brother about this. He... he doesn't take things like this well. When he gets angry, it's... a lot." Elowen studied her for a moment, then spoke evenly. "I can keep this from him, but only if you promise me something in return. No more work like this. Not even once." "I promise," Nikki said

immediately, the answer coming without a second's hesitation. That earned her a softer smile.

"Good.

Then I'll keep my word too. He won't hear it from me." Thank you, Elowen!" Nikki's smile returned, bright and unguarded, her eyes curving warmly, dimples showing as the tension finally lifted from her face. Elowen watched her for a moment, something stirring unexpectedly in her chest. If I ever had a daughter... I'd want her to turn out like this, gentle and full of life, the kind of person people can't help but love. But the thought of what Nikki had just gone through dimmed that warmth almost instantly, a shadow passing through her eyes. "Scarlet!" Nikki called out, her voice light again.

Elowen turned. Scarlet had changed into something entirely different from before. The bold, attention-seeking look was gone, replaced by a tailored lilac bodice fastened neatly at the front and a long, dark green skirt that moved softly with each step. The overall effect was composed, almost understated, the kind of elegance that did not ask for attention but earned it anyway. She approached at a measured pace, then lowered herself in a respectful curtsy. "Your Grace, thank you for what you did today." Elowen inclined her head slightly. "You're welcome.

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Tell me, what do you plan to do now?" 1/3 2:40 pm Chapter 429 A Different Choice Finished

Scarlet lowered her gaze. "I will stay at Stargazer Pavilion. I have nowhere else to go. I was raised there. Outside of it... I wouldn't last long." Even without saying it outright, the reality was clear. After what had happened today, staying there would not be easy. Elowen spoke calmly. "You could come with me instead." Scarlet looked up, caught off guard. "I have something in mind," Elowen continued, her tone steady. "It's not fully formed yet, but I intend to build it step by step.

Come back to Duskmoor Manor with me. When the time comes, I'll need people I can trust. You could be one of them." Scarlet hesitated, clearly overwhelmed by the offer. Before she could respond, Nikki jumped in, practically glowing with excitement. "You should go! Really. If you stay with Her Grace, you won't have to deal with men like that ever again. It's a fresh start. Just say yes." Scarlet's fingers tightened slightly at her sides. "But... I don't have any real skills." Elowen's expression softened. "Skills can be learned. Reading, writing, riding, even handling a bow.

None of that belongs to men alone. If you put in the time, you'll get there." Scarlet's lips parted slightly. The hesitation was still there, but something else had taken root beneath it. Nikki leaned closer, lowering her voice but not her enthusiasm. "She's right. And don't forget, she saved us today. You can trust her." Scarlet drew in a slow breath, then finally made her choice. "Alright... I will go with you, Your Grace." Elowen nodded, clearly pleased. Elsewhere, Rowan staggered toward the Crown Prince's Wing, barely holding himself together.

His hair was disheveled, his face swollen and scraped raw in places, dried blood dark against the dirt clinging to his skin. His clothes hung unevenly, marked by the aftermath of a brutal encounter. He stopped at the gate and snapped at the guards, voice strained but forceful. "I need to see His Highness. Now. Go inform him." The guards took a moment to recognize him. Once they did, the lead guard stepped forward, posture rigid. "His Highness is currently in seclusion, focusing on his studies. He is not receiving visitors." Rowan's temper flared. "I am not just anyone.

You know exactly who I am. I am to be the princess's future consort. My relationship with His Highness is not something you can brush off." The guards did not react. Frustration sharpened

his tone. "And I am not here for small talk. I have urgent business. It concerns the Chapter 429 A Different Choice Duke of Duskmoor and Her Grace." At that, a subtle shift passed between the guards. Rowan seized on it. "Even if you won't let me in, you can at least pass along the message." The lead guard studied him briefly.

"State the matter." 飽 Finished Rowan quickly recounted what had happened at Stargazer Pavilion, then gestured sharply at his battered face. "Tell His Highness to look at me. That will explain everything." After a pause, the guard gave a small nod. "Wait here." He turned and disappeared through the gate. Inside the Crown Prince's Wing, in the study, Alaric stood at his desk, brush in hand, finishing a line of careful script. Iris stood nearby, quietly preparing more ink, her movements smooth and unobtrusive. The guard entered, stopping at a respectful distance.

"Your Highness, Rowan requests an audience at the gate." Alaric did not look up. "For what reason?" "He appears to have been in a fight. His face is swollen, his clothes disordered. He claims the matter is urgent and concerns the Duke of Duskmoor and Her Grace." 2.5K 3/3 2:40 pm admin

Chapter 430 Backfire Finished "Ella?" Alaric finally paused, setting the brush aside with deliberate precision, the ink still glistening faintly on the parchment. "Yes, Your Highness." The guard recounted Rowan's words from the gate, keeping his tone steady and formal, relaying everything without embellishment. Alaric listened in silence. When the guard finished, his gaze lowered slightly, thoughtful for only a brief moment before his voice cut through the stillness, cold and unmistakable.

"So he upset Ella." Outside, the night air carried a sharp chill, the courtyard dim under scattered torchlight. Rowan stood waiting beyond the gate, shifting slightly as pain pulsed through him in waves. His face burned, his ribs throbbed with every breath, but anticipation held his thoughts together. Once His Highness sees me like this, there's no way he lets this go. J Duke of Duskmoor or not, Alaric is the Crown Prince. He stands above them. And I'm one of his people. They didn't just hit me, they challenged him. Time stretched, each moment dragging longer than the last.

Then at last, movement. The heavy gates opened just enough to allow three figures through. Rowan's heart surged, expectation rising fast enough to drown out the pain. But there was no royal presence. No sign of Alaric. Only the guard who had gone in before, now flanked by two armed men, their armor catching faint light as they stepped forward in unison and blocked the entrance behind them. Rowan's excitement faltered, confusion creeping in. "Where is His Highness?" The lead guard stood straight, voice even and official. "His Highness will not receive you." Rowan's voice sharpened instantly.

"That's impossible. You didn't deliver my message properly. If His Highness knew what the Duke of Duskmoor and his wife did to me, he would not ignore this." The guard regarded him briefly. "His Highness has a message." Hope snapped back into place. Rowan leaned forward despite the pain, urgency in his voice. "What did he say?" The guard's eyes lingered on him for a fraction longer this time, a trace of something unreadable passing through. 1/3 Chapter 430 Backfire Finished Then he spoke, each word clear and exact. "His Highness said you do not know your place.

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If you had been beaten to death, it would have been no more than you deserved." Rowan went still. The meaning reached him, but his mind refused to accept it. His lips moved, voice unsteady. "What... did you just say?" No answer came. Instead, the guard took a single step back and gave a short command. "Take him." Rowan barely had time to react before he was seized. The first strike hit hard enough to knock the breath from his lungs. The rest followed without pause, fists and boots driving into him with controlled, practiced force..

He tried to speak, to protest, but the words broke apart into strained cries, then into nothing but raw sound swallowed by the night. No one stepped in. "Enough." The order came at last, clean and decisive. The blows stopped immediately. Rowan collapsed onto the cold stone, his body slack, every inch of him screaming. Each breath dragged painfully through his chest, sharp and metallic, as though he were breathing through blood. Through blurred vision, he saw the guard standing over him, looking down without expression. "His Highness has one more instruction," the man said.

"If there is a next time, you will not be walking away." A brief pause. "Now leave." The guards turned without another glance and walked back through the gate. The doors shut behind them with a heavy, final sound that echoed through the courtyard. Rowan lay there, unmoving, his thoughts spiraling in confusion. Why... why would Alaric do this to me? Footsteps approached hesitantly. "M-My Lord..." one of his attendants crouched nearby, voice trembling. "Are you alright?" Rowan's throat worked before any sound came. When it did, it was rough, barely held together.

2:40 pm P P p p Chapter 430 Backfire "Macrwyn..." If Alaric had cast him aside, then so be it. Macrwyn had not. She wouldn't turn on me... she never would. She'd do anything I asked of her,

anything at all. Finished She might not command the same authority, but she could still stir trouble where it mattered. And if there was one person she could reach, it was Elowen. As long as Elowen suffered for this, tonight would not be wasted. "Take me to her," Rowan forced out, the words scraping against his throat.

He could not stand, so they lifted him carefully, supporting his weight as they made their way through the palace grounds. By the time they reached Maerwyn's residence, the atmosphere had softened. Warm torchlight flickered along the stone walls, casting a steadier, more welcoming glow than the stark entrance of the Crown Prince's Wing. The doors stood open, unusual for the hour. A senior attendant lingered beneath the covered entryway, When she saw the group approaching, uneven and struggling, she hurried forward. The moment she recognized Rowan, her expression shifted to shock.

"My lord, what happened to you?" Rowan ignored the question, his voice strained with urgency.

"Where is Her Highness? I need to see the princess." The attendant's brows drew together slightly, though she answered without delay. "It is the festival evening. Her Highness is attending the palace banquet. She has not yet returned." 2.5K her posture tense as she looked out into the night. admin