

# Awakening Love: Reborn to Be His Duchess Novel

Chapter 512 A Cruel Command Maerwyn watched until his figure disappeared around the corner, then finally let out a long breath. She pressed a hand lightly to her chest, her heart still beating fast, but the fear had already turned into excitement. She had actually stood up for Azure. Pride filled her as she turned and walked back, her posture straight and confident. Alaric moved quickly down the path, his expression dark and stormy. Partway there, an attendant from the Crown Prince's Wing approached cautiously. He was the one responsible for the prized stallion.

"Your Highness," he said carefully, "what should we do with the horse? Did the Lady of Grace and Virtue accept your gift?" Alaric stopped and turned slightly. The sunlight fell across half his face, leaving the other half in shadow, making his expression look even colder. Iris immediately read the mood and stepped forward before things escalated. "Take the horse back to the western stables outside the city. Make sure it's kept somewhere secure for now." The attendant hesitated.

"But it took so much effort to find a horse like that, and transporting it all the way to Vanelle cost a great deal of time and resources. Wasn't it meant as her birthday gift? Why send it back instead of-" He didn't get to finish. Alaric's gaze snapped toward him, sharp and icy. The attendant froze, a chill running through him as he quickly fell silent. Alaric's voice came out low and cutting.

"Then put it down." The attendant stood there, stunned, unsure if he had heard correctly. Even Iris felt a jolt of shock. Put it down? After everything that had gone into finding that horse?

And now, just because it couldn't be given away, it was to be destroyed? Alaric didn't spare them another glance. As if he had just dealt with something trivial, he turned and walked away without

hesitation. That kind of indifference was colder than anger. Iris remained where she was for a moment, the faint chill of early spring brushing against her skin, doing nothing to ease the cold settling deep inside her. She took a slow breath before finally moving to follow him. The Crown Prince was unpredictable, ruthless, and quick to turn. There had been countless better options.

The horse could have been sold to another noble house, gifted elsewhere, or kept for future use.

But instead, he chose to destroy it simply because he was angry. Today it was a horse.

Tomorrow? If he never gains the Lady of Grace and Virtue's forgiveness, what happens to someone like me, someone connected to him? Would I end up the same way one day, over something trivial, or just because he needs somewhere to vent his anger? Her original plan had been to wait until the court qualification trials were over, then slowly consider her next move.

Now, that plan clearly had to change.

Every extra day by his side meant more risk. Back at the front courtyard, the music continued, the banquet still lively as if nothing had happened. "Alaric!" Leonhart spotted him right away and stepped forward with a grin. "That was fast. Weren't you going to check on her?" Noticing the dark look on Alaric's face, he lowered his voice slightly. "She didn't want to see you?" There was no malice in his tone, just casual concern. But to Alaric, it only made things worse. He stopped, glanced at him, and spoke coldly, each word edged with irritation. "If you already knew, why ask?"

"What, did you leave your brain somewhere?" Leonhart's smile froze instantly, his mouth parting in awkward surprise. Alaric ignored him and walked past without another word, heading straight for his seat. Leonhart remained where he was, looking confused and a little embarrassed. After a moment, he scratched his head, still trying to process what had just happened. Iris had taken it all

in. She stepped forward at the right moment. "Leonhart." He turned at the sound of his name. She gave a small, respectful nod, her tone gentle and composed.

"His Highness had a disagreement with Maerwyn earlier, so he's not in the best mood. He spoke without thinking; it wasn't directed at you. Please don't take it to heart, and don't let it affect your relationship." Leonhart blinked, realization dawning. He studied her for a moment before asking, "You're Iris, right? From the Crown Prince's Wing?" A hint of surprise crossed her face, perfectly measured. "I didn't expect you to remember me." Leonhart smiled, visibly more at ease. "Of course I do. Every time I visit, you're the one handling the drinks and desserts. You're always thorough.

Hard to forget that."

Chapter 513 Quiet Calculations Iris lowered her eyes, her voice soft and measured. "It's nothing more than what I'm expected to do, my lord. I couldn't possibly take credit for it." Honestly, even something as simple as refilling drinks... I could've just had Tristan do it. But Iris always found a way to take those tasks herself, smooth and unnoticeable, as if it were only natural. After what happened to Daphne, she had learned her lesson. Someone in her position could not afford to drift along and hope for the best.

If she wanted a future, she had to build it herself, piece by piece, before the ground beneath her shifted. She had already asked around about Leonhart. His father, Duke Roland, had a reputation across Avenlor as a man who lived comfortably and stayed far from court politics. He held rank and wealth, yet kept himself untouched by the power struggles that swallowed others whole. In some ways, that made his household even more desirable than Duskmoor Manor. There was security there. Stability. No constant maneuvering, no endless traps to avoid.

And Leonhart himself, despite his status, was nothing like Alaric. He lacked the arrogance, the sharp temper. If anything, he was soft-hearted, easygoing, and treated those around him with a rare kind of fairness. If she could serve at his side, her future would be far easier. That was why she made herself visible to him whenever she could, making sure he would remember her face, her presence. "Iris." Leonhart said, leaning a little closer, lowering his voice as if sharing a secret, "earlier you mentioned Alaric and Maerwyn had some kind of falling-out? What happened?"

It looked serious." Iris lowered her gaze further, her expression tightening just enough. "I shouldn't be speaking about matters like that." Leonhart's tone turned earnest, almost coaxing. "Come on, just between us. I won't repeat it, I swear. It's not like anyone else is listening. You can't expect me to just forget it now, can you?" Iris hesitated. Then suddenly, a faint chill crept along her spine. Subtle, but unmistakable. Someone was watching her. She turned her head slightly, her eyes flicking toward Alaric. But it wasn't him.

He sat alone, shoulders tense, drinking steadily, lost in his own thoughts, paying no attention to anything else. So who? "Iris?" Leonhart nudged again, softer this time, almost pleading. "Please? No one's going to blame you for this." Iris pushed the unease aside and turned back to him. It still struck her how rare this was. A man of his standing, speaking to her so casually, so closely, as if there were no distance between them. The only person she had seen act like that before was Elowen. That thought only reinforced her conclusion. Duke Roland's household truly was the right place.

After a brief pause, she sighed softly, as though giving in. "...If you insist, my lord." Her voice remained low and careful as she recounted the entire situation, step by step, without rushing,

without embellishment. When she finished, Leonhart exhaled, his expression complicated. "I see. That explains a lot. No wonder Alaric's been in such a mood." Iris dipped her head slightly, her tone earnest. "I've already overstepped by saying this much. If word of it spreads, I'll be the one to pay for it. Please, my lord, I'm begging you, keep this to yourself." Leonhart placed a hand over his chest.

"You have my word. Not a single detail leaves me." Then he frowned faintly. "Still, why are you so worried? Alaric can be sharp, sure, but he's not unreasonable." Iris only offered a faint, strained smile, saying nothing. Leonhart studied her, clearly about to press further. But she didn't give him the chance. She gave a small, respectful bow of her head. "If there's nothing else, I should return." Without waiting, she turned and walked back, her steps quiet and controlled, stopping behind Alaric once more.

Back when she had served near the Crown Prince's Wing, she had watched Leonhart carefully. He was curious by nature, always wanting to understand more than he was told. So she had given him just enough, leaving space for questions, drawing him in. And just as his curiosity began to deepen again, she cut it off. He wouldn't let that go. He would think about it, dwell on it, carry it with him until the next time they met. And when that moment came, he would seek her out again. When Iris came to a stop behind Alaric, that same feeling crept over her again, someone watching her.

This time it was sharper, heavier, impossible to ignore, cold and clinging, like a presence that wouldn't shake loose no matter how hard she tried. She frowned ever so slightly, keeping her gaze lowered as she scanned the surroundings from the corner of her eye. Attendants moved about their duties. Nobles chatted over wine or watched the musicians perform from the raised

gallery. Nothing seemed out of place. Could someone be lingering out of sight? Still, she knew her own standing. She wasn't someone who drew attention. These nobles had seen beauty far beyond anything she could offer.

So why her? She couldn't make sense of it. Not far off, Albert sat distracted, barely touching the pastries and spiced wine laid out before him.

Chapter 514 Fractures Pearle Albert, bored out of his mind, glanced around until something caught his eye. He quickly nudged Liam. "Hey, look. Alaric's back." Liam followed his gaze.

Albert leaned closer, his voice low but urgent. "Should we go talk to him about the court qualification trials now? Before the banquet wraps up?" Liam grabbed his arm immediately.

"Bad idea." Albert blinked. "Why?" Liam let out a breath. "You really can't tell? He's in a terrible mood." Sure enough, Alaric was pouring himself another drink. The decanter ran dry, and his irritation only deepened.

An attendant hurried over with a polite smile, reaching to take it and replace it. Alaric didn't even look at him. He let the empty decanter drop from his hand. It hit the stone floor and shattered cleanly. Liam gave Albert a look. "See that? He's already smashing things. You walk up to him now, and you might be next." Albert shuddered. That made sense, but he still looked confused.

"But he was fine earlier. It hasn't even been that long. What happened?" Liam shrugged. "Could be anything.

Maybe whatever he went to do didn't work out." They were related, technically, but not close enough to know his mind. "Either way," Liam added, "this isn't the time." Albert frowned, clearly worried. "So what now? At this rate, we might actually lose to someone with no backing at all." That wouldn't just mean a harsh lecture from their grandfather. Worse, it would cost them

face in front of the Duchess. Liam patted his shoulder. "Relax. If today doesn't work, we'll have our fathers visit the Crown Prince's Wing. Let them handle it.

Same outcome." Albert thought it over, then nodded, visibly relieved. "Yeah... that works." As long as they passed, the method didn't matter. "Passing's all that matters," he muttered. The light faded, and evening settled in. Duke Roland and his wife were the first to rise, offering their farewells to Elowen with warm blessings and polished courtesy. The banquet was coming to an end. Elowen stood beside Cassian, seeing the guests off one by one. They left with smiles and well-wishes, praising their union, offering hopes for a long and prosperous future together.

Elowen returned each with calm grace. As the crowd thinned, iron sconces along the manor walls were lit, their warm glow softening the edges of the night. Then, through the hum of departing voices, Elowen caught the sharp scent of wine. She looked up. Alaric was walking toward her from the dim courtyard, his steps uneven. Tristan moved to steady him, but Alaric shoved him aside without a word. As he drew closer, his expression came into focus. He didn't look fully drunk. His gaze was too clear for that. But there was something heavy in it. Something dark and tightly wound.

Elowen's smile remained, though it no longer reached her eyes. There were still guests nearby. She meant to keep this polite, controlled. But Alaric didn't give her the chance. He stepped forward abruptly, his voice rough. "Leonhart gave you that ivory scepter. Aveline sent that embroidered screen. Falconcrest Manor even brought a trained bird that can recite verses..." He listed them off, faster with each breath. "You accepted all of them." His eyes locked onto hers, unyielding. "But mine?" His voice tightened.

"I went out of my way to find that bloodline warhorse for you, and you turned it away." His throat moved as he swallowed. "Fine. You didn't want it. But then you had Maerwyn come out and make a spectacle of me, calling me out in front of everyone..." His voice faltered. "You wouldn't even face me yourself. Not even to say no." By the end, tears were already running down his face. "Elowen," he said, his voice trembling. "Do you really hate me that much?

Enough that you won't even see me, won't even accept a single thing from me?" Around them, those who hadn't yet left slowed, their attention drifting over, some openly, some pretending not to watch. The history between Elowen, Cassian, and Alaric was no secret in Vanelle. Moments like this drew eyes. Elowen remained composed. Only after he finished did she let out a soft, almost distant laugh. "You're taking this too far, Alaric. Why would an aunt hate her own nephew?" Her voice gave nothing away, no warmth, no irritation, nothing to hold onto. And somehow, that made it worse for Alaric.

It got under his skin in a way anger never could. And then there were those words, calling him her nephew, placing that distance between them like it meant nothing. Why? How was that supposed to be enough? Alaric's composure cracked. "Don't say that!" His voice rose sharply. "You hate me. Because of how I treated you, because of what I did to you, because in my last life-" He stopped himself abruptly, biting down hard enough to taste blood. The rest of the words never came. He had said too much already.

Chapter 515 A Sky for Her Elowen's brows tightened slightly as she stepped back, placing herself behind Cassian. The movement carried a quiet but unmistakable meaning. She was avoiding Alaric as if he were unstable, or something she didn't even want near her. Alaric lifted his head, his eyes rimmed red. When he looked toward Elowen, his line of sight inevitably

passed over Cassian first. Cassian stood tall and immovable, his presence steady and imposing, like a stone keep that could not be breached. Alaric clenched his jaw, his voice turning sharp.

"Look at him.

He keeps saying he loves you, says he's your husband, even got you carrying his child. But today is your birthday. Everyone here brought you something thoughtful. What did he give you? Does he even put in half the effort I do, half the heart..." Bran stood behind Cassian, and as the crown prince's words grew harsher, more and more unpleasant to hear, he could no longer stay silent.

He stepped forward. "Your Highness, you should choose your words carefully. His Grace has naturally prepared-" "Out of line!" Alaric spun around abruptly, his voice cutting through the air.

"Who do you think you are? A servant, and you think you get to speak here?" He let out a cold laugh. "And stop calling him that. This is Hale Manor, not Duskmoor Manor. What? He's already been stripped of his title and rank. Didn't you receive the royal decree?" His gaze slid past Cassian entirely, locking onto Elowen with a stubborn, almost obsessive intensity. "A gift? What could he possibly give you? Gold? Jewels? Rare curiosities? Even if he scrapes something together, what does that matter?

How could it possibly compare to what I prepared for you, that bloodline-" A heavy explosion cut him off. The sound came without warning. Alaric froze mid-sentence. Everyone instinctively turned toward the source. In the southeastern sky beyond Hale Manor, where the last traces of dusk still lingered, a massive firework burst open. Light spread outward in layered petals, blooming like a radiant golden flower, its edges trailing streams of molten brightness. Alaric's unfinished words caught in his throat. He stood there, mouth slightly open, stunned. But it was only the beginning. Boom. Boom.

Boom. A rapid succession of explosions followed, rhythmic and overwhelming, echoing from every direction. From other courtyards within Hale Manor, from the ornamental rock gardens and lakeside, even from the surrounding streets, countless streaks of light shot upward, cutting through the darkening sky before exploding into brilliance. Night deepened, yet the sky grew brighter. Countless bursts spread across the heavens, nearly covering it entirely. With Hale Manor at its center, all of Vanelle was illuminated like midday.

Fragments of light drifted downward in shimmering cascades, like a rain of glowing embers spilling from the sky itself. Before they could fade, new streaks rose to replace them. Layer upon layer, overlapping, intertwining. A sky ablaze, as if night itself had been replaced by light. "My God... this... this is unbelievable..." "I've lived in Vanelle my whole life, and I've never seen fireworks like this!" "How long would something like this take to prepare? How much would it cost?" The guests immediately forgot about the crown prince's earlier outburst.

They moved toward the open courtyard, lifting their heads to watch, voices filled with astonishment. The younger children jumped and shouted, unable to contain their excitement. The city had not yet gone to sleep, and now the entire capital was stirred awake. Beyond Hale Manor, faint cries of surprise and delight could be heard from the streets. At that moment, Bran finally straightened his posture, pride evident in his voice as he spoke loudly, "Honored guests, this display has been prepared by His Grace in celebration of the Duchess's birthday.

It has been months in the making, set to be launched from thirty-six locations across the city tonight. It is meant to bring joy to the Duchess, and to share that joy with all of you. May the coming year bring prosperity and lasting blessings." So this was the gift Cassian had prepared for Elowen. In truth, even Elowen herself had not known what he had planned. She had asked him

before, out of curiosity, but Cassian had only smiled and told her she would find out in time. She had never been able to guess. But now, she finally understood.

Elowen lifted her face toward the sky, almost holding her breath as she watched. Though Avenlor possessed the craftsmanship to create fireworks of extraordinary beauty, the process was complex beyond measure, and the cost was staggering. There were also unspoken boundaries tied to rank and status. Ordinary officials and merchants did not dare set them off freely. And even among the nobility, few could afford such extravagance. So even in Vanelle, fireworks were a rare sight. Elowen had only seen them once before, when she was younger.

Back then, only three or four bursts had lit up the night sky. They were beautiful, but fleeting. At the time, she had been close friends with Daphne, along with another young lady. The three of them had crowded by a high window, watching the display, each one exclaiming in delight. When it ended, Elowen had felt a pang of regret. Tilting her head, she had said to Daphne, "Daphne, next year for my birthday, you should give me a display like that." Daphne's eyes had widened in shock. "With what money?

We couldn't afford that even if we sold everything we owned..." Their other friend had laughed. "Ella, that's not exactly an ordinary gift. If anything, you'd be the one giving it. Honestly though, whoever set those off tonight must have gone all out. That's not just money, that's real thought behind it."