

Awakening Love: Reborn to Be His Duchess Novel

Chapter 516 What She Wanted The past faded like smoke. And now, Elowen was watching fireworks once again. But this time, it was no simple scattering of light. It was overwhelming, filling the entire sky, illuminating the whole city. All of it had been prepared for her. Beside her, Cassian lowered his gaze slightly, his eyes lingering on her for a long moment. The shifting lights reflected in her eyes, bright and alive. She liked it. Cassian's mood lifted, a faint smile forming at the corner of his lips. In truth, he had begun preparing this long ago.

Even before they had discussed hosting a grand birthday celebration. Even before this year. He had started when he was still confined to that chair, unable to stand. He concealed every step carefully, mobilizing former subordinates, reaching out to trusted craftsmen, selecting locations in secret, and testing patterns and timing over and over again. He gave strict orders that no one involved was to reveal even the slightest detail. That was why Elowen had not heard a single hint. As for why he chose this as her gift, Cassian had seen Elowen a few times in the past.

Once, he had overheard her speaking with Julian. Julian had asked her, "Ella, what do you want for your birthday next year?" Without hesitation, she had replied brightly, "Fireworks! I saw some before, and they were so beautiful!" Julian had laughed. "You silly girl, what do you want that for? You can't keep it, and once it's over, it's gone. I'll get you something more practical, jewelry, rare books, things you can actually keep and use." At the time, Elowen had pursed her lips slightly, clearly disappointed.

Cassian had turned his head away as if uninterested, but his gaze had caught the green ornament by her temple, and he had taken in every detail of her expression. Elowen herself probably no longer remembered saying those words. She certainly did not know that someone had quietly held onto that wish for years. Cassian knew there was a considerable age difference between them, and he had once believed that Elowen only cared for Alaric.

He had thought he'd never get the chance to give her something like fireworks in this lifetime, never imagined there would come a day when she would stand beside him as his wife. His wife. That changed everything. If that was who she was to him now, then whatever she wanted, he would make it happen. Her brother had it wrong. What did it matter whether something could be held onto or not? As long as Elowen loved it, that was enough. Only Alaric stood frozen where he was, his expression dark and rigid, the shift in the air hitting him harder than anything else.

The fireworks continued to explode overhead, accompanied by the guests' laughter and astonished cries. All of it made his earlier accusations and mockery seem utterly ridiculous. At last, the final cascade of light faded from the sky. The fireworks came to an end, and Vanelle returned to night, though the faint scent of smoke still lingered in the air. Many of the guests were reluctant to look away. When they glanced toward Elowen, their eyes now carried unmistakable envy. Elowen turned her head to look at Cassian, meeting his deep gaze. "Thank you," she said softly.

Cassian's expression softened. "Happy birthday." Her eyes curved into a smile. "I love it. I'm really happy." After lingering on him for a moment longer, Elowen finally turned to look at Alaric. He was still drunk. The wine he had consumed had finally taken full effect, leaving him unsteady, his eyes reddened. He stared at Elowen for a moment, as if wanting to say something.

Elowen smiled and cut him off before he could speak. "Iris." Her gaze shifted to the maid behind him. "Take the Crown Prince back to the palace." Iris bowed respectfully. "Yes, Your Grace."

She turned to Tristan.

"The steed His Highness brought, since the Duchess refused it, he has ordered it put down. I'll go oversee it. You help His Highness back." Elowen's brows drew together slightly. Watching them leave, she leaned closer to Cassian and spoke in a low voice, "That sounded like she wanted me to hear it." Cassian nodded. "She did." Elowen frowned. "If I don't accept it, he wants it killed? That's unbelievable. He could sell it or keep it at a royal stable. Why go that far?" Cassian replied calmly, "That sounds like something Alaric would do." Elowen sighed softly.

"He may be awful, but the horse did nothing wrong. And it's a rare northern breed. It might even be related to Ember..." Cassian smiled faintly. "Alright." Elowen blinked in slight surprise.

Cassian had already turned to Bran. "Make arrangements. Find someone unconnected to us and have them purchase the horse quietly. Make sure it's handled cleanly, no one notices." Since Iris had deliberately said those words, she likely did not wish to see the horse killed either. And after giving the order, Alaric would not think to check on the matter again.

That left plenty of room for those below to act discreetly. Selling it quietly would bring profit, and no one would question it. Bran nodded in acknowledgment, then glanced at Elowen. "Should I bring the horse back here, or keep it elsewhere?" Before Elowen could answer, Cassian shook his head. "She still has Ember on her mind. She won't want another of the same kind. Arrange for it to be sent to Rivenshire, and hand it over to Marwen. Nina enjoys riding, doesn't she?"

Chapter 517 Firelight and Distance A soft warmth settled deep in Elowen's chest. The arrangement had been handled perfectly. It fulfilled her wishes without sacrificing a fine horse

for nothing. That was exactly the kind of man Cassian was. Across the courtyard, long after the last flare of fireworks had faded and the sparks dissolved into drifting smoke, Albert still stood there, head tilted up toward the sky, slow to come back to himself. Liam nudged him, impatience creeping in. "The show's over. You planning to stand there all night? Go say goodbye to the Princess Consort.

We should head out; we've got plans with the He family at the Silken Veil Atelier." Albert blinked, delayed, then gave a dull, "Oh." From where he stood, with torchlight and iron braziers casting a steady glow across the estate, he caught sight of Elowen and Cassian at a glance. They stood not far off, surrounded like the center of gravity in the room. Elowen had turned slightly, smiling as she spoke with the Duke of Falconcrest and Duchess of Falconcrest. She had always been beautiful, but tonight that beauty felt almost unreal.

Her skin seemed to hold the light, smooth and luminous, the warm glow from the firelight softening her features until she looked almost untouchable, like something carved from pale stone and brought to life. Her hair was swept up in an elegant style, a delicate ornament set into it, strands of pearls swaying faintly with her movement, catching the light in quiet, shimmering flashes. She didn't need to do anything. Just standing there with that calm, effortless smile, she drew every eye.

Cassian stood at her side, tall and composed, his presence only sharpening the sense of distance around her. Together, they looked like something placed on a high altar, admired, but far beyond reach. A hollow ache opened in Albert's chest. It felt like something had been taken out of him, leaving behind an empty space that the cold night air rushed into. He and Julian could be called

old acquaintances. Back then, after losing a drinking match to Julian, he had felt irritated, unwilling to accept it.

So he thought he would get even in some small way, maybe by picking on the sister Julian treasured most. But whether it was racing horses or shooting at the training grounds, he lost. Every time, he lost to Elowen. Back then, he used to watch her from a distance, thinking she looked like the glow of sunrise on the horizon, vivid, breathtaking, but impossible to hold onto, like something that would vanish the moment you reached for it. There had been a time when he envied Alaric, even resented him. What kind of luck was that, to marry someone like Elowen? Then everything changed.

Hale Manor collapsed piece by piece, loss after loss. Elowen lost the protection of her father and brother. The next time he saw her, she had grown thinner. The brightness in her expression had faded, yet somehow she had become even more refined, more striking. Back then, Alaric had privately told their relatives that the Hale family was finished, and Elowen had become dull and uninteresting, no longer worth his attention. Albert had turned that thought over in his mind more than once. If he stepped in and proposed, with the standing of the Baker family, wouldn't it be almost guaranteed?

After all, the Hale family was no longer what it had been. Elowen was alone, vulnerable. If he appeared before her, wouldn't she see him as someone who had come to save her? That thought rose again and again. And each time, he put it off. He was afraid of being mocked for taking what Alaric had cast aside. Afraid his family would not approve. Afraid Elowen herself might refuse. So he delayed. And delayed. Until the royal marriage banquet, until Elowen stood before

the king and chose to marry Cassian. When he heard the news, he had been drinking at the Velvet Lantern.

He remembered slurring to a courtesan beside him, "She's lost her mind. Elowen's completely lost her mind. Throwing herself away like that." After that, he heard her name from time to time. People talked about how Cassian treated her, about what she had done. But it never stayed with him. There was always another distraction, another drink, another warm body close at hand. Until now. Albert stood there, breathing in the faint trace of smoke left in the air. And suddenly, it struck him. The girl he had once pitied had, without him noticing, returned to a place far beyond his reach.

So what if Cassian had fallen from power? She was still the Lady of Grace and Virtue. Even this estate still stood because of her. And him? Still the same man, living off his family, drowning in wine and indulgence. "Tonight was rather lively. If anything fell short, I hope you'll forgive us." The soft, steady voice pulled him back. Albert lifted his head abruptly and met Elowen's eyes. For a brief moment, he froze. There was warmth there, and composure, and something distant that he could not cross. His chest tightened, and he lowered his gaze immediately, unable to hold it.

For a moment, he could not even find his voice. Liam stepped forward half a step and bowed. "You're too kind. It was your celebration today. The food, the wine, even the performances were exceptional. There's nothing lacking." "You're being generous," Elowen said with a light smile. "I've heard that the two of you will be sitting for the court qualification trials this year?" Liam nodded with a smile. "We'll do our best." The smile on her lips deepened slightly. "The Baker

family has a strong academic tradition. With your knowledge and the guidance of your elders, passing should come easily.

Let me congratulate you in advance." She paused briefly, her gaze brushing over Albert, who stood silent with his head lowered. Her voice softened further. "Of course, examinations can be unpredictable. Even if things don't go as planned, given your family's standing and favor with the king, securing a respectable post through royal patronage would not be difficult. You are both young, accomplished, and well-born. Your futures are bright."