

# Awakening Love: Reborn to Be His Duchess Novel

## We Had Something Real But Didn't Handle It Right

Chapter 521 A Private Night

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Fibhed

Whatever came next could wait. Problems would come when they came, and she would deal with them then.

Tonight was her birthday.

She was going back to her room, and she was going to sleep with Cassian.

“Mira, have these gifts put away.”

Elowen spoke calmly, but her gaze lingered on the small box in her hands, the one holding the seal. Something in her chest shifted.

“This one stays with me.”

Mira nodded at once.

Soon, Elowen was alone.

Unhurried, she carried the box with her and headed toward her chambers. She had barely left the study wing, just passing the carved stone partition, when she noticed someone waiting beneath the corridor.

Rosaline.

The moment she saw Elowen, she stepped forward quickly and gave a respectful curtsy. “Your Grace.”

Elowen paused, a faint smile on her lips. “What brings you here this late?”

Rosaline glanced around carefully, making sure no one else was within earshot before stepping closer and lowering her voice. “I came with the attendants accompanying Prince Caelan and Princess Lyra today. I was also asked to pass along a message from Lady Elira.”

Elowen shifted slightly. “What did she say?”

Rosaline lowered her voice even further. “Lady Elira asked me to tell you this directly. She stands with you and the Duke, without hesitation. She believes in the Duke’s ability, and that he will rise again in time. The situation within the palace is... complicated right now, so she cannot act openly. But her position has not changed.”

She paused briefly before continuing, “She also said that if you ever need help behind the scenes, you can send word through me. I have a reliable way to pass messages back into the palace. As long as it is within her power, she will help, without refusal.”

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Elowen listened quietly.

Elira was making her stance unmistakably clear. She was choosing Duskmoor Manor.

*A birthday gift. then. And not a small one.*

Elowen liked it.

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A soft warmth settled into her expression as she nodded. “I understand. Tell her I’ve received the message, and I won’t forget it.”

Her tone softened. “It’s been a long day for all of you. Go get some rest.”

Rosaline bowed again, stepping back before turning to leave.

Elowen carried the box the rest of the way back to her room.

She didn't go straight into the inner chamber. Instead, she made a small detour, setting the box carefully on her dressing table before continuing inside.

As she passed the screen, her gaze landed immediately on Cassian.

He was sitting at the edge of the bed.

He had clearly just bathed. His hair hung loose over his shoulders, still faintly damp. He wore only a simple silk shirt, the ties undone, the fabric falling open to reveal part of his chest. In the soft glow of candlelight, the lines of muscle shifted subtly as he moved.

Elowen stopped short.

“You... what exactly are you doing?”

Cassian looked up at her, amusement flickering in his eyes, something sharper beneath it. “You said earlier you couldn't remember anything about us, didn't you? Think of this as your punishment.”

As he spoke, he slowly slid the fabric off his other shoulder and tossed it aside, leaving his upper body completely bare.

Elowen blinked.

Then she laughed.

Instead of backing away, she stepped closer, stopping right in front of him. Reaching out, she tapped lightly against his chest.

Warm, firm, and solid beneath her fingertips, the sensation lingered just enough to make her

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pause.

Crushed

Tilting her head, she smiled, eyes bright. “Cassian, are you sure this is punishment, and not you trying to reward me?”

Cassian caught her wrist before she could pull away, his thumb brushing slowly along her skin, unhurried, deliberate. “Is it a reward? You could find out.”

A faint warmth crept up Elowen’s cheeks, but she forced herself to stay on track. “Before that, there’s something important we need to talk about.”

“Hmm?” Cassian murmured, though he had already lifted her hand to his lips, pressing slow kisses along her knuckles.

Elowen steadied herself. “Flowira came to see me earlier. Besides the gift, she mentioned that Nordia will soon be sending her youngest aunt as their official envoy.”

Cassian didn’t seem particularly interested. He continued tracing slow kisses across her hand. “And?”

“Rosaline also brought a message from Elira. She says she stands with us, believes you’ll return to power, and is willing to help from behind the scenes if needed.”

Cassian gave a quiet acknowledgment.

Elowen’s brows drew together slightly in thought. “She’s patient. When news of Roderic’s death spread, she didn’t rush to say anything. She waited until now. That way, she doesn’t expose herself at all.”

“Mm,” Cassian replied, though his attention clearly wasn’t on politics.

Elowen suddenly looked at him. “Cassian... do you think Elira actually wants Caelan to take the throne one day?”

Cassian paused, just briefly, then looked up at her. “What about you? If you were in her place, with a son of your own, would you want him to sit on that throne?”

Elowen didn’t hesitate.

She shook her head.

“Honestly? No. That kind of life is exhausting. Always calculating, always carrying the weight of everything. It’s lonely at the top. If it were my child, I’d just want him safe, happy, comfortable. A quiet life would be enough.”

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Love Reborn to Be His Duchess

Chapter 522 Not So Peaceful

Cassian let out a low laugh. “That might be what you want, but tonight isn’t going to be quiet.”

Elowen blinked. “What do you mean?”

Before she could react, Cassian pulled her in with one arm, drawing her fully into his lap. He leaned in close, his lips near her ear, and murmured something too low for anyone else to hear.

Elowen’s face flushed instantly. She pushed at him, but there was no real force behind it, more instinct than resistance.

Her hands ended up against his chest, fingers brushing, then lingering, tracing over the firm lines there.

Soft and warm against her touch, the feeling settled in, easy and lingering. She didn’t pull away.

Lowering her voice, she said, “Cassian... it feels like you’ve gotten broader lately.”

His voice dropped, roughened slightly. “I used to be in better shape. After being stuck in bed and in that chair for so long, I lost some of it. Lately I’ve had time again, so I’ve been training.”

His gaze settled on her, dark and steady. “Do you like it, Ella?”

Elowen nodded honestly.

That was all the answer he needed.

He lifted her easily, settling her more securely against him, and the moment stretched, slow and unhurried.

Time slipped.

By the latter half of the night, Elowen’s voice had gone soft, her eyes damp as she pressed lightly against him. “I’m done... I really am...”

Cassian’s hand moved to her cheek, his thumb brushing gently along her skin. “I’m not.”

Elowen shook her head, stubborn despite everything. “No. I’m sleeping.”

He looked at her for a long moment. Then he sighed. In the end, he let her go.

It had been meant as punishment, but as always, he gave in to her instead.

There was no helping it.

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Chapter 522 Not So Peaceful

He had spoiled her himself.

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Funched

Cassian leaned in and kissed her cheek softly before pulling the covers up around her. His voice was quiet, warm, carrying something deeper beneath it.

“Happy birthday, Ella. May you have a long, full life.”

Alaric had drunk far too much.

By the time he was in the carriage, he was already barely conscious, completely disoriented. He had been sick several times on the way back, and even after returning, it hadn't stopped. He couldn't even keep down the herbal tonic meant to settle his stomach.

It wasn't until deep into the night that things finally quieted.

He ended up alone, curled on the bed, slipping into a restless sleep.

And then the dreams came.

Fragments of another life.

He saw himself, doubled over with stomach pain, and Elowen beside him, carrying a steaming bowl of soup with both hands.

Her

eyes

had always been bright when she looked at him and always fixed on him.

How did *I not* see it *back* then?

The way she looked at him, full of quiet hope. The way her fingers had reddened from the heat of the bowl.

He should have said something.

Just once.

“Ella, thank you.”

“Does it hurt? Is it too hot?”

“You don't have to do this yourself next time. Have someone else bring it.”

But he hadn't.

Instead, he had said, “Why are you here again? Stop making a mess and get out. I don't want to see you.”

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Finished

The memory hit like a blade.

Alaric's chest tightened painfully, breath catching as tears spilled over again, soaking into the bedding beneath him.

He hated himself for it.

The next morning, Alaric woke with a pounding head, his body still heavy from the wine. He called for Tristan to assist him.

"Your Highness."

As Tristan helped him dress, a servant announced from outside, "Jayce and Ayden from the Baker family have arrived. They've brought new paintings and calligraphy for Your Highness."

Alaric gave a low, distracted response. "I'll see them shortly."

"Yes, Your Highness."

Once dressed, Alaric glanced at his reflection.

He still looked worn, his expression dull, his energy low. He didn't bother fixing it.

He simply walked out.

Jayce and Ayden were already waiting in the study. The moment they saw him, they stood and bowed.

"Your Highness."

Alaric dropped into his seat, clearly uninterested. "What is it?"

The two exchanged a glance.

Jayce Baker started first. "It's about those two useless boys back home..."

Ayden Baker cut in with a polite smile. "Perhaps we should have the room cleared first."

Alaric gave him a brief look, then waved a hand. "Leave us."

The attendants withdrew immediately.

Jayce glanced at Ayden again, receiving a subtle nod before continuing, "It's about Albert and Liam. The court qualification trials are coming up, and the two of them are so anxious they can barely eat or sleep. They're worried they won't pass."

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Alaric let out a cold laugh. "If they're that worried, they should spend less time drinking and more time studying."

Ayden smiled, unbothered. "You're right, of course. It's not that they don't try, but the exams have been especially difficult these past few years, and the grading stricter than ever. They've taken it several times without success. Normally, it wouldn't matter so much, but Dad's health has been declining. They just want to pass this year, to give him some peace of mind."

Alaric frowned slightly. Grandfather...

That gave him pause.

Jayce still looked uncertain, watching both Ayden and Alaric carefully.

Ayden, however, continued smoothly. "This year, His Majesty has entrusted the court qualification trials to you. With such authority in your hands, surely it wouldn't be unreasonable to look after your own family a little."

Alaric's gaze turned cold as he looked at him. "You say that like it's nothing. If word of tampering with the exams reached the King, what exactly do you expect me to do then?"

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### Chapter 523 The Quiet Deal

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Ayden lowered his voice, making sure no one beyond the room could hear. "Your Highness can rest assured. This will be handled carefully. Only family will know, and nothing will leak. Jayce, Albert, Liam, and I, the four of us will keep this completely sealed."

He leaned in slightly, his tone shifting, softer now, almost coaxing. "To be honest, this is for your benefit too. When Your Highness takes the throne one day, having people in court who are truly yours will make everything easier. Decisions move faster. Fewer obstacles."

He continued, voice low and deliberate. "Look at the court now. How many officials were brought up by the Duke of Duskmoor? When the time comes, if Your Highness has someone you favor, someone you want close, how can you expect those men to act in your interest if they don't belong to your circle?"

Alaric's gaze darkened slightly, something complicated passing through his eyes.

Yes. Someone he favored. Someone he would want near him.

The study fell into silence, heavy and drawn out. At last, Alaric shifted slightly in his seat. "What you've said, I'll keep in mind."

Jayce leaned forward, clearly about to press him for a clear answer.

Ayden caught his arm quickly and pulled him back, stopping him before he could speak.

Alaric waved a hand lightly. "That's all for now. You may go."

Ayden stood at once. "Yes, Your Highness."

Jayce followed a moment later, slower, still uncertain, but he said nothing more.

Once the door closed behind them, the quiet returned.

Alaric lifted a hand to his temple, irritation surfacing as the familiar headache crept back. He pressed his fingers there, eyes closing briefly.

“Your Highness.”

At the sound of Iris’s voice, Alaric finally looked up at her. “Do you know what they’re here for?”

Iris kept her gaze lowered. “I wouldn’t dare assume, Your Highness.”

A faint, almost amused sound escaped him. “You know. No need to pretend otherwise.”

Iris paused for a brief moment, then answered carefully. “They came to speak on behalf of the

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Baker brothers. They want Your Highness to ensure their success in the court qualification trials.”

Alaric nodded once. “You read it well.”

He watched her closely. “And what do you think?”

Iris drew a quiet breath before speaking. “If I may be frank, Your Highness and the Baker family stand together. If they rise, Your Highness benefits. If they fall, it will make things more difficult. Supporting them now would, in truth, serve your own interests.”

Alaric’s fingers paused briefly against his temple before lowering. “That aligns with my thinking.”

Iris hesitated, then added softly, "There is one more matter."

Alaric turned his head slightly. "Go on."

She lowered her eyes further. "Yesterday, at Lady of Grace and Virtue's birthday, Your Highness spoke rather harshly to Leonhart. He has always been loyal to you. He was... hurt."

Alaric's expression barely changed. "I know."

After a short pause, he said, "Send word to Duke Roland's estate. Tell Leonhart to come to the Crown Prince's Wing. Say I've acquired several notable works and would like him to join me."

Iris bowed her head. "Yes, Your Highness."

She turned to leave, but his voice stopped her again.

"In the past, when Leonhart visited, you were the one attending him. He's familiar with you. Keep it that way today. Be attentive."

Iris glanced up briefly. "Understood. That will make it clear to him how much Your Highness values him. He will feel reassured."

Alaric's lips curved faintly, not quite a smile. He waved his hand. "Go."

Iris gave a proper court bow and stepped out.

If she were truly devoted to the Crown Prince's Wing, she would have stopped him just now. Interfering with something as critical as the court qualification trials was no small matter.

But she had already made her judgment.

Alaric did not have what it took to hold power for long.

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And she had no intention of tying her fate to his.

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By the time everything came to light, she would already be gone. From this point on, whether Alaric lived or fell would have nothing to do with her anymore.

Leonhart's visit had been arranged, so Iris waited for him at the palace gate as instructed.

Roughly half an hour later, his figure appeared along the stone approach.

He wore a deep navy coat, his stride relaxed, his expression open and bright as always.

When he saw Iris, his face lit up. "Iris? You didn't have to come all the way out here for me."

Iris gave a smooth, practiced curtsy. "My lord, His Highness gave clear instructions. You are an honored guest today. Everything must be handled with care."

Leonhart's smile widened immediately. "I knew it. Alaric does care about me. Yesterday at Hale Manor didn't sit right, so now he's making up for it, inviting me in and even sending you to meet me at the gate. He's really going out of his way."

Iris smiled gently. "I mentioned yesterday, Your Highness holds you in high regard. You are always on his mind."

Leonhart's mood lifted further. "Right, tell me, what exactly did he get? He just said 'paintings,' didn't give any details."

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Iris tilted her head slightly, as if recalling. "I don't know much about art, but I did hear one name mentioned. Winter Crows on the Water."

Leonhart stopped mid-step, eyes going wide. "You're serious? That piece?"

His voice rose with disbelief. "I've been looking for that for years. Everyone says the original is gone, only copies left, and most of those aren't even worth mentioning. He actually found it?"

He rubbed his hands together, excitement practically spilling over.

Iris kept her tone mild. "I can't say whether it's genuine. I only heard that the brushwork makes the birds look almost alive."

Leonhart gave her a sideways look. "You say you don't know art, then say something like that? That's not fair."

Iris lowered her gaze quickly. "I wouldn't dare. I'm only repeating what I was told."

Leonhart studied her for a moment, then smiled, clearly charmed by her sincerity.

Then something clicked in his mind. "Wait, yesterday at Hale Manor, you seemed a little off. What was going on? Is someone giving you trouble at the Crown Prince's Wing?"

At that, Iris's smile faded just slightly. She shook her head. "You misunderstand. No one is troubling me."

Leonhart didn't believe that for a second. If anything, it made him more curious. He was about to press further when he suddenly stopped and straightened.

"Your Highness."

Iris followed his line of sight.

She lifted her gaze slightly and met a pair of dark, steady eyes. Then she saw him clearly.

Caelan.

His expression was calm, composed, his presence quiet but unmistakable. The moment their eyes met, something tightened in her chest.

She immediately lowered her gaze and stepped aside, giving a proper curtsy.

Caelan didn't look at her again. His attention remained on Leonhart. "Leonhart, heading to the Crown Prince's Wing?"

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Finished

Leonhart grinned. “Yeah. Alaric got his hands on some rare pieces and asked me to come take a look. Might even gift me one or two if I’m lucky. Where are you headed?”

“To the Pavilion of Imperial Grace. His Majesty asked me to retrieve some records.”

As he spoke, his gaze shifted briefly toward Iris. “And this is?”

Iris felt her shoulders tense slightly.

Leonhart answered casually. “She serves at the Crown Prince’s Wing. Very capable. Her name’s Iris.”

Iris remained lowered, but a chill crept through her. Caelan gave a quiet acknowledgment.

“I won’t keep you,” he said calmly. “I have somewhere to be.”

Leonhart waved him off. “Go ahead.”

They parted at the crossing path. Iris straightened and Leonhart kept talking beside her, going on about the paintings with growing excitement, but none of it reached her. His words blurred into background noise.

Iris’s attention had already drifted far from the conversation.

*It’s on him. On that gaze.*

There had been something in his eyes, something steady and unreadable, the kind of look that didn’t pass over a person by accident. It lingered. It weighed.

That feeling yesterday... like someone had been watching her without ever stepping into the light...

The memory returned with unsettling clarity.

The same quiet pressure settled over her again, as if she were being observed even now.

The thought forming in her mind became harder to ignore, and with it came a growing sense of unease.

A light breeze moved through the palace road, catching a few loose strands of hair at her temple. She raised her hand to smooth them back, using the motion as cover. Gathering what composure she could, she turned her head slightly and cast a quick glance behind her, toward the direction Caelan had gone.

At that exact moment, he stepped around the bend. As if he had anticipated it, he turned his head.

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Finished

And looked directly at her.

Their eyes met across the distance.

Not close, not far, but near enough that nothing in that moment could be mistaken.

There was no surprise in his expression. No hesitation.

Only a quiet, deliberate focus. And beneath it, something sharper.

A flicker of interest that felt far too intentional. As if he had been waiting for her to realize.

As if he were saying, “So you’ve finally caught on.”

There was nothing reassuring in it.

A chill ran through her. She broke the eye contact almost immediately, lowering her gaze to the pale stone beneath her feet. Her fingers curled slightly at her sides, betraying a faint tremor she couldn’t quite suppress.

Now she was certain.

It was him.

The one who had been watching her.

But why?

Spring settled deeper over Vanelle, the air growing softer with each passing day.

The court qualification trials were drawing near. Alaric had barely had time to rest.

Before dawn, the Crown Prince’s Wing was already lit.

He had slept less than two hours when Tristan woke him.

“Your Highness, it’s time. The officials from the Ministry of Rites are waiting in the side chamber. Today is the final review of candidate records from Southvale...”

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Chapter 525 A Tale of Two Mornings

**525**

Chapter 525 A Tale of Two Mornings

Finished

In the Crown Prince's Wing, Alaric lay buried under heavy blankets, brow furrowed as he turned onto his side and pressed his face into the pillow, exhaustion clinging to him like a weight he couldn't shake.

He did not want to get up.

Tristan hesitated for a moment before forcing himself to speak. "Your Highness, it's already quite late. The ministers said you must be there before the morning bell ..."

"I heard you the first time, didn't I?" Alaric snapped, irritation sharp in his voice. "Do you ever stop talking?"

Tristan immediately fell silent.

Alaric's expression darkened as he threw the covers aside and sat up. He remained at the edge of the bed, head lowered, pressing his fingers hard against his temples as they throbbed.

"... It's all for Ella... all for her... I'll make her regret it..."

*I'm doing all of this for her. She'll see eventually. She has to.*

He muttered to himself for a long moment before finally gritting his teeth and forcing himself to stand.

He had just slipped on his shoes and tried to rise when his knees suddenly gave out beneath him. Without warning, he dropped hard onto the floor.

The impact knocked the last trace of sleep out of him.

Tristan had his back turned, focused on straightening the bedding, and didn't react in time.

Back when things were different, Alaric would have been attended by several servants the moment he stirred. Now, ever since his temperament had grown increasingly suspicious and volatile, he kept only Tristan and Iris close.

Today, it was Tristan's turn.

Too many tasks, too few hands. A moment's delay was inevitable.

Alaric's humiliation instantly turned to anger.

"You blind idiot!" he snapped, voice rising. "What matters more, me or those damn blankets?"

Tristan flinched, nearly dropping what he was holding. He turned, saw Alaric sitting on the

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floor, and went pale as he rushed forward.

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"Your Highness!" he said, reaching out to help him up.

Alaric slapped his arm away. "And now you show up? What good is that?"

Tristan froze, then dropped low, pressing himself to the floor. "Your Highness, forgive me! It's my fault!"

"My fault?" Alaric let out a cold laugh. "Then go wait outside the door and get your head straight. Stay there for two hours. Don't move unless I say so."

Tristan pressed his forehead to the cold stone. "Yes, Your Highness."

He started to rise when Alaric said, "Stay down."

Alaric's voice cut through the room, low and icy.

Tristan stiffened.

He did not dare lift his head. Slowly, he lowered his knee back to the ground and began moving toward the door on his hands and knees, inch by inch.

Alaric

watched him leave, the anger in his chest easing slightly. He grabbed the bedpost and pulled himself up, steadying his balance.

The meeting with the Ministry of Rites dragged on endlessly, dry and suffocating. By the time Alaric had been seated there for hours, his head felt heavy, his thoughts sluggish.

At Hale Manor, the morning could not have been more different.

Elowen stirred awake slowly, stretching lazily beneath the covers. The warmth of the bed wrapped around her so comfortably that she had no desire to move.

“Your Grace,” Mira said softly as she stepped inside, careful not to make noise. “It’s getting late. Time to get up.”

Elowen didn’t even fully open her eyes. “Mira... this bed is too comfortable. I don’t want to get

up

Mira opened her mouth to coax her further, but the sound of steady footsteps approached from outside. She smiled to herself and quietly stepped back out.

Elowen turned her head slightly.

Through the gauzy bed curtains, she saw Cassian enter.

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Finished

He moved with easy confidence, walking straight to the bedside. With one hand, he drew the curtain aside and looked down at her, warmth in his eyes.

He leaned in slightly. “Still not up? I made breakfast. Fresh bread with butter, roasted mushrooms, and a bit of cheese, just the way you like. The stew’s been simmering over the hearth since early morning.”

Elowen pouted. "I'm not getting up without a kiss."

Cassian didn't hesitate. He bent down and pressed a soft kiss to her lips.

She immediately stretched her arms toward him, smiling. "And I want a hug too."

The affection in his gaze deepened.

He reached out, lifting her straight up along with the blankets wrapped around her, holding her with effortless ease as he helped her get dressed and ready.

On the other side, the morning dragged on into midday.

Alaric barely managed a few bites of breakfast before rushing off again to report to Theodric.

Back at Hale Manor, Elowen was taking her time enjoying her meal.

The meal Cassian prepared was simple but deeply satisfying. The stew had a rich, savory depth from hours over the fire, the mushrooms were tender and full of flavor, and the greens added a fresh, earthy balance. She ate slowly, enjoying each bite in quiet contentment.

Without realizing it, she finished more than usual.

Only after setting her utensils down did she pause, resting a hand lightly against her stomach.

"I ate too much."

Cassian had been watching her the whole time, amusement flickering in his eyes. "Then let's walk it off in the courtyard."

Elowen's face brightened instantly. She nodded.

They strolled slowly through the yard together.

The spring sunlight fell warm across them, gentle and golden.

Elowen paused, staring at the fresh green shoots budding along the branches. After a moment, she turned, eyes bright as she looked at him.

"Cassian, we should start a garden."

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Finished

Not long after she first arrived, he had asked what she wanted changed in the estate. She had mentioned wanting a small vegetable garden.

At the time, it had been too late in the season.

Then everything else had gotten in the way.

Now, with spring settling in and things finally calmer, it was the perfect time.

Cassian's voice was gentle. "What do you want to plant?"

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Chapter 526 Planting Season

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"Turnips." Elowen said immediately. "They're great in stew, and pickled ones are amazing too."

Cassian nodded. "Then we'll plant turnips."

Excitement lit up her face as she grabbed his hand and pulled him along the yard, pointing here and there as if mapping out her own little kingdom.

“This spot gets the most sun, so we’ll use it for turnips. That corner’s a bit shaded, maybe cabbage there. And over there, the soil looks softer. I want taro, can we plant some? Oh, and along the edge, we should grow some green onions. Easy to grab when cooking.”

The more she spoke, the more animated she became, a faint flush rising to her cheeks.

Cassian listened with a soft smile. “Whatever you want. We’ll plant whatever you like.”

The next day, all the seeds she had ordered arrived at the manor.

Bran wandered over, rubbing his hands together with a grin. “Leave the fieldwork to me. Though honestly, it’s been years since I’ve done any of this. I might need a minute to remember how to till properly.”

Cassian glanced at him. “Go handle your own duties. This is my land. Whatever grows here is for

my wife. What does it have to do with you? If you’re that eager, go get married and start your own garden.”

Bran blinked. “...Right.”

He scratched the back of his head, suddenly at a loss for words.

Cassian ignored him, removing his outer coat and rolling up his sleeves, revealing strong, defined arms.

He picked up the hoe leaning against the wall, weighed it briefly in his hand, then stepped onto the open patch of soil.

With a clean, practiced motion, he drove the blade into the earth, turning over the first stretch of soil.

At the Ministry of Rites, Dominic had already recovered from his injuries and returned to duty.

After the meeting paused for a short break, he took a sip of coffee, then glanced casually toward Alaric, who sat above, eyes closed as he rubbed his temples.

“As it happens,” Dominic said lightly, “on my way here this morning. I heard that Lady of Grace

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Chapter 526 Planting Season

and Virtue purchased quite a variety of vegetable seeds.”

Alaric’s eyes snapped open.

*Growing her own food?*

Finished

On her birthday, Hale Manor had been nothing short of extravagant, the entire city lit up in celebration,

So that had all been for show?

Spent everything just to keep up appearances, and now *they’re cutting corners?*

A cold satisfaction stirred within him.

The frustration he had been carrying from preparing for the court qualification trials finally found an outlet.

In his previous life, Elowen had married him, becoming Crown Princess.

He hadn’t treated her well. He had been distant, indifferent, even allowed others to slight her.

But he had never denied her luxury, status, or dignity.

And now? She turned her back on him. Chose Cassian instead.

And ended up growing vegetables in her own yard?

*Ella.... this is the life you chose.*

*You’ll regret it. Sooner or later, you’ll understand who can actually give you the life you deserve.*

Alaric exhaled slowly, leaning back into his chair, finally feeling a trace of ease as he closed his

eyes.

After the short break, the meeting resumed.

The discussion turned to selecting officials to oversee this year's court qualification trials.

Alaric listened as the ministers presented past practices and recommended candidates, his expression unreadable.

Only when the Minister of Rites submitted a preliminary list did he finally lift his gaze, scanning it briefly.

"For the internal inspection at the Imperial Examination Hall this year," he said, "add Dominic's

name."

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Chapter 526 Planting Season

72

Fumetted

Dominic, seated below, immediately stood and bowed. "Thank you, Your Highness, for your trust. I will carry out my duties with the utmost diligence."

The Minister of Rites, an older man with a lean face, frowned slightly and stepped forward.

"Your Highness," he said carefully, "Dominic is certainly capable. However, the responsibility of overseeing the trials is significant. It concerns the selection of talent for the realm. He is still young and lacks experience in this role. Perhaps it would be safer to follow established practice this year and-

"Established practice?" Alaric turned his head slightly. "And what practice would that be?"

The minister chose his words cautiously. "In previous years, when the Duke of Duskmoor was present in the capital, this role was often handled by him-"

“The Duke of Duskmoo?” Alaric cut in with a cold laugh. “Have you forgotten where you are? There is no Duke of Duskmoo anymore.”

The minister’s face paled.

Alaric’s voice turned icy. “Cassian committed grave offenses. The evidence was clear. His title was stripped by imperial decree. From what Dominic just mentioned, he’s even resorted to growing his own food now just to get by.”

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## 527

Chapter 527 Lines Drawn

72

Finisher

The council chamber held a quiet tension, the kind that settled in when no one dared speak first.

Alaric let the silence stretch for a beat, his gaze moving slowly across the gathered officials.

“Even if we look at it from another angle,” he said at last, voice measured, “when the delegation met with Nordia, Dominic stepped forward and took the injury meant for Cassian. Had Cassian been present at court, he would have acknowledged that loyalty and seen Dominic properly advanced.”

The Minister of Rites shifted where he stood, brows drawn tight, clearly unwilling to concede. His lips parted, ready to object.

Alaric did not give him the chance.

He lowered his eyes, picked up the quill, and added Dominic’s name to the roster with a clean, deliberate stroke.

Then he spoke again, calm, but carrying weight.

“His Majesty placed the trials under my authority this year. That means the decisions fall to me. If you find that unacceptable, Minister, you may present your concerns directly and request someone else take my place.”

No one in the room missed the meaning behind that.

It was not a suggestion.

The minister’s shoulders stiffened. Whatever argument he had prepared dissolved on his tongue. After a brief hesitation, he bowed his head.

“I would not presume, Your Highness. I will abide by your judgment.”

A faint curve touched Alaric’s lips. “Good. Then we’re done here.”

The court qualification trials began soon after.

By long-standing custom in Avenlor, the examinations ran in three sessions, each lasting three full days, candidates remaining within the grounds for the duration.

On the morning the first session opened, Elowen granted Nikki leave so she could accompany her brother Josh to the Imperial Examination Hall,

By the time Nikki returned in the afternoon, the light had softened across the courtyard.

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Chapter 57 mes Plown

72

Inished

Inside Stillwater Court, Elowen sat by the tall window, a regional chronicle open in her hands. She had been reading for some time, absorbed enough that the world beyond the page had faded into the background.

The door opened quietly.

Mira stepped in, carrying a tray, setting it down without a sound. A moment later, Nikki followed, holding a small cloth-wrapped bundle.

She approached carefully, lowering it onto the table.

“Your Grace, Nikki said softly, “my mother asked me to thank you. You’ve taken care of our family in ways we can’t repay. You gave me a place here, and today, when my brother entered the exam, you even prepared such a generous gift for luck. We... we don’t have much, but my mother stayed up through the night making this. She asked me to bring it to you.”

Elowen murmured a quiet acknowledgment, eyes still on the page.

It wasn’t until Scarlet spoke that the mood shifted.

“Nikki, what’s wrong?” Scarlet asked gently.

Elowen’s fingers stilled.

She looked up.

Nikki’s face was flushed from the wind outside, but her eyes were red, her expression tight, like she was holding something back and failing.

“Those people...” Nikki’s voice trembled. “They were awful.”

Scarlet immediately reached for a cloth, dabbing at her cheeks. “Easy, don’t cry, you’ll disturb Her Grace...”

Elowen closed the book.

“Nikki,” she said, voice steady, “did someone trouble you?”

Nikki looked at her, eyes glistening, then shook her head.

She remembered her mother’s warning. “Don’t bring trouble back. Don’t burden Her Grace.”

So she stayed silent.

But the truth was written all over her face.

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Chapter 52/cies Priwn

Elowen exhaled softly, her tone gentler now.

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wished

“You work under my roof,” she said. “That makes you one of mine. If something happened, you

can tell me. Or do you not think of me that way?”

Nikki shook her head quickly. “No, that’s not it!”

The restraint broke. She wiped her face in a rush and blurted it out.

“It was those noble boys at the examination gates. They looked down on us.”

Elowen’s gaze sharpened. “What did they say?”

Nikki’s voice shook, but the words came faster now.

“We got there early, my mother and I, to walk my brother in. We finally made it close to the front. He was wearing the new coat my mother made for him, and we... we dressed as well as **we** could. But next to us were a few young lords, dressed in fine tailored coats, with attendants behind them. They kept looking at us, whispering.”

Tears slipped down her cheeks again.

“One of them said the cloth we wore wouldn’t even pass for servant wear in his household. Another said we smelled like livestock, like we had come straight from the pens. Then they laughed like it was the funniest thing they’d ever heard.”

Elowen’s expression cooled.

Scarlet’s brows drew tight. “That’s disgraceful. Clothes and circumstance don’t measure a man’s learning. For scholars to speak like that... it’s beneath them.”

Nikki’s voice rose, anger cutting through her tears.

“I couldn’t stand it. I went right up to them and told them, does a fine coat make you more learned? This is the Imperial Examination Hall, not a merchant’s showroom for silks. And I told them, so what if we raise livestock? My mother works honestly to support us and send my brother here. What’s shameful about that? If families like ours disappeared, where would they get their food? Would they suddenly know how to fend for themselves?”

## 528

### Chapter 528 A Name to Remember

Elowen watched her quietly.

Tears kept slipping down Nikki’s cheeks, one after another.

72

“But they didn’t care what I said,” Nikki went on, her voice shaking. “One of them looked me over like I was something up for sale, then said I was plain as anything, just had a sharp tongue. Said even if I were handed to his household for free as a servant, I’d still be an eyesore, and he’d have me dragged out and thrown into the street.”

Elowen’s brows drew tighter with every word.

These people...

She pressed her lips together, then asked, “Do you know which families they belong to? Or at least what they looked like?”

Nikki shook her head, frustration and embarrassment mixing together as her tears kept falling. “I was too angry, and then too upset after. I didn’t think to remember their faces. Just... three or four of them, all dressed well, with attendants.”

Her voice trailed off.

Elowen let out a quiet breath.

She hadn’t expected anything like this to happen at the Imperial Examination Hall. If she had, she would have sent Scarlet along.

Scarlet never forgot a face.

Not one of them would have slipped away.

"I'm sorry, Your Grace," Nikki said suddenly, guilt creeping into her expression. "I shouldn't have told you this. Now I've upset you too."

Elowen looked at her, her voice softening.

"I'm not upset with you," she said. "I just hate that you had to go through that. You're young, and you handled it better than most would. This shouldn't have been yours to deal with. That's on

me."

Nikki froze for a moment, clearly not expecting that answer.

She sniffed, then suddenly remembered something. "Oh, right! Kaelan was nearby. He heard what was happening and came over to help us."

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Chapter 528 A Name to Reineinber

Elowen's gaze lifted slightly. "Kaelan?"

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"Yeah." Nikki said quickly. "The moment he walked over, those men stopped laughing. They straightened up right away. He didn't say much, just looked at them and reminded them that the examination grounds weren't a place for gathering and making noise. They must've been intimidated, because they didn't say anything else and left soon after."

Scarlet let out a small breath. "Good thing he stepped in."

Elowen gave a faint nod, then looked back at Nikki, her tone steady, almost confirming something already decided.

"So Kaelan saw them. Which means he knows exactly who they are. Is that right?"

Nikki nodded. "Yes. They hadn't left yet when he came over."

"Good." Elowen said. "That's all I needed."

She looked at Nikki again.

The girl had stopped crying, but her eyes were still red. Elowen's voice softened.

"Don't cry anymore. When your brother finishes all three sessions and comes out, I'll go with you to meet him."

Nikki stared at her, stunned.

"Your Grace?" she stammered. "You... you can't go there. It's crowded and chaotic outside the examination grounds. You shouldn't be in a place like that. It's not appropriate..."

Elowen's expression didn't change, her smile calm and unwavering.

"Nikki," she said, each word clear, "you need to remember this. No one gets to mistreat someone from Hale Manor. I don't care who they are, or what name they carry."

Nikki went completely still, her lips parting slightly.

Someone like *me... she's willing to stand up for me?*

Her nose stung, and her vision blurred again as tears filled her eyes.

This time, it wasn't from humiliation.

Elowen looked at her and couldn't help but smile. "What is it now? Crying again? Was it really that bad? I told you, I'll make this right for you."

2/3

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72

Chapter 5338 A Name to Remember

Flushed.

Nikki shook her head quickly. "I'm not upset anymore, Your Grace."

"Then why are you crying?" Elowen asked.

Nikki looked at her, voice trembling. "Because... I'm grateful."

Elowen raised a brow slightly.

Nikki took a deep breath, her expression turning serious, almost solemn.

"Your Grace, from now on, my life is yours. If you tell me to go east, I won't go west."

Elowen paused, caught off guard.

That night at Stillwater Court, after the lamps had been lit and the manor settled into quiet, Elowen told Cassian everything that had happened.

From Nikki being humiliated outside the Imperial Examination Hall, to her own decision to go there in person when the exams ended and stand up for her.

By the end, she let out a small laugh. "She's still so young. Something like this, and she's already saying her life belongs to me."

Cassian looked at her for a long moment.

"Ella," he said, "do you know how men like that are made?"

Elowen gave a small nod. "I do."

Avenlor had its ways. Some were bound by fear. Some by gold. And some were taken in young and shaped over time.

The last kind were the most loyal.

They placed their lord's will above everything, even their own lives.

Cassian's lips curved slightly.

"What you did for Nikki today," he said, "is not so different from how I built mine."

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## 529

### Chapter 529 What It Means

Elowen paused, clearly caught off guard.

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Foushed

Cassian leaned back slightly, watching her. “Let me ask you something. Back when Hale Manor was on the verge of collapse, if someone had stepped in and pulled you out of it, what would you have done?”

Elowen didn’t even need to think. “I would’ve given them everything. My life included.”

Cassian smiled faintly. “That’s exactly how Nikki feels.”

Elowen blinked, still processing that. “I really didn’t think of it that way.”

*So something I did without thinking... meant that much to her?*

She let out a small breath, then added, “Still, what those men said was disgusting. I didn’t people like that to be part of Avenlor’s scholar class.”

expect

Cassian’s expression cooled slightly. “When you deal with them, don’t hold back just to spare their pride. And don’t second-guess yourself. Even if it turns into a bigger scene and reaches His Majesty, I’ll handle it.”

A hint of amusement slipped into his tone.

“I’ll take it straight to His Majesty and play it up. You’ve seen it before, it works every time.”

Elowen laughed, the sound soft and unguarded as she leaned into him, practically folding into

his arms.

Cassian held her close, his voice dropping just a touch.

“Besides, this whole situation around the court qualification trials could use some attention. If it gets bigger, that works in our favor.”

Elowen gave a quiet hum of agreement, tilting her face up to brush a light kiss against the corner of his lips.

“I’ll follow your lead.”

Before long, the court qualification trials came to an end.

Elowen had a carriage prepared, along with a full escort of Duskmoor Manor’s most capable guards.

They set out in force toward the Imperial Examination Hall.

1/4

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Chapter 529 What It Means

At the same time, the final session had just concluded.

72

rushed

The heavy wooden gates of the examination grounds opened slowly in the morning light.

Candidates began filing out, each carrying their belongings, their expressions a mix of exhaustion, relief, and lingering tension.

Josh had already packed everything carefully, his writing tools, bedding, and remaining provisions all secured inside his worn travel chest.

He lifted it onto his back and started toward the gate.

“Josh.”

A calm, clear voice came from beside him.

He turned and immediately inclined his head. "Kaelan."

Kaelan stood there in a tailored blue coat, understated but clearly well made, the kind that spoke of quiet status rather than display. He looked composed, refined, like someone who belonged exactly where he stood.

"I came alone this time," Kaelan said. "No one to travel back with. Since we crossed paths, how about we head out together?"

Josh nodded easily. "That works."

Kaelan smiled and shifted the chest in his hand.

It was packed full, the weight obvious. The handle had already pressed red marks into his palm.

Clearly, someone at home had worried he might struggle during the exam and packed far more than necessary.

Josh stepped forward without hesitation. "Let me take that."

Kaelan shook his head lightly. "You don't have to."

But Josh had already taken it from him.

"I'm used to this kind of thing," he said. "It's nothing."

Seeing how easily Josh handled the weight, Kaelan didn't argue further.

"Then once we're out, I'll have my carriage take you home first."

2/4

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Chapter 529 What It Means

Josh accepted without fuss. "Appreciate it."

They walked side by side toward the gate.

72

Emigred

Around them, voices filled the air. Some candidates were already debating questions, others comparing answers, some sighing in frustration, others walking in silence.

Kaelan glanced over. "What did you think of this year's exam?"

Josh answered honestly.

"Overall, it felt more manageable than past years. But that section on frontier supply systems and trade routes, that was tough."

Kaelan smiled. "You're being modest. Even Edmund speaks highly of your judgment and practical thinking. When the results come out this year, I wouldn't be surprised to see your name near the top."

They had just stepped beyond the gates when something came flying toward them.

Josh reacted instantly.

With one hand still holding Kaelan's chest, he grabbed Kaelan with the other and pulled him back.

Something struck the ground in front of them with a sharp crack.

A stone.

Josh's expression hardened immediately. He turned toward where it had come from.

Under a nearby tree, a small group of well-dressed young men stood together, watching openly, their expressions full of mockery.

He recognized them.

They were the same ones who had ridiculed him days ago when he first arrived.

Josh knew exactly why they had a problem with him.

Last spring, Edmund had come across one of his essays and personally sought him out, taking him in as a student.

The day

Edmund brought him home, these same young men had been waiting outside, hoping to gain the same opportunity. All of them had been turned away.

That year, Edmund had only accepted two students. Josh and Kaelan.

But Kaelan's background made him untouchable.

3/4

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Chapter 529 What it MeaPYL

72

Finished

So their resentment settled squarely on Josh.

Josh had always been patient. He knew where he came from. After his father passed, his family had fallen into hardship.

9.9K

4/4

## 530

His mother had worked herself to exhaustion just to raise him and his sister, taking on more than anyone ever should.

He had never wanted to add to her burden, so no matter what he faced, he swallowed it and dealt with it on his own.

That was how it had always been

Until that day outside the Imperial Examination Hall, when those men crossed a line and dragged his mother and sister into it, mocking them without restraint.

In that moment, a hundred different ways to make them pay flashed through Josh's mind.

But causing trouble right before the court qualification trials would've cost him everything.

So he clenched his teeth and let it go.

For now.

*There's always time to settle a score.*

Once he earned his place, once he had real standing, he wouldn't need to hold back anymore.

"What do you think you're doing?"

Kaelan had already stepped forward, placing himself slightly in front of Josh, anger clear on his face.

"This is the examination grounds. Throwing stones like that, are you out of your minds? If that had hit someone—"

The one leading the group, Albert, let out a lazy laugh.

Seeing Kaelan step in, he toned it down slightly, but the smirk never left his face.

"Relax, Kaelan. We were just having a little fun. Testing his reflexes. Looks like he did just fine."

The men behind him snickered.

"He's used to hard work anyway," Albert added. "A hit like that wouldn't do much. Maybe a bruise at worst."

Kaelan frowned. "A joke? That's your idea of a joke? Apologize. Now,"

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Chapter 530 Payback

Albert didn't even react.

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Vached

Another one stepped in. “Why are you getting worked up over him? Even if he passes, what does he bring to your household? Is he really worth this?”

“Exactly,” someone else added. “Look at him. No background, no standing. Who knows what tricks he used to get Edmund’s attention. Meanwhile, people who actually deserve it got turned away.

Albert’s gaze shifted between the two of them, something uglier creeping into his expression.

“You’re awfully protective of him,” he said slowly. “Walking out together, carrying his things, sticking this close... makes you wonder, doesn’t it?”

His tone turned crude.

“Should we be asking what exactly you two were doing in there? Sharing more than just study notes?”

Laughter broke out again.

Kaelan froze.

His upbringing had shielded him from this kind of filth. Even understanding the implication took him a second too long.

His face flushed, and for a moment, he couldn’t find a single word. Josh didn’t say anything .

In the middle of the laughter, he lowered Kaelan’s chest to the ground. Then he unstrapped his own and set it beside it.

Albert blinked, then burst out laughing harder.

“Look at that, clearing space for his sweetheart. Getting ready to beg, maybe?”

The laughter grew louder.

Josh moved, fast. In two strides, he closed the distance.

Before anyone could react, his hand shot out, grabbing Albert by the shoulder and yanking him forward.

At the same time, his other hand clenched into a fist and drove straight into Albert's face.

A solid, brutal impact.

“That one,” Josh said, voice low and steady, “was for Kaelan's name.”

2/3

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Chapter 530 Payback

72

His hands were lean but strong, built from years of work and discipline. When he struck, there was nothing soft about it.

Albert, raised in comfort, had never taken a hit like that. His vision went dark for a second, his ears ringing, half his face going numb as he stumbled backward.

But Josh didn't let go.

His grip tightened, pulling him back in. Another punch, harder.

“This one.” Josh said through clenched teeth, “is for my mother and my sister.”

The second blow hit even heavier. Albert couldn't stay upright this time.

The moment Josh released him, he collapsed to the ground. Pain spread across his face, sharp and burning.

He tried to curse, to shout something back. But the moment he opened his mouth, blood came spilling out instead.

9.9K

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3/3