

Awakening Love: Reborn to Be His Duchess Novel

We Had Something Real But Didn't Handle It Right

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Chapter 531 Public Reckoning

Albert stared blankly at the dark red pooling on the ground.

Blood?

He... actually got beaten so badly by that nobody that he coughed up blood?

He forced his swollen eyelids open with effort, vision still blurry.

By now, the commotion had drawn a large crowd outside the Imperial Examination Hall. People gathered in tight circles, whispering, pointing, openly staring.

Some looked curious. Some shocked. Some were clearly enjoying the spectacle.

“Isn't that one of the Baker family sons? The Queen's side?”

“How did he end up like that? His face is covered in blood. Who did that to him?”

“He didn't even fight back? That's pathetic...”

Every word drilled straight into Albert's ears.

The humiliation burned through him.

He roared, voice cracking with rage, “Are you all useless? Get over here and take him down!”

The group of young nobles snapped out of it at his shout, though only barely.

Josh stood where he was, his expression hard. He rolled his knuckles slowly, the faint crack echoing. His eyes were cold, sharp as steel as they swept across them. “Anyone who’s not afraid, step forward.”

The sheer edge in his tone made their courage collapse.

Not one of them dared move.

“Albert!”

At that moment, Liam pushed through the crowd with four or five broad-shouldered household guards.

The Baker family had sent a carriage to pick them up that day. Liam had finished earlier and waited, but when Albert didn’t show, something felt wrong. He returned with guards to look for

him.

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The moment he saw Albert sprawled on the ground, blood at the corner of his mouth, one side of his face grotesquely swollen, rage exploded.

He rushed forward, crouching beside him. “What happened to you?”

Albert raised a shaking hand and pointed at Josh. “Him! He did this! You have to get even for

me!*

Liam’s face turned dark as he looked up at Josh, his voice cold. “You did this?”

Josh didn’t back down. “Yeah.”

Liam rose slowly to his feet. “Good. Very good. You’ve got some nerve.”

He turned his head slightly. “You heard me. Grab him. Hold him down. Hit his face. Don’t stop until he’s on his knees begging, until even his own family wouldn’t recognize him.”

The guards answered in unison and stepped forward, thick arms flexing, their expressions

vicious.

“Hold it.”

Kaelan strode forward, stepping directly in front of Josh. “Josh had his reasons for what he did today.

Liam didn’t even glance at him. This wasn’t just about Albert being beaten.

This was about the Baker family losing face. At a moment like this, the reason didn’t matter.

A common-born examinee daring to strike a member of the Baker family was already unforgivable.

Liam let out a cold laugh. “Kaelan, I respect your mother, Lady Aveline, so I’ve shown you some courtesy. But no matter the reason, no one gets to lay a hand on my family and walk away. If I don’t make an example of him today, how is my family supposed to hold its ground in Vanelle? Move.”

Kaelan’s expression hardened. “In broad daylight, right outside the Imperial Examination Hall, you’re going to do this?”

Liam scoffed. “Do what? I’m just teaching an arrogant nobody his place. I suggest you step aside. Fists aren’t exactly careful. If you get caught in it, that won’t reflect well on your mother.”

Kaelan didn’t move an inch. “As long as I’m here, no one touches him.”

Josh let out a quiet breath. He didn’t want to drag Kaelan into this. He lowered his voice. “Kaelan, I appreciate it. But this has nothing to do with you. They’re coming for me. Just go.”

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“No.”

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Kaelan’s tone was firm, leaving no room for argument.
“I’m not stepping back from this.”

Liam gave a mocking laugh, losing patience. “Enough. Do it.”

Kaelan’s voice rose sharply. “Whoever lays a hand on him is disrespecting me, and disrespecting my mother, Lady Aveline. Think carefully.”

Liam’s smile turned cold and cutting. “Your mother holds status, sure. My family respects that. But my aunt is the Queen. My cousin is the Crown Prince. In Vanelle, power comes from who stands behind you. And your side isn’t enough. So tell me, Kaelan, besides invoking your mother’s name, who else do you have?”

“Me.”

The voice came suddenly.

Not loud. not forceful, but it cut cleanly through the tension.

Everyone froze for a split second, then turned instinctively toward the source. Not far away, an elegant carriage had come to a stop.

Before anyone could react, two lines of guards moved forward in precise formation, surrounding the entire area. Their movements were disciplined, their gazes sharp, the air around them carrying the unmistakable weight of seasoned soldiers.

Under countless eyes, Elowen stepped down from the carriage and walked forward.

She moved at an unhurried pace, completely composed.

Her gown flowed in a soft sea-green hue, tailored in the noble fashion of Avenlor, sleeves long and layered, the fabric catching light with quiet elegance. Her hair was adorned with delicate jeweled pins, arranged flawlessly.

Her beauty was striking, but it was not what commanded attention.

It was the quiet authority she carried, steady and undeniable. The crowd fell silent without thinking.

Every gaze fixed on her, some respectful, some curious, some uneasy.

Elowen was used to it. She showed no reaction at all.

She came to a stop, glanced briefly at Liam, then lowered her eyes toward Albert on the ground.

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Chapter 532 Her Protection

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Liam was the first to react, stepping forward and bowing. “Your Grace... Lady of Grace and Virtue.”

Albert struggled through the pain, forcing himself to follow, though his movements were clumsy.

Elowen didn't spare him a glance.

She lifted a brow slightly.

"Just now, who exactly were you planning to lay hands on?"

Liam's heart tightened. He assumed she was here for Kaelan and quickly explained, "Your Grace, we wouldn't dare offend Kaelan. It's this man. He acted without regard for law or order, attacking my brother in broad daylight and leaving him in this state. I was angry and only meant to discipline him lightly."

Elowen tilted her head a fraction. "You mean Josh?"

Liam nodded immediately. "Yes, him."

He let out a cold huff. "Whoever is backing him must be quite bold, letting him attack a noble like this. It's outrageous."

Josh felt tension rise in his chest.

She had taken his sister in, treated her kindly, even supported him when he came to take the

exam.

Did I just create trouble for her by acting without thinking?

Elowen spoke calmly, "You're asking who's backing him?"

A faint smile curved her lips. "That would be me."

Liam froze where he stood.

Elowen turned to Josh, her voice gentle. "Josh, think carefully. That day outside the Imperial Examination Hall, the ones who mocked your background, point them out one by one. I have a few words I'd like to share with them."

Josh was momentarily stunned.

She wasn't blaming him. She was standing up for him. He looked at her.

Her eyes were clear, steady, encouraging. "Go ahead."

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Josh took a deep breath. If she was willing to stand behind him, then he would speak plainly.

He raised his hand and pointed directly at Albert on the ground, his voice firm and clear. "Your Grace, he was the one who led it. Yesterday, he mocked my family for dressing poorly."

Liam's expression shifted instantly. He stepped forward. "Your Grace, even if my brother spoke out of line, that doesn't justify being attacked in public. Look at him, he's been beaten so badly his face is practically ruined—"

Elowen lowered her gaze, studying Albert. "He is quite badly hurt."

Relief flashed across Liam's face. "Exactly. You see it too. Josh was far too ruthless."

Elowen continued evenly, "Still deserved it. He shouldn't have run his mouth."

Liam stared at her, stunned.

Elowen withdrew her gaze. "Since he's already been beaten like this, and the injuries are serious enough, I won't pursue it further today."

She turned back to Josh. "Aside from this Baker son, who else spoke out of line? Point them out one by one. I'd like to see who we're dealing with."

Josh straightened, his gaze sweeping across the crowd.

The same young nobles who had laughed and mocked earlier now shrank back, avoiding his eyes, wishing they could disappear on the spot.

Josh raised his hand again and pointed at a pale-faced young man. "Your Grace, yesterday outside the hall, he mocked my mother. Said she smelled like a pig pen."

The young man's face turned white instantly. His first instinct was to turn and run, but the guards had already sealed off every exit. There was no gap, nowhere to escape.

Sweat broke out across his forehead. His legs felt weak.

Elowen gave a small nod and lifted her chin slightly. "Bring him here."

"Understood."

Two guards stepped forward, one on each side, gripping his shoulders and dragging him out of the crowd, forcing him to stand in front of Elowen.

She looked him over from head to toe, her tone mild. "You're quite well put together."

Then she turned her head slightly and gave a calm instruction. "Take him nearby. Find a pig

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pen. Throw him in and let him get a proper sense of what that actually smells like. Make sure he stays there for thirty minutes. Let him fully appreciate it before bringing him back out."

"No, please, Your Grace! I was wrong! I won't do it again!"

He struggled desperately, panic taking over, but it was useless. A guard covered his mouth and dragged him away.

Elowen shifted her gaze back to Josh, signaling for him to continue.

Josh felt something surge in his chest, his voice steady as he pointed again. “And him. He said if Nikki were given to his household as a servant, he’d have her beaten and thrown out.”

Elowen let out a soft, almost thoughtful sound. “Oh?”

Her gaze fell on the man in the blue robe. “So you were planning to take someone from my household?”

The man stiffened instantly.

The punishment from moments ago was still fresh in everyone’s mind. Any arrogance he had was gone. He forced out a strained smile, panic clear in his eyes. “Your Grace, that’s a misunderstanding, a complete misunderstanding. I was just speaking carelessly, I didn’t mean it like that at all.”

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533 A Lesson Given

Elowen spoke slowly, almost casually, as if the matter meant very little to her. “I’m not looking to lay a hand on you. I just want a private word.”

The young man in violet froze, the smile on his face stiffening as sweat began to gather along his brow. "I... I don't think that's necessary, Your Grace..."

"I said I want a word." The smile on Elowen's lips faded, her voice cooling. "And you keep avoiding me. Should I take that as you refusing me outright?"

He paused, caught completely off guard.

Elowen let out a short, cold laugh. "I have no idea which house you come from, but clearly no one there bothered to teach you proper conduct. You speak recklessly, try to pull a girl away from my staff as if she were yours to claim, and now that I'm standing in front of you, you can't even offer basic courtesy."

The young man blinked, completely stunned.

What is this?

Every sentence she spoke seemed to layer over the last, leaving him no room to respond.

No matter how many explanations he could come up with, none of them would come out clean.

Elowen turned slightly and gave her order without hesitation. "Take him."

Her tone was calm, like she was arranging something routine. "Bring him back to Hale Manor. I've had the grounds reorganized recently, and there's plenty of work to be done. He can start with the water runs and hauling duties."

The young man's eyes widened in shock. "Your Grace, I am from an official family. My father is Deputy Communications Councilor Archer. We-

"Deputy Communications Councilor Archer?" Elowen cut him off, one brow lifting slightly. "Perfect. Then send word and have him come along as well. Since you'll be working, it only makes sense your father joins you."

The young man went completely still. This wasn't punishment.

This was humiliation. Sending him to do labor was one thing, but calling his father to do the same?

He couldn't even find the words.

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He turned instinctively toward Liam, desperation clear in his eyes.

Liam clenched his fingers, drew in a breath, and stepped forward. “Your Grace, with respect, this arrangement may not be appropriate. Gavin is, after all, the son of a serving official...”

“Not appropriate?” Elowen turned her head, her gaze settling on him. “A moment ago, you made it very clear that harming someone from the Baker family meant insulting the entire Baker family. So tell me, how does that same principle suddenly become inappropriate when it concerns Hale Manor?”

Her tone sharpened slightly.

“Or are you suggesting that the dignity of Hale Manor, and the people I choose to protect, somehow rank below yours?”

Liam fell silent, his face shifting between red and pale. “Josh is... only a common candidate. He holds no position, no title...”

Elowen cut him off cleanly. “And what of it? I choose to stand for him.”

She looked at him directly. “If you have an issue with that, you are welcome to bring it before His Majesty.”

Liam’s body stiffened.

Elowen no longer paid him any attention. She turned to Josh instead. “Anyone else?”

Josh already felt the matter had gone far enough. He shook his head. “Your Grace, the others were only laughing along. It doesn’t rise to anything serious.”

Elowen nodded, then shifted her gaze to Kaelan, who had been silent the entire time. “Kaelan, you were there as well. Is there anything you wish to add?”

Kaelan paused, then looked at her.

The daylight fell across her face, tracing the lines of her features with clarity.

The Elowen he remembered had been gentle, composed, soft in manner.

The woman standing before him now was decisive, unyielding, and carried an authority that pressed outward without effort.

This... isn't the same presence.

For no clear reason, his thoughts drifted to Cassian.

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Not in appearance. In presence.

They've started to feel alike.

Kaelan steadied himself and shook his head. “No, Your Grace.”

Elowen glanced between him and Josh, then gave a small nod. “Very well.”

Josh wasn’t someone who held grudges easily.

Kaelan, raised carefully by Aveline, understood restraint and balance. He would not push matters beyond what was necessary.

If Scarlet had been there that day, things would not have ended this cleanly.

She would have remembered every face, every word, and not a single one would have slipped away.

But things had already reached this point.

There was no need to go further.

“Then we end it here,” Elowen said, her voice lifting slightly, carrying across those nearby.

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“Let me make one thing clear. Respect begins with how you conduct yourself. Backgrounds may differ, education may vary, but dignity is not ranked. Leaning on your family name to belittle others does not make you powerful. It only proves a lack of character.”

She let the words settle before adding, “Mind your words. And your actions.”

Then she turned back to Kaelan, her expression softening slightly. “You’ve had a long day. Head home and get some rest. No need to keep Aveline worried.”

Kaelan inclined his head. “Safe travels, Your Grace.”

Elowen said nothing further. She turned and stepped toward the waiting carriage as guards brought Josh and the pale-faced Gavin forward.

Soon after, the carriage set off from the Imperial Examination Hall, heading toward Hale

Manor.

On the other side, Liam’s face had gone rigid. He directed the servants to help Albert into their carriage.

By the time they returned to the Baker Estate, word had already spread.

Albert’s mother rushed out the moment she heard, her voice breaking as she saw him. She clutched him tightly, crying out in panic, calling for a physician, demanding to know who had

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done this, the entire courtyard thrown into disorder.

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Chapter 534 No Way Forward

Liam managed to steady her enough to summon the estate physician.

After a careful examination, the conclusion was clear.

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It was mostly surface injury, though the cheekbone showed a slight fracture. Proper rest would be required. Medicine was prescribed to reduce swelling, ease pain, and help him recover.

As Albert lay there, teeth clenched, groaning from the pain, Liam's frustration only grew.

"If you have an issue, take it to His Majesty."

Elowen's words lingered in his mind like something lodged too deep to pull free. He held no office. No special standing that allowed him access to the inner court.

Even if he wanted to press the matter, he had no path to do it.

After turning it over again and again, Liam finally made his decision. He would go see his grandpa, Colton Baker.

Colton resided in the eastern wing of the Baker Estate.

The courtyard there was quiet and restrained, old trees rising high above carefully kept grounds, the entire place carrying an air of age and discipline.

At eighty, his hair was completely white, his face lined with years.

He sat by the window, supported by attendants, slowly drinking a bowl of freshly prepared medicine.

When Liam entered and greeted him, Colton gave a faint, warm smile. "Liam. You and Albert have finished your exams? How did it go?"

Liam inclined himself deeply. "Yes, Grandfather. We have both completed them. The questions seemed somewhat easier this year. I believe I answered them reasonably well, and Albert did his best. We agreed to come see you as soon as it was over, so you would not worry."

Colton nodded, the smile on his face deepening slightly. "Good. Once it's done, it's done. As long as you gave it your best."

His gaze moved past Liam. "Where is Albert?"

Liam clenched his jaw, then suddenly dropped down heavily, his voice filled with urgency. "Grandfather. Albert has been beaten. He's badly hurt. He's in his room now. The physician has already seen him. His face is severely swollen, and even the boy has been affected. There isn't

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a single place untouched."

Colton's brows drew together sharply. "Beaten? By whom?"

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Liam lifted

his reddened eyes. “A candidate named Josh. He comes from a low background. He has a younger sister who serves at Hale Manor under the Lady of Grace and Virtue. After the exam, Albert merely nudged a small stone that rolled near him, and he suddenly lost his temper and struck Albert twice without warning. Albert had no chance to react...”

In just a few sentences, he removed all of Albert’s fault.

“Grandfather, Albert is completely innocent. That man acted without any regard for the Baker family. And Lady of Grace and Virtue not only failed to act fairly, she sided with him, humiliated me in public, punished several of us, and even threatened to summon Councilor Archer to Hale Manor for labor.”

His voice tightened. “Grandfather, you must stand up for Albert. And for me.”

He lowered himself further, waiting for anger and a decisive response. But instead, the room fell into silence.

Liam hesitated, then carefully looked up. Colton’s expression was calm. Far too calm.

Those aged eyes, though clouded, remained sharp as they looked down at him.

There was no trace of sympathy. Only a cold clarity.

Liam’s chest tightened, and he instinctively looked away.

“Stand up for you?” Colton spoke slowly, his voice low and steady. “And how exactly do you expect me to do that?”

Liam answered at once. “We present the matter before His Majesty. Make clear that

Albert was attacked without cause and that I was humiliated. Let His Majesty judge, punish the attacker, and correct Elowen’s actions so the matter is properly settled.”

Colton let out a cold laugh.

“Albert’s nature, do you think I’m unaware of it?”

His voice sharpened.

“A stray stone, is that what we’re calling it now? Liam, your ability to twist a story has become quite refined.”

Liam’s face went pale, his mouth opening slightly as if to defend himself.

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Bur Colton continued, “I have not met Josh, but I have heard of him. He was personally taken in by Edmund this year. Edmund does not take in fools. If that boy raised his hand, then Albert must have said something he shouldn’t have. Something that crossed a line, perhaps even dragged in someone’s family.”

He paused, his tone turning colder.

“And you want me to bring this before His Majesty? Do you think His Majesty cares about family names? What he values is ability and character. If this reaches him and he looks into it, who do you think he will side with?”

Silence pressed down across the room.

Then, more quietly, heavier than before:

“And that boy... comes from a family that paid for this realm with their lives.”

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Chapter 535 A Dangerous Mistake

“What...?” Liam blurted, his head snapping up, shock flooding his face.

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Colton let out a heavy, irritated breath, his cane striking lightly against the floor as his temper rose. “Josh’s father, Patrick, served under Clement for years. He wasn’t just another officer, he was one of the most trusted men in that command. When the army had to withdraw, he stayed behind with barely a hundred men to hold the line. He bought time with his life.”

His voice hardened as he continued, each word carrying weight. “His name was entered into the rolls of honor. His Majesty personally ordered compensation for his family. He is remembered as one of Avenlor’s war dead.”

The more he spoke, the angrier he became. “And right now, with fighting tightening in the Southwestern Marches, the court is doing everything it can to honor men like him, to keep the army steady. And what do you do?”

He fixed Liam with a sharp glare. “You go after his son, and you let the Duchess catch you in the act. Do you have any idea what that looks like? You handed her the perfect reason to make an example out of you.”

Liam’s strength drained out of him. He shifted awkwardly where he sat, then lost what little composure he had left and dropped heavily back, no longer able to hold himself upright.

Colton looked at him, the disappointment in his eyes only deepening. After a moment, he waved his hand in dismissal, like he didn’t even want to look at him anymore. “Go home. Think about what I said. Keep your brother inside and make sure he stays there until he heals and learns something from this. If I see either of you causing trouble again, don’t expect anyone to clean up after you.”

At Rayne Manor, later that evening, the inner residence was quiet.

Archer Rayne had just returned when a servant hurried in to report that his favored concubine was unwell again, clutching her chest. He didn’t even stop to rest before heading straight to her

rooms.

Inside, she was already reclining against a cushioned daybed, dressed in a soft rose-colored gown that draped lightly over her

figure. Her hair had been loosened just enough to frame her face, giving her that carefully crafted, fragile look that always drew him in.

The moment she saw him, she leaned forward and slipped into his arms, her body soft against his, her hands sliding up around his neck.

The warmth of her, the faint scent of perfume, the way she pressed close without hesitation, it stirred something immediate and familiar. His hand settled at her waist, pulling her closer as he lowered his head, ready to kiss her when fast and urgent footsteps broke the moment.

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“My lord! My lord, something’s wrong! It’s serious!”

Archer’s expression darkened instantly, irritation flaring. His grip tightened slightly as he snapped without even turning. “Get out. Whatever it is can wait.”

The servant didn’t move.

“My lord, it can’t. It’s the Lady of Grace and Virtue. She’s sent for you by name. You’re to go at

once.”

That title cut straight through everything.

Archer went still.

Lady of Grace and Virtue. Elowen.

Cassian's wife. The daughter of Clement Hale.

Cassian had lost his title after the Nordanian prince's death, and Duskmooor Manor had been renamed. But her rank had not only remained, it had been reinforced.

That told him everything he needed to know.

The woman in his arms shifted, her tone turning soft and coaxing. "Why are you worrying about her? Look at me. I'm not even wearing anything under this gown..."

Her hand guided his, pressing it lightly against her chest, "See? My heart's racing..."

Normally, that alone would have been enough to distract him completely.

Not tonight.

Archer pushed her away without warning. The force sent her stumbling back onto the cushions with a startled cry.

He didn't look at her again.

"Get the carriage ready," he said sharply, already moving toward the door.

The servant hurried after him. "My lord, Hale Manor has already sent one. It's waiting at the front."

Archer stopped mid-step. "They sent a carriage?"

That wasn't courtesy. That was intent.

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Before this, he had tried more than once to approach Cassian, sending letters, making personal visits, and every time he had been turned away without exception.

After Cassian's fall, Archer had held back, watching carefully, weighing whether he should redirect his efforts toward Elowen instead.

He hadn't acted yet. And now she had made the first move.

"Gavin is already there," the servant added.

Archer frowned.

Something about that didn't sit right.

Still, he forced himself to stay calm. He was a court official. His son was preparing for the court qualification trials. This shouldn't spiral out of control.

By the time he arrived at Hale Manor, the sky had fully darkened.

The carriage stopped at a side entrance, and before he could step down, a young attendant approached.

"I'm Anson," he said, bowing properly. "Her Grace asked me to receive you. This way, please."

Archer returned the gesture quickly, lowering his posture more than he normally would. "Thank you."

As they walked, he tried to sound casual. "Do you happen to know why Her Grace called for me?"

Anson didn't slow down. "You'll see shortly, my lord."

The answer was polite, but it gave him nothing.

And somehow, that made it worse.

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They walked all the way into the main courtyard.

Archer saw his son almost immediately.

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The same boy who needed help dressing at home, who had servants waiting on him for every little thing, was now stripped down to a plain inner shirt, struggling to carry a heavy wooden bucket.

Step by uneven step, he made his way toward a row of garden beds, arms trembling as he tried to pour water without spilling most of it.

Archer stopped cold.

“What is this supposed to be?” he demanded, disbelief clear in his voice.

Anson answered calmly, “This is precisely why he was invited to Hale Manor.”

Archer turned to him sharply. “Invited? To carry water?”

Anson inclined his head. “Yes, my lord.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Archer said, his voice tightening. “He’s from an official family. He’s a scholar preparing for the court exams. You can’t have him doing labor like this. It’s degrading. It’s improper.”

Anson nodded once. “You’re right.”

Archer drew a breath, ready to demand that it stop immediately.

But Anson continued, his tone unchanged.

“Which is why Her Grace asked for you to come as well.”

Archer blinked, caught off guard. “What does that mean?”

Anson turned slightly toward him. “Her Grace said your son lacks discipline and proper upbringing. That is his fault. But a father bears responsibility for how his son is raised. Since he is here to reflect on his behavior, you will join him.”

For a moment, Archer didn’t react.

Then his expression hardened.

He was a fourth-rank official. Deputy Communications Councilor.

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And now he was being told to haul water in a courtyard garden.

The humiliation hit all at once.

He almost refused outright.

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Before he could speak, Anson added, almost casually, “He resisted earlier. The marks are still there. If you’re unwilling, the guards can assist. They tend to be... thorough.”

Archer glanced around.

The men standing nearby were silent, steady, and clearly not the kind who hesitated.

The refusal died before it reached his mouth.

His face slowly drained of color as he let out a quiet, defeated breath.

Inside the study, the atmosphere was calm.

Elowen rested against a cushioned seat by the window, a book open in her hands.

“Your Grace,” Anson said as he entered, bowing slightly. “They’ve both started working in the garden.”

Elowen lifted her gaze and looked outside.

Through the greenery, she could make out two figures moving back and forth, clumsy and uneven in their efforts.

She gave a soft nod. “Well done.”

Anson lowered his head. “Just carrying out your instructions.”

Elowen’s attention shifted to Nikki, who stood nearby grinding ink.

Ever since she heard what had happened, that Archer’s son had been brought in, forced to work, and even punished for resisting, the girl hadn’t stopped smiling.

Those dimples made it obvious.

Elowen watched her for a moment.

She’s enjoying this more than she expected.

That thought didn’t bother her. If anything, it felt justified.

She closed her book gently. “Nikki.”

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Nikki looked up immediately. “Yes, Your Grace?”

Elowen gestured toward the window, a faint, knowing smile at the corner of her lips. “That’s enough. Go outside and keep an eye on them.”

“Keep an eye?” Nikki repeated, blinking.

Then it clicked.

Her eyes lit up. “You mean... watch them work?”

Elowen nodded. “Take something with you. If they slow down or try to cut corners, correct them. Don’t worry about their status. Would you like to do it?”

Nikki covered her mouth, barely containing her excitement.

She couldn’t believe she was being trusted with this.

But more than that, she was thrilled.

Those noble sons had always looked down on her, acting like she didn’t even belong in the

same space.

Now things were different.

Now she had someone backing her.

And not just anyone.

Her face flushed with excitement as she nodded quickly. “Yes, Your Grace. I’ll go right away.”

She set aside the ink and hurried out.

Near the window, a cluster of thin trees grew along the edge of the courtyard. She stepped over, selected a flexible branch, and snapped it clean.

She tested the weight in her hand.

Just right.

This is going to sting.

A quick grin crossed her face before she ran off toward the garden.

Anson watched her go, his expression turning slightly thoughtful.

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Chapter 1516 A Lesson Learned

After a brief pause, he turned back to Elowen and lowered his voice.

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red

“Your Grace, what you’ve done will certainly settle matters for Josh and his sister, and it reinforces authority within the manor. However... Archer is still a ranking official. After today, he may bring this before the court. He could claim you overstepped, that you humiliated a government official. It might damage your standing, or give others a reason to act against you.”

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Anson’s concern made perfect sense.

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Fushad

There were established procedures in Avenlor. When an official committed a wrongdoing, it was meant to be reviewed and handled by the proper authorities, in accordance with the law.

Elowen held the rank of Lady of the First Rank, and her status placed her among the most respected women in the realm. Even so, bypassing formal channels and personally subjecting officials to punishment that bordered on physic

al discipline, if word spread, would inevitably give people something to talk about.

Elowen only smiled, calm and unbothered. “Honestly, I’d be disappointed if he didn’t go complain.”

Anson paused, momentarily caught off guard.

Elowen had already lowered her gaze again, turning another page of her ledger as if the matter had already passed.

There was nothing more to say.

Anson bowed and quietly withdrew.

Through the entire afternoon, Archer and his son Gavin were kept in the rear grounds of Hale Manor, hauling water and tending the vegetable beds.

Nikki stood nearby, hands clasped neatly behind her back, posture straight and deliberate. She held a thin rod like a proper steward, pacing back and forth with exaggerated seriousness, her sharp eyes fixed on the two of them.

Archer, older and shaped by years of disciplined study and earlier hardship, managed to keep his movements steady.

Gavin was another story entirely.

He was used to long days of leisure, riding through the city, drinking, surrounding himself with companions. Work like this was completely foreign to him.

The wooden handles of the buckets quickly rubbed his soft palms raw, the skin turning red after only a few trips.

Before long, his arms began to tremble, muscles burning from the unfamiliar strain.

Frustration and fear churned together inside him, making his movements less steady. The buckets swayed as he walked, water sloshing over the edges. By the time he reached the rows, a

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Chapter 267 A Line Crossed

good portion had already spilled, leaving the narrow paths slick with mud.

Nikki stopped in her tracks, clearly unimpressed.

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Poched

She tapped the rod sharply against her palm and snapped, “You can’t even carry water without dumping half of it along the way? What are you good for? You’re all height and no strength. I’ve seen kitchen staff with more backbone than you.”

Gavin’s face darkened, but he didn’t dare speak.

Nikki went on, her tone cutting and relentless. “You don’t like hearing it? Look at yourself. You can’t lift, you can’t carry. You’re only fit to sit around living off your family name. Put you out on your own without that, you wouldn’t last. You’d be starving before the week’s out. How are you supposed to be useful to anyone?”

Both father and son looked humiliated.

But the guards stationed nearby made things clear enough. Any sign of resistance would not be tolerated.

So they endured it.

They kept working.

By the time the sun dipped low and the last light stretched across the estate, iron braziers were lit one by one, casting a steady glow through Hale Manor.

Archer and Gavin were exhausted, breathing hard, drenched in sweat. Their inner tunics clung to their backs, and their boots and trousers were thick with mud.

Only then did Anson step forward.

“Her Grace says you may leave. The kitchen didn’t prepare enough this evening, so you won’t be staying for supper.”

To them, it felt like being released from a sentence.

They had no desire to stay.

If they stayed, who knew what else they would be made to do?

They hurriedly changed back into their wrinkled formal attire, supporting each other as they made their way out, eager to leave as quickly as possible.

Outside, Helena Rayne had already been waiting with a carriage.

The moment she saw them, disheveled and filthy, she froze in shock. “What happened to you?”

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Chapter

A Line Crossed

72

Finished

Gavin

stumbled forward and threw himself into her arms, breaking down instantly. The more he cried, the harder it became to stop.

Archer felt a surge of humiliation and anger rising together, his throat tightening painfully.

He forced it down, his voice strained. “Let’s go. We’ll talk at home.”

On the ride back, Gavin’s sobbing filled the carriage, relentless and loud.

Archer’s patience snapped. “That’s enough. All you’ve done is cry. Do you have anything else in you?”

Gavin’s crying hitched, faltering.

Helena shot Archer a sharp look. “He’s been humiliated. He’s allowed to cry. You call him useless, what about you? If you had any real standing, would the two of you have been trapped there and treated like that?”

Archer went silent, his face turning rigid, unable to respond.

Helena held Gavin close, her eyes reddening as she comforted him. “I don’t know how I ended up married to you. My son, forced to haul water like that... at home I wouldn’t even let him lift a finger. And you call yourself an official? You throw your weight around in the house, taking one mistress after another...”

“Enough,” Archer snapped, his voice sharp.

Helena fell silent, but her expression remained tight with resentment as she continued to

soothe Gavin.

Archer’s jaw tightened.

“This isn’t over.”

There was no way he would let this humiliation stand.

So what if Elowen is the Lady of the First Rank?

She has no right to treat a court official like that.

He might not be powerful, but after years in service, he had connections.

People who would listen.

3/4

538

Chapter 538 Not Just Kindness

Just wait. I’ll settle this.

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Frustrated

At Hale Manor, in the main dining hall, Elowen and Cassian were seated together for supper.

Mira stood nearby, smiling. “Your Grace, you should’ve seen Nikki this afternoon. She was in such a good mood the whole time. Probably finally got some frustration out. She even ate an extra half serving tonight.”

Elowen’s eyes softened slightly as she lifted her spoon, taking a sip of the rich, slow-cooked

stew.

Mira continued, “Josh borrowed a book from your study earlier. He returned it just now, not a single page out of place, and he even cleaned up the entire room before leaving.”

Elowen gave a small nod.

Those two really were good kids.

Footsteps sounded outside.

Elowen looked up just as Josh stepped in, Nikki following behind him.

Josh came forward and bowed deeply. “Your Grace.”

Cassian did not look up, only gave a quiet acknowledgment before placing a portion of vegetables onto Elowen’s plate.

Elowen set down her utensils and looked at them with a gentle expression.

Her gaze moved from Josh to Nikki.

The girl stood behind him, head lowered, her foot lightly brushing the polished stone floor, her whole posture slumped with quiet frustration.

Elowen asked softly, “What’s going on?”

Josh bowed again, his tone steady. “When I was preparing for the court qualification trials, our situation at home was difficult. Your Grace showed kindness, allowed Nikki to work here, and gave us support. I will never forget that.”

He continued, calm but firm.

“Now that the exams are over, regardless of the outcome, I shouldn’t continue to rely on your generosity. I plan to take Nikki home tonight so we won’t trouble you further.”

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Chapter 538 Not Just Kindness

Elowen’s gaze shifted to Nikki.

The girl’s head dropped even lower, her shoulders sagging.

Elowen understood immediately. “What about you? Do you want to go back?”

Nikki looked up suddenly, the words slipping out before she could stop herself. “I don’t want

to...”

Her voice was small, thick with emotion.

Josh turned his head sharply.

Nikki froze, her voice cutting off as she quickly lowered her head again.

Josh faced forward once more, his tone growing more earnest. “She’s still young. There are many things she doesn’t understand. Keeping her here may only cause trouble.”

He paused, then continued, “You’ve been generous. I know you would allow her to stay. But someone else’s kindness is not something I should depend on without restraint. What you’ve given is a gift. If we accept it without limits and grow used to it, then we become the kind of people who only take and never repay.”

His voice steadied.

“I may be poor, but I won’t lose my sense of self.”

Elowen watched him quietly.

Josh went on, "And to be honest, it isn't right for her to stay. I come from nothing. The other candidates look down on me and speak harshly, but I can endure it. Time will settle those accounts when I've earned my place."

He paused, then added, a trace of gratitude in his eyes, "But Nikki couldn't stand seeing that. So she told you."

He lowered his gaze slightly.

"I understand what happened today. You were standing up for us. From my perspective, it felt... satisfying."

He took a breath.

"But I also know it puts you at risk. It could offend powerful families with deep influence. Once might be manageable, but if it continues, it could become a burden for you."

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Chapter 525) Not Just Kindness

His tone grew more serious.

"I don't want my personal grievances to put you in a difficult position."

He stepped back and bowed deeply once more.

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Fased

"I will remember your kindness for the rest of my life. With your help, we can manage for now.

If I'm fortunate enough to succeed and enter service, I will repay what I owe."

The hall fell quiet.

Only the faint crackle of the braziers could be heard.

Elowen sat still, the softness in her expression fading into something more thoughtful.

She looked at the young man before her, slight in frame, but standing straight, and something stirred quietly in her chest.

Even Cassian glanced at him, giving him a second look.

After a moment, Elowen spoke, “I understand what you’re trying to say. The fact that you’ve thought this through speaks well of you. You haven’t failed your father, or Edmund’s guidance.”

Her tone shifted slightly.

“But I still want Nikki to stay at Hale Manor.”

She held his gaze steadily.

“This isn’t out of pity. Nikki is capable, attentive, and takes her work seriously. The study is always in perfect order because of her. I’m very satisfied.”

She continued calmly, “The household stipend here is higher than elsewhere. Nikki earns what she’s given. It isn’t charity. And besides, I have other plans that require her to remain here. The timing just isn’t right yet.”

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Awakianzig Love Reborn to Be His Duchess

Chapter 539 Terms of Power

Josh looked genuinely surprised.

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Friched

Elowen didn’t rush him. She continued in an even, thoughtful tone, “And one more thing. I’ve been supporting your family and backing your studies, b

ut that's not just because of your father. I've been watching you. You're disciplined, you've got real talent, and more importantly, you've got backbone. You remember who helped you and you don't take it for granted. That kind of character is rare. Someone like you, your future can go very far."

She let that settle before going on, her voice still calm but carrying weight. "If you succeed, I benefit too. The exams might be over, but that doesn't mean the road ahead will be smooth."

Josh caught the meaning beneath her words and slowly lifted his head.

Elowen smiled slightly. "The path through the court qualification trials is never easy. You're going to run into obstacles sooner or later. Without someone backing you, it's easy to get stuck before you even get started. And if I want Hale Manor to keep its standing, I'll need capable people on my side. Josh, do you understand what I'm saying?"

Everything clicked into place.

He stepped forward and bowed deeply, his voice steady. "Your Grace, I understand."

Elowen's smile softened. "Good. That's all I needed to hear. Still, Nikki hasn't been home in a while. Take her back tonight and spend some time with your mother."

Josh answered immediately, "Yes, Your Grace."

Nikki had spent the whole day thinking she would never return to Hale Manor, never see Elowen or Scarlet again. She had been holding back tears, her whole mood dim and heavy.

Now everything turned around in an instant.

Her face lit up, bright and lively again. "Yes, Your Grace!"

The two of them offered their farewells to Elowen and Cassian and stepped out.

Night was settling in, and Elowen wasn't comfortable sending them off alone, so she had a carriage prepared from Hale Manor and assigned two guards to accompany them home.

Once they climbed inside, Nikki could barely sit still.

“Josh, look at this carriage. It’s incredible. It rides so smooth. Back home, even the village head probably hasn’t been in something like this. Just wait until that kid next door sees it, he’s going to be so jealous.”

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Chanter 439 Terms of Power

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Fayched

Josh nodded faintly, but his attention wasn’t on the carriage.

His thoughts kept circling back to Elowen’s words. “You’re going to run into obstacles sooner or later.”

What kind of obstacles did she mean?

By the time the carriage reached the edge of the village, the sky had dimmed into a cool, dusky blue.

Dinner was over, but no one had turned in yet.

Clusters of villagers lingered beneath a large old tree near the entrance, chatting about bits of news from Vanelle. Children ran around it in bursts of energy, chasing and laughing.

“A carriage! There’s a carriage coming in!”

A chubby boy in a short tunic spotted it first, shouting at the top of his lungs.

The chatter stopped instantly.

Adults turned. Children crowded closer, curious.

The carriage rolled forward, painted a deep indigo, its wood polished smooth, the heavy drapes thick and finely made.

This was something rare.

Right on cue, Nikki lifted the curtain just enough to reveal her and Josh inside.

The boy's eyes went wide. "Nikki! Nikki! That's Nikki!"

He waved wildly and ran after it. "Hey, it's me! Your neighbor!"

Nikki turned her head as if she had just noticed him, her voice bright and composed. "Oh, it's you. Sorry, it's hard to hear from inside."

Josh watched her performance, amused, but didn't expose her.

The boy, flushed and out of breath, kept running alongside. "Nikki, where did you get this carriage? It's amazing. Where'd it come from?"

Nikki blinked her clear, lively eyes, deliberately dragging it out. "Why don't you guess?"

The boy wanted to ask if he could ride along, but the carriage had already moved deeper into the village toward their home.

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Chauler 539 Terms of Power

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ished

He slowed to a stop, breathing hard, watching as it disappeared into the growing dark, his face full of envy.

Behind him, the crowd burst into excited chatter.

"Was that really the siblings?"

"Of course it was. Didn't Josh go to Vanelle for the exams? That carriage... could he have already passed and been sent back like that?"

"No way it's that fast. They still have to review everything. That takes at least a month."

"Then whose carriage is it? That's not something ordinary people have. Maybe some noble took a liking to him. Took him in as a student, or maybe even as a son-in-law?"

“Could be.”

The chubby boy scratched the back of his head and spoke with complete sincerity. “My mom always said studying could change your life. I thought she was just saying that to get me to read. I even thought Josh was dumb for always having his nose in a book...”

He looked toward where the carriage had gone, eyes shining.

“Turns out she wasn’t lying. You really can make something of yourself. You really can ride in something like that.”

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Awawenig Love Reborn to Be His Duchess

Chapter 540 Gathering Storm

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Airished

He clenched his small fists. “I’m going to study too. I’m going to pass those exams. I’m going to ride in a carriage like that one day.”

Half a month passed in what felt like no time at all.

At Hale Manor, in the main courtyard garden, fresh green shoots had begun to push through the dark soil of the vegetable beds.

That afternoon, Elowen stood with Cassian along a stone path beside the garden.

She wore a light lavender cloak, leaning slightly forward as she studied the tender sprouts with quiet interest.

Cassian stood beside her, though his attention rested more on her than the plants. “Word is Archer’s been meeting frequently with officials from the Censorate. And t

hat boy you threw into the pig pen, his father works there too. They're likely gathering accusations and preparing to bring a case against you before His Majesty."

Elowen tilted her head, completely unbothered. "Isn't that exactly what we want? I was worried they'd swallow it and let it go. If they don't make a move, it's harder for us to set the next stage."

Cassian's lips curved. "You're trouble."

Elowen straightened, her eyes bright with amusement. "Learned from you."

Just then, Bran approached quickly and bowed. "Your Grace, we've received word. The new Nordan envoy has arrived at the outskirts of Vanelle. They are expected to formally enter the city and present themselves at court tomorrow afternoon."

Elowen turned slightly. "Last time the Nordan delegation arrived, it was handled by His Grace. Who's been assigned this time? The Crown Prince?"

Bran shook his head. "No, Your Highness. The Crown Prince has been occupied with overseeing the post-exam process, reviewing papers and finalizing rankings. His Majesty has instead appointed Prince Caelan to take full charge of receiving the Nordan envoy."

Caelan.

Inside the palace, Leonhart had once again sent word requesting entry. As usual, Alaric instructed Iris to go to the palace gates and receive him.

As she reached a fork in the corridor, a tall figure stepped out from behind the corner of the red stone wall, directly into her path.

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Chapter 540 Gathering Story

Iris stopped short. She lifted her eyes briefly, then lowered them just as quickly.

Caelan.

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Filehed

He wore a dark slate-blue formal coat, a jade belt at his waist emphasizing his tall frame. His face was partially shadowed, making his expression hard to read, except for his eyes, dark and sharp, fixed on her with quiet intensity.

Iris stepped back to create a respectful distance and dipped into a formal curtsy. "Your Highness."

Caelan's voice was calm. "What a coincidence. Running into you here again."

Iris held her posture, her thoughts sharp and clear.

Coincidence? Not a chance.

He knew I'd be here. He came looking for me.

But why?

She couldn't read him.

Straightening slowly, she answered carefully, "I was sent by His Highness to receive Lord Leonhart at the palace gates. Your Highness guessed correctly."

A faint smile touched Caelan's lips. "If we're talking about sharp minds, I doubt I compare to you."

It sounded like praise.

It didn't feel like it.

Iris lowered her gaze further, her tone even more respectful. "You give me too much credit. I simply follow orders. The Crown Prince instructed me to receive Leonhart, so I wouldn't dare delay. As for Your Highness, your judgment is exceptional. Otherwise, His Majesty wouldn't have entrusted you with receiving the Nordian envoy. That alone shows his confidence in you."

Caelan said nothing.

He simply stood there, watching her, his gaze lingering on the faint tension in her expression.

A cool draft moved through the corridor, stirring the hem of his coat.

Under that steady scrutiny, Iris felt the pressure build, yet she didn't dare look up.

She had always been good at reading people.

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Chapter 540 Gathering Storm

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In the Crown Prince's Wing, she could see through most of them.

She understood Alaric's pride and rigidity. She knew Leonhart's open, easy nature.

She could even grasp parts of Theodric's thinking, and Isla's careful strategies.

But Caelan, she couldn't read him at all. He was younger than her.

And yet every time she faced him, it felt like trying to see through shifting fog, like the situation was slipping beyond her control.

"You seem particularly interested in Leonhart."

Caelan spoke suddenly.

The question came out of nowhere, and Iris's heart skipped.

She kept her gaze lowered. "Why would Your Highness think that? I serve the Crown Prince. Any guest who visits the Crown Prince's Wing must be treated with care. I wouldn't dare neglect that duty."

She paused briefly, then added, "If Your Highness were to visit as well, I would serve you with the same care."

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