

Awakening Love: Reborn to Be His Duchess Novel

We Had Something Real But Didn't Handle It Right

541

Chapter 541 A Calculated Offer

6

72

Finished

Caelan let out a soft laugh. “Iris, do you feel like serving in the Crown Prince’s Wing is a little too uncertain? Planning ahead, looking for a more secure place for yourself?”

The question was blunt.

Though phrased like a question, it sounded far more like a statement.

Iris’s fingers tightened inside her sleeve, her nails pressing into her palm, the faint sting keeping her steady.

She lifted her gaze to Caelan, her tone still respectful and composed. “Your Highness overestimates me. I have no idea where such unfounded rumors came from. His Highness has always trusted me and treated me generously. Being allowed to serve at his side is already more than I could hope for. I have never harbored any divided loyalties, nor would I dare entertain thoughts of abandoning my lord for personal gain.”

She dipped into a proper curtsy. “If Your Highness has no further instructions, I should go receive Lord Leonhart.”

With that, she turned to leave.

Behind her, Caelan's voice followed, calm and unhurried. "Leonhart leads an easy life. The household affairs of Duke Roland's estate, finances, staffing, all of it, are managed by the Duchess. She appears gentle, but she runs a strict household. Careful, precise. They value clear backgrounds and proper lineage in those they employ, and they do not make changes lightly."

Iris's steps paused for the briefest moment.

Caelan continued, "Leonhart may be easygoing, but when it comes to staffing, he has no authority. You won't be able to enter Duke Roland's household."

A beat of silence.

Then he added, "If you're in a hurry to leave the Crown Prince's Wing, you might consider someone else."

A slight pause.

"For instance... me."

The single word landed softly, yet carried unmistakable weight.

Iris turned back almost instinctively.

1/4

17:18 Fri, May 22 N

Chapter 541 A Calculated Offer

6

72

Finished

The spring sunlight was bright, forcing her to narrow her eyes slightly as she looked at the young prince standing against the light.

His posture was straight and composed, his features blurred by the glow, but his eyes were strikingly sharp.

Their gazes met for a brief moment.

Then Iris looked away.

She drew in a quiet breath. “Your Highness must be joking. I am of low standing, hardly worth troubling you over. However, since Your Highness shares a close bond with the Crown Prince, and I serve at his side, I would dare offer a small suggestion out of respect for that brotherly relationship.”

Caelan inclined his head slightly, as though listening attentively. “Go on.”

Iris lowered her eyes. “I have heard that His Majesty has entrusted Your Highness with receiving Nordia’s new envoy upon their arrival. It is an important diplomatic matter, and since Your Highness has not handled such affairs before, there may be unfamiliar details. In my humble opinion, Your Highness could visit Hale Manor and seek guidance from those with experience.”

Caelan raised a brow slightly.

Iris continued, “Moreover, I have heard the Crown Prince mention that Hale Manor has recently had some tensions with several noble families in Vanelle. If Your Highness were to visit, it would be entirely appropriate, as a nephew showing concern for his uncle and aunt.”

She finished softly, “I have spoken out of turn. Please forgive me. Lord Leonhart must be waiting, so I will take my leave.”

After speaking, Iris gave another curtsey and turned to leave,

This time, she did not pause.

Caelan remained where he stood, watching her figure grow more distant, the interest in his eyes deepening.

A few steps behind him, Cedar, who had remained silent until now, stepped forward slightly and asked in a low voice, “Your Highness, why are you so interested in a maid from the Crown Prince’s Wing?”

Caelan was steady and reserved by nature, rarely showing such keen interest in any one person.

Caelan withdrew his gaze and asked lightly, “Is it that obvious?”

Cedar nodded honestly.

2/4

17:18 Fri, May 22 N

Chapter 541 A Calculated Offer

§

72

Finished

Caelan let out a quiet laugh, then turned and began walking forward, hands loosely clasped behind his back. “You wouldn’t understand. That girl is... very interesting.”

Cedar tilted his head, confusion written all over his face.

Caelan had no intention of explaining further. This was his own matter.

They had little contact with the Crown Prince’s Wing and were unfamiliar with its attendants.

It was only at Lady of Grace and Virtue’s birthday banquet that he first noticed Iris .

Objectively speaking, in a palace filled with striking beauties, Iris’s looks were not particularly remarkable. She could only be called neat and pleasant.

But that day, amidst the lively banquet, he had personally observed how Iris navigated between Leonhart and Alaric. He found it fascinating.

So that day, he kept watching her.

She seemed to notice someone observing her, yet could not determine who it was.

Until they met again in the palace.

When Caelan looked at her without hiding it, she finally realized.

The one who had been watching her that day... was him.

Caelan.

He also noticed that she was deliberately drawing closer to Leonhart, so he paid attention, quietly instructing people to watch the movements of Duke Roland's household.

When he learned that Leonhart would enter the palace today, he waited here.

And as expected, he saw her again.

He, Caelan, intended to become Crown Prince.

And beyond that, the King.

First, because he believed the current Crown Prince was unfit. If Alaric were to inherit the throne, given his temperament and methods, the people of the realm would likely suffer greatly.

3/1

17:18 Fri, May 22 N

Chapter 541 A Calculated Offer

542

Chapter 542 No Way Back

Second, within the royal family, a prince who does not aspire to the throne cannot be considered a worthy prince.

Finished

Moreover, if he failed to claim the throne, neither he nor his mother would survive under the Queen and the Crown Prince.

They had no alternative.

Recently, the Crown Prince's influence at court had been rising steadily. Caelan and his mother had discussed it in private, both sensing that something was off.

Now, Caelan was completely certain.

Everything traced back to Iris.

The invitation he had extended earlier had been sincere.

He did not

lack loyal guards, nor servants to handle daily affairs. What he lacked was someone like Iris, someone sharp-

minded, observant, and able to read a room the moment she stepped into it. She knew how to move through complicated situations without drawing unnecessary attention, adjusting just enough to stay ahead without ever losing control. She wasn't about brute force. She was more like a finely balanced blade, subtle, controlled, and precise, the kind that didn't need strength to break through a stalemate, only the right angle and perfect timing.

He wanted her.

He needed her.

Iris received Leonhart and brought him back to the Crown Prince's Wing, where he settled into a warm chamber to admire calligraphy and paintings.

As usual, Iris stood by to attend to him.

She knew his preferences well. From time to time, she offered a few comments, never overly elaborate, yet always insightful.

Leonhart nodded

repeatedly, clearly enjoying himself, growing more fond of her with each exchange

.

After about two hours, as the time for the evening meal approached, Leonhart reluctantly prepared to leave.

At that moment, footsteps sounded outside, followed by a servant's announcement

.

1/3

17:18 Fri, May 22 N

Chapter 542 No Way Back

Alaric had returned.

“Alaric!”

\o 7z

Finished

Leonhart greeted him with a bright smile, stepping forward. “You’re finally done! These pieces today are incredible!”

Alaric still carried a faint trace of ink from the Ministry of Rites. He was in good spirits. Seeing Leonhart so pleased, he allowed a slight smile. “If you truly like them, choose one. I’ll give it to you.”

Leonhart’s eyes widened in delight. “Really? I can actually take one?”

Even as he spoke, he had already moved toward the long table, carefully selecting a piece.

“Of course.”

Alaric paused briefly before adding, “But once you take it, you’ll run an errand for me.”

Leonhart, fully absorbed in choosing, replied without looking up, “Where to? What do you need?”

Alaric’s voice remained even. “Hale Manor. Go check on your aunt.”

Leonhart blinked, finally looking up in confusion. “Go see her? Why?”

Alaric slowly rotated the signet ring on his thumb. “I’ve heard that she’s recently offended several noble families in Vanelle over minor matters, even drawing criticism from court officials. As her nephew, and a member of the royal family, it would be appropriate for you to visit and show concern.”

Leonhart paused, slightly taken aback.

Alaric continued, “Also, I’ve heard that Caelan went to Hale Manor today. Officially, to consult his uncle about the proper protocol for receiving Nordia’s envoy.”

At the side, Iris was pouring coffee for Leonhart.

At those words, her fingers trembled slightly.

The stream shifted just a fraction, though no coffee spilled. She steadied her hand immediately.

He really went... just as I suggested.

But he had been careless.

2/3

17:18 Fri, May 22

Chapter 542 No Way Back

72

Finished

If the Crown Prince's Wing already knew, then his movements had not been concealed at all.

Alaric let out a faint, amused scoff. "That Caelan. When he was younger, he was frail, like a sickly stray kitten, always avoiding people. Now he's different. Excelling in both study and martial training, speaking more confidently before Father, earning plenty of praise."

His eyes narrowed slightly, a dangerous glint appearing. "Putting in this much effort... perhaps he's starting to eye this position as well."

Leonhart was startled. "Alaric, I think you're overthinking it. Caelan has always been calm and well-behaved."

Alaric scoffed. "You think everyone is harmless."

He waved a hand dismissively. "Enough. Pick your painting. Just remember what I told you. If you forget, don't expect any gifts from me again."

Leonhart rubbed his nose awkwardly, a little embarrassed.

Iris placed the cup back over the small brazier to keep it warm, then lowered her gaze to check the coals carefully.

Once finished, she gave a silent curtsy and quietly withdrew from the room.

Halfway down the corridor, a thought struck her suddenly.

If Alaric already knew Caelan had gone to Hale Manor...

Did that mean he also knew about their encounter earlier along the palace path? If he knew about Caelan's visit, then her meeting with him might also be known.

Given the Crown Prince's temper, an outburst would be the least of her concerns.

No... I can't afford a single *mistake right now. Not at a time like this.*

A thin layer of cold sweat formed on her forehead.

"Iris."

Alaric's voice suddenly sounded from behind her.

Her entire body stiffened. She forced herself to stop, then slowly turned around

543

Chapter 543 A Simple Order

No harsh questioning came.

No sudden accusation.

;

72

Finished

Alaric simply spoke, his tone controlled. "Go find Tristan. Have him leave the palace at once and carry a message to the Baker Estate. Tell my two uncles the matter they requested has already been handled."

Iris paused for a brief moment.

So it was only a message.

The tightness in her chest finally loosened just a little. She lowered her head. "Yes, Your Highness."

The following day, just beyond Vanelle's outer gates, banners snapped in the wind as ranks of guards stood in formal formation.

Caelan stood at the front, dressed in full ceremonial attire, dark velvet layered over deep crimson, trimmed with gold thread. His posture was upright, his expression composed.

There was still a trace of youth in his features, but his gaze had steadied. The weight of royal bearing had already begun to settle over him.

The Nordanian delegation approached at a measured pace.

Their carriage rolled to a stop. The curtain was drawn aside, and under the escort of several Nordanian guards, the newly appointed envoy stepped down.

She appeared to be in her early twenties, dressed in the signature style of Nordanian nobility. Her gown was richly layered, bold in color and intricate in pattern, adorned with heavy goldwork and large gemstones at her throat and wrists.

Her figure was tall and full, her skin warm-toned.

Her eyes stood out the most, long and slightly lifted at the corners, carrying a sharp, alluring edge.

There was something calculating in the way she looked at people.

Caelan stepped forward, his voice clear and steady. "You've come a long way. The journey must have been tiring. His Majesty has sent me to welcome you personally, and a reception has been prepared within the palace this evening. We would be honored if you would attend."

17:18 Fri, May 22 N

Chapter 543 A Simple Order

72

Finished

Valessa let her gaze travel over him slowly, her voice lazy but edged. “Last time my brother entered your palace, he never came back out. From what I hear, your palace doesn’t sound particularly safe.”

She paused, then let out a faint, amused breath.

“I think I’ll stay where you’ve arranged for us instead. Feels more reliable.”

Then she tilted her head slightly, her lips curving. “And I am the sister of the King of Nordia. By custom, shouldn’t a prince of higher standing be sent to receive me? Instead, you send someone like you?”

Her eyes lingered, openly dismissive.

“Still a boy.”

The words were blunt.

Several Avenlor officials nearby shifted uncomfortably.

Caelan, however, remained composed. The day before, he had gone to Hale Manor. Cassian had warned him clearly.

Valessa was difficult.

Proud, sharp-tongued, and fond of testing boundaries.

Caelan met her gaze calmly. “His Majesty sent me precisely because he values Your Highness’s safety.”

Valessa raised a brow.

“By custom,” Caelan continued, “a visiting royal of your rank would indeed be received by one of our senior princes. That was the case when Roderic arrived last year. However, His Majesty considered that Your Highness is in the prime of youth, while most of our senior princes are far older. He believed sending someone closer in age would make the reception feel more fitting. It is a gesture of consideration.”

He did not rush his words.

“As for the reception in the palace, security has been reinforced at every level. Every detail *has* been reviewed and secured. What happened before was unforeseen on both sides. His Majesty remains deeply regretful. Avenlor sincerely seeks peace, and your safety will be fully assured”

Cassian had told him something else. She liked being praised for her youth.

And she had another weakness. Caelan continued, "All arrangements for tonight's reception

2/4

17:18 Fri, May 22 N

Chapter 543 A Simple Order

have been placed under Alaric's supervision."

Valessa's expression shifted slightly. "The Crown Prince? Alaric?"

Caelan nodded. "Yes."

This time, her lips curved with interest. She lifted her chin slightly. "Then I'll attend."

Caelan allowed himself a faint smile.

The task was done.

Thinking back, it was fortunate he had listened to Iris and gone to Hale Manor.

Cassian had given him exactly what he needed.

72

Finished

At the time, just before he left, Cassian had called him back and said, "If she refuses, tell her Alaric will be there. She won't decline after that."

Caelan had wanted to ask why.

But Cassian had already been in a hurry, heading off to prepare dinner for Elowen, apron tied, clearly unwilling to delay.

There had been no chance to ask.

Now, the answer was obvious.

As the evening banquet approached, preparations within the palace were nearly complete.

Elowen received her invitation and set out early with Cassian in a carriage.

Along the way, she seemed to recall something and turned toward him. “Cassian, why is Nordia’s new envoy so interested in Alaric?”

Cassian leaned back against the cushioned seat, resting his chin lightly against his hand. “During the campaign in Nordia, there was a battle at Wolf Ridge. We set an ambush and captured an elite unit. Valessa was among them. She was the sister of the commanding officer and knew quite a bit about their troop deployments.”

His tone remained easy.

“The situation was tense, so I needed information. I told her I was Alaric, said I despised the war and had slipped away from the army to stop it.”

2/1

544

Chapter 544 A Familiar Trick

Elowen looked at him. “And then?”

72

Finished

Cassian’s lips curved slightly. “I pretended to help her escape. On the way, she trusted me and shared quite a bit. When we reached the exit, Bran was already waiting with men as instructed. We captured her again.”

Elowen shook her head, her tone sincere. “That’s ruthless.”

Cassian seemed perfectly at ease with that. “A seasoned hunter knows how to handle another.”

Elowen smiled faintly. “But she’s seen you before. You and Alaric look nothing alike. If she recognizes you tonight...”

Cassian shook his head. “It was dark, chaotic. She didn’t see clearly enough to remember.”

Elowen tilted her head slightly. “And if she does recognize you?”

Cassian leaned closer, lowering his voice just enough. “Then I’ll be relying on you, Your Grace.”

Elowen laughed.

Before long, the carriage reached the palace gates.

Night had settled in, and the palace was illuminated by rows of iron sconces and braziers, firelight casting a steady golden glow across stone walls and high archways.

Cassian stepped down first, as he always did, and extended his hand.

Elowen placed her hand in his, letting him guide her down carefully.

His gaze briefly passed over her rounded stomach, and a thought came to him. “When the child is born, you’ll still step down first.”

Elowen looked at him. “And then?”

“I’ll still help you down.”

Elowen smiled. “The child will cry.”

Cassian answered calmly. “Then he can wait.”

She laughed again.

“Aunt.”

17:18 Fri, May 22 N

Chapter 544 A Familiar Trick

Finished

The voice came from nearby, familiar.

“What’s so amusing?”

Elowen turned.

Alaric stood beneath the torchlight, dressed in formal court attire, a gold circlet set in place. His expression was composed, but his gaze had already dropped to their joined hands.

Something dark flickered there.

Elowen’s smile faded slightly.

Cassian spoke lazily, “Grown matters. Not for children.”

The tone was deliberate.

Alaric’s jaw tightened as he looked at him. “So you’ve come as well.”

He paused, then continued, “The invitation was sent to her by me. I didn’t expect her to bring unrelated company. If I recall correctly, you are still under sanction. Bloodline aside, that leaves you little more than a noble without standing. This kind of banquet doesn’t seem appropriate for you.”

The words were not polite.

The air around them seemed to still. A few passing officials slowed their steps, listening quietly.

Cassian glanced at him. “I’m here as family of the Lady of Grace and Virtue.”

He emphasized the last part.

Alaric paused.

Elowen nodded slightly. “You’ll understand when you have a family of your own.”

Alaric’s expression faltered for a brief moment.

Then his eyes narrowed. “Still, you may want to be careful. Making too many enemies in Vanelle doesn’t end well.”

He looked at her more intently. “If you ever find yourself cornered, come to me. I can offer you more than certain... unreliable company.”

Before this, he had used gifts to coax Leonhart into visiting Hale Manor and finding out what had happened recently.

2/4

17:19 Fri, May 22 N

Chapter 544 A Familiar Trick

72

Finished

Leonhart came back and confirmed everything.

Elowen had thrown an official’s son into a pig enclosure.

She had also made Archer and his son spend half a day hauling water at Hale Manor.

All of it, for a boy with no standing.

Alaric had been stunned. For someone like that?

Even he wouldn’t act so openly.

Now that Cassian no longer held the title of Duke of Duskmoor, they had lost that protection.

And yet Elowen still acted without restraint.

If the officials joined together to press the issue, even her title could be stripped.

And yet... A part of him almost looked forward to that.

Once she lost everything, once she had nothing left to rely on, she would have no choice.

At that point, she would fall entirely within his control.

Elowen showed no anger. Her reply was brief. “We’ll see if you’re in a position to help when that time comes.”

She turned. “Let’s go, Cassian.”

Cassian acknowledged softly.

Alaric watched them walk away, his gaze fixed on their joined hands. It stirred something restless in him.

In all his memories, past or present, he had never once held Elowen’s hand like that.

But then he thought of something else.

The arrangements for the court qualification trials were already in place. In half a month, the results would be announced. His cousins would pass and enter official ranks, becoming his support.

From then on, everything would move according to his will.

At that point, something as simple as holding her hand would mean nothing.

3/4

17:19 Fri, May 22 N

Chapter 544 A Familiar Trick

His mood eased.

He stepped forward and entered the hall. Most of the guests had already gathered.

Then movement stirred at the entrance.

The Nordanian delegation had arrived.

9.9K

B

72

Finished

4/4

545

Chapter 545 A Dangerous Beauty

6 72

Finished

Elowen lifted a crystal cup of honeyed drink to her lips, taking a slow sip before looking up.

The Nordian delegation was larger than expected.

Flowira and Zachary walked among them, flanking a woman at the center.

That had to be Valessa.

She had clearly dressed with intent.

A deep crimson gown, richly woven with gold thread, caught the torchlight as she moved. The cut followed Avenlor court fashion at a glance, but the tailoring was sharper, the sleeves fitted closer along the arms instead of flowing loose, giving her silhouette a more controlled, almost predatory elegance.

At her wrists were a pair of heavy gold cuffs, each sculpted into snarling wolf heads, the craftsmanship so vivid they almost seemed ready to bite.

Her skirt fell straight without splits, paired with dark deerskin boots that rose to her ankles. The tips curved slightly upward, each adorned with a single luminous pearl that swayed faintly with her steps.

Her hair had been braided into multiple fine strands, each tied off with small gold rings. Half of those braids were gathered and secured with a crescent-shaped comb set with rubies, while the rest spilled freely down her back and shoulders.

At her brow rested a deep amber gem, large and glowing like captured firelight, intensifying the sharpness of her features.

Her brows arched cleanly, her lashes thick, her eyes naturally tilted upward at the corners. There was something untamed in her beauty, something bold and unapologetic, the kind that didn't invite admiration so much as demand it.

Elowen watched her for a moment, then said softly, "She's stunning."

Cassian didn't look up, his attention still on peeling the skin from a grape with careful precision before placing it into a small dish for her. "Not as stunning as you."

Elowen glanced at him, caught slightly off guard.

Before she could respond, Valessa had already stepped forward and come to a stop in the center of the hall.

"Which one of you is the Lady of Grace and Virtue?"

1/4

17:19 Fri, May 22 N

Chapter 545 A Dangerous Beauty

Her Avenlor speech was flawless.

72

Finished

Elowen had just placed the grape into her mouth. At the question, she looked up.

Every gaze in the hall had already turned toward her.

Valessa followed their attention and locked onto Elowen. Her eyes narrowed slightly.

"So it's you."

Her gaze moved over Elowen once, deliberate and unhurried. "You live up to the reputation."

Elowen swallowed, then lifted a linen napkin to lightly touch the corner of her lips before rising with composed grace. “Your Highness is generous. You are truly—”

“Beautiful, yes,” Valessa cut in, her attention already drifting away as if she had lost interest mid-sentence. “But empty.”

Her tone carried open disdain. “A bloom with no fragrance. Looks good from a distance, offers nothing up close.”

A ripple of murmurs spread through the hall.

Elowen paused briefly.

She had never met Valessa before. The hostility was immediate, deliberate.

Cassian’s expression darkened, his posture shifting as he started to rise. Elowen caught it instantly and placed her hand lightly on his shoulder.

Cassian looked at her. There was no hurt in her expression.

Only calm refusal. She didn’t want him intervening.

Cassian held her gaze, the tension in his eyes cooling into something colder, more restrained. After a moment, he settled back into his seat.

“Your Highness...” Flowira spoke from the side, still dressed in Zachary’s attire. “The Duchess is widely admired. Her Tales of Luminara have spread through Nordia, and many readers truly enjoy them—”

Valessa’s expression tightened. She shot her a sharp look. “If you remember who you’re speaking to, then hold your tongue. Taking someone else’s side so easily, I wonder who taught you that.”

Flowira stiffened, her face going pale.

2/4

17:19 Fri, May 22 N

Chapter 545 A Dangerous Beauty

§ 72

Finished

Zachary, dressed in women's clothing and still struggling with the language, looked between them, clearly unable to follow what was being said.

At that moment, Alaric stepped forward, a courteous smile on his face.

"Your Highness has traveled far. You must be weary from the journey. The Duchess is family to me. If there has been any offense, I hope Your Highness will be gracious."

Valessa turned her gaze to him. "You're the Crown Prince?"

"I am."

She studied him for a moment, and something in her expression softened slightly. "You're too soft-hearted. That's why people walk all over you."

Alaric paused.

He had never framed it that way before. But hearing it now, it settled into place too easily.

Yes.

He had always been too accommodating. That was why Cassian overshadowed him. That was why Elowen had turned away from him.

Valessa gave a quiet, dismissive breath. "But now that I'm here, I won't let that continue. A crown prince should act like one."

The protective tone in her voice was unmistakable.

A thought surfaced in Alaric's mind, unexpected and strangely compelling.

Could it be she's heard *of me in Nordia... and taken an interest?*

The idea amused him. A faint smile curved at his lips.

If that were true, it wouldn't be a bad thing.

It could strengthen his hold over the Crown Prince's Wing.

And perhaps... Make Elowen look at him again.

“Your Highness is kind,” Alaric said smoothly. “Please, take your seat. The banquet will begin shortly.”

Valessa gave a slight nod and took her seat.

3/4

17:19 Fri, May 22 N

...

72

Chapter 545 A Dangerous Beauty

The Nordian delegation followed.

Alaric gestured behind him. “Iris, pour the wine.”

Iris stepped forward, lifting a cup.

Valessa glanced at her. “You only keep one attendant?”

Iris lowered her gaze. “I am honored to serve His Highness.”

Valessa studied her, her gaze sharp and critical.

Finished

Iris wore a pale blue servant’s gown, her hair neatly arranged. Her features were pleasant, but understated.

Valessa let out a faint laugh. “Unremarkable.”

She tilted her chin slightly toward Elowen. “Not even close to her.”

Iris knew her place. She had never considered herself comparable to Elowen.

And faced with someone like Valessa, there was no room to argue. Not when the woman herself carried such overwhelming presence.

9.9K

B

1

546

Awakening Love Reborn to Be His Duchess

Chapter 546 The Game Begins

Iris lowered her head further. "I wouldn't presume to compare myself to Her Grace."

Valessa waved her off with little interest. "I don't need you. Step back."

Iris glanced toward Alaric.

She didn't mind the task, nor the insult. But she had stepped forward at his instruction.

Alaric watched the exchange, his mood unexpectedly light.

He waved a hand. "You're dismissed."

Relief passed quietly through Iris as she withdrew.

72

Finished

Across the hall, Elowen had taken in everything. For a moment, something amused her, and she let out a soft laugh.

Cassian turned slightly. "She spoke to you like that, and you're laughing?"

Elowen's eyes curved. "She still called me beautiful. I'll take the compliment."

Cassian's expression didn't ease. "Ella, you shouldn't have stopped me."

Elowen turned serious. "I know you didn't like seeing that. But this isn't just about that

moment."

She shifted closer, lowering her voice.

“I thought of something.”

Cassian glanced at her. “What?”

Elowen leaned in slightly. “Cassian, do you remember that account in The Chronicle of Kingdoms, the one where a ruler let his rival grow bold before moving against him?”

Cassian’s eyes sharpened.

Understanding settled in.

He looked at her, then said quietly, “You’re letting her push... on purpose.”

She’s not ignoring it. She’s setting the stage.

Outside the hall, away from the noise, Iris walked along the pale stone corridor until the sound

1/4

17:19 Fri, May 22 N

Chapter 546 The Game Begins

of voices faded behind her.

72

Finished

Only then did she stop in the shadow of a column and draw in a slow breath of cool night air.

She lifted her hand unconsciously, brushing her cheek.

“Iris.”

A voice called softly from the darkness.

Her heart jumped. She recognized it immediately.

Caelan.

Her first instinct was caution. She glanced around quickly. No one.

“Don’t worry,” Caelan said, stepping forward into the dim light. “No one from the Crown Prince’s Wing is nearby.”

Iris stepped back slightly, lowering her gaze as she gave a proper bow. “Your Highness.”

Caelan looked at her directly. “Have you considered my offer?”

She understood exactly what he was getting at.

It meant walking away from the Crown Prince’s Wing, not turning to Duke Roland, and choosing him instead.

For a moment, she said nothing, the weight of that choice settling quietly between them.

Caelan continued, his tone steady. “What happened inside, I saw it. If you were under my protection, I wouldn’t have allowed that. I would have stood for you.”

Iris’s fingers tightened slightly at her side.

Life in the Crown Prince’s Wing required constant care. Alaric wasn’t cruel, but he had never truly trusted her.

More often than not, she was simply useful.

Nothing more.

But those thoughts could not be spoken aloud.

She kept her gaze lowered. “I am not someone worth noticing. There’s nothing to take offense

at.”

214

17:19 Fri, May 22 N

Chapter 546 The Game Begins

Firushed

Caelan shook his head. "A woman's worth isn't defined by her looks. Intelligence matters far

more."

Iris pressed her lips together, then finally looked up at him.

Under the moonlight, his expression was composed, his presence quieter than Alaric's, but deeper.

"May I ask something, Your Highness?" she said carefully. "If I were to serve you, what would you expect of me? Would I stand at your side, or remain where I am?"

Caelan's eyes lit slightly. "That's the right question."

He stepped closer. "Right now, Alaric holds the advantage. I can't bring *you* over openly. It would draw attention, and he wouldn't allow it. So I need you where you are, acting as my support."

Iris didn't respond immediately.

Instead, she said, "You went to Hale Manor, and word reached the Crown Prince quickly. How can I be sure I won't be exposed? If I'm discovered, you may be safe, but I won't be."

Caelan smiled faintly. "That visit was intentional."

Iris froze.

"I didn't do it for him," Caelan said. "I did it so you would see how I treat the people I rely on. If I trust someone, I don't question them."

He paused slightly. "I listen."

He did not call them servants. He spoke as if they mattered.

Something in that shifted inside her.

Caclan continued, “You don’t need to worry about your safety. Once the Nordia negotiations are settled, I’ll find a way to bring you to my side. You’re sharp. I’ll make use of that. And I’ll protect you.”

His voice remained calm, assured.

“You won’t have to stand in halls pouring wine or enduring petty slights. You’ll advise me. That’s where you belong.”

3/4

17:19 Fri, May 22 N

Chapter 546 The Game Begins

72

72

Finished

9.9K

ALA

547

Awakening Love Reborn to Be His Duchess

Chapter 547 A Silent Pact

72

72

Finished

A cool night breeze drifted through the corridor at the Crown Prince’s Wing, brushing past the rows of iron sconces fixed along the stone walls. The flames flickered gently, casting shifting shadows across their faces.

Iris said nothing.

This was no small matter. Once she took that step, there would be no turning back.

Caelan studied her in silence for a moment, then eased the tension deliberately, stepping back just enough to give her space.

“I’ve said everything I needed to tonight,” he said, his tone calm but measured. “I don’t expect an answer right away. If you agree, within three days, find a way to leave a branch of peach blossoms outside my mother’s residence. If you don’t... then do nothing. I’ll understand.”

He stepped back further, his figure gradually disappearing into the dim edges of the corridor.

“It’s cold tonight. You should head back.”

Iris stood still for a brief moment, then gave a proper court bow toward him. “Understood. I’ll take my leave, Your Highness.”

She turned and walked down the corridor toward the Crown Prince’s Wing.

Her steps were steady.

Her heartbeat was anything but.

Inside the grand banquet hall, the atmosphere was still lively.

Theodric sat at the center, elevated above the gathered nobles, his presence commanding without effort. His gaze swept across the hall, sharp and calculating, carrying the weight of years spent ruling.

At last, it settled on Valessa.

“It pleases me to finally meet the princess,” Theodric said, his voice deep and steady.

Valessa rose gracefully and offered a formal Nordan salute, composed and unyielding. “Your Majesty is too generous. It is an honor for our delegation to be received with such distinction.”

Theodric allowed himself a faint smile. “Now that you’ve arrived in Vanelle, it is time for our nations to resume negotiations.”

17:19 Fri, May 22 N

Chapter 547 A Silent Pact

72

Finished

Valessa inclined her head slightly. “Of course. My brother, the King of Nordia, places great importance on these talks, which is why I was sent personally. However, whether these negotiations succeed depends greatly on who represents your side.”

Her tone remained even, but the intent beneath it was unmistakable.

“As I understand, the matter was previously handled by Your Majesty’s brother. Unfortunately, his conduct was... less than acceptable. It even led to the death of my brother, Roderic.”

The hall fell into complete silence.

Roderic’s death was not something openly discussed, and yet here she was, stating it plainly, the accusation clear.

Theodric’s expression did not shift. “The circumstances of the prince’s death are still under investigation. As the primary suspect, my brother has already been stripped of all duties and confined to his residence. He will not take part in these negotiations.”

Valessa gave a small nod. “That is reassuring.”

She continued without pause, “In that case, given his status and legitimacy, the Crown Prince would be the most suitable choice. As heir, he represents the future of Avenlor. Having him oversee the negotiations would demonstrate sincerity.”

She turned toward Alaric, her gaze softening slightly.

“If he is not the one presiding... I doubt I would have much interest in continuing.”

The implication was unmistakable.

Even edged with pressure. Several senior officials exchanged subtle glances, their expressions tightening.

Theodric remained silent for a moment, then glanced toward Cassian. Cassian, however, seemed entirely unconcerned.

He sat beside Elowen, carefully separating the bones from a piece of roasted river fish, placing the clean portion onto her plate with quiet focus, as though the entire exchange had nothing to do with him.

Theodric frowned faintly, clearly dissatisfied, then withdrew his gaze.

At last, he nodded.

“The princess makes a reasonable point. Very well. The Crown Prince will oversee these negotiations.”

2/1

17:19 Fri, May 22 N

Chapter 547 A Silent Pact

Alaric felt a surge of exhilaration.

72

Finished

He had never realized how effortless things could feel when someone powerful stood firmly on his side.

With Valessa openly supporting him, his path ahead would be smooth.

Alaric rose and gave a formal bow. “I will give this my full effort and will not disappoint Your Majesty or the princess.”

By the time Elowen returned to Hale Manor, it was already late into the night.

As the carriage came to a stop at the front courtyard, Anson stepped forward immediately, lowering his voice.

“Your Grace, you have a distinguished guest waiting.”

Elowen already knew who it was.

She gave a small nod. "As usual, show her to the study."

"Yes. Your Grace."

She turned to Cassian. "You should get some rest."

Cassian gently pressed her fingers. "Don't overdo it."

Elowen nodded. "I won't."

Inside

the study at Hale Manor, the hearth burned steadily, filling the room with warm light.

Flowira stood near the center, still dressed in her Nordian envoy attire. Her features were striking, but a trace of worry lingered in her expression.

She steadied herself before speaking.

"You may not know this, Your Grace, but in Nordia, my aunt holds a position very similar to His Grace"

She continued slowly, her voice quieter.

"She is my father's full sister. When he ascended the throne, she played a crucial role. On the night of the uprising, she took a blade meant for him. The wound damaged her deeply... she was never able to have children afterward."

Flowira lowered her gaze briefly.

3/4

17:19 Fri, May 22 N

Chapter 547 A Silent Pact

72

Finished

“My father has never forgotten that. He grants her almost anything she asks. That’s why she acts the way she does. I’ve tried to reason with her, but she doesn’t take it seriously.”

9.9K

4/4

548

Elowen listened quietly, her expression calm and composed.

72

Finished

“There’s no need to worry,” she said gently. “Some things are better left to unfold naturally. If the envoy favors the Crown Prince and wants to support him, that’s not a bad thing. As heir, he should be taking on more responsibility for His Majesty.”

Flowira understood immediately.

No interference. *No resistance. Let it happen.*

The higher he rises, the harder he falls.

Soon, the day of the court qualification results arrived.

Elowen’s pregnancy had progressed enough that going out was no longer practical, so she sent Mira, Nikki, and Scarlet to see the results in her place.

Before long, the three of them returned together.

Mira rushed in first, cheeks flushed from the cold air and the crowd, her voice full of

excitement.

“Your Grace, the city was packed today. Outside the Imperial Examination Hall, it was shoulder to shoulder. I could barely get close enough to see the results board.”

She accepted a cup of warm water from Rosaline, took several quick sips, then continued, "Some people were celebrating, others were crying. I even saw an old man with completely white hair pushing through the crowd just to get a look. I don't even know if he made it."

Nikki came in a moment later, head lowered, her eyes red.

Elowen noticed immediately.

Mira lowered her voice. "Josh didn't pass. His name wasn't on the list."

Elowen wasn't surprised.

She simply asked, "Who placed at the top this year?"

Mira thought for a moment. "Albert, Liam, and Kaelan."

Elowen paused, almost letting out a laugh.

Alaric really wasn't even trying to make it look fair anymore.

1/3

17:19 Fri, May 22

Chapter 548 Let Them Climb

6

72

Finished

Mira misread her reaction and quickly added, "It's alright, Your Grace. Even if the Baker family did well, it doesn't affect Hale Manor."

Nikki sniffed and forced a small smile. "My brother said it's fine. If not this year, then next year."

Elowen offered her a few gentle words, then turned to Scarlet.

"What about you? Did you hear anything interesting?"

Scarlet gave a respectful bow. "I can't read, so I didn't understand the list itself, but I did hear people talking."

Elowen leaned back slightly. "Tell me."

Scarlet organized her thoughts carefully.

"First, among the top ten, only two came from modest backgrounds. The rest were all from established families. Even the top three. Many candidates were saying privately that the results didn't seem entirely fair."

She continued, "Second, word is that the Crown Prince's Wing plans to host a gathering for the top ten candidates."

Elowen raised a brow slightly.

By tradition, the top three would be summoned the next day to the Hall of Imperial Grace, where Theodric would meet them personally before confirming their final ranks.

Now the Crown Prince intended to meet them first.

And not just the top three. All ten.

Scarlet added, "Some people said it was suggested by the Nordian princess."

Elowen let out a soft laugh.

Flowira had understood perfectly.

She lifted her hand slightly. "Go and repeat everything you just told me to His Grace. Ask him to go to the palace."

Scarlet hesitated. "Should His Grace advise His Majesty against approving this?"

Elowen shook her head, "No. He should make sure it's approved."

Scarlet paused, surprised, but nodded. "Understood, Your Grace."

2/3

17:19 Fri, May 22 N

Chapter 548 Let Them Climb

6

72

Finished

Cassian never questioned Elowen's decisions.

The moment he received the message, he set aside everything and headed to the palace.

About half an hour later, Elowen was still in the study, casually flipping through a storybook, when she heard his footsteps.

She looked up just as he walked in.

He crossed the room quickly, picked up the cup beside her, and took a long drink.

Elowen set the book aside. "Well?"

Cassian smiled slightly. "When have I ever disappointed you? It's done. His Majesty agreed."

Elowen's expression brightened.

Without thinking, she reached out and brushed her fingers lightly along his cheek. "You're impressive."

Cassian turned his head, pressing a kiss into her palm. "That's it?"

Elowen smiled, her eyes soft. "You're good at persuading people. Getting His Majesty to approve something that clearly breaks protocol isn't something just anyone could manage."

Cassian looked at her, his gaze deepening. "Anything else?"

Elowen blinked, then froze for a moment.

She understood. Her heart skipped. She blinked slowly. "Are we really having this conversation in the middle of the day?"

Before Cassian could respond, hurried footsteps sounded outside.

Bran's voice followed, urgent.

"Your Grace, His Grace, someone has arrived from the Crown Prince's Wing."

Elowen raised a brow slightly. "Show them in."

9.9K

549

Chapter 549 The Invitation

72

Finished

At Hale Manor, as evening settled in and the last of the daylight faded against the t all windows, Elowen had nearly finished going through the ledgers at her desk wh en Bran stepped inside, bringing Cora with him.

Elowen remained seated, her posture composed as she looked Cora over carefully f rom head to toe before speaking.

Cora lowered her gaze, her hands folded neatly in front of her. "Your Grace, I was sent here on the Crown Prince's orders."

Elowen rested her fingers lightly against the edge of the desk. "What message did he send you with?"

Cora replied, "His Highness received the top ten candidates from the court qualific ation trials today and has invited Your Grace to attend at the Crown Prince's Wing. First, Princess Valessa of Nordia is present, and His Highness hopes the two of yo u may become better acquainted. Second, Your Grace holds the title of Lady of Gra ce and Virtue. With such distinguished scholars present, your attendance would se rve as encouragement."

She paused, then added in a quieter tone, "His Highness also gave a specific instru ction. When Your Grace comes to the Crown Prince's Wing, you are not to bring an y family members."

As she spoke, her gaze flickered briefly toward Cassian standing nearby.

Elowen lifted a brow. "And if I choose not to go?"

Cora lowered her head further. “His Highness said that among those invited today is a young man named Josh. He comes from a poor household. The Crown Prince’s Wing does not have a carriage available to send him home, so Your Grace would be asked to take him back afterward. Otherwise, he would have to walk back on his own.”

She hesitated only a fraction before continuing, “That alone would not be much of a problem, but His Highness also said that if Your Grace is unwilling to assist, Josh may be required to remain behind and work to repay the cost of today’s reception. The Crown Prince’s Wing does not keep idle hands.”

Her voice softened at the end, her head bowed low.

Elowen’s fingers curled slightly, her expression cooling. “So this is a threat.”

Cora remained still. “I am only repeating His Highness’s words.”

Elowen let out a quiet, humorless laugh. “If he’s gone this far, then I suppose I don’t have much

of a choice.”

1/3

17:20 Fri, May 22

...

Chapter 549 The Invitation

72

Finished

She rose from her seat, glancing briefly at Cassian before turning back to Cora. “He made it clear I’m not allowed to bring anyone?”

Cora nodded. “Yes, Your Grace. Only you.”

Not long after, the carriage from Hale Manor rolled through the gates of the Crown Prince’s Wing.

Alaric had been waiting.

The carriage came to a smooth stop, and the door was opened.

Inside, Elowen sat alone.

Alaric looked in, and something unmistakable flickered across his eyes.

In his previous life, Elowen had always kept her head lowered, her figure so slight it seemed she might be carried off by a strong wind. She rarely had new gowns made, and the ones she wore hung too loosely on her frame. When she greeted him, the fabric would shift just enough to reveal the sharp outline of her shoulders beneath.

He had never liked that.

Too fragile. Too withdrawn. Not someone who could stand beside him as Crown Princess.

But now, her complexion was soft and radiant, like ripe summer fruit warmed by the sun. With the season turning, her gowns were lighter, and the gentle curve of her abdomen was clearly visible. Yet it did not make her seem heavy. Instead, it gave her a quiet warmth, a sense of fullness that made her presence feel grounded and alive.

A flicker of regret stirred in Alaric's chest.

If he had taken her fully as his wife back then, would she have looked like this for him?

His throat tightened, and when he spoke, his voice carried a carefully measured gentleness. "Ella, you came."

Elowen remained seated, not moving. Her brows drew together slightly. "Where is Josh?"

The smile at Alaric's lips stiffened for a moment before smoothing out again. "Him? He didn't make the list. He's in one of the side halls, feeling sorry for himself."

He stepped forward and extended his hand toward her, palm open, his gesture easy and familiar. "Come on, Ella. Step down."

His posture suggested closeness, as though nothing had changed between them.

17:20 Fri, May 22 N

Chapter 549 The Invitation

72

Finished

As though they still stood where they once had.

Elowen did not take his hand. She didn't even glance at it.

Her gaze remained cool and steady. "I write fiction, not political doctrine. You didn't bring me here to encourage anyone. You brought me here to show that you can control the people around me whenever you feel like it."

Alaric's hand lingered in the air before he slowly withdrew it.

He let out a quiet breath. "If you understand that, then you should also understand this. You should leave Cassian and come back to me."

Elowen said nothing.

"What do you even see in him?" Alaric let out a short laugh, edged with disdain. "He has nothing left now. No title, no estate, no command. And it's only going to get worse. Princess Valessa has already promised to support me once Nordia and Avnlor establish ties. When that happens, the first person I'll deal with will be him."

He took another step closer, his voice lowering. "Look at today. I insisted on meeting the top candidates ahead of schedule. Cassian tried to stop it, even went to speak with His Majesty, but it didn't matter. His Majesty approved it anyway. That alone shows you where things stand."

Elowen still did not respond.

"Ella..." His tone softened again, coaxing, patient. "I don't care whose child you're carrying. If you come with me, if that child calls me father, I'll give you everything. Wealth, status, anything you want. The finest horses, the grandest festivals, whatever you like."

Elowen finally spoke. "And if I refuse?",

a

9.9K

B

2

3/3

550

Awakening Love Reborn to Be His Duchess

Chapter 550 No Way Back

:

72

Finished

Alaric smiled faintly. “If you refuse, then you’ve chosen him. That’s fine. Once I deal with him, I’ll take you back anyway.”

His voice remained gentle, but his words were merciless. “Don’t worry, Ella. I care about you. I’ll make sure you’re safe. But that child...”

His gaze dropped briefly to her abdomen.

“If it’s born, I’ll make sure it doesn’t live. If not, I’ll have it taken care of before it ever has the

chance.”

The cruelty in his words was plain, stripped of all pretense.

Elowen’s brows tightened, and she instinctively placed a hand over her stomach, as though shielding the child from hearing.

Alaric watched her closely, something dark and obsessive in his eyes. He stepped closer, his voice softening again. “Ella, come on. Take my hand.”

Before he could finish, a sharp blow struck the back of his leg.

Alaric's leg gave out instantly, and he dropped hard to the ground, pain shooting through his knee.

Shock and anger surged as he looked up and saw Cassian standing there.

Cassian stood slightly to the side, relaxed, looking down at him.

"You-"

Alaric's expression twisted as he turned toward Elowen. "I said no one else was allowed!"

Elowen shifted slightly in her seat, settling more comfortably. "That's my personal guard. He's responsible for my safety. You didn't say I couldn't bring a guard."

Alaric faltered, then turned back to Cassian.

Today, Cassian wasn't dressed in noble attire. Instead, he wore a fitted black riding outfit, a leather belt at his waist, boots built for movement. At a glance, he looked exactly like a guard.

Only then did Alaric realize Cassian had been there all along, just outside the carriage. He simply hadn't noticed.

His expression darkened.

1/3

17:20 Fri, **May 22** N

Chapter 550 No Way Back

:

72

Finished

He had been played.

"Fine," he muttered through clenched teeth.

Cassian spoke calmly, “Your Highness, the ground isn’t comfortable. If you’ve got something to say, you might want to stand first.”

The tone alone was enough to make Alaric’s face flush.

The guards behind him rushed forward to help, but Alaric shoved them aside, his gaze turning sharp again as he fixed on Elowen. “So you’re just going to ignore Josh? I know who he is to you. You wouldn’t let anything happen to him.”

Elowen did not answer.

At that moment, footsteps approached.

Elowen looked up to see an attendant from Kaelan’s side leading Josh over. “Your Grace, Your Highness.”

Only then did she turn back to Alaric, a faint smile touching her lips. “I knew you’d be waiting here to make a show of things. But Kaelan placed among the top ten this year, and his people are all here. I have some connection with his family, so getting Josh out wasn’t difficult.”

Her tone remained calm. “I’m taking him home now. If you have anything else to say, you can say it to my guard.”

Cassian moved at once, his arm coming up casually as it rested across Alaric’s shoulder.

“Your Grace’s right,” he said. “Anything you want to say, say it to me. I’m just the guard.”

Alaric tried to pull away.

It didn’t work.

Cassian’s grip looked loose, but it carried precise control. His thumb pressed at just the right spot, and a wave of numbness spread instantly through Alaric’s arm, locking half his body in place.

“Your Highness!” one of the guards called, stepping forward.

Cassian turned his head slightly and looked at them.

That single glance was enough.

There was no raised voice, no overt threat, yet something in his presence carried the weight of

2/3

17:20 Fri, **May 22 N**

Chapter 550 No Way Back

battlefields and command.

The guards froze.

Some of them had once served under him.

:

Even now, without his title, that instinctive fear remained.

They didn't dare move.

72

Finished

Alaric could only stand there, helpless, watching as Josh climbed into the Hale Man or carriage, watching as it rolled away.

Only then did Cassian release him, giving his back a light pat.

Alaric stumbled forward, nearly losing his balance.

"Take care," Cassian said casually. "We won't be staying for supper."

He turned and walked toward the carriage.

When he reached it, he didn't bother with the step. With a light motion, he vaulted up smoothly, landing with effortless control.

The carriage rolled toward the side gate.

Only then did Alaric snap out of it.

He straightened abruptly, his chest rising and falling, his eyes bloodshot as he stared after them, his expression twisted with anger.

“Elowen!” he shouted. “Don’t think I need you!”

9.9K

H

3/3

17:20 Fri, **May 22** N