

Awakening Love: Reborn to Be His Duchess Novel

We Had Something Real But Didn't Handle It Right

551

Chapter 551 No Turning Back

:

6

72

Finished

The carriage never slowed. It rolled straight through the side gate of the royal residence and out onto the main road beyond.

“There are more women than you could count lining up for me. Who do you think you are?”

“I’m the Crown Prince. Do you have any idea who you’re talking *to*?”

“Yeah, maybe I liked you. But I’m not about to sit around waiting for you like it’s my only option.

“This is the last time I’m saying it. If I ever come crawling back or even look your way again, then I’m not Alaric.”

By the end, his voice had gone raw, cracking under the strain.

But the carriage was already gone, wheels rattling over the stone-paved street outside the palace grounds.

Cassian tilted his head slightly, listening for a moment, then turned back with a faint grin. “Sounds like Alaric’s still shouting after you.”

Elowen didn't even bother looking back. "If you hadn't said anything, I would've thought it was some stray mutt losing its mind."

Cassian let out a quiet laugh.

Back at the Crown Prince's Wing, Alaric stood alone along the stone passage, his hair disordered, his eyes bloodshot as he stared at the empty road where the carriage had vanished.

"Your Highness..."

Iris spoke carefully, her voice small.

Alaric turned. His hand came out of nowhere.

The crack rang sharp against the stone walls.

The blow sent Iris stumbling sideways, completely caught off guard. Her carefully pinned hair came loose at once, strands falling across her face, and the edge of her lip split from the impact. The pain hit hard, then dulled into a heavy numbness.

"You useless little worm!" Alaric snapped. "Didn't I tell you she wasn't allowed to bring anyone

1/4

17:20 Fri, May 22 N

Chapter 551 No Turning Back

:

with her? You can't even handle something that simple. What exactly do I keep you for?"

71

Finished

Iris dropped immediately, folding herself down low until her forehead nearly touched the ground. "Your Highness, please don't be angry. This servant failed. I deserve-

“I know you failed,” Alaric cut in coldly. “So stay right there. Don’t move. You’ll hold that position for twelve hours.”

Her whole body stiffened.

Twelve *hours*?

Through the day and into the night?

The path beneath her was uneven stone, hard and unforgiving. Holding that posture for that long would destroy her legs.

But no one argued with the Crown Prince.

No one dared.

She sank lower, her voice shaking. “I understand. I’ll take the punishment.”

Elowen brought Josh straight back to Hale Manor.

After stepping down from the carriage, she turned to him, her tone gentle but firm. “You’ll stay here for the next few days. I’ve already sent word to have your mother brought over as well. The Crown Prince won’t let this go easily, and it’s not safe for you out there.”

Josh bowed deeply, gratitude written all over his face. “Thank you, Your Grace.”

He hesitated, pressing his lips together before speaking again, quieter now. “I didn’t make the list... I’ve let you down.”

Elowen shook her head. “This wasn’t on you.”

Josh straightened, his shoulders firm, his gaze steady. “If I didn’t pass, that’s on me. My writing wasn’t strong enough yet. That’s all there is to it. Please don’t try to soften it for me, Your Grace. I’ll sit the trials again next year. I won’t fall short twice.”

A flicker of approval passed through Elowen’s eyes.

He’s steady. Doesn’t make excuses, doesn’t look for someone to blame. That kind of spine... he’ll go far.

She didn’t say it out loud. Instead, she turned to Cora. “Take him to Tranquil Court. When his

2/4

17:20 Fri, May 22 N

Chapter 551 No Turning Back

mother arrives, bring her there too. They'll stay together for now."

G71

Finished

Josh hesitated. "Your Grace, we could stay in a smaller room. There's no need to clear out an entire residence for us."

Elowen smiled lightly. "It's been empty long enough. It could use a bit of life again."

He still looked like he wanted to argue, but she lifted her chin slightly. "Go on. I need some rest."

His eyes flicked briefly to her stomach. She had already done far too much today, going all the way to the Crown Prince's Wing to pull him out of trouble.

Swallowing his words, he bowed again and followed Cora without protest.

Once he was settled, Elowen turned to Mira, lowering her voice.

"Go to Falconcrest Manor. Tell Sylvia that I had a scare after returning from the Crown Prince's Wing today, and I'm not doing well. Ask her to come see me."

Everything she'd been setting up was finally starting to fall into place.

Mira froze. "A scare? Your Grace, are you-"

"I'm fine."

Elowen's lips curved, a hint of mischief in her eyes. "I just need a reason to bring her here. When you speak, make it sound serious. Worried. And make sure the Duchess hears you."

Mira caught on right away. Her mistress wasn't just sending for Sylvia, she was making sure the news reached the Duchess too.

And the Duchess never ignored this kind of thing. If she heard even a hint of trouble, she'd come in person without a second thought.

Mira straightened. "I understand. I'll go right away."

After Mira left, Elowen returned to her chamber.

She sat at her dressing table and opened a carved ivory case, taking out a fine powder. With a soft puff, she pressed a light layer across her face.

The powder was finely milled, a gift from the royal court. It settled smoothly, dulling the natural warmth in her skin just enough to leave her looking faint and drained.

She tilted her head toward Cassian. "Well? How do I look?"

3/4

17:20 Fri, May 22 N

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Chapter 551 No Turning Back

9.9K

B

71

Finished

552

Chapter 552 The Trap Closes

Cassian leaned in slightly, studying her face.

"Pale," he said. "Enough that I feel like heading back and putting Alaric through a wall."

Elowen let out a soft laugh.

“Then we might as well make it convincing,” she said, eyes glinting. “Go get Hugh.”

Cassian nodded and stepped out.

71

Finished

Mira arrived at Falconcrest Manor not long after.

As Elowen’s personal maid and a familiar face, she was recognized immediately at the gate.

The guard greeted her with an easy smile. “Here on Her Grace’s business again?”

Mira didn’t return the smile. “I need to see the Duchess. Right now.”

Something in her tone made him straighten at once. “This way.”

The main hall overlooked a quiet stretch of water, flowering trees swaying just beyond the windows.

Inside, Duchess Yvonne sat at a polished table, preparing coffee with slow, practiced

movements.

Sylvia sat across from her, watching closely.

Mira stepped forward and lowered herself into a deep, formal bow. “Mira greets Your Grace, and my lady.”

Yvonne looked up, smiling faintly. “Mira. Where’s your mistress? Why didn’t she come along?”

Sylvia added warmly, “I was just thinking I should visit her soon.”

Mira didn’t rise.

Her eyes were already red.

“Her Grace... had a pregnancy scare today. She couldn’t come.”

The smile disappeared from Yvonne's face. "What?"

1/3

17:20 Fri, May 22 N

Chapter 552 The Trap Closes

71

Finished

Sylvia went pale. "What? How did that happen? She was fine just days ago."

Mira wiped at her tears, but they kept falling. "I... I don't even know how to explain it properly. Please, you should come see her. I'm really worried..."

Her voice broke apart, her words tumbling over each other.

Sylvia was already on her feet. "Mother, I'm going now."

"I'm coming with you," Yvonne said immediately.

She turned to a servant. "Have the carriage prepared, and make sure it rides smooth. And bring that aged restorative tonic from my stores."

By the time they reached Hale Manor, Hugh's voice could already be heard from inside.

"...She pushed herself too hard traveling and was shaken badly. That's what triggered it. The good news is she got back in time, and we've stabilized things. For now, she's out of danger. But she needs complete rest. No stress, no shocks..."

Sylvia didn't wait. She headed straight inside.

In the outer room, Hugh was finishing a prescription while speaking with Cassian.

She gave a quick bow. "Your Grace, where is she?"

Cassian nodded toward the inner room. "Inside."

Sylvia headed straight inside without another word, the Duchess right behind her.

Hugh paused mid-sentence, glancing up at Cassian, his look clearly asking. "That enough?"

Cassian didn't bother speaking. He just leaned back slightly, his expression easy, almost bored. "Yeah. You're done. Get out."

Elowen lay propped against the headboard, covered with a thick quilt.

Her face looked drained of color, her lips pale, her eyes half-lidded with exhaustion.

She slowly opened them as they entered, surprise flickering across her expression. "Sylvia? What are you doing here? And Duchess Yvonne as well..."

She turned a reproachful look toward Mira. "You really didn't have to make such a fuss over this."

Mira dropped low again immediately, her voice breaking as she spoke. "Your Grace, I know you

2/3

17:20 Fri, May 22 N

Chapter 552 The Trap Closes

71

Finished

didn't want to trouble anyone, but what happened today at the Crown Prince's Wing... you were treated so unfairly. You could barely stay on your feet on the way back. The Hale Manor has no one left to rely on, and His Grace no longer holds power. If not Falconcrest Manor, who do we turn to? This child wasn't easily conceived. I can't risk anything happening to you... or the baby."

Yvonne spoke calmly, stepping in at once. "Don't blame her. She's only trying to protect you."

Sylvia sat beside the bed, her expression tight with worry. "Tell me what happened."

Cora stepped in right on cue, pulling over two chairs and setting them by the bedside for the ladies to sit.

Elowen sighed softly. “It’s nothing serious. Today was the release of the trial results. The Crown Prince invited the top candidates to a feast.”

Sylvia nodded. “Yes, my husband mentioned it. But what does that have *to* do with you?”

Elowen’s voice remained gentle. “He sent for me specifically. Said that since I write popular stories and hold the title Lady of Grace and Virtue, I should come meet the new scholars.”

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3/3

1

17:20 Fri, May 22 N

Awakening Love Reborn to Be His Duchess

553

Chapter 553 A Trap

:

71

Finished

Duchess Yvonne drew her brows together. “Storybooks and statecraft essays are two completely different things. How could anyone lump them together?”

Sylvia nodded quickly, clearly unsettled. “Exactly. Why would His Highness summon you to the Crown Prince’s Wing for something like that?”

Elowen gave a faint shake of her head, her voice soft. “That’s what I thought at first, so I tried to decline. But His Highness had someone with him, a young man named Josh. He sat for the court qualification trials this year and didn’t pass, yet he was still summoned to the Crown Prince’s Wing.”

She paused briefly before continuing. “You may not know him. His father once served under my father and was killed in battle years ago. He left behind a widow and a child, and they’ve struggled ever since. With him involved... I couldn’t refuse to his visit.”

The Duchess let out a quiet sigh, her expression growing heavier.

*She’s too kind for her own good. And that Crown Prince, reckless, pushy as hell. If the kid can’t handle it, then why even call him in? And insisting Elowen comes **too**... what is that, if not throwing his weight around to back people into a corner?*

Sylvia’s temper flared, her voice sharp with indignation. “He’s clearly pressuring you. Using someone else to force your hand!”

Elowen managed a pale smile. “When I arrived, His Highness was polite enough. He even came out personally to receive me. But the things he said...”

Her voice trailed off, and she turned her face slightly away, her eyes shimmering. “It’s not worth repeating. In the end, it was my own health that gave out.”

Mira, seated low beside the bed, suddenly spoke up, her voice breaking with emotion. “How is this Your Grace’s fault? It was His Highness who told you to leave His Grace and stay at the Crown Prince’s Wing with him. He even said the Nordian princess promised to back him completely...”

Both the Duchess of Falconcrest and Sylvia froze, their eyes widening in shock.

Elowen tried to stop her, but a soft cough caught in her throat before she could speak.

Mira pressed on, unable to hold back. “He also said that even if you refuse now, once he takes the throne, he’ll have you brought to him no matter what. He even spoke of forcing a potion on you to rid you of your child. You were furious, and that’s what caused the distress.”

Elowen finally found her voice. “Mira. That’s enough.”

1/3

17:20 Fri, May 22 N

Chapter 553 A Trap

But it was too late.

Finished

Every word had already sunk in.

The Duchess of Falconcrest was well known in Vanelle for knowing everything worth knowing. The history between Elowen and the Crown Prince was no secret to her, nor to the rest of the city.

Back then, Elowen had been deeply devoted, while the Crown Prince never gave her a clear answer, keeping her close just enough.

In the end, she turned away and married the Duke of Duskmoor.

That chapter should have been closed long ago.

Since her marriage, she had lived well. She and the duke were devoted to each other, and now she carried his child. Her life had found its rhythm.

Yet the man in the Crown Prince's Wing behaved like someone who had cast something aside, only to suddenly decide it mattered again. He kept reaching back, stirring trouble where none belonged.

Sylvia flushed with anger. "This is on him, not you. Why do you keep taking it on yourself?"

The Duchess reached out, taking Elowen's cool hand and gently rubbing it. "Sylvia is right. Listen to me. Women don't get the same freedom men do. We're expected to hold everything together, and when something goes wrong, we're the first to blame ourselves."

Her voice softened. "If you keep doing that, how are you supposed to live? You're expecting now. You and your child come first. Why should you carry the weight of someone else's wrongdoing? What the Crown Prince did today was wrong, plain and simple."

She went on in a softer tone, "I brought you something to help build your strength. Have Doctor Dray look it over and prepare it the right way. You need to recover properly. This household leans on you."

After sitting a while longer, the Duchess and Sylvia rose to leave.

Elowen made a motion to get up, but the Duchess quickly stopped her. “Stay where you are. Rest. Let Gerda see us out.”

Elowen nodded gratefully.

Only after they left did she finally exhale, the tension slipping from her shoulders.

Mira leaned closer, her eyes bright. “Your Grace, how did I do?”

2/3

17:20 Fri, May 22 N

Chapter 553 A Trap

:

71

Finished

Elowen smiled, her eyes curving. “Perfect.”

Mira grinned. “I learned from you and His Grace.”

Elowen swung her legs off the bed, clearly in better spirits. “I’m feeling good today. I’ll bake something you like.”

Mira lit up, then hesitated. “Your Grace... will this really work?”

Elowen’s smile lingered, calm and certain. “It will. News travels fast in court. What the Crown Prince did won’t stay quiet for long. The Royal Censorate will speak.”

She continued evenly, “And the Duchess won’t keep this to herself. My visit to the Crown Prince’s Wing will spread before the day is out.”

Her eyes narrowed just a touch. “That’s not how you play it. You don’t rush the finish. You close in piece by piece, until there’s no way out.”

By the time they reached Falconcrest Manor, the Duchess hadn’t even stepped through the gate before she ran into an acquaintance delivering an invitation for an afternoon outing in the countryside.

After everything she had just heard, there was no chance she would keep it to herself.

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2

3/3

554

Awakening Love Reborn to Be His Duchess

Chapter 554 The First Ripples

She turned right back around and left again without entering the estate.

Sylvia returned home with her attendants.

71

Finished

At the same time, Piers had just come back from the Ministry of Crown Justice. He had changed into more comfortable clothes and was heading toward the study when he spotted Sylvia walking in from the inner courtyard.

Something was wrong the moment he saw her.

Her eyes were red, and so was the tip of her nose. She had clearly been crying.

He stepped closer and stopped in front of her. “What happened?”

The moment she saw him, everything she had been holding in surged back up. Tears filled her eyes again.

She pressed her lips together, trying to steady herself, and told him everything she had seen and heard.

By the end, her voice trembled. "I hate this. She's always been so good to me. With out her, I wouldn't have what I do now. And now she's treated like this, bullied while carrying a child... and I can't do anything to help her. I feel useless."

Piers felt his chest tighten.

What the *hell is the Crown Prince thinking? Crossing lines is one thing, but pushing it this far... leaving Sylvia in tears?*

That was something he couldn't ignore.

He had always been gentle with Sylvia, never even speaking harshly to her.

And now she couldn't stop crying.

"Hey... it's alright."

He pulled her into his arms, holding her close. "We're in this together. If you're hurting, I feel it too. I won't let this go. I'll make sure she gets justice."

He spoke softly until she finally calmed down.

They walked back together toward the inner court. Just past the gate, Piers noticed a carriage waiting in the courtyard.

1/3

17:20 Fri, May 22 N

Chapter 554 The First Ripples

:

71

Finished

Dark wood, polished clean, with embroidered curtains bearing a simple floral pattern.

He turned to a servant nearby. "Is my uncle here?"

The servant bowed his head. "Yes, my lord. Lord Gareth arrived some time ago. He's in the study with His Grace."

Sylvia glanced at the carriage. “What brings him here today?”

The Duchess of Falconcrest was born a Davis. Her elder brother, Gareth Davis, Piers’s maternal uncle, served as the Lord High Chancellor at court.

Piers thought for a moment. “Most likely about the Crown Prince.”

The Crown Prince had clearly overstepped, hosting a private gathering in his own residence under the Crown Prince’s name and inviting the top newly ranked candidates. The whole matter had already set the Ministry of Crown Justice buzzing with speculation all day.

As for the Royal Censorate, it was their duty to scrutinize conduct and call out misconduct across the court.

Given that, his uncle was unlikely to stay silent for long.

He looked at Sylvia. “Didn’t I promise you? Leave this to me. Go get some rest.”

She looked up at him, her eyes still damp.

His expression softened. He brushed her cheek lightly with his thumb. “But you have to promise me something. No more tears.”

She nodded.

He gave her hand a gentle squeeze before turning and heading toward the study.

Gareth had spent years in the Royal Censorate and carried real influence. If he chose to speak, it would carry weight.

The study was on the eastern side of the estate.

Piers stopped at the door, straightened his coat, and knocked,

There was a brief pause before his father’s voice came from inside. “Come in.”

He pushed the door open.

The Duke of Falconcrest sat at the head of the room, dressed in a dark, simple robe. Across

17:20 Fri, May 22 N

Chapter 554 The First Ripples

71

Finished

from him **sat** Gareth, lean and composed, his posture straight, his expression calm with a faint, practiced warmth.

Piers stepped forward and stopped a few paces away, lowering his head respectfully. “Father. Uncle.”

The duke looked at him. “What is it?”

Piers didn’t **waste** time. “The Crown Prince crossed the line. He pressured the Duchess, a Lady of the First Rank, and caused her condition to worsen. This can’t be overlooked.”

The duke frowned slightly. “Her condition worsened? Explain.”

Piers repeated everything Sylvia had told him, word for word.

The duke’s expression darkened. “This Crown Prince...”

He stopped himself, unwilling to say more.

Piers turned to Gareth. “The Royal Censorate should raise this tomorrow. This is grounds for impeachment.”

Gareth shook his head calmly. “There’s more to it than that. The Crown Prince hosting newly selected candidates may seem improper, but His Majesty approved it. If the Censorate challenges this now, it risks questioning the Crown itself.”

He continued, measured and steady. “As for the Duchess, she’s no longer in immediate danger. The Crown Prince may have spoken out of line, but nothing irreversible happened. If we push this too far, it may be seen as overreach, or as interference in royal family matters.”

Piers caught the meaning behind his words immediately.

This was reluctance.

Gareth shifted the topic with practiced ease. “That aside, I didn’t come today over court matters. I happened upon a cask of exceptionally fine early harvest wine and thought it worth sharing.”

9.9K

4

3/3

555

Chapter 555 No Middle Ground

Piers hadn’t expected anything different.

He knew his uncle too well.

Gareth had built his reputation over years in the Royal Censorate, known for discipline, restraint, and a mind sharpened by study. But there was one habit he had never shaken.

He stayed out of factions, and more importantly, he avoided making enemies, especially powerful ones.

71

Finished

He moved through court like a careful negotiator, never committing too hard, never closing a door. He greeted everyone with the same measured warmth, always leaving himself an exit.

That balancing act was exactly why he had held his post for over a decade, in a position where most men burned out quickly.

Piers had come tonight because he knew this was how the conversation would go.

His uncle saw too many angles. Piers didn’t.

He had never been the kind of man to swallow injustice, and this time, the Crown Prince had pushed things too far.

He had made his wife cry.

Piers' voice dropped, steady but cold. "Uncle, I know why you're holding back. You don't want to cross the Crown Prince. You go back a long way with Lord Colton, and you don't want trouble with the Baker family. And if the Crown Prince takes the throne someday, you don't want him remembering this."

Gareth's smile flickered for a split second before settling again. "You're overthinking things. A man in office answers to principle, not personal ties."

Piers didn't react. "That worked before. It won't work now."

He stepped forward slightly, his tone sharpening.

"The court's shifting. Power's moving. No one gets to stay neutral anymore. The Crown Prince is getting bolder, leaning on Nordia's influence like it's his shield. The Duke of Duskmoor might be taking hits right now, but his standing in the army and his support at court aren't going anywhere. And the other princes? You really think they're just sitting quietly?"

His gaze locked onto Gareth.

1/4

17:20 Fri, May 22

Chapter 555 No Middle Ground

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"You think you can keep playing both sides. That's not going to hold."

71

Finished

He let that settle, then added, quieter but more pointed, "And there's something else you're not factoring in. I'm married into the Duke's family. We're close with him and his duchess. And tomorrow morning, I'm speaking up in court. I'm taking this straight to His Majesty."

A beat.

“With me standing where I do, how exactly do you expect the Crown Prince to treat you kindly? How do you stay untouched after that?”

“Enough!” the Duke of Falconcrest snapped. “You’re too young to understand how any of this works.”

Piers didn’t back down. “I understand enough. We serve the Crown. We’re paid by His Majesty and supported by the people. That means we don’t stay quiet when something’s wrong.”

His voice carried, firm and unwavering.

“The Crown Prince crossed a line. He called in the top candidates under the excuse of helping His Majesty. But His Majesty is in good health. He doesn’t need someone stepping in for him. And if that excuse holds, then explain this to me.”

His expression hardened.

“Forcing the Duchess of Duskmoor into the Crown Prince’s Wing. Was that ‘helping’ too?”

Silence pressed in.

“She’s carrying royal blood. What he did ignored basic decency and family bonds.”

The Duke opened his mouth, but nothing came out.

Piers didn’t let up.

“Being careful matters. Thinking things through matters. But being careful isn’t the same as being afraid, and thinking things through doesn’t mean you throw out your principles.”

His words landed clean and hard.

“What the Crown Prince did today was wrong. If the Royal Censorate looks the other way, that’s failure. Plain and simple.”

The room fell quiet.

The Duke of Falconcrest and Gareth exchanged a look, both letting out a low breath.

17:21 Fri, May 22 N

Chapter 555 No Middle Ground

:

71

Finished

At Hale Manor, the mood was unusually light.

Elowen had been in a rare good mood and decided to cook herself, something she hadn't done in a long time. Fresh pastries came out of the ovens, warm and fragrant. Mira got a plate, and Cassian got two.

She had just finished cleaning up when Anson came in with news that Marissa Mercer had arrived.

The Mercer family lived out in the countryside, a fair distance from the manor. Nikki had mentioned before that her mother's health had been declining for years, nowhere near what it used to be. Elowen had sent word ahead, telling them not to rush the journey.

Even so, the carriage had taken its time getting here.

After adjusting her dress, Elowen stepped out to meet her.

At first, she thought she wouldn't recognize Marissa at all.

But the moment she saw her standing beneath the covered stone walkway, something clicked.

A memory surfaced.

There had been a time when Marissa was young, when Patrick was still alive. Elowen had once seen her gently dabbing sweat from his brow with a cloth, dressed simply, her expression soft and steady. She had been the kind of woman people found easy to look at, calm, graceful, like something that belonged in a quiet riverside garden.

Now, time had changed her.

Her hair had gone pale at the edges, her face lined with years that hadn't been kind.

The moment she saw Elowen, Marissa began lowering herself into a deep bow.

Elowen stepped forward quickly and caught her by the arm. "Please, don't."

Marissa looked at her, eyes bright with emotion. "You've grown into such a fine lady, Your Grace. The General and his wife would be proud."

Elowen paused.

It had been a long time since anyone had spoken to her like that.

For a second, it felt like nothing had changed.

3/4

17:21 Fri, **May 22 N**

Chapter 555 No Middle Ground

She let out a soft breath. "Yeah... they would."

She gestured toward the interior. "Come on, let's head inside."

71

Finished

At that moment, the sound of wheels rolled up beyond the side gate, the carriage coming to a clean stop.

9.9K

4/4

556

17:21 Fri, **May 22 N**

Awakening Love Reborn to Be His Duchess

Chapter 556 Setting the Board

Elowen recognized the crest immediately.

A servant hurried to set the step in place, and Kaelan stepped down, his expression tight.

She had expected him to come, just not this fast.

“Your Grace.”

He walked straight up and stopped a few steps away. “Is Josh back? Is he safe?”

Elowen nodded calmly. “He’s fine. You didn’t need to worry.”

71

Finished

Marissa tensed instantly. “Why are you asking about my son like that? Did something happen?”

Kaelan turned to her at once, offering a respectful bow. “You must be his mother. Earlier today, the Crown Prince hosted a banquet at the Crown Prince’s Wing for the newly admitted scholars. Your son was summoned as well.”

Marissa frowned, confused. “But he didn’t pass. Why would they call him?”

Kaelan hesitated. He couldn’t say the truth.

That Josh had been used as leverage. That would only make things worse.

Elowen stepped in smoothly. “There’s nothing to worry about. Josh and Nikki are both here. You can relax. For now, your family should stay here with us.”

Marissa’s eyes reddened. “We already owe you so much... He didn’t pass. He let you down, and his father...”

Elowen shook her head gently. “Let me ask you something. Do you think his writing is actually poor?”

Marissa sighed. “I wouldn’t know. I’ve never understood that kind of thing. I just know he studies constantly. But if he failed... then it must not have been good enough.”

“No,” Kaelan cut in, unable to hold back. “That’s not true. He’s better than I am.”

Elowen added, “This is Kaelan, Lady Aveline’s son. He studied under Edmund as well, same as Josh, and he took the court qualification trials this year.”

Marissa quickly inclined her head in greeting.

Kaelan thought for a moment, then turned back to Elowen. “I passed by the Imperial

1/4

17:21 Fri, May 22 N

Chapter 556 Setting the Board

:

71

Finished

Examination Hall on my way here. There are still people gathered outside. A lot of them. The ones who didn’t make it aren’t leaving, and they’re talking.”

He paused.

“They’re saying the results don’t add up. Especially the Baker family. Those two made the top ranks somehow. People aren’t buying it.”

He glanced at her, hesitant. “As for you...”

Elowen smiled faintly. “I’ll handle it. You should head back.”

Kaelan understood. He bowed and returned to his carriage.

Once he left and Marissa’s family had been settled, Elowen called Anson over.

“Go find Finn,” she said. “Bookshops are where news spreads fastest. Scholars, travelers, people from everywhere. Have him start something.”

Her tone sharpened.

“Nothing obvious. Just enough to make people question things. Say the results look off this year. Talented men didn’t make it, while noble sons rose to the top. Suggest there might be something behind it.”

She met his eyes. “Make sure it spreads. The right people need to hear it.”

Anson nodded immediately. “Understood.”

In her previous life, she had overheard members of the Baker family speaking with Alaric.

They had wanted help.

Their sons were taking the exams, but their writing wasn’t strong. They had hoped he could “do something.”

Even back then, Elowen had found it absurd.

You don’t fix weak writing overnight. And you definitely don’t fix it two days before an exam.

At the end of the day, there was only one real explanation. Someone had pulled strings, leveraging authority to tamper with the royal examinations.

And it wasn’t as if Elowen was guessing blindly. She knew the Baker sons. She had seen them herself. None of them had any real discipline for study, and whatever they did write barely held together. Most of their days were wasted in idle развлечments, drinking, chasing pleasure, and treating life like a game they had already won.

2/4

17:21 Fri, May 22 N

Chapter 556 Setting the Board

N. 71

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Yet somehow, when the results were posted, every one of them had passed.

In her previous life, Elowen had been too consumed by her own struggles to look into it further, let alone challenge it.

But things were different now.

She was the Lady of the First Rank, the Duchess of Duskmoor. She had both the standing and the obligation to step in.

And more than that, she intended to use this.

What had happened at the Crown Prince's Wing, the way Alaric had overstepped his place, the pressure he had forced onto his own aunt by marriage, the irregularities in the examinations, and whatever else lay beneath the surface, none of it existed in isolation.

They're all connected. Whether he realizes it or not.

Each piece on its own might be dismissed.

But together, they formed something far more dangerous.

What started as scattered threads was already pulling together, closing in without leaving him any real room to maneuver.

There wouldn't be a clever excuse this time, no easy way to sidestep the consequences.

Sooner or later, every path would lead him straight into it.

The following morning, before first light, the great hall of state stood filled wall to wall with assembled officials, their voices low and expectant as the court prepared to begin.

Piers stepped forward, ceremonial tablet in hand, his posture straight and his voice carrying cleanly through the chamber as he formally brought his accusations against Alaric.

He laid everything out in full.

The Crown Prince's overreach in summoning newly admitted scholars without sanction. The undue pressure placed upon the Duchess of Duskmoor, a Lady of the First Rank, to the point of endangering her condition.

By the time he finished, the hall had erupted into a wave of hushed but unmistakable uproar.

At the head of the chamber, Theodric remained still, his expression set, offering no immediate

3/4

17:21 Fri, May 22 N

Chapter 556 Setting the Board

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response as his gaze drifted downward and briefly settled on Alaric.

For a fleeting moment, Alaric froze.

§ 556

71

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Then he steadied himself.

This was not unexpected.

He had already prepared for this outcome.

I didn't come *back just to lose again*.

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557

Awakening Love Reborn to Be His Duchess

Chapter 557 A Court Turned

Finished

Inside the royal audience hall, Alaric stepped forward with easy composure, as if the tension in the room had nothing to do with him.

“Piers, I received the newly appointed scholars under my father’s command. That much is beyond dispute. As for the duchess, she claims her condition was disturbed, but claims alone don’t make truth. Did anyone from the Royal Physicians’ Guild confirm it? Hugh is a traveling doctor at best. His word carries no weight here. And more to the point, he answers to Hale Manor. It’s just as likely this is a staged accusation meant to drag the Crown Prince through the mud.”

Piers tilted his head slightly, studying him. “And what exactly would she gain from that?”

A faint, cutting smile appeared on Alaric’s lips. “Resentment runs deep. She never forgave me for refusing her hand, and she still clings to the glory Duskmoor Manor once had. Now that my uncle has fallen from favor, the responsibilities that used to be his have passed to me. You can imagine how that sits with them.”

He didn’t wait for a reply before continuing, his tone sharpening.

“And let’s not pretend this so-called Lady of the First Rank is some gentle soul. She throws her weight around whenever it suits her. During the royal examinations this year, she publicly humiliated a court official and his son. The whole capital was talking about it. So tell me, Piers, did you miss it, or are you choosing to look the other way?”

“Your Majesty!”

Archer stepped forward, voice already thick with emotion. “On the day the results were posted, my useless son had just stepped out of the examination grounds. He exchanged a few heated words with another candidate, nothing more than youthful temper. But the duchess decided to back that boy. She forced both me and my son to Hale Manor and made us haul water and tend the gardens like servants for half the day!”

The Royal Inspector, Quentin hurried forward to add his voice. “My son suffered the same. We refused to go, so she had him tossed into a pig pen. When he came home, the smell wouldn’t wash off for days. He’s been waking up screaming ever since, and now he can’t even sit at a table if pork is being served.”

A wave of uneasy murmurs spread through the hall. Some officials frowned, others looked openly disturbed.

Piers's grip tightened around the carved ivory tablet in his hand, the tension showing in his fingers.

Archer pressed on, louder now. "It's only natural that Piers would defend the Lady of the First

1/3

17:21 Fri, May 22 N

Chapter 557 A Court Turned

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71

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Rank. His wife is kin to the Duke of Duskmoor. His ties to Hale Manor are close. Anyone in his position would do the same."

Quentin stepped in smoothly, picking up the thread. "That may be true, but we serve the Crown, not our relatives. If every man here starts using his office to settle personal scores, dressing it up as righteous accusation, then we're inviting chaos back into this court. Have we learned nothing from the years when factions tore this place apart?"

He paused, letting the weight of that sink in before continuing, "Piers serves in the Ministry of Crown Justice. Oversight and public accusations are not his responsibility. So what are we looking at today? Duty, or something else entirely?"

The shift was subtle but unmistakable. What had begun as scrutiny of the Crown Prince was now turning into suspicion of Piers.

Piers frowned, searching for a way to respond, but the ground had already started to tilt beneath him.

Around him stood men who had clawed their way into power through the examinations, men who could twist an argument until truth barely mattered.

So this is what *Father* meant. *This isn't about right or wrong. It's about who controls the story.*

Alaric watched it all unfold, satisfaction flickering in his eyes as he lifted his chin slightly.

Then a steady voice broke through the tension. "Your Majesty, I would say they are not entirely wrong."

Heads turned as Gareth, the Lord High Chancellor stepped forward from the ranks of civil officials.

He looked as he always did, calm, measured, impossible to read. Alaric glanced at him, a hint of surprise crossing his face.

Gareth rarely took sides. He had built his reputation on staying above the fray.

And yet here he was.

Even he knows which *way this* is going.

A trace of satisfaction touched Alaric's expression.

Facing the throne, Gareth spoke, his tone heavy with meaning. "And precisely because of that, I must admit my own failure. It is the duty of the Royal Censorate to keep watch over officials, to speak when something is wrong, and to keep order in this court. If the Crown Prince has crossed a line, we should have been the first to say so. Instead, it has fallen to the Ministry of Crown Justice to speak up, risking accusations of bias and factional ambition. That failure rests

2/3

17:21 Fri, May 22 N

Chapter 557 A Court Turned

with me, and with the entire Censorate."

Alaric's expression froze, then darkened.

That's not support. Not even close.

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Quentin reacted instantly. “Piers is your own nephew, Gareth. Anyone in your position would feel compelled to step in.”

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3/3

558

Chapter 558 The Blade Turns Back

71

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Archer wasted no time piling on. “The Censorate has always stood apart from factional disputes. Gareth has upheld that standard for years. It would be a shame to see that reputation dragged into unnecessary conflict now.”

They closed in from both sides, trying to box Gareth into their narrative.

Gareth didn’t rise to it. If anything, he seemed to consider their words, giving a small, thoughtful nod before answering.

“I’ve spent more years in this court than either of you, and most of them within the Censorate. So allow me to offer a bit of advice. In this hall, there is only one role that matters. We are servants of the Crown.”

He turned his gaze to Quentin.

“Has the Crown Prince addressed His Majesty as ‘Father’ here? Of course not. This **is** a place of state. Titles matter. Roles matter. Personal ties do not. The same applies to the rest of us. There are no uncles or nephews here, only officials. We are paid to serve the Crown, and that is where our loyalty belongs.”

Quentin’s face drained of color.

Gareth shifted his attention to Archer.

“And yet both of you have spent the better part of this discussion circling Piers’s connection to Duskmoor Manor, while avoiding the real question. Did the Crown Prince act improperly, or not? Every argument you’ve made points back to personal motives, to factional fears. It makes one wonder why you’re so eager to steer the conversation away from the issue at hand.”

His voice remained calm, but the implication cut deep.

“It almost sounds like you’re trying to shut down any voice in this room that doesn’t favor the Crown Prince’s Wing.”

For a moment, neither Archer nor Quentin could find a response.

Gareth rarely spoke, but when he did, he left no room to maneuver.

Theodric finally spoke, his tone measured. “Gareth, since you’ve raised the matter, what is your

view?”

Gareth bowed his head respectfully. “Your Majesty, I wouldn’t presume to claim special insight. I only intend to fulfill my duty. As head of the Royal Censorate, it is my responsibility to call out misconduct and maintain order in this court.”

1/3

17:21 Fri, May 22 N

Chapter 558 The Blade Turns Back

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71

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Theodric regarded him. “So you believe the Crown Prince was wrong to meet the scholars. early?”

“Not only that.”

Gareth straightened, his expression turning grave.

“On my way to court this morning, I heard troubling rumors in the streets. I felt it necessary to report them.”

A flicker of unease passed through Alaric’s eyes.

What now...

Theodric leaned slightly forward. “What kind of rumors?”

Gareth answered without hesitation. “There’s growing talk among scholars and townsfolk that this year’s royal examinations were not conducted fairly. Some even suspect corruption.”

The hall erupted into noise.

Alaric’s head snapped to the side, his expression darkening.

Gareth continued, unhurried. “I even heard children chanting rhymes in the streets. They sing that the Baker family’s festival lights can’t illuminate true talent, but the Crown Prince’s favor can unlock any gate. It’s a crude way of saying that influence matters more than merit.”

He paused briefly before adding, “There are also whispers that examiners weigh coin heavier than ink. None of it reflects well on the court.”

Alaric let out a cold laugh. “So now you’re accusing me of rigging the examinations?”

Gareth met his gaze evenly. “Your Highness, I am reporting what I heard. His Majesty has always valued the voice of the people. When such rumors spread this widely, they cannot be ignored.”

He continued, steady and precise. “The Baker brothers have taken these exams for three years. They failed twice without distinction. This year, under your oversight, they suddenly rose to the top ranks. It may be coincidence, but it is a striking one.”

His gaze flicked briefly toward Archer and Quentin.

“Earlier, when Piers raised concerns about Your Highness’s conduct, both of you were quick to accuse him of factional bias because of his ties. If this matter involv-

g the Baker family continues *to* spread, do you not think people will begin to suspect the Crown Prince of building his own faction?”

2/3

17:21 Fri, May 22 N

Chapter 558 The Blade Turns Back

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Alaric’s expression turned grim.

How did this get out... and this fast?

Quentin, seasoned enough not to lose his footing, stepped forward again. “Your Majesty, every year there are disappointed candidates who complain after the results are announced. Rumors like this are nothing new and rarely hold any truth.”

He shifted the focus with practiced ease. “We are here to discuss the duchess abusing her authority. How did we end up debating the Crown Prince and the examinations instead?”

Archer caught on immediately. “Exactly! What happened outside the examination grounds was witnessed by officials, scholars, and townsfolk alike. That is not rumor. That is fact. No matter how Lord Gareth redirects the discussion, it cannot be denied.”

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3/3

559

Chapter 559 A Shift in the Court

They were at it again.

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Gareth, however, remained completely composed. Not a flicker of urgency crossed his face as he stepped forward and inclined his head toward the throne.

“Your Majesty, regarding the disturbance outside the Imperial Examination Hall that these two lords have brought up, I’ve heard of it as well. Shortly after it happened, word reached me through the Royal Censorate. As Lord High Chancellor, I took it seriously. But before bringing anything to the throne, facts must come before speculation. I couldn’t rely on hearsay alone, so I held off and had the matter quietly looked into.”

Theodric leaned back slightly, interest piqued. “And what did you find?”

Gareth straightened, his voice steady.

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“The man under the Duchess’s protection that day is named Josh, a candidate in this year’s trials. His father once served under General Hale and died in battle during the uprising years ago. He didn’t fall by accident. He fought to the end and gave his life for the crown. Though the court granted compensation, it’s no secret that a widow raising children alone rarely lives in comfort.”

A subtle shift passed through the chamber. Several generals standing among the officials grew noticeably more alert.

Gareth continued, his tone sharpening just enough.

“As for what actually sparked the incident, my inquiry shows that when the family arrived at the examination grounds, they crossed paths with the sons of Quentin and Archer. Seeing their plain clothing and obvious hardship, the young men decided to entertain themselves. They mocked the mother, said she smelled like she belonged in a livestock pen, and made cruel remarks about the younger daughter’s looks, claiming she wasn’t fit for decent service.”

A murmur rippled through the court.

“Josh chose to let it slide,” Gareth went on. “He didn’t escalate it. But the girl later told the Duchess. Now, the Duchess was raised in a military household, and His Grace the Duke of Duskmoor built his name on the battlefield. With the war in the Southwestern Marches still weighing on the realm, the morale of soldiers matters more than ever. Seeing the family of a fallen officer treated that way, she stepped in. Frankly, it would have been strange if she hadn’t.”

He paused, letting that settle before sweeping his gaze across the room.

“After confirming all this, I came to a simple conclusion. Yes, she acted quickly. But her reasoning was sound. Standing up for the families of those who died for the crown sends a

1/3

Chapter 559 A Shift in the Court

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message. It tells the army their sacrifices matter. It tells the people the crown remembers. That kind of message strengthens the realm, not weakens it. For that reason, I chose not to raise the matter further. On principle, she did nothing wrong.”

This time, the response was more obvious.

Several military officials nodded without hesitation.

Even among the civil officials, many who had clawed their way up from modest beginnings shifted in quiet agreement. Their looks toward Archer and Quentin were no longer neutral.

Gareth let that tension sit for a beat before turning back to the two men.

“Now then, let’s talk about your grievance. Your sons started this. They insulted the family of a fallen soldier. If anyone has grounds to complain, it’s that family. Not yours. And if you truly believed your sons had been wronged, why wait a full month before bringing it up? Why not come forward immediately and ask for a fair ruling?”

His voice didn’t rise, but it landed hard.

“A month is a long time. Long enough for bruises to fade. Long enough to rethink a story.”

Archer’s lips trembled. Quentin’s composure cracked, sweat forming at his temples

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Neither of them managed a response.

They had wanted to bring the matter forward earlier. They had been furious enough. But they also knew their position was shaky, and Elowen's rank made things even more delicate. So they waited.

Today had seemed like the perfect moment.

They hadn't accounted for Gareth.

And now there was no way out.

Piers glanced sideways at his uncle, something genuine settling in his expression.

He had always thought Gareth too cautious, too measured.

But this... This was something else entirely.

So *this* is how it's *done*.

Gareth stepped forward again and bowed deeply.

"Your Majesty, I will admit the rumors I've brought today about irregularities in the trials

2/3

Chapter 559 A Shift in the Court

Finished

haven't been fully verified. But rumors don't appear out of nowhere. Something sparked them. And what's at stake here isn't small. It's the reputation of the Crown Prince. It's the integrity of the realm's selection process. It's the trust every scholar places in this system."

He lifted his head.

"These exams are the backbone of the kingdom. If that trust cracks, everything follows. I ask that Your Majesty order a full investigation into this year's trials. Let the truth come to light. Only then can the rumors be put to rest and confidence restored."

The confrontation ended there, at least for now, with Gareth and Piers clearly in control of the narrative.

By the time the news reached Hale Manor, the day had already tipped into afternoon.

Elowen was stretched along a cushioned bench by the window, a ledger open in her hands. As the report concluded, her eyes lit up with quiet satisfaction.

“I didn’t expect it to go this cleanly.”

Cassian leaned back slightly, watching her. “You’re telling me you didn’t see this coming? Once Piers got involved, Gareth stepping in was inevitable.”

She shook her head, completely honest.

“I didn’t have it mapped out that precisely. I figured Piers would clash with Alaric because of Sylvia, turn it into a spectacle, and force the court to look into it. That part felt predictable. But Gareth stepping in and steering it this smoothly? That’s a bonus I didn’t count on.”

A smile crept onto her face as she turned toward him.

“Looks like I’m not as sharp as I thought. My guess missed the mark.”

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560

Cassian’s expression softened. He reached out and tapped her lightly on the nose.

“Not even close. You’re still the quickest mind in the room.”

She let out a quiet laugh, but it didn’t last long before her brows drew together again.

“There’s something that doesn’t add up, though.”

He tilted his head. “What is it?”

Elowen shifted slightly, thinking it through.

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“Iris is always at Alaric’s side. She’s not careless. If he wanted to help the Baker family, she would’ve guided him to do it quietly. Getting them through the exams would’ve been enough. But pushing them into the top ranks? That’s reckless. It draws attention. That doesn’t feel like her influence at all.”

Cassian didn’t hesitate.

“That’s because she wasn’t in a position to influence anything.”

Elowen looked at him.

He continued, calm as ever. “After we left the Crown Prince’s Wing that day, Alaric lost his temper. In front of everyone, he struck her. Then he had her held in place along the stone path outside for half a day.”

Elowen blinked.

Not entirely surprising.

But still... It said more than the act itself.

Iris had always been the sharpest mind near him. But that kind of treatment meant something deeper. It meant she had never truly been valued.

And someone like Iris would absolutely understand that.

Which meant when Alaric started making reckless decisions and shutting everyone else out, she likely stopped trying to pull him back.

Maybe she was already looking for a way out.

Some people didn’t need enemies.

1/4

Chapter 560 Tightening Lines

Finished

They unraveled all on their own.

Elowen leaned into Cassian's shoulder, her gaze drifting toward the courtyard where sunlight spilled across the stone and greenery.

It's already in motion. Now it's just a question of how much fight he's got left.

On the way back from court, Alaric could barely keep his footing steady.

Theodric had actually approved a full inquiry into this year's royal examinations.

That alone made Alaric's pulse spike.

The king had never been the obvious heir. He'd fought his way to the throne through a brutal succession struggle, backed in part by the Duke of Duskmoor, but what truly secured his rule was a different choice entirely. He broke with old noble lines and raised men of talent from modest birth, earning the loyalty of scholars and officials across the realm.

Once crowned, he treated the examinations as the backbone of the kingdom. Merit, order, legitimacy. Those weren't just ideals to him. They were the foundation of his power.

And now... he wanted them investigated.

If the inquiry went far enough, it wouldn't take long before the truth surfaced.

He would find out that Alaric had quietly arranged for Josh's results, along with another candidate's, to be swapped with those of the Liu brothers.

At the time, it had seemed trivial.

Josh was his own cousin. A top ranking wasn't exactly undeserved.

What the hell was I thinking?

If this came to light, Theodric wouldn't just be displeased. He would be furious. And when the king was furious, he didn't stop at a warning.

House arrest would be the least of it. Alaric's jaw tightened as the realization settled in.

He might lose the title altogether.

For the first time since stepping into the hall, real unease crept in. And it didn't let go.

Alaric's thoughts spiraled as he approached the steps. He misjudged one, his foot catching hard against the stone, and his balance gave out.

2/4

Chapter 560 Tightening Lines

"Your Highness!"

Tristan reacted instantly, grabbing his arm before he hit the ground.

"Are you hurt, Your Highness? Should I call for a physician?"

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Irritation flared in Alaric's chest. Why would he care about a bit of physical discomfort right

now?

If he lost his place as heir, there would be far worse pain waiting for him.

Alaric pulled away, irritation sharp in his voice. "Does it look like I care about that right now?"

Tristan hesitated, then pushed through anyway.

"Your Highness... Iris is still outside. She's been holding that position for nearly ten hours. She may not last much longer. She must understand her mistake by now. Perhaps... you could let *her* stand down?"

"Iris?"

The name stopped him cold. Then something shifted.

His eyes lit up, sudden and intense. Tristan stiffened, thinking he had said the wrong thing.

But Alaric didn't lash out. Instead, he let out a low breath, almost disbelieving.

"Iris... right. Iris."

He turned sharply and headed back toward the Crown Prince's Wing without another word.

He still had her. The one person who could fix this.

When he arrived, she hadn't moved.

Her body looked like it might give out at any second. Her face had gone completely pale, her lips drained of color. A faint tremor ran through her arms, the only sign she was still conscious.

“Iris!”

His voice cut through the air.

She flinched, instinctively trying to lower herself further in apology. Alaric stepped in quickly and caught her hands before she could.

“Stop. Don't do that.” His grip tightened. “I need you. Right now.”

3/4

Chapter 560 Tightening Lines

Her eyes opened slowly, unfocused at first, then settling on him.

He leaned closer, voice dropping.

Finished

“Gareth stirred things up in court today. Started talking about rumors of cheating in the trials. Somehow convinced His Majesty to launch a full investigation.”

His gaze locked onto hers.

“You're the smartest one I've got. Tell me what to do. If they dig into this, the Baker brothers won't hold up under scrutiny. And when that happens...”

His voice tightened.

“I'm finished. So think. Fast.”

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4/4