

Awakening Love: Reborn to Be His Duchess Novel

We Had Something Real But Didn't Handle It Right

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Chapter 561 A Convenient Collapse

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Fint hed

The hand gripping Iris tightened without warning, fingers digging in until a sharp jolt of pain cut through her numb arm.

The sting pulled something loose in her memory.

Back when she had been serving Daphne, there was a day Daphne pointed straight at her and tore into her for lacking proper decorum. Iris had been younger then, stubborn enough to talk back.

Daphne struck her across the face so hard her ears rang, then hissed, "Do you even understand your place? When His Majesty passes judgment, even the highest lord bows his head and accepts it. Whether he wants to or not."

Now it was her turn.

She had been forced to stay like this for so long that her vision dimmed at the edges, her body swaying as if it might give out any second.

And still, Alaric had rushed over without a shred of concern for her condition, demanding, **as if it were** the most natural thing in the world, that she come up with a solution for him on the

spot.

“Your Highness... I...”

Her lips barely moved, her voice thin and scraped raw.

Alaric’s eyes lit up. He leaned in immediately, bringing his ear close to her mouth. “Say it.”

Iris let out a faint, uneven breath.

Under his eager stare, her strength seemed to drain all at once. Her body slackened, and she collapsed backward.

The excitement froze on Alaric’s face. He stared, momentarily blank, as if his mind had failed to catch up.

Tristan dropped into a crouch beside her and checked her breathing “Your Highness, she’s passed out.”

Alaric straightened sharply. “Pathetic”

Tristan swallowed whatever else he might have said.

Alaric paced, agitation rolling off him. “So what now? I’m supposed to go to my mother?”

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Tristan chose his words with care. “Your Highness, Her Majesty is both your mother and the head of the royal household. If anyone can smooth things over with His Majesty, it would be

her.”

That only made Alaric's expression turn darker.

Not long ago, he had stood before her, speaking with absolute certainty, making bold claims he could not take back.

Tristan hesitated, then tried again. "Your Highness... she doesn't look well at all. Should I bring in a court physician?"

"A physician?" Alaric snapped, irritation flaring. "She's the one who messed up, and now she's useless to me. What exactly would justify that kind of attention?"

His voice went cold. "Take her out of here. I don't want to see her."

Tristan quickly called in two guards. They lifted Iris's limp body and carried her away.

Once the door shut and the footsteps faded, the room fell completely still.

On the bed, Iris's lashes trembled ever so slightly.

Then her **eyes** opened. She had never actually lost consciousness.

Not long after Alaric returned to his study, Tristan stepped inside.

"Your Highness, she's been settled. But... are you certain we shouldn't have someone look at her? If anything happens to her in the Crown Prince's Wing, it could become a problem."

"What problem?" Alaric cut in sharply. "She's been down for what, a few hours? She'll live."

His gaze narrowed as he looked Tristan over. "You've been unusually invested in her lately. Speaking up for her again and again. What's going on? You've taken a liking to her?"

Tristan went rigid and immediately lowered himself, pressing his head down in a deep bow. "Your Highness, I would never dare. Truly. I only meant that she's been useful to you. If something happened to her, you'd lose someone capable at your side. That's all I swear, there's nothing improper in it. Please believe me."

Alaric let out a quiet, disdainful breath. "You'd better not. She's just a servant. Not worth this much concern."

He moved back to his desk and sat down. “Do your job well, and when I get what I want, you won’t be forgotten. I’ll see to it you’re matched with someone suitable. Young, attractive, easy to live with, someone who knows how to take care of a household.”

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Tristan kept his head lowered. “Thank you, Your Highness.”

Alaric studied him briefly, then said, “You’re leaving the palace. Now. Go to Hale Manor.”

“Hale Manor?” Tristan looked up before catching himself.

“Yes,” Alaric said, voice measured. “Piers pushed too far in court today. No way he did that on his own. Elowen is behind it. You go tell her this doesn’t have to turn into a full war. Not yet. She tells Piers, Gareth, all of them, to hold their tongues.”

His eyes hardened. “Because if this escalates, I’m not going down quietly. She should remember I still hold proof that Cassian had the Nordin prince eliminated.”

Tristan felt his pulse spike but lowered his head again. “Understood. I’ll go immediately.”

At Hale Manor, Cassian stood at a long wooden worktable, working dough with steady, practiced hands.

Nearby, Elowen sat at a smaller table, chin resting lightly in her palms, watching him with a soft, amused smile.

“Your Grace.”

Anson appeared at the doorway and bowed. “Tristan from the Crown Prince’s Wing has arrived. He says he **was** sent by the Crown Prince and requests an audience.”

Elowen didn’t even shift her posture. “Let him wait. The duke and I are occupied.”

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Anson withdrew at once.

Cassian glanced up briefly. “Alaric’s man?”

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Elowen nodded. “He’s getting restless. Sending someone to feel things out.”

Cassian

gave a quiet acknowledgment and went back to the dough, saying nothing more.

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Tristan stood outside the side entrance of Hale Manor for a full half hour under the midday sun. The heat pressed down heavily enough to make his head swim.

He didn’t dare urge anyone. He simply stood there, posture rigid, sweat tracing down along his temples.

At last, a maid came to bring him inside.

In the Great Hall, Elowen sat at the head of the room, composed and unreadable.

Tristan kept his gaze low as he stepped forward, offering a deep, formal bow before repeating Alaric’s message word for word.

Elowen listened without interruption, then gave a soft, almost amused breath. “He really said all that?”

Tristan steadied himself. “Yes, Your Grace.”

Elowen shook her head faintly. “Working for someone like that can’t be easy.”

She wasn’t trying to make things difficult for him. But the Crown Prince’s side had been pushing too aggressively, and she intended to take that edge down a notch.

To Tristan, her words landed with unsettling weight.

He instinctively lifted his head, then quickly lowered it again, unsure how to respond.

“Go back and tell him this,” Elowen said, her tone calm and even. “There’s no middle ground left between us. No room to negotiate. Either he falls, or I do. That’s it. If he thinks he can use that incident again, he’s welcome to try. I’ll be waiting”

She gave a slight tilt of her chin. “You can go.”

Tristan turned to leave.

“Wait.”

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Elowen seemed to recall something. “Last time, it was Iris who came, wasn’t it? Why the change?”

Tristan hesitated. His lips parted, but no words came.

Elowen’s expression softened just slightly. “He’s always been like this. It’s not **easy**, serving under him.”

She glanced toward Mira.

Mira stepped forward with a small, polished white vial and held it out.

Elowen's voice turned gentle. "This was prepared by a physician here at the manor . It helps with swelling and leaves no scars, especially on delicate skin. I heard he struck her recently. Take this to her."

Tristan stared at the vial for a moment before looking up at her.

Something tightened in his chest, something he couldn't quite name.

When he reached out, his fingers trembled.

He took the vial carefully, then bowed deeply. "Thank you, Your Grace. I'll make sure she receives it."

On the **way** back, he held the vial tightly in his hand, his thoughts churning.

Lady of the First Rank...

Someone outside their world still cared whether people like them lived or suffered. Still noticed something **as small as** a servant girl's injury.

But the Crown Prince?

Iris had given him everything, and at the slightest misstep, he struck her, punished her, drove her to collapse, and wouldn't even allow her basic care.

What *would* it be like... to *serve someone* like *her* instead?

The thought hit him so suddenly it almost startled him out of his stride.

By the time he returned, Alaric was already waiting.

He grabbed Tristan by the arms. "Well? What did she say? Did she back down?"

Fear tightened Tristan's throat. He stepped back and lowered himself quickly, head bowed.

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“Your Grace said... there is no room for compromise. Only that one of you will fall.”

“Unbelievable.”

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Alaric lashed out, kicking over a small table nearby. “That ungrateful, venomous woman. I should have seen it sooner. She thinks she’s won? Thinks that useless uncle of mine will protect her?”

His voice rose, shaking with anger. “She’ll regret this. She’ll come back and beg for mercy.”

Tristan remained still, barely breathing.

After venting his fury, Alaric sank down amid the mess, his breathing uneven.

Her stance left no room at all.

That meant she intended to use the court qualification trials to bring him down completely.

She hated him.

Because he refused to marry her.

Alaric clenched his jaw.

He wasn’t about to sit and wait for ruin.

“Come on,” he said hoarsely. “We’re going to see my mother.”

When Alaric entered, Isla sat in the inner chamber, turning a strand of polished stones between her fingers. The light from the iron sconces along the walls flickered softly across the room.

Her gaze lifted, cool and distant as it landed on him.

“Well,” she said, her tone edged with faint mockery. “Look who decided to visit. It’s been a while since I’ve seen such an important guest.”

Alaric lowered his head. “Your Majesty.”

“Your Majesty?” Isla let out a quiet laugh. “I thought the Crown Prince, in all his glory, had already forgotten where he came from”

Alaric pressed his jaw slightly, then bowed his head further. “I wouldn’t dare. You’ve always been on my mind.”

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Isla’s expression turned icy. “You say you’ve been thinking of me? Let me see. The last time I came to pay your respects was the fifteenth of last month. It’s been twenty-seven days since I last saw you. And that’s your idea of concern? Alaric, your concern is awfully rare.”

Her voice grew sharper with each word. “You think you’ve grown strong enough to stand on your own now, don’t you? You’ve decided you don’t need me as your mother, and the Baker family means nothing to you. So why are you even here? Go back to the Crown Prince’s Wing. I’ve had enough of looking at you acting clever while leaving a trail of trouble behind you.”

Alaric's face flushed, then drained. He set his jaw. "If Your Majesty is still upset and unwilling to help, or even speak to me properly, then I'll come back another day."

He turned and started toward the door.

"Stop."

Her voice cut through the room.

Alaric halted, his shoulders tight.

Isla rose and walked up to him. She had to tilt her head slightly to meet his eyes.

"I am upset," she said, her tone easing just a little, "but that doesn't mean I won't help you. You're my son. The Crown Prince's Wing and the Queen's court are bound together. I'm not about to abandon you."

She drew a breath. "I've already heard what happened at court today."

Now her voice lowered, edged with frustration. "What were you thinking? Helping the Baker family is one thing, but putting Albert and Liam right at the top where everyone would notice? Were you trying to make it obvious something was off?"

Alaric's eyes were bloodshot as he pushed back. "I did it for you. For the Baker family's standing. Just look at them. My cousins spend their days drinking, chasing women, and wasting coin at gaming tables. When it comes to learning, they fall short every time. If things went the usual way, none of them would ever earn a place in court. If I didn't step in, the Baker name would vanish from official ranks. I was trying to fix that."

Isla let out a long breath, the anger giving way to something heavier. "And your attempt to fix things may ruin you along with them."

She steadied herself. "From now on, stay quiet in the Crown Prince's Wing. Let your father's inquiry run its course. If he questions you, you know nothing. This was the work of careless subordinates. You were misled. Show regret, admit you failed to keep proper control, and

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nothing more. No matter what happens, you are still the Crown Prince, his eldest son by the queen. Without clear proof tying this directly to you, he won't shake the foundation of the realm lightly."

She paused, then added, "I'll send word to your grandfather. He'll know how to steady things at court and smooth the right paths."

Grandfather.

Alaric felt his thoughts settle all at once.

Of course. How did I forget that?

The Baker family still stood behind him.

His grandfather had weathered three reigns. His former students and allies were everywhere. Even Theodric treated him with measured respect.

Elowen. Gareth. Even his uncle.

They were nothing compared to a house with roots that deep.

At the Baker estate, Jayce and Ayden sat across from each other in the great hall, cups of coffee growing cool between them.

Neither of them attended court that morning. They had heard about the commotion, but neither had taken it seriously.

To them, it was only natural for the Crown Prince to help his cousins secure a place through the examinations. Even if people talked, with the Crown Prince and the Baker family backing them, what could really come of it?

They were debating which newly opened tavern to visit that evening when a palace servant arrived at a gallop, delivering a message from the queen.

That was when their expressions finally changed.

After sending the servant away, they moved to the study. The air inside felt heavier, and neither of them spoke at first.

Jayce began pacing. "If you ask me, the Crown Prince handled this badly. Getting Albert and Liam through would've been enough. Why put them right at the top where everyone's eyes

would land?"

Ayden exhaled slowly. "What's the use of saying that now? We were the ones who went to him together. He agreed, and he followed through. At the time, we were too busy celebrating to think about holding them back. Complaining now won't change anything."

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"Then what do we do?" Jayce snapped. "The king's ordered a full inquiry. The Ministry of Crown Justice, the High Tribunal, the Royal Censorate, all of them are involved. Which part of this holds up if they start digging?"

Ayden didn't answer right away.

After a moment, Jayce tried again. "What if we go to Gareth? He's always been reasonable, and he's had dealings with Father before. If we bring proper gifts and speak carefully, maybe he'll ease things over with the king."

"No," Ayden said, shaking his head. "He's the one who brought this forward in the first place. He made it public. He's not on our side. Going to him now would only make us look desperate. And he's not even leading the inquiry. His word won't decide anything."

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“Then we go straight to the officials handling it,” Jayce pressed. “Someone must be willing to listen. We offer coin, favors, whatever it takes.”

Ayden shook his head again. “We’ve only been in office a few years. How many men of real weight do we know? And what could we offer that they’d actually value? If we misstep, we don’t just fail. We hand them more reason to suspect us.”

Jayce fell silent, fear creeping in. “So that’s it? We just sit here and watch Albert and Liam lose everything? Watch the Baker name fall apart?”

A long pause followed.

Then Ayden spoke, his voice low. “There’s only one path left. We tell Father.”

Jayce froze. “Father?”

His legs weakened at the thought.

Colton had ruled their childhood with an iron hand.

If he learned they had worked with the Crown Prince to tamper with the royal examinations, his anger would be the least of their worries.

Ayden gave a tight, humorless smile. “This isn’t about avoiding punishment anymore. It’s about survival. Father knows what matters. However angry he is, he won’t act blindly when the family’s future is on the line. He’s spent a lifetime building influence. If he steps in, there’s still a chance to steady things.”

He lowered his voice. “If we hide this and it comes out later, that’s when we’re finished.”

Jayce struggled, but he knew Ayden was right.

Even if they said nothing, their father would hear of it soon enough.

In the end, they straightened their coats and made their way toward Colton's residence.

Each step felt heavier than the last. Ayden reached the door first and knocked.

"Come in."

The voice inside was old, but steady.

They stepped inside.

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A wrought-iron brazier burned quietly in the corner, releasing a thin ribbon of scented smoke into the air. Colton reclined on a carved wooden chaise, dressed in a plain, timeworn robe, looking more like a retired scholar than the man who had shaped half the court.

Two young maids stood nearby, gently working the stiffness from his legs.

"Father."

"Father..."

He opened his eyes. They were clear and sharp, nothing dulled by age.

His gaze settled on them, calm but heavy with authority.

Jayce's composure broke first. His legs gave out as he dropped low, bowing so deeply his forehead nearly touched the floor.

"Father, you have to help us!"

Ayden instinctively started to follow.

“Stand.”

The word stopped him cold.

Colton barely moved, lifting one hand slightly. The maids stepped back at once and helped him sit upright.

Once settled, his eyes returned to Jayce, cooler now. “Get up and speak.”

Jayce kept his head lowered. “I... I don’t dare...”

A faint edge of mockery entered the old man’s voice. “What is this? Do you expect me to come lift you up myself?”

Cold sweat ran down Jayce’s back. He scrambled to his feet, still bent forward, not daring to meet his father’s eyes.

Ayden remained slightly bowed, tension visible in every line of his posture.

“Now,” Colton said, “tell me what’s happened.”

Jayce couldn’t find his voice.

Ayden stepped in, forcing himself to stay steady. “Father, please hear me out. Albert and Liam have worked hard year after year, but they’ve never managed to pass. We grew anxious. If this kept going, no one from our generation would ever make it into court. Everything you built

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could slip away in our hands.”

He glanced up briefly.

No reaction.

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His throat tightened, but he continued. “We made a foolish choice. We went to the Crown Prince. Out of regard for family ties, he agreed to help and arranged for their names to appear among the successful candidates. We thought it would stay quiet. But today, at court, Gareth somehow learned of it and exposed everything. His Majesty is furious and has ordered a full investigation into this year’s court qualification trials.”

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Colton let out a dry, cutting laugh. “Studying day and night? Really?”

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His eyes settled on Ayden, sharp enough to make him flinch. “You’ve gotten a lot better at lying without blinking. I’ll give you that.”

Ayden went pale.

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“Those two sons of yours,” Colton went on, voice low but biting, “do they put even half as much effort into their studies as they do wasting coin in pleasure houses? I’ve seen their desks. They look like they’ve never been used. Books still stiff from the binder, ink barely touched. And you thought I wouldn’t notice? That I sit here like some doddering old man who sees nothing, hears nothing?”

He leaned forward slightly. “I already know what happened at court this morning. If you hadn’t shown up, I would have had you summoned.”

The room went tight.

Jayce and Ayden both instinctively bent forward in a deep bow, panic written all over them.

“Stay up.”

Colton’s voice snapped through the air. “Now you’re scared? Where was that caution when you did it? This family has stood for generations on discipline and real merit. That’s what built our name.

And you throw it all away for what? To prop up two spoiled fools who couldn't earn their place if their lives depended on it?"

His tone hardened further. "You tampered with the royal examinations, the backbone of the realm, and dragged the Crown Prince into it. Tell me something. Are you trying to bring this house down, or do you just think your heads are impossible to lose?"

Neither of them could speak. Sweat clung to their backs despite the cool air.

Colton drew in a slow breath, forcing his temper down. Anger wasn't going to solve anything

now.

He leaned back into his chair. "What did Her Majesty say?"

Ayden kept his head lowered. "She sent word that His Highness must deny everything. Blame it on the people beneath him. She also asked that you... steady things at court. Keep everything from spiraling."

Colton gave a short, humorless laugh. "Convenient. Deny it? When the inquiry begins, every man involved will be questioned until he breaks. No one holds out forever. And she expects me

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to 'steady things' while His Majesty is watching every move and Gareth is standing right beside

him?"

He shook his head slightly. "You don't understand that man. He doesn't act often, but when he does, he finishes what he starts. No one is going to risk taking favors from us right now,"

The last bit of hope drained from their faces.

Ayden's voice came out thin. "Then... are we finished? The family... Albert and Liam... all of us... even Her Majesty... the Crown Prince..."

Colton didn't entertain the panic. "Start talking."

His voice turned cold and precise.

"Everything. From the moment you had the idea, to how you approached His Highness, to how it was carried out. Who handled what. I want every detail."

They hesitated.

His gaze sharpened. "If you leave anything out, you're not just dooming yourselves. You're dooming all of us. If I don't know the full picture, I can't fix it."

Ayden looked like he'd just seen the gallows.

All the color had drained from his face, his lips trembling as he bent forward, struggling to get the words out in any kind of order. The story came in pieces at first, uneven and unsteady.

Jayce stood off to the side, glancing at his younger brother, then sneaking quick looks at their father. Every so often, he gave a shaky nod, a quiet, half-formed "yeah" slipping under his breath as if agreeing might somehow make this easier.

Bit by bit, Ayden laid it all out.

How he had gone to the Crown Prince. How Alaric had hesitated, then agreed. Which examiner had been brought in. How the papers were switched. Who had been paid off to copy the scripts and cover their tracks.

Nothing was left out.

Every detail, dragged into the open.

Colton sat back in his chair without moving, listening in silence.

Late afternoon light slanted through the tall windows, cutting across his face and splitting it into light and shadow.

On one side, the light caught every line of age, his hair gone pale, the weight of years etched deep into his features. On the other, his eyes were dark, unreadable, his mouth set tight, hard as

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By the time Ayden reached the end, his strength gave out completely. His shoulders sagged, as if something inside him had finally snapped.

Beside him, Jayce lowered his head as well, not daring to say another word.

Colton looked at them for a long moment. "Fools."

Their legs nearly gave out. "I told you to stay up."

His voice rose again, then softened slightly after a pause. "That said... I know why you did it. You didn't want the next generation of this family to lose its place. You thought you were protecting what we built."

He exhaled quietly. "As your father, I can't pretend I don't understand that."

Both men looked up, stunned, eyes reddening.

"There's still a way through this."

Colton tapped his fingers lightly against the arm of his chair. "That deputy examiner you mentioned, Travis. He's capable, but more importantly, he knows how to survive. I was the one who brought him up. He owes this family. A reminder of that debt should be enough."

His gaze sharpened. "He'll know exactly what to say, and what never to say, when he stands before the throne."

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“As for the copyist, Milo,” Colton continued, tone steady, “I know him too.”

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“He’s from Lynelle. Poor background. His mother’s bedridden, well into her eighties. He never married, stayed to care for her. People call him devoted.”

He paused, then spoke plainly. “We give him a choice. He takes the blame, says he acted alone out of greed, and in return, we take care of his mother for the rest of her life. Food, treatment, a proper burial when the time comes.”

Jayce and Ayden nodded quickly, relief washing over them.

“You’re not done yet,” Colton added. “Go back and erase everything tied to this. Letters, records, anything that could point back to you. And anyone who knows too much needs to keep quiet. Permanently, if necessary.”

His voice dropped. “Nothing gets left behind.”

“Yes, Father. We understand.”

They answered immediately, already turning to leave.

Colton gave a slight nod, though his expression didn’t ease.

His fingers rubbed absently against the worn fabric over his knee. “Still... something about this feels off.”

They stopped.

Colton looked at them. “Think about it. Where does all of this lead? Straight to the Crown Prince. And who’s driving it forward? The Duke of Duskmoor.”

He paused. “This was never about fairness. And it certainly isn’t about justice.”

His voice lowered. "It's about succession."

They froze.

Ayden swallowed. "You mean..."

Jayce blurted out, "You think the Duke wants the throne?"

Colton shot him a look. "If he did, he would've taken it years ago. When the last emperor died, he controlled the entire army. No one could have stopped him. Instead, he put His Majesty on the throne."

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Jayce immediately went quiet.

"Then why go after the Crown Prince?" Ayden asked.

Colton's hand stilled.

"A woman."

"A woman?" Ayden blinked, thrown off for a second, then it clicked. "You mean... the Duchess of Duskmoor?"

Jayce frowned. "That still feels like a stretch. Whatever happened between her and the Crown Prince is in the past. She's married now. Would anyone really push things this far over that?"

Colton's expression turned sharp. "Huh? You nearly got yourself killed over a courtesan once. Don't pretend you don't understand."

Jayce flushed, completely shut down.

Colton continued, voice steady and cold. “Men have burned down everything they built over less. Power doesn’t make you immune to that.”

Ayden spoke more carefully now. “So this whole thing... it traces back to her. What happened before is what’s driving the Duke now.”

Colton gave a slight nod. “And if it’s him, this isn’t the only move he’s making.”

A shadow crossed his face. “Especially that matter.”

Both brothers stiffened instantly. They knew exactly what he meant.

Back then, when the Duke’s victories started making people uneasy, Isla had acted without approval. She worked with her brothers and arranged an attack meant to take him off the board.

It had nearly worked.

He had been unconscious for a long time. Long enough that people thought he might never

wake.

He only came back after his marriage.

Colton hadn’t known at the time. When he found out, it was already too late to undo anything.

Now his voice turned firm. “Go back and check every part of that incident again. Everyone involved. Every step. Every loose end.”

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His eyes locked onto them. “Make sure nothing was missed.”

Evening settled in.

At Hale Manor, Elowen sat behind a wide rosewood desk, posture straight, expression composed. A pair of iron wall sconces cast a warm, steady glow across the room.

Cassian stood behind her, working the tension out of her shoulders with slow, practiced pressure.

Bran stepped in quietly. “A message came from Falconcrest Manor. Piers sent word.”

He continued, voice low and clear. “At court today, Lord Gareth urged a full investigation. His Majesty approved it. The Ministry of Crown Justice, the High Tribunal, and the Royal Censorate will handle it jointly.”

He paused briefly.

“But Lord Gareth also made his position clear. Since he leads the Censorate, he has to stay at a distance to avoid any suggestion of bias. The investigation itself will be handled by the other offices.”

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Inside Duskmoor Manor, Elowen didn't look surprised in the slightest. "Lord Gareth is keeping his distance. He has no intention of getting pulled too far in."

She turned her head toward Anson. "What's the situation at the Crown Prince's Wing and the Baker Estate?"

Moments like this made it clear just how much she had gained by marrying Cassian. There wasn't another household in the kingdom with a sharper network of informants or men better trained for shadow work.

She had watchers stationed around the Crown Prince's residence for days now, and quiet eyes placed throughout the Baker Estate as well.

Anson stepped forward. "Your Grace, shortly after court dismissed this morning, His Highness went straight to Her Majesty. Not long after, Her Majesty sent a messenger to the Baker Estate. Jayce and Ayden were called in, and the two of them went together to see Colton. They stayed inside for half an hour."

Elowen gave a small nod.

No surprise there. After hitting resistance at court, Alaric had gone straight to the queen and then to the Bakers.

And once Colton stepped in, things were already moving behind the scenes.

queen and

She had never expected this to be easy. Taking Alaric down was never about removing just one

man.

It meant going up against everything behind him. The queen, the Bakers, and every official tied to their influence.

They were bound together. If one fell, they all felt it.

Elowen had already made up her mind to pull him off that throne-in-waiting, but the Bakers would fight just as hard to keep him there.

At this point, the examination scandal had nothing to do with fairness anymore. It was just another piece on the board.

Now it came down to her and the Baker patriarch.

She rubbed her fingers together slowly. “You mentioned the Bakers reached out to the deputy examiner, Travis. A man like that has been in court long enough to know how the world works. Small bribes won’t sway him, and speeches about justice won’t land either. He owes his rise to

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the master, so of course he’ll lean their way. We’re not getting leverage on him.”

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Firushed

Her tone shifted, quieter but sharper. “But the copy clerk, Milo, is another story. Poor background, devoted to his bedridden mother, and new to his post. Someone like that is... workable.”

Cassian’s hand moved lazily as he leaned back, his voice calm and unhurried. “If I had to guess, Colton has already given him a choice he can’t turn down. Or he’s made it clear what happens if he refuses. Either way, Milo will take the fall.”

Elowen tipped her chin up to look at him. “If they can buy him, we can buy him back.”

Cassian raised a brow. “That’s not going to be easy. You’ll need someone who knows how to talk people into things.”

Someone persuasive.

Elowen turned away again, resting her cheek against her hand as she thought it through. After a while, something clicked into place.

A faint smile curved her lips.

“With Colton stepping in like this, Alaric is going to ease up,” she said. “And once he does, the truth behind Prince Roderic’s death will start coming to light.”

At the Baker Estate, dawn had barely broken when Colton sent for Ayden again.

Ayden had spent the night tossing and turning, irritation building with every passing hour. He had only just fallen asleep before sunrise, and now he was being dragged out of bed again.

The frustration was still sitting heavy in his chest.

But the moment he walked into the room, it vanished.

Colton was still in the same reclining chair as yesterday, wearing the same worn robe.

Ayden froze for a second.

He hasn't slept... hasn't even gotten out of that chair?

He was about to greet him when Colton spoke first. "I've been thinking this over all night. Something about it still doesn't feel right."

Ayden paused, caught off guard.

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Firushed

Colton frowned slightly. "Go to the palace. Keep it quiet. Find a way to pass word inside. Tell them I've come down with a chill and I'm not doing well. Say I've been thinking about His Highness, and if he has the time, I'd like him to come by."

Ayden blinked. "Why?"

Colton gave him a sharp look. "You younger ones have a habit of making big moves without telling me. First the attempt on the Duke of Duskmoor, then the exam tampering. I don't like not knowing what else you might have done. If the duke gets hold of anything, he'll use it against us. I'd rather know now and plan for it than sit around waiting to be cornered."

Understanding hit immediately. Ayden straightened. "I understand. I'll take care of it right away."

Colton waved him off. "Go. Don't waste time."

Ayden left at once and headed for the Crown Prince's Wing.

By the afternoon, a carriage rolled quietly out of the royal residence and entered the Baker Estate through a side gate.

Alaric wasn't naive. His grandfather had always been in strong health. This sudden illness was obviously just an excuse to see him.

The moment he stepped inside, he skipped all formalities. "Grandfather, what's the situation? Did you handle it? Can you keep everything under control?"

Colton's eyelids shifted slightly. A flicker of disappointment passed through him.

Not even a simple *question about how I'm doing*.

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Finished

He let out a quiet breath and, with a maid's help, pushed himself upright.

Alaric stepped closer, stopping in front of him, eyes fixed and impatient.

Colton took a moment before speaking. "You can relax. The examination issue is already handled. The deputy examiner, Travis, and the clerk, Milo, have both been taken care of. As for the rumors, I've arranged for them to spread through taverns and coffeehouses where scholars gather. The story will turn into one about struggling students making things up, and attention will gradually shift toward corruption among minor officials. Give it a little time, and people will move on."

The plan was clean and thorough, balancing pressure with misdirection.

Alaric let out a long breath, tension finally easing. "Good. That's exactly what I needed to hear. Grandfather, you always think ahead. With you handling this, I don't have to worry."

Colton's brow tightened slightly at the way he spoke, still carrying that princely distance even here.

But he didn't call it out.

"I asked you here for three reasons," he said instead. "First, to let you know everything is under control. Second, Albert and Liam's names will be struck from the final lists. They won't pass. You should be aware of that, and you shouldn't arrange something like this again."

He paused, his gaze steady.

"And third, I need a straight answer. What exactly is going on between you and the Duke of Duskmoor?"

Alaric waved it off. "What could there be? Just old history."

Colton didn't let it slide. His tone grew firmer. "Your Highness, the court has been flooded with accusations lately, all aimed at the Crown Prince's Wing. Gareth, who usually keeps his head down, has suddenly become aggressive. Piers has openly challenged you. This doesn't look random. It looks planned. Like someone's been building a trap piece by piece. And that trap is aimed at your position."

He held his gaze. "I believe the Duke of Duskmoor is behind it

Colton's voice lowered slightly. "This isn't about prying into your affairs. It's about your safety and the stability of the realm. If we don't understand where this is coming from, we'll keep getting caught off guard, just like we did with the examination"

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Alaric frowned, instinctively dismissing it.

But something in his grandfather's expression made him hesitate.

71

Finished

“If you really want to trace it back,” he said after a moment, “it probably starts with Elowen.”

“The Duchess of Duskmoor?” Colton turned slightly.

Alaric let out a short laugh. “She’s now been granted the title Lady of Grace and Virtue.”

He walked over and sat down.

“Back then, she was completely set on marrying into my household. I kept my distance. She took it personally. At the royal betrothal feast, she turned around and married my uncle instead. Ever since then, she’s made a point of going against me.”

Colton studied him closely. “Is that all? Have you ever done anything to her?”

He already knew Alaric would never dare act directly against Cassian.

So the answer had to lie elsewhere.

Alaric scoffed. “What do you take me for? I’m the heir to the throne. I don’t bully people. We’ve argued, sure, but nothing serious.”

Colton said nothing, just kept looking at him.

Under that steady gaze, Alaric shifted, irritation creeping in. “...Last fall, during the royal hunt, I had one of her horses killed.”

He quickly added, “And I paid for it. I was punished, and I apologized. I even sent her a top-bred horse on her birthday, but she refused it.”

Colton ignored the explanation. “What kind of horse was it?”

“Just something she raised growing up.”

Alaric sounded impatient now. “I didn’t know all the details back then. She kept pushing me, so I gave her a warning. That’s all.”

At that point, Colton understood everything.

Elowen came from a military family. To people like that, horses weren’t expendable. They were as important as steel and supplies.

And that one had been raised by her own hand.

To her, it was never “just a horse.”

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But Alaric had it killed.

That kind of grudge didn't fade.

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Finished

Colton exhaled quietly but didn't linger on it. “And recently? Have you done anything else to the duke and his wife?”

Alaric hesitated, his eyes flickering. Under that steady pressure, he knew he couldn't dodge it.

He lowered his voice. “...I had Prince Roderic of Nordia killed, and made it look like my uncle was behind it.”

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Chapter 569 A Dangerous Victory

“What did you say?”

71

Finished

Colton's composure shattered. He jerked upright so fast it triggered a harsh coughing fit, his chest heaving as he struggled to breathe.

The young maid beside him hurried over, steadying his shoulders and easing him back while rubbing slow circles across his back.

It took a moment before he could speak again. When he finally looked at Alaric, there was disbelief in his eyes.

“Your Highness... you’ve made a serious miscalculation.”

Alaric frowned, clearly displeased. “I don’t see how. The entire operation was executed cleanly. No witnesses, no loose ends. Because of this, my uncle lost his title, his command, and even his estate was stripped and reassigned. That’s not a mistake. That’s a decisive win.”

Colton let out a long breath, his voice low and grave. “You’re celebrating too early. What you see is a man losing ground. What you fail to see is what he may gain from it.”

He leaned forward slightly, eyes sharp. “In warfare and in court alike, a retreat doesn’t always mean defeat. Sometimes it’s bait.”

Alaric’s brows pulled together. “You’re giving him too much credit. If he were that calculating, his household wouldn’t have been such a disaster before. His own relatives nearly tore it apart. That estate was a mess.”

“Your Highness.”

There was clear frustration in Colton’s tone now. “He never cared about that estate. He spent most of his life on campaign, fighting for the crown. He wasn’t in Vanelle long enough to bother with petty domestic chaos. It wasn’t neglect. It was indifference.”

His gaze hardened. “But things have changed. He has a duchess now. And Elowen is not someone he’ll allow anyone to touch.”

A brief pause, then more quietly, “You’ve crossed that line more than once.”

Alaric’s expression shifted, but he didn’t interrupt.

“Tell me honestly,” Colton continued, “do you truly not understand how much His Majesty favors him?”

Silence stretched for a beat before Colton spoke again, each word measured.

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Finished

“What if this fall from power is staged? What if he’s letting you think you’ve won, lowering your guard, waiting for you to expose yourself completely?”

His voice dropped further. “And when you do... he closes the net.”

A cold weight settled in Alaric’s chest.

His fingers tightened slightly against the armrest. *...Did I really miss something this obvious?*

“Grandfather...” His voice came out strained. “I didn’t think it through.”

He looked up quickly, urgency breaking through. “You have to help me.”

Colton sighed, some of the tension leaving his shoulders. “That’s exactly why you’re here. Now start from the beginning. The attempt on the Nordan envoy. I want every detail. Who planned it, who carried it out, and whose idea it was in the first place.”

Alaric nodded and leaned in, speaking quickly, the words spilling out without restraint.

When he finished, Colton didn’t respond right away.

Instead, a faint, almost unexpected light appeared in his eyes.

“Iris...” he said at last, “she’s wasted as a servant.”

Alaric blinked.

“The way that plan was structured,” Colton went on, “timing, misdirection, positioning, it was precise. Whoever designed it understands people, not just tactics.”

He fixed Alaric with a pointed look. “You need to change how you treat her.”

Alaric frowned slightly. “She’s a palace maid.”

“And you’d be a fool to keep seeing her that way.”

Colton’s tone sharpened. “Don’t treat her like something disposable. Treat her like an asset. Reward her. Respect her. Give her a reason to stay loyal to you.”

He added, slower now, “Men like me can help you outside these walls. But inside the palace? Someone like her is worth more than a dozen officials.”

Alaric hesitated.

*She’s **just** a servant... isn’t she?*

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To him, that had always been the rule. A servant was a tool. A useful one, maybe. But still replaceable.

Colton leaned closer. “Is she still in your residence? Bring her here. I want to meet her.”

Alaric had never seen his grandfather this intent, this urgent.

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Finished

The Baker family was vast, with no shortage of heirs, yet the old man had never singled out any of them like this.

Not even him.

Even as his legitimate grandson, even as the Crown Prince, he had always been met with discipline and expectation, never this kind of attention.

And yet now... over a palace maid?

What is it about her that makes her worth this much to him?

Alaric’s gaze shifted away, unease creeping in. “She’s... still there. But she didn’t come with me.”

Colton's expression dimmed. "You sent her on another task?"

A brief silence.

Then Alaric spoke, a touch stiffly, "She made a mistake. I had her punished. She collapsed afterward. She's still confined to her room."

Colton's hand tightened against the carved armrest. "You did what?"

His voice rose, edged with disbelief. "Do you have any idea how rare someone like that is?"

He leaned forward, anger now unmistakable. "Even if she was at fault, you don't handle it like this. You show restraint. You keep her close. You make sure she chooses to stay loyal."

His

eyes locked onto Alaric. "Instead, you've pushed her away."

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Colton's voice only grew sharper.

71

Finished

"You've done the exact opposite of what you should have," he said, frustration unmistakable. "Instead of securing her loyalty, you've pushed her toward the edge. If you treat her like she's nothing, sooner or later she'll believe it, and once that happens, it won't take much for someone else to win her over."

His eyes locked firmly onto Alaric.

“Think about what she knows. She’s been serving at your side. She understands your habits, your temper, what pleases you and what doesn’t. She’s familiar with the inner workings of the Crown Prince’s Wing, who answers to whom, how things move behind the scenes.”

He didn’t pause.

“And more importantly, she knows your past schemes. If she carries all of that to one of your rivals, then this won’t just be the loss of a servant. It will be a disaster you won’t recover from.”

Every word struck its mark.

Alaric felt as if a bucket of cold water had been thrown over him.

How did I *miss something this obvious?*

The more he thought about it, the more unsettled he became.

He shot to his feet so abruptly the chair scraped harshly against the floor. “You’re right. I overlooked this. I need to return immediately.”

He turned to leave, then stopped short and looked back.

“Grandfather, the matter with the Nordian envoy, framing my uncle... is there anything else I should arrange? Do I need to do more to make sure nothing traces back to me?”

Colton shook his head slowly. “That part was handled cleanly. As long as everyone involved keeps silent and every trace has been properly cleared, it won’t be easily uncovered, at least not by ordinary means.”

Then his tone shifted, firm and deliberate.

“What matters most right now is stabilizing the people around you. Especially Tris.”

He spoke with measured emphasis. “You need to calm her, win her back, and keep her willing to serve you. That matters more than anything else.”

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Finished

A brief pause, then he added, “She’s sharp. If she truly stands with you, then even if small cracks appear in that earlier matter, she might be able to maneuver around them, find a way to defuse the situation.”

His gaze held steady.

“Sometimes, people matter more than evidence.”

Alaric nodded repeatedly, gave a quick bow, and hurried out without another word.

The carriage raced through the streets toward the Crown Prince’s Wing, the sound of hooves striking stone echoing sharply in the air.

The moment it passed through the gates, Alaric pushed the door open before it had even fully stopped. He jumped down, stumbled for half a step, then steadied himself and strode forward.

Grabbing Tristan by the arm, he demanded, “Where is Iris? Where is she now?”

Tristan was startled, immediately lowering his head. “Your Highness, Iris is still resting in the side room where she stays. She hasn’t—”

“Take me there. Now.”

The side chamber was narrow and poorly lit. A single iron sconce burned against the wall, its weak flame casting uneven shadows across the room.

The furnishings were bare and worn, and the air carried a damp, stale smell.

Iris lay on a hard bed, a thin, threadbare blanket pulled over her. Her face was pale to the point

gray,

but her forehead was flushed with an unnatural heat.

of

Her lips were dry and cracked, moving faintly. “Water...”

A servant girl sitting nearby glanced over, her expression indifferent.

“She’s been muttering all day,” she said with a dismissive click of her tongue.

Then she raised her voice, making sure it carried.

“Still thinking about water? You really don’t understand your place, do you?”

She leaned back slightly, a hint of mockery in her tone. “You’ve been punished. That’s what you are now, a disgraced servant. You were already half-dead after that, and His Highness didn’t even bother calling for a physician. No medicine either”

She let out a short, dry laugh. “Isn’t that obvious enough? You’ve been cast aside. He’s done with

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you.”

Her eyes flicked toward the bed, full of disdain.

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Finished

“You’re lucky you’re even allowed to lie here. That’s more mercy than most would get. So stop making noise and lie still. Don’t make things worse for yourself.”

Iris slowly closed her eyes.

A heavy, numbing cold spread through her chest.

Sometimes, she believed she was clever. Able to read people, to see through situations, to plan ahead.

But then there are moments like this... when I start to think I might be the biggest fool of all.

When Daphne fell from favor, why had she tried so hard to remain in the Crown Prince's Wing?

Compared to Daphne, the crown prince was colder, harsher, impossible to rely on.

Caelan had once approached her quietly.

Three days, he had said. Leave a single blossom outside Elira's residence, and I'll understand

your answer.

But she never did it.

Yesterday, Tristan had come to see her in secret, bringing an ointment gifted by the Lady of Grace and Virtue.

At the time, Iris had found it almost laughable.

Someone who owes me nothing still shows me kindness... and the one I serve just leaves me here to rot.

Her fingers curled weakly against the blanket.

I should have made a different *choice*.

"Your Highness, what brings you here?"

The servant girl's voice suddenly turned bright and eager, dripping with flattery. Iris's breath caught slightly.

The Crown Prince? What is he doing here?

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A flicker of unease tightened in her chest.

“Is Iris inside?” Alaric’s voice followed immediately after.

“She is, she is!”

Finished

The servant girl responded quickly, her tone even more ingratiating. “Rest assured, Your Highness, I’ve been watching her for you. Just last night I gave her a sip of water, nothing else. Haven’t given her a bite to eat, so she won’t cause any trouble for you again, I promise—ah!”

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