

Awakening Love: Reborn to Be His Duchess Novel

We Had Something Real But Didn't Handle It Right

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Chapter 571 A Performance of Mercy

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Finished

The maid barely got through half her eager flattery before it broke into a sharp scream.

Iris forced her eyes open, the dim glow of a wall sconce blurring at the edges of her vision. Through the haze, she saw Alaric drive his boot hard into the girl's midsection.

"You useless fool!" he snapped. "Who told you to neglect her like this?"

The maid collapsed onto the floor, curled in on herself, her face drained of color.

Alaric didn't spare her another look. He crossed the room in long strides and stopped at the bedside, lowering himself slightly, his voice softening in a way that felt almost deliberate.

"Iris, can you hear me? How do you feel? Are you in pain anywhere?"

Her lashes fluttered as she tried to push herself up, instinctively trying to lower herself in

respect.

"Don't. Stay where you are."

He reached out as if to steady her, then abruptly turned, his expression hardening again.

“Tristan, what exactly were you doing?” His voice cut sharp and cold. “She’s in this state and you didn’t think to call for a physician? Are you blind, or just useless? If anything happens to her, you’ll answer for it.”

A bitter frustration rose in Tristan’s chest, and he felt completely wronged.

He had suggested calling for a royal physician more than once. It was His Highness who refused.

But a servant didn’t get to argue.

He swallowed it all, stepped forward, and bowed deeply. “This is my failure, Your Highness. I should have handled it better. I beg your pardon. Please don’t be angry.”

“Then stop standing there,” Alaric said, his tone turning impatient. “Go to the royal infirmary and bring me the best physician they have. Tell them I want the finest treatment, and I want her back on her feet quickly.”

“Yes, Your Highness.”

Tristan turned and hurried out without another word.

Once the room cleared, Alaric looked back at Iris, his tone gentler again

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“Don’t worry. I’ve sent for the best. You’ll be fine.”

His gaze drifted around the narrow servant’s chamber, taking in the low ceiling, the bare stone walls, the single dim light.

A frown creased his brow.

“This place isn’t fit for you,” he said. “Once you’re better, I’ll have you moved somewhere brighter. Somewhere proper.”

Iris listened quietly and gave a faint nod. “Thank you, Your Highness.”

Only then did the tension in his chest ease. By evening, Tristan returned with a physician.

Examination. Prescription. Herbs simmering over a small brazier.

After taking the medicine, some color finally returned to Iris’s face. Strength followed slowly, enough for her to sit propped against the pillows.

Tristan stayed close. When he saw her breathing steady, he spoke carefully, “Are you hungry? I could go to the kitchen and find you something decent.”

She shook her head. “I can’t eat.”

He pulled a low stool closer and sat beside her, lowering his voice.

“Iris, you saw it yourself today. His Highness does care. He was angry before, sure, but once it passed, he immediately called for the best physician. Since he’s said it out loud, things will be different now.”

Her expression remained calm, almost gentle.

“Yes,” she said quietly.

Is that really why? *Because his anger passed?*

No. That’s not *it*.

Her thoughts settled, cold and clear.

She turned slightly. “Where did you and His Highness go earlier? Outside the Crown Princes Wing?”

Tristan didn’t hesitate. “We went to Baker Estate. Lord Colton hasn’t been well and wanted to see him, so His Highness paid a visit.”

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Of course. So that's it.

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So it seemed the Crown Prince had picked up a few pointed remarks during his visit to the

Baker estate.

That would explain why he rushed back and put on this little show of concern for his attendants.

As for Tristan's claim that His Highness would treat her well from now on-

Iris let out a silent, almost amused breath.

Maybe he would.

Maybe he wouldn't.

She wasn't about to tie her fate to a master that unpredictable, not for the sake of a moment's kindness that could vanish just as quickly.

Her gaze shifted. "The ointment Lady of Grace and Virtue sent... where did you put it?"

"I hid it," Tristan said. "Didn't want anyone noticing, so I tucked it beneath a loose stone under your bed."

"Good."

She closed her eyes again.

Two days passed.

Iris had mostly recovered. Her face was still pale, but she could move about without difficulty.

She remained in the same cramped servant's chamber.

The promise Alaric had made that day about moving her somewhere better turned out to be nothing more than passing words.

After that, he did nothing.

Iris didn't mind.

If anything, she felt relieved. If he had followed through, things would've been far more complicated.

She reached beneath her bed, pried loose a stone, and retrieved the small white jade vial hidden underneath. Slipping it into her robes, she made her way toward the study to request an audience.

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Alaric sat behind a heavy wooden desk, several reports spread before him. His brow was drawn tight, his mood clearly sour.

When he saw her enter, he set aside his pen, his posture easing into something deliberately

warm.

“Iris? What are you doing here? I told you to rest.”

She stepped forward and lowered herself into a deep, formal bow, her posture precise and respectful.

“Thank you for your concern, Your Highness. I'm much improved. I came today to ask permission for something.”

He looked at her. “Go on.”

Iris drew out the vial and presented it with both hands.

“I would like to visit Hale Manor.”

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“Hale Manor?”

Alaric’s expression shifted at once, suspicion flickering across his face.

“What for?”

Iris kept her head slightly lowered, her tone calm and measured.

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“Please allow me to explain, Your Highness. This ointment was sent to me by Lady of Grace and Virtue, through Tristan.”

Alaric froze for a brief moment, then his face darkened sharply.

“That fool dared to keep something like this from me?”

“Please don’t be angry, Your Highness,” Iris said gently. “He meant well. You already have more than enough to deal with, and Hale Manor has been watching your household closely. He didn’t want to trouble you further.”

Alaric let out a quiet scoff. Some of the anger faded, but his gaze remained sharp, probing.

“And you? Why go now? To thank her?”

Iris lowered herself further, her voice steady.

“You see clearly, Your Highness. I belong to you. In this life, I will serve no one else. When I made mistakes before, your punishment was justified. Yet when I fell gravely ill, you still sent for the finest physician. I have no way to repay that.”

She paused briefly, then continued, “This ointment may be a gift, but I believe it also carries intent. Lady of Grace and Virtue may be trying to draw me to her side.”

Alaric’s expression tightened.

Just as his grandfather had warned him.

There would always be people trying to pull useful pieces away from him.

Fortunately, he had acted in time.

Iris went on, her voice even.

“My purpose in going to Hale Manor today is to return this ointment and make my position clear in person. I will tell her that I owe everything to you and would never turn against my

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Chapter 572 A Calculated Loyalty

master for personal gain. That should put an end to any misunderstanding.”

The tension around Alaric lifted completely. A satisfied smile spread across his face.

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“Good. That’s exactly what I wanted to hear.” His tone warmed. “You have my permission. I’ll have a carriage prepared and send you there at once.”

Half an hour later, Iris arrived at Hale Manor.

She was led into the study.

Elowen sat behind her desk, composed and silent, her presence steady and unreadable.

Iris stepped forward and lowered herself fully, bowing so deeply her forehead nearly touched the floor, her posture one of complete submission.

“Thanks Your Grace for the ointment you sent. I’ve come today to place my future entirely in your hands. From this moment on, I will serve at your command, with no divided loyalty.”

Elowen did not respond right away.

Iris remained where she was, motionless.

She had expected this.

Without lifting her head, she continued, “I understand Your Grace has doubts. That is only natural. I serve in the Crown Prince’s household, and appearing here like this, offering my loyalty, would make anyone question my intentions. I don’t expect immediate trust. I only ask that you hear me out. If, after that, you still believe I am of no use, I will leave at once without complaint.”

A brief silence passed.

Then Elowen spoke, “Go on.”

Iris paused slightly before lifting her head. She did not meet Elowen’s gaze, letting her eyes rest instead on the gilded edge of the desk.

She drew a slow breath and began.

“I was born into poverty and entered service in the Garrett household as a child. From the very beginning, I understood that my life was never mine to control. Everything depended on the will of those above me.

“When Miss Garrett was promised to His Highness, I was given two choices. I could go with her. or I could be placed into her brother’s household as a concubine. You know what kind of man he is, Your Grace. I refused that path.

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“I begged the mistress to let me follow Miss Garrett into the Crown Prince’s Wing.

“I understood that if she secured her place, I would have somewhere to stand. So I advised her and helped her navigate the conflicts within the royal household.”

She let out a quiet breath.

“But she was stubborn. She ignored my counsel and acted on impulse. One mistake led to another, until she angered His Majesty and was cast into the Secluded Wing

“The Crown Prince, in his fury, ordered that every servant who had come with her be put to death.”

A brief pause.

“I survived by making myself look pitiful. As though I had suffered under her. It stirred his sympathy, and I was spared.

“I didn’t want much. Just to endure my years of service and, one day, earn leave to walk away. So I did everything I could to assist him.”

Her voice softened slightly.

“But he is not a man anyone can rely on. His temper turns without warning. In his eyes, someone like me is no different from an object. When something displeases him, he lashes out without restraint.

“Not long ago, he punished me harshly and left me without care afterward, refusing even to summon a physician.”

She lifted the vial slightly in her hands.

“Only you helped. They say true kindness is revealed in the worst moments. We have no ties, and yet you chose to help me. I won’t forget that. That is why I am here today. I am willing to serve you, with complete loyalty.”

She knew this much with absolute clarity.

Different people required different truths.

With Daphne, obedience was enough. Offer a suggestion now and then, and if it was accepted, all the better. If not, there was nothing to be done but let her have her way.

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Chapter 573 A Calculated Choice

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Awakening Love. Reborn to Be His Duchess

Chapter 573 A Calculated Choice

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When dealing with Alaric, there was only one way to survive. Absolute loyalty, careful words, and just the right suggestions at the right time.

Elowen was different.

With her, hiding things, twisting the truth, or playing clever games was the worst possible

move.

She saw too much. She could tell what was genuine and what wasn't, and once she realized she'd been deceived, there was no going back.

So Iris chose to be completely honest.

Elowen remained silent.

Unhurried, Iris continued, "Your Grace, I won't pretend otherwise. I've been planning an exit for a long time. The Crown Prince's Wing isn't a place anyone can rely on forever. I've always known that. At first, I thought about finding a way to serve Duke

Roland's heir. He's kind, but he lacks real influence. When I was injured and recov

ering, he never came into the palace, so he knows nothing of what happened. And even if he did, given his position, there's little he could actually do."

She went on, steady and composed.

"There's also Prince Caelan. He approached me several times, asking me to stay where I am and act as his informant. At the banquet welcoming Nordia's envoys, he told me that if I agreed, I could leave a peach branch outside Lady Elira's residence as a sign. But I never did. Even after I collapsed from the punishment, I didn't go to him."

Elowen finally spoke, "Even if Duke Roland's heir isn't reliable, Prince Caelan seems like a strong option. If I take you in, I won't move you to Hale Manor right away. You'd remain in the Crown Prince's Wing, just as he intended. So why choose me?"

Iris met her gaze directly. "Prince Caelan is indeed a good choice. He promised to treat me as an advisor, not merely a servant."

She didn't hesitate.

"But

you are better, Your Grace."

Elowen raised a brow slightly. "That's quite a statement. Why?"

Iris pressed her lips together, then answered firmly, "Because you are a woman. You understand what I've had to endure."

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Elowen stilled, something stirring beneath her calm expression.

Iris remained where she was, posture straight, eyes clear and unwavering.

After a moment, Elowen said quietly, "Iris, you are very perceptive."

Iris lowered her head. "Everything I've said today is the truth. Not a single word is false. If you choose not to accept me, I will understand. I've done many wrongs while serving His Highness. You have every reason to refuse me, and I would not resent it."

Elowen leaned forward slightly. "One last question."

A flicker of tension crossed Iris's face as she looked up. "Please ask, Your Grace. I will answer honestly."

Elowen narrowed her eyes just a fraction. "The assassination of the Nordan prince, Roderic. All the evidence pointed to the Duke of Duskmoor. Was that your doing?"

Iris froze for a brief moment.

Her face paled, but she did not look away.

"Yes," she said. "It was my suggestion to His Highness. From choosing Roderic as the target, to arranging for the Vice Minister of Rites to approach His Grace and earn his trust, to leaving the arrowhead at the scene, and coordinating false testimony afterward to mislead the

investigation... every part of it was planned by me."

Elowen let out a soft, brief laugh.

It was too fleeting to read.

Iris felt her chest tighten.

Then Elowen spoke again, her voice calm and even.

"Very well."

Her gaze settled on Iris. "From now on, you serve me."

Iris blinked, stunned. "Truly? Your Grace is willing to take me in? Truly?"

Elowen gave a small nod. "Yes."

The answer was simple, but it carried weight.

All the fear, the uncertainty, and the pressure Iris had been holding onto since she risked

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everything to come to Hale Manor finally broke.

Her eyes reddened, her throat tightened, and tears began to spill.

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Elowen's tone softened. "If I decide to trust someone, I don't doubt that decision. As long as you don't betray that trust, you'll have all of it."

The word trust landed heavily.

Iris tried to steady herself, but the tightness in her chest only grew stronger. Tears slipped down her cheeks, one after another.

"Get up. There's no need to stay like that," Elowen said gently, then turned her head. "Mira, bring her a seat."

Mira hesitated. She still found Iris far too calculating, especially given what she had done for the Crown Prince.

But she would never ignore Elowen's command.

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Mira quickly brought over a small cushioned stool and placed it near the writing desk, at a respectful distance.

Iris had never experienced this before.

Not in the Gu household, and not in the Crown Prince's Wing. In front of her masters, she had always stood or lowered herself in submission.

Being offered a seat?

Never.

She looked at it, uncertain. "I can stand, Your Grace. I wouldn't dare..."

Elowen smiled faintly. "Like Prince Caelan, I see you as an advisor. And advisors don't stand through council."

Warmth spread through Iris's chest, catching her off guard.

She didn't refuse again. She stepped forward and sat carefully.

The seat was firm, not particularly comfortable, yet it gave her a strange sense of steadiness.

Elowen watched her.

"As I said earlier, even though you now serve me, you'll need to remain in the Crown Prince's Wing for the time being."

"I understand," Iris replied, straightening. "I never expected to leave so soon."

"The Crown Prince's fall is only a matter of time," Elowen said. "But there's something I've been considering."

Iris focused immediately. "Please go on, Your Grace."

"It's about the Nordan prince's assassination," Elowen said. "His Grace and I have been investigating. We followed the trail and uncovered some leads, especially regarding those forged arrowheads meant to implicate Duskmoor Manor. We've begun tracing their origin. What I need now is to bring the matter into the open."

She rested her chin lightly on her hand

"My original plan was to use Dominic as an entry point. He drinks heavily and spends time in certain... private establishments. I intended to stir up trouble around him there. But since the assassination, he's become unusually cautious. Almost spotless"

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Her gaze sharpened.

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"I've had people watching every notable tavern and discreet house in the capital, but he's never appeared. It's as if he abandoned the habit overnight. Do you know why?"

Iris answered without hesitation. "Because I planned for that outcome."

Elowen's brows lifted slightly.

"I knew you and His Grace would pursue the matter thoroughly," Iris continued. "Dominic would be the obvious starting point. His habits are too easy to exploit."

"So I advised His Highness in advance. We created alternate routes for him."

Elowen leaned back slightly. "Alternate routes?"

"Yes," Iris said with a nod. "If he wishes to go out, he no longer uses the main entrances. Instead, he first enters certain inns or taverns we arranged beforehand. From there, someone guides him through back c

corridors, service passages, and connecting alleys, moving him discreetly until he reaches his destination.”

She spoke calmly, “Your watchers remain outside, monitoring visible entrances. They have to, to avoid being noticed. But they can’t see what happens inside, or where those internal paths lead.”

She paused.

“So Dominic continues as before. He simply does so out of sight.”

Elowen leaned back fully, a trace of approval in her eyes. “I see. Your planning is very thorough.”

“I will draw detailed maps of every route,” Iris said immediately. “Including the contact points and the people involved. I’ll present everything to you today. If there’s anything else you require, Your Grace, I will handle it properly.”

Elowen rested her cheek lightly against her hand, thinking.

With that information, she could arrange for Dominic to be exposed, dragging the assassination case back into public view, alongside the examination scandal and everything else tied to it.

A faint smile touched her lips. “Tell me, my advisor. Do you have any suggestions?”

The title made Iris flush slightly.

She adjusted her posture before asking. “Your Grace... may I ask how far you intend to go

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regarding the Crown Prince?”

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Elowen's expression cooled, her voice turning steady and cold.

"Alaric slaughtered the horse I raised from a foal."

Her gaze hardened.

"I want him stripped of everything he has. And when that's done, I want him dead."
"

A chill ran through Iris.

So there's no middle ground. This ends in ruin.

She lowered her gaze slightly. "In that case, the Baker family cannot remain. They and the Crown Prince are deeply tied. If he is to fall completely, they must be removed as well."

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Chapter 575 The Game Begins to Turn

Elowen gave a slight nod, signaling for her to continue.

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Encouraged, Iris laid out her plan in careful detail. "Your Grace, I've already reported every hidden passage Dominic uses throughout Vanelle. All you need to do is make this matter public and push for the Nordian prince's assassination case to be reopened. When that happens, I'll work from inside the Crown Prince's Wing and force the Crown Prince to slip. From there, it will be easy to expose the Baker family's past crimes, bribery, corruption, faction-building, all of it. Once the evidence is laid out and public opinion turns, the Crown Prince won't be able to protect himself, and the Bakers will be dragged down with him. When a house starts to crumble, even its closest allies will turn on it to save themselves. By then, the Crown Prince and the Bakers will only pull each other deeper into ruin."

She looked at Elowen, her gaze clear and steady. "Your wish will be fulfilled."

Iris didn't stay long at Hale Manor. After sketching out a detailed map of the hidden routes and marking key contacts, she rose to take her leave.

Elowen stood as well. "I'll walk you out."

Walk me out?

Iris's heart jolted. For a moment, she thought she had misheard.

Getting a seat here is already more than I deserve... and now the Duchess is walking me out herself?

Never in her life had she been treated this way.

Not by Daphne, not by the Crown Prince. To them, she had always been nothing more than a servant, a tool.

Only the Duchess treated her like a person. Someone clever enough to be worth respecting.

A strange warmth mixed with a sharp ache rose in her chest.

The more she thought about it, the more certain she became. Swearing herself to Hale Manor and following Elowen was the best decision she had ever made.

They left the study courtyard and walked along the covered corridor toward the side gate

The garden was full of life

To Iris, it felt far warmer than the grand yet cold halls of the Crown Prince's Wing.

As they reached the arched gate, Iris suddenly remembered something. "Your Grace"

Elowen glanced at her. "Yes?"

Lowering her voice, Iris said, "Inside the Crown Prince's Wing, His Highness has grown increasingly suspicious and rigid. He keeps his distance from advisers and lo

ngtime attendants alike, unwilling to hear counsel. These days, the only ones allowed close to him are myself and Tristan. Most of his private matters pass through our hands.”

She paused briefly before continuing, “When I told him I was coming here today regarding the ointment, I didn’t hide the fact that Tristan had secretly brought it back from Hale Manor. Now that His Highness knows Tristan acted behind his back, he’ll be displeased. He’ll likely take it out on him.”

Elowen understood at once. “You did that on purpose?”

“Yes.”

Iris admitted it without hesitation. “I’ve learned to protect myself. I always think one step ahead and leave myself a way out. Even if you had refused to take me in, once Tristan is punished, he’ll end up on the same side as me. That would give me a better chance of surviving.”

Elowen didn’t reproach her. Instead, she let out a soft laugh. “That does sound like you.”

Relieved, Iris let out a quiet breath. Her eyes brightened as she looked at Elowen. “Fortunately, you were generous enough to accept me. Once Tristan grows estranged from the Crown Prince, I can draw him over. When that happens, His Highness will truly stand alone.”

Elowen spoke gently, “Your thinking is thorough, but there’s no need to rush. Your safety comes first.”

“I understand,” Iris replied respectfully.

At last, Iris gave a deep bow before turning and climbing into her carriage.

Elowen remained at the gate, watching until the carriage disappeared around the corner, before turning back with Mira.

On the way, Mira finally couldn’t hold back any longer. She quickened her pace and asked, “Your Grace, I know Iris! Back when Daphne was around, she helped plot against you more than once. And after she went to the Crown Prince’s Wing, she did plenty of terrible things for His Highness. Someone like her, with a mind full of twists and turns, who knows what she’s really up to today? How could you forgive her and take her in?”

Elowen's voice remained calm. "Mira, I understand your concerns. It's wise to be cautious. especially now."

She reached out and took Mira's hand as they walked, speaking slowly. "But you heard what she

said in the study. For many people, this world doesn't leave them with choices. She wanted to survive, to live a little better, and that meant doing things she might not have chosen otherwise. Now that she's sincerely come to me, and she truly is capable, I'm willing to treat her with respect and give her my trust."

Mira listened, still unconvinced. "But... she's not like us. I'm just worried she isn't truly loyal to you..."

Elowen suddenly smiled. "Are you worried that once she's here, clever and capable as she is, I'll favor her over you?"

Mira's face flushed bright red. "I... I'm not!"

Elowen's smile widened. She gave Mira's hand a gentle squeeze. "How could the two of you be the same? She's an adviser. You've been with me since we were children. What we share is entirely different. No one could ever take your place in my heart."

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Chapter 576 Fractures Beneath the Throne

Mira nodded vigorously.

Back in the study, Elowen called Rosaline over. "Rosaline, please deliver a message to Lady Elira."

Rosaline stepped forward and lowered her head to listen.

"Elira has taken Iris into Hale Manor for the time being. She'll be an asset to me, and to Prince Caelan as well. The concerns Her Majesty and the prince once had now have a promising beginning. The rest of the arrangements can proceed as planned. Please assure them they can

be at ease.”

Rosaline committed it to memory. “I’ll see to it at once.”

With that, she withdrew.

Over time, Elira and Elowen had formed an unspoken alliance.

Elira knew Elowen intended to take revenge on the Crown Prince.

And Elowen had long seen that Elira meant to elevate her own son, Caelan, to contend for the position of heir.

Neither needed to say it aloud. Both simply played their parts.

Back when Caelan had approached Iris several times in an attempt to recruit her, Elira had already sent word to Hale Manor through Rosaline. Since Iris came from *the* Garrett family, and Elowen had past ties with them, Elira hoped to learn more *about* Iris’s temperament to help persuade her.

Now that Iris had come forward on her own, the outcome was different, but the goal remained the same.

“Your Grace.”

From outside, Rosaline’s voice sounded as she offered a greeting.

Elowen looked up and saw Cassian standing at the doorway.

Dressed in a dark robe, his posture straight, his expression relaxed, his gaze rested on her *with* quiet warmth.

“Ella, lunch is ready.”

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Elowen didn’t move. Instead, she beckoned him over. “It can wait. Come here first. I’ve *got* something to show you”

Cassian raised a brow but stepped inside without question.

Elowen caught his hand and drew him closer, then pointed to the map spread across the desk. “Iris didn’t come empty-handed. She gave me this. Every hidden passage in Vanelle, the contacts, the signals, it’s all here.”

Her fingertip tapped lightly against the marked points, a pleased smile playing at her lips. “Now Dominic has nowhere left to run. And once he’s caught, the old Nordian **case** will be reopened. When that happens, Alaric is finished.”

Inside the Crown Prince’s Wing, the study was filled with the faint scent of incense.

Alaric sat behind his desk, a book in hand, but his brows were knit in irritation. He hadn’t taken in a single word.

Footsteps sounded outside.

A young attendant in blue entered with his head lowered, offering a respectful bow. “Your Highness, Lord Dominic has sent word. He says he’s been cooped up at home and would like to go out for a drink. He asks for your permission.”

Iris stood nearby, grinding ink. She said nothing.

Her hand moved steadily, circling the inkstone without haste.

Alaric’s voice turned sharp with impatience. “My grandfather already warned him, this is a sensitive time. Can’t he drink at home? Stop making trouble and stay put.”

The attendant flinched. “Y-yes, Your Highness. I’ll deliver your reply at once”

After he withdrew, Iris set the ink stick down gently and spoke in a soft voice, “Your Highness’s caution is wise. But Lord Dominic is a man who enjoys his wine. He’s followed your orders and hasn’t stepped out for half a month. Prudence is necessary, but allowing him some relief now and then might prevent resentment from building.”

She lowered her voice further. “Besides, the hidden routes you arranged are impeccable. There’s no way Hale Manor could know of them.”

Alaric tapped his fingers against the desk

That was true.

He had taken great care in arranging those routes and informants. In his mind, they were flawless.

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And truth be told, he hadn't seen Elowen in half a month, and the thought of it was starting to gnaw at him.

Dominic was the same, always one for drink and entertainment. Being confined for so long would naturally breed frustration.

His grandfather meant well, but he could be overly cautious.

Too much caution could backfire.

"You make a fair point."

Alaric finally spoke, turning to a servant nearby. "Go. Bring that attendant back."

The servant left at once.

After a moment, Iris spoke again, her tone light. "Your Highness, if I'm not mistaken. Tristan's punishment ends tomorrow?"

Ever since learning that Tristan had secretly brought ointment from Hale Manor for Iris, Alaric had been furious.

To go

behind his back and deal with Hale Manor, what was that if not betrayal?

He had ordered Tristan to stand outside the Crown Prince's Wing for two hours each day and had his meals reduced.

In just a few days, Tristan had grown visibly thinner and pale.

Alaric's expression turned cold. "It's about time. But I'm not finished with him yet

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Chapter 577 Discipline and Doubt

Iris looked up at him, her tone calm and measured.

“Honestly, for something like what Tristan did, going behind your back like that, he should’ve been kept out there for a full month. You already went easy on him cutting it down to half. **But** even so, it’s enough to make a point. Everyone in the residence will think twice after this.”

Alaric clearly liked how that sounded. The tension in his face eased a little.

He thought it over, then waved a hand. “Fine. Go tell him he’s done. He doesn’t need to stand out there anymore.”

Iris dipped her head. “Your Highness is merciful. Though... should his meals be restored as well?”

Alaric had already started to relent, the answer nearly forming.

Then Iris added, almost lightly, “After all, he only took some salve from Hale Manor, and that was for me. When you think about it, it’s not exactly a serious offense.”

Alaric’s expression darkened instantly.

Not serious? He’s been reaching out to Hale Manor behind my back, and that’s not serious?

“His meals stay cut,” Alaric snapped. “Let him stay hungry. Maybe that’ll remind him who *he* really belongs to.”

Iris lowered her eyes. “Understood.”

When she stepped out of the study, the late afternoon sun was *bright* and unforgiving.

Tristan stood off to the side near a carved stone lion, his face pale, his clothes hanging loose on his frame.

Two hours like that was already exhausting for anyone. For someone who had been underfed for days, it was something closer to punishment than discipline.

When Iris approached, he didn't react right away.

"Tristan," she said softly.

He turned his head slowly. His eyes were unfocused at first, then gradually settled on *her*

"His Highness says you're done. You can go back.

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Tristan gave a faint nod. He struggled to turn toward the study and lowered himself into a stiff bow, his voice barely holding together. "This servant... thanks Your Highness for his merry

Iris stepped closer. "I'll walk

you back."

He didn't respond. He just forced himself forward, step by step.

As they moved across the courtyard, Iris lowered her voice.

"He's still upset, so your rations won't be restored. But it's fine. I'll share mine with you. I never finish it anyway. You helped me before. Now I'll help you."

Tristan's lips twitched, forming something like a smile.

It looked strained. Almost painful.

"The Crown Prince..." he murmured.

Iris glanced at him quietly.

Another one. He's starting to see it too.

By evening, Hale Manor had settled into a calm rhythm.

Elowen and Cassian had just finished dinner and were walking slowly through the kitchen garden behind the manor.

Elowen bent slightly, resting her hands against her knees as she looked over *the young plants*.

“They’re growing well. Makes me want to pick them already.”

Cassian smiled. “When they’re ready, I’ll cook them for you.”

She tilted her head toward him. “This is the first time we’ve grown something together. We should invite people over when the harvest comes in.”

She thought for a moment. “I wonder if my aunt will be back by then. If she is, we should invite her too. Let her try your cooking.”

At that moment, Bran approached quickly, his expression serious,

He stopped in front of them and bowed. “Your Grace. It’s done.

Cassian raised a brow. “Dominic?”

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Bran nodded, though his expression carried a hint of unease. “Yes... he caused a major scene at the Spring Blossom House. But...”

Elowen caught it immediately. “But what?”

Bran let out a breath. “It went too far. Someone’s dead.”

Both Elowen and Cassian paused.

Elowen already knew from Scarlet that Dominic and Rowan had never gotten along. Every time they met, it turned into insults or worse.

Rowan had been beaten badly before. First by Cassian, then again after clashing with Alaric and Maerwyn, leaving him bedridden for quite some time.

But Elowen had arranged for Hugh to treat him properly, making sure he recovered.

Earlier that morning, word came in that Dominic had gone to the Spring Blossom House.

So she made her move, quietly steering Rowan there as well.

Everything had already been arranged inside. A clash between them was inevitable.

She just hadn't expected it to end with a death.

Her expression tightened. "Who died?"

As far as Elowen was concerned, neither Rowan nor Dominic was worth much. Whatever happened to them didn't matter to her.

But they weren't just men. They were pieces.

One kept watch. The other held things together.

She had already built something around Alaric, something tight and deliberate, and nothing would move unless both of them did.

Rowan? If he died, so be it.

Dominic was different.

Too many threads ran through him. Too much depended on where he stood.

If he died tonight, a large part of what she'd set in motion would *fall* apart.

This *can't go wrong. Not here. Not now.*

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And for the first time in a while, Elowen felt the tension set in.

Bran paused briefly before answering, "Rowan."

Elowen's shoulders relaxed slightly.

Bran stepped closer, lowering his voice.

“Our man inside reported that both of them had been drinking heavily. It started with an argument over a courtesan. Just words at first. Then Rowan struck first, knocking Dominic to the ground and going at him. Dominic couldn’t take it, and in the struggle he grabbed a pewter wine jug nearby and swung it at Rowan’s head. It was full, heavy. The first hit split his brow. But Dominic didn’t stop. He struck him again. And again. By the time the staff pulled them apart, Rowan was already dead.”

9.9K

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Cassian spoke calmly, “What’s being done about it?”

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Bran answered, “The King’s Capital Prefecture arrived immediately. But given who’s involved, they didn’t dare handle it on their own. It’s already been reported up. By now, the case should be in the hands of the Ministry of Crown Justice. The news hasn’t spread outside yet, but inside the palace, it’s likely already known.”

Elowen understood.

Dominic held a real position at court, a rising figure with influence.

Rowan, though less capable, still carried weight through his family and background.

There was also his past with Maerwyn, something people still talked about.

And Dominic was close to Alaric.

Neither of them was insignificant.

Back when Elowen first learned about their feud, she had been so pleased she couldn’t sleep.

Now?

Dominic had killed Rowan.

She might not be sleeping tonight either.

But for a different reason.

A thought crossed her mind, and her eyes shifted slightly.

“If word has already reached the palace, then the Crown Prince’s Wing must know as well.”

Bran nodded. “Yes. Just a little later than we did.”

That delay mattered.

Elowen’s lips curved faintly.

“Then he’s probably panicking right now, trying to bury it. But this kind of thing doesn’t stay buried. The harder he tries, the more he exposes himself.”

She looked at Bran. “Send word in. Tell Iris and Lady Elira to let things play out. Don’t interfere. The more he reaches, the more he leaves behind. It’ll make things cleaner when we move.”

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Bran understood immediately. “Yes, Your Grace.”

He turned and left.

Elowen watched him go, then spoke thoughtfully.

“I thought Dominic would be the one to lose tonight. Rowan had the advantage. Hugh made sure he fully recovered. I was worried Dominic wouldn’t stand a chance.”

Cassian raised a brow slightly. “Ella, you ever notice something?”

He looked at him. “What?”

“If you really want something, and you keep pushing for it without stopping, things start to fall into place. Like everything starts working in your favor.”

en paused.

assian reached out and touched her cheek lightly.

“When I fought for the throne, it felt the same way. Every turn, every shift, *it all le*
d to the same

outcome.”

His voice lowered.

“We’ll end him.”

At the Crown Prince’s Wing, Alaric had been sitting comfortably, drinking coffee w
hen the report came in.

Before the guard could even finish, the cup slipped from his hand and shattered on
the floor.

He jumped to his feet, ignoring the coffee soaking into his clothes.

“Say that again,” he demanded. “Who did Dominic kill?”

The guard hesitated. “Your Highness... it was the Boyd family’s son...”

Alaric’s face turned dark. “Who killed him?”

The guard swallowed. “Deputy Minister Dominic, Your Highness...”

Alaric froze for a moment.

Then his anger

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“That idiot!” he snapped. “I allowed him out, and this is what he does? He creates
a disaster like this?”

Still not satisfied, he added bitterly, “And Rowan. Son of a soldier, and he goes do
wn that easily? Useless. All he’s done is make things worse.”

Iris stepped forward silently and crouched down, picking up the broken pieces one by one.

Not yet. Wait. Let him make the mistake himself.

She had been the one to suggest easing restrictions on Dominic earlier.

Alaric wasn't foolish. If she spoke now, it would raise suspicion.

So she waited.

Right on cue...

"Stop that!" Alaric snapped, grabbing another cup and throwing it at her feet.

"If you hadn't said anything earlier, I wouldn't have let him go! This whole mess is on you!"

Iris flinched, immediately lowering herself, her voice trembling just enough.

"This servant was foolish. I deserve punishment. I never expected him *to* act so recklessly. *I* only wanted to ease Your Highness's concerns. I didn't think it would lead to this. Please punish me as you see fit. I won't protest."

9.9K

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When she finished, Iris lowered herself into a deep formal bow, bending forward until her forehead nearly touched the floor. Her back looked fragile, and she was shaking badly.

Alaric looked down at her from where he stood, his expression cold.

What she had said earlier wasn't wrong. That suggestion had been made with his mind.

Iris was clever, but she wasn't all-knowing. There **was** no way she could have foreseen Dominac causing something like this.

In the end, the blame still landed on Dominic.

Alaric pressed his fingers against his temple, forcing his irritation down. “Enough. Apologizing now won’t help. We’re already in this mess. Stop wasting time and think of a way out.

“Your Highness, please calm yourself.”

Iris remained lowered, her voice steady.

“Although a man died today, according to the guards both Lord Dominic and Rowan had been drinking heavily. The conflict began over a courtesan and escalated into a fight. If we look closely, Rowan struck first *and* did so with force. Lord Dominic, unable to endure the pain, reacted in self-defense and, in the chaos, struck a fatal blow. This was not intentional murder.”

Alaric’s brows remained tight. “And what does that change? What exactly should I do?”

Iris slowly lifted her head, her eyes filled with unwavering loyalty. “The most urgent matter is to keep this from spreading. Especially to prevent certain people from using it to draw Your Highness into it.”

Alaric’s eyes hardened.

Yeah.

Hale Manor had been circling him *for* a while now, and the entire Falconcrest faction barely even bothered to hide their contempt.

Feels like everyone at court *is* just waiting for him to slip.

They’re all watching me... just waiting for the chance to take me down.

He stared at Iris. “You’re not wrong. So how do I keep *this* contained?”

Iris spoke gently. “The High Tribunal has not yet formally *opened* proceedings. Your Highness

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should

go to the Boyd estate in person.”

“Go there myself?”

“Yes.”

Her tone was earnest. “First, Rowan was once close to Your Highness. Upon hearing of his death, it is only proper that you go in person to express your grief. It shows loyalty and sincerity.”

She continued, carefully guiding each step. “Second, if Your Highness personally consoles Commander Boyd, appealing to both reason and emotion, it may ease his grief over losing his son. If the Boyd family is willing to hold back, there will be room to resolve this.”

Ice softened slightly. “If the family does not pursue it aggressively, the court will not go too hard either. What seems like a major incident can be reduced, and what is reduced eventually fades. The storm will pass, and Your Highness will remain untouched.”

Alaric fell into thought.

It made sense.

Still, for a Crown Prince

beneath his station.

After a pause, he said grandfather for

Iris gave a slight

Alaric p

A tr

it

visit the home of a third-rank military officer felt

serious matter. I should first go to the Baker estate and ask my

It would be wise to consult him, but...”

It appeared on her face. “I fear the news has already spread through Vanelle. If you were Prince’s

Wing, it has likely reached His Majesty as well. Lately, His Highness is giving great importance on the military. Now that the commander's only order is a full investigation."

He said to him. "And that order may come quickly. If Your Highness leaves the matter to the Baker estate first, the delay may cost you. By the time you reach the Majesty's order may already be issued, or the Boyd family may already be case before the throne. At that point, any attempt to calm the situation may

expression shifted.

He said to his father well.

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Especially when it involved military families, there would be no leniency.

She sees further than most. No wonder Grandfather values her judgment.

He made up his mind.

Lowering himself a little now was nothing compared to securing the throne later.

"You're right. There's no time to lose. I'll

He strode toward the door.

go now."

As he passed Iris, he slowed slightly and looked down at her. "What happened today could have gone much worse. You reminded me in time. That speaks well of your loyalty. When I accomplish what I'm meant to, I won't forget you. I'll see you married into a respectable household, properly settled, with a stable life ahead."

A stable life. A husband, a household, children.

Those words echoed in Iris's ears, carrying a strangely sharp edge.

Iris suddenly thought back to the way Elowen had addressed her that day.

A strategist.

The word still lingered. And the more she thought about it, the more certain she felt. Walking away from here and choosing Hale Manor had been the right call.

Becoming Elowen's person... that had changed everything.

Iris lowered her head again. "Serving Your Highness is my duty. I ask for no reward."

Alaric said nothing more.

Once inside the carriage, he leaned back against the cushions, replaying her obedient and composed demeanor.

She was intelligent and capable. And she stayed by his side without asking for anything.

Could it be... she wants something else?

His brows drew together.

She wasn't particularly striking. At most, she could be called pleasant. If she truly admired him and made it known someday, how should he handle it?

Reject her? That would seem cold, given her usefulness.

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Accept her? That would be difficult.

Alaric rubbed his temple and let out a quiet sigh.

Being admired by too many women really is an unavoidable burden of the Crown Prince.

9.9K

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Awakening Love: Reborn to Be His Duchess

Chapter 580 The King Reacts

Inside the royal residence, the Minister of Crown Justice stood before the king's desk, posture rigid, a thin layer of sweat forming at his temples as he finished recounting the events at the pleasure house.

Theodric's expression was dark, his presence carrying a heavy, suffocating pressure.

In his hand, he turned a carved stone paperweight, gripping it so tightly it seemed it might crack.

Not long ago, he had repeatedly warned the court that officials were not to frequent brothels or indulge themselves in excess.

And yet Dominic, a senior official, had openly defied that order.

Worse, the man he killed was the son of a military commander.

Earlier that very morning, urgent dispatches had arrived from the southwestern front. Another defeat. Another commanding general lost.

He was already struggling to decide who could be sent next.

And now this.

Dominic gets drunk and kills a commander's only son... how are those military families supposed to take that? If their loyalty starts to crack, who's still gonna be willing to step onto the field?

The more he thought about it, the angrier he became. With a sharp motion, he slammed *the* paperweight onto the desk.

The sound made the minister flinch, lowering his head further, *not* daring to speak.

"Your Majesty."

Quin stepped in quietly. "Lady Elira has been waiting outside for some time. Should I ask her to return later?"

Theodric paused slightly.

The Jones family had, in recent years, sent several sons into military service. Some had already gained a reputation for competence.

He glanced once at the trembling minister before speaking. “This case *will be* handled strictly according to the law. No exceptions, Investigate thoroughly and present *the truth*. The Boyd family deserves an answer, and so does the court. You may go.”

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The minister felt as if he had been spared a sentence. He bowed repeatedly and backed out his robes damp with sweat.

Theodric then gestured to Quin. “Let her in.”

A moment later, Elira entered, carrying a small covered tray, her steps measured and calm

She passed the departing minister at the doorway, exchanging a brief, polite nod

When she reached the desk, she set down a cup of warm tonic and placed it within reach. Her voice was soft. “You seem troubled today, Your Majesty. Is it because of what happened at the pleasure house?”

Theodric took the cup and gave a low acknowledgment.

Elira continued gently, “You shouldn’t let it weigh on you too heavily. It’s not worth harming your health. I’ve heard that His Highness has already left the palace to deal with the matter personally. With him stepping in, things may settle soon.”

Theodric froze mid-motion.

His eyes snapped toward her. “He left the palace?”

Elira seemed startled for a moment. A trace of unease crossed her face as she stepped back and lowered herself in a respectful curtsy, “That was careless of me. I only heard it from attendants and assumed it was true. Please forgive me, Your Majesty.”

“You don’t need to cover for him.”

His tone turned sharp. “Say exactly what you heard. Where did he go?”

Elira hesitated briefly before answering. “I wouldn’t dare hide anything from you. I heard *the* attendants mention that His Highness took a carriage out earlier today. I didn’t know the reason at the time. After seeing the minister just now, I assumed perhaps you had assigned him to handle this matter.”

She lowered her voice slightly. “I didn’t realize you weren’t aware.”

Then, more gently, “Please don’t be angry. The Crown Prince is grown now. It’s natural for him to make his own decisions.”

Theodric let out a cold laugh. “His own decisions? I’d say he’s grown bold enough to ignore me entirely.”

His voice rose sharply. “Quin.”

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Quin stepped forward at once. “Your Majesty”

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“Find out immediately. I want to know whether he left the palace, where he went, and **who** he met. Every detail”

Seeing the king’s fury laid bare, Quin didn’t hesitate for a second. “At once, Your Majesty.” He bowed quickly and withdrew without delay.

He had served Theodric for years and knew exactly what this meant. When the king was in this kind of mood, nothing short of a full and exact account would satisfy him.

It wasn’t long before Quin returned.

Before he could speak, Elira stepped back at just the right moment. “If Your Majesty has matters to attend to, I won’t disturb you further.”

Theodric gave a short acknowledgment.

She curtsied again and left.

Outside, she walked along the long stone corridor, her pace

unhurried.

Her longtime attendant followed closely. Once they were certain no one else was nearby, *the* woman spoke softly. “Why didn’t you stay a little longer? Lord Jett has already confirmed everything. The Crown Prince went to the Boyd estate. That’s clear leverage. *If* you had remained, you could have guided the conversation. With His Majesty already angry, you might have pushed this further.”

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