

Awakening Love: Reborn to Be His Duchess Novel

We Had Something Real But Didn't Handle It Right

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Chapter 591 Words Behind Smiles

So I'm young. And I'm a woman.

Then what about you?

A man who's already stepped away from court, yet still chooses to stand here today?

For the briefest moment, Colton's smile stiffened, but it returned just as quickly.

"General Hale has earned great distinction," he said in an even tone. "And by all accounts, he raised his children well. Still, years spent on campaign mean limited involvement in court affairs. Your Grace grew up in that household, surrounded by a soldier's way of thinking. When it comes to the complexities of court, it's only natural there may be... gaps in understanding."

He paused lightly before continuing.

"As for what you said earlier, envying His Highness for having senior officials at his side, I cannot accept that characterization. In this chamber, before His Majesty, no one 'supports' anyone. We speak only according to law and conscience."

He inclined his head.

"I am here today simply because I was uneasy. I wished to see this matter resolved clearly with my own eyes. If the Crown Prince is at fault, I will not shield him. If he has been wronged, I will not allow injustice to stand. Nothing more."

Elowen nodded in agreement, her tone gentle and composed.

“What you say is entirely reasonable. My husband and I truly understand very little about court affairs. We only came because His Majesty summoned us.”

The meaning beneath her words was unmistakable.

Unlike you.

Colton gave her another look..

This girl from the Hale family was far more difficult than he had anticipated.

Her words were polished and mild, yet every sentence pushed back against him, subtle and precise, even turning his own position against him.

He withdrew his attention from her and turned toward the throne.

“Your Majesty, if I may be so bold, what exactly is the matter being tried today? I have only

mapler Sy words benign smiles

heard fragments and remain unclear.”

Theodric spoke, “Vernon.”

Vernon, the Minister of Crown Justice rose immediately and stepped forward, offering a firm

bow.

“Your Majesty. My lord. Today’s matter began with a killing at the Velvet Lantern. Dominic, Deputy Minister of Rites, after drinking, became involved in a dispute with Rowan, son of Commander Boyd. In the course of the altercation, Rowan was killed.”

He continued smoothly.

“This case was originally a straightforward matter of manslaughter. However, during questioning, Dominic revealed that several months ago, when Prince Roderic of Nordia was assassinated near the border, the act was not carried out by the Duke of Duskmoor, but was instead a deliberate plot meant to frame him.”

Colton’s brows drew together slightly.

Vernon went on.

“Dominic claims that he acted under direct instruction from the Crown Prince. He was ordered to approach the Duke and intensify tensions between the Duke and the Nordian prince. Meanwhile, assassins were arranged along the prince’s route, disguised as men from Duskmoor. After the attack, evidence bearing the Duke’s mark was deliberately left behind, and *all* clues were directed toward him, leading the court to believe he was responsible.”

Colton remained composed, thinking for a moment before speaking.

“Did Dominic provide any physical evidence?”

Vernon hesitated.

Colton did not wait for an answer and instead addressed the emperor.

“Your Majesty, although I have retired, I spent over twenty years handling cases. *I* am still familiar with the laws.”

His voice was calm and steady.

“In any case, a conviction requires both testimony and material evidence to support one another. A claim without proof cannot stand. Moreover, the one who accuses must provide the evidence. If a man could rely solely on his own words to accuse the Crown Prince of such a

crime.

He paused,

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“Then this would appear less like testimony, and more like an attempt to shift blame.”

His approach was direct and precise, grounded in legal principle, making his stance sound impartial and reasonable despite clearly favoring the Crown Prince.

A faint sheen of sweat appeared at Vernon’s temple.

“It is true that physical evidence is currently limited. Much of what Dominic described was conducted in secrecy, leaving little behind. The Ministry is working urgently to gather-

“To gather?” Colton interrupted quietly.

Vernon’s chest tightened.

Colton turned again toward the throne.

“Your Majesty, there is something I cannot understand.”

He paused, his tone growing heavier.

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“Dominic is charged with manslaughter. Under the law, a drunken killing is rarely punished *by* death. At most, exile. So why would he now bring up an old matter from months ago, revealing something of this scale?”

His gaze sharpened.

“What does he stand to gain?”

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Chapter 592 The Countermove

His words stirred the entire court.

Piers couldn’t help turning to look at Gareth, clearly anxious.

Surely now we step in?

If the Duchess takes a hit here, Sylvia will not let it go.

Gareth remained completely still, his expression calm as he gave a slight shake of his head.

She did not come here unprepared.

This is well within her control.

As expected, Elowen spoke, “My lord’s concerns are entirely reasonable, and they reflect how a case should be handled,” she said calmly. “However, this testimony only emerged this morning. The Ministry has only just presented it before His Majesty. Naturally, the evidence *has* not yet been fully gathered.”

Colton did not respond.

Elowen continued, her tone steady.

“That said, Dominic is not making baseless accusations. The matters he described, the evidence that should exist, I have already secured.”

Theodric leaned forward slightly.

“You have it?”

Elowen met his gaze and nodded.

“Yes, Your Majesty. You are aware that my husband has always been cautious in matters concerning Nordia, especially the negotiations. Prince Roderic provoked him repeatedly, yet he remained restrained, unwilling to jeopardize Your Majesty’s efforts. Why would he choose *to* assassinate the prince?”

She continued smoothly. “But at the time, the situation escalated too quickly. Nordia demanded answers. The court demanded truth. And the truth is not something that can be uncovered overnight.”

She paused briefly:

“My husband could have spoken in his defense. But he understood that doing so would only

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intensify matters and place Your Majesty in a more difficult position.”

Her voice softened.

“So he bore it in silence. He offered no explanation, no defense, and endured the accusations, even accepting the loss of his title and confinement to his estate.”

She let out a quiet breath.

“But I know what it took for him to achieve everything he has. As his wife, I could not bear to see him suffer such unfounded accusations. So I spent time and effort investigating, and eventually uncovered the truth.”

Theodric’s gaze lingered on her with new consideration.

Colton’s expression, however, tightened slightly.

Elowen continued, as though unaware.

“Originally, we intended to wait for the right moment and present the evidence properly. But Your Majesty’s summons came suddenly, and we had no time to prepare. The evidence remains at Hale Manor.”

She inclined her head slightly.

“It would be best if Your Majesty sent someone to retrieve it. That way, there can be no

suspicion of tampering. Whether the evidence is genuine or not will be clear at a glance, and no one will be able to question it afterward.”

Her reasoning was flawless.

Theodric studied her, then turned. *Cassian... that guy really hit the jackpot.*

“Quin. Go to Hale Manor yourself.”

Quin bowed. “Yes, Your Majesty.”

Elowen added calmly. “You can ask for Bran. He knows exactly where everything is kept

Quin acknowledged and left at once.

Silence settled over the chamber

Every gaze turned

toward Elowen, filled with surprise, scrutiny

and caution

This young Lady of the First Rank was far from suple.

Chapter 592 The Countermove

Elowen paid no attention to it. She turned back to Colton, her expression as gentle as before

“You asked why Dominic, facing a lesser charge, would expose something so serious,” she said. “I can offer an explanation.”

Colton’s gaze sharpened.

“While investigating this matter, I also looked into Dominic himself. He is known as a protégé of Lord Rodney and appears aligned with the Jones family. However, in practice, he rarely visits them. Instead, he spends much of his time in gambling houses and pleasure establishments.”

She paused.

“More importantly, he is deeply in debt from gambling.”

The room grew still.

“At one point, he owed a vast sum and was being relentlessly pursued by creditors. Yet suddenly, those debts were repaid.”

She let the moment hang. “The one who paid them... was the Baker family.”

An uproar broke out across the court.

Colton’s composure finally cracked.

For the first time, a visible fracture appeared in his calm demeanor.

He opened his mouth to respond, but Elowen spoke first, her tone unchanged.

“The debt records, along with witness testimony, are in my possession, together with the rest of the evidence. Once Lord Jett returns, you will be able to examine them yourself.”

9.9K

Chapter 593 Conscience and Leverage

For once, Colton found himself caught off guard, the words stalling just slightly in his throat.

He had seen every kind of political storm, dealt with men far more troublesome than most, *yet* facing Elowen now, he couldn't immediately steer the conversation where he wanted it to go.

Elowen continued without hesitation. "At first, I couldn't understand why Dominic would choose this moment to expose the assassination of the Nordanian prince. What could he possibly gain from it?"

Her voice remained even, but there was something grounded beneath it.

"Then I thought of my father. He's fought battles his entire life, some he won, some he lost. There was one defeat that stayed with him. After he returned, he shut himself away in his study for days and refused to see anyone. It wasn't until he won another campaign later that he finally smiled again."

She lifted her eyes, meeting Colton's gaze directly, clear and steady.

"It took me time to understand why. He wasn't simply brooding over defeat. He felt he had failed His Majesty. He couldn't make peace with that."

Her tone sharpened slightly.

"My father is a soldier. He was never much of a scholar, yet even he understands *what* loyalty means. Dominic is different. He studied for years, earned his place through the examinations, and entered court as a servant of the Crown. Every book he read taught him the same thing. Loyalty to the king. Responsibility to the realm. And above all, a conscience

She did not look away.

"He took part in the plot against Prince Roderic. He disrupted a peace negotiation that His Majesty had worked hard to secure. He placed the Crown in a difficult position and brought disgrace upon the court. Those are facts.

A brief pause followed.

"But after doing all that, do you really believe he could feel at ease?"

Cassian stood beside her, his expression relaxed, the faintest trace of amusement lingering – the corner of his hips as he watched the exchange unfold.

Elowen spoke again, slower this time, each word deliberate,

This time, he killed Rowan by mistake and was thrown to a prison cell under the Ministry of

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Crown Justice. At that point, he knew his life was over. He understood that he would not walk out alive.”

She held the silence for just a moment longer.

“So before the end came, he told the truth. Not because it would save him, and not because *it* would benefit him, but because he wanted peace of mind.”

Her voice carried clearly through the chamber.

“That way, he wouldn’t betray the trust His Majesty had placed in him, and he wouldn’t betray everything he had spent his life learning.”

Colton had no immediate reply.

Alaric was down on one knee, his eyes bloodshot as he stared at Elowen, the intensity of his gaze almost burning.

There was resentment there, and something deeper, something sharper.

She really does hate me.

Enough to drag everything into the open in front of the entire court.

Is she determined to see me stripped of my position before she stops?

His thoughts pulled him backward.

Elowen, smiling at him.

Elowen, lowering her gaze shyly in his presence.

Elowen, looking at him as though he were the center of her world.

Now, when she looked at him, there was nothing left but distance. Cold and unyielding.

He wanted to demand an answer, to ask her why things had turned this way.

Before he could speak, Colton's voice cut in.

"Your Grace speaks with remarkable clarity."

Alaric turned sharply, disbelief flashing across his face as he looked at his grandfather.

"Your Highness, Colton continued, his voice aged but steady as it carried across the hall, "the way you handled this matter was deeply improper"

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Alaric's eyes widened.

Colton did not look at him as he went on.

"For years, the Duke of Duskmoor has distinguished himself on the battlefield, risking his life and securing victory after victory for the Crown. The soldiers follow him because they trust him, and his command is respected throughout the ranks. Everyone in this court knows it.

His tone remained measured.

"You are the heir to the throne, the foundation of the realm. Even if your reputation does not match his, that is no cause for concern. He is your uncle, your elder. These honors and reputations are not something he would ever try to take from you."

A slight pause.

"If he had wanted that throne, he could have pursued it long ago. When the time came to choose sides, he could have stepped forward. But he didn't. He stepped back instead. He chose to serve as your uncle and as His Majesty's subject."

Colton's voice lowered, gaining weight.

"So why let suspicion take root? Why assume he posed a threat and move to suppress him? *Why* go so far as to orchestrate the assassination of a Nordan prince and place the blame on him?"

His words landed heavily.

“That single shot did not just kill a prince. It struck at the very peace His Majesty has worked so carefully to build.”

Elowen’s brow lifted slightly.

He’s shifting the ground.

She had believed she had driven him into a dead end.

Yet instead of defending the indefensible, he had turned the entire argument. He rereframed it.

Not as calculated malice, but as fear. A crown prince unsettled by a powerful uncle, making a reckless decision.

It sounded like condemnation, yet it softened the nature of the crime.

At the same time, he had quietly reminded the emperor of something *far* more dangerous.

The army’s loyalty.

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This old *man doesn’t* miss a *step*.

Colton paused briefly before continuing, “As for Dominic, I was familiar with him. He admired the great poets and enjoyed his drink, but he handled his duties with care. He was loyal. devoted to the Crown.”

He drew a slow breath.

“He understood right and wrong. Even when he assisted Your Highness in framing the duke, he believed he was acting for the good of the realm.”

Another pause.

“Now that he has come to his senses and chosen to speak the truth, I would say he has done the right thing.”

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Colton turned his gaze toward Alaric, his expression sharpening.

“Your Highness, do not think of asking Dominic to shield you. He serves the Crown, not you.

Alaric’s voice broke as he shouted, “I never asked him to protect me! If I had, why would he say any of this?”

Colton looked at him, and though it was fleeting, disappointment passed through his eyes.

He still doesn’t understand.

He took a measured breath. “That may be your claim. But we should examine the statement itself.”

He turned toward the throne and inclined his head. “Your Majesty, if I may, I would like to review the testimony.”

Theodric gave a slight nod. “Proceed.”

A palace attendant stepped forward and presented the document.

Colton accepted it and read through it carefully, line by line, without rushing.

When he looked up again, his gaze settled on Alaric.

“Your Highness, you say you did not ask Dominic to shield you, yet Iris from the Crown Prince’s Wing paid him a visit.”

Alaric froze.

He had focused only on the latter part of the testimony earlier and had not even noticed the earlier record.

He had indeed sent Iris to silence Dominic.

A chill spread across his back.

Colton continued, reading aloud.

“His Highness reminds you to respect the authority and laws of the Crown, to speak truthfully, and not to make reckless accusations out of panic or resentment

Alaric blinked, momentarily stunned. That was not how he remembered it.

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Of course Iris would phrase it that way. She always knew how to turn a situation in his favor.

Colton’s expression eased slightly.

“It appears Your Highness did not instruct him to lie.”

Alaric exhaled sharply and nodded. “Exactly. That’s what I meant. I never told him to protect

me.”

Colton did not respond to him further. He closed the document and returned it to the attendant.

Then he turned back toward the throne.

“Your Majesty, it is true that His Highness has made a grave mistake. He grew wary of the duke’s influence and, in a moment of poor judgment, acted rashly. His actions led to the death of the Nordian prince and caused the Duke of Duskmoor to be wrongly accused.”

He paused before continuing, “Fortunately, Nordia has not withdrawn from negotiations. A new envoy has already arrived, and discussions are still ongoing. This is a blessing for the realm and for Your Majesty.”

With visible effort, he lowered himself into a deep formal bow.

“I humbly request that the Duke of Duskmoor’s honor and standing *be* fully restored. He *has* been wronged, and now that the truth is known, justice must be done.”

A brief pause followed.

“I also ask that His Highness be disciplined. A mistake of this magnitude cannot go unpunished.”

Alaric's face shifted from red to pale, then to a sickly gray.

His thoughts spiraled.

Grandfather... what are you doing? Even you are not standing with me now..

Despair settled heavily in his chest.

Theodric sat upon the throne, his expression unreadable, his gaze deep and steady.

"Rise," he said.

Colton remained where he was.

After a brief silence, Theodric spoke again. "I will consider your words."

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Only then did Colton lift his head, though he still did not stand.

"Your Majesty, there is one more matter I must raise."

Theodric gestured slightly. "Speak."

Colton took a slow breath.

"The negotiations with Nordia are at a critical stage. This concerns the border, the safety of our people, and the stability of both realms. The new envoy, by all accounts, holds Your Highness in high regard."

He continued carefully.

"If punishment is carried out now, it may disrupt the negotiations and create uncertainty on their side."

A measured pause.

"I humbly suggest that any decision regarding punishment be postponed until *after the negotiations* are concluded. At that time, whether Your Highness is demoted, removed, exiled, or confined, Your Majesty may decide without constraint."

His voice remained steady.

“But for now, the greater priority should be the success of the negotiations.”

Elowen watched him, her expression unchanged, but something shifted quietly in her thoughts.

A clean retreat.

He knew he could not protect the position outright.

So he chose to concede, to present himself as impartial, even severe.

And in doing so, he secured time. Time for the situation to change. Time for the Bakers to act.

Weeks, perhaps months.

In that time, anything could happen.

Alaric would remain the heir, even if tarnished. And that alone was enough.

Every move calculated down to the last detail

Quentin stepped forward after gauging the emperor’s expression, adjusting his robe before

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speaking, “Your Majesty, I agree. Matters must be weighed by urgency. The situation in the southwestern marches remains unsettled, and Your Majesty already bears a heavy burden. If the negotiations with Nordia were to falter now, it could unsettle the court and the people

alike.”

He inclined his head respectfully.

“As for today’s matter, the Duke of Duskmoor has already cleared his name before the court. Everyone present understands the truth. How the case is handled afterward can remain within these walls.”

A brief pause.

“There is no need to turn this into a public spectacle and give Nordia reason to mock us.”

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Seeing the shift in the atmosphere, Archer stepped forward at once, trying to smooth things over before things spiraled further.

“Your Grace,” he said with a measured tone, “you are, after all, His Highness’s own uncle. Surely something like this does not need to be taken so far. And given that you are also His Majesty’s brother, you understand better than anyone the weight he carries. It would be a kindness not to place him in an even more difficult position over... a matter like this.”

The implication was unmistakable.

Even if the crown prince had done wrong, the duke should swallow it.

Let it pass. Endure it.

Piers stood among the officials of the Ministry of Crown Justice, watching with quiet interest, clearly expecting Elowen to answer.

But before she could speak, Gareth stepped forward.

“My lords,” he said evenly, “you’ve managed to turn the truth inside out.”

His voice was calm, but every word landed clean.

“The one who acted wrongly is the crown prince. The attempt on the Nordian envoy and *the* scheme to frame the Duke of Duskmoor are established facts. Dominic’s confession is already in hand, and the rest of the evidence will be presented shortly.”

He let the words settle before continuing.

“And yet, listening to the two of you, one would think the fault lies with the duke instead.”

His gaze shifted to Quentin.

Quentin instinctively shifted back half a step.

It made no difference.

“You spoke of the duke’s reputation in the army,” Gareth went on. “That part is true. *He* is respected. But *do* you understand why?”

His tone sharpened slightly.

“He earns it. He leads from the front. Every victory he’s claimed *has* come at *real* cost. *He* has held the borders together with his own strength.”

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A brief pause.

“And somehow, in your telling, that becomes a problem? Would you prefer he failed instead?”

Quentin’s face went pale.

Gareth did not press him further. He turned to Archer.

“And you,” he continued, voice steady, “reduced an attempt on a Nordian royal to a trivial matter.”

He gave a small shake of his head.

“We are fortunate this discussion is contained within these walls. If such words reached the Nordian delegation, how do you imagine they would respond?”

His eyes narrowed slightly.

“They would hear that we consider an attack on their bloodline insignificant. Do you intend to continue peace talks under that impression, or would you rather see the kingdom dragged back into war?”

Archer felt the pressure immediately, a thin sheen of sweat forming *at* his temple.

Gareth did not slow.

“You also said His Grace should spare His Majesty the burden of this matter. On that point, *I* agree. But let me ask you this.”

He glanced toward the throne.

“Do you believe His Majesty would willingly see his own brother wronged?”

A beat passed.

“The facts are here. The evidence will be placed before the throne. The judgment belongs to His Majesty alone.”

His voice turned colder.

“And yet, from what I’ve just heard, it sounds as though the two of you have already decided how this should end.”

His gaze hardened.

“Or have you taken it upon yourselves to rule in his place?”

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Silence fell instantly.

Quentin and Archer both looked stricken, their mouths opening slightly, but no words came.

At last, Theodric spoke, “That is enough.”

His tone was not loud, but it carried absolute authority.

“We will wait for the evidence.”

The hall went still.

Moments later, footsteps echoed beyond the great doors.

Quin entered first, followed by Bran, who carried two heavy wooden chests, one in each hand.

Every eye in the chamber shifted toward them. Those chests held the truth.

Bran stepped forward and lowered himself into a deep formal bow. “Your Majesty.”

Theodric inclined his head. “Rise.”

Bran straightened and stood with hands at his sides.

“What you have brought,” the emperor said, “are the materials gathered by the Duke of Duskmoor and his duchess?”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” Bran replied. “They spent months gathering these in secret.”

Theodric looked toward Cassian and Elowen.

“Then present them.”

His gaze moved briefly toward Colton. “Colton, you may take your seat.”

Colton acknowledged and was assisted back to his chair. Cassian helped Elowen to her feet, and together they stepped forward.

Cassian opened the first chest. Inside, stacks of documents were arranged with careful precision.

Elowen picked up the top sheet and turned so the court could see.

“This is a debt record from the Gilded Vault,” she said clearly. “It shows that Dominic lost three thousand silver marks in a single night of gambling. His signature is here, along with that of the house steward.”

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She passed it to Quin, who delivered it to the throne.

Theodric examined it, his expression darkening. Elowen lifted another document.

“This is the repayment record for that same debt. It confirms the full amount was settled. The name signed here is Bennett, steward of the Baker Estate.”

She said no more. She didn’t need to. Everyone understood the implication.

Then she continued.

9.9K

Chapter 596 No Escape Left

Letters exchanged between Dominic and the crown prince. Movement records from Duskmoor Manor during the time of the attack.

Armory logs detailing weapons issued and returned.

Each piece added another layer. Each detail locked the truth more firmly in place.

Wit

document presented, the color drained further from Alaric's face.

looked hollow, as if whatever strength had been holding him upright had finally

he throne, Theodric watched in

when set down the final document

This concludes the evidence concerning

Theodric's restraint broke

"Disgraceful."

His voice rang through the

"How could

Alaric's

But

the disappointment in his eyes deepening.

the attack on the Nordian envoy."

He bowed himself fully, head bowed, not daring to look up.

It did not come.

Relief. A thin thread of relief crept in.

just like Grandfather said.

princess was still in Vanelle.

ot a moment for escalation. “Your Majesty need not be angered just yet.”

voice rose again, steady and composed.

stured toward the remaining documents. “There is more to consider.”

Alaric’s heart lurched violently.

Elowen drew out another set of papers and unfolded them.

“My father once served with a deputy named Mercer, who fell in battle years ago, leaving behind a widow and a son. That son, Josh, took part in this year’s royal examinations.”

Her tone was calm, almost gentle.

“He did not pass. I found that unusual, so I kept his work, intending to look into it.”

She glanced toward the throne.

“Your Grace has often said that Your Majesty values the examinations and the fair selection of talent above all else, and has repeatedly issued orders against corruption.”

She continued smoothly, “Josh is not only the son of a fallen soldier, but also a student of Edmund. His ability has been widely praised. If he had simply failed under ordinary circumstances, that would be one thing. But given his reputation, the result raises questions.”

Her voice softened slightly.

“I bring this forward not to complicate matters, nor to take advantage of the present situation. But if he was wronged, then the loss is not his alone. It is a loss to the realm.”

She held the documents steadily.

“True talent is rare. If someone worthy has been cast aside, then it is only right he be given the chance to serve the crown.”

Theodric considered her words.

“The examination case has already been assigned for review,” he said. “It has not yet been concluded.”

His gaze shifted.

“Harvey. This matter was entrusted to you. What progress has been made?”

Harvey stepped forward quickly.

“Your Majesty, I began the investigation immediately. The results of two candidates from the Baker family, Albert and Liam, raised concerns, so I retrieved their examination papers for comparison.”

He spoke carefully, “I also questioned the deputy examiner, Travis, as well as the clerk responsible for copying their papers, Milo. Travis confirmed that all procedures were followed

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correctly, from distribution to collection, sealing, and transcription. His statement has been recorded and signed.”

He hesitated briefly.

“As for Milo, I have attempted to summon him multiple times, but he has declined, citing his mother’s serious illness. He claims he cannot leave her side. I did not wish to force the matter, so I left instructions for him to appear once her condition improved. However, he has not yet come.”

Theodric frowned slightly.

“Then he will come now.”

He turned his head.

“Quin. Deliver my order. He is to appear at once.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

Quin bowed and left.

Elowen spoke again.

“Your Majesty, if I may suggest one thing. It would be worthwhile to retrieve the examination papers of Albert, Liam, and Josh, both their original submissions and the copied versions. Comparing them side by side may reveal discrepancies.”

Harvey hesitated.

Theodric did not. “Bring them.”

Harvey bowed. “Yes, Your Majesty.”

A fine sheen of sweat had already formed along his brow.

Alaric remained lowered, his legs numb beneath him.

But the anger building in his chest burned far hotter than any physical discomfort.

Elowen... Was exposing the envoy attack not enough for you?

His fingers pressed hard against the cold floor.

Now you bring this up too?

His jaw tightened.

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How far are you planning to push this? Do you really intend to see me fall?

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Chapter 597 Cracks in the Plan

Alaric let out a silent, cold laugh.

Fortunately, she didn't know that the matter of the examinations had already been thoroughly handled by him and his grandfather.

Once the papers were brought forward, nothing would be found.

His father would only see this for what it was, Elowen stirring trouble where there was none.

He remained lowered to the floor, perfectly still, waiting for this entire farce *to come to an end*.

After that, he would personally take charge of negotiations, earn merit, and naturally, his father's anger would fade.

And when that time came...

He would make every single person involved pay for today.

The only one unsettled was Colton. His gaze lingered on Elowen, layered with caution and something harder to name.

How much does she actually know?

First, she reopened the case of the Nordanian prince's assassination and shifted the blame onto the Crown Prince.

Then she brought up the examination scandal without pause.

This can't be coincidence. She planned this.

A deep unease settled in his chest.

But here, in the royal court, there was nothing he could *do* for the moment. *He could only wait and respond as things unfolded.*

Time stretched.

At last, footsteps echoed from outside the hall.

Minister Harvey entered first, accompanied by two officials from the Ministry of Rites, each carrying stacks of examination scripts.

Moments later, Quin returned with Milo.

Chapter 597 Cracks in the Plan

Milo was an unremarkable man at first glance. Plain features, humble background.

In a gathering like this, someone of his rank had no place here. His presence alone set him apart from everyone else.

And yet, dressed in a clean official robe, his back straight and his gaze steady, he walked forward step by step with quiet resolve.

There was something unshakable about him.

He stopped below the raised dais and lowered himself into a deep formal bow.

“Milo greets Your Majesty.”

Theodric’s gaze rested on him briefly.

“I’ve been told you refused multiple inquiries from the Ministry of Rites.”

Milo lifted his head, meeting the emperor’s gaze without flinching.

“That is correct, Your Majesty.”

A faint ripple moved through the court.

The emperor continued, “Why?”

Milo answered clearly, each word measured.

“Because I was afraid.”

Theodric leaned forward slightly. “Afraid of what?”

Milo remained lowered, but his spine stayed straight.

“Your Majesty, I hold a minor post in the Ministry of Rites. My duty is to transcribe

examination scripts. This is my fourth year in that role. In this year’s court qualification trials, I was assigned to copy the papers of Albert and Liam.”

He paused briefly.

“By coincidence, I handled their scripts last year as *well*.”

A murmur stirred faintly in the hall.

“When I copied their work this time, something felt *off*. I remembered their handwriting from last year. The scripts I saw this time were neat, but completely different”

Chapter 597 Cracks in the Plan

He took a breath.

“I couldn’t understand how someone’s hand could change so drastically in such a short time. I had doubts, so I brought the matter to Deputy Examiner Travis. Lord Travis told me the Baker family had hired renowned tutors and pushed the two young masters to practice diligently. He said the improvement was natural, even commendable, and told me not *to* overthink it.”

Milo’s voice remained steady.

“I still had doubts, but I said nothing further. I am only a clerk. My words carry no weight. So I buried my concerns and completed my duties as required. Every script copied, every record sealed, all according to protocol.”

His tone lowered slightly.

“But after the examinations ended, someone came to my

The hall fell completely silent.

home.”

At those words, Alaric’s head snapped up. He stared at Milo in shock.

Wasn’t everything already handled?

He instinctively glanced toward Colton.

The man’s expression remained calm, unreadable as ever.

Milo continued, “It was the steward of Baker Estate. He said his name was Bennett. He brought a large sum of silver and told me it was meant to support my elderly mother. He said that as long as I kept silent if anyone asked questions later, the money would be mine. And that each year afterward, more would be sent.”

Low murmurs spread through the court.

Milo raised his head again.

“Your Majesty, my mother taught me from a young age to live with integrity. She said our family has worked the land for generations, and it was only through great effort that I was *able* to study and enter official service. She never asked for wealth or rank. Only *that* I remain true to my conscience and worthy of the salary granted by the Crown.”

A brief pause.

“When she learned of this, she told me that if I accepted that money, she would rather end *her* own life than live to see it.”

Awakening Love: Reborn to Be His Duchess

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Chapter 598 The Weight of Truth

A collective intake of breath swept through the hall.

The officials present looked at the low-ranking clerk with newfound respect.

Milo continued.

“I was ashamed when I heard her words. But I also knew the Baker family holds immense power. If I refused outright, I might not survive the consequences. So I accepted the money temporarily and stored it at home without touching a single coin. My mother sealed it herself in a wooden chest and marked the date. I intended that if this matter were ever investigated, the money would serve as evidence. If not, once things settled, I would quietly return it.”

Alaric’s hands tightened.

So

this is what you call “handled“? I should’ve taken him out when I had the chance.

Milo continued, “Not long after, someone from Hale Manor came as well.”

Theodric’s gaze shifted almost instinctively toward Elowen.

Alaric followed, a cold smile forming in his mind.

So my grandfather failed. You think you’ll succeed where he didn’t?

Milo spoke plainly.

“Your Grace sent a physician, Doctor Dray, to examine my mother. I was alarmed at the time. The Baker family had just come, and then Hale Manor followed. *I* could not understand what forces were at play. I feared being used, and I feared becoming entangled in matters far beyond my station. So I declined the offer as politely as I could. Doctor Dray did not insist. He only said that if my mother’s condition worsened, I could seek him out at any time.”

Elowen lowered her gaze, saying nothing.

She had anticipated this.

When she learned the Baker family had made their move, she sent Hugh at once.

Milo was known to be deeply devoted to his mother, who had been ill for years. She had assumed that an offer of treatment would win his favor.

But he refused.

Even his mother refused. And strangely enough, that made things better.

Chapter 598 The Weight of Truth

People like them could not be swayed by power or bribery. They answered only to their own sense of right and wrong.

And in a court like this, that kind of person carried far more weight than any carefully planted ally.

Milo’s voice rang out again.

“Later, news spread that the court had begun investigating irregularities in the examinations. When I heard this, I thought back to the visits from both Baker Estate and Hale Manor. I realized this was no simple matter of misconduct. The implications were far-reaching, far beyond what someone like me could grasp. So when the Ministry of Rites summoned me repeatedly, I claimed illness and stayed away.”

He lifted his head fully.

“Only now, with Your Majesty asking in person, do I dare to speak *the* truth and *place* everything before you.”

His voice grew firmer with each word.

When he finished, he lowered himself again in a deep, formal bow.

Across the hall, officials stared at him.

His robe was plain. His rank insignificant.

And yet, in that moment, he stood taller than many among the powerful. On the throne. Theodric remained silent for a long time.

His gaze lingered on Milo, then shifted slowly to Alaric, still lowered on the floor.

Then to Colton. Finally, it settled on Elowen and Cassian.

He understood perfectly well what this truly was. On the surface, it was an investigation into examination fraud.

In truth, it was a struggle between his son and his brother's household.

Choosing a side would not be simple.

After a long pause, he let out a quiet breath.

“Quin.”

Quin stepped forward. “Your Majesty.”

Chapter 598 The Weight of Truth

“The original scripts and the transcribed copies are here,” Theodric said. “Compare them. Let's see what actually happened.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

Quin stepped forward at once.

According to the laws of Avenlor, examination scripts were collected immediately after submission and sent to a transcription office, where clerks copied them word for word.

The originals were sealed.

The copies were anonymized, marked, and sent *to* the examiners for evaluation.

Quin, who had served the emperor for years, understood exactly what was *expected* of him.

Theodric valued merit above all else.

And now, with the entire court watching, he had no choice but to rule with absolute fairness.

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Chapter 599 The Verdict Falls

Because of that, it wasn't enough for the King to review the Baker brothers' examination Josh's work had to be presented as well.

papers.

Quin gathered the original scripts along with their official copies, then turned toward Elowen with a respectful bow. "Your Grace, the essay you mentioned, may I present it to His Majesty along with the others?"

Elowen gave a slight nod and handed over the pages.

Quin received them carefully and arranged everything in order across the long council table before the throne. "Your Majesty, everything is prepared."

Theodric's gaze settled on the documents.

He picked up Albert's original script, then the copied version, comparing them side by side.

A faint crease formed between his brows.

Next came Liam's.

Again, original against copy.

The crease deepened.

Finally, he lifted Josh's original script, then the pages Elowen had submitted, placing them side by side.

This time, his expression hardened completely.

The great hall fell silent.

Not a whisper, not a shuffle of boots. The air itself seemed to tighten.

Alaric felt his pulse hammering in his ears, his chest tight, his thoughts scattering
“Remarkable.”

At last, the King spoke.

His voice was quiet, but it carried through the chamber like a struck *bell*.

Colton closed his eyes. There was no hiding this now.

Alaric had tried to glance up, hoping to read his father’s face, but the single word made his

Chapter 599 The Verdict Falls

stomach drop. He quickly lowered himself, not daring to look again.

Theodric’s voice turned cold, edged with fury. “How many times have I said it. The royal examinations are the backbone of this kingdom. They decide who governs, who serves, who carries the future of the realm. And yet you dared to tamper with them right under

His gaze swept the hall.

“Did you think I wouldn’t notice. Or that I wouldn’t care.”

His voice sharpened.

my roof.”

“My own Crown Prince. The man meant to inherit this throne. Leading a scheme like this and deceiving the Crown itself.”

Alaric’s whole body shook.

Quin spoke carefully, “Your Majesty, shall we summon Lord Travis for questioning?”

The King let out a short, humorless breath. “The proof is in front of us. There’s no need.” His tone turned decisive.

“As an examiner, he twisted the law for personal gain and misled the Crown. Strip him *of his* post immediately. Hand him over to the Ministry of Crown Justice. Interrogate him, and follow every lead. I want every accomplice uncovered.”

Quin lowered his head. “Yes, Your Majesty.”

The King’s gaze shifted.

It landed on Harvey, Minister of Rites. Harvey felt it instantly. A cold sweat broke across his back.

“Harvey.”

He moved forward quickly, lowering himself with a deep bow, voice unsteady. “Your Majesty.” The King looked down at him. “You’ve handled your duties well enough in the past. That’s *why* I entrusted the examinations to you. But this time, tell me. Were you blind, or did you choose to look the other way.”

Harvey’s chest tightened.

When the Duke of Duskmoor had overseen things before, everything *ran* smoothly.

This year, with the Crown Prince interfering, pushing decisions without understanding the

Chapter 599 The Verdict Falls

system, nothing had been stable.

But those were thoughts a man in his position could never say out loud.

He lowered his head further. “I failed in my duty. I accept my fault. I ask for Your Majesty’s mercy.”

The King’s voice slowed, deliberate. “Since you were not directly involved, I will give you a chance to correct this.”

“You will personally oversee the investigation. The results of the examinations will be reissued. Every person involved will be dealt with. Anyone connected, no matter their rank or backing, will be removed and barred from office for life.”

A pause.

“Do this well, and I will overlook your failure. Fail, or protect anyone, and you can take his place in a prison cell.”

Harvey exhaled in relief. “I understand. I will see it through.”

Then the King turned his attention to Colton. A man who had served three reigns. *The Queen’s father. Roots deep in the court.*

Not someone who could be brought down openly. Not today. But he could still be warned.

“As for Alaric.”

The King’s eyes fell on his son.

Disappointment, cold and heavy.

“From this moment on, you are stripped of your position as Crown Prince. You will *be* removed from the Crown Prince’s Wing.”

Elowen, standing among the court, felt her breath catch.

Her fingers tightened against the folds of her gown.

It’s over.

Finally.

Everything she had endured, planned, and waited for....

For a moment, it felt unreal. Then a steady warmth pressed *lightly* against her *back*.

Chapter 599 The Verdict Falls

Cassian.

The sensation grounded her. She let out a slow breath.

It’s real. It’s finally real.

Across the hall, Alaric felt the world tilt.

He lifted his head, eyes bloodshot, voice shaking. “Father... I was wrong. I admit it. This... this wasn’t deliberate. Please, show mercy. Please...”

“Not deliberate.”

The King cut him off sharply.

“The assassination of a Nordian prince was not deliberate. Framing the Duke of Duskmoor was not deliberate. Corrupting the examinations and deceiving the Crown was not deliberate.”

9.9K

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Chapter 600 The Interruption

Theodric’s voice dropped, each word deliberate and heavy. “Alaric, you have failed me.”

Alaric’s face drained of color. He opened his mouth, desperate to explain himself, but under that gaze, nothing came out. Every excuse died before it could form.

The King lifted his hand slightly. “Guards.”

The great doors swung open, and several members of the King’s Guard strode into the hall, their armor catching the torchlight along the stone walls.

“Remove him,” Theodric said, his tone leaving no room for argument. “Confine him within the Royal House Council under strict watch. No one is to see him without my command.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

Two guards stepped forward and seized Alaric by the arms, forcing him upright.

The reality hit all at once.

Not just stripped of his title, but locked away.

Panic broke through whatever composure he had left. “Father, please, just this once. *I was wrong. I won’t do it again. I swear it.*”

Theodric did not react.

Alaric twisted against the guards, trying to pull free as he turned toward Colton. “Grandfather, you have to help me. Please.”

The old man slowly closed his eyes.

The guards tightened their hold and began dragging Alaric across the *hall*.

His ceremonial robes had fallen into disarray, his hair undone, dignity slipping away with every step, no matter how hard he struggled.

No one in the chamber spoke.

Rows of nobles and officials stood rigid, heads lowered, as if even breathing too loudly might draw the King’s anger.

Only Alaric’s voice echoed through the vaulted hall, raw and breaking. “Father, it was *the* Duke of Duskmoor. He set me up. And Elowen hates me. She’s taking revenge. *Father*, please, show mercy”

Elowen stood among the court, listening as his voice faded into the distance.

A quiet breath left her. She lowered her gaze and did not look again.

“Hold.”

A clear, cool voice cut in from the entrance.

Elowen’s brows drew together slightly as she turned. Valessa, Princess of Nordia, strode into *the* hall without hesitation.

At the same time, Colton opened his eyes. Elowen glanced at him, and in that instant, everything clicked.

So this is his final move.

He had brought the princess here.

He knew Valessa had taken an interest in Alaric, and now he meant *to* use the peace negotiations as leverage against the throne.

Valessa stopped at the foot of the dais and inclined her head *in* a formal court bow. “Your Majesty of Avenlor, may I ask why your Crown Prince is being taken away in chains?”

Theodric’s expression tightened slightly.

“This is a matter of Avenlor’s court,” he said, voice controlled. “You are our guest. It would *be* best not to involve yourself.”

Valessa did not yield an inch. “If it concerns the Crown Prince, then it concerns me .”

Her voice carried clearly through the chamber, steady and unflinching. “I was sent here to negotiate peace between our kingdoms. What happens to your heir affects that process. Stability matters. A realm without a steady line *of* succession is a realm on the *edge* of unrest

She met his gaze directly.

“If the Crown Prince can be removed so abruptly, your court risks instability. And if that happens, I don’t see how these negotiations can move forward.”

The meaning settled over the hall without needing to *be* spoken outright.

If you take down the Crown Prince, the whole court’s gonna spiral, and that kills day chance I have at negotiating peace.

And if the talks fall apart, we’re probably looking at a war

Chapter 600 The Interruption

So think it *through before you make a move.*

Theodric’s brows drew together more tightly as he weighed her words.

War already pressed along the southwestern marches. If Nordia turned hostile now, Avenlor would be forced to fight on two fronts.

He had no desire for that. War drained the treasury, cost lives, and left the people *to* suffer.

Everything he had worked to steady could unravel.

His gaze shifted, briefly, toward Cassian. Cassian stood still, his expression calm and unreadable, offering nothing away.

Silence stretched again, heavy and expectant.

Colton stood with his head slightly bowed, his face composed, though the *faint* tremor in *his* beard betrayed the tension beneath.

He was gambling everything on this moment.

If Alaric could be spared today, if he could remain in the Crown *Prince's Wing*, *then there* would still be a path forward.

Once the negotiations concluded and time passed, influence could *be* rebuilt.

He did not speak.

Instead, he cast a subtle glance toward Quentin, the Royal Inspector

Quentin caught it immediately.

He drew a breath, steadied himself, and stepped forward. "Your Majesty, even if His Highness has committed serious offenses, the negotiations with Nordia are at a critical stage. Remove him now could provoke them and jeopardize the peace. If that happens, we risk wear on ENAK fronts, and the consequences would be severe. I ask that Your Majesty consider this carefully

Theodric remained silent

Seeing that hesitation. Quentin pressed on more cautiously this time Perhaps His Highness could be given a chance to make amends Let him see the neurons through decrease peace between our kingdoms. That may serve to offset his unisordock in the cau

The lung did not answer

But neither did he dismiss the suggestion***2

Chapter 600 The Interruption

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Seeing that hesitation, Quentin pressed on, more cautiously this time. Perhaps His Highness could be given a chance to make amends. Let him see *the* negotiations through and secure peace between our kingdoms. That may serve to offset his misconduct in the examiner

The King did not answer

But neither did he dismiss the suggestion

The interruption

Elowen felt something sink inside her. Her fingers tightened slightly at her side.

No. This cannot *be* allowed to *turn back* now.

9.9K

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