

Awakening Love: Reborn to Be His Duchess Novel

We Had Something Real But Didn't Handle It Right

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Awakening Love: Reborn to Be His Duchess

Chapter 601 The Wrong Man

There was no way Elowen could let Alaric walk free like this.

If this chance slipped away, nobody knew how long it would take before another one appeared. especially now that Valessa had openly tied the peace negotiations to Alaric's fate while Theodric, the King, was clearly wavering in front of the assembled nobles.

As unease quietly spread through the hall, Elowen instinctively looked toward Cassian, and in that same instant, a memory abruptly surfaced in her mind.

It was something Cassian had mentioned long ago while speaking casually about the war in Nordia.

At the time, she had only half listened.

Now, however, that forgotten detail suddenly became the most important thing in the room.

Her eyes fixed sharply on him as she lowered her voice.

“When you fought in Nordia before... did you ever use Alaric's identity?”

Cassian paused for the briefest moment before one brow lifted slightly.

Smart little thing.

She always figures things out before anyone else in the room.

Without drawing attention, he gave a small nod.

The tightness in Elowen's chest finally eased.

Colton knew Valessa had become strangely obsessed with Alaric, but he had never figured out where that obsession came from.

This time, I'm the one holding the winning hand.

Across the chamber, Valessa's posture grew even more forceful as she lifted her chin proudly toward the throne.

"The Crown Prince remains outside the *hall*," she said clearly. "I ask Your Majesty to consider the peace between our kingdoms and spare him for now. As *long* as the prince *remains* in place, negotiations can continue."

Cassian finally spoke then, *his* voice calm and smooth enough to cut cleanly through *the* tension hanging over the chamber.

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"The princess truly has a generous heart."

Valessa immediately turned toward him, and the displeasure in her expression sharpened the moment she realized who had spoken.

Cassian, however, looked entirely unbothered.

"When I met the princess on the Nordian front years ago," he continued evenly, "she was exactly the same then. Even in the middle of war, she cared more about keeping ordinary people from suffering than about herself."

Valessa stared at him in confusion.

What is he talking about?

He's seen me on the battlefield before?

Right beside Cassian, Elowen chose the perfect moment to speak, letting just enough surprise enter her voice.

"Your Grace met the princess during the war?"

Cassian inclined his head once. "Several years ago, during the campaign against Nordia, I captured Princess Valessa myself."

Valessa's eyes widened instantly as disbelief spread across her face.

Meanwhile, Cassian remained perfectly composed beneath the watchful eyes of the entire

court.

"At the time, I managed to learn quite a bit about Nordia's military routes and supply movements from the princess," he said calmly. "She was too compassionate to watch civilians continue suffering through war, so she chose honesty. For strategic reasons, I introduced myself as Avenlor's Crown Prince. I never expected that after all these years, the princess would remain just as kindhearted."

"You..." Valessa's gaze immediately sharpened with suspicion as she stared at him closely. "You're saying you captured me? Then where did it happen?"

"Wolfscar Ridge," Cassian answered without hesitation.

Valessa's breathing tightened slightly.

"And who exactly did *you* capture that day?"

Cassian appeared to think back casually before answering. "A Nordian *light cavalry* patrol. You

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were leading the unit yourself. If I remember correctly, you carried a dagger with a red gemstone set into the hilt."

The color drained from Valessa's face almost instantly before rushing back all at once in a wave of heat.

Back then, she had only been thirteen or fourteen years old, terrified after being captured on enemy ground while surrounded by foreign soldiers and unfamiliar banners.

Yet the man questioning her had spoken with such patience and calm authority that before she realized what was happening, she had already revealed every military secret she knew.

For years afterward, Valessa had hated him for it.

She had sworn countless times that if she ever saw him again, she would kill him herself.

And yet, buried beneath that resentment, another emotion had always lingered quietly in her heart, tangled deeply enough that even she could never fully untangle it.

No matter how many years passed, she could never forget him.

Whenever she looked at other men afterward, she found herself unconsciously searching for traces of that same voice, that same composure, that same effortless confidence.

All this time, she had believed the man from the battlefield was Avenlor's Crown Prince.

That was why she had become so obsessed with Alaric.

The moment she heard he was in danger, she rushed here without hesitation and did everything she could to protect him.

But now she suddenly realized the truth.

The man she remembered had never been Alaric at all.

Valessa stood frozen beneath the towering arches of the royal chamber, unable to speak for several long moments.

Her eyes remained fixed on Cassian before drifting almost involuntarily toward Elowen beside him, where they lingered briefly on the unmistakable curve of her pregnancy beneath layers of embroidered velvet.

Something complicated flickered through Valessa's gaze.

Of course.

He already belonged to someone else now.

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Soon, he would become a father.

And she?

She was nothing more than a foolish girl he had captured once on a battlefield years ago before skillfully coaxing every secret out of her with a few calm words.

Valessa slowly looked away as an indescribable bitterness rose quietly in her chest .

Cassian, meanwhile, remained infuriatingly composed.

“Princess, you have my apologies,” he said smoothly. “At the time, our kingdoms were enemies. and I served my own sovereign. I had little choice except to borrow the Crown Prince’s identity and use whatever methods the war demanded. Since we stand here today before His Majesty and the royal court, allow me to formally ask your forgiveness.”

As he spoke, he inclined his head toward her with effortless elegance, the movement relaxed enough to appear almost lazy.

The gesture struck Valessa like an arrow pulled straight from memory.

Years ago, after she had revealed every detail regarding Nordia’s military routes and supply stores, that same man had leaned casually beside the campaign firelight and tilted his head *in* exactly the same way before saying, “My thanks.”

His voice, his mannerisms, even the look in his eyes all perfectly overlapped with the man standing before her now, leaving Valessa with no room left to deny the truth.

The man she had spent years unable to forget had never been Alaric.

It had always been Cassian, the Duke of Duskmoor.

Outside the royal chamber, the arrival of the Nordan princess had temporarily halted the King’s Guard, which meant Alaric’s desperate pleas still drifted faintly through the open doors.

He had been begging for mercy for so long that his voice had become painfully hoarse, **yet** he still refused to stop.

“Father... please... Your Majesty... I know *I* was wrong... please...”

The ragged sound scraped harshly through the corridor.

Valessa suddenly let out a quiet laugh.

I crossed kingdoms trying to save the wrong man.

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And the person she had nearly humiliated herself for turned out to be nothing more than a pathetic coward clinging desperately to survival.

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From the royal dais above, Theodric watched the entire exchange between Valessa and Cassian without interrupting once. He did not know what had happened between them years ago, but after ruling Avenlor for so long, he could already sense the shift taking place within the chamber.

The balance inside the court had changed again.

Rather than question either of them directly, Theodric merely rested one hand against the carved arm of the throne and spoke in a calm, measured voice.

“As for the negotiations between our kingdoms, I believe there is still room for compromise. Alaric’s crimes are serious, and he cannot be forgiven lightly. My decision remains unchanged. He will be stripped of his position as Crown Prince, though he shall retain his status as Prince for now. Since the princess has spoken on his behalf, he may continue overseeing the negotiations until the treaty is finalized. Once both kingdoms formally sign the agreement, **his** merits and offenses can be judged together.”

As he finished speaking, Theodric turned his attention toward Valessa.

“What does the princess think?”

Valessa gathered herself quickly, the turmoil from moments earlier already hidden beneath her composed exterior.

“Your Majesty is wise.”

After a brief pause, however, she continued thoughtfully, “That said, I’m curious. What exactly did your former Crown Prince do to deserve such punishment?”

Theodric had not expected the question, though he saw no reason to conceal the truth before the gathered court.

“Following investigation, it was determined that Alaric personally orchestrated the corruption surrounding the court qualification trials.”

The moment the words left his mouth, disgust surfaced plainly across Valessa’s face.

“Corruption within the court qualification trials?” she repeated sharply. “*Then even I can’t defend him.*”

For the first time since she entered the chamber, genuine surprise appeared on Theodric’s face.

Valessa lifted her chin slightly, her expression growing colder beneath the torchlight

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“My father taught me from childhood that capable people are the foundation of every kingdom. A realm may survive poor harvests. It may survive weakened armies. **But** no kingdom survives once it loses talent. As long as capable minds remain, the kingdom endures. Once they disappear, decline follows soon after.”

Her gaze hardened with unmistakable disdain.

“He stood as heir to the throne, yet he manipulated the trials that determine the future of your scholars and officials for his own gain. If my royal brother heard of this, he would conclude that the nobles of Avenlor are unworthy of trust altogether.

A man

like that should never oversee negotiations between kingdoms. My brother would never agree to it”

Then, with complete seriousness, Valessa placed one hand over her chest and offered a formal bow toward the throne.

“Your Majesty judged correctly. Removing him as Crown Prince was absolutely the right decision. Earlier, I spoke rashly before understanding the full circumstances, and for that I owe the court an apology.”

Silence settled briefly through the chamber.

Even Theodric looked momentarily stunned.

I haven't even brought up Alaric trying to assassinate your uncle yet...and you're already decided the punishment was justified?

Nearby, Colton's eyes widened so abruptly they nearly bulged from his face.

What is happening?

He had arranged for the Nordian princess to appear precisely because she was supposed to pressure the throne into protecting Alaric.

She was supposed to force Theodric into compromise through the peace negotiations.

So how had everything collapsed after only a few exchanges?

Unless...

Unless the person Valessa truly cared about had never been Alaric at all.

Colton instinctively looked toward Cassian.

Yet before he could think further, his eyes collided directly with Elowen's calm dark gaze.

A chill shot straight through his chest.

It's over.

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This time, it's truly over.

By now, Theodric had already pieced together enough of the situation to understand the larger picture.

Simply put, his son was a fool.

Faced with Valessa's sudden change in attitude, Theodric's mood visibly improved.

"You acted without knowing the full circumstances," he said mildly. "No offense was taken.

Valessa immediately followed with another flawless court bow.

"Today's misunderstanding was entirely my fault. I entered the royal chamber before learning the truth and spoke recklessly in defense of the wrong person. I ask Your Majesty's forgiveness. Since the court still has matters to resolve, I shall take my leave and allow you to continue."

"Very well," Theodric replied.

Only after receiving permission did Valessa finally relax slightly before turning toward the doors.

Yet after taking several steps, she paused again as though another thought had suddenly occurred to her.

"The negotiations between our kingdoms should not be delayed any longer," she said while glancing back toward the throne. "Once Your Majesty finishes handling today's matter, discussions ought to resume immediately. However..." Her eyes shifted naturally toward Cassian. "Your representative should probably be replaced."

Theodric nodded once. "I will consider *it*."

Valessa continued without hesitation.

"In my opinion, the Duke of Duskmoor was far more suitable than Alaric. He has stood on battlefields himself. He understands bloodshed, sacrifice, and what peace truly costs. A man like that is worthy of negotiating with me."

At those words, Theodric glanced toward Cassian as well before giving the same answer.

"I will consider *it*."

Valessa said nothing further. After one final bow, she turned and strode toward the exit. This time, however, her pace was noticeably quicker than when she had entered, almost as

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though she wanted to escape the chamber before another humiliating moment could catch up to her.

After all, she had stormed into the royal court earlier in full confidence, prepared to defend someone before the eyes of the entire kingdom, only to discover she had mistaken an insignificant fool for the man she actually remembered.

The embarrassment alone was enough to make her skin burn.

At this point, Valessa wanted nothing more than to leave as quickly as possible.

Unfortunately for her, the moment she stepped beyond the chamber doors, a ragged voice called after her desperately.

“Princess! Princess!”

Outside the hall, Alaric was still restrained by the King’s Guard, his robes disheveled and his entire appearance carrying the desperation of someone already standing at the edge of ruin.

The instant he saw Valessa emerge, hope burst across his face like a drowning man spotting rescue through a storm.

“Princess!”

The guards forced him back before he could rise properly, leaving him struggling helplessly against their grip while he craned his neck upward toward her.

“What happened?” he demanded hoarsely. “Did Father agree? Am I safe now?”

Valessa looked down at him from the top of the stone steps, and for a moment, disgust nearly surfaced openly in her eyes.

This man?

This pathetic creature was the person she had crossed kingdoms to save?

Still, crushing him immediately felt almost too merciful.

So instead, Valessa smiled.

It was not a warm smile.

It curved slowly across her lips with all the sweetness of poisoned wine.

“Yes,” she said softly. “Your father agreed.”

Alaric froze in disbelief.

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“Really?”

Valessa lifted one elegant brow, and beneath the firelight lining the corridor, her striking features bloomed with dangerous beauty.

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Valessa spoke leisurely, her lips curved with lazy amusement as though she were indulging a child.

“Yes, His Majesty decided to spare you. Not only that, he intends to keep you as Crown Prince, and in a few years the throne will pass to you as planned. As for me, I'll be wed to you in alliance, which means all of Nordia will one day stand behind you as well.”

Alaric stared at her blankly for a moment.

But when his eyes settled on Valessa's radiant, captivating face, confidence surged through him all over again.

She admires me. A woman like her would never deceive me.

In his mind, she must have done everything within her power inside the royal chamber just now, arguing desperately beside her grandfather to protect him no matter the cost.

And besides, Theodric was his father.

No father would truly destroy his own son.

He had remained outside the hall the entire time, pleading again and again for mercy. Surely his father's heart had softened in the end. Surely he had relented before it was too late.

Which meant there was only one possible explanation.

He had been forgiven.

He was still Crown Prince.

Still heir to the realm.

And soon, he would marry the Nordan princess and use Nordia's influence to strengthen his position forever.

A slow smile spread across Alaric's face as low laughter escaped his throat,

Once I'm back in the Crown Prince's Wing, things are gonna change. After the wedding. After the throne's finally mine.

Elowen, Cassian, I'm not forgetting any of this. Every second of today's humiliation is coming back to you eventually.

And especially Elowen.

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He would build a magnificent gilded aviary and lock her inside it like a prized songbird so that from then on, she would belong to him alone.

And she would be forced to watch Cassian die with her own eyes.

The more he imagined it, the louder his laughter became until it twisted into something almost unhinged.

The members of the King's Guard exchanged uneasy looks.

Had the former Crown Prince finally gone mad?

"What are you all standing around for?"

Alaric abruptly stopped laughing and lifted his chin arrogantly.

“I am still the Crown Prince. How dare you handle me this way? His Majesty will be coming out shortly, and when he does, every one of you will answer for this. If you have any sense at all, you’ll let go of me now.”

The guards glanced at one another again.

They belonged to the emperor’s personal guard and answered only to Theodric himself, yet Alaric sounded so certain that hesitation crept into their minds despite themselves. Combined with the strange commotion that had come from inside the royal chamber earlier, doubt slowly took hold.

What if His Majesty truly had changed his mind?

Without realizing it, their grip loosened slightly.

The instant Alaric felt the pressure on his arms weaken, triumph swelled inside him. With a violent jerk, he broke free from the guards’ restraint and staggered upright.

After catching his balance, he smoothed out his rumpled court robes before arranging an elegant, gentle smile across his face. Turning toward Valessa, he looked at her with unmistakable eagerness.

“My princess,” he said warmly, “when shall we hold the wedding?”

The woman he truly wanted had always been Elowen,

But Elowen hated him. Worse still, she had even tried to strip him of his place as heir.

How childish.

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How unreasonable.

Only Valessa had stood by him. Only Valessa had gone so far for his sake, charging into the royal chamber and risking herself to save him.

A woman capable of that was someone worth keeping close.

The smile on Alaric’s face softened further as he stepped toward her, his expression full of practiced affection and tenderness.

“To be honest, I fell for you the moment I first saw you. Your beauty, your grace, your courage... every part of you captured me completely. I swear I’ll treat you well for the rest of my life and make you the happiest woman in all the kingdoms.”

He reached toward her hand, his voice dropping low and intimate.

“I’ll stand beside you for the rest of our days and never let go of your hand...”

A sharp crack cut through the air.

Before he could finish, Valessa drove her boot directly into his stomach.

The kick landed hard and fast, backed by the strength she had built from years of riding and hunting across the northern grasslands.

Alaric never saw it coming.

His entire body flew backward before he crashed onto the stone courtyard with a painful thud. He sat there stunned, eyes wide with disbelief as he stared at her.

“You... you dared to strike me?!”

Valessa burst into laughter.

“What Crown Prince? You’re just another prince now. Who exactly gave you the right to throw your weight around?”

Alaric froze.

The color drained from his face so quickly it was almost frightening.

“What do you mean prince?!” he shouted hoarsely. “I’m the Crown Prince! I’m the heir! Didn’t His Majesty forgive me? Didn’t you plead for me?!”

Valessa laughed so hard she nearly doubled over.

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Mocking fools truly was entertaining.

“You really believe every word someone tells you?” she asked between laughs. “Then if I told you His Majesty planned to marry your grandfather off to you next, would you start preparing guest chambers for him too?”

Her smile turned openly mocking.

“Alaric, with a brain as empty as yours, you actually think you’re worthy of marrying me? Whatever’s rattling around inside your skull clearly isn’t doing its job. Honestly, you’d be better off without it, you idiot.”

After rolling her eyes at him, she turned and walked away without another glance.

Alaric remained sitting on the ground in complete shock.

Raised within the royal court since birth, he had never once endured ridicule this crude or humiliating.

For a long moment, he could not force out a single word.

Only when the King’s Guard seized his arms again did he finally recover enough to speak.

“Fine... fine...”

His voice shook violently as he yelled after her.

“So you’re just like all the others! You said you cared about me. You said you’d help me. But the moment things turned difficult, you betrayed me too! Fine! Then get out! All of you, get out!”

But by then, Valessa had already passed through the palace gates.

She did not hear a single word.

Inside the royal chamber, Theodric sat upon the throne with visible exhaustion weighing on his features.

Today’s court session had lurched from one crisis into another without pause, and even a ruler accustomed to political storms felt worn thin by the end of it.

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Still, there were matters that had to be settled before court could adjourn.

Theodric pressed his fingers against his brow for a brief moment before speaking.

“Effective immediately, the Duke of Duskmoor shall have his title, lands, and privileges fully restored. Hale Manor will once again serve as Duskmoor Manor. As for the court qualification trials, the Ministry of Rites will oversee the investigation beginning today. Public notices are to be posted immediately. All previous rankings are void, the examination papers will be reviewed again, and new results will be announced once the review is complete. Every aspect of the matter will be supervised personally by the Duke of Duskmoor.”

After a brief pause, he continued in a colder tone.

“As for the attempted assassination of Prince Roderic of Nordia, the case will be jointly investigated by the three judicial councils. Every individual involved shall be punished according to the law.”

His gaze swept slowly across the assembled officials.

“Does anyone object?”

Not a single person dared speak.

Even Colton hurriedly lowered himself into a deep formal bow alongside the rest of the court.

“Your Majesty is wise!”

Only then did Theodric let out a quiet breath.

“That’s enough. Rise and withdraw. Court is dismissed.”

The ministers bowed deeply once more as Theodric departed from the hall.

Among the crowd, Elowen lowered herself as well, pressing her forehead lightly against the cold stone floor.

Inside, however, she felt unusually calm.

She knew the matter was finally settled.

From this day forward, Alaric would never again be heir to the throne.

And even the Baker family would no longer have the power to restore him.

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Today, Colton had exhausted every possible move. He had dragged Valessa into the matter and even used the peace alliance with Nordia as leverage, yet in the end everything still collapsed.

A faint smile curved Elowen's lips.

But she knew this still was not the end. Could the Baker family truly escape so easily?

Her gaze lifted slightly toward the old man standing not far away.

Colton had already played his strongest card by bringing out Valessa. But she and Cassian still had one more move waiting.

At the thought, Elowen's mood brightened considerably.

"Ella."

Cassian stepped closer then, one steady hand supporting her arm as he helped her rise. His voice was warm and gentle enough to melt stone.

"How about I head home and bake you some savory meat pastries?"

Elowen withdrew her gaze from Colton and answered softly, "I want the lamb filling."

Cassian's eyes curved immediately with a smile.

"Done. I'll chop the meat extra fine for you."

The two of them walked side by side toward the palace gates.

"Your Grace."

"Your Grace."

Several officials quick to read the changing tides approached with eager smiles and respectful bows.

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‘Congratulations, Your Grace. Justice has finally been served.’

‘I’ve long wanted the chance to share a drink with Your Grace. Why not take advantage of today’s good news?’

Cassian dismissed them without hesitation.

‘No time. I’ve got things to do at home.’

One official persisted carefully. ‘Surely Your Grace could leave those tasks to the household staff?’

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Cassian answered lazily, ‘I’m going home to make pastries for my duchess. Nobody else makes them properly, and I don’t like seeing her disappointed. Whenever my duchess is unhappy, somebody usually ends up regretting it.’

His gaze drifted calmly over the official.

‘What? You volunteering for the role?’

The official nearly broke into a cold sweat.

‘Of course not, Your Grace. I wouldn’t dare disrespect *you*. I merely meant that Your Grace and the duchess truly share a rare devotion. It’s enough to make anyone envious.’

As he spoke, he deliberately glanced toward Elowen.

Cassian looked at him flatly.

‘What’s there to envy? You can go home and bake pastries for your own wife too.’

The official blinked in confusion.

Beside them, Elowen let out a quiet laugh.

Cassian merely took her hand and continued leading her outside.

“Ella,” he reminded her softly, “slow down a little. You’ve had a tiring day.”

The official remained rooted where he stood, staring after the couple’s retreating figures.

They truly were absurdly devoted to one another.

Exactly as the rumors claimed.

Wiping sweat from his brow, he muttered quietly, “His Grace really never changes .”

Someone beside him leaned closer and whispered, “You mean he’s still as vicious with *his* tongue as ever?”

The official nearly jumped out of his skin.

“Vicious? What nonsense are you talking about? That’s called honesty. Genuine honesty. Understand?”

These days, one careless remark could cost a person dearly.

Back when the Duke of Duskmoor had been stripped of office and confined to his state,

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people could mock him however they pleased because he had been a fallen noble.

But now?

His title had been restored. He remained Theodric’s younger brother, and he had emerged from the former Crown Prince’s scandal completely vindicated.

Calling him sharp-tongued now was practically asking for death.

Honest.

That was the only safe word to use.

As the official watched the couple disappear farther into the distance, he sighed again with genuine envy.

The Duke of Duskmoor truly had remarkable fortune.

When he had fallen from power, his duchess never abandoned him.

Now that he had risen again, he still lived entirely on his own terms, even insulting people with absolute confidence.

Outside the palace gates, the Nordian delegation's carriage still waited beneath the dim iron lanterns lining the royal road.

Flowira stood beside it dressed in tailored riding clothes styled after a Nordian prince.

Earlier that day, one of the palace matrons had rushed over claiming the Crown Prince was in danger and insisting that Valessa must save him immediately.

Flowira had grown close to Elowen recently, and because of that, she understood perfectly *well* that the conflict involving the Crown Prince's Wing and the Baker family was far more complicated than outsiders realized.

Her aunt had merely been dragged into the struggle and used as a shield.

But no one could stop Valessa once she made up her mind.

When Zachary tried persuading her not to interfere, she had kicked him hard enough to send him stumbling backward.

Flowira, fortunately, escaped without being struck and simply accompanied her aunt to the palace instead.

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Now she glanced toward the palace gates before looking back at Valessa beside her.

Her aunt appeared to be in an excellent mood after leaving the palace.

And somehow furious at the same time.

Since Valessa had not spoken first, Flowira wisely chose to remain silent as well.

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Chapter 605 The Princess Waiting Outside

After sitting in silence for quite a while beneath the dim glow of the carriage lanterns. Flowira finally turned toward Valessa and spoke carefully.

“Aunt Valessa, are we still not leaving? Are you waiting for someone?”

Valessa kept her eyes fixed on the palace gates beyond the stone courtyard, her posture unmoving.

“You already know the answer to that.”

Flowira hesitated briefly.

She did know.

After moistening her lips, she lowered her voice a little more cautiously. “Are you waiting for the Crown Prince?”

At the mention of Alaric, visible disgust crossed Valessa’s face at once.

“Avenlor no longer has a crown prince,” she said flatly. “That fool lost the title and got sent right back to being an ordinary prince.”

Flowira blinked in surprise. “You wasn’t able to save him?”

Valessa let out a cold laugh, the sound edged with contempt.

“Why would I save him? He wasn’t even the same man anymore. If we’re being honest, my uncle died because of him. The only reason I didn’t have him killed myself was because *I* respected my uncle’s dying wish and refused to drag Nordia and Avenlor into another war.”

Flowira struggled to absorb the meaning hidden within those few blunt remarks before finally asking, “Then what you mean is...”

Valessa answered without the slightest hesitation.

“The man who captured me years ago and deceived me from beginning to end was the Duke of Duskmooor.”

Flowira’s pupils trembled faintly.

Cassian?

If the matter had only involved resentment over being tricked after capture, perhaps things would not have become so complicated.

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water bus in Princess Waiting Outside

But Flowira understood her aunt too well. What had started as hatred had long since twisted into something far more dangerous.

Love.

If the man had truly been Alaric, maybe there would still have been some room to untangle the situation cleanly.

But Cassian already had a duchess.

Flowira unconsciously curled her fingers together before speaking in a careful voice. “Aunt... His Grace is already married, and Her Grace is expecting a child now. Besides, the Duchess of Duskmooor herself is...”

“I know.”

Valessa cut her off before she could finish, her expression stubborn and completely unapologetic.

“So what if he’s married? So what if she’s carrying his child?”

Then she turned fully toward Flowira, pride blazing openly in her eyes beneath the night sky.

“I met him first. If anyone ought to be called the late arrival here, it’s the Duchess of Duskmooor.”

Flowira stared at her in stunned silence.

There's actually someone who thinks this way?

Still, after another second, she realized it was entirely in character for her aunt.

Valessa had practically raised her. She had taught her how to ride, how to draw a bow, how to hold herself proudly in front of nobles and warriors alike.

Yet Flowira had never once imagined that when it came to matters of love, her aunt could be this wildly fearless.

Valessa folded her arms calmly and lifted her chin.

“I stayed here tonight because I intend to speak with them face-to-face. Some things deserve to be said plainly.”

Flowira blinked. “What exactly do you plan to say?”

Valessa relaxed her shoulders slightly before answering with complete confidence.

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“What else would I say? Ever since I met Cassian, I’ve never forgotten him. I love him. The fact that he already has a duchess changes nothing for me. I’m willing to compete fairly if Her Grace is generous enough to allow it instead of turning the whole thing into a scandal. And if she’s agreeable to it, I wouldn’t mind sharing his household and serving at his side together with her.”

Flowira nearly lost control of her expression.

Before she could gather the courage to argue, Valessa suddenly gave her a meaningful look.

“If you’d learned even a little of this boldness from me, your sweetheart wouldn’t have been stolen away by that little snake back then.”

Flowira’s face changed immediately.

At that exact moment, Valessa suddenly looked toward the palace entrance, and a bright spark lit her eyes.

“They’re finally coming out.”

Flowira instinctively followed her gaze.

Under the golden light spilling from the palace archways, Elowen and Cassian emerged side *by* side through the gates, speaking softly together while making their way toward the line of waiting carriages beyond the courtyard.

Their own carriage happened to be stationed nearby as well.

Valessa’s eyes locked firmly onto Cassian’s tall figure, and for the first time all evening, genuine nervousness surfaced in her expression. A faint sheen of sweat dampened her palms.

After taking a steadying breath, she stepped forward decisively.

Flowira hurried after her at once, suddenly feeling uneasy herself.

Valessa crossed the courtyard in only a few strides before stopping directly in front of Cassian and blocking his path without hesitation.

Only then did Cassian finally pull his attention away from Elowen and look toward Valessa instead.

His expression remained cool and restrained.

“Is there something Your Highness needs from me?”

The distance in Cassian’s tone was impossible for Valessa to miss, and her brows drew together

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slightly.

you the Princess Waiting Outside

Back in Nordia, she had always been the brightest jewel of the royal court. Her father spoiled her endlessly, her brothers indulged her every whim, and the young lords and knights around her treated her with eager admiration whenever they saw her.

Only Cassian had ever met her with this kind of indifference.

The realization bruised her pride more than she wanted to admit, but she still straightened her back proudly before speaking with complete honesty.

“Yes. There’s something I came to say.”

Though she stood slightly shorter than Cassian, Valessa was considered tall among women and still stood nearly half a head taller than Elowen.

Her gaze drifted past Cassian before settling directly onto Elowen with faintly challenging scrutiny.

Elowen had already been quietly looking back at her.

Her fair face appeared soft and luminous beneath the palace lights, while her gentle brows and calm eyes carried no hostility whatsoever.

The curve of her pregnancy rounded gracefully beneath her gown, and there was something deeply steady and comforting in the elegant way she carried herself, as though simply standing near her could put a restless heart at ease.

For one strange fleeting moment, Valessa suddenly thought of her mother.

“If there’s something Your Highness wishes to say, then please speak freely.”

Elowen’s voice was warm and soft enough to smooth away tension from the cold night air.

Valessa narrowed her eyes slightly.

“You’re certain you want me to say whatever’s on my mind?”

Elowen smiled and nodded naturally.

“Of course. You can say anything you’d like. After all, today’s outcome happened largely because of Your Highness. No one contributed more to Alaric losing his position.”

Valessa gave a quiet huff before replying, “Fine. Then I’ll say it plainly.

Elowen’s smile somehow softened even more.

Chapter 605 The Princess Waiting Outside

“All right. I’m listening.”

Standing behind Valessa, Flowira's palms had already gone damp with sweat, and her heart pounded so hard she could barely calm herself down.

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Chapter 606 An Unexpected Invitation

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Flowira could hardly imagine what kind of expression the Duchess of Duskmoor would make once Valessa openly confessed her feelings for Cassian and proposed sharing his household.

Yet after a long pause, Valessa simply lifted her chin and spoke in a deliberately imposing tone.

"It's nothing especially complicated. You heard what I said earlier, didn't you? Cassian and I met long before you married His Grace."

Elowen nodded softly, her voice as gentle as warm candlelight.

"His Grace already told me about that before. Honestly, what happened back then really was unfair to Your Highness. You were still young when you were taken captive, and that must have been terrifying. Then later, after discovering you'd been deceived, you were probably hurt even more."

Valessa froze slightly.

All the sharpness and hostility she had carefully built up seemed to melt apart in an instant like frost beneath sunlight.

Elowen continued gently, her expression calm and sincere.

"But things will be different now. Avenlor and Nordia are building peace between our kingdoms, and there won't be another war. The people of both realms won't have to suffer anymore, and neither will the princesses caught in the middle of these conflicts. Better days are finally ahead for everyone."

Valessa stared at Elowen silently, her expression becoming unexpectedly complicated.

Meanwhile, Elowen simply continued smiling at her with warm sincerity.

Valessa parted her lips slightly, and before she even realized what she was saying, the words slipped out on their own.

“...Then I hope the two of you live happily together for many years.”

Flowira’s eyes widened so dramatically they nearly rounded into circles.

What is Aunt Valessa saying right now?!

Isn’t she supposed to finally make her intentions clear?

How did this somehow turn into her wishing them happiness instead?

Chapter 606 An Unexpected Invitation

Elowen’s smile grew even softer.

“Thank you, Your Highness.”

Then after a brief pause, she added warmly, “Would Your Highness care to join us at Duskmoor Manor for pastries? His Grace makes excellent lamb-filled pastries.”

Flowira immediately thought.

Aunt Valessa must be swallowing all those feelings because she doesn’t want to lose face. She’s definitely miserable inside right now. There’s no way she’ll actually agree to go.

Valessa fell silent briefly before answering.

“All right.”

Flowira’s eyes widened even further.

She agreed?!

Elowen’s smile brightened at once before she turned toward Flowira as well.

“Prince Zachary should come too.”

Flowira looked at her aunt, then at the warm and gentle duchess standing beneath the palace lanterns, before finally nodding slowly.

On the road toward Duskmoor Manor, the atmosphere inside the Nordian carriage became strangely delicate.

Flowira glanced quietly toward Valessa sitting across from her.

Her aunt had leaned against the carriage window, though the blush spreading from the tips of her ears all the way down her neck remained impossible to ignore. Even her eyes seemed oddly evasive now, and the entire woman carried a stiffness that looked painfully awkward.

Flowira could not help sneaking another glance at her.

Valessa immediately caught her looking and snapped fiercely, "Don't ask."

Flowira obediently closed her mouth.

The carriage rolled steadily through the lamplit streets, while the enclosed cabin remained so quiet that only the creaking wheels and their breathing could *be* heard.

After enduring the silence for a long while, Valessa finally failed to hold back any more.

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Chapter 606 An Unexpected Invitation

"It's mainly because she seemed too gentle," she muttered awkwardly while avoiding Flowira's gaze. "The way she spoke was gentle too. And she's beautiful enough to make people lose their train of thought. The second she smiled at me, I suddenly couldn't say any of those things anymore."

Flowira answered sincerely, "Her Grace really is gentle. But there's strength in that gentleness too."

Valessa immediately glared at her.

"Didn't I tell you not to talk about it?"

Flowira looked utterly wronged. "Aunt, I wasn't asking anything. I was just replying..."

“That’s forbidden too.”

Flowira instantly fell silent again.

Meanwhile, elsewhere in Vanelle, Colton forced himself to leave the royal court while relying entirely on sheer willpower to remain standing.

But the moment

he passed beyond the palace gates, his body suddenly swayed violently, and he nearly collapsed forward onto the stone roadway.

Thankfully, the waiting footman reacted quickly enough to catch him before he hit *the* ground.

Colton leaned heavily against him while gasping for breath. His face had gone deathly pale, cold sweat pouring down from his temples as his trembling hand gripped the servant’s arm tightly.

“Go,” he rasped urgently. “Take me home. Quickly.”

The servant did not dare delay even a moment and immediately helped him into the waiting carriage.

Slumped against the carriage wall, Colton’s breathing turned rough and uneven as he urged frantically, “Faster. Move faster.”

The coachman snapped the reins sharply, and the carriage thundered through the crowded streets hard enough to send pedestrians stumbling aside in alarm.

At last, they reached Baker Estate.

Colton was practically half carried through the manor gates.

The moment he stepped inside, he shouted hoarsely, “Bennett! Bennett!”

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The steward hurried over immediately, but the instant he saw Colton’s condition, his face changed in alarm.

“My lord, what happened to you?”

Colton seized Bennett’s wrist with frightening strength, forcing the steward to suck in a sharp breath from the pain.

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“Go summon everyone,” Colton demanded harshly. “I don’t care where they are. Bring them all back immediately. Something disastrous has happened. The Baker family is in serious trouble.”

Bennett’s heart sank at once.

Without daring to waste another second, he turned and rushed out personally.

The various Baker lords were dragged back from taverns, gaming houses, private dining halls, and expensive courtesans’ chambers alike.

When several of them entered the hall, they still looked annoyed at being interrupted.

“Father, what’s so urgent? I still had guests waiting for me.”

“Exactly. Couldn’t this have waited until tomorrow night? It’s not even that late yet.”

Before anyone could continue complaining, Colton suddenly grabbed the medicine bowl sitting beside him and hurled it onto the stone floor with every ounce of strength he still possessed.

The sharp crash echoed violently through the hall as shattered porcelain scattered everywhere, splashing bitter medicinal broth across robes and boots alike.

The entire room instantly fell silent.

Supporting himself against the edge of the table, Colton breathed heavily while his sharp gaze swept across every face before him like the edge of a drawn blade.

“You still think coming home early is an inconvenience?” he snarled. “Then why don’t you complain about the weight of the heads still attached to your necks?”

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Chapter 607 The Fall of a Prince

“The title of Crown Prince has been revoked,” he said slowly, his voice low and sharp enough to cut through the room like steel. “From this day forward, Alaric is no longer heir to the throne. His Majesty has reduced him to the rank of Second Prince.”

The words struck the room with the force of a cathedral bell tolling before disaster.

Several men froze outright, their eyes widening in disbelief.

Jayce reacted first, though his voice came out strained and uneven. “How could this happen? Father, I thought everything had already been settled.”

Ayden, meanwhile, looked as though the blood had drained straight from his body. “Father, then what about the Bakers? Is the family going to be dragged into this too?”

A cold laugh escaped Colton.

“The investigation into Roderic’s death has nothing to do with our house, so we can still keep our distance from that matter.” His expression darkened further as he continued. “But His Majesty also ordered a complete investigation into the corruption surrounding the court qualification trials.”

The room fell silent again.

Colton’s gaze shifted toward Jayce and Ayden, and the chill in his eyes made both men stiffen immediately.

“And that case,” he said flatly, “involves the two of you, along with your sons.”

The color vanished from their faces in an instant.

After a long pause, Colton finally continued in a weary voice. “At this point, there’s only one way left to protect the rest of the family. The boys will have to be handed over before this reaches any deeper into the household.”

Jayce nearly lost his footing.

“Father!” He stumbled forward so quickly that he almost collapsed before Colton’s *chair*, lowering himself desperately at the older man’s feet while clutching tightly to the fabric of his robe. “Liam is your grandson. He’s only twenty years old. His future’s barely even started. You can’t just cast him aside now.”

Ayden hurried forward as well, panic rising visibly across his face. “Father, please think this through carefully. Our family doesn’t have many heirs with real promise to begin with, and Albert and Liam were the only two who made it this far through the examinations. They were

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Chapter 607 The Fall of a Prince

supposed to restore honor to the Baker name. Yes, they made mistakes, but everything they did was for this family. They wanted to bring distinction to our house and make you proud. Father, you have to save them.”

The others quickly joined in, speaking over one another in growing desperation.

“That’s right, Father. If anyone in this kingdom can fix this, it’s you.”

“You’ve handled worse situations before.”

“You can’t abandon them now.”

Colton stared at the chaos unfolding in front of him, and suddenly an angry laugh broke from

his chest.

“Save them?” His voice rose sharply. “Do you really think I haven’t already tried?”

He pointed furiously toward the doors of the chamber, where anxious servants lingered outside beneath the flickering iron sconces.

“This family is drowning in disaster from every direction. One problem after another needs cleaning up, and now there’s an idiotic grandson outside causing even more trouble *that* somehow I’m expected to solve too.” His breathing grew rough with anger. “What exactly do you all think I am? Some holy prophet blessed by the he

avens? Do you think I can simply walk into court and make His Majesty forget what happened?”

The room went deathly still.

Colton let out another bitter laugh, though this one sounded far more tired than angry.

“Even a miracle worker couldn’t pull this family out of the fire now, much less an old man who’s already halfway to the grave.”

Jayce and Ayden were left speechless.

After a moment, Colton steadied himself against the table and forced himself to continue

“The investigation was announced openly before the entire royal court, and the judgment came directly from His Majesty himself. No one can reverse it.” His eyes swept across every son standing before him. “Anyone foolish enough to plead for mercy now will only die alongside them. If any of you think you’re capable of saving those boys, then by all means, go try.”

He paused briefly before adding in a colder voice, “And don’t think sacrificing the boys guarantees the rest of you will survive. Once investigators start pulling apart the case, neither of you may escape blame either. At that point, all I’ll be able to do is see whether my years serving the crown still carry enough value for His Majesty to spare the rest of the family from execution.”

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The chamber instantly erupted into panic.

Execution.

Not merely punishment for one or two men, but the destruction of the entire bloodline.

Fear spread across the room almost immediately.

“This never would’ve happened if those boys had accepted their limits instead of cheating their way through the examinations.”

“Everyone knows His Majesty values the court trials above nearly everything else. They practically walked straight into disaster.”

“And now the whole family’s paying for it.”

Colton slowly looked around the chamber, his gaze lingering on each of his sons one by one.

One man had rushed over so quickly that his belt still hung loose beneath his outer coat. Another carried the heavy scent of perfume and wine, with traces of lipstick still visible near his collar.

Not one of them looked worried about him.

Not one of them possessed enough composure to make a decision or shoulder responsibility.

Every single one of them looked terrified, blaming one another while waiting for someone else to rescue them from the consequences of their own actions.

The colder Colton’s heart grew, the more exhausted he felt.

Back when he was fifteen, he had already risen above countless scholars through sheer talent. By twenty, he had entered royal service. By thirty, he had climbed into the upper ranks of court, and by forty, he had become one of the most influential officials in the realm.

So how had he ended up raising such useless sons?

Every one of them knew how to indulge themselves in feasts, gambling halls, and women, but the moment trouble arrived, they collapsed into panic like frightened children without a shred of courage or judgment between them.

The more Colton thought about it, the more violently his anger surged.

Finally, he slammed his hand against the table with all the strength he had left.

“That’s enough. Get out. Every last one of you, get out of my sight

The men scrambled toward the doors as though fleeing a battlefield, stumbling over one another in their rush to escape.

Within moments, the chamber was left in complete disarray.

Colton watched their retreating figures disappear down the corridor, and suddenly a sharp pain twisted through his chest before a violent fit of coughing overtook him.

“Grandfather!”

A worried female voice sounded from outside the room.

Colton slowly lifted his head and saw Clarisse hurrying inside, concern filling her face as she moved quickly to his side. She gently steadied him and rubbed his back while trying to calm his breathing.

“Are you alright?” she asked softly. “You shouldn’t push yourself this hard.”

Only then did the harshness in Colton’s expression ease slightly.

“Clarisse,” he said quietly, “why are you here?”

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Chapter 607 The Fall of a Prince

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Chapter 608 The One Seeking Revenge

“I heard Her Majesty summoned you to the palace at dawn,” she said gently. “I couldn’t stop worrying after that. Anything important enough to require your personal presence at court couldn’t possibly be minor, and with your health already so poor lately, I wanted to come check on you myself.”

A faint warmth finally surfaced in Colton’s exhausted eyes.

After raising so many sons, the person who cared most about him in the end had turned out to be this granddaughter.

“Grandfather,” Clarisse asked quietly after a moment, “what happened at court today?”

The weariness in Colton’s face deepened.

“Sit down.”

Clarisse obediently took the seat beside him, folding her hands neatly in her lap while Colton slowly recounted everything that had taken place earlier.

By the time he finished speaking, the fire crackling in the hearth had become the only sound in the room.

“The Duke and Duchess of Duskmooor forced open the investigation into the court qualification trials,” Colton said with a long, heavy sigh. “Alaric lost his position as Crown Prince, and now Albert and Liam have been dragged into the case as well. I’m afraid the Baker family won’t be seeing peaceful days anytime soon.”

Shock spread across Clarisse’s face as she listened.

“I never imagined matters had escalated this far.”

Colton leaned back against the chair and closed his eyes briefly, looking as though the weight of the entire family had settled onto his shoulders.

Clarisse slowly tightened her fingers together.

“It seems,” she said carefully,
“that the Duchess of Duskmooor truly hates the Crown Prince.”

No.

Not Crown *Prince anymore*.

Second Prince.

But Colton barely noticed the distinction.
Instead, he opened his eyes and looked toward Clarisse sharply.

“Hates him?” he repeated slowly.

Clarisse nodded.

“I interacted with the Duchess of Duskmooor a few times before, and afterward I intentionally asked around about her past.” She paused briefly before continuing. “Before her marriage, she was deeply devoted to Alaric. Everyone in Vanelle knew about it, so I’m certain you did too.”

Colton did know.

The entire capital had known.

“At first, Alaric treated her warmly,” Clarisse continued, “but over time he grew colder

and more distant toward her. Eventually she married the Duke of Duskmooor, and that should've been the end of things. Instead, Alaric continued provoking her when he never had the chance."

Clarisse's expression darkened slightly.

"During last royal hunt, he slaughtered the horse she'd raised since childhood."

Colton's brows slowly tightened.

"The Duchess of Duskmooor collapsed afterward and remained unconscious for several days," Clarisse continued quietly. "His Grace was furious enough that many people lost their lives before the matter finally settled."

She looked directly at Colton.

"Grandfather, I don't think this ends here."

Silence filled the chamber once more.

At that moment, Colton suddenly remembered the brief instant earlier that day inside the royal court when he had turned around and unexpectedly met Elowen's eyes across the hall.

Elowen had inherited the finest traits of both her parents. The sharp strength in her father's features had been softened by grace, while her mother's gentle eyes carried an unwavering steadiness beneath their warmth.

When she looked at him, there had almost seemed to be a trace of a smile there.

But the coldness in her gaze had felt like winter ice.

Over decades navigating the royal court, Colton had seen countless men scheme, betray, and

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Chapter One Seeking Revenge

destroy one another in pursuit of power.

Eyes like hers, however, were rare.

He recognized that look immediately.

The look of someone who would chase revenge to the very end without ever turning back.

Colton slowly closed his eyes and released a long breath filled with exhaustion.

Clarisse was right.

This matter was nowhere near finished.

Alaric losing the title of Crown Prince was only the beginning.

And for the first time, Colton finally realized the mistake he had been making from the very start.

The person truly opposing him had never been the Duke of Duskmoor.

It had always been Elowen.

From beginning to end, Colton had treated everything as another struggle for influence within the royal court, so he responded the same way he always had throughout his political career. He weighed alliances, balanced factions, cultivated support, and attempted to preserve Alaric's position through ordinary political maneuvering.

But Elowen was never fighting for power.

She wanted revenge.

Nothing else.

An eye for an eye. Blood for blood.

People raised in military households valued loyalty above almost everything else. They grew up listening to stories of honor and sacrifice, learning from childhood that debts written in blood could never simply be forgotten.

And after the destruction of Hale Manor, Elowen had already lost nearly every connection she still had to her past.

That horse had never been just a horse to her.

It had been one of the last pieces of warmth she still carried from the life she once knew.

And Alaric had butchered it.

The moment he did, Elowen was never going to forgive him.

More importantly, Alaric, Isla, and the Baker family had always stood together within the same faction at court. Their fortunes rose together and fell together.

Which meant that if Elowen intended to destroy Alaric completely, then the Bakers were destined to become targets as well.

On her path toward revenge, the Baker family had already been marked.

“Clarisse,” Colton finally said after a long silence, his voice sounding noticeably older than before, “if you were in my position, what would you do next?”

Clarisse’s expression turned solemn.

“I think,” she answered carefully, “the only choice left may be to seek peace.”

Colton looked at her in surprise.

Clarisse did not avoid his gaze.

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“To be honest, Grandfather, I dislike the Duke and Duchess of Duskmoor as well, and I still want revenge against them for what they’ve done to our family.” She paused briefly before continuing in a calm voice. “But circumstances no longer favor us. In many of these conflicts, His Grace and the Duchess were the wronged side from the very beginning. On top of that, the Duke of Duskmoor is deeply trusted by His Majesty, especially now that tensions in the Southwestern Marches continue worsening. If war breaks out, His Majesty will almost certainly rely on His Grace to lead the campaign.”

The firelight flickered softly across her face as she continued.

“That means the Duke and Duchess of Duskmoor will only gain more influence moving forward, and now the Duchess has seized the perfect opportunity to strike directly

ectly at Alaric and at our family. Meanwhile, the Bakers have fewer and fewer options left.” Her fingers tightened quietly in her lap. “If we continue opposing them head-on, I’m afraid this family may truly reach a point where there’s no way back.”

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Awakening Love Reborn to Be His Duchess

Chapter 609 Waiting for the Right Hour

A faint crease appeared between Colton’s brows as he listened to Clarisse speak, her voice soft yet astonishingly steady despite the storm pressing down on the entire Baker family.

“Grandfather, if we want to protect ourselves now, then we can’t keep standing against the Duchess of Duskmoor,” she said quietly while folding her hands in her lap. “Whatever Her Grace wants, we give it to her. If she wants Prince Alaric ruined, then we stop shielding him. If she wants the truth behind the court qualification trials exposed, then we hand Albert and Liam over ourselves. Whatever terms she asks for, we accept them. At least that way, the family still has a chance to survive this with some strength left.”

She paused only briefly before continuing, her tone calm enough that it almost sounded chilling.

“But this doesn’t mean we forget what happened today. We remember every humiliation and every debt owed to us. Then, when the Duke and Duchess of Duskmoor finally grow careless someday, we repay everything slowly, piece by piece, exactly the way they’ve done to us.”

The chamber fell completely silent after she finished speaking.

Colton sat there watching her for a long while without saying a word.

He had always known this granddaughter of his was intelligent, but tonight she seemed far sharper, far colder, and far more composed than he had ever imagined.

And worst of all, she was right.

There would be time later.

If the Baker family insisted on crashing headfirst into the Duke of Duskmoor now, they would only destroy themselves against an enemy far stronger than they were.

Retreating for the moment and preserving their strength was the wiser choice.

At last, Colton let out a slow breath and nodded.

“I’ll go to Duskmoor Manor personally.

Elsewhere, Valessa did not begin regretting her decision until she found herself standing beneath the towering gates of Duskmoor Manor.

Only moments ago, she had been fully prepared to confront the Duchess of Duskmoor like a rival stepping onto a battlefield.

So how in the world had this somehow turned into an invitation to pastries?

And worse, she had already agreed to come, which meant backing out now would make her look ridiculous.

Grinding her teeth inwardly, she forced herself to continue forward and followed behind Cassian and Elowen as attendants pulled open the ironbound doors leading deeper into the estate.

The manor grounds were quiet beneath the evening sky. Warm light spilled from iron lanterns fixed along the stone corridors, gilding the ivy-covered walls in soft amber as they passed through an arched inner gate and followed the winding path toward the main residence.

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Chapter 609 Waiting for the Right Hour

By the time they reached the private courtyard, Valessa’s attention had already shifted upward toward the plaque hanging above the entrance.

Stillwater Court.

Valessa slowed instinctively beneath the carved stone archway, her gaze lingering on the name etched into the plaque above the entrance.

Years ago, when she had still foolishly admired the Crown Prince of Avenlor from afar, she had devoted herself to studying the refined court language spoken among Avenlor's nobility. She had never mastered it completely, but she understood enough to recognize the sentiment woven into the name before her.

Stillwater, a name that carried the feeling of a quiet refuge, a place untouched by chaos or ambition where life could finally settle into something peaceful and enduring.

And somehow, the moment she looked at it, she understood exactly what the estate meant to Cassian and Elowen.

Not a ducal residence.

Not a symbol of rank or power.

Just a home built for the two of them.

Valessa lifted her gaze just in time to see Cassian guiding Elowen carefully across the stone path with one hand steadying her arm, his movements patient and gentle as though he feared she might so much as trip over a loose pebble.

She could not honestly say she felt jealous.

Still, a strange thought surfaced unexpectedly in her chest.

A solitary life certainly had its freedoms. No obligations and no weaknesses. No one capable of hurting you simply because they mattered too much.

But perhaps finding someone who truly understood you and walking through life beside them was not such a terrible thing either.

"Aunt, watch your step. There's a stair there."

Flowira's voice suddenly interrupted her thoughts.

Valessa instantly shot her niece a glare sharp enough to cut glass.

"Would you stop talking for once?"

Flowira blinked at her in confusion.

She had only been trying to help.

Ahead of them, Elowen suddenly stopped and turned around with obvious excitement brightening her face.

“Princess, come look at this.”

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Chapter 609 Waiting for the Right Hour

Valessa and Flowira both looked over at once.

Cassian had already gone ahead toward the kitchens to prepare the pastries himself, leaving Elowen standing alone in the middle of the courtyard with her arms spread slightly as though proudly presenting a

treasured secret.

“Cassian and I planted all of these together,” she said with a grin.

Only then did Valessa finally notice what filled the courtyard around them.

Instead of the rose hedges and ornamental gardens one would expect to find on a noble estate, the courtyard was filled with neat rows of thriving vegetable beds.

Rows upon rows of thriving greens stretched neatly across the soil beneath the lanternlight, every plot healthy and flourishing.

Valessa raised a brow in surprise.

A duchess growing her own vegetables?

For some reason, that made Elowen far more interesting than she had expected.

Elowen looked genuinely delighted as she gestured toward the garden.

“Once everything’s ready for harvest, you should come back again. I’ll cook for you myself.”

The words drew a laugh from Valessa before she could stop it.

Elowen held one of the highest titles in Avenlor, yet she spoke with the warmth of an ordinary woman proudly talking about her household garden and inviting guests over for supper after harvest season.

Oddly enough, Valessa found she liked that about her.

There was no arrogance in the way she carried herself.

No exhausting noble pretense.

With unusual patience, Valessa shook her head lightly,

“I probably won’t get the chance. Once the negotiations are over, I’ll be heading back to Nordia.”

A flicker of disappointment crossed Elowen’s face immediately.

Seeing that expression, Valessa unexpectedly smiled again

“But aren’t you supposed to come to Nordia eventually?”

Elowen looked startled. “Why would I go to Nordia?”

Now it was Valessa’s turn to stare at her.

“You seriously don’t know?” she asked in disbelief. “Your grandmother was the Oracle of Nordia.”

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Chapter 609 Waiting for the Right Hour

Elowen froze where she stood.

My grandmother?

The Oracle?

“You mean no one ever told you?” Valessa sounded even more confused now. “Flowira brought you the ceremonial seal, didn’t she? Something like that isn’t handed out to just anyone.”

Elowen instinctively turned toward Flowira, who still wore fitted riding clothes tailored in the style of a young nobleman, and suddenly remembered the birthday gift she had received not long ago.

Alongside the gifts from Flowira and Zachary, there had also been a golden ceremonial seal.

At the time, Flowira had hurriedly explained that the metal came from the heavens and was considered sacred by the people of Nordia. Then, perhaps worried Elowen might refuse such a valuable object, she had quickly added that it was simply a gift from Noah.

But now Valessa was saying the seal had belonged to her grandmother.

For several moments, Elowen could not sort through the contradiction at all.

Seeing her confusion, Flowira finally spoke up awkwardly from the side.

“Every time I came to Hale Manor before, I had to sneak in late at night and leave again before dawn, so there was never enough time to explain everything properly. And honestly, these stories aren’t the kind of thing you can summarize in a few sentences. I was worried that if I tried explaining too much at once, I’d only confuse Your Grace even more, but if I said too little, then none of it would make sense either, so I just kept putting it off...”

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Chapter 610 The Bloodline of the Oracle

Valessa relaxed slightly at those words, the sharp edge in her expression softening.

“That’s understandable,” she said with a small nod. “Your grandmother’s story alone could take an entire night to explain properly, and once your grandfather becomes part of the story, things get ever more complicated.”

By now, Elowen’s thoughts were hopelessly tangled together.

There were too many questions crowding her mind all at once, each one more confusing than the last, but after hesitating for several moments, she finally asked the one that mattered most.

“My grandmother...” Her fingers tightened slightly against the edge of the table before she lifted her eyes toward Valessa again. “Is she still alive?”

The question itself felt strange coming from her lips.

She had never met this woman. Before tonight, she had barely even known she existed. Noah almost never spoke about her, leaving Elowen with nothing more than the faint outline of a person she could not truly imagine.

And yet now, waiting for the answer, she felt her heart slowly tense with nervous anticipation.

Valessa’s expression quieted.

After a brief silence, she answered gently, “She passed away years ago.”

Elowen’s lashes trembled faintly.

Valessa continued, “That’s why the ceremonial seal was passed down to you. The Oracle’s bloodline has always passed through a single daughter in every generation. Your grandmother took your grandfather into her household and gave birth only to your mother, and your mother later had only one daughter as well. You.”

Elowen immediately caught the unusual phrasing.

“Took my grandfather into her household?”

Valessa looked mildly surprised by the question.

“That’s simply how things work in Nordia,” she explained naturally. “The customs of the grasslands are very different from Avenlor. Women can choose husbands just as easily as men choose wives. What matters strength and standing, not whether someone is male or female.”

Elowen sat there staring at her for several moments, visibly trying to absorb the information.

Finally, she let out a slow breath and pressed her fingertips lightly against her temple.

“There’s too much for me to process at once,” she admitted with a helpless laugh. “Why don’t we sit and talk properly? If Your Highness doesn’t mind, I’d like to hear everything from the beginning.”

Valessa nodded immediately.

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The Bloodline

“Of course.”

The three women crossed into the open pavilion near the garden paths and settled beneath the timbered roof while the cool evening breeze drifted softly through the hanging curtains.

Iron lanterns glowed warmly overhead, casting flickering amber light across the polished stone table and cushioned benches layered with woven blankets. It was the sort of quiet corner clearly meant for long conversations and peaceful evenings together.

Elowen and Cassian must have spent countless hours there.

Not long after they sat down, Mira arrived carrying a silver tray filled with steaming cup and freshly baked honey cakes from the kitchens.

Valessa wrapped both hands around the warm cup without drinking immediately.

“In Nordia,” she began slowly, “women hold far greater authority than they do in Avenlor, and that all traces back to the Oracle.”

The lanternlight flickered softly across her features as she spoke.

“The people of Nordia worship the God. According to our oldest legends, only the Oracle can hear the voices of the gods and serve as their eyes upon the grasslands. In the Nordian tongue, the title is ‘Ogu,’ which later became your grandmother’s family name.”

Elowen listened quietly without interrupting.

“The Oracle’s bloodline has always been unusual,” Valessa continued. “Each generation produces only one daughter, and that daughter naturally inherits the title after her mother.”

She paused briefly before continuing.

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“The Oracle oversees sacred rites, interprets omens, and guides the people during times of hardship. While your grandmother was alive, she even advised the royal court directly behind the ceremonial veil during assemblies of state. Though,” Valessa added with visible contempt, that was under the previous king, and he was a disgusting creature. Arrogant, indulgent, rotten to the core. He would have happily dishonored even the wives of his own brothers if no one stopped him. Last year, my brother overthrew him and claimed the throne himself.”

Only then did Elowen suddenly realize something important.

“If my grandmother is gone,” she said slowly, “and my mother passed away years ago while I remained here in Avenlor...” She looked carefully toward Valessa. “Then doesn’t that mean Nordia no longer has an Oracle?”

“That’s right.”

After speaking for so long, Valessa finally lifted her cup and took a slow sip of water.

“And explaining why is where things become complicated.”

At that moment, Elowen finally understood why Flowira had struggled so much whenever the subject came up before.

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None of this was the sort of story someone could explain casually

Valessa rested the cup between her hands while her gaze drifted toward the darkened gardens beyond the pavilion.

“When your grandmother first became the Oracle, Nordia was suffering through some of the harshest years in its history. Winters arrived early and refused to leave, freezing the grasslands before the herds could properly feed. Then summer brought drought after drought until rivers dried into cracked earth and crops failed across the plains.”

Her voice lowered slightly.

“When people began starving, sickness followed soon after. Weak bodies cannot survive disease for long. and before long the dead began to outnumber the living. There weren’t enough healers, and there weren’t enough medicinal herbs to save everyone. So naturally, the people placed all their hopes on your grandmother.”

Valessa looked toward Elowen.

“She was the Oracle. The chosen voice of the gods. People believed she could pray for gentle seasons, drive away plague, and restore balance to the grasslands.”

A quiet silence settled briefly between them.

“But nothing changed.”

Elowen immediately understood the meaning behind those words.

The people had started losing faith in the Oracle.

Valessa continued, “And then your grandfather appeared.

Something softer entered her voice now, touched with reluctant admiration.

“He arrived carrying medicines the people of Nordia had never seen before. He taught them how to recognize healing herbs, how to brew remedies properly, how to clean wounds and stop bleeding before infection spread. Slowly, fewer people began dying.”

A quiet laugh escaped her.

“But naturally, rumors followed soon afterward. Some people claimed the Oracle had failed the gods and no longer deserved her title, while others began insisting that the foreign healer possessed greater power than the Oracle herself and should be revered instead.”

Valessa shook her head, clearly amused by the memory.

“So in the beginning, your grandmother absolutely despised your grandfather. Every time they met, they argued so fiercely the entire camp could hear them. She thought he was some charming outsider destroying Nordia’s traditions and weakening the people’s faith, while your grandfather thought she was impossibly stubborn and too obsessed with sacred customs to face reality.”

The smile tugging at Valessa’s lips deepened slightly.

“My brother once told me that he heard them shouting at each other inside a tent late one night. They were

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arguing loudly enough that he became convinced someone was about to end up dead, so he rushed amide trying to stop them before things got ugly”

Valessa paused dramatically before laughing outright.

“The moment he threw open the tent flap, he found the two of them kissing instead”

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