

Awakening Love: Reborn to Be His Duchess Novel

We Had Something Real But Didn't Handle It Right

613

Chapter 613 A Game Left Unfinished

Colton's expression stiffened for a moment before he spoke again, his voice catching faintly with age and emotion. "If things truly have to come to that point, then at least wait until I'm gone before you make your move."

"Lord Colton, I'm afraid you're giving me far too much credit," she replied with gentle composure. "The men of my family are gone, and everything I have now exists only because His Grace has chosen to shelter me. I can barely move comfortably these days, let alone involve myself in matters of court. As for Prince Alaric, what possible power could I have to threaten a house like the Bakers?"

Colton had not expected her to remain so calm even after he had spoken so plainly.

At this point, he could only follow the path she had deliberately left open for him.

"You're right, Your Grace. I've grown old enough to start frightening myself with my own thoughts." A tired smile crossed his face. "Take tonight as nothing more than an old man speaking too freely."

After a brief pause, he lowered his gaze toward the dancing fire.

"From now on, whether Prince Alaric survives or falls is no longer something I'm capable of interfering with. If others want to see him disgraced, so be it. If they mean him greater harm than that..." He exhaled slowly. "Then there's little an old man like me can do to stop it anymore."

Elowen smiled faintly, though her eyes remained unreadable.

“You make it sound far more dramatic than it is, Lord Colton. Prince Alaric is still His Majesty’s eldest son. No matter what happens at court, no one would truly allow him to end in misery, much less lose his life.”

Colton gave a low laugh under his breath. “Perhaps you’re right. Perhaps I really have become senile.”

Silence settled between them for a few moments, accompanied only by the crackling hearth and the muted howl of wind beyond the stone corridors of the manor.

Then Colton slowly spoke again.

“I’ve heard for years that His Grace is exceptional at chess, and I imagine Your Grace must be quite skilled yourself after spending so much time at his side. Under different circumstances, I would’ve enjoyed sharing a match with you someday.” He gave a small shake of his head. “Unfortunately, age catches up with all of us eventually. My eyes fail me now, and my mind isn’t nearly as sharp as it once was. Still, there’s one lesson my father taught me when I first learned the game that I’ve never forgotten.”

Elowen remained silent, allowing him to continue.

Colton’s fingers tightened around the carved head of his cane.

“He used to say that the most dangerous thing you can do is corner a desperate opponent. Once someone believes they’ve lost everything, they stop caring how much destruction they leave behind.” His gaze lifted slowly toward Elowen. “And when one great house collapses entirely, the damage rarely stops there. Cold has a way of spreading from one hall to the next.”

After finishing, he rubbed at his temple with visible weariness.

“As for anything beyond that,” he muttered with a self-deprecating smile, this old mind of mine can scarcely remember anymore.”

At that moment, Mira entered quietly carrying a polished silver tray, the scent of coffee drifting through the room as she approached.

Elowen's smile returned with practiced grace. "At least have some water before you leave, Lord Colton."

But he declined with another slow shake of his head.

"I rushed out so quickly tonight that I forgot to take my medicine. I really should return before it gets too late." With visible effort, he pushed himself upright using his cane. "Thank you to Your Grace and His Grace for receiving me despite the intrusion."

Elowen made no move to stop him.

Supported by his cane, Colton slowly turned toward the doorway and made his way out with careful.

uneven steps.

"Bran," Elowen said calmly, "escort Lord Colton out."

"At once, Your Grace."

Bran immediately followed after him.

Only after the old man's frail figure disappeared into the darkness beyond the courtyard did Cassian lean back in his chair and let out a low amused laugh.

"Well, at least that saved us from wasting perfectly good coffee."

Elowen could not help laughing at that.

Cassian turned toward her, warmth flickering in his eyes beneath the glow of the hearth. "And honestly even if he were twenty years younger, he still wouldn't stand a chance against you at a chessboard."

Her smile brightened for a moment before gradually fading into thoughtfulness.

"Still," she admitted softly, "he's not entirely wrong. Pushing people too far when they've got nothing left to lose rarely ends well."

Once Alaric was dead, her revenge would already be complete

But the Baker family's influence ran too deeply through Vanelle. Their alliances reached into noble courts, military ranks, merchant houses, and nearly every

corner of the capital. If she forced them into a dead end, there was no telling how violently they might retaliate before collapsing.

And there was another

issue.

Once Alaric lost his position, Isla and the Baker family would inevitably lose much of their influence within Theodric's court. But if the Bakers were crushed entirely, then the balance of power inside Vanelle would shift dangerously toward Elira, the Jones family, and Duskmoor Manor itself.

Someone would eventually need to take Alaric's place.

Elowen knew perfectly well that Elira and Caelan had already begun eyeing that future.

But Theodric had always valued Cassian highly.

And given Cassian's reputation among both the nobility and

whether Theodric might someday begin viewing him with con people, it was impossible to say

suspicion as well.

Leaving the Baker family in place, at least temporarily, would create a necessary balance against future dangers.

The smile at the corner of Elowen's lips faded slightly as she looked toward Cassian with unusual seriousness.

"Cassian, I think we should leave the Bakers alone for now and deal with them later when the timing's better." Her voice softened. "But after everything they did to you... after all those years you lost because of them..." She hesitated briefly before asking. "Would letting them go for now make you feel wronged?"

Cassian lifted a brow. "You mean the part where the Queen and the Bakers worked together to leave me unconscious for years?"

Elowen nodded immediately.

“If you still resent it, then I don’t care what Colton said tonight. Anyone who hurt you deserves to pay for it eventually.”

Cassian’s expression softened almost instantly.

He reached over and brushed his fingers gently along her cheek, his touch warm against her skin.

in his eyes. “If they hadn’t done “Ella, I’ve honestly never felt wronged by any of it.” A quiet smile. what they did, I never would’ve found the courage to ask for your hand. And without you...” His gaze lingered on her face with unmistakable tenderness. “I probably would’ve spent the rest of my life alone.”

The warmth in his voice made Elowen’s chest ache unexpectedly.

And with that ache came memories she had avoided revisiting for a very long time.

Ever since marrying Cassian and building a family together with him, she had rarely allowed herself to think about the misery of her previous life.

Until now.

Back then, after she died inside the Crown Prince’s Wing, what had Cassian felt when he learned the truth? By then, he had already awakened.

No one had saved him early in that lifetime, and because of the conspiracy against him, he had remained trapped in darkness for years.

By the time he finally opened his eyes again, she had already been forced into marriage with Alaric and slowly destroyed within the Crown Prince’s Wing until sickness left her thin, exhausted, and barely recognizable.

Knowing she had married Alaric must have devastated him.

And when he learned she had died so young inside that cold royal residence....

What would’ve destroyed him first-grief or rage?