

Awakening Love: Reborn to Be His Duchess Novel

We Had Something Real But Didn't Handle It Right

614

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Awakening Love: Reborn to Be His Duchess

Chapter 614 Wherever You Are

Elowen suspected the answer was probably both.

For one fleeting moment, she found herself wanting to see what kind of expression Cassian would have worn in that lifetime after hearing of her death.

But the thought also meant imagining herself married to another man while Cassian spent the rest of his life alone in this world.

The idea hurt too much to bear.

In every lifetime, the only person she truly wanted was him.

Meanwhile, Cassian was still speaking softly beside her, his voice blending with the warm crackle of the fire.

“Ella, you know me better than anyone else does. I’ve never been the kind of man who fights to possess things for himself. I went to war and accepted the title of Duke of Duskmoor because my brother needed me to, Whatever responsibilities he placed in my hands, I accepted quietly and never asked for more. Most of my life has been spent in military camps or along the frontier, and I handed an entire estate over to Marwen because titles, wealth, and household affairs never seemed important enough to waste energy on.”

His eyes settled on her with quiet affection.

“I loved you for years, but I never once dared approach Hale Manor to ask for your hand. I uncovered evidence against the Baker family long ago, yet I never brought it before His Majesty because I didn’t want to force him into an impossible position. He’s my brother, Ella. Other than you, he’s the person I care about most in this world. I knew exactly how difficult it would’ve been for him to choose between us. One side was his son, and the other was me. No matter which side he protected, someone would’ve suffered for it”

His fingers slowly intertwined with hers.

“So I stayed quiet. I never fought for anything.” His voice softened further. “The only reason I’m willing to do any of this now is because of you. However far you want to go, I’ll go there with you. This decision has always belonged to you”

Before Flowen even realized what was happening, heat rushed into her eyes.

Tears slid down her cheeks so suddenly that she barely noticed them until several warm drops landed against the back of Cassian’s hand.

Even she looked startled.

Cassian froze for half a second before immediately reaching toward her, his expression turning

“Hey, what happened?” he asked gently while wiping away the tears gathering beneath her lashes. “Did I say something wrong?”

Flowen shook her head quickly, but the movement only made moir tears spill free.

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“No, that’s not it. Her voice trembled helplessly despite herself. “You didn’t say anything wrong at all. I just... I suddenly felt really emotional.”

Cassian looked both amused and helpless at the same time.

As he continued carefully drying her tears with his thumb, a quiet laugh escaped him.

“You already know how much I love you. I tell you constantly, so how are you still crying over this?”

Elowen looked up at him through tear-filled eyes, her expression soft enough to melt anyone's resolve.

"That's because I never realized someone could love me this deeply."

The moment she finished speaking, she leaned forward almost instinctively and kissed the corner of his lips.

Even in broad daylight, she could not stop herself from doing that much.

Cassian blinked in brief surprise before smiling warmly. One hand cupped her face as he kissed her properly in return, slow and gentle enough to leave warmth lingering between them long after he pulled away.

Then, with endless patience, he resumed wiping away the remaining traces of tears from her cheeks.

Elowen allowed him to fuss over her quietly until her breathing gradually steadied again.

Only then did she suddenly remember something important.

"Oh, right." She looked at him seriously. "Cassian, there's something else I need to tell you."

Without lifting his gaze from her face, he asked calmly, "Does this happen to involve whatever Valessa told you while I was making those pastries earlier?"

Elowen gave a small nod, though her expression quickly turned awkward.

"She told me my grandmother was from Nordia." She hesitated for several seconds before forcing herself to continue. "And apparently she was also... the Oracle Ogu."

Cassian's brows lifted slightly as his thumb brushed away the final trace of moisture beneath her eye.

"An Oracle?"

Embarrassed, Elowen nodded,

A thoughtful look crossed Cassian's face before he suddenly gave a low laugh.

"Well, that certainly explains a few things."

Elowen blinked at him in confusion. “Explains what exactly?”

A teasing smile slowly appeared at the corners of his mouth as he leaned closer and lowered his voice.

“Why do I occasionally feel like I’m committing sacrilege every time I drag you into bed.

It took Elowen a second to understand what he meant.

Then she burst into laughter and smacked his shoulder lightly.

The sound

drifted crisply through the room.

The moment she had

Cas

looked at him, however, regret flashed across her face, and she immediately rubbed through her hair, worried she might have actually hurt him.

He smiled softly as he caught her hand and pressed a lingering kiss against her fingers.

His expression gradually settled into seriousness again.

He asked quietly, “do they want you to return to Nordia?”

Elowen immediately crossed her face.

“You already knew?”

He nodded slowly.

“I’ve heard stories about Nordia’s Oracle long before this. They haven’t had one in several generations, and the kingdom spent years torn apart by war because of it. The current king managed to stabilize things for a while, but nobody knows how long that peace will last. For them, bringing back the Oracle would mean legitimacy, stability, and unity all at once.”

Then he smiled faintly.

“I always assumed Nordia would eventually reclaim its Oracle someday. I just never imagined she’d turn out to be my wife.”

Elowen studied him carefully.

“So... what do you think?”

Cassian lifted a brow slightly, waiting for her to continue.

Her voice softened with caution.

“Cassian... would you be willing to go to Nordia with me?”

Before he could answer, she hurried to explain herself.

“It’s not that their langu

what k

“And

me their Oracle or anything like that. Honestly, I don’t even speak pre. But after hearing Valessa talk about it, I started wondering

home. She rested a hand lightly against her stomachs m still pregnant, and there’s no way we could make

and and wife and wherever ife takes us we should face r

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together. So if you truly think going to Nordia would be a bad idea...” Her voice softened almost into a murmur. “Then I won’t go.”

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Chapter 615 Beyond Avenlor

Cassian wasted until klowen had finally said everything weighing on her and before he gently curled s fingers around hers and asked in an way abrown cool tome. Villa haven't you always loved bonehark riding

As first. Bowen did not understand why he was suddenly bringing that up to the wingly nodded an answered honestly. "Yeah, I do"

Warm amusement flickered through Cassian's eyes as sunlight filtered through the arched windows behind him, softening, the sharpness of his features. Then if we end up in Nordia someday you'll be able to ride to your heart's content. The plains there go on for miles without end and they raise benter horses than anywhere the I've ever seen"

Flowen stared at him for a brief moment before realization slowly dawned across her face.

"You'd really go to Nordia with me?"

Cassian smiled as though the matter were perfectly ordinary. "Why wouldn't I?"

The sudden tenderness in his voice made Elowen's chest tighten all over again, and warmth quickly gathered at the corners of her eyes,

"But here in Avenlor, you're still a royal duke," she said quietly. "If we leave for Nordia, nobody there will even know who we are?"

Cassan looked at her steadily, his expression impossibly calm.

"But they'll know you," he said,

His thumb idly traced slow circles against her fingertips while a faint smile tugged at his mouth

"You're the Oracle of Nordia, aren't you? Besides, I heard women there are allowed to formally choose their own husbands. When we married before, I was unconscious for half of it, and there was barely any real ceremony to begin with. Once we're in Nordia, you can marry me properly this time"

Ylowen could not help laughing, "Who says things like that?"

But halfway through speaking, she looked up and met his gaze directly.

Cassian was watching her with complete sincerity, so earnest that there was not even the slightest trace of teasing in his eyes.

He truly meant it

The realization softened something deep inside her almost instantly

Before she even noticed herself doing it, she had already begun genuinely considering whether such future might actually be possible.

Going to Nordis no lomery wounded unrealistic at all

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Chapter 615 Beyond Avenlor

A smile slowly curved at the corners of her lips as she squeezed his hand in return.

“Then once all this chaos settles down, we’ll go together.”

Cassian nodded without hesitation. “Alright.”

The two of them rose from the bench beneath the covered stone arcade and slowly made their way back through the manor grounds side by side while mellow afternoon sunlight spilled across the pathways, stretching their shadows long over the cobblestones.

As they walked, Elowen suddenly sighed softly and murmured, “I wonder where Grandfather is now. Maybe he’s still traveling around treating people, or maybe he already went back to Falkriver.”

Cassian thought for a moment before replying, “The Southwestern Marches have been in turmoil lately, and Falkriver probably isn’t peaceful anymore either.”

Falkriver stood near the borderlands between Avenlor and the Southwestern Marches, one of the kingdom’s most strategically important fortress cities and the first place caught in the crossfire whenever war broke out in the south.

If fighting spread through the Southwestern Marches, Falkriver would inevitably suffer first.

Elowen lowered her eyes thoughtfully as she considered that.

“Then I think Grandfather probably did return,” she said after a moment. “He acts carefree all the time, and honestly, his mouth can be downright vicious, but he’s still the kindest person I know underneath it all. If there’s war in Falkriver, there’s no way he’d stay elsewhere while people are suffering.” Cassian listened beside her with a quiet smile, allowing her to continue talking without interruption.

“And after we visit Nordia, we can stop by Falkriver too,” Elowen continued brightly. “Cassian, you’d love it there. The mountains are beautiful, and Grandfather even gifted me an entire stretch of highland territory when I was younger.”

She chatted the entire way back without running out of things to say, moving from one story to another while Cassian patiently listened beside her, occasionally asking a question or quietly responding whenever her excitement carried her off into another memory.

Elowen had always grown sleepy easily after eating too much, and once Cassian began slowly massaging the tension from her shoulders and neck while she reclined against the cushioned settee beside the window alcove, the little remaining alertness she had left quickly faded away.

Even though her eyelids had already become too heavy to properly keep open, she still stubbornly refused to release his hand.

“You’re heading to the palace this afternoon, aren’t you?” she mumbled drowsily.

Cassian lowered his gaze toward her.

“We agreed before that we’d present the evidence proving the Queen arranged the attack against me, the said quietly. “Once His Majesty sees everything. Alaric won’t have any way out of this

Elowen gave a sleepy little hum in acknowledgment.

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Chapter 615 Beyond Aventor

She was obviously exhausted already, yet she still forced herself to add one final reminder.

“Then don’t stay too late. Come back early.”

Cassian bent down and pressed a soft kiss against her forehead.

“I will”

Only after hearing that did Elowen finally loosen her grip on his fingers and drift fully to sleep.

Cassian sat there quietly watching her for a long while before finally rising from the settee and leaving the chamber.

Later that afternoon, carrying every piece of evidence with him, he entered the royal residence and requested an audience with Theodric inside the royal study.

One by one, he laid the evidence across the desk.

Private letters, witness testimonies, coded correspondence, personal seals, and sworn statements all fit together with terrifying clarity, documenting exactly how Isla and the Baker family had secretly conspired years ago to arrange an ambush during his return from the battlefield and send hired blades after him.

As Theodric continued reading through the documents, his expression darkened more visibly with every passing page.

By the end, the restraint he had maintained finally snapped.

He slammed the papers down onto the desk, grabbed the silver drinking goblet beside him, and hurled it violently across the chamber floor.

“These treacherous bastards!”

Dark wine splashed across the carpets while shattered porcelain scattered over the stone tiles.

Cassian lowered his eyes toward the broken fragments before calmly remarking, “Every time Your Majesty loses his temper, Avenlor loses another priceless relic.”

Theodric nearly choked on his own fury.

“At a time like this, that’s what concerns you?”

Then his expression hardened all over again.

“You marched into battle for this kingdom and nearly died for me, and meanwhile she was plotting behind your back to have you murdered. If something had truly happened to you, what exactly was I supposed to do?”

Cassian looked at him evenly.

“Brother, something did happen to me. I spent months unconscious, and even the royal physicians. believed I might never wake again.”

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Theodric abruptly fell silent

The fury in his expression gradually shifted into something heavier and far more complicated.

Cavian smiled faintly

“Thankfully, Your Majesty arranged my marriage to Ella. I was so happy I woke right back up.”

Theodric wared at him speechlessly for a moment.

After a brief vilence. Cavian continued in the same calm tone.

“You can probably tell these documents were gathered quite a while ago. If I truly intended to accuse someone publicly, I could’ve presented them long before today, or exposed everything during court this morning, I chose not to because I didn’t want to put Your Majesty in a difficult position, and I certainly didn’t want unrest spreading throughout the court.”

His voice remained composed throughout, but the meaning behind his words was unmistakably serious.

“The reason I finally chose to bring this to Your Majesty privately is because Alaric’s temperament is far too dangerous. I genuinely don’t believe someone like him should inherit Avenlor’s future. Whether Your Majesty still intends to keep him as heir or merely retain his royal status, I hope you’ll reconsider carefully. I simply cannot stand by and watch the foundation our people built end up ruined in the wrong hands.”

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Chapter 616 His One Refusal

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Theodric lifted his eyes toward Cassian and asked in a low voice, “Then what about the Baker family? Colton and all the rest of them have spent years abusing their influence and enriching themselves through corruption. Shouldn’t they be dealt with too?”

Cassian’s expression barely changed.

“Your Majesty has always known better than anyone how these matters should be handled,” he replied evenly. “As for the Baker family, I trust Your Majesty already has a decision in mind. Personally, I’m only concerned about my duchess and the child she’s carrying now. Nothing else matters much to me

anymore.”

A faint smile touched his lips before fading again.

“Besides, after spending so long recovering, my health is nowhere near what it used to be. I doubt I’ll be able to continue serving Your Majesty the way I once did.”

This time, there was no humor in his voice at all.

Theodric’s brow tightened immediately.

“Cassian,” he said slowly, “you know there’s war in the Southwestern Marches right now.”

Cassian nodded once. "I know."

Theodric's gaze darkened further.

"Then do you also know we've been losing?"

That finally caught Cassian off guard.

For one thing, he genuinely had not known the campaign had deteriorated this badly.

And for another, the moment Theodric raised the subject, Cassian already understood exactly where this conversation was heading.

Silence settled heavily across the room.

Outside the tall cathedral windows, the afternoon light had already begun dimming toward evening, but neither man spoke again for quite some time.

At last, Theodric exhaled deeply and broke the silence himself.

"After court this morning, I was already considering restoring you to military command," he admitted, "Now that your name has been cleared and your position restored, it only makes sense to send you south to stabilize the situation. Even if you hadn't come here today, I still would've summoned you before nightfall."

Cassian remained silent.

Theodric studied him carefully before continuing in a quieter voice.

Chapter 616 His One Refusal

"I know what's weighing on your mind. Your duchess is close to giving birth, and I understand why you don't want to leave her right now. But Cassian, Avenlor cannot afford to keep losing ground in the south

As he spoke, Theodric rose from behind the desk and walked toward him.

"You know exactly what Falkriver means to this kingdom," he said gravely. "If the Southwestern Marches continue advancing, Falkriver will eventually fall into enemy hands. That fortress city was defended with blood and sacrifice by General Hale himself years ago, and it remains one of the most important strongholds protecting Avenlor's southern border."

At the mention of Falkriver, something flickered faintly in Cassian's eyes.

Under normal circumstances, he would have agreed without hesitation.

Theodric and Cassian had grown up together since childhood, and there had never once been distrust between them.

When Theodric fought for the throne years ago, Cassian stood beside him through every storm.

After Theodric ascended the throne, Cassian spent years leading armies across the continent without ever once refusing an order.

No matter what was asked of him, he had always agreed.

But today was different.

The silence stretching between them grew longer and heavier with every passing moment.

At length, Theodric lowered his voice further, and for the first time, genuine exhaustion showed through his expression.

"Cassian, we're brothers. More than anyone else, I know exactly how much this kingdom owes you. I haven't forgotten any of it." His gaze darkened heavily.

"What happened before, I will absolutely see justice done. Isla will answer for what she did, and so will the Baker family. But the Southwestern Marches cannot simply be abandoned, and Falkriver absolutely cannot fall."

Then after a brief pause, he added quietly, "I still hope you'll take command of this campaign, and as soon as possible."

The room fell silent again afterward.

Cassian stood there motionless for several long moments before finally stepping back and lowering himself into a deep formal bow before the throne.

Even bent forward, his back remained perfectly straight.

"Your Majesty," he said quietly, "I don't want to go."

Theodric froze.

For a moment, he genuinely seemed unable to believe what he had just heard.

Chapter 616 His One Refusal

“What did you say?”

Cassian lowered his gaze toward the stone floor beneath him.

“I said I don’t want to go to the Southwestern Marches.”

Theodric’s expression darkened immediately.

Falcher

“Cassian,” he said sharply, “do you even understand what you’re saying? Millions of lives are at stake there, not to mention Falkriver itself.”

“I know.”

Cassian’s voice remained calm, though quieter now.

“I know all of that, Your Majesty.”

“Then how can you still refuse?”

For the first time since entering the royal study, emotion finally surfaced clearly in Cassian’s voice.

“The people matter,” he said slowly, “but Ella matters too.”

Theodric’s gaze sharpened.

Cassian continued before he could interrupt.

“She nearly lost her life once already because of everything tied to me, and now she’s carrying my child. If

I leave for war again and something happens while I’m gone...” His voice lowered slightly before he

continued, “There are other commanders in Avenlor capable of leading armies. I was never the kingdom’s only option.”

Theodric stared at him coldly.

“You honestly believe anyone else can hold that border the way you can?”

Cassian did not answer immediately.

Instead, he lowered himself further until his forehead rested against the cold stone beneath him.

It was not submission.

It looked far more like exhaustion.

“For my entire life,” he said quietly, “I’ve never once asked Your Majesty for anything. I never disobeyed an order, and I never placed my own wishes before the kingdom.” His voice softened further. “But this once, I’m asking Your Majesty to spare me.”

Theodric’s jaw tightened visibly.

“And if refusing me costs you everything?” he asked coldly. “Your authority your title, your place in this kingdom. Even then?”

apter 616 His One Refusal

Meanwhile, back at Duskmoor Manor, Elowen’s sleep had become increasingly restless.

Even in miser

She

cams, an uncomfortable heaviness pressed against her chest, leaving her trapped between sleeping and waking where everything felt wrong yet impossible to esca

al times to force herself awake, but exhaustion kept dragging her consciousness ba neone gently shook her shoulder twice did she finally begin waking properly.

ep, Elowen instinctively assumed Cassian had already returned from the palace.

mediately appeared on her face as she opened her eyes.

moment her vision cleared and she realized the person standing beside her was Mira instea pointment visibly flickered across her expression before she quickly forced herself to smile ag

hat is it?” she asked softly, her voice still heavy with lingering sleepiness.

Mira, meanwhile, looked thoroughly delighted.

“Your Grace,” she said with a grin, “Lady Elspeth is here.”

Elowen stared blankly for half a heartbeat before the meaning fully registered.

Instantly, every trace of disappointment disappeared.

“Aunt Elspeth is here?” she exclaimed as she hurried upright from the cushioned settee. “Quickly, bring in.”

Before Mira could even respond, Elowen had already thrown aside the wool blanket draped over her lap slipped hurriedly into her soft house slippers, and rushed toward the receiving hall as quickly as her pregnancy would allow.

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Chapter 617 The Great Hall

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“Your Grace, please slow down a little,” Mira pleaded as they hurried beneath the glow of the iron wall lanterns. “You’re still carrying the baby, and Lady Elspeth has already been shown to the Great Hall with Lirien. They aren’t going anywhere.”

Elowen gathered the last of her loosened hair behind her ears while continuing forward without

hesitation. “Then why didn’t you wake me earlier? How long have they been here already? Did Nina really come with her?”

Mira looked so unjustly accused that she almost sounded offended. “Lady Elspeth only arrived a short while ago, and she specifically told everyone not to disturb Your Grace while you were resting. I only thought you’d want to see them immediately, so I came the moment everything was prepared.”

That finally made Elowen smile, and she glanced back at her apologetically. “Then I blamed you unfairly. Mira always knows what I need before I do.”

The closer they drew to the Great Hall, the more clearly laughter drifted through the open doors ahead, warm and lively enough to make Elowen’s chest loosen before she even stepped inside.

“Elowen truly knows how to run a proper estate,” Elspeth was saying cheerfully. “A courtyard this large ought to be put to use. Keeping a kitchen garden is far better than letting all that land sit empty, and whenever the cooks need herbs or vegetables, they can simply gather them fresh instead of relying on market deliveries. Once I return home, I’m doing the same thing with our grounds. Perhaps I’ll even keep a few sheep as well, since you’ve always loved roasted lamb.”

Then came Lirien’s bright voice, eager and animated.

“And if we build a fish pond too, we could stock it with trout because Mother loves roasted river fish. I’ll feed them every day until they’re enormous.”

The sound alone made Elowen smile before she even crossed the threshold.

A moment later, she finally saw them clearly.

Elspeth sat near the long hearth wearing a soft gray-blue overdress fastened with silver clasps, her neatly arranged hair partially covered by a finely woven cap, and the healthy warmth in her complexion made her look far younger than she had during their last meeting. She spoke about gardens and livestock with the confidence of someone commanding an entire household, gesturing across the hall as though she were planning military strategy instead of discussing sheep and vegetables.

Beside her stood Lirien, though calling her Nina almost no longer suited her.

Today she wore a pale golden spring gown trimmed with cream-colored embroidery, and her hair had been braided carefully into twin loops pinned behind her head in the style favored by young noblewomen. Her cheeks had finally filled out with healthy color, and she had grown noticeably taller as

well.

Most importantly, the fearful caution that once clung to her had vanished completely.

Back then, she had seemed like some fragile little thing trying desperately to survive a bitter winter.

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Chapter 617 The Great Hall

Now she looked alive in every possible sense, flourishing openly beneath warmth and care.

Elsbeth truly had raised her well

“Ella!”

Lirien spotted her first and immediately lit up.

“Elowen?” Elspeth turned just as quickly, delight washing across her face as she rose from her seat and hurried forward.

Elowen smiled warmly. “Aunt Elspeth.”

The older woman immediately took both her hands and looked her over carefully from head to toe. “Look at you. You’ve become even more beautiful since I last saw you.”

Then her gaze lowered to Elowen’s stomach, and her eyes softened at once with emotion. “Your belly’s grown so much already. Tell me honestly, has it been difficult? Are your legs aching badly?”

shoulders Elowen laughed softly and squeezed her hands reassuringly. “Not at all. Cassian massages my and legs every evening, and lately he’s been obsessing over what I ought to eat, so the kitchens are constantly sending up new dishes for me to try. Honestly, carrying this baby hasn’t been hard on me at all.”

“Well, of course he should be taking care of you,” Elspeth said immediately, as though the matter required no praise whatsoever. “That’s simply what a husband is meant to do.”

Only afterward did she suddenly remember something else and glance around the hall. “Speaking of him, where is he? Why isn’t he here with you? I heard he’d lost his title.”

Elowen gently patted the back of her hand. “Everything was restored this morning. His Grace has already recovered both his authority and title, and he’s gone to the royal residence to meet with His Majesty. He should be back before long.”

Then, not wanting the conversation to linger there, she guided Elspeth farther into the hall.

“Enough about him for now. Aunt Elspeth, come sit properly.”

Turning toward the attendants waiting nearby, she added, “Mira, Cora, have water brought in, and ask the kitchens to prepare pastries and warm tarts as well.”

Then she looked back toward Lirien with a smile. “Is there anything you especially like eating? Just tell them

Lirien grinned immediately. “I’m really not picky about food.”

“That girl will eat absolutely anything.” Elspeth interrupted with open amusement. “If she gets hungry enough, she’ll finish two full platters and still sit there tearing apart an entire roasted lamb shank like one of the stable boys”

Elowen laughed outright at the image.

Lirien flushed scarlet from embarrassment and protested at once, “Mother! You’ve only just arrived and you’re already making fun of me in front of Ella?”

Vicar Mall

That only made Elowen laugh harder. “There’s nothing wrong with that. When I was your much. After spending all afternoon riding or practicing archery, I’d come back starving en half the supper table by myself.”

As she spoke, she held her hands apart to demonstrate the size.

“I used to devour entire roasted pork joints without even realizing it because I’d be so hung

Lirien stared at her as though she’d finally found someone who completely understood her, brightened instantly. “Exactly! That’s exactly how I feel too!”

Elsbeth sat beside them seemed lighter for i

Then Lirien s you gave m every we

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the two girls chatter together, smiling so warmly that the en

d something and leaned forward excitedly. “Oh, right, Ella.

s incredibly clever too. Sometimes it honestly feels like she u

ened immediately. “Have you named her yet?”

enough that the ribbons in her hair trembled. “I did. She’s chestnut-color ts, so I named her Chestnut.”

softly, genuinely pleased. “That’s a lovely name. Nina’s very good at naming thing

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Chapter 618 Someone Still Waiting

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Lirien immediately lowered her head after receiving praise, though the smile at the corners of her mouth only deepened, and she gently brushed the toe of her shoe against the floor in embarrassment.

Watching her, Elowen rested one hand over her stomach and spoke in a soft, thoughtful voice. “We still haven’t chosen a nickname for the baby yet, so maybe

when the time comes, you can help think of one for her. Nina, would you like to do that for me?"

The suggestion startled Lirien so much that her entire face turned red almost instantly. "Me? Oh, I don't know if I could..."

She looked both thrilled and nervous at the same time, caught between wanting to agree immediately and feeling too shy to accept so easily.

The sight amused Elowen enough that a teasing thought crossed her mind. "It's alright. If you choose one I don't like, I simply won't use it."

That blunt honesty caught Lirien completely off guard for a second, though somehow it also made her visibly relax.

The nervousness faded from her expression, replaced by eager determination.

"Then I'll think very seriously about it," she promised earnestly. "The moment I get home, I'll start coming up with ideas every day until I find the perfect one."

Elowen smiled and nodded. "Good. Then I'll look forward to hearing it."

Elsbeth watched the exchange beside them with obvious affection before finally waving a hand toward Lirien. "Alright

go and entertain yourself for a while. We adults still have things to discuss."

Now, off you &

Lirien blinked in confusion and glanced around the enormous hall. "But where exactly am I supposed to go?"

Elowen tilted her head thoughtfully for a moment before her eyes suddenly brightened. "Actually, there's a girl around your age staying in my household. Her name's Nikki. Would you like to spend time with her?"

Lirien nodded immediately. "Anyone serving in your household must be wonderful."

Elowen turned toward Cora. "Take Lirien to Nikki, and tell her she has the entire afternoon free by my order so the two of them can enjoy themselves properly."

Cora bowed respectfully. "Yes, Your Grace."

Before leaving, Lirien still looked toward Elspeth instinctively, waiting for permission.

Elspeth laughed and waved her onward. “Go enjoy yourself. Just try not to bring the whole manor down around you”

That was all the encouragement she needed.

Lirien happily followed Cora from the Great Hall, and even after she disappeared down the corridor her

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Chapter 618 Someone Still Waiting

excited voice still floated faintly back through the open doorway.

“How old is Nikki? Does she like riding? What does she usually do for fun?”

The hall gradually quieted after the two girls left, leaving only Elowen and Elspeth seated together

Elspeth looked at Elowen for a long moment before finally speaking again, her voice gentler now than before.

“Earlier this year, I completely forgot the date of your birthday because Nina and I were traveling, and by the time I remembered, it was already too late to return in person. I could only send a few gifts ahead, and afterward I kept feeling guilty about it.” She paused briefly before continuing more softly. “This time. I counted the weeks carefully because I knew the baby would be arriving soon. Bringing a child into the world is one of the most important moments in a woman’s life, and I couldn’t bear missing it.”

Warmth suddenly stung behind Elowen’s eyes.

She no longer had a mother.

Ever since becoming pregnant, she had occasionally found herself wondering what it might feel like to have one nearby through all of this, because most women did. Mothers stayed beside their daughters during childbirth, comforting them, guiding them, helping them through the fear.

She had once convinced herself that it didn’t matter because Cassian would remain with her.

But sitting here now, she realized she had forgotten something important.

She still has Aunt Elspeth.

“Oh, that reminds me.” Elspeth leaned slightly closer, lowering her voice with curiosity. “On the road to Vanelle, I heard all sorts of rumors from travelers. People were saying Alaric was stripped of his position as Crown Prince. Is that really true?”

Elowen nodded calmly. “Before this, Alaric secretly arranged the assassination attempt against Roderic of Nordia, then tried to frame Cassian for it, which led to His Grace temporarily losing both his title and authority. Not long afterward, the scandal surrounding the court qualification trials surfaced as well, and Alaric turned out to be deeply involved in that too. His Majesty had been deceived about many things, but once the truth came out, naturally he was furious.”

Elspeth sighed quietly and shook her head. “When he was younger, that boy never seemed capable of becoming someone like this. Back then, his eyes still looked honest. He seemed no different from any ordinary child.”

Elowen lowered her gaze slightly.

Back then, after she had once saved him, Alaric had looked at her with complete sincerity and solemnly promised he would take responsibility for her someday.

Now that memory felt impossibly distant.

“People change,” Elowen said softly. “Especially when they spend years surrounded by the wrong influences. Nina changed too, didn’t she? Back then, she spent every day watching everyone’s expressions before daring to speak. Now that she’s with you, she’s become lively and carefree

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Pride and tenderness softened Elspeth’s expression immediately. “Nina truly is a good child. When she first came with me, she barely even dared laugh out loud because she was afraid of bothering someone. It broke my heart watching her live like that. Now she chatters from morning until night.”

Elowen smiled faintly. “That’s how children are supposed to be?”

Elspeth continued studying her quietly for several moments before finally reaching out and gently touching her cheek.

“It’s so good seeing you again. Ella. You truly have no idea how much I missed you while I was away.” Elowen instinctively softened her voice in return. “I missed you often too, Aunt Elspeth

Elspeth snorted in amusement. “I doubt that very much. You’ve had Cassian spoiling you every day, so don’t try charming me with sweet words now

That made Elowen laugh, warmth curling through her eyes. “Well... perhaps not every single moment,” she admitted honestly. “But I absolutely thought about you often, and I wrote letters constantly.”

That answer finally satisfied Elspeth. “Now that, I believe,”

The two women laughed together for a while longer before Elspeth suddenly glanced toward the windows. “Speaking of Cassian, how long has he been gone now?”

Elowen followed her gaze toward the fading afternoon light beyond the glass and estimated the time after a moment’s thought.

“Perhaps an hour or so,” she answered, though uncertainty lingered faintly in her tone because she had only recently woken and no longer had a clear sense of time.

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A thoughtful look settled over Elspeth's face. "He's been gone far too long," she murmured after a moment. "I wouldn't be surprised if His Majesty decided to keep him at the palace."

The words made Elowen's chest tighten unexpectedly.

Elspeth noticed the subtle change in her expression almost immediately, and the teasing warmth in her tone softened into concern. "Do you want me to go speak with His Majesty myself? If he's planning to bury Cassian under another pile of royal duties, I can still drag that boy back home whether he likes it or not."

Elowen lowered her gaze briefly, fingers curling around the warmth of the porcelain cup in her lap while she considered it carefully. In the end, though, she simply shook her head. "No, Aunt Elspeth. Cassian can handle it."

Then, not wanting the conversation to linger too long on the subject, she poured another cup for her aunt with steady hands. "At least try the coffee before it cools. I haven't even tasted it myself yet."

Elspeth accepted the cup. "I'm only worried His Majesty trying to force something else onto him again. You know what Cassian's like where his brother is concerned. Sometimes I swear that boy's spent his whole life living for the throne instead of for himself."

The remark caught Elowen completely off guard.

For several seconds, she genuinely did not know what to say.

Meanwhile, inside the royal study at the palace, the atmosphere had grown so tense that even the attendants waiting beyond the chamber doors barely dared breathe too loudly.

Theodric stood near the long council table beneath the glow of iron wall lanterns, his expression dark and restrained as he fixed his gaze upon the man before him. "Cassian," he said at last, his voice carrying unmistakable authority, "you should understand better than anyone that everything you possess today was granted by me. Are you truly prepared to defy my wishes now?"

The warning already carried enough weight to terrify most men at court.

Yet Cassian merely lifted his eyes calmly toward him, his expression utterly devoid of fear.

“Your Majesty,” he said quietly, “you know better than anyone that I was never a man with grand ambitions. When we were young, Mother used to complain that I didn’t behave like the other princes at all. While everyone else was out racing horses through the castle grounds or sneaking into the falcon mews looking for trouble, I could sit beneath the stone arcade for an entire afternoon doing nothing except staring into

space.”

A faint smile crossed his face.

“If you hadn’t told me you intended to claim the throne one day, I probably would’ve drifted through life without caring much about anything. You were the one who taught me that a person ought to devote himself to something meaningful, or to someone worth protecting. From then on, wherever you chose to go, I followed without hesitation.”

Theodric’s expression shifted slightly at the words before hardening again almost immediately.

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Cassian continued speaking in the same steady voice,

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“Later, I saw Ella for the first time from across the tournament grounds. Truthfully, I barely even saw her face back then. What stayed with me was the way she rode across the field with the wind catching her cloak while she drew her bow as naturally as breathing, every arrow striking true as though she’d been born beneath a lucky star.”

The moment Elowen’s name left his lips, warmth surfaced unmistakably in his eyes.

“I remember thinking there couldn’t possibly be another person in the world like her. She was bright enough to make everything around her feel alive. The more I learned about her afterward, the deeper those feelings became, but even then, I buried them because I never once imagined I’d truly be able to marry her. In all the world, only you knew any part of what I felt. If you hadn’t arranged that

marriage, Ella and I would've continued missing each other for the rest of our lives."

Theodric remained silent.

Cassian's voice stayed calm, though every word carried unmistakable sincerity.

"Whether it was becoming the Duke of Duskmoor or leading armies into battle, every choice I made was because you needed me to make it. If rebellions rose, you ordered me to crush them, and I did. If you wanted someone to command the armies of the realm, then I took up residence at Duskmoor Manor and accepted that responsibility without complaint. For nearly thirty years, I've lived according to your will. Whatever you asked of me, I never hesitated, and I never feared dying for it."

As Theodric listened, the severity in his expression finally began to loosen.

Every word was true.

Perhaps he had simply grown too accustomed to Cassian's obedience over the years, because only now, hearing him say it aloud so plainly, did Theodric realize just how much his younger brother had sacrificed without ever once asking for anything in return.

"But now I have Ella"

The moment he spoke her name again, something in his composure finally cracked.

"Your Majesty," he said, his voice roughening slightly, "I have Ella now."

A faint redness appeared around his eyes beneath the candlelight, though his gaze remained astonishingly steady

"We already lost too many years together. Without your decree, we would've continued missing one another until the end of our lives. Back when I was accused of assassinating the Nordian prince. I never rushed to clear my name because part of me genuinely thought that if losing my title and command meant I could stay beside her every day instead, then maybe that wouldn't have been such a terrible outcome after all?"

He paused, his motion tightening in his throat before he continued

“You said Ella depends on me now because she’s carrying our child, but the truth is that I’m the one who cannot bear to be without her

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gisstened red, yet the conviction in his voice never wavered.

I love her. I can’t let her go. No matter how many times I’m forced to choose between the entire world and Ella, I’ll choose her every single time.”

The confession settled heavily into the silence of the chamber, carrying a depth of feeling so overwhelming that even the air itself seemed to still around them.

Theodric stood motionless for a very long time without speaking.

Cassian remained lowered before him in formal deference despite the numbness spreading through his legs, his posture never shifting even slightly.

At last, Theodric exhaled slowly and stepped back.

“Enough”

Cassian immediately looked up, tension visible in his eyes as he searched his brother’s expression.

Theodric lowered his gaze toward him, his own expression far more complicated now than before. “You just said you’ve never asked anything for yourself all these years. Since you’ve finally done so today, refusing you now would make me seem like a coldhearted brother indeed.”

Genuine surprise flashed across Cassian’s face, as though he had never expected Theodric to agree so easily.

Before he could say anything else, however, Theodric had already turned back toward the documents spread across the desk, his voice calm and unreadable.

“The matter involving Isla and the Baker family arranging your assassination will still be dealt with properly. As for the fighting in the Southwestern Marches, I’ll appoint someone else to oversee it.”

His hand rested briefly against the edge of the table before he added quietly, “You may remain in Vanelle and stay beside Ella.”

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Relief washed over Cassian so suddenly that the tightness in his chest eased all at once. He immediately lowered himself into a deep formal bow before Theodric, one hand pressed over his heart in respect.

“My thanks to Your Majesty for this grace.”

Theodric did not turn around, merely waving a hand dismissively as the fire crackled softly nearby. “Enough already. Go home. I heard Elspeth returned to Vanelle today, which means she’s probably waiting at your manor by now.”

A genuine smile surfaced across Cassian’s face. “Yes. Aunt Elspeth has always spoiled Ella the most.”

He had already begun walking toward the doors when another thought occurred to him, prompting him to stop and glance back over his shoulder. “Once Ella safely delivers the baby, we’ll bring the child to the palace and properly pay our respects to Your Majesty.”

That finally drew a laugh out of Theodric.

He turned slightly, amusement visible in his eyes. “You’re not coming to pay respects. You and your little family are obviously planning to come here and squeeze rewards out of me.”

Cassian laughed easily. “If Your Majesty chooses to reward us, that only proves your generosity.”

Theodric snorted. “Stop trying to flatter me and get out before I change my mind.”

Still smiling, Cassian bowed once more. “Then I’ll take my leave.”

This time, Theodric merely answered with a low sound of acknowledgment.

Cassian departed in excellent spirits, the heaviness that had shadowed him for days finally disappearing completely.

Because of that, he never saw the expression left behind in Theodric's eyes after he walked out of the chambe

Standing alone beneath the warm glow of the lanterns, Theodric watched his younger brother disappear beyond the carved doors, unmistakable relief and satisfaction gradually surfacing across his face.

That foolish younger brother of his had finally learned how to live for himself.

Strangely enough, Theodric envied him for it.

After so many years trapped upon the throne beneath endless responsibilities and court intrigue, he had almost forgotten what it felt like to love someone deeply enough that the rest of the world no longer mattered. He could no longer remember the simple happiness of fighting desperately for someone, or hurrying home because there was a person waiting there whom he longed to see.

Those ordinary joys had drifted impossibly far away from him long ago.

Then suddenly, another thought occurred to him, one that improved his mood considerably.

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“Quin.”

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The attendant waiting outside hurried into the chamber immediately. “What does Your Majesty require?”

Theodric's expression cooled again, though this time there was clear malicious satisfaction beneath it. “Summon everyone from the Ministry of War. Every last one of them.”

The situation in the Southwestern Marches had already become a nightmare waiting to erupt, and since Cassian clearly could no longer be sent there, Theodric had no intention of suffering through the headache alone.

If he was going to lose sleep over military reports, then the ministers could suffer alongside him.

After all, tormenting exhausted officials remained one of the few entertainments left to a ruler.

By the time the thought settled properly in his mind, Theodric finally felt considerably better.

When Cassian returned to Duskmoor Manor that evening, a violent explosion suddenly erupted somewhere within the estate grounds, loud enough to send birds scattering from the nearby trees.

Cassian's instincts sharpened instantly.

His first thought was retaliation.

With guards and hidden sentries stationed throughout the manor, anyone capable of slipping through the defenses and causing that kind of destruction was no ordinary threat.

The ease that had settled over him during recent months vanished immediately. Every muscle in his body tightened as he moved swiftly through the corridors with the silent precision of a hunting wolf, heading straight toward the source of the noise.

Smoke already billowed thickly through the courtyard ahead.

Even through the haze, Cassian's hearing immediately picked up two separate sets of footsteps inside it, allowing him to pinpoint their positions almost instantly.

He was just preparing to strike when Elspeth's furious voice suddenly rang through the smoke.

"Lirien! What exactly did I warn you about?! I told you not to blow apart the courtyard! Were you listening to a single word I said?!"

A second later, Elowen's gentler voice followed behind it.

“Aunt Elspeth, don’t be angry yet. I’m sure they didn’t mean for this to happen. We should make sure they aren’t hurt first.”

Only then did the tension finally drain from Cassian’s body.

Turning toward the familiar voice, the cold sharpness in his expression softened unmediately.

“Ella

Elowen looked over the moment she heard him, delight brightening her face instantly. “Cassian? You’re

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back already?”

He answered softly before walking toward her.

She had evidently rushed outside after hearing the explosion because the loose strands of hair she’d tucked behind her ear earlier had slipped free again around her cheeks. Cassian lifted a hand naturally, brushing the strands gently back into place.

“His Majesty kept you at the palace for quite a while,” Elowen said while studying his expression carefully. “What did he say?”

Cassian smiled without the slightest hesitation. “Nothing important. We mostly talked about old times.”

He had no intention of mentioning that Theodric originally wanted him to leave for the Southwestern Marches

Ella was far too softhearted. Once she learned how dire the fighting there had become, she ably spend her days worrying over the suffering of the people at the border.

nd that, the choice he made today already proved his love for her clearly enough. There was no place those feelings before her again simply to deepen her affection for him further.

By then, Elspeth had already dragged two soot-covered girls out from the smoke-filled courtyard.

One was Lirien.

The other was Nikki.

Both girls looked thoroughly miserable, their clothes stained black with ash while soot smeared across their cheeks, leaving only their bright eyes visible beneath the grime.

Cassian could not help laughing at the sight. “Ella, weren’t you saying recently that you wanted a daughter? If she turned out this troublesome, would you still want one?”

The two girls immediately blinked up at Elowen in perfect unison, wide-eyed and innocent despite their disastrous appearance.

Elowen finally burst into laughter. “Maybe not one quite this troublesome.”

Over the following days, the investigation into the attempted assassination of the Nordan prince, the corruption scandal surrounding the court qualification trials, and the attack against the Duke of Duskmooor all proceeded simultaneously beneath Theodric’s direct supervision.

With Theodric personally overseeing every detail, no official beneath him dared show even the slightest

carelessness.

Meanwhile, Elowen remained quietly at Duskmooor Manor focusing on her pregnancy while Cassian personally cared for her each day, massaging the soreness from her shoulders, neck, and legs while casually recounting the latest developments from court beside the hearth.

As spring deepened across Vanelle, the weather gradually warmed enough that Elowen no longer needed

the heavier winter gowns.

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That afternoon, Mira pushed open the tall window frames inside the study, allowing sunlight to spall through layers of flowering branches outside before scattering shifting patterns of gold and shadow across the carpets and shelves.

Elowen reclined comfortably along the chaise near the windows with a book resting in her hands.

The moment she heard approaching footsteps in the corridor, she recognized Cassian immediately

Even so, she deliberately kept her eyes lowered toward the page, pretending complete indifference while the corners of her lips quietly curved upward.

Cassian noticed the tiny expression at once the moment he approached, amusement surfacing unmistakably in his eyes.

Without warning, he reached down and smoothly pulled the book from her hands.

Elowen finally looked up at him, feigning annoyance. "I was reading that."

Cassian laughed softly before brushing his fingers gently along her cheek. "You can stop pretending now, my Ella."

Then he set the book aside, sat beside her on the chaise, and carefully lifted both her legs across his lap before beginning to massage them with slow, practiced pressure.

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