

# Awakening Love: Reborn to Be His Duchess Novel

## CHAPTER 1: CHAPTER 1

Chapter 1 The Year She Was Seventeen Again "If there is someone you care for, say it. I want to hear it from you." The King's voice echoed from the raised dais, measured and steady, carrying both authority and a rare gentleness. Each word was deliberate, sincere. Elowen Hale stood frozen. In that instant, she understood-she had returned. She had been reborn, back to the year she turned seventeen. Today was the palace banquet, ostensibly a family gathering. In truth, the King had summoned her for one purpose alone. With his own mouth, he intended to decide her marriage.

Elowen parted her lips, but the words caught in her throat. A surge of tangled emotions tightened her chest, her vision blurring with heat. "You need not be afraid." When she failed to answer, the King's voice softened further. "The Hale family has served the crown for generations. Your father, your brothers, your uncles-they all fell for Avenlor on the battlefield. Now, only you remain. I will personally see to your marriage. No matter whom you wish to wed, I will make it so." Even after living two lifetimes, the memory of Hale Manor still made Elowen's heart ache.

Avenlor had stood for less than a century. Its foundation was shallow, its enemies numerous, its future fragile. Last year, the horsemen of the Northern Reaches had shattered the border defenses. The Hale family had been ordered north to defend the realm. On the day they departed, her father, uncles, and elder brothers had been full of spirit, laughing and teasing her until she found them unbearable. When they returned, they came in coffins. Their bodies were wrapped in torn, blood-soaked cloaks. Silent. Still.

Her aunts and sisters-in-law scattered-some returned to their birth families, others remarried. Her mother, crushed by grief, fell ill and died at the start of the year. The once-lively Hale Manor was left with only Elowen. The King had named this banquet a "family gathering," but everyone knew the truth. He meant to marry her off. It was his way of honoring the fallen Hales. A light laugh broke the solemn air. "Why even ask, Father?" a girl said teasingly. "Everyone knows Elowen is hopelessly in love with Alaric.

She's never exactly been subtle." It's Princess Maerwyn Valebourne-the King's favored daughter. In her previous life, Maerwyn had said the exact same words. Back then, Elowen had flushed crimson and lowered her head in shy embarrassment at the mention of Alaric Valebourne, the Crown Prince. The King had laughed heartily and waved his hand. "Then it's settled. We'll choose an auspicious day, and you and Alaric shall be married." She had poured herself into that wedding. Every detail. Every preparation. She told herself that effort mattered-that if she tried hard enough, he might notice her.

Might care. But-on their wedding night, Alaric shut her out. He refused to touch her. Refused to let her near the bed. By morning, Elowen was still there, curled on the cold stone floor, fully dressed, staring into the dark. There was no intimacy. No heir. The King and Empress, once full of pity, gradually turned disappointed. The entire Crown Prince's Wing adjusted accordingly. Without favor, without a child, Elowen became invisible. Servants no longer bothered to hide their disdain. She endured it all in silence. Until one day, she overheard a conversation.

Alaric was speaking with one of his close companions-about her. Only then did she realize that everything she had suffered, he had known. He simply hadn't cared. Or worse-he had allowed it. His voice had been cold, sharp with contempt. "She forced me to marry her," he said, "and now she's getting what she deserves." His companion hesitated. "But Elowen is beautiful. She genuinely cares for you. Do you really feel nothing for her?" Alaric didn't pause. "She disgusts me." The world went cold. I forced you to marry me, did I? Is that really what you think? It had been your father's decision.

If you didn't want it, why hadn't you spoken up? Why punish me instead? In this farce, the King was praised as a benevolent ruler honoring a fallen hero's family. The Crown Prince earned favor. And Elowen-she alone paid the price. What had she done to deserve it? Grief clawed at her until she thought she might vomit, yet nothing came. Her eyes burned, but no tears fell. Numb, she went to Alaric. She stood before him and lowered herself into a deep, formal bow, asking for a dissolution of their marriage. Alaric, usually indifferent, snapped.

Without warning, he seized a cup and hurled it at her. Elowen did not move. The cup struck her temple. Blood streamed down her face. For a moment, Alaric seemed startled, as though he might rise. Instead, he clenched his jaw. "There's no need to act pitiful." He refused the annulment. For days, he ignored her completely. Later-without explanation-he agreed. On the eve of their separation, Elowen looked around the chambers and realized she felt nothing for them. There was nothing she wanted to take. In the mirror, she barely recognized herself. Married at seventeen.

Four years later, she was all sharp edges and hollow eyes-pale, exhausted, worn thin. At least she would be free. She fell asleep. And woke again at seventeen. Perhaps even the heavens had taken pity on her. "Oh?" the King said thoughtfully, turning back to the present. "She likes Alaric?" "Yes," Maerwyn said with a playful smile. "Elowen is completely smitten. "She's always bringing him pastries she bakes herself. Once she hurt her hand and kept insisting it didn't hurt at all-though I ended up eating most of them.

"And not long ago, when Alaric lost something important, he was in a foul mood. Elowen even came to ask me what symbol he preferred. She wanted to replace it for him herself." As Maerwyn spoke, Alaric's brows knit together. His discomfort was unmistakable. To him, all of this was nothing but an unwanted burden. Around the hall, guests began turning to look at Elowen. Some curious. Some amused. All eager for spectacle. Another girl might have felt humiliated. Elowen felt nothing. This was insignificant compared to what she had already lived through. The King laughed.

"So you like him that much? You grew up together-naturally, it must be mutual. In that case, I'll arrange the betrothal myself-" "Your Majesty." Elowen's voice cut through the hall. The King turned. "Hmm?" Her eyes were faintly red, but her voice was steady. This time, she didn't even look at Alaric. She stepped forward and bowed deeply, her posture formal and composed. "It is true that I grew up alongside His Highness," she said clearly. "But I have always held him in respect. I have never once harbored improper feelings toward him." Silence fell across the hall.

Elowen did not see it, but Alaric's brows drew even tighter. The King frowned slightly. "Are you certain?" Elowen knew he would not relent unless she named someone. She remained bowed and answered with solemn conviction. "I have long admired the Duke of Duskmoor. If I may become his wife, I would have no regrets in this life." admin