

## Awakening Love: Reborn to Be His Duchess Novel

Chapter 11 A Door That Should Not Be Opened After the examination, Halbrecht made a few adjustments to the prescription. Firemned Elowen had Mira walk him out. She stood watching as Bran bent over awkwardly but carefully, tucking the blanket around Cassian's body with great attention. After a moment of thought, Elowen asked, "Bran, how long have you been with the Duke?" Bran replied honestly, "My father served in the royal guard. Not long after I was born, I was brought into the palace. For as long as I can remember, I've always been at the Duke's side.

So it's been..." He counted on his fingers. "Twenty-seven or twenty-eight years, I suppose?"

Elowen's thoughts stirred. She turned her head. "Then you must know a great many things about him." "That's right." "Do you happen to know if he's ever had someone he loved?" Bran froze, his expression clearly conflicted. "Your Grace..." Elowen knew exactly why he trailed off. She smiled. "Truth is, I already heard long ago that the Duke had someone in his heart. I don't mind. If I did, I wouldn't have married into this household." Then she softened her voice.

"I'm not bringing this up to start a fight or demand answers. It's just that earlier, the royal physician said that emotional stimulation might help rouse the Duke. I recall hearing that he once had a woman he cherished above all others. Someone he never forgot. If we could find that lady and bring her here, perhaps the Duke would wake." She looked straight at Bran, her expression calm and composed. "So you can relax. Just tell me who she is. Everything I do is for the Duke's sake." Cassian lay on the bed.

His limbs were devoid of strength; his entire body was unable to move, and even his eyelids were heavy as stone. Only his thoughts remained perfectly clear, and his hearing was still sharp.

He heard every word Elowen said. And he heard Bran's realization, "Your Grace is absolutely right!" Cassian burned with silent frustration. So easily talked into it. Fool. Elowen asked patiently, "So, who is she?" Cassian hesitated. Then thought again-when Elowen spoke in such a soft, coaxing voice, even he found it hard to resist. Perhaps it wasn't entirely Bran's fault for caving in.

173 16:41 Tue, Mar 31 d Chapter 11 A Dear That Should Not Be Opened : Finisher Bran scratched his head, a bit distressed. "Well... I'm not exactly sure." Elowen clearly hadn't expected that. "You're not?" Bran admitted, "I really don't know if the Duke ever had someone like that. Over the years, many people tried to match him with someone, but he always refused. Said he already had someone in his heart. Rejected every proposal without a second thought. Later, even His Majesty came to ask who the woman was, and said he'd arrange the marriage personally. That would've been perfect.

But the Duke still turned it down. Eventually, His Majesty started to suspect-maybe there wasn't anyone at all. Maybe the Duke just didn't want to marry and used that as an excuse." "I see..." Elowen murmured, deep in thought. Cassian lay there, a bit surprised at himself-he hadn't realized he'd hidden it so well. Born into nobility, Cassian had never needed to hide his feelings from anyone. When he was pleased, no reward was too great to hand out. When he was displeased, people would be forced to bow and accept punishment.

He never needed to read others' moods, and certainly never worried about offending anyone. He'd never had to lie except about this. This was the only thing he had ever kept secret. Even those closest to him, even his brother the King, hadn't heard a whisper of it. "It doesn't matter," Elowen said, not looking the least bit discouraged. "Even if there isn't someone he loved, the

Duke must care about something else. We'll try, one thing at a time." "How do we try?" Bran asked curiously. Cassian was wondering the same thing. Elowen only smiled. "We'll try slowly, over time. It's late now.

Let's rest. Tomorrow, I still need to visit Lady Marwen." Bran gave a short nod and stepped back to take his leave. Cassian frowned. To him, there was no need at all for Elowen to go see Marwen. She was now the Duchess of Duskmoor. The only person she should ever have to lower her head for was the King himself. His thoughts paused, and then something else occurred to him. Elowen said she was going to rest-but where? He soon got his answer.

He heard the soft rustling of fabric, the sound of clothing brushing lightly against the floor as it  
16:41 Tue, Mar 31 d Chapter 11 A Door That Should Not Be Opened 1';, ) Fincher drew closer. Someone climbed into bed. A breeze of jasmine drifted past his nose, faint and clean. It was Elowen's scent. She lay down beside him, on the inside of the bed, just next to him. Cassian's breathing faltered, his chest rising and falling unevenly. He didn't know if it was from being unconscious too long, or if the fragrance at his side was too overwhelming-but he couldn't fall asleep.

Thoughts from the past surfaced, and with them, visions of the future. Suddenly, Cassian felt something drape lightly across his waist. The touch was soft and light, barely perceptible through the thin silk and blanket, carrying a faint coolness against her skin. It was Elowen's arm. She had rolled over in her sleep and draped her arm across him. Cassian's breath hitched. His entire body went stiff. There was no way he could sleep now. The next morning, Elowen rose and sat before her dressing table. "I'm going to see Lady Marwen today," she said to Mira.

"Arrange my hair properly." 1.5K 3 admin

Chapter 12 The Price of Trespass 125 Finished Mira nodded quickly, then lowered her voice.

"My lady, will you be talking about Lord Lucien?" "Of course." Elowen knew this side of the manor was heavily guarded. Without an official sigil token, no one could get in. And there was only one such sigil-held by Marwen. In other words, without Marwen's approval, Lucien wouldn't have been able to enter at all. Mira suddenly remembered something and pulled a yellow pendant from her sleeve. "My lady, this." Elowen turned her head. "What is it?" "Lord Lucien dropped this.

He fled in such a panic last night, I found it by the garden wall." Elowen took the pendant, her lips curving faintly. "Good." After getting dressed, Elowen brought Mira, Cora, and two older attendants with her to Rose Hall. Over there, Marwen had just gotten up and finished dressing. She was still yawning when a maid hurried in with quick steps to announce that the Duchess of Duskmoor had arrived. Marwen raised her brows. "Well, well. Looks like Lucien was more capable than I gave him credit for." Last night, she'd heard that Lucien had returned pale and shaken. She'd assumed he'd failed.

Turns out, the job had been done. She sneered. "Deliberately waiting until morning to come? Good. Let's see how I deal with her." Once she was washed and dressed, Marwen sat upright in the main hall, her expression icy, her eyes locked on the doorway. She was waiting for Elowen to walk in and say, "Aunt Marwen", and she would snap back, "So you still remember I'm your aunt?" Then she would scold her, "You didn't come pay your respects yesterday. Do you know how wrong that was?" Footsteps approached, growing louder. Marwen's heart picked up speed. Her palms grew damp with nervous sweat.

At last, a shadow passed through the doorway. 1/3 16:41 Tue, Mar 31 d Chapter 12 The Price of Trespass 3/() Finished The girl who entered wore a pale green gown, a light silvery shawl resting over her shoulders. Her hair fell loose down her back, her complexion clear and composed. She looked less like a living girl than a figure stepped out of a painted panel. Seventeen-year-old Elowen was at the height of her beauty. Before Marwen could even react, Elowen spoke, her voice cool and clear. "Lady Marwen, do you realize what you've done wrong?" Marwen's carefully rehearsed speech vanished.

Stunned by the unexpected question, she faltered. "You... you're questioning me? You're just a girl-and you dare speak to me like that?" Facing that youthful yet calm, detached expression, Marwen felt anger surge inside her. "Barely married into the family and already acting so high and mighty! Once you gain a foothold in Duskmoor Manor, I suppose you'll cast the entire Ashcroft family and me out!" Elowen didn't argue. She asked, "Last night, did you give Lucien Ashcroft your access sigil?" Marwen didn't think much of it and snorted. "So what if I did? I manage this estate.

I can give that sigil to whomever I please. What, trying to wrest control of the household on your second day here?" Elowen locked eyes with her. "So that means Lucien attempted to assassinate the Duke under your instruction?" Marwen thought she'd misheard. "Wh-what?" It took her a beat to react. Then she clenched her teeth in fury. "How dare you accuse me of such a thing! You want control, and now you're fabricating charges against me?" Elowen drew a yellow pendant from her sleeve and tossed it in front of her.

"Do you recognize this?" Marwen's maid bent down, picked it up, and placed it in her mistress's palm. Marwen glanced at it. "A pendant. Fine quality, yes." But she'd seen finer. This meant

nothing to her. "What now? Trying to bribe me after threats didn't work?" Elowen chuckled.

"Lady Marwen, the sun's been up for a while. Are you still half-asleep?" Hearing the mockery in her tone, Marwen's brow creased. "You-" "Take a closer look. This pendant belongs to Lucien," Elowen said coldly. Marwen paused. She examined the pendant again.

The more she looked at it, the more familiar 2/3 16:41 Tue, Mar 31 d.. Chapter 12 The Price of Trespass 35 Finished it seemed. She turned it over. On the back was carved a single character-Lucien's name. It was his pendant. A chill ran through Marwen's chest. "Why... why is this in your possession?" Elowen's voice remained calm. "Last night, Lucien used your sigil to enter the Duke's chambers. He intended to harm the Duke. Fortunately, I discovered him in time and stopped him. He fled in a panic and dropped this. My maid picked it up." A loud crash echoed in Marwen's mind.

No wonder Lucien had returned last night looking like a ghost... Now that the Duke was involved, her bravado collapsed. Her face turned pale. "No... That's impossible... Lucien wouldn't do that. He said he was going to see you-" Elowen ignored the last part and said crisply, "The guards witnessed him enter. Mira spoke to him herself. And this pendant-his pendant-is now in your hands. We have witnesses and evidence. The facts are clear. Lady Marwen, you have no room to deny it." 1.5K 4 admin

### Chapter 13: Blood on the Threshold

As Marwen stood, it felt as if she had been plunged into an icy lake. Even though the Duke of Duskmoor lay unconscious, he remained the full-blooded brother of the King, his rank and standing unquestionable. An attempt on his life constituted a capital offense. Marwen teetered on the edge of collapse, despair threatening to engulf her entirely. Elowen observed every shift in

Marwen's expression, paused briefly, and then continued, "Luckily, Lucien did not succeed in harming His Grace.

Out of respect for the Ashcroft family's past loyalty and because this was Lucien's first transgression, His Grace decided to show mercy. Nevertheless, Lucien is now forbidden from entering that courtyard, not even a single step." Marwen nodded slowly, then, a realization struck her, and she looked up. "You mentioned His Grace spared him, but isn't His Grace still unconscious?" Elowen answered calmly, "His Grace briefly regained consciousness last night. Physician Halbrecht was summoned to Duskmoor Manor overnight. Were you not informed?" Marwen froze.

She recalled Halbrecht's unexpected visit the previous night, finding it peculiar as it was not a routine examination. So, the Duke of Duskmoor had indeed awakened, even if only momentarily. "Aunt Marwen," Elowen's voice remained steady, "now that you have surrendered the entry token, henceforth, none may enter the courtyard without my consent. This matter concludes here." The news of Cassian stirring left Marwen feeling as if her soul had departed her body. She dared not voice any objection and obediently relinquished the token.

Elowen enclosed her fingers around it, releasing a quiet breath. With this, no one could intrude upon the courtyard again. She said no more and departed. Inside the chamber, Marwen slumped onto the couch, drained of all vigor. When she touched her face, cold sweat coated her forehead and cheeks, induced by fear. A mere seventeen-year-old girl yet burdened with such weight. For a fleeting moment, it seemed as if Cassian himself stood before her. A maid approached with a cup of warm drink.

"My lady, have this to steady yourself." Marwen accepted the cup and sipped. As the warmth spread within her, her mind gradually cleared, her countenance darkening. Today, the Hale girl had taken the entry token. Tomorrow, she might come for the household keys. If she lost control of Duskmoor Manor, the comfort and status enjoyed by her and her children would cease. No, she couldn't sit idly by and let that happen.

After addressing Lucien and Marwen, Elowen returned to her courtyard, engrossed in reviewing the account books. By nightfall, she finally concluded. Mira entered and remarked, "Your Grace, you shouldn't strain yourself like this daily. You'll harm your eyes." "It won't be a habit. I'm finished now," Elowen replied, stretching. "There are numerous discrepancies in the accounts. While the manor yields substantial monthly income, its expenses surpass it.

We are spending more than we earn, relying on dwindling reserves." Mira trimmed the candlewick, expressing surprise. "It mirrors Hale Manor." Elowen sighed softly. "Indeed."

Throughout the years, Avenlor had never been free of conflict. Where there was war, casualties followed. Some soldiers returned injured, others perished, leaving behind vulnerable dependents. Although stipends were provided, they often failed to reach those in need. Her family had always supplemented the funds from the manor to bridge the gap, much like Duskmoor Manor.

"If this persists, how long can the reserves last?" Mira murmured. "Surely you won't dip into your dowry?" Elowen remained silent, offering only a faint smile. Cassian, lying still on the bed, overheard every word. It puzzled him. There was more than enough wealth, ample for the manor to thrive for generations. When did things become so strained?

"By the way, Your Grace," Mira interjected, recalling, "tomorrow marks your return to your familial home." Traditionally, a newlywed woman refrained from visiting her birth family until

formal arrangements were made by both sides. "It's regrettable," Mira added. "With His Grace still incapacitated, he can't accompany you." Elowen's smile was gentle. "It's for the best."

Cassian hesitated. Was it truly for the best? If she had wed Alaric, would she hold the same belief? Because it was him, she deemed it preferable not to go. His mood soured inexplicably.

After a pause, Elowen continued, "Consider this. My father, brothers, and uncles are gone, and my mother passed long ago. Returning home usually entails the husband meeting the bride's parents. Yet, if I were to return now, I'd find only a silent estate and the family chapel awaiting me." Cassian tensed. Mira's features softened. "Your Grace..." Elowen sought to lighten the mood. She suddenly smiled, asking, "Mira, would you care for some Honey-Almond Tea Cakes?" Mira hesitated, her eyes brightening.

"Your Grace, are you planning to bake them yourself?"

Chapter 14 When the Duke Stirred Elowen nodded. Mira immediately forgot her sadness and swallowed reflexively. Fincher Elowen's second aunt had been the daughter of a renowned chef, and she had passed on all her skills. Elowen was clever and quick to learn, eventually surpassing her. Everything she made was exceptionally good. In the past, Elowen often made food for Alaric, experimenting with different recipes and methods. Mira always tasted them first, and every time she was delighted. But ever since the betrothal banquet, Elowen had rarely entered the kitchen.

for "Tomorrow, I'll return to Hale Manor on my own. I'll go to the chapel, say my prayers my father, my brothers, and my uncles, and leave bread and cakes at their resting place. I want them to know that I'm married now, and that I'm living well." Her voice was light and gentle, like a spring breeze brushing across water. Mira nodded obediently. Cassian listened, his emotions

tangled. The two of them went to the small kitchen and were gone for quite a while before returning. Mira was thoroughly satisfied, a smile lingering on her lips as she helped Elowen take down her hair.

"Your Grace, the cakes were incredible. If someone never tastes your baking in their lifetime, they've truly lived in vain." Elowen looked a little distracted and forced a smile. "Don't talk nonsense." "It's true," Mira insisted, then glanced at the mirror. "Your Grace, are you unhappy?" Elowen shook her head. "No. I'm just tired." It was already very late. Mira didn't question it further and hurried to help her wash and prepare for bed. Afterward, she withdrew respectfully and closed the door softly behind her. The room fell silent. Elowen sat alone at the dressing table for a while.

Only when an unseen bird chirped outside the window did she seem to snap back to herself. She stood and walked toward the bed. Cassian lay neatly on the bed, a thin blanket covering him. If he were awake, she would have felt embarrassed. But with his eyes closed, seemingly unaware, sharing the bed didn't make her 16:41 Tue, Mar 31 d Chapter 14 when the Duke Surrendered uncomfortable. As she climbed in, she lifted her right foot first, but not high enough. Her foot struck the bedframe, and she hissed softly. The mishap happened too suddenly.

She couldn't pull back in time, and her body tipped forward toward Cassian. Frisned She let out a small cry, instinctively reaching out to brace herself. There was no floor beneath her hand, only warmth. Firm, solid, with distinct muscle beneath her palm. Her face flushed bright red as she realized what she had touched. The weather had been hot, the bedding thin. It felt as if her hand had landed directly against his body. Meeting the sight of his lean, handsome face, Elowen finally came back to her senses.

As if burned, she quickly withdrew her hand and said in a hurried whisper, "I'm sorry." Cassian lay still, unresponsive. Elowen muttered helplessly, "I almost forgot. You can't hear me." She pulled her hand back, climbed onto the bed, and lay down beside him. But the sadness she had been holding back rose again. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't suppress it. As for Cassian, he was caught in quiet self-doubt. Compared to the night before, she was sleeping much farther away. Was he too thin now? Had she brushed against him and immediately recoiled in distaste?

Suddenly, he heard her sniff. Cassian paused. Elowen turned over, her back to him, and pulled the blanket over herself. Soft, broken sobs echoed in the quiet room. Cassian frowned. His fingers at his side twitched twice. Then everything fell still. The next day, Elowen rose early. Padding softly across the floor, she made her way to the mirror. Leaning in close, she carefully inspected her eyes-only when she was sure there was no visible redness or swelling did she finally let out a quiet breath of relief. Mira entered from outside, holding a fresh basin of water. "Oh!

You're up early, Your Grace." "Going home today," Elowen replied lightly, settling herself before the mirror. "I suppose I'm a 2.3 16:41 Tue, Mar 31 d.. Chapter 14 When the Duke Stirred little happy." Mira didn't press further. "Alright, we'll go with something more modest today." 製材 Finished Once her hair was done and her attire arranged, Elowen prepared to depart, Mira trailing behind her. Bran met them in the front courtyard and gave a small nod. "Your Grace, allow me to assign two of the house guard to escort you.

Both men served in the army-disciplined and trustworthy." Elowen paused, then gave a short nod. "Very well." When they arrived at Hale Manor, the carriage rolled slowly to a halt before

the gates. As Elowen stepped down, her gaze happened to fall on two small tufts of wild grass sprouting beside the worn stone threshold. Suddenly, a memory surfaced-clear and vivid. Years ago, when her father and brothers were still alive, the street outside had been packed with carriages late into the night. Guests came and went in endless succession.

The stone steps before the gate had once been worn smooth by the tread of a hundred boots. Now, it was all too quiet. A quiet ache stirred in her chest. "My lady..." The steward, Regan, stepped forward. At the sight of her, his weathered face lit up, voice trembling with emotion. "My lady, you've finally... finally come home." 1.5K a admin

Chapter 15 A Manor Divided : 51 Finished Ever since he suffered a throat injury years ago, Regan had spoken with difficulty. But Elowen was long accustomed to it and listened patiently before replying with a smile, "Today is the day I return to visit my family. His Grace remains unconscious, so it wasn't convenient for him to come with me." "Understand... understand..." Regan nodded slowly. "I'll head to the family chapel now, pay my respects to our ancestors." "Good... good..." "You can go about your work. No need to accompany me." Regan responded with a grunt of acknowledgment.

Then he seemed to remember something. "Also... the... the Duke's heir... is here too..." Elowen looked surprised. "Leonhart came?" "Yes... yes..." She smiled, her eyes curving as she took Mira along with her down the corridor. Behind them, Regan struggled to finish his sentence. "Also... His Highness... came... too..." But Elowen didn't hear that part. On the path to the chapel, Mira said with a cheerful grin, "I remember His Lordship always liked the things you made, my lady." "He did," Elowen replied, "and I brought some honey-almond tea cakes today.

"I'll share a few with him." She felt a little puzzled. Why would Leonhart be visiting the chapel at the manor today? As they spoke, they arrived. The lighting inside wasn't great. Elowen could make out two vague figures near the altar. One was clearly Leonhart, and the other was likely his attendant. With a soft laugh, she stepped inside. "Leonhart, sometimes I suspect you have the gift of foresight. How else would you know I made tea cakes today just for my return?" Leonhart turned at the sound of her voice.

"Elow-" He caught himself and corrected, "My lady." "So well-behaved," she said, her smile deepening as she looked over at him. She was about to speak again when she caught a glimpse of the man standing beside him. The 16:41 Tue, Mar 31 d... Chapter 15 A Manor Divided words caught in her throat. Finished Most of Alaric's frame was cloaked in shadow, but even in the dim light, his face remained striking-sharply handsome. Elowen frowned slightly and instinctively took a small step back, then quickly composed herself with a faint smile. Not a warm one. Just courteous, distant.

Alaric felt a wave of irritation rise within him. "Your Highness is here too." Elowen said, her tone flat, nothing like the warmth she had shown to Leonhart just moments ago, as if Alaric were no more than a stranger. He didn't understand. What was she playing at? Was this another ploy to attract his attention? "Oh, right." Elowen turned to Mira and took the food box from her hands, opened it, and offered it to Leonhart. "Want one?" Leonhart's eyes nearly welled with tears.

Earlier that morning, he'd still been curled up under his blankets, sound asleep, when Alaric barged in and dragged him off to the family crypt to pay respects to the ancestors. He had trained under Elowen's father briefly in his youth, so there was no real excuse to refuse. He had wanted to eat first, but Alaric shoved him into the carriage before he could even dress properly. Now he

was starving. Faced with Elowen's bright smile, he didn't hesitate and eagerly reached for a cake. "These are for the memorial, aren't they?" Alaric's voice cut through the air like a blade.

Leonhart froze mid-reach. So... he wasn't supposed to eat them? "It's fine. I made extra," Elowen said with a kind smile. "Take some. They're for sharing." Leonhart breathed a sigh of relief, finally free of guilt, and picked up a piece. He took a bite. The soft, subtly sweet flavor melted over his tongue. His eyes fluttered shut for a second in bliss before he stuffed the whole thing in his mouth. Alaric watched, throat bobbing. He was... hungry. Leonhart chewed contentedly, then turned to Alaric. "You should have one too. Hers are the best." Alaric scoffed inwardly.

No one knew Elowen's cooking better than he did. 16:41 Tue, Mar 31 d Chapter 15 A Manor Divided 35 Finished She used to send all her pastries and cakes straight to the Crown Prince's Wing. And every time, he had them thrown out or given away. But today, Alaric thought, if Elowen were to offer him one personally... he might actually take a bite. To his surprise, once Leonhart had taken his share, Elowen closed the box and set it aside. "All right. Time for the offerings." She didn't even glance in Alaric's direction. He let out a cold laugh and turned on his heel.

Leonhart quickly followed, carefully guarding the rest of the cakes. Elowen ignored them for now. She stepped up to the family shrine, carefully laying out each plate of sweetbread on the long wooden table. Then she lit the taper, touched her fingers to her forehead and chest, and bowed before the carved memorial stones with quiet reverence. "Father, Brother, all my uncles and ancestors, I am now married into Duskmoor and hold the title of Duchess. Though His Grace remains unconscious, everyone at the manor has treated me with great respect and kindness. I've been...

well cared for..." Her voice caught. A lump formed in her throat, and tears threatened to fall. She always acted carefree, even foolish at times. But truthfully, she missed them deeply. The pain of their absence was something she carried every day. Eventually, Elowen came to understand a few things, like why she had clung to Alaric the way she had. 1.5K 1 3/3 admin

Chapter 16 Keys, Ledgers, and Power Finished Perhaps she had truly liked him once. Or maybe... he had been her only way to escape the grief. Elowen swallowed the sob that tried to rise. Her voice grew quieter. "Now, I'm only waiting for His Grace to wake. No matter how long it takes, I'll wait." She set the candle back into its holder, then lowered herself to her knees and bent forward, bowing so deeply that her forehead struck the cold stone floor with a dull, muffled sound. When she finally stepped outside, she was surprised to find that Alaric and Leonhart were still there. Which meant...

they must have heard everything she just said inside. "Would you like to join us at the House of Hundred Flavors?" Leonhart asked eagerly. "We are going there for breakfast. It's been ages since the three of us shared a meal." Elowen shook her head without hesitation. "No. I'm returning to the manor." Leonhart tried again. "Come on. Back then, the three of us would often eat there. It was always such fun..." "It's different now," Elowen said. "We were young then, unmarried. We could do as we pleased.

That's no longer the case." Leonhart opened his mouth to argue again, but Alaric interrupted him. "Maerwyn's birthday celebration is in a few days," he said abruptly. "You'll attend, won't you?" He emphasized that last part, speaking slowly and deliberately. Elowen remembered that gathering. In her previous life, she and Alaric had just gotten engaged. Naturally, she attended the princess's birthday banquet. Even though she knew Maerwyn didn't like her, Elowen had

carefully prepared a gift. After all, she was going to be her sister-in-law. But something unexpected had happened that day.

Her relationship with Alaric grew worse, and she became the laughingstock of all Vanelle. "You don't need to be nervous," Alaric said, eyes fixed on her. "It's only a small event. Just family, really. My mother has invited a few noble daughters from the capital, nothing more." He made sure to stress that last part. The implication was obvious. The birthday banquet would double as a matchmaking event-his mother's effort to choose him a bride. Why say that to her? Did he think she'd be upset? 173 16:41 Tue, Mar 31 d. ... Chapter 16 Keys. Ledgers, and Power 39 Finished Elowen smiled faintly.

"You're of age, and it's only right that you marry soon. If you happen to find someone you like at your sister's celebration, have your mother arrange it. I'll be sure to prepare a generous gift for your wedding." Alaric's jaw clenched. Ever since the banquet-ever since she volunteered to marry Cassian-he hadn't known peace of mind. He used to hate it when she chased after him. But now that she didn't, he felt even more irritable. To make sense of it, he'd found a reason to come here today. He wanted to see her. And this... this was how she spoke to him?

That calm, patronizing tone was like a proper noble lady lecturing a junior. It grated on his nerves. Elowen turned and walked away. Leonhart watched her go, then muttered under his breath, "She really has turned into an elder. The way she talks... just like my grandmother back home." Alaric let out a cold laugh. "Elowen? Don't call her that. She's your elder now, remember? You should say 'my lady.'" Leonhart blinked. Alaric's tone was so bitter, so sharp. He glanced at him and asked, "Are you... upset?" "Why would I be upset?" Alaric snapped. "I'm thrilled.

Just wait till I pick a bride-someone beautiful, with a good temperament. Once she becomes Crown Princess, I'll be overjoyed!" Leonhart wanted to say something more, but held back. A worried look flickered in his eyes. If only that's true... Elowen returned to Duskmoor Manor. As soon as she stepped down from the carriage, Gerda hurried to meet her. "My lady, thank heavens you're back." Elowen tensed. "What happened? Is it His Grace?" "No, no," Gerda said quickly, trying to ease her concern. "His Grace is fine." She lowered her voice. "It's Vivian. The eldest daughter of Lady Marwen.

She's here again." Elowen paused. "Vivian Ashcroft?" Gerda nodded solemnly. "That's the one. She's a year younger than His Grace, and she has 2/3 16:41 Tue, Mar 31 d Chaplet in keys, Ledgers, and Power 35 Finished always harbored deep feelings for him. When her father was alive, she had tried more than once to marry into this household. But General Ashcroft disapproved and planned instead to marry her off to one of his officers. Lady Vivian threw such a fit the match was eventually canceled. Later on, she married the third son of an earl, as his lawful wife." Elowen nodded.

"The Earl's family? That's a decent match." Gerda leaned in and lowered her voice. "So it would seem. But... the third son is frail. Weak in... certain marital matters. Lady Vivian wasn't pleased. She's taken up a few men on the side." ◦ admin

Chapter 17 Feeding the Rumor Finished Elowen paused. She asked instinctively, "Did she have someone beat up his husband to vent her anger?" That caught Gerda off guard. In Avenlor, before a noblewoman was married, her family would usually make arrangements to teach her the matters of the marital chamber-how to behave with her husband, and how to bear children. But

Elowen's case was... different. When her parents were still alive, she was far too young. By the time she reached marrying age, there was no one left to oversee those things.

In her previous life, she had married Alaric, but they had never once shared a bed. She died without even knowing what such intimacy meant. There were many things she simply didn't understand. Gerda chose her words carefully. "She didn't lay a finger on her husband. Instead, she's been spending time with men outside, often sneaking out to meet them-or worse, sneaking them into the house to, well... romp in bed when her husband isn't home." Elowen's face flushed crimson at the phrasing. Now she understood what those words really meant.

Gerda went on, "After General fell in battle, the young lady began visiting Duskmoor Manor quite frequently. At that time, the Duke was in good health. She would often bring him stews or nourishing broths-clearly hoping to rekindle their old relationship." Elowen blinked, startled again. "There was even one time," Gerda said, lowering her voice, "she stripped down and climbed into the Duke's bed, offering herself to him outright. He flew into a rage and banned her from ever returning. Only after the Duke fell unconscious did she dare show up again.

And ever since His Majesty issued the royal engagement between you and the Duke, she's been coming by more and more frequently. She even showed up today. With the Duke unconscious like this..." Gerda didn't finish her sentence, but her concern was obvious. If Vivian tried her stunt again-stripping down and crawling into the Duke's bed-he wouldn't even be able to say no this time. 1/3 16:41 Tue, Mar 31 d Chapter 1: Feeding the Rumor f nigned Elowen, however, was unfazed. "No worries. I already took the entry medallion from Lady Marwen. She can't get into the manor wing anymore.

Come on, let's head back. I'm sure the Duke is just fine." At the Rose Hall, Vivian lounged lazily across the couch, her waist curved just enough to accentuate her seductive posture. All ten of her fingers were lacquered with deep crimson gloss, and she was peeling grapes at a leisurely pace. Marwen sat nearby, glancing from the door to her daughter, clearly growing irritated. "You mean to tell me the Earl family can't even afford grapes anymore? Had to run back here to mooch off mine?" Vivian didn't even look up. "Mother, you're fuming because the new Duchess embarrassed you.

Don't take it out on me. I didn't wrong you. You're the one who dragged me here on short notice to fight your battles. If you chase me off, who else do you have?" Marwen flared at the mention of "the Duchess." "Don't even say her name! She's just a girl, barely grown! Only relying on a royal decree, yet dares to threaten me like that-" Last night, she had summoned Lucien and questioned him. Why did he try to assassinate the Duke? Lucien had panicked and confessed everything. That little witch Elowen had tricked her! Lucien wasn't trying to kill anyone.

He'd merely taken a liking to Elowen and had sneaked into her room, hoping to take advantage of her. Nothing but a minor incident, and yet Elowen had blown it wildly out of proportion. She'd accused Lucien of attempted regicide, no less! Then, they used it as an excuse to confiscate Marwen's access medal. Marwen was furious. She gave Vivian a sharp push. "Enough grapes! Half the money you use to keep your men fed comes from me! If that little witch truly takes control of Duskmoor Manor, where will you get your money then?" Vivian's eyes flickered slightly.

She chewed the grape in her mouth, swallowed, then dabbed her lips with a silk cloth. "Relax, Mother. Everything's already in place." Marwen blinked. "In place?" Vivian's smile turned

wicked. "I've lived like a widow for years. I know how lonely the nights can be." 2/8 16:42 Tue, Mar 31 d. Chapter 17 Feeding the Rumor 「",」 Frushed You think I don't know what Elowen wants? Today, I came prepared-with my trump card. She won't see it coming. Just sit back and enjoy the show." Halfway through the path, Elowen heard a sudden shout. "You little thief! You dared steal from Lord Lucien?"

"I'll beat you to death!" Then came the unmistakable thuds of fists hitting flesh. Elowen followed the voice, stepped through the moon gate, and saw a burly servant kicking a young boy curled up on the ground. The boy had his arms wrapped around his head, shielding himself. Not a single cry of pain escaped him. Elowen frowned. Gerda raised her voice, sharp and clear. "Enough!" The servant immediately stopped and bowed toward Elowen. "Your Grace." "What's going on here?" Elowen asked. "This brat," the servant said, pointing at the boy, "dared to steal from Lord Lucien.

"I caught him red-handed." "You caught him. Why not just return the item? Why the beating?" Elowen asked. The boy suddenly chuckled. His voice was rough, and he laughed as he pushed himself slowly upright. 1.5K 1 3/3 16:42 Tue, Mar 31 ... admin

Chapter 18 A Slap Heard Across the Hall Seeing the boy's face clearly, Elowen couldn't help but pause. Finished His checks were streaked with dirt and dried blood, making him look pitiful and wild. But his eyes-those striking, bright eyes-held a gleam so sharp it made her breath catch. The tilt of his eyelids, the slight upward curve at the corners... he looked startlingly like Alaric. Had she glimpsed him at night, she might have mistaken him for the Crown Prince himself.

But unlike Alaric's distant, cold arrogance, this boy had an eerie softness to him, the kind of beauty you'd find in a venomous snake hidden in shadows. Beautiful in a dangerous, glittering

way. "You're still smiling?" the servant growled. He kicked the boy again, then turned to Elowen. "Your Grace, he broke Lord Lucien's writing brush and can't pay for it. I was just-well-disciplining him. But don't worry, I'll get him out of your sight right away." He moved to grab the boy. The boy raised his head and looked at Elowen, those eyes rimmed with a soft pink flush. "Hold on." Elowen said.

The servant paused, confused. "If he broke the brush and can't pay, beating him won't get the money back," Elowen said calmly. "And you'll only tire yourself out for nothing. Seems like a bad deal." The boy chuckled again. His lashes lowered slightly, and the corner of his mouth curled. He lifted his gaze to her again, pupils glinting like onyx under sunlight. In that case," he said softly, "why doesn't the Lady take me in?" His voice dropped, husky and smooth.

"I'm good at everything." The words lingered, slow and deliberate, carrying a quiet promise of trouble-like a predator testing the air, already certain of its hold on her. Gerda's instincts flared in alarm. She had served in the royal court long enough to smell trouble before it arrived.

Everything about this scene screamed setup. The sudden beating, the strange boy, the perfect timing-this wasn't an accident. Someone had orchestrated this so that Elowen would stumble upon it And then there was the boy's face.

That resemblance to the Crown Prince wasn't something you 173 16:42 Tue, Mar 31 d ple 16 & Gbp Heard Acrome the Han could fake. F: Gerda stole a glance at Elowen, wondering-what would the young Duchess do? The boy tilted his head, voice like honey and smoke. "So? Take me in. I'll make sure you're... very well taken care of." Elowen frowned in confusion. "You taking care of me doesn't get the brush paid for. I still wouldn't have the money." The boy

faltered. D She turned to the servant. "Let's be honest-beating him is pointless. Instead, take him to the stables in the back.

He can work off the debt by feeding horses. Pay him the standard wage for stablehands. Once he's earned enough to cover the brush, he can leave." The servant blinked, caught completely off guard. The boy looked equally stunned. "Stables... Elowen narrowed her eyes at him. "Didn't you just say you could do anything? Then go take care of the horses. Make sure they're... very comfortable." The boy opened his mouth, but no sound came out. That... wasn't what he meant by "serving." "Your Grace..." the servant tried to interject, panicking now. This wasn't what he'd been told to do.

His orders were to get this pretty, brazen boy into Elowen's bed, not the stables. "What is it?" Elowen asked. Before he could fumble for words, she added helpfully, "I get it. You're worried he might run off. No problem-I've got two guards with me, both former soldiers. Very reliable. I'll assign one to go with you. He'll make sure the boy does his job." The servant's smile twitched, nearly collapsed. She wasn't joking. She waved over one of her guards-a hulking man who stood like a wall and had a stare sharp enough to skin a man alive. The servant recognized him immediately.

He'd once heard this man had snapped an assassin's neck clean in one motion. Forget the boy. He himself might not come back from the stables in one piece. As for Elowen-mission complete, she walked away lighthearted and unconcerned. Gerda watched her go, lips twitching with suppressed laughter. Sometimes, being sweet and naïve was its own kind of weapon. 2/3 16:42

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Manor, Bran had just finished administering the Duke's medicine. He lit up when he saw Elowen. "Your Grace!

That bamboo strip trick you taught us-it works like a charm! I've never had such an easy time giving His Grace his tonic!" Elowen smiled. "I'm glad to hear that." She asked, "Everything went smoothly while I was out?" "All good. Nothing unusual." Elowen turned to Gerda with a "see, I told you" expression. Gerda smiled, shaking her head. The rest of the afternoon passed peacefully. Elowen immersed herself in reviewing the manor accounts. It was tiring work, but surprisingly satisfying. By the time she finally finished, the sky had turned dark.

After washing up, she lay down in bed-but couldn't fall asleep. Beside her, Cassian stirred faintly, picking up on her restless movements. That jasmine scent clung to her skin, light and lovely, sometimes sharp, sometimes mellow. It tickled his nose. Elowen tossed again and finally gave up, turning to face him. She whispered, "I can't hold it in anymore... just a little bit."

Cassian stilled. What was she about to do? Then, she sighed in frustration. "My lord... I'm the kind of person who talks a lot. If I don't say something soon, I'm going to explode." 1.5K C admin

Chapter 19 Whispered Secrets Cassian was speechless. Ah. She's speaking. 0:0 So she was just talking. He had thought it was something else. "Right," Elowen suddenly said, brightening with an idea. 35 29 Finished She lay sprawled on the bed, her hands propping up her chin on the pillow, lifting her upper body slightly. "My lord, I'm going to talk to you now. Since you're unconscious and all." She figured he couldn't hear a word she said. And having convinced herself of that, she went right on. Her legs kicked up behind her, ankles crossed and swaying lazily in the air.

Her whole posture was cheerful and relaxed. "I went through all the account books today," she began. "Sorted the finances for the past year, and even tallied up the wedding expenses from this month. Next, I'm planning to do a full inventory of the staff-every page, maid, guard... even the horses. Nothing gets overlooked." Cassian raised a brow. Her parents had clearly trained her well. "I also ran into this boy earlier today," she continued. "He has eyes like His Highness's. Said he stole one of Lucien's writing brushes and broke it, so some servants tried to beat him to death.

But he said he wants to work for me, claimed he could serve me... 'comfortably,' was how he put it." Cassian was stunned. "But Mira, Bran, and Cora already take care of me just fine," Elowen said matter-of-factly. "They're more than enough." Cassian fell silent. ...So maybe her parents hadn't trained her that well after all. "I didn't let them beat him to death," Elowen admitted. "Had him sent to the stables instead. I guess... I did feel a little bad for him." Cassian's chest tightened slightly.

So that so-called 'sympathy' of hers was all because the boy looked like Alaric, that's what moved her heart. But Elowen grinned mischievously. "Mostly, I just wanted to see what Alaric would look like feeding horses." Cassian raised an eyebrow. 144 16:42 Tue, Mar 31 d Chapter 10 Whispered Secrets 0:0 35 Finished "Elowen murmured, "He's always so arrogant, looking down on everyone, throwing tantrums like a spoiled brat. Thinking about it now, he's actually pretty annoying..." As she went on, her voice grew softer and softer. And eventually, it faded altogether. She had fallen asleep.

The Duke's Manor had been peaceful for a few days. But over at Rose Hall, tension was building. Marwen was growing impatient. "I thought you said everything was arranged," she

snapped. "You guaranteed it would work! It's been two days, and not a single thing has happened!" Vivian, however, remained calm. "Don't worry, Mother. She's still infatuated with His Highness. She always wanted to marry him. But she couldn't. She wasn't good enough. So she was forced to accept the King's decree and marry our cousin instead.

Now, if she sees someone who looks like His Highness, how could she possibly resist?" Marwen glared. "If that's true, then where's the proof? No word, no messengers, nothing!" Vivian pressed her lips together. Truth be told, she was starting to feel a little uneasy herself. "She's young," she said. "And this is her first time. She's probably being cautious. Maybe she's even detained our spies..." "What do we do, then?" Marwen was nearly trembling with frustration. "We've been waiting for this moment to catch her red-handed!" Just then, the sound of hurried footsteps echoed from outside.

A maid rushed in, face flushed with excitement and nerves. "My lady! That boy from the other courtyard-he finally left the house. He's heading for the stables!" Marwen blinked. "The stables?" "The stables!" she repeated. Vivian chuckled. A sly smile tugged at her lips. "That little girl's more cautious than I thought," she murmured. "Hiding him in the stables and sneaking off in the evening for a secret meeting..." The sky outside was already dark. If the two of them ducked behind some hay or snuck behind

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Chapter 19 Whispered Secrets the stable wall, no one would notice for quite some time. 125  
Finished Marwen's face flushed with excitement. "Then what are we waiting for? Let's go catch them in the act!" But Vivian caught her by the wrist. "Not yet." Marwen turned, exasperated. "How can we wait? This is the best chance we've had!" "If you go now," Vivian said smoothly,

"they might not have even taken off their clothes yet. Wait just a little longer. Half an hour at most. Catch them in the middle of it, and they won't be able to run or hide.

Everyone will see them for what they are." Marwen's face lit up with glee at the image. Elowen had brought only Mira with her to the stables tonight. She was there to do a headcount of both staff and horses. But a problem quickly emerged. The number of horses didn't match the records. A group of stablehands gathered, trying to figure out if a horse had been lent out or if someone had miscounted. After much discussion, the truth came out. The horse hadn't been lent. It hadn't been miscounted. It was dead. It had died just today. Fed to death-by that boy.

As Elowen approached, she could hear the shouting from a distance. "...What exactly is that thing on your shoulders? You call that a head? What's inside it-manure? Out of respect for the Duchess, I didn't give you hard labor. All you had to do was feed the horses. A little hay, a little water. That's it! But you-you lazy bastard-complain all day about being tired, and now you've gone and killed one of the horses!" Elowen followed the shouting and soon saw a tall man berating the same boy she'd seen a few days ago. The boy really did look like Alaric.

Now, dressed in coarse stable clothes, he was being cursed out with finger pointed right at his nose-and it was honestly delightful to watch. Elowen took her time, lingering to enjoy the scene before finally stepping forward. The boy spotted her and lit up immediately. "Your Grace," he said. His voice was soft and rich, drawn out like a lover whispering sweet nothings. 16:42 Tue, Mar 31 d. Chapter 19 Whispered Secrets 1.5K : admin

Chapter 20 Elowen, Come Here Elowen shivered. Goosebumps prickled down her arms at the way he said it. She rubbed at her sleeves and gestured toward him. "Come with me." Finished The boy turned back to the stablehand and shot him a smug, taunting grin. The man muttered

under his breath. "Bloody pretty-face." Elowen turned to leave. The boy followed close behind. Mira started to step forward as well, but Elowen held out a hand to stop her. "Wait here," she said softly. Mira didn't understand the reason, but she had grown up under Elowen's care and never questioned her decisions.

She simply nodded and stayed put. Elowen led the boy toward the western side gate. A lantern hung near the archway, its dim light casting a warm, flickering glow. A small flight of stone steps led down from the gate. Elowen was just about to descend. Suddenly, the boy stepped up behind her, a little too close. His voice dropped low, soft and honeyed. "These past nights, I've waited for Your Grace in the stables," he murmured. "And tonight... you came. Just for me. You won't leave now, will you?" He was far too near. Elowen instantly recoiled, a frown creasing her brow as she took a step away.

But the boy kept whispering, "I don't need a title. I don't want status. All I want is to stay by your side. I can do so much..." "Oh, you mean like killing a horse?" Elowen cut in sharply. The boy froze. "W-what?" "You were working off a debt for a single writing quill," she said coldly. "Feeding the horses for a few days would've paid that off. But now, you've gone and killed one of the finest warhorses in the manor. That horse was bred from the Northern Plains, one of the best we've ever brought in.

Worth more than you, frankly." She folded her arms across her chest, anger simmering beneath her calm tone. "If I hadn't been doing a full count of the horses today, no one would've even known it had died." 1/ 16:42 Tue, Mar 31 d.. Chapter 20 Clowen Come Here Elowen had grown up in the Hale military estate. She understood exactly how precious a trained warhorse was. 85

Finished And more importantly-if not for this mess, she would've been in bed already. Not out here, still chasing down problems. The boy looked stunned. "I...

I didn't..." "I should never have put you in the stables," she said bluntly. "I thought, well, you're grown, and feeding horses doesn't take much brainpower. But who knew you'd manage to kill one. And you have the nerve to say you're 'good at many things?'" Her disdain was obvious in her tone. The boy's face flushed red with shame. "I... I wasn't talking about feeding horses..."

"Oh, I know what you meant," Elowen snapped. "You meant sex. The things that happen in bed between a man and a woman." She didn't understand it at first, no. But she had questions. And she wasn't afraid to ask.

She had consulted Gerda over the past few days. She wasn't the same innocent, clueless girl she had been. The boy bit his lower lip. Then, slowly, he walked down the stone steps, stopping in front of her. He stepped into the path of her light and knelt, eyes tilted upward as he looked at her. "You only say that," he said softly, "because you haven't experienced it yet. But you came for me tonight. You brought me out here, just the two of us. Was it really only to scold me?" He didn't look away.

The lantern cast soft shadows along the line of his jaw and down the length of his throat, his posture relaxed, almost graceful. He tried to move closer. His voice dropped lower. "You came out here for a reason, didn't you?" "Your Grace," he breathed, "just for tonight... let me serve you." His hands reached for her ankles. And just as Elowen drew back her foot, ready to kick him away... A voice cracked through the dark. "You filthy harlot! Meeting a stable boy in the dead of night?!" Elowen's head snapped up.

Marwen had arrived, flanked by a dozen maids and guards, striding down the path like a battle  
214 16:42 Tue, Mar 31 d Chapter 20 Elowen, Come Here charge. 0: Elowen's voice rang out,  
calm as ever. "Aunt Marwen. What brings you here?" 35 Finished "As if you don't know!"

Marwen practically spat the words. "You're here, late at night, sneaking off to meet your lowborn  
lover? After barely a few days of marriage? While your husband lies unconscious?" Her finger  
jabbed toward the boy. "And what?"

Still pretending you're innocent?!" The boy immediately played along, shrinking back behind  
Elowen, voice trembling. "Your Grace..." The sight only fueled Marwen's fury. "Caught red-  
handed! There's no denying it now!" She turned to the servants. "What are you all standing  
around for?! Bind this whore and drag her out of the manor! In a few days, she's to be cast out in  
shame!" "Wait," came a sharp voice from behind. It was Bran. Marwen turned, scoffing. "Bran,  
don't let yourself be fooled by this woman!

She's nothing but-" "Is she?" Another voice spoke, quiet and raspy, but steeped in undeniable  
authority. Every face on the path blanched in an instant. Marwen's eyes went wide. She turned  
slowly, lips parting, breath catching in her throat. Wheels creaked over the cobblestones. Elowen  
turned too. Cassian sat in his chair, his face pale, striking, and impossibly composed. Bran was  
behind him, pushing the chair slowly forward. Elowen's heart skipped. He was awake again?  
But... why was he here? Did he hear everything? She couldn't help but feel a pang of dread,  
wondering how much he'd overheard.

The chair came to a halt-close enough to see, but not so near as to give anything away. "Perfect  
timing, Your Grace," Marwen said quickly, her voice regaining strength. "Just look at the kind of

woman you married! Not even a week into her vows, and she's sneaking off in the middle of the night to lie with a stable boy!" admin