

Awakening Love: Reborn to Be His Duchess Novel

Chapter 2

Playing Hard to Get? The grand hall erupted in an instant. "What? The Duke of Duskmoor?" "She really said she wants to marry him?" "Why would she give up the Crown Prince for the Duke?" "Does she even realize he's in no condition to marry anyone at all?" The whispers surged like a rising tide, rippling across the hall from every direction. Elowen heard them clearly, yet her expression never wavered. The King sighed, trying to soften the moment. "That would be a difficult match for you," he said gently.

"Perhaps I should choose someone else for you from among the noble houses." Elowen did not retreat. "Your Majesty," she said firmly, "I am deeply grateful for your compassion. But I have already made a vow before the Holy Mother. In this lifetime, I will marry no one but the Duke of Duskmoor. I humbly ask for your blessing." She bent low, lowering herself until her forehead touched the cold marble floor. The sound of the impact was soft-but resolute. Cassian Valebourne, Duke of Duskmoor. The King's full brother. Ninth among their generation.

In the years when the King had still been a prince fighting for the throne, it was Cassian who had stood unwaveringly at his side. Again and again, he had dragged the King back from the edge of death. His loyalty and strength had been instrumental in securing the crown. Afterward, Cassian led campaigns to the east and north-crushing rebellions, expanding the kingdom's borders, and earning unmatched renown on the battlefield. Until one year ago. While stationed in the Northern Reaches, Cassian collapsed during a campaign. He was carried back to Duskmoor Manor-and never woke again.

Royal physicians came and went. None could offer certainty. Some whispered that he might never awaken at all. Elowen knew all of this. And she knew something else. In her previous life, during the third year of her marriage, Cassian had awakened. That year had been one of the darkest periods she had ever endured. She remained childless. The Queen arranged for Alaric to take a consort. Compared to Elowen, the consort was cherished-by Alaric, by the palace staff, by the entire Crown Prince's Wing.

When Cassian finally awoke, Alaric brought both Elowen and the consort to visit him at Duskmoor Manor. On the return journey, the consort deliberately departed early in the carriage, leaving Elowen behind. Elowen didn't know the way back. She lingered, hoping someone might offer to take her along-but everyone knew the Crown Prince had no affection for her. No one wanted to risk offending him. Just as despair began to close in, a weak but steady voice sounded from behind her. "There's a carriage ready. Come." She turned around, stunned.

Cassian sat in a wheelchair, draped in a dark, loose robe. His sharp features were pale and gaunt, his body visibly diminished. And yet, when he saw her face, he offered a faint, gentle smile. "Would you care to stay for supper at Duskmoor Manor?" he asked. "No, I..." Elowen tried to say no, but the moment her lips parted, tears spilled down her cheeks-hot, uncontrollable. She didn't understand it. Why was she treated like this? What had she done wrong? Her only sin was that she no longer had anyone left to protect her. Her family had died serving the realm-yet she was the one cast aside.

All the pain she had buried so deeply finally broke free in Cassian's presence. He sighed softly, then drew a handkerchief from his pocket and offered it to her. She cried for a long time. And he stayed beside her the entire time. After that day, Elowen never saw Cassian again. But she remembered that moment for a very long time. Back in the present, the King frowned, deep in thought. He said nothing. It was the Queen who spoke at last, her voice calm and gentle.

"If she is truly determined to marry Cassian," she said, "then perhaps we should honor her sincerity." The King looked at her, then back at Elowen, still bowing before him. Finally, he gave a reluctant nod. "Very well." He rubbed his temple, weary. "You have no family left, and Cassian remains unwell. The palace will oversee all arrangements." Elowen bowed again. "Thank you, Your Majesty." She had no intention of repeating the same mistake-of marrying Alaric once more. Cassian was her best option. For one thing, he was still unconscious.

That alone gave her time-time to plan her future on her own terms. And in her previous life, though Cassian eventually recovered consciousness, poor care had left him permanently paralyzed. He spent the rest of his life in a wheelchair. He had once shown her kindness when no one else would. The least she could do was care for him while he was vulnerable-help him heal, perhaps even help him walk again. And when he did wake, she would ask him for a divorce. He likely wouldn't want to marry her anyway.

Before her father and brothers died-back when Cassian was still healthy-Elowen had heard rumors that he had once loved someone. No one knew who that woman

was. Across the banquet hall, Alaric sat rigid at his table, his gaze fixed on Elowen as she bowed and petitioned to marry his uncle. An inexplicable irritation gnawed at him. "She wants to marry Cassian?" Maerwyn muttered under her breath. "Elowen really is the dumbest girl alive." Alaric's brow tightened. Maerwyn leaned closer, her eyes gleaming.

"Alaric, I'll bet anything she'll regret this in less than a week." He gave a cold, humorless smile. "That has nothing to do with me." ... After the banquet, Elowen returned to Hale Manor. She walked through the familiar garden, into her long-abandoned chamber, and collapsed onto the bed. For the first time in years, she no longer had to face life with Alaric. She was finally home. The thought brought her peace. She slept deeply, night after night, slowly regaining her strength. Several days later, Hilda-one of the Queen's longtime attendants-arrived at Hale Manor.

She greeted Elowen with a warm smile. "His Majesty has entrusted your wedding arrangements to Her Majesty," Hilda said. "The Queen has been preparing everything herself. Today, she'd like to choose an auspicious date-and she hopes you'll come to the palace to help." Elowen hesitated. "I'm not very good with such matters. Her Majesty may choose any date she finds suitable. I don't mind." Hilda laughed softly. "Even common families consult the bride's side after the groom's family chooses a date. You should come, my lady.

The Queen said she hadn't seen you for a long time and would like a private word." A private word? Elowen paused. In both this life and the last, the Queen had never liked her. They had never been close. But Hilda's tone was sincere and gentle. Elowen couldn't bring herself to refuse. It was late afternoon when she entered the palace. She followed the servants toward the central wing-the Queen's residence. The setting sun bathed the cobblestone path in warm gold. Elowen kept her head lowered, watching the light flicker across the ground beneath her feet.

"Your Highness." Hilda's respectful greeting rang out suddenly. Elowen froze, then slowly lifted her head. Alaric stood not far ahead. Tall. Immaculate. Cold. His brows were furrowed, his eyes sharp and assessing as they landed on her. That gaze made her chest tighten. She lowered her head at once and stepped back, offering a restrained bow. "Your Highness." Alaric's frown deepened. He knew Elowen liked him. She had learned his routine, timed her visits to the Queen, brought pastries she baked herself. Pretending chance encounters, she would smile and hand them to him. He never ate them.

He either gave them to the servants or had them thrown out. But today, she carried no pastry box. So she'd come just to see him, hadn't she? At the banquet, she had boldly declared she no longer liked him. And now she appeared here-clearly

regretting it. Playing distant. Pretending she'd moved on. Alaric let out a low, mocking chuckle. "Really, Elowen?" he said coolly. "Is this your idea of playing hard to get? Honestly, it's kind of boring." admin