

## Awakening Love: Reborn to Be His Duchess Novel

Chapter 21 A Visit Long Overdue Even though she had done nothing wrong , Elowen stilled uneasy . 99 Finished Instinctively , she glanced toward Cassian . In the dim light , all she could see was the sharp line of his jaw , subtly tensing . " Just the other day , she came to confront me , " Marwen was saying , voice filled with indignation . " Accusing Lucien of trying to harm His Grace . But Lucien has always respected his cousin more than anyone ! You know this , Your Grace ! He would never dare offend you .

It was that girl - Elowen - spouting lies , stealing my access sigil , playing her little mind games ... " She narrowed her eyes . " I wouldn't be surprised if all of this was planned from the start . She's scheming to seize Duskmoor's household authority for herself ! " Elowen was stunned . The audacity - Marwen was turning the truth on its head . Granted , the claim that Lucien had tried to assassinate Cassian ... might have been something Elowen had exaggerated just a little . Her confidence wavered . She glanced again at Cassian . After all , Lucien was his cousin . Marwen was his aunt .

Of course , he'd lean toward ... Cassian tapped a long , elegant finger against the armrest His voice came , even and cool . " Take her away . " Marwen lifted her chin , triumphant . " You heard His Grace ! What are you waiting for ? Drag this shameless harlot out of here ! " But the guards behind Cassian didn't move toward Elowen . Instead , they stepped forward and seized Marwen by the arms . . Marwen stared in disbelief , " What ... what is the meaning of this ?! " Cassian's expression remained calm . " Lucien did , in fact attempt to assassinate me . " Marwen froze . Her eyes widened .

" What ?! " Cassian continued , " I knew ahead of time that the Duchess would be visiting the stables today . " Marwen's breath caught . He knew ? Bran , standing behind him , added , " Her Grace told me efore leaving that she planned to inspect the horses and stablehands . If she were truly meeting someone incret , why would she inform me beforehand ? " Marwen's face went pale , then flushed with anger and disbelief . She gritted her teeth . " But ... but she clearly slipped away alone to meet with that stable boy- Elowen let out a sigh and spoke with resignation , " This sort of matter ...

the fewer people who know , the better . " The moment she said it , Marwen's alarm bells went off . Elowen turned to the boy . " You not only ruined Lucien brushes , but also poisoned a warhorse . You've cost Duskmoor a great deal of money . How do you intend to repay it ? " The boy was speechless . Elowen's tone remained kind and composed . " If you tell me who sent you , I'll forget the debt . " 1/2 11:35 Fri , Apr 3 MM . Chapter 21 A Visit Long Overdue The boy stiffened and shook his head . " I ... I wasn't sent by anyone !

" 87 % Finished Elowen replied , " You bear some resemblance to His Highness the Crown Prince . How could there be no one behind this ? You entered the manor intentionally , perhaps to provoke discord between His Highness and His Grace , to drag this household into ruin . Whoever sent you clearly had malicious intentions . " Marwen began to panic . And Elowen looked at her again " That's why I brought him somewhere private to question him . A matter this sensitive - if it got out , the entire household could be in danger." Marwen's face turned ashen . She tried to smile , but it came out stiff and dry . Cassian's lips curled ever so slightly . Elowen looked at the boy again . " If you insist on keeping silent , there's little I can do ." She shrugged helplessly . " I suppose I'll have to sell you to the Velvet Lantern . Twenty clients a night should

clear your debt in about six months . Thirty a night , and you could be done even faster . " The boy stared at her , a look of horror on his face . " What ?! " Elowen tilted her head . " Didn't you say you were good at serving people ? Twenty or thirty shouldn't be so hard , should it ?

" The boy turned ghostly pale . " No ... no way ... " He was getting older . Lately , even just two visits from Vivian in one day left him completely drained . Twenty or thirty ? Every night ? He'd be dead within a week ! Elowen caught the terror in his eyes and lifted a brow . " o ? Are you ready to tell me who sent you? " The boy clenched his sleeves tightly , his brow furrowed , as he struggled with the decision . Just as he was about to speak , Marwen suddenly cried out , " Ah ! " She collapsed to the ground , arms and leg " pawled . " Lady Marwen has fainted !

" The boy blinked , as if waking from a trance , and clamped his mouth shut . Elowen didn't seem disappointed . She already had a good idea who was behind it - either Marwen or Vivian . The maids and attendants scrambled to help Marwen up . Cassian spoke again , slow and measured . " In the past , I was too busy to oversee the estate , and so all responsibilities were temporarily handed to my aunt , But now that I have taken a wife , the duties of this household Il be transferred to the Duchess . Starting omorrow . " Elowen's heart gave a small flutter .

He was giving her control of the household . Marwen gave a final twitch on the ground and passed out completely . admin

Chapter 22 Wolves in the Courtyard Elowen was watching the scene unfold with interest when Cassian's voice broke in . " Would you like a chair , so you can enjoy the show properly ? " There was a teasing note in his voice . Elowen flushed and smiled awkwardly . " It's not that entertaining ... " Cassian raised a brow but didn't press her . Elowen offered quickly , " Shall we go back , Your Grace ? " Cassian gave a soft hum of agreement . Bran remained behind to deal

with the boy . Marwen was carried off to Rose Hall . Elowen stepped forward to push Cassian's wheelchair .

They walked in silence . Back at the manor , Elowen suddenly heard a restrained cough . She looked down - and to her shock , noticed that Cassian's lips had turned completely bloodless . Sweat dotted his forehead . " I'll call for the physician ! " She turned to leave . Cassian caught her wrist . " Wait . " Elowen looked at him anxiously . " Your health- " " I forced myself to wake , " Cassian said plainly . " I can stay conscious for a while ... but not long . " Elowen nodded , worry in her eyes . Suddenly , a thought struck her .

She hesitated , then asked , " Your Grace , when you were unconscious ... could you hear what people were saying around you ? " Night after night , she had laid beside him , murmuring sorts of things - about her family , her past ... even crying once or twice . She'd thought he would be comate se for a long time , so she hadn't held back . But now , with Cassian waking more and more frequent ... it hit her . His body seemed much better . Even if he couldn't open his eyes , maybe his mind had been aware all along . What if he'd heard everything ? That would e mortifying .

Cassian didn't open his eyes . " No. I couldn't hear anything . " Elowen wasn't entirely convinced . " Really ... ? " Cassian suddenly lifted a brow . " Did you say something o me ? " Elowen choked and quickly looked away . " No ... not really ... " Cassian's expression remained unreadable . " Help me to he bed . " Elowen supported him gently , helping him to sit on the edge of the bed . Then Cassian said , " You'll be managing ousehold starting tomorrow . Don't ruin my estate . " Elowen straightened at once . " I won't ! I promise ! " Cassian said nothing more .

He let go of her and lay back down . But Elowen could still feel the heat of his grip on her wrist . She looked down at the spot where he had touched her . Then looked toward the bed . Cassian had passed out again . From the exertion earlier his collar had loosened slightly , exposing the smooth , firm line of his chest . He'd broken a sweat . His skin gleamed faintly . 11 WILL 1/3 11:35 Fri , Apr 3 MM . Chapter 22 Wolves in the Courtyard " Your Grace ! " Bran hadn't entered the room yet , but his voice called out first , " How is His Grace ?

" Finished Startled , Elowen jumped , yanking her gaze away . She'd been staring so intently she hadn't noticed anything else . Embarrassed , her ears turned bright red . Without turning around , she replied , forcing herself to sound calm , " He's ... fallen asleep again ." Thankfully , Bran was too focused on Cassian to notice her flustered state . He sighed , full of sorrow . " I thought His Grace was recovering ... " Elowen managed to pull herself together . " This means he is getting better . He's been waking more often .

If we continue caring for him properly , he might fully recover someday ." Bran nodded , visibly encouraged . " You're right , Your Grace ! " He noticed the sweat on Cassian's face and rolled up his sleeves . " You've worked hard enough today . Go rest . I'll clean him up and take care of the rest . " Elowen nodded . She glanced at Cassian one last time , then left for the next room . While washing up , Elowen recalled that in her previous life , it had taken Cassian years to regain consciousness . This time , he'd already woken twice - and it hadn't even been half a month since she arrived .

Why ? Had he also woken briefly in the past life , but the news never left Duskmoor Manor ? No . That wasn't it . She remembered visiting the manor in the past . Cassia had been in a wheelchair , his face far more gaunt and deathly pale than it was now . If he had regained

consciousness earlier , he wouldn't have looked like that , which meant that this time ... something had changed . The variable was her , A small frown tugged at Elowen's brow . Cassian must've wanted the title of Duchess to go to the woman he truly loved .

But fate had led Elowen into the manor , shocking him so deeply that it brought him back from the brink . And because her father and brothers had once fought beside him ... because he pitied her as an orphan ... Cassian had ftened , unwilling to ask for a divorce . Elowen felt a pang of guilt . She let out a soft sigh . If that was how it was , then the next time Cassian woke , she would have a proper talk with him . She could step aside anytime . The title of Duchess didnt have to belong to her . The next morning , Elowen rose early .

41 Last night , Cassian had told her he was handing over the management of the entire Duskmoor estate to her. AWAY HI + 2/3 11:35 Fri , Apr 3 MM . \* .87 % Chapter 22 Wolves in the Courtyard Finished Flowen believed that Marwen was not someone with a steady or honest heart . If the estate remained in her hands , it would only be a matter of time before everything fell apart . 1.5K HT 1 admin

Chapter 23 The Weight of a Title 87 % 83 Finished After all , she was eager to take charge and see if she could manage the estate herself . Step one was to head to Rose Hall and collect all the manor's keys , ledgers , and ecords . Elowen brought Mira and Cora along , had Bran accompany them , and summoned both Gerda and Edith for good measure . Still feeling that wasn't enough , she added two brawny guards from the house staff . With such a large entourage behind her , she felt much more onfident . Marching boldly with full force , Elowen led the group straight to Rose Hall .

Mira stepped forward first to state their purpose . " By order of His Grace himself , Her Grace the Duchess will now take the entire estate . We ask that Lady Marwen come forth and hand over all the keys and ledgers . " They were received by a maid - Agnes - the same one who had come after Elowen on her wedding night to urge her to pay respects to Marwen . Agnes tilted her eyes and wouldn't even look Mira directly in the face . " Lady Marwen has managed the manor for many years . Suddenly appointing a duchess , barely of age , to take charge ? I fear the estate will fall into disarray .

" Mira straightened . " This is His Grace's direct order . " Agnes gave a lazy shrug , smug and stubborn . " Of course we know it's His Grace's command . However , we all care about him and want what's best for him . If the estate crumbles under new hands , who bears that blame ? Better to wait until His Grace awakens and discuss it properly . " Mira froze . Young and inexperienced , she hadn't dealt with this kind of scene before and didn't know how to respond . Elowen turned to look at the two older women standing beside her . Gerda said nothing .

But Edith stepped forward without word , raised her hand , and delivered two loud slaps across Agnes's face . Elowen was stunned . Mira was stunned . Agnes certainly hadn't seen that coming . Dizzy from the rows , she staggered back . Edith's voice was like a whip . " Matters of His Grace and Her Grace are not for a mere servant to speak on . " Her brow arched coldly . " Well ? What are you waiting for Invite the Duchess in ! " Her authority was overwhelming . Agnes , who clearly preferred bullying the meek , was immediately cowed . She clutched her face and word .

couldn't s Elowen's eyes lit with quiet admiration . A woman from the royal palace indeed - decisive and efficient . Mira looked positively inspired , Her eyes sparkled as she clenched her

fists in her sleeves . So that's how it's done . She got it now . She understood . " Who's here ? Is it Elowen ? " A soft female voice called from inside . A young woman tepped gracefully through the doorway , eyes curving with a smile . " I've heard my cousin married a beauty . Seeing you today , I must say the rumors were 1/2 11:35 Fri , Apr 3 M M. Chapter 23 The Weight of a Title true .

" It was Vivian Ashcroft . Before Elowen could respond , Vivian continued . " You're here for my mother , aren't you ? " 87 % Finished Elowen nodded . Vivian sighed . " Something must have shaken her last night . She's been sleeping ever since she returned . " " She hasn't woken up at all ? " " Not once . " Elowen askeu , Did you send for a physician ? " " We did . But he said he couldn't find anything wrong and just prescribed rest . " Anyone with sense could see right through this . Mimicking Cassian's coma ? Really ? She couldn't even be original . Elowen played along .

" Then , about the keys and ledgers - who should I ask ? " Vivian sighed helplessly . " No one else knows the details . We'll have to wait until Mother wakes up . " Elowen nodded sympathetically . " What a shame . " Vivian followed with a sigh of her own . " But since it's Aunt Marwen , and she hasn't stirred , I ought to see her for myself , " Elowen said , her tone suddenly shifting . " ... What ? " Vivian blinked . Elowen was already walking inside . Vivian tried to stoper , but Mira , finally awakened , pounced . She grabbed Vivian in a firm hug before she could move .

" Hey , you - what are you- " Vivian yelped . By the time she shouted , Elowen had already reached the bedside . Marwen lay still under the face was pale and utterly devoid of color . ers . Her Elowen stared down at her for a moment , then turned to the side table , picked up the still -

warm cup , and returned to the bed . And poured it over Marwen's head . The hot drink splashed all over her face , up her nose , into her eyes- Marwen shrieked and sat bolt upright in shock . Elowen s d there holding the cup , face serene , tone polite . " No need to be so formal , Aunt Marwen .

" Marwen was speechless . She flushed with fury , " You drenched me with drink and expect me to thank you ?! " The drink had washed off much of her makeup , revealing perfectly healthy skin underneath . She looked nothing like a sick woman . Elowen gazed at her and answered sweetly , " Vivian said you'd fallen into a mysterious sleep , and not even the doctors knew what to do . But all it took was a little water , and now you're cured . Shouldn't you be thanking me ? "   
wwwwww 2/3 11:35 Fri , Apr 3 MM . Chapter 23 The Weight of a Title Marwen choked on her words . She had no comeback .

87 % Finished Elowen handed the cup to Gerda . " Now that you're awake , please hand over the estate keys and ledgers . " Marwen had expected this , of course . She gave a cold chuckle and rolled out the excuse she'd prepared long ago . " There are far too many ledgers . You'll never be able to carry them all . Why don't I just keep holding onto them for now ... " admin

Chapter 24 Eyes That Begin to Open 87 % Finished " No trouble at all , " Elowen cut in , smiling . " I brought Bran - and two guards . Both served under His Grace on the battlefield . They've carried broadswords heavier han this . A few ledgers will be no problem . " Marwen's face went pale . It wasn't subtle . Elowen was threatening her . The trouble was , Rose Hall had only a few maids and matrons - none of them a match for soldiers trained in war . Swallowing her anger , Marwen forced herself to nod .

Elowen watched as Marwen rose , pulled a small key from beneath her pillow , opened a small wooden chest under the bed , a . retrieved a larger key . Then she walked to the bookcase against the west wall of the adjoining study , unlocked the hidden cabinet inside , and revealed the ledgers and master keys of Dusmoor Manor . Elowen took the keys herself and had Bran and the guards carry out the ledgers . They were moved to the estate's main study , where Elowen promptly began inspecting them . She hadn't read more than a few pages before letting out a soft , disbelieving laugh . " That woman .

She's so petty . The wages she gave the manor's maids were disgracefully low . Mira's monthly pay equals six months ' wages for the personal maids at Rose Hall . " She flipped through another . Then another . Her brows drew together in a frown . " There aren't even that many people living in the manor , " she murmured , rubbing her temples . " Yet somehow Marwen managed to spend a fortune every day on wine and food . " Which meant only one thing - Marwen had been pocketing the money . And pocketing a lot of it . But how ? " Cora , setting aside the ink block , chimed in .

" Your Grace may not know , but the supplier wh vegetables to the manor is one of her cousins . And the wine ? From a tavern she owns - just hidden behind a steward . " Elowen's eyes narrowed . So nearly all the funds were being funneled back to Marwen . Cora continued , " Since His Grace fell ill and handed her the keys , things have only gotten worse . The food's been terrible . Rotten meat , Mushy greens . Watered - down wine . " That part , Elowen had noticed , Since the wedding , the food had felt increasingly hard to swallow . She'd thought the cooks were simply unskilled .

Now she knew the truth lay in the ingredients . " We'll need new suppliers , " she said , already planning . " No use sticking with thieves . " She also needed to select a birthday gift for Maerwyn . She had the perfect idea . Calling for a carriage , Elowen left Mira behind to continue learning from Edith and took Cora along , with the usual pair of guards . Their destination was Cloudmere Lane , the most bustling market street in all of Vanelle . The district boasted clothiers and jewelers finer than anything even the palace could offer . 1/2 11:35 Fri , Apr 3 MM .

Chapter 24 Eyes That Begin to Open 87 % Finished In her past life , Elowen had spent days searching before finally choosing a pair of Greenstone Bangles- translucent , smooth , and rare . Yet when she had presented them , in full view of Alaric and a hall full of courtiers , Maerwyn had pretended to sneer . She called them hideous . Claimed Elowen had no taste . Elowen had nearly lost face . But months later , she'd overheard a palace maid gossiping - Maerwyn had kept the bangles and wore them often . She had liked them . She just wanted to humiliate Elowen .

The princess had never liked her . Elowen didn't know why . All she knew was that the scorn and ridicule from Maerwyn had caused her pain , shame , and bitterness for years . In this life , she wasn't marrying Alaric - but she still had to prepare a gift , not for the princess herself , but for her title . She was the King's daughter and Cassian's niece . Elowen's gift was not meant to earn the princess's approval . It was to please the King and give honor to Cassian and all of Duskmoor Manor . She would still gift the same bangles .

Following her memory , she arrived early at the shop on Cloudmere Lane . The bangles were still being carved . " These , " Elowen said , pointing to the half - finished pair . She didn't wait for the final polish before paying in full . The shopkeeper beamed . " A fine eye , My lady . You'll

not find better . " " I'll be next door , " Elowen replied . " Have them boxed properly for me when they're done . " " Of course ! " The shop next door was a small tavern .

Most places in Vanelle had long switched to hiring musicians and dancers to lure patrons , copying the style of the city's more notorious pleasure halls . But this one still clung to old - fashioned oral storytelling , drawing crowds with spoken tales rather than spectacle Which meant it rarely had business . Elowen came often . This place belonged to her aunt Isobel . Hale Manor's first great loss had been her uncle . He had been twenty - seven . Her aunt , pregnant at the time , had miscarried when she heard the news . Her father had vowed to support Isobel for the rest of her life . admin

Chapter 25 The Tavern on Cloudmere Lane But her aunt's mother had refused . First , she had said , " How can a woman survive in this world without a husband by her side ? " ¥ 87 % Finished Then she added , " Your Hale family does nothing but train for war . Today , one of your sons dies in battle , tomorrow another . What happens when you're all dead Who will provide for my daughter then ? " At the time , her words had been vicious . But in hindsight , they turned out to be prophetic . She had threatened to take her own life , forcing the aun to relent and return home to remarry .

Rumor had it that the second husband was an abusive brute . Eventually , the man died . Her mother passed not long after . Now , the aunt lived alone , quietly supporting herself through the properties she had inherited . This tavern was one of them . LA WHIR Elowen often visited when she had time , but she never went to see her aunt directly . She would simply book a private room , order a selection of pastries , listen to the storyteller , and leave when the session concluded . Today was no different .

But she had barely reached the halfway point of a new tile when the door to her private booth was knocked . The same young clerk from the jeweler's shop entered , bowing deeply . " My lady , I'm afraid we cannot sell you the bangle after all ." Elowen frowned . " Why ? " . " A gentleman has expressed interest in it and ... he offered a higher price ." Her tone sharpened . " You run a business , don't you ? I reserved that bangle . I even paid . And now you're telling me you've gone back on your word ? " The clerk smiled apologetically . " The gentleman offered quite a generous sum .

And , well ... " He hesitated . " Would you perhaps come and speak with him directly ? Annoyed but composed , Elowen left Sera at the tavern and followed the clerk back to the shop . She had only just stepped inside when a familiar figure entered her field of vision . Her steps faltered . Her face went pale in an instant . It's Alaric . He sat at the table , lifting a cup of warm brew with visible displeasure , his brow creasing at the thin , bitter taste . The shop called it their finest ale , but to a prince accustomed to excess , it was little more than watered swill .

Hearing footsteps , Alaric set the cup down and lazily lifted his eyes . And there she was , radiant and composed . His instinctive reaction was " You're following me ? " Elowen blinked . " I beg your pardon ? " She gave a soft , unimpressed hum . " I have far better things to do than follow you . I reserved a bangle here earlier today . I was told someone tried to outbid me for it . That someone , I assume , is you ? " 11:35 Fri , Apr 3 MM . Chapter 25 The Tavern on Cloudmere Lane Alaric frowned . He hadn't known the bangle had been hers .

87 % 0 Finished In truth , he didn't know why he had come to the shop at all . Or why he had insisted on that particular piece . But in some distant corner of his dream - filled memory the bangle had felt ... important . The clerk looked between the two , unsure what to do . They

seemed to know each other . " Perhaps , " he offered cautiously , " since the two of you are ... acquainted , you could discuss it amongst yourselves . We only have the one pair , and perhaps one of you needs it more than the other . We also have many other fine pieces ... " But Alaric ignored him completely .

His gaze stayed on Elowen . " If I recall correctly , you don't even like wearing jewelry . Were you planning to give it to Maerwyn ? " " She's my niece , " Elowen replied coolly . " A gift from her aunt on her name day is only proper . " Her tone shifted . " But you - knowing the bangle had already been reserved - still chose to force the shopkeeper's hand by offering more . What , exactly , do you think gives you that right ? " Alaric bristled . It was just a bangle . He hadn't cared that much . But her current posture - cold , unyielding , righteous - it grated .

She used to trail after him , all sweetness and wide eyes . She would fetch anything he wanted , go anywhere he led . When had that changed ? Now she stood before him , fighting him over a trinket ? His gaze darkened . " Things I want , " he said softly , " I always get . " Elowen narrowed her eyes . So he had no intention of backing down . She turned to the clerk . " How much did he offer ? " " Thirty ... thirty , " the clerk stammered . Elowen didn't hesitate . " Fifty . " The clerk gawked . " F - Fifty ? " " A hundred , " Alaric said , calm as a frozen lake .

Now the clerk was nearly gasping . In Avenlor , a hundred could buy a cottage and a plot of land . And the gentleman tossed it out as if it were nothing . Elowen clenched her fingers inside her sleeve . She didn't back down . " One hundred twenty . " " One hundred fifty . " Her eyes flared . But before she could continue ... " Two hundred , " Alaric said flatly . Elowen burned . " I didn't raise the bid ! " 2/3 11:35 Fri , Apr 3 MM . Taven Chapter 25 The Tavem on Cloudmere Lane 87 % Finished He shrugged . " It is just a number .

" And for the crown prince , who would one day own the realm itself , what did a mere two hundred mean ? admin

Chapter 26 Old Debts , New Faces . The clerk looked nervously between them . " My lady ... will you be raising your offer ? " Alaric's eyes glittered . " Yes , tell us - are you going to raise it again ? " 87 % Finished His tone was biting , mocking . Elowen hesitated , her lips pressed tight . She had only brought a little more than two hundred with her today . She was just about to offer it all - damn the expense - when Alaric , clearly enjoying himself , cut her off . " Doesn't matter what you offer , " he said , languidly smug " I'll always outbid you .

Add fifty more to whatever she says . " Elowen stared . He was doing this on purpose . Just to spie her . Alaric met her gaze squarely . " I did say ... things I want , I always get . " Her chest rose and fell sharply with anger . The clerk turned to her , hopeful . " So ... are you withdrawing ? Shall we sell the bangle to this gentleman ? " Elowen , suddenly thoughtful , didn't answer right away . Her expression shifted . She smiled sweetly . " Are you really that determined to take something from me ? " Alaric inclined his head . That was all she needed .

She beckoned the clerk with a finger . The man leaned in , puzzled , as Elowen whispered something in his ear . His brows rose . He hesitated . Then he nodded . Elowen turned back with a satisfied smile . " Honestly , the bangle isn't even that special . You want it for two hundred ? Fine . It's yours . I'll take that hairpin instead . " She pointed to another item . " Ten ? " The clerk nodded . " I'll take it . " Alaric sneered . " Sixty . As I said - whatever she wants , I'll add fifty . " But Elowen didn't look the slightest bit upset . She simply nodded , then pointed to another piece

Another and another . Each time , Alaric added fifty . By the end , she let out a happy sigh and glanced at him with a half - laugh . " Well then ... shall we tally up ? " The clerk , already prepared , stepped forward with a ledger in hand . " Sir , you've purchased thirty - eight items in total . That comes to one thousand and eighty . " Alaric blinked . " ... That much ? " The clerk beamed . " Yes ." Alaric hadn't brought nearly that much . He had come light , unaccompanied . He forced a composed expression .

" I'll have someone deliver it this evening . " " 87 % Finished " " Of course ! " The clerk practically bowed . " We'll prepare everything for delivery . May I ask where to send it ? " " ... They'll know where , " Alaric muttered vaguely . " Very good , my lord ." The clerk handed him a slip . " I'll need your seal or signature here ." Alaric looked down at the number , felt the color drain from his face . He signed anyway , lips pressed tight . If his mother found out - he shuddered to imagine it . Still , in front of everyone , he could only keep up appearances .

He reached for the now - cold drink - but his hand trembled , spilling a few drops . Then the clerk turned to Elowen with a grin . " My lady , shall we prepare your share ? " Alaric stiffened . " Her share ? " Elowen gave him a radiant little smile . " Cash , if you please , " she told the clerk . She turned back to Alaric , her tone honeyed . " I made a little deal . " His pupils dilated . " You- " " I told him , " Elowen went on , " if he let me pick some pieces and you agreed to buy them all , I'd split the difference .

He makes a profit , and I get twenty per item VILE Alaric nearly choked . The clerk returned with a neat bundle of money . " Here you are , my lady . Please count . " Elowen checked them quickly , then nodded . " All in order . " She turned to leave , her steps light and easy . " Stop ! " Alaric surged forward , grabbing her wrist . She spun , eyes flashing . " Have you lost all se - of

decorum ? " He didn't let go . His voice was low , seething . " You think you can trick me and just walk away ? " " Trick ? " she echoed , incredulous .

" I reserved the bangle paid for it , and you forced your way in , talking about how money means nothing to you - that you always get what you want . And now I'm the one who caused a scene ?

" admin

Chapter 27 What Belongs to the Duchess 87 % Finished Alaric stared at her , cold fury flickering in his eyes . " You never used to act like this , " he said . " But today , you've set me up on purpose . Why ? Because I refused to marry you ? " The shop boy , who had originally wanted to step forward and break up their argument , froze in place . After hearing that bombshell , he instinctively backed away , as if he'd just stumbled into the middle of a royal scandal . Elowen's eyes widened in shock . Alaric sneered . " Am I wrong ? " Anger surged in her gaze . " You are !

" He gave a bitte icy laugh . " Then who was the one always trailing after me ? Every time you made a tart or sweet cake , you'd find a way to bring it to me . Who kept pestering Maerwyn , asking what I liked , what I wanted , racking her brain just to make me happy ? Elown , have you already forgotten how shameless and clingy you used to be- " Ппот Smack ! A loud slap cut him off mid - sentence , silencing the words that had been about to turn nastier . His head snapped to the side . He froze for several seconds . He was the Crown Prince .

Since childhood , he had never once suffered this kind of humiliation . Stunned , Alaric looked back at her , utterly disbelieving . Elowen's voice trembled . " If I'd known this day would come , I wouldn't have pushed you out of the way when that carriage charged at us ! " " I hit the ground hard , " she went on . " My knee was badly injured , and I've never been able to ride a horse since

. All I ever wanted was to ride into battle alongside my father and brothers , but that dream ended the day my knee gave out . Now, if I stay on my feet too long it starts to ache .

If I push myself past my limit , the - pain flares . On rainy nights , it keeps me awake until dawn .

" Alaric's expression faltered . For a moment , even the sting on his cheek faded from his mind ..

He hadn't known . In either this life or the last , Elowen had never said a word about it . She ad believed he would see her worth on his own . How could someone look at another's sacrifices and remain blind ? How could he watch her suffer and still say she deserved it ? Her eyes turned red around the edges . She clenched her teeth . " You have no heart . You take no responsibility .

I ruined my knee just from not marrying you - can you imagine what would've happened if I had

? I don't hate you because you refused to marry me . thank the gods I married your uncle instead

. " Alaric froze . His chest tightened so suddenly he felt breathless . For the first time , he realized - truly realized - that something vital , something he had taken for granted , was slipping away from him . And there was nothing he ould do to stop it . Elowen yanked her hand from his and turned to leave , er steps swift and unhesitating . Back at the tavern , the storyteller was just finishing .

Cheers and chatter filled the air as the tale came to a close . Elowen pulled out the money she had earned ear er , counted half of it , and handed it to Cora . " Here , take this down and reward

them . " 1/3 11:36 Fri , Apr 3 MM . Chapter 27 What Belongs to the Duchess 87 % ! Finished

Patrons at taverns often slipped a few coins to the performer . The entertainer kept a share , and the rest went to the tavern , an unspoken custom that rewarded the act and kept business lively .

Cora was stunned . " My lady , where did all this money come from ? " Elowen brushed it off .

" Just a deal I struck . Now go . " Cora still looked confused , but accepted the money and hurried off . Elowen sat alone in her private room , lowering her gaze to her injured knee . A quiet heaviness settled in her chest . The drinks had gone lukewarm , but she picked up the cup anyway and took a small sip . Then she broke off a piece of pastry and took a careful bite . It was delicious. Her aunt's baking never failed . " My lady , " Cora said as she returned . Elowen was just about to stand when another voice called out - soft , warm . " Is this the Duchess of Duskmoor ?

" Elowen froze , too nervous to turn her head . That voice it was her aunt . What was she doing here ? Why now ? " Of all our patrons today , " her aunt said gently , " Your Grace's reward was the most generous . I simply had to come up and thank you in person . " Elowen still didn't turn around . She prayed her aunt wouldn't recognize her back , then waved her hand dismissively and lowered her voice . " It's nothing . You've been paid , so go on back to your work . " But her aunt added , " I brought a few pastries . Would Your Grace take them home ? " Still , Elowen didn't move .

" Just give them to my maid , " she said casually .. There was a long pause behind her . Elowen's heart thudded wildly in her chest . Then she heard a soft sigh . " Don't tell me ... You don't want to acknowledge me anymore , Elowen ? " This time , the voice trembled with barely suppressed tears . Elowen froze . Her heart squeezed tight . Slowly , she turned around - and met her aunt's warm , familiar gaze . Her throat bobbed . " Aunt Isobel ... " Isobel's eyes were misty , but her smile was gentle . " Yes , m here . " She held out a plate of delicate pastries , her tone sweet .

These are my newest recipes . Won't you try one ? " Elowen wiped her eyes and managed a small nod , swallowing the lump in her throat . Isobel stepped inside and sat beside her . The

scent of her perfume , soft and clean , washed over lowen . It brought her back to her childhood days in Hale Manor , where she used to follow her aunt around , ip toeing to see how the dough was kneaded . admin

Chapter 28 A Quiet Line in the Sand X87 % Finished She used to watch , wide - eyed with wonder , as strange ingredients were transformed into warm , fragrant pastries . " Wow ... " she would whisper in awe . Those memories now felt like a distant past . " Aunt , " Elowen said quietly , " Do you think ... maybe I'm just not someone worth loving ? " Isobel gently took her hand . " Elowen , " she said , " You're more than worth it . You're young , bright , confident , and kind . Anyone who's ever met you can't help but like you . If someone doesn't , then the problem isn't you . It's them .

They're petty , or jealous , or both . But you ? You're the kind of girl anyone would be lucky to love . " Warmth blossomed in Elowen's chest . She nodded . " No point celing sad over Alaric , " she murmured . " Just like there's no point feeling happy because of him . " If she no longer cared about him , he couldn't affect her nymore . She took a bite of her aunt's new pastry , and her eyes lit up . " This is incredible ! Teach me how to make it ! " Isobel smiled . " Of course . I'll show you . " Elowen jumped to her feet . " Let's go to the kitchen ! " Her aunt chuckled and followed .

Together , they headed to the back . Elowen's eyes widened at the sight of all the fresh produce . " Where do you buy all these ? " she asked . " An old farmer lives near the southern end of Cloudmete Lane , " Isobel said . " He's been growing vegetables - for decades . My father used to buy from him , and I still do . He even brings in goods from neighboring villages . " Elowen nodded thoughtfully . " What about wine ? Where do you get the best ? " " From the Windmill

Tavern , of course , " her aunt said . " Don't you remember ? Back at Hale Manor , we always  
She trailed off .

It had been years since she'd been part of the manor . Elowen tilted her head with a smile . "  
Once my aunt , always my aunt . I wasn't wrong . " Isobel's gaze softened with affection . She  
smiled back . They spent the afternoon baking pastries and packing them neatly into boxes .  
Once everything was loaded into the carriage , Elowen gave her aunt a tight farewell and left  
to place orders for vegetables and w The payments were agreed upon , but the contracts still  
needed to be signed .

Her sister - in - law had drilled it into her early that nothing counted until it was written down  
and sealed . Without that , anything could still be undone . By the time Elowen returned to the  
manor , it was nearly dusk . She handed the pastry boxes to Mira . " Distribute these everyone in  
the manor . " 11:36 Fri , Apr 3 MM . Chapter 28 A Quiet Line in the Sand 87 % 9 Finished Alaric  
returned to the Crown Prince's Wing only to be met with a fierce scolding from Queen Isla .

She berated him over the palace's ongoing financial troubles - saying that though she held the  
royal seal , even she was constantly scrambling to make ends meet And yet here he was , her  
grown son , throwing around money as if it were nothing . This time , Isla was truly furious . She  
didn't even wait for the attendants to leave before lashing into him , not sparing him an ounce of  
dignity in front of the servants Humiliated and cornered , Alaric clenched his jaw and muttered ,  
" ... It was because of Elowen . " The moment the name left his lips , Isla paused .

He seized the chance to tell her about Elowen's suppose scheme - though , of course , he  
conveniently left out the part where he had added fifty to the price himself . By the time he

finished , Isla's fury exploded . She hurled a cup to the floor , shattering it . " I knew it ! That wretched girl is nothing but bad luck . Nothing good ever happens when you cross paths with her ! We're already scraping by in the palace , and now this - another absurd expense ! " Alaric let out a breath of relief . At least she had stopped blaming him .

Isla took a moment to calm herself , though her tone was still sharp . " ... Did you know Cassian has awakened ? " Alaric looked surprised . " Uncle Cassian woke up ? " " It was only briefly , from what I've heard . The details are still unclear . But your father wants you to visit Duskmoor Manor and check on him . The trouble is , Elgwen's there . Today , she tricked you into spending all that money , and I suspect it's because she still hasn't let you go . If you go to the manor now , she'll likely think you're doing it for her . " A slow smile tugged at the corner of Alaric's mouth .

The Queen was right . Elowen probably did still have feelings for him . That would explain all her games and petty schemes . He considered for a moment then said , " Mother , if it's Father's command , I can't exactly refuse . But I don't have to give Elowen the tir . of day . " Isla sighed . " There's no helping it then . You'll just have to endure the discomfort . After all , her son was simply too outstanding . Handsome , capable , and the heir to the throne - how could a little enchantress like Elowen possibly forget him ? Back at Duskmoor Manor , that evening , Elowen washed her hair .

She dried it for a while , but didn't bother to get it completely dry , She was simply too tired today . She missed the days when she was little , when she could just throw herself onto the bed , lay her head off the edge , and let her hair fall freely . So that's what she did now - sprawled across the mattress , head tilted back toward the edge , her damp hair cascading in waves toward the floor . admin

Chapter 29 The Night Does Not End Kindly \* 3873 Finished  
Cassian was lying straight on the bed , so when Elowen lay down beside him , a bit of physical contact was unavoidable . But they were married now , weren't they ? Sharing a bed or leaning on one another shouldn't matter . With that thought in mind , she eased herself down , letting her legs rest loosely across his thighs . If her hearing had been sharper , she might have caught the sudden quickening of his heartbeat . But Elowen was entirely unaware . She simply felt comfortable .

No wonder , she thought , recalling how her mother used to drape her legs across her father at night . This was just nice . Gazing up at the gauzy canopy overhead , she began to murmur about the day's events . " ... I can't outbid him . No money , my money or my status . After all . Alaric has a throne to inherit . " Cassian remained silent . Two hundred ? That was nothing more than pocket change to him . And as for lineage , Alaric wasn't even the most capable of the King's sons . His claim wasn't as secure as he believed . " But Elowen's voice shifted , gaining a light , amused tone .

" I came up with a little business venture with the shopkeeper ... She described it in detail . By the end , she chuckled softly . " It was just a bangle . It wasn't worth more than thirty , fifty at most if someone's feeling generous . Two hundred ? Three hundred ? That's just idiotic . Money doesn't grow on trees . " Cassian smiled to himself in the dark . She hated being cheated . After she finished , she lay quiet , as usual , started to move for a while , then reached up to feel her hair - mostly dry now . She sat up on the inner side of the bed to sleep .

As she passed Cassian , her loose hair brushed lightly across his face . Soft and scented , it tickled his skin- and , somehow , his chest . His breath hitched . Elowen lay down again , but something felt unusually warm . " Did the temperature rise ? " she mumbled . She sat up , glancing

over Cassian lay under a thin brocade coverlet . The weather had indeed warmed , and she thought perhaps it better to pull the blanket down a bit , so he wouldn't sweat too much and develop a rash . With that in mind , she gently tugged the quilt down to his waist . And then , her gaze dropped .

Under the soft glow of moonlight and candlelight , a non cable bulge was very apparent , She blinked . " What's that ? A rash ? A really big bump ? " Cassian was speechless . What kind of military household doesn't teach basic anatomy ? 1/3 11:36 Fri , Apr 3 M \*\* Chapter 74 The Night Dous Men Ene King Elowen , curious , poked it twice . Finishest Cassian was about to lose h . Still unaware , she tugged the blanket a bit farther , pulling open his tunic . A loud gasp tore through the room . As if she'd stumbled upon a viper or some feral beast . Flustered .

Elowen scrambled to pull the blanket back over him . Her cheeks flushed crimson . heart pounding in her chest . She sat frozen for several moments , unable to move or look at Cassian - or at that SPOL The image , unfortunately , was now etched deeply into her memory . Eventually , she lay back down , but this time far from him . facing away , her back rigid . Cassian found the whole thing equal parts amusing and exasperating . Was it really that shocking ? Didn't all men have one ? When he recovered fully , someone ought to teach her properly . No He would teach her .

Elowen had a nightmare that night . In it , she happily went to the market , only to find all the stalls filled with massive , monstrous mushrooms . Towering , grotesque , absolutely terrifying . She turned and ran , but she tripped . Looked down - another mushroom . When she woke the next morning and looked in the mirror , there were two dark circles under her eyes . Mira came in to help with her hair , chattering as always " Your Grace , the old man from the village

brought vegetables this morning . I heard the mushrooms are especially fresh . Some of them are huge !

" Shall I have the kitchen cook some for lunch ? " Mira loved mushrooms . Elowen used to like them , t but after last night , she realized maybe not so much anymore . Elowen didn't even hesitate . " No ! " Mira blinked . " Why not ? " Elowen pinched her fingers together , frowning . " I hate mushrooms . Especially the big ones . " Mira replied ... eh ? " Since when ? Just then , Bran called from outside the room . " Your Grace The palace sent someone . " Elowen looked toward the door . " Who ? " " His Highness " She froze . Bran added . " Word reached the palace that His Grace stirred .

His Majesty is concerned , so he sent His Highness to check on him . " Elowen nodded slowly . In her past life , when Cassian had awakened , Alaric had come to Duskmoor Manor , 100 .  
admin

### Chapter 30: The Duke Awakens

Although Cassian had not fully regained consciousness this time, the palace had its ways of being informed. Whatever needed to be known, His Majesty would be the first to know. It was no surprise that Alaric had been dispatched. "Have His Highness received in the front hall?" Elowen inquired. "Yes, Your Grace," was the response. Elowen turned to Mira, "Let us finish dressing." Mira hesitated, being well aware of Elowen's history with Alaric. Tentatively, she suggested, "Your Grace... perhaps skip the lip color today? It might seem like you are trying to impress His Highness..." Elowen smiled, "Silly Mira, avoiding something to show I am not trying to impress him is still a way of catering to him. We owe His Highness nothing. However

we usually dress, that is how we shall dress today. Let us make it exquisite." Mira, not entirely understanding, nodded in agreement.

Half an hour later, they arrived at the front hall. Alaric had been waiting for some time. He sat composed in his chair, a cup of water beside him, now mostly cold. When he glanced up and saw Elowen, his eyes flickered with unmistakable admiration. Elowen donned a deep red gown of exquisite fabric, its lines simple and elegant. Her hair was styled in a neat coiled twist, her neckline modestly cut and adorned with subtle embroidery. She exuded composure and refinement, her beauty understated yet striking. Alaric narrowed his eyes, a slow, mocking smile appearing on his lips. "Married to my uncle now, and still playing games. Dressing up like this - trying to make Duskoor Manor a laughingstock?" Elowen raised an eyebrow, "Your Highness, what do you mean by that?" "I came to see my uncle, not you. There was no need for you to dress up."

"You think I dressed like this for you?" "Didn't you?" Her gaze cooled, "No wonder Her Majesty is in such a hurry to find you a wife. You are sorely lacking in manners." Alaric's brow furrowed, "You are lecturing me now?" "I am the Duchess of Duskmoor. I represent this household. Regardless of your visit, I present myself accordingly. Do not speak in such a manner in front of others. It only tarnishes Her Majesty's guidance."

For a moment, Alaric felt as though he was being reprimanded by an elder, despite Elowen being younger. He clenched his jaw, ready to respond, but she had already moved on, "Your uncle briefly woke, he is not fully recovered." Still seething, Alaric's tone was sharp, "And you are certain?" She responded calmly, "We share a bed. Why would I not be sure?" Alaric froze, "You

sleep next to him? Even when he is unconscious?" Elowen appeared puzzled, "He is my husband. Why wouldn't I?"

After a brief pause, he relaxed, realizing she was bluffing. She cared for him too much to share a bed with another man. He was not going to allow her to get away with it, "I wish to see him," he stated deliberately. Elowen frowned slightly, "He is resting. It would be impolite to disturb him." Cassian, once proud and untouchable, now appeared pale and frail. She imagined he would not want others to witness him in such a state. This was her rationale, but to Alaric, it sounded like an excuse, proof that she was deceiving about sharing a bed with him. "His Majesty sent me," Alaric flatly stated, "If you obstruct me, you are obstructing His Majesty. Are you concealing something?" After a moment's contemplation, Elowen relented, "If it is His Majesty's wish... then let us pay our respects."

As they proceeded to the courtyard, Alaric's keen eyes caught sight of the vanity and side bed tucked in the antechamber. He paused, and Elowen followed his gaze. Those had been arranged on their wedding night, she hadn't had the chance to remove them. Before she could explain, Alaric chuckled coldly, "Deceiving others is one thing, but do not deceive yourself." "I have never slept there," she hurriedly clarified. He remained unconvinced, "Since you wed my uncle, live as his wife," he said scornfully. "I would not have married you before, and I certainly will not now. Even if you never share a bed with him, even if you remain chaste, it is inconsequential. You now belong to him." His words were harsh, yet strangely satisfying to him. Elowen still mattered to him. She had wed Cassian, but she was still attempting to reserve herself for Alaric. This realization pleased him more than he cared to acknowledge.