

Awakening Love: Reborn to Be His Duchess Novel

Chapter 391 The Weight of Expectations him some ointment first?" 13% 2 Finished Hugh nodded and opened his medical case. From inside he took out a small white jar and handed it to the servant. The boy stared at it in disbelief, carefully holding the cool jar with both hands. Elowen gestured gently toward the door. "Go find somewhere to treat the burn properly, and change into clean clothes afterward." The servant finally snapped out of his daze. His eyes instantly reddened. He bowed deeply toward Elowen, his voice shaking. "Thank you, Your Grace.

"Thank you for your kindness." Only then did he hurry out. With the servant gone, the room became even quieter. A faint herbal fragrance drifted through the air. Kaelan spoke in a hoarse voice filled with frustration. "I'm glad you came to see me, Your Grace... but at the same time, I wish you hadn't. I didn't want you to see me like this." Elowen looked at him steadily. "Then how did you end up this sick?" Kaelan slowly shook his head. His eyes looked hollow. "I don't know." Elowen glanced toward Hugh.

"Doctor Dray, please." Hugh gave a quiet hum of acknowledgment and stepped closer to the bed. "Your hand." Kaelan obediently extended his arm. The wrist looked painfully thin, little more than bone beneath pale skin, the faint lines of veins visible beneath the surface. Hugh gently took the wrist and briefly felt the pulse before studying Kaelan's face more carefully. After a moment he released his hand. His tone remained calm, but his words were measured, "You seem to have caught a chill recently, and your constitution is somewhat delicate.

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But that is not the real problem." He paused slightly before continuing. "The greater issue is strain of the mind. Too much worry, too many burdens weighing on your thoughts. When the mind is troubled for too long, the body inevitably begins to fail. A physician may ease the symptoms with medicine, but the true cause lies elsewhere." Kaelan pressed his pale lips together and said nothing. Hugh raised an eyebrow. "So tell me, Kaelan.

Have you been sitting at home day and night thinking about the Duchess of Duskmoor until you made yourself sick 2/3 12:37 Mon, Apr 13 O 13% Chapter 391 The Weight of Expectations Finished Kaelan jerked upright in shock. Color rushed to his pale face, turning it bright red. Ironically, that flush made him look far more alive than before. "No. That's not it. I would never. I wouldn't dare..." Hugh nodded thoughtfully. "If that's not the reason, then tell us what is." Kaelan lowered his head, his voice heavy. "I..." He wanted to speak, yet the thoughts tangled in his chest felt overwhelming.

There was too much to say, and he had no idea where to begin. Hugh waited patiently for a while. When Kaelan still said nothing, he studied his expression. "Well? Why stop now?" Kaelan suddenly covered his face with both hands. His shoulders trembled slightly. "Is it because Aveline puts too much pressure on you?" Elowen asked quietly. Kaelan's movement stopped instantly. Hugh also turned to look at her. Elowen remained seated calmly in the carved chair, her hands folded lightly over her knees. A faint smile touched her lips.

"While walking here, I noticed how deeply your mother cares about you. She clearly places great hopes on your future. Your courtyard and your study are filled with calligraphy and paintings meant to inspire you to work harder." Her gaze softened as it returned to him. "Kaelan," she said gently, "you're carrying far too much pressure, aren't you?" She no longer addressed him

formally. Instead, she used his given name. Her voice was soft and comforting. Something inside Kaelan finally loosened. He lowered his head and gave a quiet, defeated nod. Elowen had expected as much.

Kaelan might admire her, but no one would fall this ill simply because they couldn't have the person they liked. ◦ 2.4K 1 3/3 admin

Chapter 392: More Than One Path

In her previous life, Elowen had also loved Alaric. Yet when she slowly faded away inside the Crown Prince's Wing, succumbing to sickness until her final breath, it was not because of her unrequited love for Alaric. Kaelan, too, bore a burden. Elowen gazed at him kindly. "Kaelan, would you share with us the weight on your mind?" Kaelan hesitated, then lowered his hands from his face, his eyes fragile as they met Elowen's.

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The Duchess of Duskmoor appeared as graceful and kind as he remembered, genuine concern etched on her face. His heart melted, incapable of denying her. With a hoarse voice, he began, "Since childhood, my mother has impressed upon me the need to excel in my studies. She insists I must pass the royal examination on the first try to bring honor to our family." Hugh, intrigued, interjected, "Your family holds a noble title, your father is a court official. Even without the examination, Theodric would likely offer you a position due to family ties. Why this self-imposed pressure?" Kaelan bowed his head. "Externally, our family may seem grand," he spoke slowly. "However, my father's role at court is mostly symbolic. He wields little real power. Despite my mother's title, her connection to Theodric is distant. Our requests often require pleading and sometimes aid from those beneath our station." His voice lowered. "My mother...

she feels ashamed, even if unspoken." Elowen nodded knowingly, "She hopes your success in the examination will restore her pride." Kaelan affirmed quietly. Elowen scrutinized him, "You have always been diligent and talented. Passing the exam should be within reach." Kaelan smiled bitterly. "I am not so sure anymore."

Chapter 395: A Mother's Kind of Love

As Elowen concluded, a gentle smile lingered on her lips, her eyes lowered. "My mother once held me close, tears falling on my brow," she recounted softly. "Marriage into Hale Manor meant nothing about my father's status or our family's reputation. She married for one reason—love for the man himself." Her voice unwavering and sincere. "She loved my brother and me unconditionally. Her love bore no expectations or conditions. She loved us simply for being her children." Elowen raised her gaze to Aveline. "Even if I never upheld Hale Manor's name or restored its honor, I would always be her daughter. She would love me the same." Aveline's eyes glistened with emotion. "Your mother's love ran deep." Elowen's smile warmed. "Do you not love Kaelan in the same way?" Aveline tensed, struck by Elowen's words. Elowen's calm voice persisted. "Isn't Kaelan facing a struggle akin to mine?" Aveline faltered, unable to respond. Unnoticed, they had reached the gates. Elowen paused, "I must depart now. Find me at Duskmoor Manor if you seek further counsel." Aveline, her thoughts in disarray, absentmindedly nodded. "Safe travels," she bid Elowen farewell, watching the carriage bearing the Duskmoor crest fade from view.

Later, an elderly maid informed Aveline, "Edmund will attend the young master's lessons today." Aveline, usually delighted, was in a reverie prompted by Elowen's words. In a quiet moment, Elowen's wisdom echoed in her mind.

Elowen's voice resonated, "The officer's children played joyfully, despite their modest attire."

Elowen turned to Kaelan, "That day I learned of life's vastness, with countless living different existences." Her tone serene yet profound. "We need not constantly compare ourselves. Gratitude for what we possess is vital." Kaelan's eyes flickered. Elowen reassured, "Your essays may lack perfection, but they hold merit. The royal examination is not for one, but many." She continued gently, "While some may excel, your efforts are not futile. Your writing bears its own strengths." Kaelan pondered aloud, "What if I fail?" Elowen replied with a smile, "Should you falter this year, attempt again. If not now, then in the future. Life offers diverse paths." She concluded softly, "Your mother's love transcends any examination outcome."

Chapter 393 A Line for the Future Kaelan looked troubled. "But... what if my mother think it would embarrass her?" Elowen interrupted him gently. "Don't worry. She won't feel embarrassed." Kaelan frowned in confusion. "How can you be so certain?" α . 13% Finished A small smile curved across Elowen's lips. "Because in a little while, I'm going to speak with her myself." After saying that, she glanced around the room. "This place feels terribly oppressive," she said thoughtfully. "Why cover the walls with nothing but moral lessons and study maxims? A room should have something that lets you breathe." She was still thinking about what might improve the space when Kaelan's eyes suddenly lit up. "There is something I've always wanted." Elowen looked at him, her gaze patient and inviting. Kaelan lowered his voice slightly. "I just don't know whether Your Grace would agree to such a presumptuous request." Elowen considered it. "Tell me what you're thinking first." Kaelan drew in a steady breath and gathered his courage. "Would Your Grace be willing to write a piece of calligraphy for me? I would like to keep it in this room."

Elowen blinked in surprise. "My handwriting?" Hugh spoke up immediately. "That's not appropriate." Kaelan looked puzzled. "Why not?" Hugh's face remained completely expressionless, and his words came out sharp and blunt. "Because the Duke of Duskmoor turns into the embodiment of jealousy whenever someone gets too close to her. If he finds out she wrote something just for you, he'll be angry enough to turn Vanelle upside down." Elowen laughed at the exaggerated description. "You're making it sound far more dramatic than it really is." Hugh silently thought otherwise.

She has never seen this side of Cassian, the fiercely possessive streak, the utterly unreasonable way he guards anything he considers his. Around her, he hides those sharp edges surprisingly well. When Kaelan heard the title Duke of Duskmoor, he hesitated and eventually gave in. "If that's the case... then forget it," "It's fine." Elowen smiled warmly. "It's only a few lines of writing. I'll do it for you." Joy immediately brightened Kaelan's face, as though even the weakness of his illness had faded a little.

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1/3 12:37 Mon, Apr 13 Chapter 393 A Line for the Future 13% Finished Elowen stood and pushed back the cuff of her gown, revealing a slender, pale wrist. Turning toward the doorway, she called out, "Someone bring writing materials." A young servant hurried inside and quickly spread a sheet of fine white parchment across the writing desk near the window. He set out a small ink bottle beside it and placed a neatly trimmed quill within easy reach. Elowen stepped forward and picked up the quill.

She dipped the tip lightly into the ink and paused for a moment, tilting her head as she considered the words. Then she lowered the quill and began to write. The scratching sound of the feather against parchment filled the quiet room. When the ink dried across the page, the lines

read: Drink the wine that fills your cup today. Let tomorrow worry about tomorrow. With the servant's help, Kaelan slowly pushed himself upright and leaned closer to read. After murmuring the lines softly, he turned toward Elowen in surprise. "That's a verse from the classical age." Elowen nodded with a gentle smile.

"Exactly. Whenever life feels overwhelming, when worries begin to press so heavily that you can hardly breathe, read those lines again. Life is meant to be lived in the present. Learn to appreciate what lies before you." Kaelan studied the elegant script and nodded firmly. "I'll keep this by my desk." "But it's still missing one small thing," Elowen said, lifting the quill again. Kaelan looked puzzled. "What could it be missing?" Elowen only smiled. She leaned over the parchment once more and added a small final line neatly in the corner.

After finishing, she set the quill aside and wiped the ink from her fingers with a damp cloth. "There," she said lightly. "Now it's perfect." Kaelan stepped closer to read the small inscription. The moment he saw it, he paused in surprise. "Well," Elowen said with a bright smile, "the writing is finished, and we've said everything that needed saying. I should head back now," She looked at him warmly, "Focus on recovering your strength. When spring arrives, you'll be ready for the entrance examination at the Royal Academy," Kaelan nodded obediently. He watched Elowen walk toward the door.

Just as her graceful figure was about to disappear beyond the threshold, he suddenly called out. "Your Grace!" Elowen paused and turned back from the doorway. Sunlight streamed in behind her, outlining her figure in soft golden light. 2/3 12:37 Mon, Apr 13 Chapter 393 A Line for the Future 13%2 Finished "What is it?" Kaelan looked at her, his heart beating faster. His fingers

tightened unconsciously at his side. "Do you think I'll pass the examination?" Standing in the warm light, Elowen broke into a bright smile. "Of course you will," she said confidently.

"You're intelligent, and you have real talent." The tight knot that had been lodged in Kaelan's chest for so long finally loosened. He let out a long breath and smiled in return. The shadow that had lingered on his face gradually faded, and the improvement in his complexion was clear even at a glance. Elowen and Hugh walked side by side out of Kaelan's courtyard. What she had not expected was that Aveline had not gone far at all. She stood beneath the arched moon gate outside the courtyard, pacing anxiously back and forth with tears shimmering in her eyes.

The moment she saw Elowen step out, she hurried forward. "Your Grace," she asked urgently, her voice trembling, "how is Kaelan? Is he any better?" Elowen gave her a reassuring smile.

"Please don't worry. He'll be fine." "And Doctor Dray..." Aveline looked toward Hugh. 2.4K 3/3
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Chapter 394: A Mother's Fear

Hugh remained silent as Elowen answered softly, "It isn't a physical illness. It comes from the heart." Aveline blinked in confusion, "From the heart?" Elowen nodded. Aveline seemed prepared to ask more questions, but Elowen spoke first, "If you have a moment, would you walk with me in the garden?"

Aveline turned and glanced toward her son's courtyard before nodding. She pressed a handkerchief gently against the corners of her eyes, wiping away the tears. Elowen began walking beside her along the winding path through the garden. Hugh and the other attendants naturally slowed their pace, following at a respectful distance. As they walked, Aveline could not

contain her feelings, "Your Grace," she said with a trembling voice, "to be honest, Kaelan is my entire world. When I gave birth to him, I nearly lost my life. I fought through death itself just to bring him into this world. If anything were to happen to him, I... I wouldn't be able to go on."

Elowen listened quietly, sympathy softening her expression. "I used to hear people say that a child is a piece of a mother's own heart," she said gently. "When I was younger, I never truly understood that. Only now, after becoming pregnant myself, do I finally begin to grasp what it means." Her hand rested lightly against her abdomen. "Sometimes I catch myself wishing I could place every good thing in the world before this child." Aveline nodded quickly as tears began to flow again. "Exactly," she said, "That's why I've given Kaelan the best of everything I possibly could. Your Grace has no idea. The residence he lives in is the finest in the manor. Everything he eats, drinks, and uses has been chosen with the greatest care. And for his studies, I spent whatever it took to invite the most learned scholars in all of Vanelle to teach him."

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She took a deep breath before continuing, "I tell him often, 'Kaelan, my whole life's hope rests on you passing the royal examinations and bringing honor to our family. If you fail, then everything I've done and every effort I've made will have been wasted. How could you bear to see your mother heartbroken?'" Elowen fell silent for a moment. "There it is. That is exactly the problem. If Kaelan heard those words day after day, it was no wonder the weight had become unbearable." Elowen pressed her lips together briefly before speaking again, "Do you ever think," she said gently, "that this might place too much pressure on him?"

"Pressure?" Aveline looked genuinely baffled, "All he does each day is stay at home reading and writing essays. He has nothing to worry about and no responsibilities to carry. What pressure could he possibly feel?" Elowen realized that Aveline simply could not see the situation from

Kaelan's perspective. In her mind, she had done everything she could to provide him with the most comfortable life imaginable. He did not need to worry about anything except studying. Yet she had overlooked the fact that such overwhelming devotion, so constant and suffocating, had quietly become a burden he could barely carry.

"Your Grace," Aveline said suddenly, turning toward her, "those things about unbearable pressure... did Kaelan really say them to you himself?" Elowen nodded honestly. Aveline sighed, "He must still have feelings for you," she said, "But he understands the difference in your positions and fears you might distance yourself from him. So he made up this excuse about pressure." Elowen did not argue immediately. After a brief moment of silence, she raised her eyes and asked a question that seemed unrelated, "In your heart, what matters most?" Aveline looked confused, "What do you mean?" Elowen's voice softened, "When I was younger, I once asked my mother the same question."

Aveline turned to her in surprise, "At the time," Elowen continued, "my father, brothers, and uncles had already passed away. Just as many people in Vanelle said, the Hale family had become nothing more than widows and orphans. Our house had long since declined. Stories often praise a young noble daughter who carries the burden of restoring her family's honor. But I never had much interest in literature or military strategy. I simply didn't have the ability to rebuild the Hale family." Her expression grew distant as the memory surfaced, "I felt miserable and deeply ashamed. I had no idea what I should do. I couldn't sleep at night, and food lost all its taste. Day by day I grew thinner."

Aveline looked at Elowen with sympathy and pity. "At that time," Elowen said calmly, "many people in Vanelle believed I was wasting away because Alaric had stopped paying attention to

me." Aveline felt a flicker of embarrassment; to be honest, she had believed the same thing back then. "But that wasn't the truth." Elowen's eyes remained bright and steady, "What truly crushed me wasn't childish heartbreak. It was the unbearable guilt of believing I had failed the generations before me." She paused briefly. "One day I simply couldn't endure it any longer. I went to my mother and asked her something."

Elowen's voice grew quieter, "I told her that the honor of our family would disappear because I was useless. I asked her whether things would have been different if I had died instead of my brother. Would the Hale family still be strong today?" Aveline's heart tightened sharply. She could not stop herself from asking, "What did your mother say?"

Chapter 395: A Mother's Kind of Love

Accompanied by the memory of Kaelan's pale, fragile face, devoid of vitality, Elowen stood in contemplation for a while before inhaling deeply. "Kaelan is already in poor health. What good would a lesson do him now?" she murmured softly. "Send word to Edmund, thanking him for his efforts. Inform him that Kaelan requires rest, and I will personally express my gratitude another day." Pausing briefly, she added, "As for the lessons, we shall postpone them until Kaelan's health is restored. When the time is right, I will inquire about his desires." The maid blinked in surprise, then relief washed over her features, and she eagerly nodded. "Yes, Your Grace. I shall deliver the message promptly."

Observing the maid depart with visible cheer, Aveline couldn't help but smile faintly. The Duchess of Duskmoor's given name was Elowen, which Aveline initially found uncommon. However, after their recent conversation, she reconsidered. The name suited Elowen remarkably

well, exuding a sense of steadiness and quiet reassurance. Perhaps that's precisely what my son needs.

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As the carriage left the manor, it merged back into the bustling streets of Vanelle, post-Christmas. The city had resumed its usual rhythm, with market stalls lining the streets and the air filled with merchants' voices hawking their wares. Elowen peered out of the carriage window, intrigued by the surroundings. Her eyes wandered across the shops, and upon spotting a familiar pasty shop sign, she made a decision. Leaning forward, she instructed the driver, "No rush to return. Please take us to Cloudmere Lane first." "Yes, Your Grace," the driver replied, steering the carriage into another street.

Cloudmere Lane remained among Vanelle's busiest districts, with carriages passing by constantly and the streets teeming with pedestrians. Eventually, the carriage halted in front of a confectioner's shop owned by Elowen's second aunt, Eudora Smith. Stepping down from the carriage, Elowen's gaze fell upon the adjacent shop, where the jewelry store had been replaced by a newly opened bookshop. Remembering her encounter with Alaric in the now-vanished jewelry store not long ago, Elowen wondered at the swift change. Welcomed by a cheerful attendant, she was ushered inside with the promise of fresh pastries.

Caught in her thoughts, Elowen found the young man oddly familiar. Despite a fleeting attempt to recall where she might have seen him, she let go of the puzzle. The attendant, named Josh Merter, informed her of a private room prepared by Lady Smith. Puzzled by his recognition, Elowen listened as Josh shared his story of seeking work to support his family, though she remained unable to place him.

Chapter 396: The Vanished Shop

When Elowen reflected on the situation, she realized her role was minor. Alaric and Isla had overly personalized the issue. Holding onto such bitterness over a single payment seemed trivial. "Your Grace, please make yourselves comfortable," Josh said respectfully with a bow. "I will inform Lady Smith of your arrival." He left swiftly. Soon, hurried footsteps approached, and Eudora rushed in, nearly running.

Elowen stood to welcome her, their hands joining immediately. Eudora examined Elowen closely, her gaze finally resting on Elowen's gently rounded belly. Joy and concern mingled in her eyes. "I heard about your pregnancy," she said emotionally. "I wanted to visit you at Duskmoor Manor right away. But I thought your home must be crowded with guests and gifts, so I refrained from adding to the hustle." Elowen smiled.

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"Most guests never see me. If you had come, I would have made time for you," she assured Eudora warmly. "If you couldn't visit, I can come to you." Eudora nodded eagerly. "Seeing you well at Duskmoor brings me comfort. His Grace cherishes you. Your father, brother, and uncle..." Her voice wavered, emotions brimming as tears welled in her eyes when she mentioned her late husband. Elowen felt a lump in her throat.

She kept smiling, taking deep breaths. With a trembling voice, Eudora continued, "If they watch from above, they must be happy for you." Elowen nodded gently. "Aunt, let's sit and talk." Eudora agreed. Just then, Josh returned with coffee and pastries, placing them neatly on the table. Eudora glanced at Josh and then at Elowen with a smile. "Ella, remember Josh?" Elowen hesitated. Eudora chuckled, "He's Patrick Mercer's son." Elowen's eyes widened.

Looking at Josh again, his resemblance to Patrick was uncanny. Patrick, one of Clement's capable officers, was trusted for his instincts and determination. Elowen recalled the story of Clement joking about a potential match between Patrick's child and her. Patrick had always been cheerful and kind to her.

As Elowen thought of returning, Hugh reminded her calmly, "Shouldn't we head back? The wait at Duskmoor Manor might grow long." Elowen turned to him, beaming. "The pastries are excellent here. I thought to bring some for him to try." She urged Hugh to taste them.

Reluctantly, he agreed.

Josh led them towards a private room, and Elowen remembered the jewelry shop that used to be next door. Curiously, she asked when it had become a bookshop. Josh explained that the shop offended someone in the palace by demanding payment for jewels purchased by the Crown Prince. Eventually, continuous harassment led to the shop's closure.

Listening to the story, a hint of guilt stirred in Elowen's heart. Had she not manipulated Alaric into buying all those jewels, the shop might have survived. This thought passed fleetingly.

Chapter 397: The Young Scholar

Patrick always found ways to entertain Elowen during his visits to the Hale household to discuss military affairs. Sometimes he brought her small honey sweets wrapped in paper, other times he gifted her smooth stones he claimed were treasures from distant mountain streams. This led Elowen to once accompany her father to visit the Mercer family, located outside the walls of Vanelle. Their residence consisted of two modest yet well-maintained thatched cottages, with a meticulously swept yard that gleamed in the sunlight.

Josh's mother was a gentle woman, dressed plainly but immaculately, with a garden overflowing with flowers she had lovingly planted. The front path was adorned with bright blossoms, while herbs and climbing vines adorned the back of the cottage. In those bygone days, young Josh and his little sister spent their afternoons joyfully playing in the yard, running and laughing amidst the flower beds. However, the arrival of war changed everything. Patrick perished on the battlefield, his body returned home shrouded in a soldier's cloak, marking the beginning of the Hale Manor's decline.

Subsequently, the men of the household fell one by one in faraway battles, leading to the eventual collapse of the Hale family. Elowen herself barely survived the ensuing turmoil. In those trying times, she lacked the strength and clarity to recall the wife and children Patrick had left behind. Only now did those memories resurface. Elowen gazed at Josh once more, smiling with a touch of embarrassment. "You seemed familiar earlier," she confessed. "It took me a moment to recollect who you were." Josh waved it off with a casual grin. "No worries. I remembered you, Your Grace."

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As he spoke, he delicately placed a plate of pastries on the table. Each pastry was shaped like a blooming flower. "Eudora recently experimented with a new recipe," he explained. "Please, give them a try." Elowen sampled one of the pastries. The delicate crust dissolved on her tongue, the filling lightly sweet with a hint of floral and creamy warmth. Her eyes lit up instantly. "These are exquisite." Turning to Eudora, she requested, "Auntie, could you make more of these later? I intend to win someone over with them." Eudora chuckled warmly. "Certainly. I'll make as many as you need."

Proudly, Eudora added, "You know, this boy works exceptionally hard. At just sixteen, he will sit for the royal examinations this spring. However, education comes at a cost. Books, tutors, accommodations... It's all a financial burden. He dislikes seeing his mother struggle, so he studies diligently whenever possible and works at the confectioner's shop to ease her load."

Elowen, intrigued, inquired about his studies and his prospects for the upcoming examinations. Josh modestly replied, "I'm doing reasonably well, but I wouldn't claim to be exceptional."

Eudora playfully interjected, "This child is too modest. His memory is exceptional; one might even call it photographic. His essays have impressed even Edmund himself. The esteemed scholar praised his clarity of thought and insightful arguments." Elowen, recognizing the significance, asked, "Edmund from the Royal Academy?" "Indeed," confirmed Eudora. Elowen's eyes sparkled with genuine interest. "Josh must indeed possess remarkable talent," she remarked. Edmund's scholarly renown extended beyond Vanelle, encompassing the entire kingdom of Avenlor.

Eudora beamed with pride as she recounted, "Towards the end of last year, Edmund invited Josh to a poetry gathering at his home. Kaelan from Aveline's household was also present. Both penned essays that day, and Edmund remarked that, in terms of writing, Josh's composition surpassed Kaelan's." Elowen finally grasped the situation. Josh was the one who had unsettled Kaelan's confidence. However, Josh dismissed the notion, stating, "Please, Eudora, spare me the praise. Edmund was being gracious. My essay was hastily written and flawed. Kaelan hails from a scholarly lineage; his writing is refined and elegant - that's true excellence."

Eudora gently nudged his arm. "Excessive modesty can border on boastfulness." Josh chuckled shyly, scratching his head. Elowen observed him quietly before asking, "Josh, balancing studies

with work here, doesn't that drain you?" Josh smiled, "It's not as challenging as it seems. I enjoy it. If I were cooped up studying all day, my eyes would tire, and my thoughts would stagnate. Working here exposes me to diverse people and tales from travelers across the realm, which I find fascinating." Elowen nodded thoughtfully, though a faint sigh resonated within her.

In terms of learning, Josh might indeed be a prodigy. Kaelan resided in the opulent halls of Aveline's estate, guided by the kingdom's finest scholars, while Josh, residing in a simple cottage outside the city, toiled at the confectioner's shop during the day, stealing moments at night to read by lamplight. Despite the odds, his essays outshone Kaelan's. Life, in its capriciousness, sometimes set up insurmountable disparities based solely on talent. Yet Elowen recognized that, more often than not, the true divide lay not in talent but in birth.

After a contemplative pause, Elowen tenderly offered, "Josh, your father served as my father's deputy. We are not strangers. If you encounter hardships in the future, come to Duskmoor Manor and seek me out." Josh blinked in astonishment. "Your Grace, your generosity overwhelms me. However, Duskmoor Manor hosts numerous visitors daily. Managing such an extensive estate and palace duties must keep you occupied. How could I burden you by arriving unannounced?"

Chapter 398: The Duke's Jealousy

Cassian settled back into the chair but kept his gaze fixed on the doorway. The guard bowed respectfully. "Your Grace, the duchess has not returned yet. I returned early to inform you, sensing your concern." Cassian raised an eyebrow. "At least you're earning the salary I pay you." The guard chuckled nervously and proceeded to give a detailed account of Elowen's movements. Elowen had visited Aveline's residence after leaving the manor. The guard narrated her interactions, including comforting Kaelan.

Midway through the report, Cassian's brows furrowed. His tone turned icy. "You mentioned the duchess wrote a calligraphic line for Kaelan?" The guard confirmed, "Yes, Your Grace. It was a line from a poet." Cassian scoffed quietly. "Kaelan is quite persistent." Bran refrained from speaking his thoughts. It was merely a piece of writing. Was the Duke truly jealous over such a trivial matter? However, a glance at Cassian's face revealed the tension in his jawline, a sign preceding his temper.

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Recognizing the warning signs, Bran wisely held his tongue. Sensing the shift in mood, the guard inquired cautiously, "Your Grace... what are your orders?" Cassian narrowed his eyes. "Tonight, go to Aveline's residence." Bran's heart skipped a beat. Was the Duke contemplating a confrontation? Cassian continued composedly, "Retrieve the calligraphy." Bran was taken aback. The guard, too, appeared incredulous. Cassian reclined in his chair, collected. "Initially, I considered having it destroyed. But then I remembered Ella crafted it. Disposing of it would be a loss. Bring it to me. I'll keep it."

Internally, Bran lamented. Your Grace, it's not the calligraphy you wish to destroy; it's Kaelan. Cassian spoke again, his voice cool. "That will be all. Return to safeguard the duchess. Tonight, secure the writing." The guard bowed and turned to leave. After a moment's pause, he hesitated. "Your Grace... there is..." Chapter 400: The Forbidden Book

Spotting her name in a gossip pamphlet felt surreal to Elowen. Beside her, the young shopkeeper reminisced, "In the past, our shop sold novels penned by Azure, thriving until she ceased writing. The demand plummeted." He expressed regret over the shift in readers' preferences towards scandalous romantic tales. Reluctant to sell such books, he resorted to printing pamphlets as a last resort. "If only Azure would resume writing," he sighed.

Elowen's gaze met his. "May I know your name?" Her calm inquiry unnerved the shopkeeper, fearing repercussions from the Duchess. Overwhelmed, he collapsed to the floor, requesting to settle affairs before facing consequences. Elowen reassured him, urging him to rise. Placing the pamphlet back, she observed the shop's novels. "Your name?" she prompted. "Finn," he confessed. Elowen assured him, alleviating his fears. Finn, grateful, stood up, and Elowen decided to support his new business by purchasing several novels.

Finn's joy was palpable as Elowen selected books, including a slightly worn one titled "The Begonia Hairpin." Intrigued, she added it to her purchase. As she left, Finn counted the money, recalling the book's notoriety. The realization dawned on him too late. "The Begonia Hairpin," despite its elegant title, was a scandalous and vulgar novel. Finn's smile faded, realizing his oversight.

Chapter 399 Changing His Mind The guard looked visibly startled. This was the first time he had ever seen Cassian change his decision so quickly. 13% Finished Bran, who had been standing nearby watching the entire exchange, could not help sighing inwardly once again. The duchess truly is remarkable. She must have known from the start that once Cassian learned about this matter, jealousy would strike immediately. That was why she had prepared in advance. More importantly, she knew exactly how to soothe this amously jealous duke once the storm arrived.

The duchess truly understood how to keep Cassian completely under her control. Meanwhile, elsewhere in the city. Elowen remained at the confectioner's shop for a while longer, chatting with Eudora. The pastries she planned to take home had already been carefully wrapped and packed. Only then did she rise and bid farewell to both Eudora and Josh. When she stepped outside the confectioner's shop, her carriage was already waiting at the entrance. Elowen was

about to climb inside when she paused. After a moment of thought, she turned around and walked toward the newly opened bookshop next door.

Even before reaching the entrance, she could smell the distinctive scent of aged parchment mingled with fresh printing ink. It was not exactly pleasant, but neither was it unpleasant. The shop itself was not very large, though it was tidy and tastefully arranged. Against the far wall stood a towering wooden bookshelf that stretched nearly to the ceiling. The shelves were carefully organized with all kinds of volumes, most of them historical texts, scholarly works, and collections meant for students preparing for the royal examinations.

Near the entrance sat a wide display table covered with popular novels, handwritten copies, and crudely printed pamphlets. The shop had very few customers, leaving the place rather quiet. Beside the door, in the sunniest corner of the room, stood a reclining chair. A young man lay sprawled across it, a book resting open over his face while his chest rose and fell in the slow rhythm of deep sleep. Elowen assumed he must be the shopkeeper. She walked closer.

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Seeing this, Mira stepped forward and called softly, "Hey, wake up." 1/3 12:38 Mon, Apr 13 D

Chapter 399 Changing His Mind The man stirred at the sound. Still half asleep, he mumbled something and lifted his head slightly. 13% Finished The book covering his face slid down and dropped to the floor with a soft thump. Elowen glanced toward him and was about to speak.

Then she saw his face clearly and paused in surprise. The man rubbed his eyes and looked up.

The moment he recognized Elowen, his expression froze as well. His mouth hung open in shock.

They had met before.

This bookshop owner was none other than the quick handed young clerk who had once worked at that jewelry store. The young man clearly standing frozen for only a moment, he jumped up from the chair in a panic and hurriedly tried to compose himself. cognized her as well and knew her identity as the Duchess of Duskmoor. After He wanted to show proper respect, yet he had no idea what gesture would be appropriate before a duchess. In his panic, he simply bent forward in a deep bow.

"Your Grace, the Duchess of Duskmoor has come to my humble shop," he said, his voice trembling slightly from nervousness. "It is truly an honor." Elowen glanced around the shop and could not help smiling. "There is no need for such formality." Then she asked gently, "Do you no longer sell jewelry?" The young man straightened and quickly explained. "Your Grace, that jewelry shop was never mine to begin with. I was only hired to work there. After our owner offended... someone important, he began living in constant fear. He could barely sleep at night.

In the end, he had no choice but to sell the shop quickly at a low price and return to his hometown in the south with his family." Elowen nodded quietly. She could not help feeling a trace of guilt toward that former owner. The whole incident had been an unfortunate disaster that had something to do with her. Though in truth, the main reason had been the narrow mindedness of Isla and Alaric, The young man continued, "My family originally ran a bookshop generations ago, so in a way I have returned to the old trade.

I used my savings from the past few years and borrowed some money from friends to rent this place. I thought that selling books and writing supplies would be a peaceful way to make a living without attracting trouble." Elowen listened while letting her gaze drift across the colorful novels

spread across the table. Finally her eyes settled on a stack of cheaply printed pamphlets. She casually picked one up and looked at the young man with a raised brow.

"You sell this," she said, holding the paper lightly between her fingers, "and you still claim you want to avoid trouble?" 2/3 12:38 Mon, Apr 13 D Chapter 399 Changing His Mind These pamphlets were a kind of underground publication. 13% Finished People privately copied and printed gossip that was never officially confirmed, including rumors about the royal household, pregnancies among palace consorts, which prince currently enjoyed favor, and even political developments like promotions or dismissals among officials.

Though the court had not openly banned such publications, they If authorities discovered them, punishment would follow without The young man knew that perfectly well. His heart began re certainly not encouraged. Fine beads of sweat appeared on his forehead, and his legs felt weak. Still, he did not collapse. Instead he bowed repeatedly in desperation.

"Your Grace, please understand. I truly had no choice. I need to make a living. Selling ordinary books barely brings in customers anymore.

These pamphlets attract few buyers so I can earn enough coins to survive." He lowered his voice, pleading, "Please show mercy, Your Grace. Let me keep this small livelihood." Elowen had already begun reading the pamphlet in her hand. It was very recent. It described the banquet at the palace, including the fall of Daphne, who had been stripped of her position as Crown Princess, as well as the news of the Duchess of Duskmooor's pregnancy. 2.4K admin

Chapter 400: The Forbidden Book

Finn, the young bookshop owner, held his breath as he watched Elowen's expression. He knew he was playing with fire by selling those underground pamphlets. However, instead of the cold fury he expected from a noble, Elowen simply flipped through the pages with a look of mild amusement.

"Your writing is quite sharp," Elowen remarked, her finger lingering on the paragraph describing her own pregnancy and the downfall of Daphne. "But if you wish for this shop to survive the year, you should be more discreet when dancing around the shadows of the throne."

Finn exhaled a breath he hadn't realized he was holding, bowing so low his forehead nearly touched the table. "Your Grace's wisdom is boundless. I... I only sought to provide what the people hunger for. I will be more careful, I swear it."

As a gesture of profound gratitude—and perhaps to ensure her continued silence—Finn hesitated, then beckoned Elowen toward a small, secluded shelf hidden behind a tattered velvet curtain. He reached into a hollowed-out compartment and pulled out a volume wrapped in aged silk.

"Your Grace, since you have shown such mercy to a lowly merchant, I wish to offer you something truly unique," Finn whispered, his voice trembling with a mix of fear and pride. "This is a book that officially does not exist."

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Elowen took the object. As the silk fell away, the title "The Begonia Hairpin" appeared in elegant, fading script. Her eyes widened slightly. She had heard whispers of this title before—a scandalous, semi-biographical account of the hidden tragedies and power struggles within the inner palace during the reign of the previous Emperor.

It was said that when King Theodric first laid eyes on a copy years ago, he had flown into a cold, murderous rage. The book allegedly contained metaphors that hit too close to certain royal secrets he wanted buried forever. He had ordered every copy hunted down and burned, declaring that anyone caught possessing it would be charged with treason.

"You are a very bold man, Finn," Elowen said softly, her thumb tracing the spine of the forbidden book. "If Cassian—or worse, Theodric—knew this was sitting in a shop next to a confectioner's, your head would be on a pike by sunset."

Finn wiped the cold sweat from his brow. "I know. But I felt... I felt that a lady of your intellect would appreciate the truth hidden within these pages more than a hangman would."

Elowen let out a soft, melodic laugh. The young man's audacity was almost refreshing. She signaled to Mira, who stepped forward to hand Finn a purse of gold coins that far exceeded the price of every book on the display table.

"I'll take it," Elowen said, tucking the book under her arm. "And as far as I'm concerned, I only bought a few harmless historical texts and some light novels today."

Finn watched the carriage depart with a heart full of turmoil. He felt a pang of guilt for handing such a dangerous spark to the Duchess, but he also felt a strange sense of relief. The forbidden relic was finally out of his hands.

Inside the carriage, Elowen leaned back against the cushions, looking at the stack of books. Her mind was already racing. She didn't just see a story in *The Begonia Hairpin*; she saw a weapon—and perhaps, a mirror into the very secrets the royal family worked so hard to hide.

By the time the carriage pulled into the gates of Duskmoor Manor, Elowen's mood was radiant. She had new pastries for her husband, a secret book for herself, and the satisfaction of knowing that even in a quiet bookshop, she could still find the threads of a much larger game.