

Awakening Love: Reborn to Be His Duchess Novel

Awakening Love Reborn to Be His Duchess Chapter 41 The Royal Invitation Elowen couldn't help but take another long look at him. Piers had no patience for Daphne's theatrics. "Hurry up and apologize!" he snapped at her. Finished Daphne flinched at his tone, her shoulders trembling as she stammered toward Elowen, "I-I'm sorry..." "And?" Piers pressed, his voice still sharp. Daphne shuddered again, her face flushing crimson with humiliation. "I shouldn't have slandered you!" Only then did he relent, turning to Elowen with a respectful nod. "Duchess of Duskmoor, I owe you an apology as well.

My sincerest regrets. Is there anything else you require?" Elowen accepted gracefully. "Nothing else, thank you." He gave a short nod and gestured toward the palace gates. "Then please, proceed inside." He shot a stern glance at Daphne. "She will remain under my watch, waiting outside the gates until all other guests have entered. Consider this my recompense for my earlier mistake in misjudging you." Order was restored at the palace entrance. Elowen settled back into her carriage as it rolled through the towering gates.

After a short journey, they reached the carriage park, where dozens of coaches already stood. Elowen alighted and continued on foot. Maerwyn's birthday banquet was to be held in the Gilded Hall, but Elowen was in no rush to go there directly. Following Cassian's instructions, she first made her way deeper into the palace complex to inform the King of his awakening. Meanwhile, carriages continued to stream into the palace grounds. Daphne arrived at the Gilded Hall much later than the others, her eyes red-rimmed and swollen from crying.

Maerwyn, seated and chatting with Alaric, noticed Daphne's distressed state from across the room. Curiosity piqued, she called out, "Lady Daphne, what's wrong? Has someone upset you?" Daphne's gaze flitted almost imperceptibly toward Alaric before she lowered her tearful eyes. Her maid, bursting with indignation, answered for her. "It was Lady Elowen!" Alaric, who had been lounging listlessly, his attention elsewhere, felt a subtle shift within him at the name. His brow twitched slightly, and he lifted his gaze. "Don't talk nonsense!" Daphne chided her maid with a delicate sob.

"I'm sure Elowen didn't mean any harm! And if Lord Piers chose to side with her over me, well, that was his choice to make. We cannot blame Elowen for it." Maerwyn's interest deepened. "So she did bully you?" She cast a thoughtful glance at Alaric. "And Lord Piers was involved? Does he fancy Elowen, then?" Alaric's frown deepened. "Come here!" Maerwyn beckoned Daphne eagerly. "Tell me everything! What exactly happened?" In the Gilded Hall, the birthday festivities were underway.

The hall was filled predominantly with ladies of the court, clustered in small groups, their laughter and chatter weaving a tapestry of merry sound. The moment Elowen stepped through the doorway, that tapestry unraveled. The voices hushed, one by one, until an unnatural, heavy silence blanketed the entire hall. Elowen felt the weight of their stares—mocking, scornful, derisive. She didn't need to guess the cause. Daphne had clearly been here first, sprinkling her own embellishments onto the story. In her past life, such scenes had been all too common. She was almost numb to them.

Besides, mere looks could not touch her. As the Duchess of Duskmoor, her status was exalted, surpassing even that of today's birthday girl, Maerwyn. Her seat was at the very top of the hall,

beside the Queen herself. If they wished to look at her, they would have to look up. "Elowen, my dear, you're here." As Elowen approached, Isla greeted her with her customary, benevolent smile. "Your Majesty." Elowen offered a slight curtsy. "Please, sit. We've been waiting for you," Isla said warmly. No sooner had Elowen taken her seat than Princess Maerwyn, seated nearby, spoke up with a sly grin.

"Lady Elowen, mind if I ask-why did you come into the palace so early, yet show up here so late? You didn't sneak off to meet someone, did you?" Elowen lifted her gaze to meet hers and asked calmly, "What are you implying, Your Highness?" "I'm merely curious," Maerwyn retorted, her tone deceptively light. "Is it such a difficult question to answer? Or perhaps... you were meeting a secret lover?" In her past life, Elowen had arrived late for a different reason.

Maerwyn had posed the same insinuating question, her words dripping with the implication that Elowen 273 2:25 pm pp p Chapter 41 The Royal Invitation had been off rendezvousing with some random man. Fished Back then, fearing Maerwyn's displeasure, Elowen had offered only soft-spoken explanations, enduring the veiled barbs with a fragile, forced smile. She had no intention of enduring such treatment now. "A secret lover?" Elowen arched a delicate eyebrow.

"Surely, Your Highness, you do not customarily refer to His Majesty the King as such?"

Maerwyn froze. She went to see Father?

Her expression remained dubious. "Why would you need to see Father?" "His Majesty is deeply concerned about Cassian's condition. As his wife, I went to provide the King with an update. Is there anything improper in that?" Elowen's voice was gentle, yet each word carried undeniable weight. "If you doubt my word, you are welcome to seek an audience with His Majesty and ask him directly." All color drained from Maerwyn's face. She was terrified of her father. And she

had just alluded to him being a secret lover... If this ever reached his ears, she'd be confined to her chambers for months!

"Elowen, please forgive her. Maerwyn is still just a child," Isla stepped in at the perfect time to smooth things over. 1.7K H admin

Chapter 42 A Proper Gift Finished "That's true, she is still just a child," Elowen agreed amiably, nodding. "After today, she will be seventeen, won't she? Practically a woman grown, and nearly my own age." Isla's gracious smile flickered for just a fraction of a second. Elowen then heaved a theatrical sigh. "At such an age, yet she doesn't address me as 'Aunt', but calls me by my given name with such impertinence. And to speak so carelessly of His Majesty..." Isla forced an apologetic expression. "...You are quite right.

The King and I have been so occupied with affairs of state that we've regrettably neglected her education in proper conduct." Elowen tilted her head, her gaze steady on Isla. "Cassian and I, as her elders, naturally wouldn't hold a grudge against a child. But she represents the royal family's dignity. If she shows no sign of improvement, people outside the palace will surely gossip. Don't you agree, Your Majesty?" Cornered, Isla could only nod with a strained smile. "Yes...

I shall ensure Maerwyn receives stricter guidance from now on." Only then did Elowen allow a faint, satisfied smile to touch her lips. She gestured to her maid. "Mira." Mira stepped forward, holding an ornate lacquered box. Elowen's expression was all polite warmth. "This is a humble birthday gift from Cassian and me. We wish Princess Maerwyn endless joy and blessings in all the years to come." Maerwyn wanted nothing more than to snatch the box and hurl it to the marble floor, followed by a torrent of scathing remarks to salvage her wounded pride.

But her mother's hand clamped firmly over hers, a silent, unyielding command. Isla's smile was perfectly measured. "Thank you both for your thoughtful gift." She signaled a maid to accept it, then turned a pointed look at her daughter. "Aren't you going to thank your aunt?" Maerwyn's brow furrowed. "I won't-" "Say it." Isla's words were slow, deliberate, her eyes sharp with warning. A cold dread prickled Maerwyn's scalp. She feared her mother's displeasure far too much. With immense effort, she forced the words out toward Elowen, "Thank you... for the gift.

Elowen raised a single, questioning eyebrow, "Hmm?" Maerwyn knew she was being toyed with. Fury simmered, but under her mother's gaze, it was forced into a suffocating submission. The word was ground out between clenched teeth. "...Aunt." Elowen's smile blossomed, genuine and bright. "You're most welcome. It's the least an aunt can do." Maerwyn, clearly fuming and desperate to end the interaction, turned away. But Elowen wasn't finished. 1/3 Chapter 47 A Proper Gift "Aren't you going to open it?" Maerwyn looked to her mother. Isla gave a slight, permissive nod.

Finished Gritting her teeth against the vitriol rising in her throat, Maerwyn snapped open the box's clasp. Expecting a hairpin or bracelet, she was instead greeted by the sight of several slender, cloth-bound volumes. The title on the top one read: The Conduct of Noble Ladies. Beneath it lay another: Admonitions for Women. Maerwyn stared, aghast. Her voice rose to a shrill pitch. "What is this? Who wants this junk?" Elowen had initially prepared jewelry. First, the bracelet was taken by Alaric. Then, upon reflection, she realized she no longer needed to curry favor with a mere princess.

She was the Duchess now. She explained with serene grace, "The Conduct of Noble Ladies was penned by a Queen. A King declared her work a guiding light for future generations. Like

Admonitions for Women, it serves to instruct young women in proper speech and behavior. As a princess of the realm, it is most fitting for you to study such texts, to understand your duties and govern your conduct accordingly. Only then can you truly honor the expectations His Majesty and Her Majesty have placed upon you." She paused for effect.

"These particular copies were personally transcribed by the late, revered Queen Genevieve of the previous dynasty. They are quite precious. It took no small effort to procure them." Genevieve had been famous for her gentle virtue and submission, a model Isla often held up for the court ladies-and one she had frequently used to criticize Elowen in the past. Now, Elowen presented these very books. The sentiment was impeccable, beyond reproach. Both Isla and Theodric could only praise her for her thoughtful consideration. The important part was that Maerwyn was thoroughly miserable.

"Elowen, you are truly thoughtful," Isla said, her praise sounding genuine enough. "It is my duty," Elowen replied modestly. Maerwyn's expression was one of pure disgust, as if she'd swallowed a mouthful of flies. Elowen took in her discomfort with immense satisfaction, so much so that the honey cakes and fruits on the table suddenly tasted even sweeter. Fuming, Maerwyn shoved the books aside, her entire demeanor radiating discontent. "Your Highness." Daphne approached and curtsied, her voice meek. "What is it?" Maerwyn snapped, her temper frayed.

"I've come to present my gift," Daphne said respectfully. 2/3 25 pm ppp. Chapter 42 A Proper Gift Finished Maerwyn's heart sank as she noticed the book in the hands of Daphne's maid.

"What now? More books on how to be a proper lady?" "Of course not," Daphne said softly, a gentle smile playing on her lips. "I bring you Tales of Luminara." At the title, Elowen's hand,

which had been reaching for another cake, froze mid-air. That name... Maerwyn's face lit up with instant delight. "Truly? You managed to get a copy of Tales of Luminara?" Daphne's smile widened. "Not just any copy.

This is the original manuscript, penned by Azure. Very rare." Azure was the anonymous author of popular serialized romances. No one knew if they were a man or a woman, young or old. 1.7K

1 373 admin

Chapter 43 Poisoned Wine Finished Back in the day, Tales of Luminara had taken Vanelle by storm, sparking a frenzy among the young noblewomen, many of whom revered the mysterious Azure as a genius. None more so than Maerwyn. After finishing Tales of Luminara, Azure had vanished without a trace. It was said Maerwyn had even shed secret tears over the disappearance. Hearing it was the original manuscript, Maerwyn was electrified. She shot to her feet. "Quick! Bring it here at once!" The maid presented the volume. Maerwyn took it with reverent hands, stroking the cover.

"Azure's own handwriting..." She opened it. The page revealed an elegant, flowing script. Maerwyn froze for a second, struck by a strange sense of familiarity. At a glance, it looked almost like... Elowen's writing?! The thought startled even her. She shot a quick glance at Elowen, her mind racing. How could she possibly be Azure? A woman like her, writing such inspired tales? Impossible! With a derisive snort, she dismissed the absurd idea. "Lady Daphne really knows how to pick a gift and how to give one," Maerwyn huffed, sliding Elowen a sidelong look.

"Not like some people..." Her voice was pitched just loud enough to carry. Elowen looked up, a pleasant smile on her face. "What was that, dear niece? Are you saying you don't care for the

books I gave you?" "I" Maerwyn began, the insult already forming on her tongue. But then she caught her mother's gaze. Isla's eyes held a heavy, unmistakable disapproval. Maerwyn choked back the words, her face contorting. She forced a different tone. I... I need some air." She clutched Tales of Luminara to her chest and stalked out, frustration in every step. Daphne shot a look at Elowen and followed.

Truth be told, Maerwyn didn't like Daphne much. Few people in the world met her standards- basically just her father, mother, brother, and Azure. ...And her uncle, Cassian. Though "met her standards" wasn't the right phrase for him. Regarding Cassian, Maerwyn felt only bottomless dread. 1/3 !:25 pm Chapter 43 Poisoned Wine Finished In short, she'd always looked down on Daphne. But today, gifted with the precious manuscript, Maerwyn was in a lenient mood and didn't immediately send her away. Your Highness, please don't be too upset," Daphne murmured softly as they walked.

"Lady Elowen has just married into such a lofty position. It's only natural she'd become a bit full of herself." Maerwyn just snorted. Daphne watched her carefully. "Though, given how familiar she is with so many gentlemen, such a. frec- spirited nature, I can't imagine the Duke of Duskmoor would-" "Oh, shut up!" Maerwyn cut her off irritably. "You kept hinting that Elowen and Piers were having an affair, that she was late because she was meeting him secretly. And what was the truth? She was with my father!

Do you have any idea how humiliating that was in front of my mother just now?" Daphne blinked, then forced a placating smile. "But, Your Highness, whether she truly saw the King or not... that's merely her word, isn't it?" Maerwyn couldn't be bothered to argue. She couldn't exactly go and interrogate her father. Daphne sighed, as if speaking to herself. "If only one could

catch her in the act with another man-that would settle things." Maerwyn suddenly stopped and turned to look at her, a new light in her eyes. Back in the hall, not long after, servants entered bearing wine.

A delicate, ornate carafe was placed on each table, its rich, heady aroma quickly filling the Gilded Hall. Maerwyn returned shortly after. Elowen glanced up and saw that the sullen, stifled anger from before had completely vanished. In its place was a smile of sure victory. From across the room, Maerwyn's gaze met hers, glittering with a barely-contained excitement laced with unmistakable malice. The expression was a perfect match for the one from her past life. A cold weight settled in Elowen's stomach. Last time, Maerwyn hated her for trying to marry Alaric.

She had secretly plotted, drugging the wine. Back then, Elowen had no clue. She told herself this was the palace, and it was a princess' birthday feast- what could possibly go wrong? 24 Chapter 43 Poisoned Wine She had underestimated just how vicious Maerwyn could be. Finished Elowen had drunk the offered wine without a second thought. The heat had come upon her swiftly, a relentless, uncomfortable fire spreading through her veins. Feigning concern, Maerwyn had then suggested a maid escort her to a nearby antechamber to freshen up and sober up. But that antechamber had already been prepared.

Two guards were hidden inside. They were tall, well-built, handsome men. And they were shirtless. Dizzy and disoriented, Elowen had entered. The maid had "accidentally" spilled water on her sleeve, coaxing her to remove her overdress. The maid had then slipped silently away, and the two guards had emerged from the shadows. By the time Elowen realized the trap, it was too late to flee. Their hands, strong and unyielding, had closed around her wrists. And then Maerwyn had arrived, kicking the door open with her entourage in tow.

What the assembled ladies had witnessed was the scene Maerwyn had engineered: two half-naked, muscular guards, and a disheveled, flushed Elowen caught between them. 1.7K 2:25 pm
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Chapter 44 A Tainted Toast That incident had quickly reached Alaric's ears. He had refused to hear a single word of Elowen's explanation. He already despised her, and this had pushed his disgust to its absolute limit. Finished Perhaps a part of the reason he later refused to touch her was the deep-seated belief that she had been "soiled." Back then, because the marriage contract between Elowen and Alaric still stood, Theodric and Isla had issued a strict, absolute command: the matter was to be sealed, not a whisper allowed to escape.

Yet, rumors of Elowen's alleged tryst with the guards spread like wildfire regardless. Elowen became the laughingstock of the entire Vanelle. She dared not leave the palace, dared not face anyone. She hid in her chambers, drowning in misery, humiliation, and a venomous hatred directed inward. Later, Elowen slowly figured it out. She shouldn't hate herself. She was the victim. She had committed no crime. The guilt lay with Maerwyn, with the two guards, with the maid-with all those who had conspired against her. Now, reborn, Elowen would never again let herself be cornered.

She would fight back. She would ensure the wicked tasted the full bitterness of their own poison. 'Aunt Elowen.' Maerwyn, now seated, poured herself a goblet of wine. Just as she had done in that other life, she raised it toward Elowen. "A toast to you." Elowen met her gaze, her expression polite but distant. "I'm not much of a drinker." Maerwyn wasn't about to let her off so easily. She pouted. "No way you don't drink. Isn't it said that everyone from a military family can hold their liquor? Don't tell me you're the exception?" She then adopted a penitent sigh.

"Aunt, I was disrespectful earlier. I truly see my error now. I'm offering this toast to make amends. You wouldn't refuse me, would you?" Elowen's eyebrow arched slightly. So, emotional blackmail it is. Isla intervened diplomatically. "Elowen, if you truly don't want to drink, then don't." Maerwyn panicked at once. "How could that be?!" 1/3 Chapter 44 A Tainted Toast Isla now frowned, sensing something was amiss. "I... I really just want to make things right." Maerwyn insisted, forcing a contrite tone.

"To mend our relationship..." Isla clearly didn't believe a word of it and opened her mouth to press further. Finished "Alright then," Elowen said, sounding as if she had reluctantly relented. "Since Maerwyn is sincerely remorseful, I wouldn't want to disappoint her." She gestured to Mira to fill her goblet. Lifting her own cup, she then turned to Isla. "Your Majesty, won't you join us? That we have become family is a rare blessing. It would be lovely to share this toast together." Isla was not fond of wine and hesitated.

Maerwyn, now wholly focused on getting Elowen to drink the drugged wine, eagerly chimed in. "Yes, Mother! It's my birthday. Just one cup, please?" Unable to withstand the combined pressure, Isla gave a reluctant nod. Three goblets met in the air with a soft clink. Watching Elowen drain her cup in one go, Maerwyn nearly laughed aloud. Oh. Elowen. Now you're truly finished! A short while later. Elowen raised a hand to her temple, her eyes growing hazy, as if filmed with moisture. "Your Majesty, Princess Maerwyn... my head really hurts." Before Isla could speak, Maerwyn jumped in eagerly.

"Aunt must be feeling the wine! Autumn! Quickly, escort her to the antechamber to rest!" A maid named Autumn stepped forward from behind Maerwyn. "This way, Your Grace." Elowen rose, her steps slightly unsteady as she followed the maid out. Maerwyn only saw her retreating

back. She did not see how, once out of sight, the feigned drunkenness melted from Elowen's face. Her eyes were clear and sharp, and a subtle, cold curve touched the corner of her lips. Maerwyn watched her leave, a triumphant, poorly-concealed smirk twisting her features. Isla saw it and her frown deepened.

"What mischief are you plotting now?" Maerwyn adopted an innocent expression. "Whatever do you mean, Mother? You wrong me." Isla knew her daughter all too well. She lowered her voice. "In the past, if you teased or bullied Elowen a little, it was of little consequence. But now it's different. She has married Cassian! Need I remind you of his standing with the army? Or how dearly your father holds his brother? Elowen is the Duchess of Duskmoor now.

If you cause trouble for her and word reaches your father, not even I'll be able to shield you from his wrath!" Chapter 44 A Tainted Toast Finished A flicker of genuine fear passed through Maerwyn. She had almost forgotten. Elowen was no longer just that annoying woman clinging to her brother. She was her aunt by marriage now. She pursed her lips, muttering, "But Uncle Cassian is still unconscious, isn't he? And even if he wakes, he might not take her side..." Before she could finish her thought, Isla's body gave an involuntary shudder. "Mother?" Maerwyn asked, concerned. "Are you unwell?"

Your face is so flushed..." Isla fought against a strange, creeping discomfort spreading through her limbs. She took a steadying breath. "Maybe I'm drunk. I don't usually drink, and this wine is strong today..." Maerwyn hissed, "It's Elowen's fault! Why'd she have to rope you into drinking?" "I... I shall be fine after a short rest," Isla said, pushing herself to her feet. Her form swayed unsteadily. 1.7K 3/3 admin

Chapter 45 A Trap Sprung A nearby lady-in-waiting hurried forward to steady her. Finished Maerwyn watched her mother's unsteady retreat with a flicker of worry, but it was quickly smothered by a surge of glee. As soon as Isla was out of sight, Maerwyn began counting on her fingers, a triumphant smile spreading across her face. Just a little while longer, and I'll lead everyone to witness the scandal! Elowen was seated on a stone bench in the palace's rear colonnade. Mira stood beside her, gently fanning her with a silk fan.

At the sound of approaching footsteps, Elowen looked up to see Isla, her steps faltering, her cheeks tinged with an unnatural pink. Elowen rose and approached, her face a mask of concern. "Your Majesty, are you quite alright?" "A bit too much wine, nothing serious," Isla managed, her mind still clinging to a thread of clarity. She glanced behind Elowen. "Wasn't Autumn supposed to be with you? Where is she?" Elowen's expression didn't waver. "I sent her to fetch a sobering draught from the royal physician." Something felt off to Isla. But her head felt stuffed with wool-swollen, dizzy.

A strange, insistent heat was beginning to prickle beneath her skin, making coherent thought difficult. She swallowed, her hand unconsciously tugging at the high neckline of her gown. "You seem unwell, Elowen said, her voice soft with feigned worry. "Perhaps you should rest in the antechamber. Autumn should return with the draught soon." Dazed, Isla could only nod.

Supported by her lady-in-waiting, she turned toward the side chamber. Behind them, Elowen's composed expression hardened slightly. Earlier, when no one was watching, she had switched their goblets.

The wine Elowen had drunk was perfectly fine. The wine Isla had consumed was the one Maerwyn had tampered with. Maerwyn's willful, domineering nature was, in large part, a

product of Isla's indulgence. Time and again, no matter the offense, Isla had covered for her, meting out no real punishment. In Elowen's past life, even after the truth of Macrwyn's plot had come to light, Isla had only offered a token reprimand. Not even a confinement to quarters. 2.25 pm Chapter 45 A Trap Sprung Firvones Instead, she had turned the blame on Elowen: "How could you/not even know what you were drinking?"

Besides, it was only some aphrodisiac wine. The body is your own-couldn't you control yourself? Now, watching Isla's retreating back, Elowen thought coldly. Your turn now, Your Majesty. Do you know what you just drank? Is your own body under your control? "Let's go." Elowen said quietly to Mira. She did not return to the Gilded Hall. Instead, she turned toward the heart of the palace. This way led to Theodric's study. Halfway there, however, she came face-to-face with a familiar, and unerly unwelcome, figure-Alaric.

Without a second thought, Elowen moved to step around him and continue on her way. Alaric's brow furrowed. He raised an arm, blocking her path. 'Stop.' Elowen turned her face to the side, refusing to meet his gaze directly. He looked down at her, his eyes inscrutable. 'I've just come from Father. I hear Uncle Cassian is fully awake now?' Elowen gave a slight nod. "So you'd do well not to offend me. My husband would not take it kindly." A low, derisive laugh escaped Alaric. "Husband: You speak as if he dotes on you.

If that were true, why didn't he accompany you to the birthday banquet today?" Elowen remained unruffled. 'He has important matters of his own to attend to.' eyes, his "Fool," Alaric sneered. 'You understand nothing of men. He didn't accompany you because, in his affairs are more important than you are. My uncle already has someone in his heart. Do you truly believe that person is you?' He didn't wait for a reply. And you, wielding your new title like a bludgeon,

humiliating others at the palace gates-if word of that reaches my uncle, he will despise you for it." Elowen knew it.

He had swallowed Daphne's twisted version of events whole. Just as he always had in the past. Her expression cooled several degrees. "Whether he likes me or hates me is a matter between husband and wife Not your concern. Now, move aside. I need to see His Majesty." The words 'husband and wife' grated on Alaric's ears like shards of glass. His jaw tightened. He took a sudden, aggressive step toward her, his voice dropping. "You marred my uncle, and yet you carry on with Piers? If my uncle learns of this, he will not spare you!" Elowen nodded absently. "Mm-hmm. Noted.

I'm terrified." But her tone and the detached look on her face made it clear his words held no weight with her. N Chapter 45 A Trap Sprung 0441 Finished The dismissiveness only fueled Alaric's agitation. Elowen arched a brow. "Now, can you move?" He stood his ground, his gaze boring into her. "Elowen, don't think I don't know! You're hiding a man at Duskmoor Manor!" Elowen paused, genuinely taken aback for a moment. So much had happened these last two days, she'd totally forgotten about that stable boy! If Alaric knows... that has Marwen and Vivian's meddling written all over it.

I'll settle that score later. 1.7K admin

Chapter 46 A Confrontation and a Lie Exposed Right then, Alaric caught every tiny flicker on her face. Guilty? Finished His eyes narrowed. "So full of talk about marrying my uncle willingly, about loving him. And yet you hide a man who looks so much like me in his manor." A strange, unwarranted pleasure bloomed within him. His eyebrow arched. "Elowen, do you regret it? Back then, you lashed out and said you'd marry the Duke of Duskmoor instead of me. Since you

moved into Duskmoor Manor, you dream about me every night, don't you?" Elowen felt a wave of revulsion. She'd had enough.

"Alaric," she snapped, her voice cold with fury. "Did that last fever of yours finally cook what little sense you had left?" He smirked. "Struck a nerve, have I?" "You're not just wrong, you're delusional!" Her brow furrowed in disgust. "If I harbored feelings for you, wouldn't I treat a man who resembles you like a treasure? Wouldn't I, like some ancient king, build a gilded cage to keep him in luxury? Why would I have him shoveling manure in the stables?" Alaric faltered. His smirk vanished, his lips pressing into a thin line.

Slowly, the memory clicked into place-when he first saw that man, the guy was caked in mud, pale as a sheet. Clearly not living well. She was using him like an animal. "You're a grown man, the Crown Prince no less. How can you be so utterly witless?" "You-Alaric's eyes turned icy, her insult hitting its mark. "And another thing," Elowen cut him off, her tone frosty. "My admiration for the Duke of Duskmoor is genuine. Marrying him was a considered choice, never a whim. I do not dream of you. I don't even think of you! Today is a celebration. I've just eaten.

Spare me your nauseating drivel." Alaric's handsome face darkened with rage, his jaw clenched so tight it ached. Suddenly, Elowen took a step closer, invading his space. "I should be asking you. Why do you keep questioning if I regret my marriage? Why do you keep asking if I still pine for you? Your Highness... could it be that you are the one with feelings? That you are the one filled with regret now that I've married the Duke?" Alaric stiffened, his face draining of color, then flushing with a sickly pallor. She had struck a nerve, deeper than he cared to admit. He had been dreaming of her.

Sometimes it was the past, when he and Elowen were inseparable. 1/3 2:26 pm ppp. Chapter 46

A Confrontation and a Lie Exposed Sometimes it was strange scenes-maybe in the Crown Prince's Wing-where he and Elowen were together, like they were wed, living as husband and wife. The past was razor sharp. The future felt fogged over, like seen through mist. Bottom line, those dreams were hitting more and more often. 6:4 Finnhed Now, with her so close, the delicate fragrance from her hair filled his senses. It twisted inside him, stirring unwelcome memories and a chaotic, restless agitation.

In a burst of irritable violence, he shoved her away. "Nonsense! The sight of you disgusts me! How could I possibly regret anything? I'm overjoyed you're no longer clinging to me!" Elowen, caught off guard, stumbled backward. Her back slammed hard against the cold palace wall. The impact was solid, knocking the breath from her lungs. A sharp pain blossomed, followed by a numb tingling across her shoulder blade. Alaric belatedly realized his overreaction. His hand started to reach out to steady her. "You two-what are you doing here?" Theodric's voice cut through the tension.

Alaric's arm froze mid-air, then snapped back to his side. He struggled to compose himself, but his expression remained strained. "...Father." Theodric, ever perceptive, noted his son's disquiet with a barely perceptible frown. He turned his attention. to Elowen, studying her face. "Elowen, are you unwell?" Alaric jumped in. "She's fine." Theodric's gaze flicked to him. "I was speaking to Elowen. Do not presume to answer for her." Chastised, Alaric pressed his lips together, his eyes darting nervously to Elowen. A memory from her past life surfaced. They'd never consummated their marriage.

When Theodric found out, he asked about it. Alaric had answered with gentle concern, "Father, Elowen has been feeling unwell. Out of consideration for her health, we've postponed the consummation." When Theodric had turned to Elowen for confirmation, Alaric's eyes had held a sharp, unmistakable warning. Unable to meet his gaze, Elowen had lowered her eyes and whispered, "It's true. It's all my fault. Please, Your Majesty... do not blame His Highness." Now, from an angle Theodric couldn't see, Alaric was looking at her with that same cold, warning glare.

He wanted her to hide what just happened. If Theodric learned Alaric had shoved Elowen in a fit of temper, he'd tear into him. After all, Elowen was the Duchess of Duskmoor now. That title carried weight. Elowen straightened up, rubbing her sore back. "In truth, Your Majesty, I am not unwell. It's just that His Highness pushed me rather forcefully. My back met the wall quite abruptly, and it stings a bit." Alaric stared at her, stunned. She... she just said it. Just like that. Theodric looked equally surprised.

"Alaric pushed you? Whatever for?" Elowen let out a small, weary sigh. "I cannot claim to know His Highness' mind. I was on my way to see you when he stopped me. He demanded to know if I regretted marrying the Duke of Duskmoor. I told him I had not a single regret. That seemed to anger him, and he pushed me." 1.7K admin

Chapter 47 The Trap Closes Alaric's face turned deathly pale. Theodric's brow furrowed into a deep, angry crease. His gaze, heavy with authority and displeasure, fixed on his son. "Is this true?" Alaric's lips parted, but no sound came out. Theodric's expression turned icy. He turned to Alaric's attendant. "You speak. If you dare shield him, you will answer to me." The

attendant dropped to his knees with a thud, his voice trembling. "Y-Your Majesty... it is true. His Highness... did push the Duchess." Which meant the rest of it was likely true as well.

Theodric's eyes darkened with growing anger, his gaze sharp as a blade. "Are your days still too idle? Was my recent admonition wasted? I told you to comport yourself as a Crown Prince should! Yet here you are, accosting Elowen with such nonsense! Need I remind you she is now your aunt by marriage?" Alaric dared not argue. He hung his head like a scolded child, accepting the reprimand in silence. After delivering the rebuke, Theodric turned to Elowen, his tone softening into one of gentle apology "The fault lies with me for failing to instill proper discipline. Elowen, please...

accept my deepest apologies." He then asked, concern etching his features, "How is your back? Shall I summon a physician? We can't have it scar." A wave of bitter irony washed over Elowen. In her past life, after Maerwyn's "discovery," Theodric had not openly chastised her, but neither had he stood by her. He had not declared his belief in her innocence, nor had he ordered a true investigation. Isla had openly favored Maerwyn. Theodric, while perhaps sensing the impropriety, had not pressed the issue. After all, Maerwyn was his daughter by blood.

Elowen was only a future daughter-in-law-an outsider Besides, Elowen's father and brother were gone. Alaric had been indifferent. In all the world, she had had no one to champion her. What did the honor or life of a lone orphan girl matter? Only now was it different. Elowen had married Cassian. No matter what, Theodric had to give Cassian face Chapter 47 The Trap Closes Finished It proved a harsh truth-who a woman married mattered above all else. But that was not the most pressing matter now. Thank you for your concern. Your Majesty, Elowen replied. The injury is minor.

However, there is another, more urgent matter Back in the Gilded Hall. Maerwyn's mind was far from her own celebration. The aphrodisiac wine had been prepared well in advance of her birthday. Maerwyn was of an age to be betrothed. From her parents hints, they intended to choose a husband for her from among the newly elevated young lords of merit. She found the idea uerly beneath her. A princess of the realm deserved a scion of a great noble house. She had set her sights on the youngest son of a general.

He came from a military family, was handsome and tall, and by all accounts, lived a clean life with no mistresses She had sounded out her parents, and their response had been far from enthusiastic. So, she had prepared the potion. If necessary, she would have used it on him. Once they had sex. her parents would have no choice but to consent. Too bad he hadn't come to the palace today. Still, it wasn't wasted. Using the potion on Elowen wasn't a loss. Maerwyn counted the minutes. It had been quite some time since Elowen drank the wine and left with Autumn.

The effects must be in full force by now. Maerwyn felt a thrill of curiosity. What did Elowen look like when the heat took her? And how 'spectacular would she be, clothes a mess, trapped with those two guards? Impatience burned within her. The time had come. She sprang to her feet and caught Daphne's eye from across the room. Daphne had already gathered four other young noblewomen, their heads bent together in gossip Meeting Maerwyn's gaze, she immediately understood. 'Shall we accompany Princess Macrwyn for some 2/3 Chapter 47 The Trap Closes fresh air?" she suggested brightly.

The group rose and followed Maerwyn in a chattering procession toward the side chamber. Maerwyn led the way, a triumphant smile playing on her lips. Finished She had already dismissed the guards from this area under a pretext. The corridor was deserted and silent. As they

neared the chamber door, faint voices drifted out. The specific tones were muffled, but it was clearly a man and a woman. A man asked, "How did it end up like this?" A woman answered, "I don't know... I feel awful, I want you... please... give me..." Maerwyn felt a prickle of vicarious shame. How brazen!

She threw the door open with a dramatic flourish, her voice ringing with accusation. "Who dares engage such debauchery here?!" A startled gasp came from within the room. For some reason, that gasp sounded eerily familiar. Before she could process it, Daphne gasped behind her, pointing. "Your Highness, look!" Maerwyn's eyes snapped to the scene before her, and her pupils dilated in shock. The man inside the chamber was stern and imposing, wearing the royal diadem. His dark robe, embroidered with subtle patterns, seemed to absorb the dim light.

"...Father?!" The word escaped her in a strangled whisper. Why is Father here? Where are the two guards I arranged? There was no time to ponder. Her gaze shifted to the disheveled woman in her father's arms. in 1.7K ◦ 1 admin

Chapter 48 Reversal of Fortune The woman was trembling violently, desperately burrowing into Theodric's embrace. Seeing that, Maerwyn exploded and stormed forward. "You bitch!"

"Maerwyn!" Theodric snapped, his brow furrowed. Finishind "Father! How could you do this to Mother? And you're protecting her?" Maerwyn retorted, her neck rigid with outrage. If Elowen really got into her father's bed, was she supposed to call Elowen Mother from now on? No way in hell. She reached out to claw at the woman's shoulder. "Have you no shame? Married to my uncle, yet you dare seduce my father!

You vile, immoral-" Her wrist was caught in a vice-like grip. Theodric's face was dark with anger, his words slow and deliberate. "Maerwyn. Enough." Wait-was Father really shielding

Elowen like this? Rage boiled over. "No, it's not enough!" She was about to unleash her fury on her father when a clear, calm voice sounded from the doorway. "Your Majesty, the physician is here." Maerwyn froze. Elowen spoke again, sounding puzzled. "Why is there such a crowd?" Maerwyn turned her head. Standing in the doorway, perfectly composed, was Elowen. Then who is in Father's arms?

A dreadful realization dawned. Maerwyn turned back, her movements stiff, and finally saw the woman's partially revealed profile. Isla's cheek was flushed an unnatural crimson, her eyes glazed and unfocused, her lips a vivid, swollen red. "Mother...?" Maerwyn's voice trembled. How? How is it Mother? Elowen drank the wine! What went wrong? Her head swam. Theodric's voice, heavy with command, cut through the silence. "All of you, out!" Chapter 48 Reversal of Fortune He meant Daphne and the others. Finished No one dared disobey the sovereign. They scrambled over each other to flee the scene.

"Have the physician administer the antidote for Her Majesty," Elowen suggested softly. Theodric gave a curt nod. He lifted Isla in his arms and placed her gently on a nearby chaise lounge. The physician behind Elowen stepped forward, examined Isla briefly, then proceed with the acupuncture. Theodric sat on the edge of the chaise, his sharp gaze settling on Maerwyn, filled with a cold, regal fury. "Explain yourself. What happened?" Maerwyn knew she had been outmaneuvered by Elowen. She shot a hateful glare her way before clenching her jaw. "It was Elowen!

She did this!" Theodric's eyes narrowed dangerously. "You accuse the Duchess of Duskmoor?" "Yes!" Maerwyn hadn't yet pieced together how the trap had been sprung, but her only recourse now was to push all blame onto Elowen. She adopted a pitiable expression. "Father, how could I

ever harm Mother? It must have been Elowen! She must have drugged Mother's wine!" Elowen, standing to the side, seemed to startle at the accusation. She gave Maerwyn a look of innocent bewilderment but ultimately said nothing, only letting out a quiet, resigned sigh. She lowered her eyes and kneeled before Theodric.

"Your Majesty, the fault is mine. Today is Princess Maerwyn's birthday. Let her enjoy the remainder of her celebration in peace." Maerwyn snorted inwardly. Just as I thought. A spineless coward. She doesn't dare expose me... But her moment of triumph was cut short by Theodric's gentle yet firm reply to Elowen. "This matter has nothing to do with you. I know you are kind-hearted and wish to avoid conflict, but this child has been spoiled beyond measure by her mother and me. After what she did today, she needs to be taught a lesson." Maerwyn stared, stunned.

Theodric turned his stern gaze back to her. "You claim the Duchess plotted against you? Then explain how you knew your mother would be here. When you burst in just now, before you'd even seen the scene clearly, the first words out of your mouth were bitch. You obviously knew exactly what was happening inside. You just thought the woman was the Duchess." Maerwyn struggled for words. "I... I heard strange noises from outside... I suspected someone was inside behaving improperly..." Theodric pressed on, his voice icy.

"When you entered, before you saw your mother's face, what were your exact words? Do you recall?" 213 2:26 pm ppp Chapter 48 Reversal of Fortune Macrwyn's face went ashen. Finished "You said. 'Married to my uncle, yet you dare seduce my father.'" Theodric quoted coldly. "Now, tell me. If the Duchess were the one who drugged the wine, why would you be so certain the person in this chamber was her?" "I... I..." Panic seized Maerwyn's heart. Theodric had already

reached his conclusion. His words were final. "It was you. You drugged the wine intended for the Duchess.

You sought to ruin her!" Maerwyn's knees gave out. She collapsed to the floor with a thud.

Elowen watched her quake and grovel, feeling no sympathy at all—only a rush of savage relief. In the last life, she'd been the one interrogated like this. Isla had not been so merciful as to dismiss the crowd. She had confronted Elowen in front of everyone, demanding to know what had happened. Elowen had said Autumn brought her here; she hadn't known anyone was inside. 1.7K

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Chapter 49 A Reckoning 7440 Finished Back then, Autumn had wept, claiming Elowen had insisted on entering the chamber and refused to be dissuaded. The two guards had sworn that Elowen had dragged them inside, stripped their shirts, and told them that since she was to marry Alaric soon, she wanted a final taste of freedom. Elowen had desperately denied it. She had tried to explain about the wine. Isla had ordered the wine from the table to be examined. The physician had declared it perfectly untainted. In that moment, Elowen had felt as if she'd been plunged into an icy abyss.

She had looked instinctively at Maerwyn and met her gloating, triumphant smile. She had understood everything then. Kneeling on the floor, disheveled and humiliated under a barrage of pointing fingers and scornful looks, she had been consumed by helplessness and shame. The memory still chilled her blood. She could never understand how one woman could so callously destroy another's honor. But she had learned—a blade doesn't hurt until it cuts your own flesh. The reprimand Maerwyn was receiving now was nothing less than she deserved. And it was still not enough.

Collecting her thoughts, Elowen spoke softly. "Your Majesty, it was surely an error of judgment. I'm certain Princess Maerwyn regrets it deeply. Now that I married Cassian, and she calls me 'Aunt, let's just drop it today.'" Invoking Cassian ensured Theodric could not let the matter slide easily. Cassian wasn't here, so she might as well borrow a little of his influence discreetly. Strategic retreat was an excellent tactic. Hearing this, Maerwyn twisted around, furious. "Quit playing saint! You think I don't know what you did?"

If it weren't for you-" "Maerwyn!" Theodric roared, cutting her off. "Your aunt shows you mercy, and you have the gall to press your advantage! I have indeed spoiled you beyond reason!" Tears welled in Maerwyn's eyes, a mix of fury and self-pity. "I didn't-!" "Silence!" Theodric thundered. Maerwyn flinched, tears finally spilling over her cheeks. She had never seen her father this angry. "Bring them in!" Theodric commanded. 1/3 Chapter 49 A Reckoning Finished Heavy footsteps sounded from the corridor. Guards entered, escorting three individuals: Autumn and the two palace guards.

Maerwyn's defiant posture crumpled instantly. Elowen watched her reaction coolly. Earlier, when Autumn had been leading her to the side chamber, Elowen had stopped midway, claiming a sudden, severe headache and ordering Autumn to fetch a physician. Autumn had frowned. "Her Highness instructed me to take you directly to the chamber to rest, Your Grace. Please try to endure it. A headache is nothing serious." Mira had stepped forward without hesitation and delivered a sharp slap across Autumn's face. "Do you remember who you're addressing?"

The Princess' order is important, but the Duchess' health is not? Telling Her Grace to 'endure it- have you lost your mind?" It was a tactic Mira had picked up from watching Edith. Stunned by the blow and Mira's fierceness, Autumn, clutching her reddened cheek, had scurried off to obey.

Elowen had praised Mira quietly. The area around the side chamber had already been cleared by Maerwyn's orders, so it was easy for Elowen to have the two guards she had brought with her enter and subdue the waiting palace guards. As instructed, they gagged the men and held them elsewhere.

Then, Elowen had waited in the colonnade for Isla. Once Isla entered the chamber, Elowen had gone to find Theodric. She could have left Isla alone with the two guards. But she could not bring herself to do something so vicious to another woman, no matter her faults. Besides, bringing Theodric made everything cleaner and more definitive. She had told Theodric that while resting from the wine, she had heard strange noises from the side chamber and had people seize them. Then she saw Isla heading that way, looking unwell. Being young and unsure, she had sought his guidance.

Theodric had gone to calm Isla. Elowen had excused herself to fetch the physician. And just as she returned, Maerwyn had stormed in to catch the adulterers-her own parents. Theodric said coldly, "You three. Speak the truth." Autumn prostrated herself on the floor, not daring to look up. Theodric pointed at the two guards. "You. Speak." 2:26 pm ppp. Chapter 49 A Reckoning Finished They served Theodric, not a princess. They dared not lie. Just as they opened their mouths, a weak voice came from the chaise. Your Majesty...

Thanks to the physician's injection, the effects of the potion had receded enough for Isla to regain some clarity. She had heard most of the exchange between Theodric and their daughter and understood the gist of what had transpired. Theodric turned to her, his tone softening. "Are you feeling better?" Isla pushed herself up to a sitting position. "I am fine. But Elowen was wronged

today because of me. The fault is mine, as Queen. Please punish me." She made as if to rise and kneel. Theodric quickly took her wrist, stopping her. "This has nothing to do with you.

The blame rests solely on Maerwyn for her wicked, reckless plot!" 1.7K 1 admin

Chapter 50 True Mastermind Is Someone Else Isla cleared her throat softly. "Maerwyn is still a child. She doesn't know any better. How could this be her doing?" Elowen wasn't surprised. Isla had chosen, once again, to shield her daughter. She had to admit, while Isla might not be a just queen, she was a fiercely protective mother. Even after being drugged herself and suffering for it, she still wanted to cover for her daughter. Bolstered by her mother's words, Maerwyn sniffed and straightened her spine. Theodric frowned, his voice growing colder. "You have always coddled her.

This is the result. The evidence is before us, and you still seek to conceal her guilt?" Isla glanced calmly at the kneeling Autumn and the guards. "Maerwyn may be willful, but she has a good heart and knows right from wrong. She would never drug her own aunt. Clearly, someone with ill intent sought to harm the Duchess and chose to pin the blame on my daughter." As soon as the words were spoken, despair flashed in Autumn's eyes. She bit her lip, then pressed her forehead to the floor. Her voice trembled. "It... it was me! I am to blame!" Elowen's brow furrowed slightly.

Pick a few servants as scapegoats. Wash the master's hands clean. Die in their place. Her sister-in-law had told her it was a common, ugly tactic in palaces and great houses. "You see?" Isla said with a sigh. "She must have meant to harm the Duchess, but I drank the wine by mistake." Theodric opened his mouth to speak, but Isla pressed on, "I am unharmed, and the Duchess is

unharméd, too. Didn't she just say she wouldn't pursue it?" Theodric fell silent, momentarily at a loss. Isla seized the advantage. "Today is Maerwyn's birthday, after all.

To make a public spectacle of this would only invite ridicule. Let us resolve this quietly and be done with it." Elowen could not accept this outcome. She lifted her face. "Your Majesty-" "Elowen," Isla interrupted smoothly, "surely you would not wish the Duke to learn of such an unpleasant affair? He and His Majesty share a deep fraternal bond. It would be a pity for such a trivial matter to sow discord between them." She was using Cassian to silence her! Elowen's lips parted, but the words died in her throat. She had no ground to stand on.

If Cassian found out, he would blame me, wouldn't he? 113 Chapter 50 True Mastermind Is Someone Else She slowly lowered her eyes, a sense of defeat settling over her. 6:0 Finished Just as she was resigning herself to retreat, a distinct sound echoed from the corridor outside-the steady, rhythmic creak of wooden wheels on flagstone. Then, Cassian's voice, cool and deliberate, cut through the tense silence. "Your Majesty. Seems you are bullying my wife." Everyone in the room stiffened, their expressions shifting in varying degrees of surprise and apprehension. Elowen stared, stunned. Cassian?

How is he here? He said he had urgent business. And his words... Is he standing up for me? While she was still reeling, the sound of the wheelchair grew closer, finally coming to a halt beside her. Elowen saw a broad, long-fingered hand extend towards her. She turned her head and met Cassian's deep, dark gaze. He raised an eyebrow. "Why are you kneeling? You've done nothing wrong. Aren't your knees sore?" A warm rush of emotion flooded Elowen's chest. She placed her hand in his palm and let him help her to her feet. "Cassian!

What brings you to the palace?" Theodric's voice held genuine pleasure as he looked Cassian over. "You look much better! Color has returned to your face!" Unable to rise for a proper bow, Cassian inclined his head from his chair. "Thanks to the diligent care of my wife." Theodric beamed. "Is that so? Then it seems my matchmaking was inspired!" "Indeed, Your Majesty was most wise," Cassian replied with a faint smile. His gaze shifted back to Isla. "Your Majesty. Do you hear clearly now?" Isla was momentarily confused. "Hear... what?" Cassian spoke slowly, each word weighted.

"Elowen and I were married by His Majesty's decree. I hold my wife in the highest esteem. To insult her is to insult both His Majesty and me." Elowen's heart felt suddenly, wonderfully warm. He was drawing a line, telling Isla and everyone else that she was under his protection. Isla forced a smile. "Of... of course no one would insult the Duchess..." Theodric added firmly, "You have my word, Cassian. I'll not allow any slight against your wife." 2/3 Chapter 50 True Mastermind Is Someone Else 949 Finished "With Your Majesty's assurance, I'm at ease." Cassian's gaze swept the room once more.

"All right. Let's get back to dealing with what just happened." Isla hesitated. "What... happened?" Cassian's fingers tapped twice on the arm of his wheelchair. "I listened for a while outside. The story grows more curious by the minute. This maid... how many times has she even laid eyes on my wife? What motive could she possibly have to use aphrodisiac wine in such a scheme? And even if, against all reason, she bore some petty grudge, how did she manage to enlist palace guards in her plot?" His eyes, cool and assessing, settled on the kneeling Maerwyn.

"It stands to reason the true mastermind is someone else." 1.7K 3/3 admin