

Awakening Love: Reborn to Be His Duchess Novel

Chapter 461 The Truth Unmasked Finished Elowen felt a ripple of unease and gestured lightly toward Zachary. "Didn't you say you'd taken a liking to someone? He made a point of coming to see you today." Elara paused, then followed her gaze. The moment she saw Zachary, she went still, tilting her head as she searched her memory with surprising seriousness, as if trying to piece together a half-forgotten dream. Then her expression brightened in sudden clarity. "Oh, right. I did fall for someone." Elowen blinked, completely thrown off, and turned to look at Rowena.

Wasn't she supposed to be so lovesick she could barely function.... Rowena pressed her fingers to her temple, clearly at a loss. What on earth did I end up raising... Zachary turned to Elowen, his tone measured. "Your Grace, what I need to say next is... rather personal." Elowen understood immediately and gave Mira and Anson a subtle look. They both inclined their heads and slipped out without a sound. Rowena followed, pausing only to close the door behind her with quiet care. Elowen hesitated for a brief moment, wondering if she should excuse herself as well.

Before she could decide, Zachary had already risen and was walking toward Elara, The moment passed, and she remained seated by the desk. Elara lifted her slightly flushed face to look at him. Up close, he was even more striking than she remembered, his features sharp and almost dazzling in a way that made it hard to look away. She gathered herself quickly and spoke in a soft, earnest voice. "You might not remember me. I'm Elara Wrenner. My father serves under His Grace, the Duke of Duskmoor." Elowen lowered her gaze slightly. Oh, he knows exactly who you are. He knows your father very well.

After all, your father is being held under his authority... and not gently treated. Zachary stepped closer, and Elara's words began to tumble out a little faster. "That day at the manor, when we first met, I nearly lost my footing, and you caught me just in time. I fell for you right then. I know we barely know each other, but feelings can grow, can't they? Look at His Grace and Your Grace. They hadn't even met before they married, and now everyone in Vanelle talks about them." Elowen's lips pressed together faintly. 1/3 2:45 pm Chapter 461 The Truth Unmasked We've already met.

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And it's not like he slowly fell for me. He was into me from the very beginning. Zachary stopped just a step away from Elara. Finished He stood slightly taller, lowering his gaze to meet hers, and let out a quiet breath that carried a hint of resignation. "We can't be together." The color faded from Elara's cheeks. "Why not?" Instead of answering, Zachary reached for her hand and gently guided it to rest against his chest. Elara froze for a heartbeat, her thoughts going blank.

Then, almost without thinking, she pressed lightly, her fingers testing the shape beneath the fabric as if trying to understand what felt... off. Her eyes widened all at once. From where she sat, Elowen watched the reaction and found her thoughts drifting in a completely different direction. Is it really that solid... The first time I touched Cassian like that, I reacted the exact same way. It's unfair how... surprisingly firm it is. "You... you..." Elara's voice trembled, her words catching as if her tongue had forgotten how to move. "You're a...

woman?!" Elowen's eyes widened a beat later as realization hit her just as hard. She looked from Elara to Zachary, then back again, trying to make sense of what she had just heard. Zachary gave a small nod. "I am not Zachary." Her voice shifted naturally now, no longer disguised, clear and bright with a softness that could not be mistaken. "I am Flowira. My brother and I exchanged

places." She continued calmly, "Miss Wrenner, I truly appreciate your feelings. But we are both women.

"There is no future for us." Elara nodded slowly, though her expression had gone completely blank, the earlier warmth gone as if it had never been there. After a brief pause, Flowira added gently, "So... would you mind letting go now?" "Ah." Only then did Elara realize she was still clutching her. She pulled her hand back as if she had touched a hot iron, her face burning as she stood there, unsure what to do with herself.

Flowira adjusted her collar with composed ease, then turned to Elowen and lowered herself into a formal ^{2/3} Chapter 461 The Truth Unmasked bow, her posture smooth and deliberate, carrying both grace and sincerity. Finished "Your Grace, concealing my identity was never meant as deception. It was a necessity. Today, I've chosen to be honest with both you and Miss Wrenner. Partly to honor my word and clear up her misunderstanding, and partly because I trust your judgment. This matter carries serious weight, and I ask that you keep it in confidence.

"You have my deepest thanks." Elowen had already steadied herself and inclined her head. "You have my word, Your Highness." "Thank you." Flowira straightened and returned to her seat. Elara remained where she stood, still processing. Elowen glanced at her, concern softening her voice. "Miss Wrenner... are you holding up all right?" 2.5K ◦ admin

Chapter 462 Not Quite Heartbroken Finished Elara's gaze drifted slowly toward Elowen, unfocused at first, then settling as she blinked a few times. Her lips parted, and when she spoke, her voice sounded dry and uncertain. "Your Grace... I think I might actually be a little heartbroken." Elowen felt a quiet laugh stir in her chest. It was hard to blame her. This was a girl

just beginning to understand her own feelings. The first time, she had fallen for Cassian, only to watch him marry someone else.

Then, just as her heart opened again, she found herself drawn to a man who turned out not to be a man at all. Anyone would feel thrown off balance after that. Elowen was about to offer something gentle in return, but Elara continued without missing a beat. "So, Your Grace... could you write me another story soon? If I have something really good to read, I'm sure I'll feel a lot better." Elowen stared at her. Then she laughed, unable to stop herself. That night, pale moonlight drifted over Duskmoor Manor, and the whole estate settled into a deep, undisturbed stillness.

In the bedchamber, most of the lights had been put out, leaving only a small glass oil lamp burning low by the bedside, its glow soft and steady. Elowen had already fallen asleep, though not deeply. At the faint sound of footsteps, her eyes opened slightly, and sure enough, Cassian had returned. He adjusted the wick of the lamp, set it lower, then removed his boots and slipped into bed beside her. Without hesitation, he drew her into his arms, letting her rest comfortably against the warmth of his chest.

"Did I wake you?" "Not really," Elowen murmured, shifting until she settled just right against him. "I wasn't sleeping that deeply anyway." She went on to tell him everything, from her aunt's letter to what had happened earlier with Flowira and Elara, her voice soft in the quiet room.

Cassian listened without interrupting. When she mentioned Elara asking for a new story, he let out a low, amused chuckle. "She says she's fallen for someone else, but if you ask me, she hasn't strayed very far at all." Elowen tilted her head slightly. "But I'm a woman too." The amusement in his eyes deepened.

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"She fell for your stories first. Once she realized you were the one 1/3 2:45 pm Chapter 462 Not Quite Heartbroken behind them, it was only natural she'd grow attached to you as well. Same as Maerwyn." Elowen gave a small nod. "I sec." Now I'm curious what would happen if she ever met Maerwyn... 艙 Finished After a short pause, Cassian spoke again, as if something had just occurred to him. "By the way, Ella." "Hmm?" "What Flowira said earlier was true. The Nordan delegation is ready to begin formal negotiations.

His Majesty called me in this afternoon to go over the details." Elowen lifted her head slightly to look at him through the dim light. "He wants you involved." Cassian nodded, his fingers absentmindedly brushing through her hair. "Something this important, something that affects the stability of the border and the future between two nations, won't be left entirely to court officials, and certainly not to anyone with their own agenda. I know Nordia well, and I command part of the forces. There's no stepping away from this." Elowen listened, then caught the faint pause in his tone.

"Who else?" Cassian glanced down at her, his expression deepened by the low light. "Alaric." Elowen's body stiffened slightly. Cassian noticed at once and took her hand, giving it a gentle squeeze. "His Majesty says that during his confinement, Alaric has been unusually disciplined. Every day, without fail, he sends word asking after the King's health. Not once has he mentioned being released or returning to court. His tone has been respectful, even sincere. I had it looked into. He's been studying quietly in the Crown Prince's Wing, with no sign of anything else.

His Majesty believes there may be genuine remorse there." Elowen stayed quiet for a while. "No matter what," Cassian continued, "he is still the Crown Prince. Leaving him out of something as significant as formal negotiations would go against protocol and could stir unnecessary

speculation." Elowen let out a soft breath. That much made sense. Cassian was right. This confinement had never been permanent. And as for her.... She had no intention of letting things end here. She tilted her head slightly. "So when is he being released?" Cassian lifted her hand and pressed a light kiss to it.

"The order was given tonight. Starting tomorrow, he'll be free to come and go." 2:45 pm pppp.

Chapter 462 Not Quite Heartbroken 7:30 Finished At the Crown Prince's Wing, after Quin delivered the King's decree lifting the confinement, he offered his congratulations and withdrew, taking most of the guards stationed at the entrance with him. Alaric stood in the courtyard, staring at the now-open gates as a long-held weight seemed to lift from his chest. "Finally..." The word slipped out under his breath before he let out a low laugh, the sound growing fuller, edged with relief and satisfaction.

He knew it. His father would never truly cast him aside. Energy surged through him as he turned in place, already thinking ahead. "I should get cleaned up, change into something proper... I finally get to step outside again. I need to see Ella." His eyes lit with sudden urgency. "Yes. Right now. I'm going to Duskmoor Manor." 2.5K admin

Chapter 463 Held at the Threshold Finished He had already started toward the door, his mind painting the moment ahead with vivid clarity, the way Elowen might look when she saw him, surprised at first, then lighting up with something warmer. "Your Highness." The voice came soft but steady, cutting cleanly through the thought before it could take hold. Iris moved without a sound, stepping just enough to place herself in his path. Her head remained lowered, her posture composed and respectful, though there was nothing uncertain about the way she stood.

Alaric stopped short, irritation tightening across his face. "Move aside. What are you doing?" "I beg your pardon, Your Highness," she said evenly, "but at this moment, your priority should be the Nordian delegation. You have yet to review the reports, the letters exchanged over these past months, or the terms being prepared for negotiation. Those matters cannot wait." He let out a breath, already impatient. "I can deal with that later. I haven't seen Ella in far too long. I'm going to Duskmoor Manor now." Iris lifted her gaze just slightly. "Then allow me to ask you something, Your Highness.

Do you mean to see the Duchess just once, or do you intend to see her often, whenever you wish?" The question caught him off guard, if only for a second. "Of course I intend to see her whenever I like. That's not even a question." "Then this is exactly why you should not go now." She took a small step closer, her voice lowering just enough to keep it between them. "His Majesty only just lifted your confinement. No one can say what he is thinking yet.

If word reaches him that the first thing you did after stepping out was ignore state affairs and ride straight to Duskmoor Manor to visit your uncle's wife, how do you think that will sound?"

Alaric's expression shifted, the edge of his certainty faltering. Iris watched him closely and continued, calm and precise. "Would His Majesty see that as devotion, or as recklessness? Would the court praise you, or whisper that you still lack judgment? If he decides nothing has changed, you may find yourself confined again before the week is out.

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And next time, it may not be so easy to step outside these walls." Alaric opened his mouth, ready to argue, but the words stalled before they formed. His jaw tightened. Seeing that hesitation, Iris softened her tone, guiding rather than pressing. "Your Highness, timing matters. If you show His Majesty that you are steady, that you can put the realm before your own desires, he will begin to

trust you again. Once that happens, there will be no more restrictions placed on you." She let the thought settle before continuing.

"And in time, when you take the throne, everything within this kingdom will be yours to command. When 1/3 2:45 pm Pppp. Chapter 463 Held at the Threshold Finished that day comes, whom you choose to see, whom you choose to keep by your side, will be entirely up to you. Even bringing the Duchess into the royal residence, openly and without question, would be well within your power." That was the part that reached him. She's right. I'm the Crown Prince. One day, all of this will be mine. Why risk everything now for a single impulsive visit? Why give his father reason to doubt him again?

"...You're right." He exhaled slowly, the tension leaving his shoulders. "I was rushing into this. That was my mistake." Iris lowered her eyes again. "Your Highness is wise to see it." He glanced once more toward the outer gate, then straightened his cloak. "I'll return to my study. I want every report on Nordia brought to me. Tristan, see to it." "At once, Your Highness," Tristan answered. Alaric turned and walked back toward the study without another word. Tristan watched him go, then leaned slightly toward Iris, his voice low with genuine admiration. "That was impressive.

You turned him around in a matter of moments. If you hadn't stepped in, he would've gone straight out." Iris did not look up. Her lashes hid whatever flickered in her eyes. "It's for his sake." The words sounded dutiful, exactly as they should: But she knew better. She had clawed her way into a place within the Crown Prince's household, and in a court like this, standing still meant falling behind. If Alaric lost favor again, or worse, if his position ever came into question, everything she had built would collapse with him.

Better to guide him now, to keep him walking a path that would hold, than scramble later for a way out. At the very least, until she found something more secure, he could not be allowed to fall. From the study, Alaric's voice carried down the corridor. "Iris. Get in here." "Yes, Your Highness." She gave Tristan a brief nod and moved off at once. He watched her go, her figure slight but steady, and decided against saying anything more. Inside, Alaric had already taken his seat behind a heavy desk.

Iris stepped over to the writing table, poured a small measure of water into the inkwell, and stirred it with 2/13 2:45 pm P p p Chapter 463 Held at the Threshold Finished practiced case. A soft, steady rhythm filled the room, quiet and unhurried, as she prepared the ink for writing. Alaric tapped his fingers against the desk, then paused as something came back to him. "When Quin delivered the decree earlier, he mentioned Uncle Cassian would be involved in the negotiations as well, didn't he?" "Yes, Your Highness," Iris replied, her movements never breaking rhythm.

Alaric let out a short, humorless laugh. "And he's still bound to that wheeled chair, isn't he? A man who can't even stand properly, and he's expected to take part in something like this. Father really has lost his sense." admin

Chapter 464 Quiet Calculations Or perhaps he simply favors that brother far too much. 0:30 Finished Iris glanced up briefly before lowering her eyes again. "There have been whispers lately, Your Highness, that the Duke's leg has improved." Alaric scoffed outright. "Whispers are all they are." I've seen how this plays out before. Nothing about that man changes so easily. In his previous life, at this very point, Cassian had still been confined to his chambers, his injury

keeping him from even the smallest involvement in court matters, let alone standing on his own.

A sudden recovery?

Nothing more than a performance. A calculated show to steady public opinion, to remind everyone of his standing, to protect both his title and the woman beside him. Alaric knew him too well. "Since I'll be part of these negotiations," he went on, a slow, deliberate smile forming, "it would be a shame not to give him the chance to prove himself." The implication beneath the words was anything but kind. Iris's hand paused for the briefest moment, sending a faint ripple across the surface of the ink. She said nothing.

Once, she had believed that staying close to the Crown Prince was the safest path forward, that with enough patience and care, she could secure a future for herself. But watching him now, so certain he understood everything, so easily led by his own desires while believing himself in control, she felt something shift. Perhaps this was not the place to tie her fate to after all. Perhaps she needed to start looking elsewhere, sooner rather than later. The following morning, at Duskmoor Manor, Cassian had already left for the palace to meet with Alaric and discuss the negotiations.

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Elowen stepped into the study and had Scarlet and Nikki brought in. The moment Nikki crossed the threshold, her eyes lit up, wide and bright as she took in everything around her, from the tall bookcases to the polished desk and the sunlight spilling across the floor. This was her first time inside the Duchess's study. 1/3 2:45 pm Chapter 464 Quiet Calculations Finished Back home, only her father had ever had a room like this. After he passed, it had belonged to her brother. It had never been a place she could step into freely. She had heard this one was built just for the Duchess.

Her thoughts drifted until Scarlet gave her sleeve a quick tug. Nikki snapped back, then quickly followed Scarlet's lead, lowering herself into a neat bow. "Your Grace." Elowen smiled and inclined her head. "From today on, you'll both be assigned here. The work is simple enough. Keep the shelves in order, see that everything stays clean, tend to the plants, and assist when needed. If anything is unclear, ask Mira or Cora." Nikki nodded eagerly. "Yes, Elowen." Scarlet shot her a look at once. "Your Grace." Nikki made a face, then corrected herself with a quick grin. "Right.

Your Grace." Scarlet turned back, her tone more careful. "Your Grace, I'm grateful for the chance, but I can't read. I'm worried I might not be suited for work in a study. If possible, I'd do better with outdoor tasks or anything more physical." Elowen regarded her with a gentle expression. "Then you'll learn. No one starts out knowing how. Stay here for now and see how it goes. If it truly doesn't suit you, we'll find something else." She gestured lightly toward the room. "Not everything here requires reading. You can dust, keep things in order, look after the plants.

That alone is already plenty." Scarlet met her gaze. There was no pressure in it, no hidden test, just quiet reassurance. The unease in her chest eased without her even noticing when it began. She lowered her eyes. "Understood, Your Grace." Elowen nodded. "Mira, show them around and go over what needs doing." "Yes, Your Grace." Mira stepped forward with a bright smile. "Come on, I'll walk you through everything." She led them around the study, explaining each section in turn. Nikki listened closely, nodding again and again, determined not to miss anything.

Scarlet followed more quietly, her gaze moving across every shelf, every surface, taking it all in with careful attention. Once Mira finished, she clapped her hands lightly as if settling on a plan. "All right, we'll start simple today. Dusting the shelves. Nikki, you take these three rows. Scarlet,

the other three. Don't pull the books out. Just use a soft cloth and brush the dust away, especially along the top edges." 2/3 2:45 pm P ppp. Chapter 464 Quiet Calculations She handed each of them a clean cloth. They both took them without hesitation.

0491 Finished After finishing her accounts, Elowen had Gerda and Edith distribute the monthly stipends as usual. With a rare moment to herself, she leaned back slightly and said, "Mira, could you grab the book I was reading earlier? The one titled Tales of the Fox Spirit, I think." "Got it!" Mira called, already heading for the shelves. Time passed. No sound came from her direction.

Elowen leaned to the side, peering over. "What's taking so long? Can't find it?" 2.5K 2:45 pm P p p p admin

Chapter 465 The Girl Who Never Forgets 948 Finished Mira stood in front of the towering bookcases with a troubled look on her face, scanning row after row. "There are just way too many books here..." She murmured the title Tales of the Fox Spirit under her breath as she searched, her fingers brushing along the spines. Not this shelf. And not that one either... A flicker of anxiety crept into her voice. "Where on earth did it go? I'm sure I saw it last night..." "Mira." A gentle voice came from nearby. "What does the book Her Grace is looking for look like?" It was Scarlet.

Mira answered without turning around, still focused on the shelves. "It's bound in indigo leather, no title stamped on the spine." Then she paused and glanced over her shoulder. "Why?" Scarlet lifted a hand and pointed toward a case further inside the room. "Then it should be over there. Second shelf up, fifth from the left. Indigo binding, blank spine." Mira hesitated, clearly unsure, but she walked over anyway and pulled the book free. The moment she saw the cover, her eyes widened. It really was Tales of the Fox Spirit.

"It actually is!" she said, both surprised and delighted, hugging the book as she turned back.

"Scarlet, how do you remember something like that so clearly? You only just arrived, and you can't even read." Scarlet lowered her gaze, her voice soft and steady. "That's why I asked what it looked like. I wiped down these shelves earlier, so I remembered where everything was placed."

"You're seriously underselling yourself." Mira laughed as she carried the book over to Elowen.

"Your Grace, Scarlet's memory is unbelievable.

She only cleaned the shelves once, and she already knows where everything is." Elowen lifted a brow, clearly intrigued. "Does she now?" Mira's smile turned playful. "Why not put her to the test?" Elowen did not hesitate.

2:45 pm P p p Chapter 465 The Girl Who Never Forgets Finished
She called Scarlet closer, dipped her pen into ink, and wrote three words on a sheet of parchment. "Take a good look at these. Remember what they look like." Scarlet studied them carefully, then gave a small nod. Elowen counted silently to three, then covered the writing with her hand. "All right.

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Now go find the book that matches what you just saw." Scarlet answered softly and walked toward the shelves. Elowen and Mira watched without blinking, their attention fixed on her. Scarlet did not wander or hesitate. She went straight to one of the cases, reached for the third shelf, and pulled out a single volume with quiet certainty. Elowen took it, opened it, and found it was exactly the one she had in mind. Still not satisfied, and now genuinely entertained, she tested Scarlet again. And again. Four times in total.

Each time, Scarlet found the correct book quickly, without a trace of doubt. Elowen and Mira exchanged a glance, both seeing the same thing reflected in the other's eyes. Astonishment, and something close to awe. Is this what it means to remember everything at a glance? "Scarlet, that's

incredible," Elowen said, her tone warm and sincere. "With a mind like yours, if you'd been born a man, you'd have taken top honors in the court qualification trials without question." A faint flush rose to Scarlet's cheeks. No one had ever said something like that to her before.

There had been praise in her past, but it had always come wrapped in something unpleasant, something that made her skin crawl. Elowen looked at her thoughtfully. "Scarlet, would you like to learn to read?" Scarlet froze, clearly caught off guard. Elowen's voice softened. "You've got a gift for remembering things. Letters, meanings, patterns, you'd pick them up faster than most. If you're willing, I can teach you a handful each day. Give it a little time, and you'll be reading on your own.

It's actually quite enjoyable." "Your Grace, His Grace has returned." Anson stepped in to deliver the message. 2/13 2:45 pm PPPP. Chapter 465 The Girl Who Never Forgets Finished Elowen's attention shifted at once. She turned quickly to Scarlet. "Then it's settled. I'll start you with a few simple words, and you can go over them whenever you have time. I'm going to see Cassian first. I've been wondering how things went today." She stepped out of the study, and the moment she lifted her eyes, she saw him.

Cassian was being guided across the courtyard, seated in his wheeled chair as Bran pushed from behind. The afternoon light filtered through the branches overhead, casting shifting patterns across him. He looked at ease, almost languid, though the stillness in his expression gave him a distant, unapproachable air. Then he heard her footsteps and looked up. Their eyes met. Elowen's face lit up at once, her smile bright and unguarded. "Cassian, what are you doing here?" The sharpness in his features softened immediately.

"You were still asleep when I left this morning, and I didn't want to wake you. I've been tied up all day, but you kept crossing my mind. The moment I had a break, I came back. Figured I'd find you here." Her smile deepened. She stepped over to Bran and took hold of the handles. "I've got it from here. Go take a break." Bran released his grip without hesitation and stepped back with a respectful bow.

Elowen turned the chair smoothly and guided it inside, the wooden wheels rolling softly over the threshold as she handled the movement with practiced ease, careful enough that there wasn't the slightest jolt. Once inside, she moved to his side and leaned lightly against the writing desk. "So, how did it go today? You met with Alaric about the peace talks, right? Everything go smoothly?" She paused, then leaned in a little closer, lowering her voice. "Do you want me to have everyone step out?" 2.5K B admin

Chapter 466 A Name That Shouldn't Matter Finished Cassian gave a slight shake of his head.

"No need. Today was mostly about settling the escort lists for both sides, along with the banquet that follows the negotiations. All of that will be announced sooner or later." Elowen nodded, listening. "Alaric put forward a few names," Cassian continued. "Galen, for one, and several others who are clearly tied to his circle." Elowen let out a quiet huff. "He's not wasting any time, is he? Already trying to plant his people in the middle of it.

Makes you wonder what he's scheming this time." A faint curve touched Cassian's lips. "Even he knows better than to make it too obvious. If the delegation were entirely his faction, people would start talking. So he added another name to balance it out." Elowen tilted her head slightly. "Dominic," Cassian said. "Deputy of the King's Works. One of Rodney Jones's protégés. That puts him firmly on Elira's side." A sharp clink broke the moment. Elowen turned toward the

sound. Scarlet stood nearby, holding a lacquered serving tray with two cups of freshly brewed coffee.

Her hand must have trembled, because the cups had knocked together just enough to make that sound. A few drops of hot coffee spilled over, landing on the tray and splashing against the back of her hand, turning the skin red almost instantly. Her face went pale for a brief second, but she quickly lowered her eyes and steadied herself, though her breathing grew uneven. Cassian's gaze lingered on her for a moment, his expression tightening ever so slightly. Elowen spoke gently. "Careful. Did you burn yourself?"

Just set them down on the desk." "Yes, Your Grace." Scarlet placed the cups down, her movements controlled despite the tension in her hands. When she finished, Elowen added, "That's all for now. You can go. If it stings, ask Mira for some salve." Scarlet didn't move right away. She lifted her head and looked at Elowen, something conflicted flickering in her eyes. Her lips parted slightly, as if she meant to speak, then hesitated. "Your Grace..." Her voice came out dry. Elowen turned toward her. "What is it?"

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You've got something on your mind?" 1/3 2:45 pm Chapter 466 A Name That Shouldn't Matter

140 ee Finished Scarlet's lashes trembled, and for a moment it seemed like she might say it. Then she pressed her lips together and shook her head, the resolve draining out of her expression.

"No... it's nothing. I was careless." Elowen studied her for a moment but didn't push. "All right.

Go get some rest. You're not needed here." "...Yes, Your Grace." Scarlet lowered her head in a formal bow before turning to leave, her steps just a touch too hurried to be completely composed.

Only after the room fell quiet again did Elowen settle back beside Cassian, a small smile curving her lips. "I've had Scarlet and Nikki helping out in the study for now. And let me tell you, Scarlet is something else. She can't read, but her memory is astonishing. Mira showed her around this morning, and after a single look, she remembered where everything was and what it looked like." Cassian listened, faint amusement in his expression. "With a memory like that, give her a few months of study and she'd be at the top of the lists. At worst, second place." Elowen laughed softly.

"That's exactly what I said." The study grew quiet, filled only with the low murmur of their voices and the occasional birdsong drifting in from outside. Later that day, Cassian left to attend to his duties. Elowen remained behind, curled up on the cushioned window seat, absorbed in *Tales of the Fox Spirit*. The story pulled her in completely, its twists and turns unfolding one after another until she lost track of time. By the time she finally looked up, night had already settled in.

She covered a small yawn, rubbing at her neck before closing the book and setting it aside, preparing to return to her chambers. Just then, the candlelight flickered. Elowen glanced up. Scarlet was walking into the study. She wore a simple blue overdress, her hair neatly arranged, her brow tightly drawn, her lips pressed into a pale line. At first, Elowen assumed she had come with a request but felt too hesitant to speak, so she softened her tone. "What is it? It's late. Do you need something?" Scarlet took a slow breath, as though steadying herself.

She stopped a few steps away, then lowered herself into a deep, formal bow, her posture rigid with determination. Finished "Your Grace, I've gone over this again and again, and there's something I feel I have to tell you. It may be

important, or it may be nothing at all, but if I keep it to myself, I won't be able to rest." Elowen straightened slightly, her expression turning serious. "Go on. I'm listening." Scarlet drew in another breath before speaking, her voice careful and deliberate.

"The man His Grace mentioned earlier, Dominic, the Deputy of the King's Works... I've seen him before." Elowen stilled. Scarlet continued, "Back when I was at the Stargazer Pavilion." Elowen hadn't expected that. She gave a slow nod, signaling for her to continue. 2.5K 3/3 2:45 pm p p p p admin

Chapter 467 A Quiet Confession Finished "Lord Dominic comes to the Stargazer Pavilion all the time. Whenever he does, he usually asks for me to sit with him." Scarlet said, her voice tight, a flicker of unease slipping through despite her attempt to stay composed. Elowen remained still, listening without interruption, her expression calm and giving nothing away. Scarlet drew a breath and continued, "On the second day of March last year, he came again. That night he seemed in a terrible state. He drank alone, cup after cup, until he was deep in his cups.

Once he was drunk, he started talking, rambling really. Complaining about how his career was going nowhere, how his superiors kept him on a short leash. Then he said something I couldn't forget. He said, 'If I'd known better. I never would have tied myself to the Jones family. The Bakers treat people far better. When they heard I'd lost a hundred dollars at the gaming tables, they sent the money over without a second thought and told me not to worry about it.'" Elowen's gaze sharpened slightly. Dominic was known to be tied to the Jones family, publicly aligned with Elira.

Yet if Scarlet's account was accurate, he had already taken favors from the Baker family, Queen Isla's kin, and might well have shifted his loyalties behind closed doors. A hundred dollars was

no small matter for a court official, especially tied to gambling. That kind of debt could bind a man just as easily as it could ruin him. The air around Elowen seemed to grow heavier as her expression turned fully serious. Scarlet let out a shaky breath once she finished, as though the effort had drained her. Her shoulders slumped slightly.

"I know I've spoken out of turn, discussing a man of rank like this. And maybe what I heard means nothing. But I felt you should know, Your Grace. If I've overstepped, I'll accept whatever punishment you think is fair." Elowen's voice softened. "Why would this be something to punish? Scarlet, if anything, I should be thanking you." Scarlet flinched, her head lifting in surprise. Elowen met her eyes, her tone steady and sincere. "Whether it proves true or not, what you've told me matters. It gives me reason to look more closely, and I will.

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"You did the right thing" Scarlet stared at her, caught off guard, her eyes reddening before she could stop it. She had grown up at the bottom of the world, where people like her were decorations at best and disposable at worst. The noble and the powerful smiled when it suited them and looked straight through her the rest of the time. No one had ever listened like this, as though her words carried weight, as though she herself mattered. A sting rose in her nose, and her vision blurred. "It's getting late," Elowen said gently.

"You should get some rest." Chapter 467 A Quiet Confession Finished Then she added, almost as an afterthought but with quiet care, "And make sure you put salve on that burn." Scarlet nodded quickly. When she stepped out of the study, the night air had turned cool and still, iron sconces along the corridor casting a dim, steady glow. She walked toward the servants' quarters, and only then did the tears finally spill over, slipping down her cheeks in a steady stream and soaking into the front of her dress. She understood the distance between them.

No matter how kindly the Duchess treated her, no matter that she had been taken out of the Stargazer Pavilion and given respectable work, their stations were worlds apart. That was why, earlier that day when she heard Dominic's name and remembered everything, she had hesitated. What right did she have to speak of a court official? What if she was rebuked for overstepping? But the Duchess had saved her, had given her a place where she could stand with dignity. Keeping silent had felt wrong. So she forced herself to speak. And the Duchess had believed her. She had said thank you.

She had said you did well. She had even remembered the burn on her hand. A warmth spread through Scarlet's chest, something unfamiliar and overwhelming. She cried without a sound, yet a small smile curved her lips. So this was what it felt like. To be trusted. To be treated like a person. Soft moonlight spilled across her tear-streaked face, leaving it bright and clear despite the tears. The arrangements for the peace talks were steadily falling into place, and the appointed day was drawing near. Elowen's pregnancy had progressed enough that it could no longer be hidden.

As the weather in Vanelle warmed and her gowns grew lighter, the gentle swell beneath her bodice became more noticeable with each passing day. Her body had begun to protest in small ways. Her feet swelled by evening, and some nights sleep simply would not come. At the same time, with the negotiations approaching, Cassian had been occupied from dawn until late into the night, rarely able to stay by her side. It crossed her mind, almost absently, that it had been half a month since he last stepped into the kitchens for her.

When Hugh came to take her pulse, he glanced at her and said, "Your Grace, you seem a little out of sorts lately." 2/3 Chapter 467 A Quiet Confession Finished Elowen blinked, then shook

her head. "I'm fine." "Your pulse tells a different story." Hugh lifted a brow. "Let me guess. His Grace has been too busy to keep you company?" She hesitated for a moment, then let out a quiet sigh. "I do miss him, that's true. But he's dealing with important matters. If I start complaining over something like that, I'd only make things harder for him." Hugh gave a small, knowing nod.

"The talks are almost here. Once they're over, he'll be at your side day and night. You might end up wishing he'd give you a little space." That finally drew a faint smile from her. Hugh studied her for a moment, then said, "When you smile like that, you remind me of your grandfather.

Especially around the eyes." Elowen's interest piqued. "Cassian mentioned you trained under him." Hugh inclined his head. "I did. It's a long story, if you care to hear it." 2.5K 3/3 2:45 pm P

p pp. admin

Chapter 468 Old Stories and Quiet Schemes Elowen shifted slightly, settling in with clear interest. Finished Hugh began at an easy pace. "When I was twelve, I had it in my head that I'd make a name for myself as a wandering swordsman. I picked a fight in Falkriver, lost badly, and ended up bleeding out by the roadside. Your grandfather happened to pass through, took one look at me, and hauled me back with him. Nearly dying once tends to change a person, so I decided I liked the idea of staying alive. That's how I ended up studying medicine under him." A faint smile tugged at his lips.

"He didn't want me at first. Turned me away more than once. I stuck around anyway, running errands, pouring his drinks, saying whatever I thought might win him over. Eventually I told him I had no intention of going back to Vanelle. When he heard where I was from, he asked if I knew Clement. I said I did. Then he asked what I thought of him. Truth be told, I didn't know much. But the way your grandfather looked when he asked made it pretty clear what answer he was

hoping for, so I said I didn't think highly of him." Hugh let out a quiet chuckle. "That did the trick.

He took me in after that." Elowen fell silent for a beat. Clement was her father. She had always known her grandfather held him in low regard. When she was a child, he would often mutter, "Ella, your father's no good. Men who live by the sword rarely end well. Stay here with me in Falkriver, and I'll see you want for nothing." Hearing Hugh recount it now, she could almost picture the exact look on his face. Her mood lightened without her realizing it. Then she remembered something. "You started training with him at twelve, and you stayed in Falkriver. I've been there many times.

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How did we never cross paths?" Hugh shrugged lightly. "Back then I slept three hours a night and spent the rest of my time buried in study. Medical texts, herbs, pulse reading. I barely set foot outside, so it's no surprise we never met." Elowen nodded, understanding. At last, the day of the peace talks arrived. Given her condition, Cassian chose not to bring her along. The negotiations were to be held in the Hall of Imperial Grace within the royal residence. Cassian arrived just as the appointed hour approached and happened to run into Alaric outside the hall.

"Uncle," Alaric said immediately, "why didn't she come with you?" Cassian knew exactly who he meant. His expression cooled, just slightly. "She's expecting. I'm not about to drag her across the palace for something like this." His gaze flicked over Alaric. "What about you? Why isn't your Crown Princess here?" 2:45 pm Chapter 468 Old Stories and Quiet Schemes Finished Then, as though the answer had just occurred to him, he added with mild indifference, "Ah, right. I forgot. She's been stripped of her title and confined to the Secluded Wing. No children either.

There are some things you wouldn't understand." Alaric's jaw tightened, the barb landing exactly where intended. After a pause, he forced a thin smile. "The girl could never compare to her.

Elowen and I grew up together. I know her better than anyone. If things had gone differently, if not for everything that went wrong, the woman at my side today would have been her.

Everything you have now should have been mine." Cassian's expression didn't change. One brow lifted slightly, his gaze carrying a trace of cool amusement. "So that's how you passed the time during your confinement.

Telling yourself stories like that." Alaric's composure cracked for a fraction of a second. Cassian continued, his tone even, each word deliberate. "You speak now like a man full of regret, but I can't seem to recall who it was that kept her at arm's length and made her miserable." He paused briefly, as if considering it. Then a faint, sharp smile touched his lips. "Must have slipped my mind. Could've been anyone. Or maybe just a fool who didn't know what he had." Alaric's face flushed, anger surging up so fast he could barely speak.

"You..." Cassian had already turned away, no longer interested. He lifted a hand slightly. "We're going in." "Yes, Your Grace," Bran replied, guiding the wheelchair forward with steady hands as they passed Alaric without another glance. Alaric stood rooted in place, staring after him, his chest rising and falling unevenly as something bitter climbed up his throat, Every word had struck where it hurt most. Did he regret it? Of course he did. If I'd had another chance, if I'd come back sooner... none of this would have happened Elowen would have been his.

Her warmth, her care, even the child she carried, all of it would belong to him. Not to Cassian. Not to a man who had taken everything without effort. Jealousy twisted in his chest, burning through what little restraint he had left. His gaze fixed on the retreating wheelchair, dark and

intent, as a slow, crooked smile formed. "Tristan," he said quietly, the words pressed tight, "everything's ready?" 2/3 Finished 2:45 pm pppp. Chapter 468 Old Stories and Quiet Schemes Tristan bowed his head. "Yes, Your Highness. Everything is in place. We're just waiting for the right moment." 2.5K B admin

Chapter 469 Terms and Tensions Finished Alaric let out a quiet scoff, forcing the irritation off his face as he smoothed his coat and stepped inside behind the others. This gathering marked the first formal exchange between Avenlor and Nordia, less a negotiation than a careful circling, each side testing how far the other could be pushed while laying out initial positions. Theodric had chosen not to attend in person. In his place, Cassian, the Duke of Duskmoor, and Crown Prince Alaric stood as Avenlor's representatives.

If this stage went well, the two monarchs would later meet to finalize a formal alliance. Nordia's side was led by Prince Roderic, Fourth Prince Zachary, and their deputy envoy, Byron. Cassian's wheelchair had barely settled at the head of the long table when Byron rose and inclined his head in a formal bow. "Your Grace." Zachary, still Flowira in disguise, sat poised and composed.

Apart from Roderic, no one present knew her true identity. Her gaze today?" drifted lightly to the empty space beside Cassian.

"Your Grace, will the Duchess not be joining us Cassian paused for a fraction of a second. Why does everyone suddenly care so much about my wife? The thought put a sharp edge in his voice.

"She is expecting and needs rest. She won't be troubled with state matters." Roderic gave a rough, humorless chuckle, the kind that grated against the ear. "I've heard that when a man's legs are shattered badly enough, it ruins more than just his stride. Leaves him with no heirs to speak of." His eyes flicked toward Cassian's legs, his tone turning openly vulgar.

"So tell me, are you certain the child she carries is yours? Would be a pity if you ended up raising another man's blood. Hah." His Avenlor was clumsy, but the insult landed cleanly. The hall went still. Byron stiffened, a sheen of sweat forming at his temples as he shot a cautious glance toward Roderic. Cassian did not react the way anyone expected. He simply lifted his eyes, calm and unhurried. "If memory serves, every time you lost to me on the field, you managed to run fast enough to save your own skin. I never crippled your legs. So where does all this experience come from?"

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Did your wife take another man to her bed, or have you been doing favors in someone else's household?" Roderic's defeats had always been a sore point. Being reminded of them so plainly, then mocked on top of it, snapped his temper. He slammed his palm against the table and surged to his feet, fury blazing. 173 2:45 pm Chapter 469 Terms and Tensions Finished "Uncle." Flowira's voice cut through the tension, sharp and controlled. Roderic turned toward her, breath heavy. "We are here for peace," she said, each word deliberate.

His chest rose and fell a few more times before he muttered a curse under his breath and dropped back into his seat. Once Alaric had taken his place as well, the talks began in earnest. Trade routes, border lines, prisoner exchanges, tribute structures, each issue tangled into the next, every clause argued over down to the smallest detail. Neither side gave ground. Voices rose, hands struck the table, and at times it felt as though the very rafters might shake loose from the force of it. The back and forth dragged on for three full hours before they finally broke.

Despite the constant friction, the framework had moved forward more than expected. Alaric rose first, lifting his goblet with an easy smile. "You've all done your part today. It's getting late, so I've arranged a supper in the adjoining hall. Think of it as a small token of hospitality. I hope our

honored guests from Nordia will join us." No one refused. His gaze slid toward Cassian.

Dominic, Deputy of the King's Works, stepped closer and lowered his voice. "Your Grace, will you attend as well?"

There are a few finer points from today's discussions I would prefer to report in private." There was something deliberate in his tone. Cassian gave a faint nod. In the adjoining hall, the tables were already laid with roasted meats, fresh bread, and spiced wine. Iron chandeliers cast a warm glow across the room as musicians began to play and dancers moved in smooth, practiced patterns. After several rounds of wine, Alaric judged the moment right. He raised his cup again, smiling. "Court feasts tend to blur together after a while. Music, dancing, the same old routines.

I've heard Nordia values strength and skill, and I've always admired that. Since this is a night meant to bring our nations closer. I thought we might add something more lively. A friendly bout, nothing serious, just enough to show a bit of spirit." Roderic leaned forward at once. "Now that sounds worthwhile. There's only so much wine a man can drink while watching dancers circle the floor." His gaze swept the room. "Though I don't see many warriors here. Looks like a hall full of courtiers. Who exactly are you putting forward?" 2/3 2:46 pm P p pp.

Chapter 469 Terms and Tensions 9445 Finished "Avenlor does not lack for either wit or steel," Alaric replied smoothly, his eyes brushing over Cassian. "Among those present, my uncle is known for strength few can match." Roderic let out a short, mocking laugh. "You mean him? He's bound to that chair. What's he supposed to do, compete in sitting still?" A few low chuckles followed. "If that's the contest," Roderic went on, "then I doubt anyone in Nordia could beat your Duke." The remark landed poorly. Several Avenlor officials stiffened, their expressions darkening.

Cassian, however, remained at ease, idly turning his goblet between his fingers as though none of it concerned him. 2.5K admin

Chapter 470 The Moment He Rose Finished Dominic spoke up, his tone firm. "That's hardly fair, Your Highness. The Duke's condition is temporary. He won't rely on that chair forever. And even now, that doesn't mean he cannot take part." Galen added with a measured sigh, "Still, since Nordia has raised the challenge, if His Grace declines, it may reflect poorly on Avenlor." The murmurs built, all of them pressing in the same direction. Toward Cassian. Alaric felt a flicker of satisfaction settle in his chest. This was exactly how he had planned it.

The banquet, the proposal, the deliberate mention of Cassian, he had set the stage knowing Roderic would take the bait. And now here it was. What could a cripple possibly do in front of everyone? The thought nearly made him laugh. Then Cassian's quiet chuckle cut through the noise. He set his goblet down with a soft, clean sound. "A fine idea, Your Highness," he said, his tone steady and unhurried. "If it adds to the evening and serves as goodwill between our nations, it would be poor form for me to refuse." He placed his hands on the arms of the wheelchair and pushed himself up.

For a heartbeat, no one seemed to understand what they were seeing. Then he stood. Straight and steady, his posture unshaken, his presence filling the room as though it had never left. The dark fabric of his ducal attire fell cleanly, revealing legs that were firm and unyielding. A wave of shock rippled through the hall. Several Avenlor officials rose to their feet without realizing it, eyes bright with disbelief and something close to relief. Across the table, the Nordian delegation stared openly. Roderic's expression froze. Alaric felt the blood drain from his face. That's not possible.

His legs were ruined. I saw it. I remember it. How is he standing right now? 1/3 2:46 pm P PPP.

Chapter 470 The Moment He Rose 0:20 Finished Cassian took a few measured steps forward, as if to make the point undeniable, then let his gaze settle on Roderic. "You wanted a bout. Let's have it." Roderic hesitated, something unsettled flickering in his eyes as old memories pressed in. "Byron," he said quickly, "you take this one." Byron blinked, caught completely off guard. Me? Cassian's voice remained calm. "I hold the rank of duke in Avenlor.

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If we're to compete, it should be with someone of equal standing." Roderic's jaw tightened, but no answer came. Cassian continued, almost conversationally, "No need to tense up, Your Highness. I'm happy to meet you on your own strengths. We could always see who runs faster." The meaning was unmistakable. Color rushed to Roderic's face, yet he could not find a single word to throw back. Cassian's gaze shifted again, landing on Alaric.

i There was nothing raised in his voice, nothing overtly threatening, yet the cold edge in his eyes made Alaric instinctively draw back, his throat tightening as he swallowed. That old fear had never left him. And now, with Cassian standing whole again, it pressed down harder than ever. By the time the feast ended and the hall began to empty, the air was filled with praise for Cassian, how he had lost none of his former strength, how he had upheld Avenlor's honor. Each word grated on Alaric. Once the others had gone, leaving only his close circle behind, the smile fell from his face.

He snatched up a cup and hurled it to the floor, where it shattered against the stone. Galen and the others lowered themselves at once into deep bows, heads down, not daring to move. "How did none of you know his legs were healed?" Alaric demanded, his voice sharp with anger. "What good are any of you?" Silence answered him. His gaze locked onto Galen, irritation

flaring hotter as he thought of Daphne. Without warning, he grabbed a wine pitcher and threw it. It struck Galen across the head.

The glass shattered, fragments scattering across the floor as blood welled at his brow and ran down, mixing with the last drops of wine. 2/3 2:46 pm pppp. Chapter 470 The Moment He Rose He did not dare lift a hand to wipe it away. "You useless fool," Alaric snapped. "Don't tell me you knew nothing." 9:0 Finished Galen lowered his head further. "Your Highness, I had heard rumors in recent days. Some claimed it was true, others dismissed it. I did not dare present uncertain information. I meant to confirm it before reporting to you.

I did not expect tonight to unfold like this." Alaric let out a cold, humorless laugh. "You always have something to say, yet nothing ever gets done." Galen paused, then spoke carefully. "Even so, tonight may not be entirely to your disadvantage." Alaric's eyes narrowed. "Go on. I'm listening." "The Duke's recovery has been kept hidden from everyone," Galen said. "Even from you. That raises a question. Does His Majesty know?" He lifted his gaze slightly. "His legs have clearly been healed for some time, yet he continued to appear confined to that chair.

That could be taken as misleading the king." 2.5K 1 3/3 2:46 pm P Ppp. admin