

Awakening Love: Reborn to Be His Duchess Novel

Chapter 471 The Snare Tightens Finished When he heard those last two words, Alaric's eyes narrowed slightly, the kind of subtle reaction that gave away just how quickly his mind was turning. That part's true. Father probably has no idea. If he went to the royal study under the excuse of reporting on today's negotiations and casually brought up that his uncle's leg had recovered, it would not necessarily lead to punishment, but it would plant doubt, and doubt alone could be enough to shift favor. With that thought settling into place, Alaric rose and headed straight for the king's study.

The moment he stepped out of the Hall of Imperial Grace, Iris called after him in a low voice, "Your Highness." He did not slow or turn, his gaze fixed ahead as he responded, "Yes?" "Are you going to see His Majesty to accuse the Duke of Duskmoor?" Alaric's tone carried faint impatience. "Isn't that obvious?" Iris pressed her lips together, hesitating just long enough to catch his attention. He glanced at her from the corner of his eye. "You don't think I should?" i She did not answer directly, her brows drawing together as she chose her words with care.

"The duke has always been cautious, and he and His Majesty have spent a lifetime understanding one another. When he appeared at the Stargazer Pavilion, he went to the palace soon after. I cannot know what was said, but it seems very likely he had already told His Majesty about his recovery." Alaric slowed, then stopped altogether. A moment later, the implication sank in. Of course. His uncle was not careless. More likely, he had already revealed the truth and then deliberately continued the act, waiting. So this was never about hiding anything. This was about a trap.

Today's negotiations had included a martial exhibition, and his uncle had known it from the start. He had been waiting for Alaric to make a move, waiting for him to push, so he could turn the moment around and make him look reckless and small. The more he followed the thread, the clearer the pattern became. It was not just one trap, but several layered together. 1/3 2:46 pm P ppp. Chapter 471 The Snare Tightens 0:5 Finished His uncle had likely anticipated that he would take the matter to the king, and when that happened, the blame would not fall where Alaric intended. It would fall on him.

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A cold sweat broke across his back. If Iris had not spoken when she did, he might have walked straight into it. Alaric turned to look at her fully now, his gaze sharpening. This woman was far more perceptive than Galen ever had been. Lowering his voice, he asked, "So what would you do?" Iris lowered her head slightly, her voice soft as a draft slipping through a stone corridor. "I wouldn't dare claim I have a solution. I only thought... the air is still bitter this time of year, and Your Highness has already had a long day.

It might be better to return to your own wing for now." Alaric studied her for a long moment before giving a quiet, noncommittal response. "Fine." The rest of the walk passed in silence, his earlier resolve replaced with a heavier, more cautious mood. When they returned to the Crown Prince's Wing, he went straight into his chamber. Iris moved to follow, but Tristan stepped in her path, lowering his voice. "It's late. I'll see His Highness settled. You should get some rest." "I need a word with him." Tristan hesitated, clearly reluctant, but eventually stepped aside.

Inside, Alaric stood by the window, looking out into the darkened courtyards where iron sconces cast wavering light along the stone paths. He turned at the sound of her steps, the candlelight shifting across his features. Before he could speak, Iris lowered herself into a deep, formal bow.

He said nothing, yet the weight of his attention pressed down on her, sharp and assessing.

Keeping her head lowered, she steadied her breath. "I know Your Highness holds no fondness for the Duke of Duskmoor. I may have a thought, though it is a clumsy one.

It might still be of some use." One of his brows lifted slightly. He stepped closer, then lowered himself so they were nearly at eye level, the dark fabric of his robe spreading across the floor.

"Go on," he said. At the far end of the palace road, Cassian was making his way toward the main gates. Dominic kept pace beside him, his smile stretched thin with effort. 213 :46 pm p p pp.

Chapter 471 The Snare Tightens "I've been meaning to ask, how has Rodney been lately?". 040 Finished His tone was overly warm, his hands clasping and rubbing together as he spoke. "If not for his guidance.

years ago, I would never have made my way in court. Now that he's getting older, I find myself worrying about his health more often." Cassian cast him a glance, one so cold it seemed to strip the warmth from the air. Dominic instinctively shrank back. "If you're so concerned," Cassian said, his voice flat and cutting, "you could visit him yourself. You both live in Vanelle. Or is the concern only for show?" Dominic's smile faltered. Cassian did not stop there. "He didn't sponsor me.

So what exactly are you expecting, that I call on him for you tonight, then report back in the morning so you can feel at ease?" Each word landed clean and sharp. Dominic felt the back of his tunic dampen as cold sweat spread across his skin. Cassian stopped suddenly. Dominic nearly walked into him, stumbling as he tried to regain his footing. "You're still following me," Cassian said, his expression unreadable. "Planning to stay the night at my manor?"

Should I send my wife away and make room for you instead?" Dominic's composure collapsed completely as he lowered himself in a hurried, awkward bow. "Your Grace, I wouldn't dare..."

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Chapter 472 Close Enough to Stay 0191 Finished His head remained lowered, his face pale. "I only meant... seeing that Your Grace's leg has recovered, I felt relieved for you." Cassian did not respond. He simply continued forward. By the time Dominic looked up again, all he could see was the edge of a dark cloak lifting in the night wind before disappearing into the waiting carriage of Duskmoor Manor. The carriage door closed, shutting him out completely. Dominic stood there for a long moment, watching it roll away into the darkness before finally letting out a breath.

He wiped the sweat from his brow, the chill of the night settling uncomfortably against his damp clothes. Everyone in Vanelle knew the Duke of Duskmoor was distant and sharp-tongued. Knowing it was one thing. Standing in front of him was another entirely. It left no room to breathe. Shaking his head, Dominic turned back toward his own carriage, his steps unsteady. He could not help but wonder how the young lady from Hale Manor managed her days, living beside a man like that. By the time Cassian returned, the manor had long since quieted for the night.

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He headed straight for the main residence, servants stepping aside as he passed. "Where is Ella?" he asked as soon as he entered. Gerda stepped forward to take his cloak. "Her Grace retired earlier. She should still be in her chamber, reading. Cassian acknowledged her with a quiet nod and continued on. Along the corridor, iron wall sconces flickered softly, their light shifting with

the draft and stretching his shadow across the stone floor. Inside the bedchamber, gauzy curtains framed the bed, half-drawn, with a warm glow spilling from a nearby lamp.

Elowen rested against the headboard, her head tilted slightly as sleep had claimed her. The book in her hand had slipped loose and lay open across the coverlet. Cassian slowed as he approached, his gaze settling on her face. 1/3 Finished 2:46 pm Chapter 472 Close Enough to Stay stay with you." She looked up at him. "You mean it?" "When have I ever lied to you?" She let out a small scoff. "More times than I can count." Holding up her fingers, she began listing them off with mock seriousness.

"You told me your leg was hurting, dragged me over, and then you kissed me, held me, and..." Her words trailed off, her cheeks warming. He laughed under his breath. "Did I?" She shot him a look, embarrassed. His smile deepened. "Alright, I did." He leaned in and kissed her again, slow and unhurried. She wrinkled her nose, pretending to complain. "You smell like you just woke up." 2.5K 1 3/3 admin

Chapter 473 A Morning at Ease The words sounded like a complaint, yet the warmth in her eyes gave her away. * Finished Cassian smiled, clearly amused. "Then I'll make you something worth waking up for. What are you craving?" Elowen actually took a moment to think, then her whole face brightened. "Some kind of noodle soup, light broth, nothing heavy." "Easy enough." Cassian shifted as if to get up. Before he could, she wrapped both arms around his waist and held him in place. He glanced down, his voice softening. "What's wrong?" Her face pressed into his chest as she spoke.

"We hardly ever get mornings like this. Stay a little longer and talk to me first. I'm not even that hungry yet." Cassian gave in without hesitation. "Alright. I'm not going anywhere." They lay

together in the quiet, the distant sound of birdsong drifting in through the window as dawn settled fully over the estate. "How did things go yesterday?" Elowen asked after a while. "Did anyone try to make things difficult for you?" Cassian almost laughed, because plenty had tried, though very few had managed anything worth mentioning. But something in him shifted, and he chose his words differently.

"Yeah. Alaric didn't waste time. First thing out of his mouth, he started taking jabs at me, said I was broken, useless, that no one in this world would ever care about me." Elowen went still for a heartbeat, then her eyes flared with anger. "What kind of nonsense is that? You have me. I love you, and our child will love you too. If anyone's alone, it's him." Cassian watched her defend him with such conviction, and the corner of his mouth lifted. "It's nothing. Ella. I can handle a few insults." "No." Her tone turned firm in a way that left no room for argument.

"I don't like seeing anyone treat you like that. Next time I see him, I'm not letting it slide." A quiet laugh escaped him. "Alright. I'll count on you to have my back." They kept talking, unhurried and close, letting the morning stretch around them. When she asked about the negotiations, Cassian walked her through everything in detail, holding nothing back. By the time he finished, Elowen said with certainty, "When they revealed your recovery at the banquet, you must've felt incredible." 2:46 pm P p pp. Chapter 473 A Morning at Ease Finished Cassian kept his expression composed.

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"It was fine. Still not as good as hearing you say you love me." She was just about to respond when her stomach let out a very audible protest. She froze, then flushed instantly. So much for not being hungry. Cassian chuckled under his breath, leaned in, and kissed her forehead before helping her out of bed. In the manor's back kitchen, Elowen settled into a wooden chair while

Cassian tied back his outer layer and set to work. He poured flour into a bowl, added water, and began kneading with practiced, steady movements.

The dough came together under his hands, smooth and elastic, shaped with quiet precision.

Elowen watched him for a while before speaking again. "Alaric will probably go straight to His Majesty to complain. I wonder what kind of punishment he's hoping to stir up." "I've already got people keeping an eye on the palace," Cassian replied calmly, never breaking rhythm. The dough softened further beneath his palms, turning supple and even. Elowen nodded, her thoughts aligning with his.

He had kept his recovery hidden on purpose, waiting for the right moment to use it against either Alaric or the Baker family. What happened at the banquet had been expected: Later that day, they returned to their chamber. Elowen rested against a cushioned settee by the window while Cassian settled in front of her, carefully lifting her foot into his hands. Her pregnancy had progressed enough that swelling had begun to set in, and some nights the discomfort woke her from sleep. He had been too occupied before, and she had chosen not to burden him with it.

Now, with time on his side, he made up for it. His hands were warm, his touch deliberate, working from her ankle upward along her calf, easing tension with steady, practiced pressure. Elowen closed her eyes, her body gradually relaxing, her thoughts drifting. A voice came from outside the door. "Your Grace." 2/3 2:46 pm Chapter 473 A Morning at Ease Finished It was Bran. Elowen blinked her eyes open, still half-drowsy. "The corridor's been cleared," Bran continued. "No one else is within earshot." Cassian didn't look up.

"Go on." Bran remained outside as he reported, "After leaving the Hall of Imperial Grace, His Highness returned directly to the Crown Prince's Wing. He did not seek an audience with His

Majesty." Elowen's eyes opened fully, sleep gone in an instant. "He didn't?" That alone was enough to set off alarm bells. That's not like him at all. In Elowen's memory, there had always been a few sharp and perceptive attendants in the Crown Prince's Wing, the kind who knew how to read a room and steer trouble before it surfaced.

But ever since Alaric changed, he had kept everyone at a distance and allowed no one close at hand except Tristan. As for Tristan, his loyalty was beyond question, but subtlety was not his strength. There was no chance he would ever think to advise restraint or caution. She straightened slightly. "What happened on the way back? Was he alone?" Bran answered promptly. "He was heading toward His Majesty's study at first, but stopped halfway. A maid spoke to him briefly, and after that, he turned around and returned." Elowen's gaze sharpened. "Which maid?" Bran had already looked into it.

"Her name is Iris. She used to serve Lady Daphne. After Lady Daphne was disgraced and confined to the Secluded Wing, Iris remained in the Crown Prince's Wing and now attends His Highness." 2.5K admin

Chapter 474 Quiet Calculations A faint crease formed between Elowen's brows. Cassian noticed immediately. "You're concerned about this Iris." She nodded, her tone steady but serious.

"Cassian, you know Galen once worked under my father. Daphne and I grew up around each other. I've seen this girl before. She's sharp, the kind of sharp that makes you uneasy." From outside, Bran added, "There's no need to worry, My Lady. His Highness asked her for advice at the time, and she claimed she had none to offer." Elowen exhaled slowly. "That just means she knows when to keep quiet.

Out in the open, with people passing by, of course she wouldn't say anything. Whatever she had to say, she would wait until they were back in private." Bran fell silent, his expression turning more serious. Elowen continued, her thoughts tightening into something more focused. "And think about it. When Daphne fell from favor, everyone tied to her was dismissed. Every single one except Iris. Not only did she stay, she ended up close enough to follow Alaric into something as sensitive as the negotiations.

That alone tells you she's not ordinary." A breeze moved through the corridor outside, stirring the iron wall sconces so their light flickered faintly against the stone. Elowen leaned back into the cushions and let out a quiet breath. "Cassian... I don't like this. Something about it doesn't sit right." Cassian looked at her, his voice calm but firm. "You're carrying our child. You don't need to fill your head with this." She was about to respond, but he spoke again first. "This is on Bran for bringing it up." Outside the door, Bran froze in place. God help me...

wasn't it Your Grace who told me to head to the Crown Prince's Wing and dig into this properly? Being a deputy is hard enough as it is. Being one at Duskmoor Manor is a whole different level of trouble. He said nothing, but the silence spoke for itself. Inside, Elowen couldn't help laughing, the tension easing from her expression. "How is that his fault? This is exactly what we asked him to look into." She reached out and nudged Cassian's arm.. He caught her hand mid-motion and held it, enclosing her fingers in his palm as he noticed how cool they were, warming them without thinking.

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1/3 2:46 pm P Ppp. Chapter 474 Quiet Calculations "Then don't worry," he said quietly. "And I won't blame him." The logic was questionable at best, but the intimacy in it was unmistakable. Elowen met his gaze, seeing herself reflected clearly in his eyes. Something in her chest

loosened. "Alright," she said softly. "I'll stop worrying." Only then did Cassian smile. Without turning, he called toward the door, "You're dismissed." "Yes, Your Grace." Bran answered quickly, relief evident even in his voice as he stepped away. Silence returned.

Cassian resumed, his hands moving from her calf down toward her ankle, steady and precise. It still felt soothing. But this time, Elowen couldn't drift off. Her eyes remained open, thoughts moving further and further away. Cassian noticed at once and lightly pressed his thumb against her toes. "Where'd your mind go?" Elowen hesitated, then said quietly, "Scarlet told me something the other day." Cassian lifted a brow. "What about?" Finished She looked at him directly. "Dominic once took money from the Baker family to cover a gambling debt.

A hundred." Cassian's hands slowed, just for a moment. Elowen continued, her voice gaining weight. "Think about it. He's an official, yet he spends his time in places like the Stargazer Pavilion and gambles on top of that. A little for fun is one thing, but a debt that large doesn't happen by accident. That's a habit that's gotten out of control." She shifted slightly, holding his gaze. "Once someone gets pulled into that, it doesn't stop. It cats through everything. Money, reputation, even family if it comes to that. And someone like that can't be trusted to stay loyal.

He claims ties to the Jones family, but after taking money from the Bakers, where do you think his allegiance really lies?" Cassian nodded once. "You're not wrong." "And then there's what happened in the Hall of Imperial Grace," she pressed on. "When Alaric put you on the spot, Dominic stepped in like he was helping you, saying your condition didn't matter, that you could still compete. But if you really think about it, all he did was push you further into the center of attention." "I know," Cassian said quietly. He reached up and smoothed the crease between her brows with his thumb.

"Ella, you don't need to carry all of this." Chapter 474 Quiet Calculations Elowen caught his hand before he could pull away. "Cassian, I've already lost my family once." He stilled. Finished "When it happened, it felt like everything collapsed at once. I didn't know where I belonged anymore, like I was drifting without anything to hold onto." Her voice softened. "It wasn't until I married you that I felt like I had a home again." Her fingers tightened slightly around his. 'Cassian... I can't lose you too." Something in his chest tightened sharply, the feeling both heavy and achingly soft.

He let out a quiet breath, then leaned forward and drew her into his arms, holding her close. 。

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Chapter 475 What She's Become Finished Pressed against Cassian's chest, Elowen listened to the steady rhythm of his heartbeat. It was slow, grounded, and reassuring in a way that settled something deep inside her. "It's alright, Ella," he said quietly, his chin resting against her hair. "Everything is unfolding the way it should." She breathed in, letting herself sink into that steadiness. "Even if something doesn't go the way we expect, it'll still be alright." He shifted slightly, his voice low with curiosity.

"Oh?" "I'm not the same person I used to be." She spoke without hesitation now, her tone calm but certain. "For a long time, I kept thinking I wasn't enough. After my father and uncles were gone, and after my brother passed, I convinced myself I could never carry Hale Manor on my own. I thought I'd fall short the moment it truly mattered." Her fingers tightened slightly against his sleeve before relaxing again. 'But lately, I've started to see things more clearly.

I understand what people are really after, I can weigh what matters and what doesn't, and I know how to hold on to the people I care about." She leaned back just enough to look at him, her gaze

steady, every word deliberate. 'So if anything ever happens to you, Cassian, if Duskmoor Manor is ever at risk, I won't hide away and break down where no one can see me. I'll stand my ground. I'll protect you, this house, and everyone in it who matters to me. I know I can do that.'" For a moment, Cassian said nothing. He simply looked at her.

Sunlight streamed across her face, softening every line, giving her an almost luminous warmth. The gentle fullness of pregnancy had replaced the last traces of girlish fragility with something steadier, something quietly enduring. He found he couldn't look away. Somewhere along the way, without him realizing it, Ella had changed. She was no longer someone who needed to be shielded. She wasn't the same person anymore. She'd come into her own, steady and self-possessed, with a quiet confidence that didn't need to announce itself.

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There was a grounded strength in her now, something you could feel even when she said nothing at all, held beneath an easy, composed exterior. A warmth spread through his chest, leaving him speechless. He lowered his head and kissed her, slow and unhurried, as if there were no need to rush anything at all. When he finally pulled back, he rested his forehead against hers, their breaths mingling in the narrow space between them. Finished "Alright," he murmured, his voice softer than before.

"Then I'll leave the rest of my life in your hands." With the broader terms of the Nordia negotiations already set, the following days were spent refining details. For once, Cassian had time to spare, and he spent it entirely with Elowen. They passed the hours reading together, playing quiet games of chess, or strolling through the courtyard after meals, letting the day stretch out at an unhurried pace. For a little while, life felt simple. Almost ordinary. Like any noble couple with nothing more pressing to worry about than how to spend the afternoon.

Elowen found herself wishing those days would last longer. News of Cassian's full recovery spread quickly through Vanelle, and before long, Falconcrest Manor and Warren, along with others, either sent gifts or came in person to offer congratulations. Cassian had little patience for any of it. He dismissed them with a few perfunctory words and returned to what he actually cared about, which was making sure Elowen ate well. On the third day, just before noon, he selected two excellent cuts of beef and headed straight for the kitchen, already planning how he would prepare them.

Not long after, Anson arrived with a message. "Your Grace, Lord Dominic requests an audience." Elowen lifted her brows slightly. "Did he come in a personal capacity, or is this official?" "He says it concerns state matters." That made turning him away more complicated. After a brief pause, she nodded. "Then bring him in." It was Dominic's first time setting foot inside Duskmoor Manor. The moment he passed through the heavy gates reinforced with iron, he felt it, a pressure in the air that made him instinctively straighten his posture and slow his steps.

He moved carefully, almost cautiously, as though any misstep might carry consequences. The deeper he went, the more unsettled he became. By the time he reached the inner court, the sight of the guards posted along the passage, each one tall, broad, and utterly unreadable, made his stomach tighten. He nearly turned back. If even the outer grounds were guarded like this, what must it be like inside, where the Duke actually lived? His imagination ran ahead of him.

He pictured a dim chamber lit by flickering candles, Cassian seated in a high-backed chair, his face half lost in shadow as he looked down with cold indifference, like a judge passing sentence. This was a mistake. I should not have come. But before he could retreat, he was already being led inside. Then he stopped. Right at the

entrance to the inner courtyard, his eyes caught on something completely unexpected. A neatly marked patch of turned earth. He blinked, certain he had misseen it, then looked again. No mistake.

Along one side of the stone courtyard, someone had carefully set aside a small garden bed. Nothing had been planted yet, but the soil had been prepared with care. A kitchen garden. Here? In the private grounds of Duskmoor Manor? The strangeness of it only made him more uneasy. He was led further in, beneath a sunlit arcade. There, a cushioned chaise had been set out, draped in fine woven fabric. A small table beside it held water, fresh fruit, and a few open books. And reclining there was a woman. Dominic didn't dare stare. He caught only fragments.

The soft sheen of fine cloth, the gentle curve of her face, the quiet composure in the way she held herself. She was reading, bathed in warm daylight, her presence refined but not distant. There was no sharp edge to her, no deliberate display of authority. Instead, she carried herself with a kind of effortless grace that made people instinctively lower their guard, while still knowing better than to cross a line. She closed her book as she sensed him approach, her gaze settling on him with calm clarity. "Dominic." " 2.5K 3/3 2:46 pm P Ppp. admin

Chapter 476 An Unexpected Sight Dominic startled and immediately lowered himself into a deep, formal bow. "Your Grace." "No need to be so formal. You may stand." Elowen regarded him quietly. "I hear you've come on official business for His Grace?" 0:30 Finished "Yes, Your Grace." He straightened but kept his eyes lowered. "It's urgent. I was hoping to report to him directly. May I ask where he is at the moment?" "He's occupied right now," she said evenly. "I'm afraid he can't see you just yet." Dominic hesitated. Occupied? At this hour? He chose his words carefully.

"This concerns the next stage of negotiations with Nordia. It's quite important. May I ask what is taking his attention?" Elowen answered as if it were the most ordinary thing in the world. "He's preparing the midday meal." Dominic froze. For a moment, he wondered if he had misheard. "...I'm sorry?" "It's nearly time to eat," she said calmly. "He's in the kitchen." This time, there was no mistaking it. And somehow, that only made it harder to process. The Duke of Duskmoor, known for his cold temper and unapproachable presence, feared across court and battlefield alike... Was cooking?

Dominic stood there, his expression stiff, trying and failing to rearrange his features into something polite. "If it truly cannot wait," Elowen added after a moment, "you may go to him." She turned slightly. "Anson, take him." "Yes, Your Grace." Dominic followed, though his steps felt strangely unsteady. They passed along a covered walkway, and before long, the scent of food drifted through the air, rich and unmistakable, accompanied by the rhythmic sound of cooking. He slowed as they approached, then glanced inside.

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The kitchen was bright and orderly, the hearth fire burning strong. Finished Cassian stood at the cooking table in a simple dark tunic, sleeves pushed back, his movements precise and controlled. A deep blue apron was tied securely at his waist as he worked over the pan with complete focus. Dominic stopped where he was. For a brief moment, his mind went entirely blank. "Your Grace," Anson announced, raising his voice slightly, "Lord Dominic has come with urgent business." The sound of cooking paused. Cassian did not turn around.

"What is it?" Dominic snapped back to himself and bowed quickly. "Your Grace, the Nordian delegation has sent word. They wish to resume talks today regarding the tribute terms and

delivery arrangements." "When?" "In half an hour." Cassian's hand stilled. He finally looked up, his brows drawing together. "That soon?" He had intended to sit down with Elowen. Dominic swallowed, his throat dry. "The time was set by higher authority. The meeting will be held in the side chamber of the Hall of Imperial Grace." A brief silence followed. "Understood," Cassian said at last.

"I'll attend." That should have been the end of it. But Dominic found himself unable to leave. His gaze drifted, almost against his will, back toward the pan. toward Cassian. The image refused to settle into anything that made sense. At that moment, Cassian plated the final dish and glanced at him, his expression sharpening with impatience. "What, are you planning to stay for a meal?"

Dominic stiffened. "N-No, Your Grace. Of course not." 2/3 2:46 pm P 041 Finished Chapter 476
An Unexpected Sight "There wouldn't be a place for you anyway," Cassian replied coolly.

"You may go." Relief hit him all at once. He bowed deeply, then withdrew as quickly as dignity allowed. Once the meal was finished, Cassian had it set out in the small dining room before returning to the arcade to bring Elowen in. She noticed immediately that only one place had been set. Looking up at him, she asked, "You're not eating with me?" He took her hand and guided her inside. "I need to go to the royal residence. The meeting was scheduled on short notice." "At least eat something first," she said softly. "You'll be hungry." He shook his head. "There's no time.

"I'll manage something there." She knew better than to argue, not when it came to matters like this. She nodded and let go. But after a moment, she stepped closer again, slipping her arms around his waist and resting her cheek against his chest, holding him just a little longer. "I'll wait for you," she said quietly. Cassian lifted his hand, his palm warm against her cheek, his thumb

brushing lightly beneath her eye. "Ella," he said, his voice low, "make sure you eat." He left soon after.

Elowen stood there for a long moment, watching until he disappeared beyond the courtyard gate, before finally turning back toward the table. 2.5K admin

Chapter 477 The Weight of Waiting Finished At Duskmoor Manor, the meal set before Elowen had clearly been prepared with thoughtful care, each dish tailored to what she enjoyed most. A whole trout had been lightly roasted with butter and garden herbs until the flesh turned tender and delicate, a slow-simmered beef and barley stew with carrots and turnips filled the room with a rich, comforting aroma, and there was also a platter of fire-grilled beef, still warm from the hearth, its juices glistening in the light. Cassian had come to know her preferences with unnerving precision.

And yet, without him at the table, the food might as well have been ash. Elowen lifted her fork and forced herself to eat at a steady pace, though nothing truly appealed to her. After finishing half a bowl of grain and a serving of broth, she already felt full, but when she set the fork down and looked at what remained, his voice lingered in her mind, reminding her not to neglect her meals. He made me promise I'd take care of myself.

With a faint crease between her brows, she picked the fork up again and made herself eat a little more, just enough to feel she had honored that promise before finally letting the meal end. By the time she left the table, the afternoon sun had softened into a warm, golden glow that stretched lazily across the stone corridors. She settled onto the cushioned seat beneath the covered gallery, a book resting open in her lap, though the words refused to settle into meaning. Her thoughts drifted without direction, as though her mind had slipped loose from anything solid.

Pregnancy had left her easily worn, her energy fading without warning. She shifted slightly, adjusting against the cushions until she found a position that eased the tension in her back, then let her eyes fall closed. Sleep came quietly, without effort. She did not know how much time had passed before the dream turned. \ Something dark and formless pressed in, followed by a sudden chill that crept along her skin. Elowen startled awake, breath catching. "Mira," she called, her voice rough from sleep. Mira was at her side almost instantly.

"Your Grace, you're awake." Elowen gave a small nod, still shaking off the remnants of the dream. "What hour is it now?" "It's nearing late afternoon, Your Grace." Elowen did a quick count in her head, and her expression tightened. "He's still not back? There wasn't much to be discussed today. It shouldn't have taken this long." 2:46 pm P Chapter 477 The Weight of Waiting Mira hesitated, then shook her head. "No word has come from the royal residence." Finished She studied Elowen's face for a moment, then made up her mind.

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"If it pleases you, I'll have someone sent to inquire." Elowen inclined her head. "Do that." As Mira turned and hurried off, Elowen rose with Cora's support, her fingers resting lightly against the maid's hand for balance. "Would Your Grace like to go to the study?" Cora asked gently. Elowen gave a quiet hum in agreement. She had barely taken a few steps when a voice carried faintly from down the corridor, unmistakably Mira's, now filled with relief. "His Grace has returned? Her Grace has been asking after you all this time." Elowen turned at once.

Just beyond the bend in the inner passage, where the corridor opened toward the secondary gate, a small procession had just entered. Cassian led them. He was dressed in a dark formal coat befitting his rank, the lines of it sharp and severe, his posture straight and unyielding, like a blade held at the ready. The tightness in Elowen's chest loosened all at once. His expression, however,

was far from at ease. His brows were drawn low, his mouth set in a hard line that spoke of restrained anger. Then, as though pulled by instinct, his gaze lifted. It found her immediately.

For a brief moment, the tension in his face eased. He stepped past Mira and the guards without breaking stride, heading straight toward her. "Ella." Elowen reached for his hand without hesitation. "Let's go inside," Cassian said, his fingers closing firmly around hers, the grip just a little tighter than usual, as if grounding himself in her presence. They moved together into the study. Cora and Mira remained outside, closing the door softly behind them.

2:46 pm Chapter 477 The Weight of Waiting Finished Elowen rose slightly on her toes as she removed his cloak, her movements careful and practiced. Cassian inclined his head just enough to make it easier for her, saying nothing as he let her take over. "What happened at court?" she asked, hanging the cloak neatly on its stand. Cassian pressed his fingers briefly to his brow before crossing to the cushioned bench by the window, lowering himself onto it and gesturing for her to sit beside him. "It wasn't anything beyond control," he said, though his tone suggested otherwise.

"Roderic from Nordia pushed things too far, words escalated, and before long the room turned into a mess. It ended with things being thrown." Elowen's attention sharpened immediately.

"Were you hurt?" "I wasn't." He caught her wrist gently when she reached for him, anticipating her next move. "But Dominic stepped in front of me when it broke out. Something came flying across the room and struck his face. It split the skin open, and there was more blood than anyone cared to see. That's what forced His Majesty to intervene. He had to settle both sides and summon the court physicians."

"That's why it ran so late." Elowen still did not look convinced. She slipped her hand free and, without asking again, began checking him herself, brushing back the fabric at his sleeve and leaning in to examine the exposed skin at his collar with careful attention. Only when she found nothing, not even the faintest mark, did she finally settle beside him again. "I thought the negotiations had already settled the framework," she said, her brows drawing together.

"Everything seemed to be moving smoothly. Why would it suddenly fall apart like that?"

Cassian exhaled slowly.

"Because Roderic decided to change the terms. The original agreement required Nordia to provide five hundred prime warhorses each year, along with eight hundred sets of hardened armor and a selection of fine pelts. In return, Avenlor would compensate them with equal value in coin, silk, trade goods, and grain stock. Today, he claimed their herds suffered losses over the winter and reduced the number to three hundred. As for the armor, he struck it out entirely."

When Roderic finished speaking, a heavy silence fell over the chamber, thick enough to make every breath feel measured.

Dominic was the first to break it. He shot to his feet, his voice sharp with restrained anger.

"Prince Roderic, those terms were agreed upon days ago. To walk them back now hardly seems in good faith." Another official from the same ministry followed immediately, unable to hold back his frustration. "Exactly. Five hundred horses is no great prize to a realm like ours. And once we accept them, do we not return the value in coin, crafted goods, and quality grain? This exchange was meant to open trade between us, something your side stood to gain from.

Yet the way you present it, one would think we were extorting you." 3/4 2:47 pm P Ppp. admin

Chapter 478 A Sudden Shift Finished "Five hundred horses. Not one less than that. And they had better be the finest stock you have. We're not accepting anything second-rate." The chamber had filled with overlapping voices, each sharper than the last. Roderic let out a low, humorless laugh, his expression turning openly contemptuous. "You keep insisting this agreement is meant to preserve peace for both our people, but listening to you now, it sounds more like you're preparing for your next campaign.

And I wonder who you expect to ride those fine horses against." His gaze slid toward Cassian, who had remained silent until now, watching the exchange unfold. "Nordia, perhaps. And when that day comes, will you send your Duke of Duskmoor to ride straight through our lands again?" Dominic's restraint snapped. He struck the table with a sharp crack, his voice rising. "Mind your accusations. Do not twist our intentions to suit your own narrative." Roderic surged to his feet in response, his hand slamming down just as hard. "And you think you can raise your voice at me without consequence?

I've made myself clear. Three hundred horses. That is the final number. The armor is no longer part of this discussion." Dominic pointed at him, his hand trembling with anger. "So this is how Nordia conducts itself. No honor, no regard for its word." The insult landed heavily. Cassian's expression darkened. Roderic's face went rigid with fury, the shift immediate and dangerous. Without a word, he seized a heavy bronze weight from the table and hurled it across the chamber. Everything unraveled at once. Cassian stepped back, unwilling to be dragged into the chaos.

Then Dominic shouted, "Your Grace, watch out!" and lunged forward. The impact came with a dull, sickening sound. The bronze weight struck Dominic square in the forehead, splitting the

skin open as blood poured down over his face. Elowen listened in silence, her expression growing more intent with every detail. "If both sides had already agreed," she said at last, her tone measured, "then for him to reverse himself so abruptly and push this hard, something must have changed behind the scenes. Either he's gained leverage. or he's been forced into a different position." 173 2:47 pm P PPP.

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Chapter 478 A Sudden Shift 01% Finished Cassian gave a slight nod. "That's my conclusion as well." Elowen looked at him, decision settling in her eyes. "I'll reach out to Flowira and ask her directly. If something shifted within their side, she'll know." Cassian glanced at her. "Flowira. The one who seems rather fond of you." Elowen hesitated for the briefest moment. Then she leaned closer, lowering her voice. "Cassian, what I'm about to tell you stays between us." Her gaze held his. The identities of Flowira and Zachary have been switched.

The one we've been seeing as Zachary is actually Flowira in disguise. The real Zachary has been the one hidden from view." Cassian's brow lifted slightly, surprise flickering before giving way to quiet understanding. Several things that once felt off now aligned perfectly. Elowen relaxed a fraction. "So don't let this trouble you too much for now. I'll speak with her. Once we know what changed, we'll know how to respond." Cassian looked at her for a moment longer than necessary. He had faced battlefields thick with blood and courts filled with schemes far more intricate than this.

Situations like today's were nothing he could not handle. And yet, watching her sit there, thinking it through for him, taking it upon herself to ease his burden, stirred something unfamiliar and deeply grounding. So this is what it feels like to have someone stand with me. He let out a quiet breath and nodded. "All right," he said, his voice softer now. "We'll do it your

way, Ella." Night settled over the manor. The messenger Elowen had sent returned quickly with an answer. Flowira had agreed to meet.

Before long, a side entrance opened briefly, then shut again without drawing attention. Dressed in plain gray traveling clothes, a wide-brimmed felt hat pulled low enough to shadow her face, Flowira followed Anson along a quieter route through the estate, keeping well away from the main paths. Elowen was already waiting in the study, with only Mira beside her. The door opened just enough to admit her, then closed at once. Flowira removed her hat, revealing her striking features. 2/3 2:47 pm P Ppp. Chapter 478 A Sudden Shift Finished Before Elowen could speak, she began. Your Grace.

"I've already heard what happened at court today. It was only meant to cover routine matters, document exchanges, lodging arrangements, nothing of consequence. My uncle said there was no need for me to attend, so I stayed behind. I never expected it to spiral like this." Elowen gestured toward a seat. "There's no need to take that on yourself, Princess. I asked you here for something specific." Her gaze sharpened slightly.

"Roderic's sudden change of position, and the way he pressed for reduced tribute, was that something already debated within your delegation, or did new instructions arrive from Nordia's court in the past few days?" 2.5K 1 3/3 admin

Chapter 479 A Whisper in the Dark Finished Flowira gave a slow shake of her head, her voice steady and certain. "None of that, Your Grace. You know how my brother is. He keeps himself apart from matters like these and has no taste for negotiation or governance. This treaty has been shaped mostly by my uncle and me. And to be frank, the terms offered by His Majesty of Avenlor would give our people real breathing room, a chance to recover after years of hardship.

My uncle may come off as hard-edged and difficult, but in private, he's been more than satisfied with the goodwill Avenlor has shown." Elowen leaned back slightly, her fingers resting against the arm of her chair as she considered it. "If nothing has changed within your court, and there's been no new command from your king, then why would Prince Roderic suddenly shift his stance?" "That's what troubles me," Flowira admitted, her brows knitting together. "He has a temper, yes, but he's never been reckless or blind to the larger picture. What he did today felt... wrong." The study fell into a heavy quiet, broken only by the faint crackle from the iron wall sconce where the flame flickered against the metal. It was clear there was little more to uncover from this line of thought. Elowen let out a soft breath. "You came all this way at this hour. I'm grateful. It's late, though. You should head back and get some rest." Flowira rose at once. "Of course." She reached for the fur-lined riding cap set beside her but paused, her fingers brushing along the worn edge as something tugged at her memory. Then she looked up again, eyes catching the firelight.

"There is something else. I don't know if it matters, but... it might." Elowen straightened. "Go on." "It was the day we settled the main terms," Flowira said slowly. "We had just left the royal residence and were on our way back when a palace attendant hurried after us. I had never seen him before. He said my uncle had left behind a wolf-tooth pendant in one of the side chambers of the Hall of Imperial Grace." Elowen's attention sharpened. "My uncle stepped aside with him and spoke for a short while." Elowen leaned forward, her voice low.

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"Did you hear anything?" "I didn't think it was important at the time," Flowira said, shaking her head. "I stayed where I was. But a few words carried over. Something about a stronger army, gaining an advantage, becoming... more formidable. And there was talk of desire, of coveting

land." She frowned faintly. "The man didn't linger. He said what he came to say and left. But after that, my uncle's expression changed. I thought he was irritated over the pendant or the carelessness of the palace staff. Now...

I don't think that was it." Elowen slowly sat upright, a chill creeping into her fingertips. "He was being warned that once Avenlor 1/3 2:49 pm P Ppp. Chapter 479 A Whisper in the Dark Finished takes possession of your warhorses and armor, its strength will grow even further, and sooner or later, it will turn that strength northward." Flowira's face paled. "Yes. That would do it." She drew in a quiet breath. "My uncle isn't what he seems, Your Grace. He looks like a man who lives for conquest, but he doesn't.

When he was young, he was driven out during tribal strife and survived only because a poor woman took him in. He's seen what hunger does to people. What cold does. He's watched families fall apart just trying to live through winter. Everything he's done, whether choosing war or peace, has been for one reason, to make sure our people don't have to live like that anymore." Her voice softened. "If he truly believed Avenlor was building strength now only to strike later, then of course he would push back, even if it meant tearing apart the agreement. To him, that wouldn't be stubbornness.

It would be protection." Elowen gave a slow nod. The root of it was clear now. Someone had planted that thought deliberately. "And that attendant," Flowira continued, her tone tightening, "I've been in and out of the palace enough to recognize most of the household staff. He didn't belong to any of them. I should have noticed." Elowen's thoughts began to race. "Who would benefit from breaking this peace? If the two sides turn on each other again, who stands to gain?" Alaric's face surfaced in her mind almost immediately.

Would he want rising tension, even open conflict, so he could step forward and take command? Victory in war would strengthen his claim, secure his position. Was that what Iris had advised him? No. That's not who he is. Elowen dismissed the idea almost as soon as it formed. She knew Alaric too well. He never cared for the battlefield. What he wanted was control, influence, the quiet satisfaction of moving pieces no one else even saw. What he has always wanted... is me. If that was true, then this wasn't about war. It was about Cassian.

And as that realization settled into place, a sharp coldness slid down her spine, leaving her breath unsteady. 2/3 2:49 pm P Ppp. Chapter 479 A Whisper in the Dark Finished If Alaric wasn't just trying to disrupt the treaty, but to push things further, to turn this into something larger, something that could drag Cassian down completely.... The confrontation earlier and Dominic's injury.... "Princess." Elowen's voice cut through the silence, sudden and sharp. Flowira looked up, startled.

"Your Grace?" "From tonight on," Elowen said quickly, "you, Prince Roderic, and Prince Zachary should remain inside your residence unless there's no other choice. I'll have additional guards sent over at once." Flowira blinked, confusion flickering across her face. "Why?". Before Elowen could answer, hurried footsteps echoed down the corridor, heavy and urgent. 2.5K admin

Chapter 480 Before the Storm Breaks Elowen did not panic. Finished Instead, she drew in a steady breath and turned to Mira. "Go find out what's happening. Don't come back until you have something clear." "Yes, Your Grace." Mira rushed out at once. Only then did Elowen lower her voice. "Princess, what's happening may not be aimed at Nordia at all. This may be directed at Duskmoor Manor. And because of that, your delegation has become the easiest piece to move." Flowira stilled, then slowly nodded as understanding took hold. "You mean...

my uncle is being used." The situation is still unclear," Elowen said, her tone firm. "But you need to leave now. Anson will escort you the way you came. Once you return, speak to Prince Roderic immediately. Tell him everything. He needs to be on guard." A pause, then softer, "And so do you." By now, Vanelle no longer felt like a capital at peace, but a place where something unseen was tightening its grip. They reached the doorway just as Mira came rushing back, breath uneven. The moment Elowen saw her face, something in her chest tightened. This better be clear," Elowen said quietly.

Mira swallowed. "Your Grace... there's been an attack." Elowen's gaze sharpened. "On who?" Prince Roderic," Mira said, her voice trembling despite her effort to steady it. "He was ambushed on the road back from the palace. He's badly injured and hasn't regained consciousness. They've taken him back to the royal residence for treatment." For a moment, Elowen said nothing. Flowira's eyes widened, shock flashing across her face. "No... that can't be right." She pressed her lips together, forcing herself to stay composed. There was no use asking a servant for details she couldn't possibly have.

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"I need to go," she said quickly, turning to Elowen. "If anything changes, I'll come back at once." Elowen nodded and stepped aside, giving Anson quiet but urgent instructions before seeing her out. When the door closed, she turned back. "Where is His Grace?" Before Mira could answer, footsteps approached again. 1/3 :49 pm P P P Chapter 480 Before the Storm Breaks This time, they were unhurried, steady, deliberate.

Finished The warm glow from the corridor's iron sconces cast a long shadow across the floor, slipping through the narrow opening of the door, where it stretched inward in a shape that was unmistakably tall, broad, and aching familiar. A hand pressed gently against the wood, easing

the door open. Elowen looked up. Cassian stepped into view, his features sharp in the low light, his dark eyes softening the moment they found hers. 'Cassian.' She moved toward him at once.

"I've figured it out. The treaty didn't fall apart on its own.

Someone inside the palace is behind this, feeding Roderic lies." Cassian's expression softened

further, a faint curve touching his lips. "Alright. I hear you." He had already suspected as much.

But he let her say it. Because it mattered to her. The King has summoned me," he continued. "I

have to return to the palace immediately. Roderic's been attacked, and no one knows if he'll make

it. This is bigger than it looks, and it's going to pull in more people before it's over. I may not be

back tonight." His gaze lingered on her. "Get some rest. Don't wait up.

If you can't sleep, have Hugh prepare something mild to settle your nerves. You shouldn't be

exhausting yourself right now." Elowen looked up at him, searching his face. He had already

turned to go, but then he stopped and reached out, brushing his fingers lightly against her cheek.

'Ella," he said quietly, "do you remember what I told you? I don't lose." Elowen nodded. His

gaze deepened. "And one more thing. You're stronger than you think. You don't need me

standing by you every moment. If I'm not here, you decide what happens next." Then he was

gone.

His dark cloak disappeared into the night beyond the doorway, his figure swallowed by shadow

as he moved past the reach of the firelight. Elowen stood there, watching long after he had

vanished. 2/3 2:49 pm P P P P Chapter 480 Before the Storm Breaks A draft slipped through the

corridor, cool against her skin, and she finally stirred. Something about him had felt too calm.

Too certain. He already knows. Or worse... he's been waiting for this. "Your Grace..." Mira's

voice came softly from behind her. Finished Elowen turned, her expression steady once more.

"I'm fine.

Go ask Doctor Dray for a calming draught." Mira hesitated, then nodded quickly. "Right away."

The medicine worked faster than she expected. Sleep took her deeply, without dreams. And

when she woke, the room was already filled with morning light. 2.5K 。 1 3731 admin