

Awakening Love: Reborn to Be His Duchess Novel

Chapter 5 A Man Lying Beside Her The dressing table had been set up in the adjoining chamber. It was clearly brand new-darkwood, finely crafted, its surface polished to a rich, glossy sheen that caught the light. A clear mirror rested on the tabletop, beside an intricately carved wooden casket. "It's such a shame His Grace couldn't see you on your wedding day." Mira, Elowen's dowry handmaid, gently let Elowen's hair down, her movements careful and unhurried. Her voice was light, almost wistful. Elowen curved her lips into a faint smile. "There's nothing to regret.

Beautiful women are everywhere in this world. I'm nothing special." She was only seventeen. Cassian was ten years older than she was. In those ten extra years, he must have seen countless women-some alluring, some sweet and bright, some bold enough to leave an impression. Compared to them, her face probably seemed painfully ordinary. And besides, even surrounded by beauty, Cassian had never married. Rumor had it that his heart already belonged to someone else. Elowen couldn't imagine what kind of woman could inspire that level of devotion from the Duke of Duskmoor.

What kind of breathtaking beauty she must be. After washing and freshening up, Elowen changed into a pale, moon-white nightgown. Bran had already brought over a brand-new pillow and a brocade quilt, laying them neatly beside Cassian. Once everything was in order, the servants withdrew with practiced discretion. Elowen climbed onto the bed as quietly as she could and lay down beside him. The wedding bed was wide, leaving a clear distance between them. She caught the faint scent of medicinal herbs and felt the steady warmth radiating from Cassian's body.

Like her father and brothers, Cassian trained year-round. His body temperature always ran slightly higher than most. Elowen turned onto her side. Outside, the night was deep and still, the moonlight faint. But inside the chamber, the wedding candles burned steadily, filling the room with a soft, golden glow. Bathed in that light, Elowen studied Cassian's profile. His features were sharp and sculpted, like mountain ridges carved by time. His lashes were thick and dark, casting faint shadows beneath his eyes.

Because he had been unconscious for so long, his lips were pale, and a faint bluish stubble traced the line of his jaw. She watched him for a long moment before speaking softly. "I'm truly sorry... for saying I would marry you while you were unconscious." Not far away, a candle crackled, molten wax blooming as the flame flared. Elowen paused, then continued in a low voice, "But I promise you-I'll take good care of you. I'll fulfill my duties as the Duchess of Duskmooor." - Compared to the liveliness of Duskmooor Manor, the Crown Prince's Wing felt heavy and lifeless.

The Crown Prince had been ill for many days. Royal physicians came and went, prescriptions were changed again and again, yet there was no improvement. The Queen was displeased. Her temper had grown increasingly sharp, and the entire wing lived in quiet dread-heads lowered, voices hushed, every step taken with care. Alaric knew none of this. He lay in bed, his thoughts tangled, drifting into a dream. In the dream, there was a wedding. And the groom was himself. Rain poured down that day, relentless and cold.

His shoes, stockings, even the hem of his robes were soaked through, smeared with mud, leaving him wretched and miserable. When he stepped into the bridal chamber, the first thing he saw was Elowen. She sat upright on the wedding bed. Her hair had been swept up and coiled atop her head, crowned with an ornate, luxurious headpiece. She wore a wedding gown of deep ivory, the fabric heavy and finely woven, embroidered with subtle floral patterns along the hem. In the candlelight, the silk caught the glow with a soft, muted sheen. She had altered the gown herself.

As the youngest daughter of Hale Manor, Elowen had been taught far more than courtly manners. She could ride and shoot like any noble girl raised on the frontier, and she was just as skilled with needle and brush. Now, her cheeks were flushed. She lowered her gaze, a restrained, nervous smile touching her lips. Faint dimples appeared, lending her an air of quiet warmth. Alaric stared at her, unable to look away. The sound of rain against the windows faded into nothing. All he could hear was the uneven, pounding beat of his own heart. He jolted awake. Darkness filled his vision.

All he could make out was the heavy bed canopy above him. His entire body was drenched in sweat. It took a long moment for his thoughts to settle. "Your Highness, you're awake?" His personal attendant entered quietly. Alaric's voice was hoarse. "What time is it?" "It's nearly the end of the night watch, Your Highness. Her Majesty will soon be returning from Duskmooor Manor." Duskmooor Manor. Alaric abruptly pushed himself upright. "What day is it today?" "The third day of the sixth month. Today is the day the Duke of Duskmooor married the general's daughter." Alaric froze.

Elowen's image resurfaced before his eyes-dressed in wedding robes, smiling softly. It felt as though something had carved into his chest, sharp and unrelenting, sending waves of pain through his heart. "Her Majesty has arrived." The announcement came from outside the door. Moments later, the Queen entered, supported by a matron. When she saw Alaric awake, relief lit her face. "Alaric, are you feeling any better?" He gave a distracted sound in response. A servant lit the candle nearby. The Queen examined his complexion-still pale, still weak from illness.

She sat down at the edge of the bed and spoke slowly. "Now that the Duke of Duskmoor and Elowen's wedding is finally over, I can breathe a little easier. From now on, I only need to focus on your marriage." Alaric stiffened slightly. "Mother, I-" "You are the Crown Prince," the Queen interrupted gently, smiling. "You've already come of age. Your father mentions your marriage often. The entire court is watching." She continued calmly, "Once your health improves, I'll make the arrangements. There are so many noble daughters in the capital.

We can take our time choosing-graceful ones, gentle ones, well-read and well-mannered ones. Every single one of them is better than Elowen." At the sound of her name, a sharp pain clenched in Alaric's chest. The Queen went on, her words flowing freely now. "When you were young, that was when you should have been studying. Yet Elowen was always dragging you off to play. She even sneaked you out of the palace once-you nearly got hurt. From then on, I disliked her. "These past years, you devoted yourself to state affairs, yet she clung to you like a burr.

I wanted to drive her out of the palace long ago, but with Hale Manor behind her, I had to restrain myself. "Now that the Hale family is gone, she's of no use at all. At least she had the sense not to shamelessly insist on marrying you. "And as for Duskmoor Manor-it's hardly a blessed place. The Duke lies unconscious, the manor's in chaos thanks to his relatives. If I hadn't kept things under control, do you think the wedding would have gone so smoothly? Elowen will have plenty of hardship ahead of her." Alaric couldn't bring himself to speak.

Having vented her thoughts, the Queen looked far more satisfied. She rose to her feet. "Alright. Get some rest and recover quickly. I'll arrange for you to meet those young ladies. With me here, your position as Crown Prince will remain perfectly secure." - The next morning, before the sky had fully brightened, Elowen woke. Mira came in to comb her hair and glanced at her face. "Did you not sleep well, Your Grace?" Elowen blinked slowly. "I'm not used to the bed." Nor was she used to having a man lying beside her. She studied her reflection in the mirror and rubbed her eyelids.

"Mira, fix my hair for court. We'll-" "Is the Duchess awake?" An aged yet steady voice came from outside. Elowen turned and saw a matron dressed in respectable attire. The woman didn't bow. She spoke plainly. "Lady Marwen instructs that on the first day after the wedding, the Duchess is to go and see her." Elowen was well aware of the situation at Duskmoor Manor. Cassian and the current King were full brothers, both born to Dowager Selene of the Ashcroft family. The Dowager had a younger sister and a younger brother. The sister had married into a noble house far away in Rivenshire.

The brother had joined the army, followed Cassian into battle, and died saving his life. Perhaps out of guilt, Cassian had brought his uncle's widow and children into the manor. That widow was Marwen. Cassian spent most of his years at war and had little time for domestic matters. Marwen had volunteered to take over the management of the manor. Which meant that now, Duskmoor Manor was firmly under her control. Elowen had also heard that Marwen had once hoped to marry her youngest daughter to Cassian. She had formally proposed it-only to be refused.

And now, it was Elowen who had married into the manor instead. admin