

The Dragon's Fated Bride Chapter 9 - IF I SHOULD DIE BEFORE I WAKE - PART 3

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As Sterling sat patiently inside the carriage, he cradled Faye's quivering body in his warm cloak, shielding her from the damp weather of late Hartesk (The season of fall.) Even though the carriage sheltered them, it was still cold. While he waited for Merrick to arrive, the Duke couldn't help but notice a shiny silver flask left behind by one of the men.

He picked up the container and pulled out the cork with a soft pop, unleashing a sweet fragrance that filled his nostrils. The rich aroma of the pear brandy, his favorite, brought a sense of comfort. As he took a sip, the smooth and velvety liquid trickled down his throat, leaving a warm sensation in his chest. The subtle notes of pear danced on the tip of his tongue, and he savored every drop, enjoying the moment of calm amidst the evening's chaos.

Faye's fragile body wiggled in his arms. He heard her mumble something that sounded akin to a protest against him holding her. Sterling gazed down to see her eyes were shut tight. He was not amused at this turn of events.

He felt the weight of exhaustion on his shoulders as he leaned his head back against the seat. This one in his arms was too much trouble. Maybe it would have been better to defy the King's order and take his chances with war.

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He understood war, but women were complicated. He knew little about them and had never involved himself in courting them. His duties as a Duke and on the battlefield kept him busy most of the time.

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Hearing Faye wheeze and knowing she was critically ill only added to his weariness. Sterling closed his eyes, trying to find a moment's respite.

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Shortly thereafter, there was a sharp knock on the coach door, the sound jolting him back to the present. He observed the handle twist and heard a

small click as the door slowly creaked open. Faye shivered under the cloak because of the cool evening breeze flooding into the carriage's compartment. She coughed uncontrollably. Sterling noticed this and sat up straight, concerned about what was happening.

"Evening commander, the men said you requested to speak with me?"

As Merrick entered the coach, his eyes landed on the Duke's arms, which were firmly wrapped around a woman who appeared to be in dire condition.

The sight of her made his forehead crease with worry. Her breathing was ragged and shallow, as if she were struggling to draw in air. The color had drained from her face, leaving her looking pallid and frail. Her lips were tinged with a deep shade of purple. Only the apples of her cheeks showed with color, and they were bright pink.

Merrick expressed great concern at the sight of the woman's deteriorating condition.

"Commander, we have to get to the next town. Quickly. Time is running out for your bride. We must find a healer or doctor to treat her, or I fear she won't survive till sunrise."

Sterling asked, "Why do you think I called you here? Doesn't your daughter suffer from fire lung? How do you treat her when she is ill?"

Merrick's expression soured as he shook his head disapprovingly at Sterling.

"I'll be direct. You've never had a wife or child to care for and worry about, so you wouldn't understand. We don't treat my daughter's condition, as it may worsen or even kill her. We call the healer, who has the knowledge. I don't know how to do it. We need to leave now."

Merrick went to reach across the coach to touch Faye's forehead, but before he could, Sterling knocked his arm back.

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"Don't! Be careful not to touch her," he cautioned.

Merrick conveyed his concern. "I can see her trembling and her cheeks are tinged red. It is a sign. She may have a fever."

Sterling frowned at Merrick's words. The one thing he knew about fevers from his days on the battlefield—if left untreated, they could kill.

Merrick stood, stooped over in the carriage, preparing to leave. He turned and addressed the Duke.

"Wait here with her commander, I will let the troops know we are moving out and return with something that might help your wife's fever."

He heard the vice commander shout for the other knights to ready themselves for travel. Some groaned and complained about the dangers of traversing this area at night in the rain. Merrick was quick to reign in the men and shut up their complaints.

"Stop your grumbling! The Duke's wife is in a bad way. We should make haste for Easthaven."

Hearing this disturbing news, the group of men fell into a state of silence. The only sound was the rustling of leather and the soft pawing of horses' hooves in the mud. Everyone watched as Merrick emerged from the shadows. In his hand, he held a canteen of water and a small paper pouch. The surrounding atmosphere was tense.

The men's eyes followed Merrick's every move as he returned to the coach with the canteen and pouch. They observed Sterling receive the pouch and sniff it. The knights who were watching all assumed it was healing herbs for the Duke's wife.

"Pour this into the water and make her drink it. She will probably fight you, as it tastes extremely bitter. However, I believe it will reduce her fever enough until we reach Easthaven."

The sound of a horse's whinny disrupted his instructions.

The Duke glared harshly at Merrick.

"I guess that means we should be on our way."

Merrick replied.

"Indeed, commander."

Sterling watched from the carriage window as the men mounted their steeds. Within moments, the order to move out was given, and the rest of the group followed suit. The only sound that was heard was that of hooves pounding against the dirt as they rode off in the direction of Easthaven.

As the coach inched forward, Sterling did as Merrick instructed and prepared the medicine for Faye. When he opened the parchment pouch, a potent scent of bitter herb hit his nostrils. His nose wrinkled at the odor. He dumped the contents into the water canteen and watched it slowly dissolve.

He propped Faye up in his arms, then shook her gently, calling her by the new pet name he had given. His voice was sardonic as he spoke.

"Wake up, my sweet butterfly. Merrick, the valiant knight, says you have to drink this."

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Faye's eyes slowly opened. The whites were red and bloodshot. Her glassy gaze stared at him, and she struggled to free herself from his firm grasp, almost spilling the elixir on them both.

Sterling gave Faye a disdainful sneer.

"What's wrong, butterfly? Did you see something from your past that you recognize? Now calm down and be still. Take your medicine like the good girl I know you are."

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Faye tried in desperation to get away from Sterling and not drink the herb water.

Nevertheless, it was useless. He only further restrained her and forced her mouth open, pouring the bitter water into it. Faye gagged and sputtered. Spitting the sour liquid from her lips. She only got about half the medicine in her. The rest was running down her chin and chest.

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Sterling's crimson eyes glared at Faye as he firmly cautioned while trying to hold her still.

"Stop fighting me, little one. I would hate to harm someone as delicate as you."

At his stern warning, she stopped her struggle and went limp. Sterling looked down to see she had lost consciousness once more.

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