

The Healer Bride: Awakening the Ruined Dragon King

Chapter 1

Aspen POV:

The Royal Messenger stood in the center of House Reynolds' grand hall, slowly unfurling a heavy parchment scroll embroidered with the King's golden dragon claw sigil.

"By royal decree of His Grace, King Gamaliel Carlisle." The messenger's voice boomed off the high vaulted ceilings, cutting through the suffocating silence. "The betrothal between Prince Krishna Carlisle and Lady Aspen of House Reynolds is hereby dissolved."

A collective, theatrical gasp rippled through the assembled family and retainers.

"In its stead," the messenger continued with formal gravity, "a new union is declared. Prince Krishna shall take to wife Lady Deena of House Reynolds. Furthermore, in recognition of House Reynolds' enduring loyalty, His Grace grants Lady Aspen Reynolds in marriage to Lord Boyce Carlisle of Blackwood Keep."

Boyce Carlisle.

The name dropped over the grand hall like a suffocating winter frost.

Once the kingdom's invincible War God, blessed with the purest Dragonflame lineage, Boyce was now nothing more than a ruined legend.

His Dragon Core had been violently shattered in the northern abyssal wars, his rank stripped, his vitality drained.

He had been left to rot in the desolate wasteland of Blackwood Keep—a crippled, paralyzed "corpse" who couldn't even speak, let alone summon dragonflame.

Every single eye in the hall locked onto me, waiting.

Everyone in the capital knew that Prince Krishna had been my entire world since childhood.

I had loved him with a devotion bordering on madness, carving his name into my heart and enduring years of ridicule for his sake.

They had all gathered today expecting a spectacle.

They expected me to fall to my knees, claw at my chest, scream in hysterical agony, and beg my father not to trade my beloved prince away for a living corpse.

My stepmother, Eleanor, rested a manicured hand over her chest, pretending to be shaken while her eyes glittered with dark, predatory amusement.

Beside her, my half-sister, Deena, wore an exquisite gown of shimmering silver dragon-scale silk.

She took a delicate step forward, her eyes brimming with manufactured tears as she reached out to clasp my hands.

"Oh, Aspen..." Deena whimpered softly, her voice dripping with sickly-sweet poison. "Please don't hate me! I begged Father and Prince Krishna to reconsider! But the royal bloodline requires a dragon-blessed bride for Krishna... and Lord Boyce is in such desperate need of a gentle caretaker in the frozen north. I will pray for you every day, Aspen."

Her fingers tightened, her sharp nails deliberately digging into the soft skin of my palm in a private, vicious gesture of triumph.

I looked down at her hands, then slowly lifted my gaze to meet her eyes.

My heartbeat remained slow, even, and calm.

There were no hot tears burning behind my eyelids.

No trembling in my breath.

My silver-gray eyes were cold, unreadable, and as still as a frozen sea.

Deena's rehearsed expression began to fracture.

The fake tears dried instantly in her eyes as she shrank back from the unsettling stillness in my gaze.

I withdrew my hands from hers without a single drop of hesitation and turned directly to the royal envoy.

"I accept the King's arrangement."

My voice was clear, ringing with effortless composure through the silent hall.

The messenger blinked, his mouth parting slightly, completely taken aback by my absolute lack of resistance.

Sitting upon the high seat, my father, Elder Fredrick Reynolds, narrowed his eyes, his knuckles tightening around his gilded cane.

He had stationed guards at every exit, fully expecting another humiliating display of madness from the daughter he considered a disgrace.

"Aspen," Fredrick's voice rumbled down, cold and completely devoid of paternal warmth. "Three days ago, you brought shame upon this house by trying to hang yourself over a broken betrothal. I will not tolerate any more tantrums. You will accept this decree with dignity."

I turned toward him, offering a shallow, flawlessly executed curtsy.

"You need not worry, Father," I replied, my voice smooth and devoid of any sorrow. "Since it is His Grace's royal will, we should not delay. Please prepare the dowry that rightfully belongs to the firstborn daughter of House Reynolds-including every ledger, estate deed, and manuscript left behind by my late mother."

Eleanor's breath hitched in sharp disbelief.

Fredrick's jaw tightened, unsettled by how easily I had taken control of the room. "You shall have your mother's chest, Aspen. See to it that you leave for Blackwood Keep by dawn."

"Gladly, Father," I said, a faint, razor-thin smile touching the corner of my lips.

Without sparing another glance at Deena's pale, confused face or the whispering crowd of retainers, I turned on my heel and walked out of the grand hall with steady, measured strides.

They believed they were banishing a broken, lovesick girl to rot in an icy wasteland beside a dying beast.

They had no idea that they had just set me free-and placed the most lethal weapon in the kingdom directly into my hands.

I returned to my room and closed the door, shutting out their world.

Reaching into the drawer, I pulled out a small, weathered wooden box.

It had belonged to my mother-the only thing of value she had left me.

I lifted the lid.

Inside, several thick, leather-bound journals lay quietly among dried herbs.

Boyce Carlisle.

The ruined lord.

I knew nothing about him, but that didn't matter.

He was the first piece on my new chessboard.