

The Healer Bride: Awakening the Ruined Dragon King

Chapter 9

Aspen POV:

The air in the chamber had turned suffocatingly thick, crackling with volatile heat.

I pressed the back of my hand against Boyce's brow, and the blistering heat sent a sharp jolt through my skin.

His breathing was rapid, shallow, and ragged, his chest straining under each convulsive gasp as beads of sweat poured from his temples.

A high fever of this magnitude was catastrophic.

His central nervous system, newly freed from the numbing suppression of Black Widow's Tear, had ignited a violent immune counterattack against the lingering infection.

But in a body with a shattered Dragon Core, such an extreme core temperature would literally cook his neural pathways and induce irreversible brain death within hours.

Standard chemical antipyretics were out of the question-introducing foreign compounds now would react with the residual neurotoxins and trigger instantaneous cardiac arrest.

Physical cooling was my only weapon.

Having sent the utterly exhausted Penny to rest in the adjoining ante-room, I remained in the dark bedchamber completely alone.

What followed was a brutal, desperate battle against an invisible reaper.

I hauled basins of freezing mountain water to the bedside, tearing linen strips into broad compresses.

Over and over, without pausing for a single second, I plunged cloths into the icy water, wrung them out with raw, aching hands, and bathed his burning forehead, the pulsing carotid arteries along his neck, and his sculpted, sweat-sheened chest.

The heat radiating from his flesh was so intense that the cold towels turned boiling hot in mere moments.

My back screamed in agony from bending over the frame; damp strands of hair stuck to my flushed face, and my fingers grew numb and blistered from the freezing water.

In the suffocating gloom of this hostile fortress, an overwhelming wave of isolation threatened to crush me.

I was one woman standing in the den of wolves, holding the kingdom's fiercest dragon on the edge of the abyss.

I turned away from the bed, carrying the heavy basin over to the side table to refill it with fresh, frigid water.

For barely two seconds, my back was turned to the bed.

In the dead, suffocating quiet of the room, a faint, almost imperceptible sound cut through the silence.

The dry, subtle rustle of coarse linen sheets.

The noise was so soft it could easily have been mistaken for the howling mountain draft.

I lifted the brimful metal basin, my exhausted hands trembling under the weight, and quickly turned back toward the bed.

I took one step forward-and froze dead in my tracks.

My breath hitched in my throat.

My heart slammed into my ribs.

The metal basin slipped from my fingers.

The heavy bronze bowl crashed against the stone flagstones with a deafening, ringing roar, sending waves of icy water splashing across my hem and surging over the cold floor.

I didn't blink.

I couldn't look away.

Resting against the dark pillows in the flickering candlelight, Boyce Carlisle's eyes were wide open.

They were not clouded with delirium, nor dull with weakness.

They were a brilliant, molten gold-the pure, untamed gaze of an ancient predator.

Cold, sharp, and razor-focused, those golden dragon eyes were locked onto me in absolute, unblinking silence.

He wasn't dreaming.

He wasn't drifting.

He was awake.

And he had been watching every single thing I had done.

When exactly did he regain consciousness?

Had he woken hours ago, quietly observing from beneath half-closed lids while I debrided his necrotic flesh and bound his pelvis in makeshift linens?

Did he hear me speaking to Penny, or sense the shift in his fever as I flushed the venom from his blood?

More importantly, did he recognize that I was working to save his life, or did he assume I was simply a more subtle assassin sent by the capital to finish the job?

I was still weighing his motives, my hands pausing over the edge of the bedframe, when the heavy thud of hurried footsteps tore through the quiet corridor outside.

Before I could straighten up, the master chamber doors were violently kicked open.

In stormed Beatrice Croft, her dark purple velvet gown billowing around her as the heavy ring of iron keys at her waist jangled like chains.

Behind her, two burly estate guards shoved a trembling Penny into the room, followed by the white-bearded castle physician, Dr. Sullivan, and a retinue of wide-eyed maids.

"Lady Aspen!" Beatrice's shrill voice cracked across the stone walls like a whip. "The servants heard a crash and the alarm of a sudden, fatal fever! What reckless madness have you wrought upon Lord Boyce, girl?!"

Penny stumbled toward me, pale and shaking, retreating behind my shoulder.

But I merely smoothed my sleeves, stepping calmly between Beatrice and the bed to shield Boyce from their prying eyes.

A young maid behind Beatrice immediately chimed in to curry favor, "Beatrice! We all saw her banish the attendants and tamper with the Lord's wounds with her bare hands! It is her sheer arrogance that brought on this dying crisis!"

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