

The Dragon King's Substitute Bride Chapter 1

"I want the princess"

The whole court fell silent for a split second then suddenly erupted in uproar.

Dragon king or not, what he asked for was unacceptable.

The king with his face blanched white looking like it's been drained of blood sat stock still on his throne almost like he'd been frozen in place but the queen's reaction was more violent.

She jumped from her throne, shaking head to toe with rage "How dare you?"

But the man at whom her venom was directed doesn't even glance at her. "Those are my terms."

She pointed at him, finger shaking and spit flying from her mouth as she yelled. "You can take your terms and...."

"Alena!"

It was the king's voice that silenced her and she turned on him, eyes wide.

"You hear what this monster says, he asks for our daughter..." her voice cracked as she hit her chest, tears threatening to fall "...my only child to be bargained off.... like, like cattle or wool in the fleece market!"

"And is her life more important than all the others in your kingdom?"

She whirled on him, the amour cloaked king standing in the middle of their throne room.

"Don't you dare talk to me about the importance of life. You and your Ryders have taken everything from us. You have razed down our villages and killed our livestock, our people are in constant mourning and now...now you wish to take the only bright light left in the kingdom? I would rather die"

"ALENA!!" The king was the one shaking with anger now. "Watch your tongue, you forget your place."

He turned to his guest, whose face he had never seen. "Dragon king..."

"Your highness." The man replies with a hint of mockery in his tone.

"Would you not reconsider? She is our only daughter; to take her is to leave Averia without an heir to the throne"

The Dragon king placed his gauntlet covered hand on his sword, his tone cold and dark.

“My demands are simple your grace and the ball is in your court but come sunrise tomorrow my army will march. And it will either be with your daughter as my bride and out of Averia for good or it will be without the princess and into the heart of your kingdom where my Ryders and our dragons will maim...and plunder...and kill until there is not a single Averian left standing. Your precious daughter included.”

No one in the court even dared to breathe.

The king sighed, clutching his scepter in both hands even as the queen by his side shook her head violently from side to side.

“No....No...don’t do this”

“You will have what you desire”

“NO!”

The King of Averia ignored her. “But on one condition”

The Dragon king shrugged. “I’m in a giving mood”

“When you and your army march out of Averia and back to your realm, you will perform the sealing ritual and close the portal between our worlds forever”

“A hundred years”

“One thousand”

“You have my word. Now if your highness will excuse me, my army and I must begin to see about arrangements to return home and I believe...you have a wedding to prepare for.”

And without a backward glance, he strode tall and proud out of the King’s court, his silver glided amour glistening and red cloak trailing behind him

The sorrow on the king’s face and the queen violent tears, the only evidence he had ever been there.

“Mother tell me this is a lie, tell me what father says is some sort of cruel jest at my expense”

“Daughter...”

But the princess would not be consoled.

To be given out to the most feared tyrant in all the 7 realms was nothing short of a curse.

One she could not bear to shoulder, fate of the kingdom hanging in the balance or not.

The queen who had been uncharacteristically silent this whole time stepped forward.

“Your highness, if I may...I have come up with a plan”

“No...” the king began

“Your highness if you would just listen”

“No! I will not listen” the king insisted, shaking his head

The queen moved closer to her husband, placing a beseeching hand on his arm.

“But my love, what if there’s another way, how can we fold our hands and let that brute be married to our only daughter?”

“But if the Dragon King finds out we tried to trick him...”

“He won’t. My love, do you trust me...do you trust me do what’s best for our kingdom, for our daughter?”

“You know I do.”

“Then let me take care of this.” She began, her voice dipping lower with every word.

“He will not find out and by the time he does...the portal will be sealed. We will be saved our daughter with us and Averia will be rid of the Dragon King for good.”

The princess ceased her weeping.

She could see her father beginning to give in

.

Maybe all hope wasn’t lost after all.

The king looked at his wife and distraught daughter. “Okay, do what you must.”

The ceremonial bells at the top of the cathedral in the palace grounds of Averia rang out 12 times, as was the custom of the people.

The streets were packed, the citizens of Averia scarcely able to believe that today, the Ryders from the Dragon realm that have since plagued their city were even now marching out, to the hill of Moria.

The location of the portal connecting the two worlds.

But yet there was no celebration or joy to be seen on anyone’s face because while the land would finally be free, the freedom came at a steep price Averia would rather not pay.

The atmosphere in the palace was even more subdued.

A wedding was about to take place but there will be no celebration or livery, no eating or drinking.

Not yet at least.

There were servants afoot, running back and forth, carrying trays laden with jewels and ribbons of cloth, rich, gold embroidered attires passing from hand to hand all to adorn the princess of the Land.

And sitting in the middle of all the chaos, was the woman who at the end of the day would leave Averia, the wife of the dreaded Dragon king.

The girl struggled to maintain her composure even as the queen came into the room.

The servants all stopped, bowing low below the waist.

The queen walked up the girl, clothed in the finest silk and jewels of the land.

“Princess, are you ready?”

When she failed to answer, the queen took her chin and lifted it gently so the girl’s tear filled eyes were staring back at her.

She ignored the tugs of her own heart; this was for the greater good.

Like the Dragon King said, what was one life in exchange for thousands of others?

“Do not be so distraught my dear, even in the years to come all of Averia will sing your name, your bravery will forever be remembered”

“You make it seem like I have a choice.”

The hatred burning in the girl’s eyes was so fierce, the queen found herself looking away.

“You are right, there is no real choice, not for anyone of us.”

Then to the servants she said. “Veil her, and bring her to the court room. He who would claim her is here already” And with that hurried from the room

When the girl was led into the room on the arm of the king, the heavy silk veil draped over her head, everyone but the Dragon king rose.

He was still dressed in the same silver amour, the heavy helmet covering his face the only way anyone from Averia had ever seen him.

If anyone found it strange th at two people about to pledge their life to each other had never seen the other’s face, no one voiced it.

Averia's brides were always covered till the night of consummation and the Dragon king...well, no one really knew why he kept his face hidden.

There were rumors of course but he didn't care to correct or confirm them.

The more people feared him, the less likely they were to rebel.

The dragon king barely glanced at his bride who stands at his side, noting the deference in her small stature and bowed head, just like it should be.

He felt her struggle not to tremble when her hand was placed in his and was mildly surprised to find himself curious as to what lay beneath the veil.

Would she tremble when he touched her that night too, when he pinned her to the sheets and truly claimed her for his.

The thought filled him with unexpected want and a curiosity he was unused to.

The marriage rites passed like a dream, and when their joined hands are tied loosely together, they might have well have been chains.

The second the wedding ends, signaled by the royal bells, the Dragon king known to his court as Midas strides from the throne room without so much as a word.

He climbed into his chariot, drawing his sword and placing it across his lap.

"My lord, the army is ready."

He nodded and gave the signal to march. Finally, it was time to go home, victorious once more.

"Dragon King, it is time to keep your side of the agreement."

He doesn't even bother to look at the King and his officials that have accompanied his army out of the kingdom.

"Do not tell me what to do King of Averia. I am not a very pleasant man when people do that."

He dragged his quiet bride roughly from the chariot, which seconds later was driven into the portal by the chief Ryder, leaving him behind clutching her hand.

He pulled her with him to where the edge of the rip touches the crest of the mountain and with a movement so fast it was a blur, whipped out a small obsidian dagger.

He took her hand in his, forcing her palm open.

Her eyes went wide behind the veil when she saw what he was about to do and she struggled against his grip but it was no use and in one quick motion, he sliced open a gash in her palm.

But rather than cry out she let out a soft gasp that had him throbbing pleasantly in all the wrong places.

He repeated the motion on himself and then intertwined their fingers, pressing their bloody palms together.

A tingling sensation of pleasure and pain ran down the length of his arm and he suppressed a groan as the magic of the blood bond coursed through his body.

“By this blood oath, I Dragon king, Midas the immortal, Lord of the 5th realm and master of The dragon’s fire hereby seal the portal between this two worlds for a thousand years...”

A fierce blue light began to envelope them both, the power rushing through his veins and into her and they both slowly began to lift off the ground.

“This is an oath bound by blood and it cannot be undone.”

Un-used to the feel of magic, the newlywed bride cried out in pain and ecstasy as pleasure beyond anything she had ever known rushes through her very being, threatening to rip her apart.

He pulled her against him, a second before they wink out of existence.

Disappearing from her world and crash landing in his.

She lay limp in his arms, the journey between the realms too much of a strain on her fragile body.

The veil had gotten lost somewhere along the way and Dragon King Midas stared for the first time at the face of his wife lying in his arm.

The chief Ryder appeared as if from thin air and attempted to take her “Let me my Lord.”

But Midas strides past him, still holding her in his arms. “Attempt to touch my queen again Leo and Chief Ryder or not, I will have your head.”

And it is unconscious that the new queen of the Dragon realm first enters her chambers.

As he lay her down on the bed, she stirred gently, her lips parting in a way that had the blood rushing away from his head.

He took off his armour, suppressing the sigh of relief at the freedom from the weight.

As he untied the strings of his shirt, he watched the gently heaving form of the woman on his sheets, her hair an unusual colour of red spread out on his pillow and the gentle stirrings of lust he had felt earlier rose with a sudden intensity that surprises him.

He took off the shirt and walked up to the bed, sitting down beside her still form.

Without even thinking about it he brushed his thumb against her bottom lip, dragging the pad of his finger against the plump fullness of it, vaguely wondering what she would taste like.

The king of the 5th realm took whatever he wanted, and right now, he wanted her.

His hand slipped from her mouth and wrapped its fingers around her slender neck.

He leaned over her, lips brushing against her ear. "I know you're awake

"

She stiffened and he laughed, her fear making him throb with desire.

"Open your eyes".

When she didn't obey, he squeezed hard, and her eyes flew open in panic.

He had never seen eyes so blue.

Taking his hand from off her neck, he straightened. "Take off your clothes"

"M...my...Lord, can we...do this tomorrow?"

Her voice was lower than he expected, a sultry candence that his body physically reacts to.

His voice was gruff when he grabbed her chin roughly, fingers digging into her cheeks, breaking the skin and drawing blood.

"That will be the last and only time I will tolerate disobedience."

"Am I clear?"

She didn't respond only nodded, tears he does not understand rolling down her cheeks.

"I said am.... I.... clear?"

She raised her head and looked at him, chin lifted in silent defiance, her light blue eyes meeting his liquid gold.

He isn't aware of when he pulls her against him, her softness pressing against the hardness of his bare chest but when he crushed his lips against hers, his want became need.

She tasted like wine, intoxicating and heady, the more he took, the more he wanted until his desire was at a feverish crescendo beyond even his control.

When he took her bottom lip between his teeth, she shivered against him and suddenly kissing her was not enough.

He ripped off her clothes, tearing away the sheer, flimsy material and she gasped loudly against his mouth.

He could taste her fear and it only made his need grow.

He lifted her up and tossed her onto the bed, eyes trailing over her form, Gently curved, sensual and totally devoid of a birthmark on her right shoulder.

Anger so fierce he could feel his dragon form beginning to stir started to rise in him.

His golden eyes took on the color of molten magma.

All royal members of the royal family of Averia had a birth mark, a half moon crescent on their right shoulder

Whoever this woman was, staring at him with wide blue eyes filled with fear, she was not the princess of Averia.

They had dared to trick him...him.

“Who are you?”

He asked getting angrier by the second, the pupils of his eyes dilating as his dragon struggled to rise to the surface in response to his rage.

She struggled to find her voice backing away from him.

“My...lord. I’m your wife, Princess of Averia”

His grabber her throat again but this time he fully intended to kill her, crushing her wind pipe so she can’t breathe.

“Lie to me again...” he growled “...and I will take out your tongue. Do you understand?”

For the first time since she was forced into this accursed arrangement, Hera looked up into the face of the man she now belonged to and tears rolled down her cheeks.

She clutched desperately at his fingers unforgivingly wrapped around her neck and struggled to take in air.

He didn’t care. “Good. Now for the last time, who... are... you?”

“I am Hera my lord, orphaned slave of Averia, now wife to Dragon King Midas of the 5th realm.”

His rage was a wave that rushed over his head, consuming all in its path.

And then, all hell broke loose.

The Dragon King’s Substitute Bride Chapter 2

HERA

How dare they!!”

I couldn’t answer even if I wanted to, not with his hands nearly choking the life from me.

His eyes are a startling red that shake me to my core, his beautiful face distorted with rage and startling clarity I realize that I am going to die.

The exact words that had brought me to this point float like ghosts through my mind.

“Hera the queen has requested for you”

7 little words; how was I to know that those were words that would change and ruin my life beyond anything I had ever imagined?

No, in that moment all I knew was that the queen has summoned me and that could only mean either of two things.

One I had done such a good job of tending to spoilt Princess Cassiopeia’s every whim and need, cleaning her room till it glimmered, that the queen was now about to promote me from palace slave to palace attendant

Or I had done something even slightly wrong and was now about to be sent away from the palace or worse, locked up in the cold dank dungeons below.

I had gotten up fearfully from the dirty kitchen floor, my hands chaffed and raw from how hard I had been scrubbing.

“What could the queen want from me?” I wondered out loud and I saw the slap coming before the blow even landed forcefully on my cheek, splitting the skin and knocking me back to the floor.

“You dare...to question the queen’s orders?”

Tears brimmed in my eyes, my stinging cheek now bright red but I knew better than to say a word in response.

“If you value your head slave girl, you will do well not to repeat such an act in the presence of her majesty, for while I might be forgiving, she most definitely is not. Now cease your sniveling and come with me.”

And without another sound I had followed, all the while wondering if this was going to be the end of me.

What would happen to my little brother if that were to be the case? Every other member of was dead, burnt to ashes in the fire that had razed down my village.

I would never forget that day; the image of my mother, waving at the door to our hut, watching me and my younger brother head off to the capital to sell our last surviving flock of geese for whatever little money we could get.

It was the last time I would see her alive.

The smoke coming from the direction of the village was the first sign that told me something had gone horribly wrong. I remembered running as fast my legs could carry me, dragging my brother behind me but even before I got there I knew it was too late.

The smoke stung my eyes and the stench of burning flesh and smoldering embers that filled my nose told me exactly what had happened.

The Dragon Ryders had attacked my village; destroying everyone and everything in it.

It didn't matter that the attackers could still be around. I hadn't stopped running until I got to our hut.

But there was no one left, nothing there but a pile of burning ashes, where my family had once stood.

The voice of the head servant broke into my thoughts. "Wait here"

I stood in front of the heavy gold doors that must lead into the queen chambers. I had never been here before.

Slaves were not allowed to roam the palace at will.

I would have preferred not to make matters worse by appearing before her highness covered in soot and dirt from the kitchen but I had little choice in the matter and while I was still trying to wipe off the grime from my hand on my dirty maid uniform as best as I could, the doors swung open and the head servant reappeared.

"Come."

When I stepped into the wide airy room, my heart had nearly stopped as I realized I was well and truly finished.

If only I had known just how much.

Unlike I had earlier assumed, I wasn't in the chambers of her highness, the queen of Averia, no I was in the throne room and seated at the top of the steps at the end of the room beside the queen and princess was no one else but His majesty himself.

My lips quivered and tears started to fall, a slave brought to the throne room before the king was either about to be sent to the dungeons for trying to escape or publicly executed for treason.

I had fallen to my knees at the base of the steps, ready to plead for my life.

It was the king who spoke first. "This is the girl?"

"Yes your highness"

The king grunted and nodded his head. "Good. What is your name girl?"

I bit back my sobs, not daring to raise my head. "I am nothing but a slave girl by the name of Hera Your majesty"

"Hera..." he repeated staring at the poor maid shaking before him. "And how old are you Hera?"

"I have seen 21 Moon harvests your grace."

"And your family?"

"All dead ... killed by the dragon Ryders, save my younger brother who also works here in his highnesses service." I said, my voice cracking on the last word hoping the mention of my brother would soften their hearts.

How very wrong I had been.

"Your brother...do you love him?"

When I failed to respond the king repeated his question, impatience in his tone. "I said do you love him...this brother of yours?"

"Yes my king, with all my heart"

I remember asking herself what kind of trial and sentencing this was to be? Where were all the guards and the members of court?

But the king had not finished with his strange line of questioning. "And would you consider any sacrifice too great to save the life of your brother?"

I hadn't needed to even think about it. "Never"

Leaning back the king nodded "It is decided then..."

By the gods, if they meant to kill me for some crime I had wished they would just come out and say it.

"...when the sun rises over the hills of Moria tomorrow, the slave girl Hera will be wed, in place of the Princess Cassiopeia to the Dragon king Midas, ruler of the 5th realm..."

I raised her head, confusion and fear greater than anything I has ever known filled me for what would be the first time of many and my blood ran cold. "My...my King...I do not understand."

But no one had bothered to answer me.

“...For the salvation of our entire kingdom and the life of all we hold dear...” He hit his scepter three times against the ground, in the manner of a royal decree. “I am Avalon the Noble, King of Averia. So I have decreed and so it will be done. Take her and prepare her.”

In that moment, I wished I had been sentenced to death because this was much worse.

And now as Midas flings me across the room, I note they may not have said it that day but that is what they have actually done.

I fall painfully against the wall, somehow managing to avoid hitting my head, my wedding attire now barely pieces of cloth hanging from my body.

He stalks towards me and I shrink against the wall, biting my cheeks hard but it was no use, the tears would not stop falling

They hadn't stopped since the day before when I was taken out of the throne room and my dirty garments stripped from me.

Not when I was immersed for the first time in a warm bath of roses and expensive sweet smelling spices and scrubbed within an inch of my life, my skin massaged with jasmine and oils from the queen's own armoire.

Not even when I was dressed in layers of the soft crystal blue of my wedding attire, its sheer material hugging my curves and moving like liquid silk when I walked.

The servants around me had held no envy for my position, not for a moment.

Even as they had brushed my hair till the flaming red of it gleamed, falling in waves down my back and adorned me in jewels fit for royalty, they had felt sorry for me.

To be wed to the Dragon king, a man whose cruelty was known and feared throughout the 7 realms, a monster so ugly he kept his face hidden.

It was nothing short of a curse.

Head bowed, my hands folded in my laps, my body shook with fear and rage, I fought the urge to run, to try and escape my bleak fate but I had known even then that it would be no use.

This was the price I had to pay.

To save my kingdom and the only living family I had left.

“It is time.” A voice announced and they placed the heavy veil on my head and led me out of the dressing chambers and to the large doors of the throne room where my fate had been sealed.

They hadn't even let me see my brother to say goodbye for fear that I would try to escape.

“You must think we are being cruel and selfish.” The king said appearing by my side in all his royal garments, crown high atop his head to lead me down the aisle. “But the princess...”

“Is heir to the throne and I am only a slave... disposable.”

I knew they could no longer harm me more than they already had, not when I was about to save all their skins and for that I would no longer bridle my tongue. “I have accepted my fate your highness. All I ask in return is that you take care of my brother.”

“You have my word. Your sacrifice will not be forgotten Hera”

“So I keep hearing”

I didn’t care if they remembered or not. They could forget if they so wished but I would not forget and when the time came, I would make them pay; All of them.

When the doors swung open and I was led in, the royal bells tolled loudly but I might have been deaf for all my attention was fixed on the one who had remained seated when everyone else rose

It was the first time I had set my eyes on him; the object of my nightmares.

Even with his face hidden behind that fierce armor with its terrifying horns, I had felt his eyes following my every move and my heart banged against the confines of my chest till I felt like it would burst.

My hand was placed in his and I found it cold and hard, calloused from battle. And even though I struggled to hide it, my body soon betrayed my fear, trembling against my wish.

He exuded a palpable power and presence beyond anything I have ever known and it scared me to my very core.

And yet, behind all that fear was curiosity and I had found myself sneaking glances at him throughout the ceremony, wondering if what lay behind was as heinous as his crimes.

I knew now that it wasn’t.

The ceremony itself had passed in a blur of words and meaningless motions.

When the cords were wrapped around our joined hands as was the custom, it was like the final nail on the coffin and I found herself once again fighting back tears at the unfairness of it all.

I was led unceremoniously out the hall, two Ryder guards at my side and placed alone in a chariot at the head of the procession of the Dragon army and he had appeared moments later hoisting himself up and beside me with a grace and fluidity that surprised me given how large he is.

He signaled for the march to start and for the first and what will be the last time, I was led out of the only home I had ever known.

He said nothing to me the entire way to the top of the hill of Moria, not when dark clouds that were not there before suddenly appeared and the sound of distant thunder rumbled, a bolt of lightning

renting the air and striking the crest of the hill so suddenly and forcefully that I had jumped in my seat.

The portal opened, filling the air with a smell that reminded me painfully of the day my village was wiped out.

Not when he dragged me from the chariot and towards the gaping hole in the otherwise darkened sky to whip out a blade and slit the skin of my palm, my blood dripping down, staining the grass below a crimson red.

Not even when pain had flooded my entire body as he pressed our bloodied palms together.

Pain so fierce, my knees gave way, pleasure so intense, stars exploded in my head; the last thing I remembered before I was whisked away.

No, the first time I had heard the voice of the man to whom I was now sworn, I had just come to, lying on the softest bed I had ever slept in, a faint throbbing in the hand that had been cut open.

His large hand around my neck, his lips brushing against my ear in a way that made my stomach clutch and my toes curl with a pleasant feeling that both surprised and disgusted me.

I would never forget the first time I had looked into the face of the monster who had destroyed everything I loved and realized the stories that said he looked like Hades himself were all wrong.

He was the most beautiful, ethereal thing I had ever seen. My finger had ached to brush against his perfection, to trace the planes of his face and run them through his long white hair.

And when he had kissed me, bruising his lips against mine making me gasp and shudder against him, my body betraying me and surrendering to the one responsible for so much heart ache and pain, I had him even more.

The same hatred that is even now reflected in his face as he stares down at me “Get up.”

I know I should do as he commands but my body is in pain and unwillingly.

“I said... get up.”

I force myself shakily to my feet not daring to raise my head.

“Look at me...” The disdain and disgust in his voice clear as day and I raise my eyes to meet his.

They are no longer the color of flames, but they are much darker than the golden gleam I had awakened to see.

“For your part in this deceit...this plot, you will be sent down to the dungeons and come tomorrow you will be publicly executed.” the finality in his voice sealing my fate.

When he turns away from me, pain and rage as sharp as the knife that had torn open my skin pierces my heart; I was already dead, what did it matter.

And I charge at him.

The Dragon King's Substitute Bride Chapter 3

MIDAS

It wasn't the force of the attack that knocked him to one bended knee.

That would be ridiculous

No, it was surprise; surprise that she had actually gone through with it.

He'd known the minute she started to think about it, his senses alert to the change in her breathing pattern even with his back turned and his dragon instincts aware of the increase in the rate of her already pounding heart.

All indicators of a cornered prey.

But that she would actually do something as foolish as trying to attack him was so inconceivable an idea, that when she jumped on his back and wrapped her feeble limbs around his neck, surprise at her foolhardiness, knocked him to his knee.

Well, no one ever said humans were the brightest of the 7 realms' creatures.

He roars in rage as her teeth sink through his tunic and deep into the skin of his shoulder.

Resisting the urge to fling her backwards and crush her tiny body against the wall behind them, he grabs her hair and pulls her off and over his shoulder and with one inhumane leap, lands on the bed, taking her with him.

He pins her below him, holding her hands with one arm above her head and as she thrashes around, fighting against his grip, his brows draw together in confusion.

She didn't even have a fraction of his strength, why did she keep struggling?

The doors to his chamber swing violently open and standing at the entrance, sword drawn and eyes frantically searching for the danger that had called to him; is Leo.

"My Lord!"

As Chief Ryder and personal protector to the throne, Leo and his dragon had the ability to sense when even a drop of blood had been drawn from a member of the royal household.

Midas doesn't turn, his eyes still fixed on the now still, half naked form of the woman below him, her blue eyes glaring at him with hatred so strong you could almost taste it.

He found himself strangely amused by it.

“At ease Chief Ryder there is no real danger here. Not from this one”

Leo unconvinced advances into the chambers, still searching the room with his eyes. “But my dragon smelt blood My Lord.”

Midas glances at his shoulder seeing the teeth marks and the tiny spots of blood seeping through and staining the fabric. “It would appear my bride is impatient for her execution tomorrow and would love for it to be brought forward to this very second.”

Leo returns his sword to its scabbard, stopping a few steps from the foot of the bed, his feet rooted to the spot by the confusing scene before him.

Surely she could not have been so stupid.

Unwillingly bride or not, to attack the dragon King could only mean certain death.

Midas turned his attention back to her, he could sense her anger and it... excited him.

Memories of the feeling of her softness pressed against his hardness, the intoxicating taste of her on his tongue, pushes it's way to the front of his mind and he has to struggle to stop himself from simply kissing her again.

Slave or not

“Your meaningless rage and futile attempts at hurting me are bemusing. It's almost a shame that I'm going to kill you.”

“Go to hell.” She spits at him and it lands on his cheek before he can turn his head.

The sound of the chief Ryder unsheathing his sword on instinct echoes through the room and she smirks up at him.

“Oh no, have I perhaps hurt your feelings? Is your errand boy going to cut off my head for you?”

The mockery in her tone and defiance in her eyes threatens to push him to the very edge of his control.

Midas laughs instead. A dark laugh devoid of mirth and warmth and when his eyes focus on her again, they are cold and emotionless.

“Put away your sword Leo, the empty words of this slave girl mean nothing to me and I can defend my own honor”

She looked up at him, her chest heaving with the exertion from her struggles “honor...what do you know about honor?”

“Enough to know that your words are beginning to make me less inclined to make your death as quick as possible.”

“So says the king who had to threaten the annihilation of an entire kingdom of people because it was the only way he could manage to get a wife.”

“You push your limits slave.”

“And so what dragon king... what is that you will you do, kill me?”

His eyes slowly begin to turn red again, his brewing anger at her disregard for his title momentarily clouding his vision and he does not notice the smirk of satisfaction that creeps unto her face.

Leo does however and he realizes what she’s doing; she trying to goad him into killing her quickly.

Midas however is too infuriated to notice this. “Chief Ryder...”

“Yes my Lord”

“Leave us... but stand outside the door; I shall need her body removed from my chambers when I am finished.”

Leo bows low. “As you wish sire.”

But as he gets to the doorway, he turns to look back at the woman forced to give up herself for her people and knew her rage was merely thinly veiled pain.

And he would never be able to explain why he opens his mouth knowing he was risking not just her life but his as well “My Lord...”

Midas says nothing in response, his eyes never even once straying from the object of his fury but his body stiffens and Leo knows he can hear him.

“If you kill her My lord, you will be giving her what she wants... you will be setting her free.”

And with a single bow and not another word, he closes the heavy doors behind him before the King can send his head flying from his body.

But he need not have worried for all of Midas’ attention is on his sham bride and the way her eyes flood with fear at Leo’s parting words. A cruel smile flickers across his beautiful lips.

“That is what you wish isn’t it?”

She turns away from him, all traces of her earlier defiance gone. He grabs her chin, forcing her to look at him.

“You would rather die than stay here as my wife.”

She laughs, harsh and bitter. "It is a fate worse than death."

Her words, like a knife send an odd prickling sensation through him.

She has managed to hurt him somehow and he does not know how but he does not like it, not one bit.

"Is that so?"

Her voice is full of a bravery he knows she does not actually feel. "Do what you must. I tire of this"

He lets go of his grip on her chin, "Oh that's where you're wrong Hera..."

His fingers tracing a path, both cool and searing down her neck, watching how even though she gazes at him with contempt, her breathing quickens and her eyes, grow darker turning the color of a troubled night sky on the brink of a storm and her body, the ship caught in the billowing waves tremble at his touch.

"For you see I on the other hand..." the path deeps lower with every word till the pad of his thumb brush against the now hard peaks that poke through nearly non-existent clothing as if begging to be touched.

Her back arches involuntarily; her striking red mouth parting in shock to let out a small sound that nearly drives him to distraction. "....I... am just getting started."

And before she can blink and re-orient herself, he is gone, taking the heat of his body with him.

He stands by the door, fastening a scarlet fur-rimmed cloak around his neck, every inch the commander of his army.

Without a single word, he calls to Leo's dragon -an ability belonging only to the King of the 5th realm -and the chief Ryder appears by the door as if summoned.

Leo hides the relief he feels at the still alive even if badly shaken woman on the King's bed, clutching the covers against her chest.

"You called My Lord."

"I did. It seems the queen is in need of a quick lesson on what happens to people who do not accord me the respect I am due by trying to deceive me as she has done. Take her to the cellar."

The Ryder's reaction is reflex, his head wiping up in alarm to look past the king and at her cowering from.

The cellar was reserved for the worst of criminals, traitors to the kingdom, vicious men who would much sooner slit your throat than they would offer you a chance to breathe.

She would not last one night there.

Midas notices this and he raises one perfectly arched brow, his chief Ryder, eternal sword and right hand to the king had never balked at an order, no matter how cruel.

He bristles and his voice takes on a dangerous tone. “Do you have an objection to my instructions Chief Ryder?”

The protector of the throne falls to one knee, head bowed and right hand on the hilt of his sheathed sword. “Never...my King.”

“I would hope not. And as for you...my dear wife”

He turns to look at her. “....you will soon come to learn what fates far...far worse than death actually are”

Yet when she raises her tear streaked face to look at him, enthralling even in her sadness, Midas the immortal is baffled to note he does not feel the satisfaction he expected to feel.

Instead there is a vague... rather faint ache in the region of his chest and he stands still, simply staring for one moment at her; bewilderment at this unexpected confusing perception, drawing his impossibly beautiful face into a frown.

But like fine sand blown away in the wind the moment passes, the feeling is gone and he strides from the room without a backward glance.

She had lain her bed and now it was time to lie in it.

The Dragon King's Substitute Bride Chapter 4

HERA

There is a popular saying among the hags and mages of Averia.

That you go through life never knowing the decision that alters the course of your destiny, changing your life forever.

Well I knew mine.

And I know what you're thinking but it wasn't choosing to go to the capital in place of my mom the day my family was murdered.

It wasn't even being sold out like a sack of greens to the man who was responsible for afore mentioned murder.

No, it wasn't any of those things.

Instead it was the moment I decided to leap through the air, wrap my arms around his neck and sink my teeth into shoulder.

In hindsight I admit, it was a poor choice.

I should have bitten into his neck instead.

Did I know it was a pointless, foolhardy endeavor?

Of course I did. If one measly bite could have taken down the dragon king I am very sure King Avalon, all modesty aside, would have leaped on him himself in Averia.

Did I know it would drive him to nearly killing me that instant?

Well... I had been counting on it.

What I hadn't known however, was just how much Midas loved to play with his food.

I glare at the one Midas had called Leo, the Chief Ryder standing at the foot of the bed dressed almost fully in amour save his helmet.

This, being led to the cellars was entirely his fault and as it turns out, anger is a good alternative to fear.

I slide down from the bed, leaving the covers behind, painfully aware of just how utterly exposed I am.

He looks away and I laugh bitterly.

"How thoughtful of you"

I stretch out my hands, ready for him to clasp cold iron chains around my wrists but he does not do that.

Instead, he takes me by the arm and leads me out of the King's chambers. Our footsteps echo across the long dark empty halls, with their brick walls of grey stone lit by flaming torches and long purple carpets, soft against my bare feet.

He still does not look at me, deliberately averting his eyes when he notices me staring at him in spite. He leads me down a winding passage where the rug abruptly ends and I can feel the cold stones with each step.

"You will forgive me if my manners are less than adequate. As you might be aware, I am too busy being led to my death."

He says nothing in response to my sarcasm, his grip on my hand not exactly gentle but at least he is not dragging me like a common thief.

He leads me down a flight of stairs and stops us at a simple wooden door, knocking sharply three times.

“I would have expected the cellar of the dragon kingdom to be a more fearsome affair”

It would appear being sent to prison has loosened my tongue considerably.

When he still says nothing, I get even angrier. “Your silence while irritating, surprises me. You seemed to have a lot to say about my fate in the king’s presence earlier.”

And for the first time he grunts out an answer. “Forgive me my queen he would have certainly killed you”

“And I suppose the place he has sent me broods for me a better fate.”

At this he has nothing more to say and bile rises in the back of my throat.

By death’s head on mop stick, just what exactly have I been condemned to?

The door opens and another Ryder appears, dressed head to toe in their black glistening armour, the emblem of the dragon kingdom etched on his chest and I fight the instinct to run.

The sight of them will never cease to make me tremble in fear.

The new one salutes him and ignores me.

The chief Ryder barks at him, managing to sound threatening without even raising his voice. “Have you lost your mind Garwith or does the sanctity of our realm so much elude you that you would show no respect to the King’s wife?”

The man shoots up to his full height, back ramrod straight before bowing low at the waist. “Forgive my impropriety, my Lady I did not recognize you.”

No one in the palace knows what I look like. I am almost certain half the dragon realm did not even know their King had gotten married.

To a human for that matter

I scoff. “I am about to be led to prison Garwith, I think your impropriety is the very least of my worries.”

If he is thrown or perplexed by my ill manners and overall general situation, he hides it well.

Leo is the one who speaks to him. “Fetch me a tunic.” And he disappears behind the door once more.

“Your concern for my honor is very touching.”

“You need something to wear. You are nearly...”

I let out another bitter bark of laughter. “Well, we all know who to thank for that.’

He goes rigid beside me, his voice taking on a steel edge. “You will speak about his majesty with respect”

“Or what Chief Ryder...you will finish his work for him?” I am surprised to find that I couldn’t have cared less if I tried.

Luckily, before I could run myself head first into even more dire situations, the door opens once more and Garwith reappears, a single brown tunic more sack than clothing draped upon his arm.

Leo, sending him off, hands it to me and I snatch it from his hands.

As I put it on however, the simple shirt falling to barely cover my thighs with its scratchy material reminding me of what I used to wear before this accursed arrangement, I am instantly grateful to no longer have my entire body out on display.

But I would much sooner chew off my own tongue and throw myself into a vat of boiling lard than I would show gratitude to any one of them

Taking my arm again, Leo leads us past the door and to the left. We come to an iron door, a guard standing with a tall curving spear standing beside it.

The guard snaps to attention and without a word opens the heavy doors and I realize we are standing the top of narrow winding steps leading down to a deep darkness below.

He guides me down the treacherous stairs holding up a torch he has taken from the wall, the air getting colder with every step and my fear returning with such force that I have to bite my lips to keep from bursting into tears.

I am not sure what scares me more, maybe it’s the burning torches getting fewer and far between so that each step we take is darker than the next or maybe it’s the complete and almost utter silence, a silence so absolute in its hopelessness that I am scared to my very bones.

After what seems like an eternity, we come to the foot of the steps and I notice a light ahead

Leo’s whisper breaks through the fog of fear around my head. “My queen...I need you to trust me”

“Trust the man about to lead me to certain doom, what a delightful idea. What’s next, will the executioner be coming to sing me to sleep?”

He stops abruptly, turning me to face him. “The dragon King is not a very forgiving man and he is very easy to anger but maybe by tomorrow, he might reconsider this sentence. For that to happen, You need to alive.”

The urgency in his tone has my heart banging at my chest and stare silently at him, eyes wide with trepidation

“I need you to listen very carefully There are blocked tunnels beyond the cells filled with boulder and nooks and crevices. None of which lead anywhere but are small and dark enough that one such as her grace could hide.”

“Why would I need to hide?”

We are now close to a set of iron grates, and I can see two guards, more giants than dragon Ryders. Their faces a mess of scars and long beards, two swords strapped to their backs.

He ignores my question, the urgency in his voice increasing as we approach the guards. “When the clock strikes three times come midnight, you are to run to one of those tunnels, without a second’s hesitation and no matter what you hear, hide there till the bell strikes again to signal the morning’s dawn.”

“What are you saying, what is going to happen?” I don’t even bother to hide the panic in my voice.

One of the guards has seen us and he leaves his post, beginning to advance towards us.

“Just do as I have said and if the god’s will it, you shall see another day.”

The guard is here now but I don’t care. I grab onto Leo’s arm, frantic and afraid more than I had ever been in my life.

“No, don’t do this...”

“It is the King’s orders and they must be obeyed.

I’m crying now, hysterical. “No, No!...please! You can’t do this!!”

The giant pulls me off him and I struggle in the air, legs and arms flailing, fingers finding purchase in the skin of the giants face and clawing till I draw blood but it’s no use.

The heavy grates rise with a loud creaking sound and I fight even harder but it is no use and the giant carries me in. The last thing I see, illuminated by the flames of the burning torch in his hand, is the face of Leo.

Completely devoid of any expression.

When the guard tosses me into a cell and locks the door behind him, I am completely beside myself with grief and fear. I quickly scramble into a corner of the almost entirely dark space, making as little noise as possible.

While I might want to scream and cry, I know it will do me no good to draw attention to myself.

While I had seen other cells from my upside down position on the giant’s shoulder and caught glimpses of fearsome faces, as far as I could tell I did not share this cell with any creature besides myself.

The minutes dragged like they tend to do when one is afraid of some far of danger and as I sat in the corner barely daring to breathe, I wondered what Leo had meant. Could he have been mistaken?

The iron bars in front of my cell certainly meant I would not be going anywhere, and unless there was some secret passage behind hidden underneath my straw mat, there were no tunnels in sight.

Maybe he is wrong, maybe Midas had instructed him to say all those things and nearly kill me with fright.

But when the bells struck twelve it all became clear and whatever shred of courage I have left disintegrated like a dry leaves in a fire.

It was the most terrible sound a tiny vulnerable woman in a cell filled with vicious blood thirsty criminals could hear.

Loud and screeching, the sound stiff hinges makes when they have not been oiled for a very long time.

The sound of all the cell doors opening at the same time.

At first there is utter silence and then...the noises begin.

Blood curdling screams and the sound of bones cracking reach my ears. The inmates were attacking each other.

I consider staying in my cell, cowering in a darkened corner.

But I had seen the eyes that had followed my arrival and if I stayed here they would come and heavens knew what they would do.

I gather myself and stifling my sobs begin to creep to entrance of my cell but I am too late, dark shadows fall across the cell floor.

A leer too horrible for words is etched on the face of the man leading the pack as he advances towards me.

“Well what do we have here?”

I scramble backwards slowly, my palms scraping against the dirt packed floor but soon there is no where left to go and my back hits the wall.

I close my eyes as he crouches inches from me, his fetid breath hot against my face.

Gods above...is this to be my end?

He grabs me, pulling me under him and I scream, kicking and crying but I am no match for him.

“It’s been too long, I am going to enjoy every second...”

Then suddenly the weight is gone and something warm and liquid splashes against my face and the metallic taste of blood fills my mouth

But the blood splattered across my face isn't mine and the when next I dare to look, fearfully opening one lid at a time.

My small cell is littered with the dead body of the men who had tried to attack me.

But I barely see them.

All my attention is focused elsewhere.

The brightest thing in that dark cold space are his eyes.

The bright angry red of a welder's forge and the color of fire.

I run into his arms

The Dragon King's Substitute Bride Chapter 5

MIDAS

There were three unspoken constants in Midas' life.

From his childhood as prince and heir to the Dragon's throne, right up till the day the power of the dragon fire awakened in him; the result of a ritual his father had done on the day of his birth to lead him on the path he now trod.

These three things had never changed.

He was always treated with the highest of respect. When he walked into a room, his cold, sharp gaze sweeping from end to end, people bowed so low they nearly scraped their heads against the floor.

His words were law and his decisions were final. No one dared to disobey him and if they did, his wrath was a swift, merciless thing that didn't stop until it devoured all in its path.

And, he always...always got what he wanted.

Yet in one day, a single person, a woman with eyes the same blue of a summer sky had somehow managed to so thoroughly obliterate all three of those unchanging sacred rules.

Maybe that was why as he strode out of his chambers, he who had slain terrifying beasts and conquered nations, razing them to ashes with a single command, who had never thought twice about passing judgment now felt so deeply unsettled.

It was a feeling he was unused to and it irritated him to no end.

He had tried to push the image of her on his bed, shaking with her anger and pain away from his mind but the fear that been etched upon her face was seared into his brain and it followed him around refusing give him even a moment's respite.

"My Lord...

He snapped at the bowing Ryder yet unable to remember a time he'd be so grateful to have his thoughts interrupted. "Yes, what is it?"

"He has arrived and awaits your audience my lord."

Ah. His blacksmith was here, doubtlessly bearing with him newly crafted weapons of the finest materials and inlaid with jewels and precious stone. Nothing like instruments of war to remind a king of his duties and the realm he was sworn to protect.

Surely that would return his wandering mind to its normal state.

It had not.

Instead as his sat in the throne room, chin cradled in the palm of his hand, listening to the royal weapons master drone on and on, an endless spiel about this sword and that spear, he had half a mind to throw the oblivious man in prison.

She would not relinquish her hold on his mind and he was slowly crossing the bridge from irritability into anger.

Midas knew he was not an easy man.

He had a firece temper and an iron will and sometimes in that temper, his decisions were harsh but none of them had ever troubled him this much.

"Get me the chief Ryder."

The weapons master startled at the interruption and the tone of his King's voice dropped the sword in his hand and it clattered with an echoing clanging noise to the ground.

"But my Lord..."

He raised one heavy brow. Was his entire court going mad?

The weapons master scampered from the room. "...at once your majesty."

Was she a witch as well?

Could she have perhaps cast some sort of spell on him?

"You sent for me my Lord"

“I did”

The chief Ryder watched him. “You are troubled.”

Midas gazed out of the tall glass windows to the left of his heavy gold throne.

The sun had long since set and darkness had fallen upon the 5th realm and the moon a glowing white sentinel had taken its place, to stand watch over the night's sky.

“It would seem Leo, that I have made a decision I do not quite like and it has filled me with an odd...sense of something I do not understand.”

The chief Ryder measured his words carefully

The King was in a mood and any one who valued their head and wanted it to remain attached to their neck would do well not to annoy him.

“Perhaps my King has made a decision in anger and now...regrets it”

Midas turned his head to look at him with a frown. “Regret... what a ridiculous notion. I have never regretted a thing in my entire life”

“Well if my Lord has never felt this feeling before how does he know what it is and what it is not?”

Midas thought for a while, his brows furrowed in concentration.

“If it pleases the king to pardon my inquisitiveness...does this decision by any chance involve the former princess of Averia?”

A scowl clouded his face. “Princess, try conniving deceitful wench.” He spat, the anger at their deceit returning with a vengeance.

“I’m afraid I do not understand my King”

“Averia tricked me, sending me a slave girl instead of the princess and now the portal stands closed for a thousand years. They think they have outwitted me but they forget that I am Midas the immortal. A thousand years mean nothing to me and the price of their sins shall be visited on their children's children”

The chief Ryder ignored the part of his brain screaming at him to shut up.

“Does my Lord not think that maybe this...attempt at subterfuge was a matter in which she... being a slave... had no choice”

Midas got up from his throne and walked past his only friend and out the throne room doors. “Your rationality is of no help to me right now.”

But Leo's words refusing to be forgotten had crept into his mind to take their place beside the face of the one who troubled his thoughts.

Hera.

Her name against his wishes conjured up images of slave girls, their hair the color of Albanoe's forest 3 moons before winter when the falling leaves would catch the sun rays to glow a bright, fierce orange.

Of a body that trembled beneath his hands and a kiss that sent the blood in his veins rushing till he was filled with a primal longing and craving he was wrought to satisfy.

This feeling was one he knew well.

Simple, unbridled lust.

He pushed open the doors and the woman with her long black hair and scantily covered curves lept to her feet in fear.

"My King! I did not expect you tonight"

He stalked into the chamber and unclasped his royal cloak to place it on her vanity chair before untying the strings of his shirt. "am I now required to inform you of my movements in my own palace or am I to understand that you are now dissatisfied with your position and would like to be replaced?"

"Of course not." She had recovered her composure and her voice is sweet and soft, a seductive candence as she swayed towards him, her sharp green eyes roaming over his features.

She wrapped her arms around his neck.

"You are troubled my king"

He pulled her roughly against him. "You speak too much"

But even when he kissed her, her expert hands pulling the shirt from over his head and tracing the planes of his lean muscled body, something felt off.

It was a something he didn't even know had been missing.

Until her.

Damn it, damn it all to hell.

"My Lord...your highness! Where are you going?"

But he stormed out of the room, angrily pulling his shirt over his head. Then the bells began to ring out.

"f**k!"

He moved with dizzying speed, unaware that he was running but knowing he had to get her before the gates opened.

If the sight of the dragon king running through his halls was a surprising thing then his presence in the cellar was an even greater shock and the two Giants at the entrance were not immune to it.

“You. Give me your swords”

Confused, the guard by the left took off the sheathed weapons strapped to his back and handed them to him, scabbard and all.

“Raise the gates” Midas growled, furiously rolling his sleeves and tying his long hair into a pile on the top of his head.

The bells tolled for the eleventh time.

The guards glanced at each other. “Your majesty...”

He whirled on them. “You dare defy me?”

They shook their heads vigorously, the braver of them speaking. “Never my King..it’s just, it’s almost midnight my Lord, the Prisoners...”

The 12th ring echoed loudly in the tunnel.

He drew the first sword from its leather holding and its steel surface reflected the orangey glow of the burning torches.

“That is my business to deal with, but if I get in there and something has happened to her...” he drew the second sword. “...you can be rest assured neither of you will see another day. Now Open...the gates.”

The gates began to rise up slowly, the gears churning loudly.

It was not fast enough and not caring for the preservation of his royal clothes, he slid to the floor and under the bars into the darkness beyond, pulling his swords behind him.

He didn’t remember getting to her cell, not really.

They came at him the minute they saw him, which was stupid of them for not only had they recognized him, they were without weapons and he had two he knew bloody well how to use.

Maybe being locked up in the dark had addled their senses.

He dove and spun, kicked and dodged, his swords moving with such speed they were nearly imperceptible blurs. Sweeping arcs of light that reached his targets with startling accuracy.

Maiming and drawing blood.

He hadn't intended to kill anyone of them, he simply intended to clear a path till he found the object of his obsession.

Until he heard her scream.

He counted five of them in her cell, brutish hulking villains. Then he spotted the one holding her down beneath him on the cold dirt floor and the rage completely took over.

She may have been a pawn in a scheme to trick him. A scheme someone would definitely pay dearly for.

But she was his; Bride to the Dragon King Midas of the 5th realm.

And no one...no one touched what belong to Midas.

It was over in seconds and he stood at the entrance, unaware of the blood splattered against the walls of room and on his clothes.

His eyes still burning the color of his dragon, his chest heaving with what remained of his anger.

But when she dove into his arms with enough force to knock him over, nothing had ever felt more right.