

The Dragon King's Substitute Bride Chapter 101

MIDAS

The dragonkin have a saying.

Those who are too foolish to take heed to the whispers of the past, ensure that history repeats itself in the loudest of manners.

And Midas has never, not for a single moment in his entire life as king, felt as foolish as he feels right now.

Standing on the other side of the dreaded hall of mirrors, he should be satisfied that he and his dragon had passed the elves' annoying tests and would now get the antidote to save their people.

But instead all he can think about is all the ways he had thrown caution to the wind.

And how just thinking about the fact that she might not always be who he thinks she is, is so painful a thought it makes him want to rip something apart.

Preferably his heart.

“Welcome back dragon king!!”

Midas focuses his attention on the tiny gathering in front of him.

The Fairy queen and her council surrounded by their entourage of guards.

He had been so absorbed in his thoughts that he had not even noticed them waiting outside for him when he stepped out of the...

He turns around and frowns.

Rather than a door or a door way, the wall behind him is nothing but smooth, rose colored stone.

Whatever opening he had come through has now completely disappeared.

The Fairy queen walks towards him.

Her steps so short and graceful, she appears to be floating.

“From the snarl on your face Midas, I take it the mirrors must have revealed something you did not particularly like.”

Midas turns back to her. “I have catered to your whims long enough Moria...”

“They are not whims.”

“Whatever they are, I grow weary of them and am no long in the mood to be patient. Give me what I seek.”

She smirks. “For a moment there I was beginning to think that you had lost your bite. But I see your that without your little human tamer you are just as brash and ferocious as ever.”

His eyes flash red at the disrespect to the woman who rules beside him and resisting the urge to bare his teeth at the Fairy queen is one of the hardest things he has done all day and while she still laughs and titters like she always does, she is not stupid enough to come closer.

He glances around.

“Where are the others?”

“You are the first of your company to make it out.”

He turns back towards the smooth stone wall. “And they will all come this way?”

“If they are worthy yes.”

Midas’ jaw works and he clenches his fist, all efforts to still his racing heart and keep his worry from showing on his face.

By f*****g Hades things were so much easier when he just did not care.

Easier...or unhappy?

Both. But at least I knew how how to deal with it.

If fighting everything that breathes could be considered dealing with it.

If she makes it out dragon king that would mean He has not manged to get to her.

Yet. He has not managed to get to her yet.

He feels the dragon sigh within him but it says nothing more.

He can tell that Er’gan is unhappy about the seeds of distrust that have begun to grow in the King’s heart but Midas cannot seem to help it.

The prophecy.

He had been warned.

Told to be careful.

Yet the dragon king had gone right ahead and given his heart to the one who would in all likelihood be responsible for destroying his realm.

He had told himself, even as he fell deeper and deeper into the complex web of emotions that was the madness of the tether bond, that maybe the Kingmakers had been mistaken.

They had said she would be at the center of a storm that would shake the seven realms.

And rather than stay away from her while he found out exactly what the prophecy meant, what had Midas done?

He had let himself fall hopelessly and stupidly in lo...

The wall in front of them begins to glow from underneath.

A space between the wall and the floor suddenly now there were the once was none.

The dragon king finds himself holding his breath without even knowing it.

Praying one of his rare, once in a troublesome moment prayers to the gods .

Asking that it is her who comes through.

As they watch, the light extends upwards in two straight lines.

Both lines arch above to form the full outline of a door and the space bounded by them dissolves into a patch of luminescence.

Gods let it be her.

But it is not and as Midas'watches, his chief Ryder steps out of the ring of light looking pale and worse for wear.

The door way disappears in a puff of light behind him leaving behind cold stone and no trace of it's existence.

"Welcome..."

Midas steps sides her and cuts her off.

Leo straightens when he sees his king and attempts to right his expression. "Your Majesty"

"I take it yours was not a journey of cakes and rainbows either."

"Somehow you manage to make that sound more horrifying."

When Midas does not throw back a retort at the chief Ryder's quip, the dragonkin warrior frowns.

"What is the matter...where is Her...the queen?"

“She still walks the hall.”

“But...”

“I must speak to you at once.”

Leo frowns but he nods.

“Oh don’t worry about us Midas, we’ll be here to welcome your precious bride if she makes it out.”

This time Midas does sneer at her.

He does not lead them very far but around a corner he sees a set of wide doors leading out into a balcony and he covers the distance in long strides, pushing the doors violently open.

“You are troubled.”

He is slowly beginning to understand why the dragonkin habit of stating the obvious annoys her.

“Yes Leo I am.”

Leaning against the railing, Leo folds his arm and cross his ankles.

Chief Ryder and friend wrapped up in one, ready to listen as both.

So Midas tells him everything.

About Er’gan’s past and the link to the prophecy and the potential that the woman closest to his heart might betray them.

Leo is silent for a long time.

A very long time.

When he finally speaks, the dragon king is surprised to hear traces of barely concealed anger in his voice.

“So you mean to tell me that you think she has somehow been corrupted by Azarath?”

“Er’gan said...”

“I am not asking you what Er’gan said your grace. I am asking you what you believe. What your heart is telling you.”

Ha had baan warnad.

Told to ba caraful.

Yat tha dragon king had gona right ahaad and givan his haart to tha ona who would in all likalihood ba rasponsibla for dastroying his raalm.

Ha had told himself, avan as ha fall daapar and daapar into tha complax wab of amotions that was tha madnass of tha tathar bond, that mayba tha Kingmakars had baan mistakan.

Thay had said sha would ba at tha cantar of a storm that would shaka tha savan raalms.

And rathar than stay away from har whila ha found out axactly what tha prophacy maant, what had Midas dona?

Ha had lat himself fall hopalassly and stupidly in lo...

Tha wall in front of tham bagins to glow from undarnaath.

A spaca batwaan tha wall and tha floor suddanly now thara wara tha onca was nona.

Tha dragon king finds himself holding his braath without avan knowing it.

Praying ona of his rara, onca in a troublasoma momant prayars to tha gods .

Asking that it is har who comas through.

As thay watch, tha light axtands upwards in two straight linas.

Both linas arch abova to form tha full outlina of a door and tha spaca boundad by tham dissolvas into a patch of luminascanca.

Gods lat it ba har.

But it is not and as Midas'watchas, his chiaf Rydar staps out of tha ring of light looking pala and worsas for waar.

Tha door way disappaars in a puff of light bahind him laaving bahind cold stona and no traca of it's axistanca.

"Walcoma..."

Midas staps sidas har and cuts har off.

Lao straightans whan ha saas his king and attampts to right his axprassion. "Your Majasty"

"I taka it yours was not a journey of cakas and rainbows aithar."

"Somahow you managa to maka that sound mora horrifying."

Whan Midas doas not throw back a ratort at tha chiaf Rydar's quip, tha dragonkin warrior frowns.

"What is tha mattar...whara is Har...tha quaan?"

"Sha still walks tha hall."

“But...”

“I must spaak to you at onca.”

Lao frowns but ha nods.

“Oh don’t worry about us Midas, wa’ll ba hara to walcoma your pracious brida if sha makas it out.”

This tima Midas doas snaar at har.

Ha doas not laad tham vary far but around a cornar ha saas a sat of wida doors laading out into a balcony and ha covars tha distanca in long stridas, pushing tha doors violantly opan.

“You ara troublad.”

Ha is slowly baginning to undarstand why tha dragonkin habit of stating tha obvious annoys har.

“Yas Lao I am.”

Laaning against tha railing, Lao folds his arm and cross his anklas.

Chiaf Rydar and friand wrappad up in ona, raady to listan as both.

So Midas talls him avarything.

About Er’gan’s past and tha link to tha prophacy and tha potantial that tha woman closast to his haart might batray tham.

Lao is silant for a long tima.

A vary long tima.

Whan ha finally spaaks, tha dragon king is surprisad to haar tracas of baraly concaalad angar in his voica.

“So you maan to tall ma that you think sha has somahow baan corruptad by Azarath?”

“Er’gan said...”

“I am not asking you what Er’gan said your gracia. I am asking you what you baliava. What your haart is talling you.”

“Of what use is it listening to my heart Leo? Look where it has gotten me.”

“Happier than you have ever been and I have known you almost all your life.”

“Of what use is my happiness if it destroys the kingdom?”

“So what do you intend to do?”

Midas stares out into the blinding vastness of the glittering fairy realm. "I want to trust her but I cannot bring myself to do so knowing what I know now. Doing that would be akin to..."

Leo scoffs. "Akin to what Midas?"

The dragon king turns, frowning.

His chief Ryder almost never calls him by his name even though he has told him many times that he may do so but that is not what has the dragon king's brows drawing together in confusion.

It is the way he had said the words.

Angry and bitter.

"You hold the heart of one of the most beautiful people to ever walk the seven realms and you want to throw it all away because of something that happened in the past?"

"Do you understand Leo that she is the reincarnation of the same person who once betrayed all of the seven realms by joining hands with darkness?"

"And so what Midas? So she has the same powers, so she stands now as the Oracle of Daphne, why does knowing all that suddenly make her different in your eyes?"

"I cannot deliberately put my realm in danger on the off chance that she might be different."

"Is your throne really all that matters to you?"

Midas gawks at his friend in disbelief. "That is untrue and unfair and you know it."

"Do I? Because you seem too eager, too willingly, to throw away the most precious thing in your life to keep it "

"I have a duty to my people before all else and if she is a threat to that..."

"You would rid yourself of her without a moments hesitation."

"You make it sound like I am just itching to get rid of her."

"Because that dragon king is exactly how you sound."

Leo shakes his head, his jaw clenched. "If she were mine..."

"Well she is not."

That is the closest Midas as come to raising his voice and both men stare at each other.

Grey steel against gold fire

Leo steps back. "No...she isn't."

Midas sighs. “I just want to do the right thing Leo.”

The gentle breeze and the peaceful sqwaking of birds a sharp contrast to the turmoil of emotions and tense atmosphere on the balcony.

“Do you love her?”

Midas closes his eyes, his heart beating out the answer even without him saying the words.

“I owe it to the dragon realm...”

“Do you...love. her?”

The dragon king is silent until the words leave his lips.

Perfect and whole in their utter certainty.

“More than my own life.”

“Then if you love her, trust her.”

“But what if keeping her by my side means trouble for everyone else?”

Leo takes out his helmet from where he had been holding it under his arm and fits it unto his head, the metal rattling loudly.

“I think the question you should be asking yourself your highness, is if you even deserve to have her by your side in the first place.”

The Dragon King’s Substitute Bride Chapter 102

HERA

I do not know what it is I was expecting when I stepped through those doors.

But it most certainly was not this.

One minute I had been holding unto to him, my fingers wrapped desperately around his as we stepped together through the doors and into the hall of mirrors.

And then very next I was all alone in a sea of blinding white light.

The door through which I had come in had disappeared and there was neither up nor down.

Neither left nor right.

There was only white.

And for one terrible, incredibly long heartbeat I had felt completely lost.

Lost and alone and so very small.

But then I had blinked and suddenly the space had changed.

Leaving me in the state I am now.

Standing in confusion and wondering why it did not work.

I stare at the heavy door that had been my way in.

I had not seen it reappear.

I had simply closed my eyes for a fraction of a heartbeat and when I opened them again, there it was.

And the longer I stare at the door, the more I arrive at only two logical explanations.

One, that I must have somehow gotten turned around and lost my way.

Or two the hall of mirrors is some made up Fae hogwash trick and that the door does not really take you anywhere.

Midas did say they liked to play games.

Perhaps this is one of them.

Because why else would I suddenly be standing exactly where I had started, in the passage the Fairy queen had led me through and on the wrong side of the door through which I had just come.

“Welcome dragon queen!”

“Oh skies above!”

My hand flies to my chest and I turn around heart on my mouth to find myself face to face with the Fairy Queen Moria and her entourage of council members and elven guards.

A single red lipped smile in a sea of stoic faces.

I focus my attention on her.

“If this is meant to be some sort of jest Fairy queen it is a terrible one.”

“Whatever do you mean?”

"I am absolutely certain I stepped through that door so why am I back here again...and where is Midas?"

She smiles that smile of hers.

The one she and her twin sister share and even knowing that it is not Hermani standing before me, I still shudder at the sight.

She floats towards me, reaching out to touch me. "Oh don't you worry your pretty little head about all that. What matters is that you stepped through the door."

I narrow my eyes at her and move my shoulder out of reach.

"Your highness, I mean no disrespect but do you not understand? We have no time for all these petty games and..."

She tsks and there is a glassy shine to her teeth and complexion that I had not noticed before.

"Are you humans always like this?"

"Depends on what you mean."

She moves around me slowly, the large width of her dress brushing against the wall when she passes by me.

"I mean distrustful, suspicious... unbelieving?"

I sigh, deciding to go along with whatever crazy conversation is brewing as long as it means getting the antidote.

"I suppose if you were the weakest, least powerful of all the creatures in the seven realms you would be the same."

She tilts her head, once again in front of me.

"Oh..."

"Oh what?"

"You sound a bit...bitter."

"I am not bitter. I am simply stating the obvious."

"Which is?"

"I do not expect you to understand."

"Please...try me. You think humans deserve to possess magic?"

Maybe it is the persistent, all assuming smirk on her face, maybe it because I do not understand what in all the realms is going on, but for some reason I cannot explain, this entire conversation is getting me angry.

Very, very angry.

I glare at her. "If you have had your land ravaged and destroyed, your people slaughtered and killed by other creatures from other realms simply because they were stronger and had more power than you...

if you had to go for days without food, sleeping in the cold and damp while your younger brother nearly freezes to death besides you all because someone who had too much magic and the ability to, decided to raze down everything you ever loved and owned to the ground, you would not stand there asking me why we are suspicious and mistrustful of all of you and your spells and magic and stupid halls. And you most certainly would not ask me if the people of Averia deserved to have magic to protect themselves."

There is a tingling in the back of my neck.

A tiny voice telling me to stop.

Telling me that she is goading me and that I do not truly feel this way.

That this bitterness and rage is not me.

Not anymore.

But I ignore it.

Because the anger fills me with warmth, makes me less afraid.

"So you want magic?"

Somewhere along the line, her entourage had disappeared.

And I am left alone.

Standing in a distorted reflective passage with the Fairy queen who keeps grinning at me.

The odd part is I was facing forward the entire time yet I did not hear or see them leave.

I must have have looked away at some point.

Maybe there is a secret door somewhere that they all went through.

"For our protection yes."

"And for vengeance?"

I swallow, suddenly disliking the glint I can see in her eye.

How did we even get here?

My mouth feels dry and my heart is racing.

“I...I suppose.”

“You suppose? Is that not why you are here Hera?”

“What?”

“Oh there is no need to play the fool my dear. I know all about your schemes. Is that not why you agreed to this marriage in the first place? You wanted revenge did you not?”

“Yes but...”

“You wanted to know the weakness of the dragon king, to get close enough to take advantage of it. Isn’t that why you are going around pretending you no longer hate him? That you no longer blame him for what he did to you and your family?”

She circles me, her voice behind my ears and as she speaks, I shake my head. Over and over again.

But no words seem to want to leave my mouth.

I no longer hate Midas.

There is no room in my heart for that.

Not with all the other things I feel for him.

But what I did not realize was that a tiny part of me, the part that had responded to her goading and her questions with anger and rage...

That Hera who remembers all she had to go through...

The hunger and the pain and the crying myself to sleep after scrubbing floors and washing royal dresses till my hands bled.

She remembers

And she still blames him for it.

I stare at my feet...at my hands... anywhere but at the one accusing me of what I now know to be true.

“You see Hera...”

The Fairy queen moves to stand in front of me again...and that is when for the first time I notice that she looks different.

She smiles at me. "I know your secret..."

Her skin glistens and shines, but it does so not like a person made of flesh and bone but like a flat reflective surface.

Like glass.

Or like a mirror.

The realization slams into me like a ton of bricks and I gasp.

This was my path.

The path the hall of mirrors had chosen for me.

The path to reveal the one secret I had left.

The Fairy queen in the mirror smiles broadly at me. "You still want vengeance."

"No..."

"Yes. That is why you are staying so faithfully besides the man who hurt you the most. Because you secretly still think that you might find his weakness...That perhaps the day would come when you might use it."

"No. Stop saying those things"

My voice is shaky and there are tears in my eyes but the reflection does not stop.

"The darkness inside of you still wants him dead Hera, still cries for his blood. His life for all the others he took from you. That is why you think you love..."

"No!!!"

The mirror shakes and the reflection within it wavers.

I point my hand at it, chest heaving.

"Don't you dare put words in my mouth and thoughts in my head. You think you know me? Well you know nothing! Nothing at all!!"

I am shouting and shaking but I do not care.

"Yes, he may have hurt me and taken my family away from me and yes maybe it will take me time before that realization no longer causes my chest to hurt or makes it hard to breathe."

I step closer to the mirror. No longer afraid.

“You were right when you said I only agreed to this marriage simply for vengeance. But what I did not expect to find...what I did not expect to do, was end up finding the happiness I had been missing for so long and while I may not have forgiven everything, I no longer want to live my life thinking about revenge.”

As I say the words, I realize just how true they are, how much I mean it, how much lighter I feel.

The reflection no longer seems as sharp but she is still there, still smiling at me.

“So you think it will be that easy? You think that you can forget, can just let go of your hate? You would turn your back in your family, the ones you claimed to love, especially knowing that the only reason you were torn apart was because of him.”

“You see that is where you’re wrong. I do not think it will not be easy at all. But I am willing to try. And you know why?”

“Why?”

“Because I love him!”

I step even closer, my breath fogging up the glass.

“You hear that you silly reflection! I love the dragon king more than I have ever loved anything in my life. So you can take your secrets and distortions and shatter into million pieces because I love him and what I feel for him is so much better than whatever guilt and hate and pain you think lies deep inside of me.”

A crack.

Then another.

Loud and startlingly.

Beginning from the corners of her smile and spreading out through the entire mirror.

And as I watch, it falls apart.

Watch and laugh as it breaks.

Shattering into tiny fragments of light and dissolving into nothingness until all that is left, is a frame of light.

A doorway.

Without a moment’s hesitation, I step through it.

And walk straight into Midas’ arms.

The Dragon King's Substitute Bride Chapter 103

Hera

The first time I got lost was a few weeks after my 8th moon harvest.

My siblings and I had spent all day playing in the sprawling fields behind our manor and it had begun to get late.

The sun already a fiery ball of orange buried halfway into the earth and casting long shadows across the ground.

Mother's instructions before her departure to go fetch my wondering father from whatever tavern he had found himself had been simple.

And we should have begun to head back inside like we had been told to.

But I had just been crowned queen in our silly games of make believe and as queen, I had decided that I wanted moon daisies braided into my crown of flowers.

The issue with my irrational desire, was not just that play time was already over and that I would not be "queen" for much longer, but that moon flowers did not grow around our home.

They did not even grow in the rolling fields beyond our gate.

No, they grew within the borders of the tall dark trees that were already being cast into shadow by the setting sun.

I should have given up.

Should have turned around and marched my tiny feet into the house and washed down for supper.

But even then I did not know how to stop.

Or how to let go.

So I had clambored over the wooden fence meant to keep us from doing exactly what I was about to do.

And deaf to the frantic warnings of my sisters, my brother was much too young then, I had run, tiny feet pitter patter over soft green grass towards the edge of the forest.

It had taken me barely five heartbeats to realize my first mistake.

I could have sworn the edge of the trees had been much closer when I looked upon them from behind the safety of my fence.

But even then, even after realizing my error, I had been too stubborn for my own good and not ready to turn back.

My siblings, tired of yelling after their oldest sister, had gone inside and all I could hear was the sound of evening crickets calling frantically to each other.

Loud and irritating over the sound of my racing heart.

Informing one another about the foolish human girl child heading to her doom.

Beginning to get afraid, I had run as fast as my feet would take me.

It would only be but a moment I told myself.

I would be in and out before any one could say fiddle faddle.

And when my sisters saw the moon flowers I had gotten, they would be sore jealous and I would not give them even a petal to hold.

Perhaps I shall let them have a sniff but nothing more.

Yet when I got to the edge of the Forest, I realized my second mistake.

The moon flowers with their luminescent white petals, falling like drops of silk away from ruby red centers, did not in fact grow at the edge at all.

But I told myself that since I had begun it, it was only right that I see it through.

The truth in fact had been much less complex.

My ego would not allow me to come back empty handed.

So of course, I had wandered into the forest.

And of course, I had gotten horribly lost.

They found me crying.

Curled up in the fork between the brown, mottled roots of a massive oak.

Tears and mucus running down my face and ruining the precious daisies clutched tightly in my hands.

I would get lost many times after that, but nothing had ever managed to compare to the first time.

The warmth and happiness and relief that had rushed through my body as I threw myself into the open arms of my mother.

The daisies were crushed between us and so lay forgotten on the dark forest floor, discarded in the wake of my rescue.

Of course, I knew I would be getting a good and stern talking to and in all likelihood would have my queen playing privileges stripped away from me for a week, but I could hardly bring myself to begin to care.

All that had mattered in that moment had been holding unto her as tightly as I could.

Crushing her between my frail, tiny bones.

And even though we had still been in the middle of a shadow cast forest with snapping branching and rustling, moving sounds, my fear was almost all gone.

Because holding unto her felt like coming home.

It always did.

And that is how I know I have to tell him everything.

Because when he holds me, it feels the exact same way.

It does matter where we are or how frightened I had been moments before.

From the moment I step into the circle of his arms, I can almost feel my fears melting away.

Giving up the fight like spears of ice under the brilliance of the sun.

Perhaps that is why thinking about Averia no longer fills me with pain or home sickness.

Somewhere along the line of this positively insane journey, the dragon king had become my home.

He pulls back, clutching my face between his hands even as his eyes roam around every inch of my face.

“You made it out.”

“A dragonkin stating the obvious. I must truly have made it back this time around.”

“Delighted to see your sharp tongue has managed to follow you out.”

I smile but it not a full one.

My head is reeling and my heart is racing.

I want to tell him everything.

About why I had agreed to this marriage and had come into his realm in the first place.

I want to tell him about my initial plans to find out his weakness and get revenge.

And about how somewhere along the line, rather than hating him, I had fallen stupidly in love with him.

Surely he would understand.

The dragon king of all people must know that sometimes getting revenge is the only thing that managed to keep you going.

But thinking it is easier than saying it out loud.

He tilts my chin up with a finger, making me meet his eyes again.

“You are troubled. What is it, what did you see?”

I glance behind him.

Somehow everyone had disappeared.

And we were alone.

Again.

I step back, shaking my head.

No, it couldn't be.

I made it out...

I did!!

“Hera...what is the matter...”

Midas makes to come towards me, his brows drawing together when they take in the panicked look on my face.

I take another step back, stretching out a palm.

“No. Stay there!”

He stops, his bewilderment and confusion only obvious in the way his eyes watch me.

“Where is everyone?”

“I do not know. Perhaps the Fairy Queen has more common sense than I give her credit for and decided to give us a moment to ourselves.”

“So I am not still in the hall of mirrors?”

“Why in hades would you...” He stops when he sees how worried I am.

“No Hera...you are not. I promise you made it out.”

“How did I know that you’re real? This, you, could all be some elaborate illusion to try and trick me into...”

To this day, I cannot say how he covers the distance between us in one blink of an eye.

But he does.

Somehow he reaches out across the space and drags me back towards him by the loop around my waist.

And then he covers my mouth with his own and steals the protests from my lips.

It feels like words unspoken.

This kiss that is different from all the others.

Fingers entwined, hearts pounding in tandem.

He kisses me with an intent and a purpose that threatens to set my very soul on fire.

A tenderness that makes my heart ache.

And when we finally break apart I can barely even remember to think.

He rests his forehead against mine. “Still think I am unreal?”

I sigh, breathless, my chest still heaving from what has to have been the most intense kiss of my life.

“By all the gods no.”

He laughs and stretches back to his full height. “Come. Let us go home.”

“No, Midas wait.”

He turns back to face me, brows drawn.

I have to say it.

I have to say it now or I am simply going to explode.

“There is something you should know.”

He freezes, then he takes a step back.

Back and away from me.

Somehow I did not aspect this reaction and it almost makes me not want to say anything.

But I push past it, ignore the bells going off in my head.

And I tell him everything.

I say the words in a rush.

Barely breathing, not wanting to stop until I get to the end.

The point where I tell him why I no longer wish to harm him or his people.

The part where I tell him I love him.

But I never get there.

I never get there because as I speak, the dragon king's expression begins to change.

His face remains the same but his eyes.

They become guarded.

And the words get stuck in my throat.

"Midas..."

"So you came into my realm with the intention to destroy it?"

"Yes but you can hardly fault me for that. You and your dragon Ryders..."

"I know and I do not...fault you for it. I myself would have done the same thing."

Relief washes over me like a pitcher of cold water.

But the feeling is short lived for when I reach out to touch him, he remains out if reach.

I swallow and straighten my back. Hiding my fear behind a cool voice and a face devoid of expression.

"Midas. What is going on?"

He watches me for a long moment.

"You say you are no longer interested in getting revenge."

“That is because I am not.”

“But what if someone manages to convince you otherwise?”

“What?”

“The one the dark elves worship, the one who is more than likely behind all of this, is a god, a creature of dark and immense power. The one called Azarath the fallen.”

I shudder when he says the name.

The hairs on the back of neck standing in end.

“Azarath...”

Suddenly, every premonition of darkness I have ever had comes back in full force, and I struggle to focus.

To focus on the words he is saying.

On what they mean.

“The Oracle of Daphne, the goddess who’s powers you hold. She let herself be lured by this darkness and she betrayed everyone else.”

“What does that have to do with me?”

“You are her incarnation.”

“I am what?”

Too much...this is too much all at once.

I want to tell him to stop talking.

To slow down and let me think but he is speaking again and my throat is refusing to work.

“And now you tell me that all this time, you have wanted to get revenge for what my people...for what I did to you.”

“Wanted Midas! Wanted. That is the whole point of telling you. You cannot possibly think that after all of this, I still wish to bring you harm?”

I wait.

And wait.

But the words I wish to hear never come.

I stumble back as if struck.

“You think I am going to betray you to some shadowy figure responsible for some much chaos and death, whose face I have not even seen?”

“But you have”

I stay silent, my mind reeling.

And somehow I know without him saying it.

The path of lost memories and the face I had seen in the darkness when I had stepped off.

Oh Gods above.

Fear, raw and primal rushes through me.

But it is nothing compared to the pain I feel as I watch him drift farther and farther away from me.

He still stands there.

He hasn't moved an inch since we began speaking yet he has never felt farther away.

And I know no matter how much I reach out, I will not be able to touch him.

Not anymore.

And my heart breaks.

Tiny cracks that spread and radiate until even the tip of my fingers start to hurt.

“Midas...”

But he is already turning away, refusing to meet my eyes.

“We must return at once. The dragon realm needs me.”

And by all the gods it hurts.

Hurts more than anything I have ever felt before.

So I do what I always do when the pain gets too much for me to think about.

I get angry

The Dragon King's Substitute Bride Chapter 104

Everything can be hidden.

Words, feelings, even entire people can be kept secret.

Knowledge hoarded, matters shoved under rugs and covered with grime and dust.

Out of sight and out of mind.

Hidden from everyone else.

And my tears were no exception.

When I first began to work for the King and queen of Averia, hiding my tears had been the first thing I learned to do.

No, now that I think about it, hiding my emotions was second.

Learning to keep my sharp tongue locked away in my mouth had been the first.

A skill honed by many beatings and the even sharper tongues of the other, more important castle workers.

But pretending not to cry, now that one I had to pick up quickly least I became the favorite object of their power lusts.

If they cannot see that they have hurt you, then they have no power over you and they leave you alone.

So I tilt my chin and make to follow him out.

My hands clenched in fists so hard I can feel my nails leaving marks on my palms.

But the thing with tears is that it does not matter how much warning they give you.

The clogging of your throat, the frantic sniffing, the heaviness in your eyes that you try oh so desperately to blink away,

All that, flying in and making a mockery of my many years of learning how not to give in to my tears.

Despite it all, I am still surprised when I feel the first drop rolling down my cheek.

I wipe it hurriedly away but there is another one right behind it.

And another

And another.

Wet, round, drops of sadness falling relentlessly until I am standing in the middle of the Fairy Queen's hall, shoulders quaking and unable to do anything but bury my face in my palms and cry.

In one breath I tell myself I am being silly for crying like this and that he has every right not to trust me.

But then in another, I tell myself he is being ridiculous, and unfair and....and...

But neither one of these are why I am standing and sobbing into my hands, unable to move.

I am crying because I never got to tell him.

Never go to say why it mattered not who's powers I held or who's incarnate I supposedly am.

And most especially why no matter what had happened in the past, there was nothing, absolutely nothing some castaway god with too many letters in his name could try to tell me that would make me betray them.

And now it did not look like I ever would.

Of course I could still say it,

I could run after him right this instant, could grab his arm and force him to look at me as I yell it into his face.

But I am no longer so sure how my words would be received.

No longer sure if he still feels anything for me.

And that...that is what hurts me the most.

"Your highness, the king is ready to leave and he asks that you..."

I try to wipe hurriedly at my face but it is no use.

"Your grace?"

"I am fine Leo. I only just... needed a moment."

He pulls my hands away from my cheeks. "A moment? I would hardly consider that a moment. Tell me what the matter is."

There is a protective edge to the way he says the words.

He is already enraged at whatever could have reduced me to a sobbing hallway mess without even knowing what it is.

I shake my head.

“Hera, what is wrong?”

I blink up at him through the haze of my tears.

I want to tell him I am fine and that it is just a moment of foolishness but all I can do is shake my head.

“If you wish not to tell me then will you at least let me fetch the King. If he finds out that someone or something has been making you cry I have no doubt he will...”

“Oh Leo...”

My voice cracks and before I can stop myself I throw my arms around him, my forehead pressed up against the hard coolness of the armour on his chest.

He stands so still I can almost hear his heart racing.

But then ever so slowly he wraps his arm around me.

Stroking me hair and holding me up even as I completely fall apart.

Skies above...

Why did it have to hurt so much?

Leo strokes my hair, murmuring soothing words besides my ears until the tears start to slow and I once more find it in me to remember how to breathe.

He pulls away a few moments later, wiping the tears from my cheeks with two large thumbs and staring at me as if seeing me like this is even more painful for him than it is for me.

He reaches out and strokes my cheek, his voice rough and low.

“He told you didn’t he?”

I pull even further away, a coolness stealing it’s way over my skin.

“So you know about it as well”

“I do.

I scoff and take another step back.

Doing it to him before he can do it to me too.

“So you also think I am doomed to repeat the same things that happened in the past? That my entire purpose here is simply as some repeat mistake sent to betray you all over again? Do you hate me now as well?”

My voice is cold and quiet.

“He does not hate you “

“You are speaking for him again.”

“Fine. I shall speak for myself to this time.”

Then he takes a step closer and another until we almost back where we started.

The top of our feet brushing against each other.

He leans in, steel grey eyes boring into me.

“When the door to the hallway of mirrors opened and I stepped through it, I did not think that I would make it out.”

I stare up at him, my brows drawing together.

“Why ever not?”

He sighs and tucks a strand of hair behind my ear.

An absent minded gesture that does nothing to distract from the heaviness in the air between us.

“Leo, why did not think you would make it out?”

He swallows and his eyes fall back against mine again.

“Because even before I stepped into that hallway I already knew what my test was going to be.”

“What was it?”

“You.”

“What?”

“There is no day...”

He seems to be fighting against the words.

As if he thinks not saying them would make it less true.

I see it the moment he gives up.

See it in the way his eyes darken and fall

“There is no day I wake up that I do not end it wishing to all the gods that you were mine instead.”

“Leo...”

“No, do not say anything. I am only telling because even I do not get to do to you all the things I think about...all the things I dream about...”

“Even if I do not get to hold you by my side, you are the best thing that has ever happened to me...to both of us and if the dragon king cannot see that then gods above forgive me but he does not deserve your tears.”

The Dragon King’s Substitute Bride Chapter 105

MIDAS

Gold...

Rubies...

A crown on your head and a castle for your bed.

Those are the parts of royalty that everyone hears about, dreams about, coveting it even in their sleep.

But the one thing no tells you about being king is just how much of it is spent making decisions that are difficult beyond belief.

And for Midas quite a number of things have served to remind him exactly how hard being royalty truly is.

From the first time he had to take the dragon throne in place of his father, to sit in front of the council, crown heavy on his head as he tried to offer them wisdom he did not yet possess.

To the very first time he had to lead his army into battle knowing their lives and the lives of all who lived within his borders depended in one way or the other on his success and return.

A gift and a curse.

Knowing that even the slightest of his decisions had the power to affect not just him but the thousands of others who look up to him meant that breathing is the only thing Midas is allowed to do without thinking.

Yet as hard as it all has been, nothing in all his reign could have prepared him for this.

Pushing past the pain in his chest and resisting the urge to turn around is the hardest thing he has ever had to do his life.

Every part of him is screaming for him to go back to her..

But he does not.

How can he face her when he knows that the pain he feels is not entirely his but hers as well.

But the hardest part is not just walking away from her.

It is knowing that he is the reason for the hurt even at this moment blossoming in her chest, radiating out even across this distance to pull apart the very fibers of his heart.

“Dragon King.”

Midas does not respond but the dragon continues anyway.

“Your handling of the situation with your Tether...”

“Not now Er’gan. Too much time has already been wasted. We must find Moria and leave at once.”

“Refusing to talk about it does not make the problem disappear.”

The words of his dragon have come to him in many forms before.

From mild amusement to condescending disinterest.

On certain occasions, even sarcasm had been known to belie its voice.

But not disappointment.

Never disappointment.

So hearing it now is such a surprise, that at first Midas does not even recognize it for what it is and he keeps walking, shoulders broad and wide among the slender, lighthearted of the elves and fairies of the castle who cast curious glances at him as he strides past.

The dragon king who, seemingly appears to be speaking to himself.

“Talking does not solve it either Er’gan”

But the dragon in his head is relentless.

“No but it begins the process.”

Midas resists the urge to scoff. “For a dragon who has spent this entire time being silent you seem to be in too much of a mood to speak now.”

“Perhaps it is because we can both see where my silence has gotten us.”

“Ah yes Er’gan trust me, I can see that oh so very well.”

“Can you truly dragon king? Because if you could I would think you would be wise enough not to make the same mistake. But apparently I am giving your intelligence more credit than it is due.”

Midas stops dead in his tracks, whirling around on the balls of his feet so that he is facing the glistening, eerily smooth wall.

“There is a dark elf positively brimming with evil magic locked up in my castle who is for all intents and purposes at this moment corrupting everything that moves and breathes on dragon’s mount. A curse of Wolfsbane that according to said evil queen who’s words could mean f**k all, I have barely half a day left to lift, and then to crown it all, there is the possibility that the woman...”

...that the woman I love might at any moment turn against me and my realm which she would be right in doing by the way, and rather than proffer solutions you would have me sit and make needless, idle chatter about it all?”

“You hurt her.”

A single sentence.

Just one.

It is like twisting the knife into an already bleeding wound and Midas is unable to stop himself from flinching.

“That was not my intention...”

“Maybe not but you did nonetheless and one does not go around hurting the ones they claim to love.”

“I admit that there are ways I could have better handled the situation but...”

“But what dragon king?”

But it is hard.

This entire situation.

His head knows what he should do.

The part of him that for a hundred and fifty years has cared about nothing but the growth and protection of his realm.

That part knows what must be done.

But his heart...

By all the gods his heart.

It wants him to drop it all, to say screw it and go back to her and take her in his arms and just disappear.

To go away from it all.

To run.

And it is not just the fact that he is even thinking about something as treasonous as this that frightens him.

It is how much he wants to.

How close he is to actually doing so.

“No one is asking that you turn your back on your realm dragon king. But after all it is that you have been through together do you not think that she deserves more than that. Does loving her not mean that at the very least, she deserves your trust?”

For the first time since he discovered the truth, the ruler of the 5th realm is silent.

The dragon takes the advantage to say one last thing.

“Dragon king...I may not have had a hand in convincing Daphne to turn to the darkness but in a way, I let Azarath take away the most important thing in my life. Do not let it happen to you too.”

The words strike against the newly mended brokenness of his heart and he realizes that Oracel or not, he cannot lose her.

Perhaps he reacted to rashly.

He should not have taken that step back and away from her.

Should not have let it seem like he was accusing her already.

He just hopes it is not to late.

Hopes that he has not already managed to ruin everything.

He must apologize. Yes.

Apologize and tell her exactly what it is that he feels.

But as he turns around.

“Oh there you are Your highness, I and my council have been going positively insane looking for you “

The tiny smirk on her face tells him she has done no such thing.

She is alone this time. Gliding gracefully towards him like she is floating instead of walking.

She cranes her neck, glancing behind him.

“Where are the rest of your company?”

“They are awaiting my return with the antidote”

And as he says the words he mind links Leo to take Hera and wait outside and when that is done, he turns his attention back to the Fairy queen.

“I believe we have all completed your... tasks.”

“Indeed you have and as I am a woman of my word...”

From within the massive folds of her voluminous sleeves she produces a single stone.

Midas tries his hardest not to snort in disbelief at the sight of it.

“So you made us go through all that, for a pebble?”

“You of all people should know not to judge a book by its cover, especially seeing the one you are in love with.”

He tries to keep his face as neutral as he can but on the inside he is thrown.

He who had spent so long trying to define exactly what it is that he feels and yet in one heartbeat...

How did she...

“Know? Oh please Midas, have you seen the way you look at her, speak to her? Even a blind man could tell.”

“Whether I am in love or not is irrelevant to the matter at hand.”

“True. We had an agreement. I take it that agreement still stands?”

“As long as I return to meet my realm exactly the way I left it, then you shall have your evil treacherous sister sent back to you “

“I know what everyone thinks but I believe that she is not truly evil, she is just... misguided and I intend to make her see the light again.”

Midas wants to tell her the truth.

Drunk on power and the fumes of dark magic, Hermani is misguided because that is what she wishes to be.

And that bringing her here will only spell trouble for the realm of Elves and Fae.

But it is not his place and so he merely nods.

“If that is what you desire. I can only wish you the best of luck “

“You think I will fail and that I am putting my realm in needless danger.”

“I do.”

If Moria is taken aback by his bluntness, she shows no sign of it.

“Perhaps you are right and I am being naive and foolish. But I am willing to take a chance on her. You know why? Because she is my sister and I love her and when you love someone...you do not give up on them..neither do you assume the worst..”

Midas frowns.

Something in the way she says the words makes he feel like she is no longer speaking about just her sister and he is unable to stop himself from looking away.

Is that what he is doing with Hera?

Is he giving up on her because he is so focused on all the things that could go wrong that he is now completely blinded to all the things that could go right?

By Hades he has made the gravest of errors.

He needs to talk to her.

To tell her just how wrong he is before he loses her completely.

He turns his attention back to the Fairy queen once again.

“I hope your plans succeed your grace but I must return to my realm now.”

She stretches out her hand as if to give the stone to him but when he reaches out she pulls it out of the way giggling.

Midas, not in the least bit amused by her theatrics nearly growls.

“Do that one more time and I cannot guarantee that you will return to your people with all your limbs intact.”

She throws her head back and laughs.

“Oh you are so much fun to rile up. It is almost a shame that your heart already belongs to another.”

He decides to say nothing in response to that and she drops the stone, small and grey into the palm of his hand.

It feels warm.

Warm and pulsating.

He stares at it.

“Now what?”

“Take it to your Kingmakers. They will know what to do.”

Midas nods once and the stone disappears into the lines of his attire and armor.

He inclines his head towards her.

A gesture of thanks and good riddance all in one.

He turns around to leave but her next words stop him in his tracks.

“I have a message for you dragon king.”

All the earlier childish playfulness is gone from her voice and Midas stares at her unblinking.

“The time of your test is nearly at hand but you must be careful least you fail and plunge us all into darkness. The evil is closer than you think, hidden in plain sight so that you will not know until it is upon you. Listen to the one who lies within you, the dragon to whom you are bound and should he ever go silent, then dragon king, know that the end is near.”

Midas sighs.

One more vague prophecy of doom because why in hades not?

The gods were really beginning to annoy him.

The moment the last words fall from her lips, her face lifts again, the brightness and annoying smirk returning once more, almost like a veil had been lifted and the candles turned back on.

Midas straightens.

“I have heard you and I will keep your words in mind.”

And with that he turns around to walk away.

She calls out after him, her voice echoing in the nearly empty passage.

“Take my advice and be watchful dragon king. For should the fifth realm fall, we all fall with it.”

The Dragon King’s Substitute Bride Chapter 106

HERA

“Leo...”

When I opened my mouth, I did not know what I was going to say.

Even when I say his name, I still am sure about the words that will follow.

My head feels like it has been held under a bucket of melted lard and then popped into the baker’s stove to slow bake until golden brown.

I shift my weight from one foot to another, unable to look him directly in the face.

Yet somehow his eyes still find mine.

Piercing steel that holds me in place until my cheeks start to turn red.

The longer I stare up at his hard, handsome face, the harder it becomes for my brain to remember how to make complete sentences and all I can do is open and close my mouth.

Gulping stupidly like some very red fish put of water.

“Leo...I...I...I...why are you smirking at me like that?”

“Just wondering how many times it is you intend to stammer the word “I” before you realize that you do not need to say anything.”

Somehow his quip gives me the strength to remember how to move my limbs.

I pull away from him, not understanding how he can laugh and look at me like he did not just utter words that could not only get him killed, but could potentially alter our lives forever. Unless...

My eyes narrow into slits and I raise my head to meet his gaze. “Where you...Jesting?”

“No your grace. I meant every word.”

“Then how in all the realms do you expect me not to say anything?” I throw my hands up in the air, at the nonchalance on his face, exasperation clouding my tone.

He raises the eyebrow with the scar like he always does. "You are upset. I should not have told you."

"Yes, you should bloody well have not! Why did you?"

He is quiet for a moment and I realize he is thinking about his answer.

Weighing the words before he says them.

Something the dragon king and I definitely need to learn to do.

He finally raises his head to look at me again. "Because for the first time in my life...I wanted to be selfish."

"Well how is that working out for you?"

"Not very well I must admit."

I scoff but then his hand closes gently around my wrist and pulls me towards him again.

"But I also did it because you deserve so much better than what he just did to you."

I swallow around the lump that seems to have suddenly reappeared in my throat.

Then I pull my hand as gently as I can from his grasp.

And when I speak this time, my voice is soft and a sigh escapes my lips but I do not stutter.

"Leo, I love him."

He does not say anything, just looks at me with that gentle, yet stoic expression of his.

I sigh even harder.

"Yes, I realize that it may sound stupid especially given what he has done in the past, what he just did...and gods above help me, what he most likely will still do in the future I..."

I wring my hands, pacing a short distance and back.

The words coming out without my even thinking about them.

"All my life, I have believed myself to be one who would do everything... anything to survive, yet when it comes to him, my common sense and my desire for self-preservation goes flying out the window and it is a scary...scary way to feel and yet..."

I stop, my head bowed. "...yet I cannot imagine anything more amazing than how I feel when I am with him."

He tilts my chin up so that I am looking at him once again. "For what it is worth your grace, you are right, it does sound stupid... maybe a bit mad too."

He drops his hand. "But...I fell in love with the King's wife, I doubt that any level of madness is touching that. You do not have to justify your feelings to me."

I stare up at him and he smiles softly.

A smirk finds its way to my lips. "You do realize that saying things like that could get you killed?"

He smirks back. "I do. That is why I am banking on the fact that you will not tell him anything we discussed here."

I feign shock, my hand flying to my chest.

"You would have me lie to my husband?"

"I believe your grace, that there is a secret of yours I am holding unto. Think of this as... returning the favor."

"This is blackmail."

"I prefer the terms 'emotional motivation'. "

I laugh and he grins.

And just like, all the tension in the air starts to decipate, like wisps of smoke before an open window.

"Fret not. The king and I are not exactly on speaking terms at the moment so you have nothing to worry about. The way things stand, he probably would not even believe a word I say anyway."

The chief Ryder sighs but says nothing more.

I step away from him, smoothening out the non-existent wrinkles in my dress and he straightens.

"We should get going, before the king starts to suspect th at I have run away with his wife."

I scoff. "He believes I am conspiring with some faceless shadow god to overthrow his Kingdom, I doubt that he would even mind."

"Your highness he..."

I raise my hand and shake my head. "No Leo, do not make excuses for him... not this time."

"As you wish your grace."

I had thought we were headed out, towards the front doors but instead, Leo leads us out two wide, swinging glass doors and into a balcony overlooking the valleys and mountains of the Fairy realm.

He turns around before we even step through the doors.

Even across the distance I can see the pain in his eyes.

But as much as I want to go him, I am unready to speak to him.

Or to forgive him.

Thankfully Leo steps between us, blocking me from his view.

“My King.”

Midas turns to him.

“The Fairy queen had fulfilled her promise and I now possess the antidote. We must leave at once.”

“Certainly your highness.”

Midas’ wings shoot out. Black and regal and stretching across the entire length of the balcony.

Massive even in his human form.

“Leo, you may change into your dragon form. I shall take the queen with me ...”

“No.”

“No?”

I step out from behind Leo, my chin raised. “I do not wish to go with you.”

He sighs and looks at me.

“You wish to stay behind?”

“I wish not to be in close quarters with the person who thinks I am about to betray him.”

I see his jaw work, watch him struggle and give up. “Very well then. So how do you presume to leave?”

“You are not only one who can fly are you?”

Maybe it is the words or the way I say them but I see it in his eyes when they find their mark.

“Hera...”

I look away from him, surprised to realize that I find no joy in seeing him hurt.

Even when he deserves it.

But I still do not want to talk to him so I turn to the chief Ryder and lay a hand on his arm.

“I shall ride with Leo instead.”

Leo starts, glancing at the king, then once at me and then back at the king.

“Your highness I do not think...”

“Fine.”

Leo’s head spins around so fast it is a wonder he does not break his neck. “My King?”

But the dragon knig does not hear him.

If he did, he does not show it.

His eyes are on me.

Locked, holding.

“If that is what you wish...”

I tilt up my chin. “It is.”

“Then so be it. I shall meet you both at the portal opening on the mountain top from whence we came.”

And with one last look at me, he takes off.

His powerful wings flap only once and I watch him, watch him fly away.

“I do not believe he just did that.”

I swallow, my eye still fixed on the sky. “I can.”

“You do not understand your grace. We, Dragonkin are incredibly possessive by nature. We do not know how to share. For you to ask to ride another dragon...and for him to agree without another word...”

I glance at the chief Ryder. “Well, perhaps his time alone will give him ample reflection, enough to start learning how apologies work.”

Leo smiles shaking his head. “You are... something.”

I shrug. “I just do not want to be too close to him just yet.”

“Because you are worried you will forgive him too easily.”

“Anyone ever tell you Chief Ryder that you are much too insightful.”

He smirks. "It is what I was made for your Grace."

He starts to take off his shirt and I look away.

Because no matter how mad I am at Midas, I do not wish to hurt him...much.

The light shines and when next I turn around the chief Ryder is gone and in his place is the large slate grey dragon I am starting to get used to.

I walk slowly towards him and brush my hand across his large, heavy snout.

Warm and smooth beneath my hand.

"You deserve all the the love in the 7 realms Leo. I am almost sorry I am not the one who gets to give it to you."

He nudges my hand and I laugh.

But even while laughing, a tiny part of me wonders why it could not have been him I fell in love with instead.

I hear the thunder and see the flash of lighting in the distance and by the time we reach the mountain top on which we arrived into the 4th realm, the portal already stands open

I slide down from Leo's back and walk up to him, to where the dragon king stands unmoving in front of the rippling, simmering in the very fabric of space.

"Do you think that everything is the way we left it?"

I still do not wish to speak to him.

But for the first time, I can hear uncertainty in his voice.

Can see it in the way his hand stay in clenched fists by his sides.

The dragon king is worried.

Worried and afraid.

And he is letting me see it.

I sigh once...twice...then a third time.

Then I cover his large hand with my smaller one.

Holding it until I feel his fingers release, until they wrap around mine.

"I cannot say. But what I do know Midas is that you are a good King and that no matter what it is that we meet, as long as they have you, I think your realm will be just fine."

He looks at me then.

His beautiful eyes roaming every inch of my face.

“I do not deserve you.”

“I know.”

“You are still angry at me aren’t you?”

“I am.”

“I am sorry.”

I nod. “I know. But sorry isn’t going to fix it. Not this time.”

“I shall fix it. All of it.”

I raise my hand to his cheek and he closes his eyes and leans his face into my hand.

“Fixing is hard Midas. It will be best if you learn how not break it in the first place.”

The passage through the portal is not so bad this time.

Wait, I am mistaken.

The nausea hits me like a physical punch in the gut and I am forced to hunch over, to dry heave and nearly cough up my lungs.

Midas holds up my hair and rubs circles across my back.

He knows I have not yet forgiven him.

But he also knows that I do not hate him.

It is already dark here.

The rocks and stones and hard lines a stark, drab contrast to the glittering brightness of the Fairy realm.

And yet, it still feels like coming home.

Leo comes in behind us, back in his human form and dressed up once more.

I finally stop coughing and manage to stand up straight, But when Midas tries to hold me, I shake my head.

Too soon.

He says nothing but I can see how hard it is for him to take that step back and away from me. Yet he does it.

I look around.

At the stars glittering in the velvet blue sky and the sparse landscape of the rocky region.

“Where are the horses?”

No sooner have I asked the question than they come, trotting towards us, their skin glistening in the wane light of the moon.

Midas glances at me.

I do not want to ride with him.

If I have to sit pressed up against him, his fingers long and warm and firm wrapped around my waist, pulling me closer...

I do not know how much longer I will be able to remain angry.

But it would not do for the King and queen to ride into the Castle on separate steeds.

Everyone would know something was wrong.

And just the look of satisfaction on Minth's face is enough to make me decided to let go, just for the ride back home.

I feel it the moment I take the first step towards the horse.

That familiar pressure.

Except this time it is worse.

So much worse.

Oh Gods above...what now?

I am aware of my surroundings, aware of the chill in the air and the hardness beneath my feet.

Yet the force with which the pressure invades my being is so much that I can no longer see, or think.

I reach out...hand flailing blindly in his direction.

“Hera!”

I feel him reach for me, but I am already being pulled under.

Already drowning.

Somehow I know, that whatever I am about to see will be bad.

Very bad.

And with that realization, everything fades.

The Dragon King's Substitute Bride Chapter 107

MIDAS

The dragon king is not a man who has many weakness.

Some might even say he has none at all.

And maybe, for the greater part of his life, that may have indeed been the case.

That he is ruthless and cruel and heartless is a rumor he has not been bothered to alter.

A reputation he has been careful to cultivate.

People are less likely to attack if they believed their opponent to have no enfeeblement of which they could take advantage.

But he is soon coming to realize that the only reason he has had no weakness in all his many, many years of walking the face of the dragon realm is simply because he had been yet to meet her.

And now that he has...by the gods it is driving him insane.

“Stop pacing dragon king. It is unbecoming.”

“Do you think she hates me?”

“She hated you before, I would think you might have been used to it already.”

“By Hades Er’gan you are not helping.”

“Very well. I am almost certain that she does at the very least dislike you.”

If the dragon were corporeal, Midas would have glared at it. Now he is forced to be content with simply scoffing and sneering into thin air.

“For a five thousand year old dragon you are not very good at offering words of wisdom.”

“You accused her of treason and plotting to betray you, what did you expect would happen?”

“But...”

“But what Dragon king, you did not mean it? When she told you her truth and you stepped away from her, was it not because you doubted her, believed her capable of betrayal?”

Midas is silent. Saying No to that would be nothing but a baldface lie.

And the ruler of the 5th realm does not lie.

Most especially not to himself.

The dragon within him sighs.

The sigh of one dealing with a petulant child.

Or a king who is unused to the nuances of emotions and what it means to want another’s happiness over their own.

Over everything else.

“You are apologetic dragon king and soon enough, she will come to see it too and perhaps forgive you but before then, you must give her space.”

Midas growls quietly to himself.

What did Er’gan think he was trying to do by leaving her alone with Leo?

Letting her reject him to ride on another dragon that was not him.

“But what if she does not?”

“Does not what, forgive you?”

Midas throws his hands in the air, his voice exasperated.

“Yes Er’gan. What if she never forgives me. What then?”

“Unlike you dragon king, I do not believe that the queen is entirely unreasonable and if she chooses not to, well I believe you are just going to have to work until you deserve it”

And now he is even more confused then he had been before he asked.

Apologies.

They have never been his greatest of strengths.

But before he can think further about it, she is here, sliding off of Leo's back and refusing to even glance in his direction.

The urge to go to her and pull her into his arms is so strong that he has to look away.

He turns to face the open portal, the antidote to the wolfsbane poison growing warm and heavy in the palm of his hand.

His kingdom...the Fate of his people...the affections of the woman he loves...

Everything in his life is suddenly uncertain.

And for Midas, a king who thrives on order and balance, the uncertainty is what frightens him the most.

That is until he feels her wrap her hand around his.

His stability in the drowning chaos.

His anchor.

His tether.

She is still displeased with him.

He can tell in the way her eyes darken every time she looks at him, can hear it in the angry pitter patter of her racing heart.

Yet that one tiny gesture, tells him that even if everything else is uncertain, she is not.

Even disgruntled and annoyed as she is, she is still his.

And Midas did not know how much he needed to know that until he did.

He also did not realize that her grasping his hand would make his ache to hold her even more acute.

How in hades did he even think that she would ever...could ever...

Gods he has been stupid.

Stupid and wrong and he had hurt her.

The one most precious thing in his life.

He will fix it

He has to fix.

Everything.

He just has to.

And he tells her as much.

She tells him in that sultry low voice of hers that makes him want to kiss her, to practice not breaking it first.

So he does not tell her that he wants to hold her.

He is not sure he would like her answer.

Midas could hear the heartbeat of anything living from across a distance of 30miles.

Could move with the speed of light and fight a war singlehandedly to come out victorious.

Could turn into a dragon of unimaginable strength and power and could soar above the clouds on wings the length of 7 horses standing abreast.

And yet when it comes to her.

He has absolutely no idea what to do.

How to make her see that nothing else mattered to him if he did not have her.

There has to be something.

A way to make things right.

He is still thinking about it even after they step through the portal and back home.

Home where thank the gods everything is neither bejeweled nor designed to either blind or give a splitting headache.

He holds her hair while she coughs and helps her back to her feet.

She tries to hide it but he sees on her face the effect the journey through the portal has had on her and he almost loses the fight not to hold her.

But her eyes tell him he is better keeping his hands to himself which of course only makes him want it more.

But he steps back and keeps his itching hands in fists by his side.

He looks around carefully, his senses merged with that of Er'gan.

Sharp and alert.

Ready to sniff out any difference in the air.

Any lingering magic.

But the only thing he can smell is residual magic from the portal they had just come through.

Yet something feels off.

For an almost imperceptible second his skin had tingked and the hairs on the back of neck had stood on end.

Midas frowns, hard.

Leo, ever alert to the changes in the mood of the king turns towards him.

“My King?”

Midas lifts one hand, silencing him.

He tilts his head to one side.

Yes, something is definitely wrong.

Something he cannot feel, something he does not understand.

Perhaps it is even something that has yet to happen.

Well whatever it is, He only knows that they have to get back to the castle.

Now.

The horses come galloping towards them but Midas is barely paying any attention and he does not glance in their direction until the horses are within reach.

Maybe that is why he does not see it happen.

Why he does not notice it until it is too late and she is crumbling to the ground.

He moves like the wind, he and his chief Ryder.

Here one moment, there the next.

Both dragonkin men reaching out and catching her before her sleeves can even brush the hard and weathered rocky floor.

Midas does not notice, the chief Ryder until Leo lets go.

He steps quickly aside but his eyes remain fixed on the prone queen lying still in Midas' arm.

The chief Ryder swallows, the worry in his eyes and clenched fists obvious for much longer than he undoubtedly intended for it be.

He rights his expression soon enough but it is too late, Midas had seen the look on the face of the man who has been his only friend for many years.

The emotions in his eyes.

But he is much too worried to deal with it now.

Brushing the hair from her face, he calls out her name.

Softly first, then louder.

But she does not stir.

The horses, as if sensing the direness of the situation bray loudly.

Stomping their hooves and kicking up dust.

Leo starts “Your highness...”

But Midas is already moving.

His wings break out.

“Meet us at the castle.”

And he takes off without another word, the body of the woman he loves lying still in his arms.

He is much too exhausted to be using Er’gan’s wings right now.

But he could not afford to wait.

Midas is not afraid because her eyes are closed.

It is not even the state of her unconsciousness that spurs him to urgency.

No, what truly unsettles him is the expression on her face.

Pain and fear.

It chills him to his very bones.

Makes the dragon in him stir and stretch out.

He lands right in the middle of the courtyard.

“Your highness!!”

It is late and the torches that line the courtyard cast a orangey bright glow on the faces of the chief steward and the Kingmaker Arydian who are standing at the entrance to the castle.

He does not wait to ask how or why Arydian, messenger of Clotho the present is here.

Neither does he bother to ask how they knew to wait for him.

He simply matches past the chief steward who had run up to him and approaches Arydian.

“Wake her up.”

Arydian shakes his head, his green eyes filled with a sympathy that only serves to annoy the king.

“I am afraid I cannot do that your Majesty.”

Midas growls. “You can’t or you won’t?”

“I can’t. She lies in a realm beyond my reach. Only she can wake herself up.”

The dragon king did not realize how much he could come to hate a mere sentence until he would hear it again, for the second time in three days.

Midas paces the room angrily

“What in hades do you mean you can do nothing Arydian! She has been lying in bed like that for three days and two nights. Surely you must be able to do something.”

“Your highness I have told you she is...”

“What good is your power if it cannot do anything to bring her back? What good is any of our powers...what good is my power.”

The Chief Ryder places a hand on the King’s shoulder.

Midas had almost forgotten that he is here.

He glances at the Chief Ryder.

At the way he looks at her.

And he sees his face, his emotions mirrored in the chief Ryder’s face.

He shakes away the thought.

Because it is ridiculous.

Leo knows better.

As his friend.

As his subject.

So Midas tell himself he is being ridiculous and turns his attention back to her.

To where she has been lying, pale and unmoving since their return from the realm of Fae and Elves two nights ago.

“You should get some rest Midas. You have barely slept on nearly three days.”

“No Leo. I want to be here when she awakens.”

,”And you will be. But only if you allow yourself be strong enough to still be awake when she opens her eyes.”

“But...”

“The chief Ryder is right my King. You have been awake for too long a time.”

Ever since he brought her back and Arydian took the antidote from him to create a warding spell against Wolfsbane which he cast over the 5th realm, Midas has not slept.

He has barely even blinked his eyes.

He has refused to leave her side.

To let go of her hand.

It was Leo he sent with Arydian to make sure the spell was cast,

It was Leo he sent to check on their prisoner in the far end of the castle

And it is Leo who has been keeping the castle running while Midas watched the woman he loves refuse to open her eyes.

And dragon king or not, it is beginning to tell on his body.

Arydian touches his arm gently.

“Go and rest Dragon king. We shall not move an inch until your return. You have my word.”

So reluctantly and with one last kiss on her cold, smooth forehead, Midas walks away.

He sees her maid, the one they called Henette, sobbing quietly outside the room.

He wants to tell her to wipe her tears.

That her mistress will be fine.

But the words reach the back of his throat and remain stuck there.

Midas is surprised to find that he is not just sad.

He is angry.

Angry at whatever is doing this to her.

And angry at himself because he is powerless to help her.

The servants wisely skitter out of his way.

Even the Chief steward for once is silent when the King passes by him.

Midas barely sees any of them and even when he does, he can barely bring himself to care.

He steps into his room but before he can close the door, a hand shoots in and stops him from doing so.

He turns around and sighs.

“Minth”

His former mistress bows her head.

“Your highness.”

“Why are you here?”

“The chief steward sent me....with this.”

Midas stares at the cup of what he assumes is honey Mead.

“I did not ask for it.”

“Oh but you need it. To keep your strength up. The whole castle, we are all very worried about you...and the queen of course.”

He takes the cup from her grasp, not because he wants it but because he needs her to leave.

She smiles sweetly.

Her cherubic face lighting up when he takes it.

But she does not go away.

So he lifts the cup to his lips.

“Dragon king I do not think...”

The liquid is strangely warm.

Tricking down his throat and leaving a trail of burning fire behind.

He clears his throat once...twice... wondering what Er'gan had been about to say.

Wondering why the dragon had suddenly gone silent.

The feeling goes away and he hands the cup back to her.

She smiles even wider.

Yet there is something in the way her eyes glint that reminds Midas of the way he had felt when they had stepped out of the portal.

That feeling of something wrong about to happen.

But he brushes it off.

“Thank you.”

She curtsies and bows her head. “You are welcome my king. If there is anything else I could...

But Midas is already closing the door in her face.

A bath has already been drawn in his room.

But neither the warmth of the water nor it's scent is able to soothe the chill in his heart

He cannot live without her.

He just cannot.

But agitated and unsettled as he is, his body is beyond exhausted.

And somehow, maybe as a kindness, he finds himself drifting, floating in a place where his worries are no more .

Tired and drained, the dragon king falls asleep.

Until...

“Midas....”

He stirs but he does not awaken.

“Midas...”

He can hear her voice.

She has followed him here, into his dreams.

And because he does not have her in reality, he reaches for her now.

Hands desperate to touch her, to hold her.

His eyes blink slowly open. “You’re here”

She smirks at him, her blue eyes twinkling and his heart fills.

“You did not think you would get rid of me that easily did you?”

“How are you here...why did no one tell me you had awoken.”

She stands up straight. “I wanted to surprise you.”

“So you no longer hate me?”

“Oh Midas...”

She leans in, pushing him back into the water. “I could never...ever hate you.”

He lets her get into the tub with him.

His happiness at seeing her again so acute that he does not stop to ask why the hairs on the back of his neck are standing again.

He tells himself it is the cold.

And when she presses her lips to his, he does not stop her.

The Dragon King’s Substitute Bride Chapter 108

HERA

“Wake up...

Hera...

Your highness...

wake up!”

My eyes fly open.

Heart pounding, mouth dry.

I must have fainted. Again.

At this point, I am beyond convinced that knocking me unconscious has become a running joke amongst the gods.

I turn to the side or at least I try to.

My head hurts but I do not know why.

So I blink stupidly up at the thatch ceiling above my head.

Thatch and wood criss crossing in a manner that is achingly familiar.

There is a window to my right, directly above my line of sight and from it streams pale sunlight.

It's brightness even more obscured by the grey cloth fluttering in the morning breeze.

There is something familiar about it.

Something familiar about everything.

My heart starts to race even harder.

Gods above...

It could not be...

"Oh would you look who finally decided to grace us with her presence this morning. Welcome back to the Land of the living your highness."

I stare up at the figure looming over my bed.

Dark, wavy brown hair.

Eyes the blue of a summer sky.

She moves away from the bed, the laundry basket filled with freshly pressed linen perched on her hip.

"You know mother believes you are out feeding the geese already not lying in bed like some queen."

She places the basket on the floor, her back to me.

She does not notice that I am barely able to breathe.

That I am sitting up in bed, clutching my chest and shaking my head.

She fleets from one end of the room to another.

“Grandma made banana bread for breakfast while you were asleep. Straight out the oven. Oh it smelt absolutely divine. You are lucky Mira would not let me eat your portion.”

She is still speaking but I can barely hear her.

There is something at the back of my mind.

Something telling me that this is not right.

That there is a reason my heart feels like it might crack my ribs and beat itself out of my chest.

Suddenly the room goes silent and she turns around.

“Are you even listening...Hera?”

I open my mouth but nothing comes out.

Concern deepens the furrow of her brow and she comes closer.

Sit besides me on the bed.

“You do not look so well.”

No...No... something is definitely not...

The coolness of her palm grazes my forehead and just like that, the feeling of wrongness disappears.

She pushes my hair from my face.

“Are you ill, do you perhaps have a fever? Shall I fetch mother?”

And before I can answer, my sister dashes from the room, calling for my mother at the top of her voice.

The feeling of wrongness is back but it is not as strong.

I try to shake it away yet it remains, lingering.

Like a faint, bitter taste in the back of my throat.

I toss aside the covering cloth I did not even realize was across my legs.

I feel groggy.

The type of groggy one feels when they have been asleep for too long and have suddenly awoken, disoriented and with no clue that almost an entire day has passed.

Except this does not feel like days.

It feels like years.

Like I have been asleep for an entire lifetime.

Somehow even my sister had looked...older?

Before I can think further about it she is back.

And she is not alone.

I stare up at four equally worried faces.

Their bodies clustered at the doorway, blocking out the sunlight.

The oldest one snorts. Her cane hitting the ground with a solid thump and her wrinkled frown wrinkles even more.

“The girl seems fine to me”

A woman, tall and slender steps out from behind her.

“Oh everyone is always fine to you Mother.”

Her voice reaches out across the space.

It claws at my heart and frays the edges of my soul and when I finally do speak, my voice is tiny and small.

“M...mom?”

She moves across the room and sits beside me.

“Greta says you are unwell.”

Eyes I see everything time I look in a mirror stare worriedly back at me even as her hands gently cup my face.

She smells like the fields.

Like sun and feathers.

Like baking and warmth.

Just like I remember.

Her thumb swipes at my cheeks.

“Darling... you are crying.”

I am?

I am.

They are all clustered around me now.

And as I look at their faces the tears fall even harder.

Gather and fall.

Gather and fall.

Like dark clouds on an endless rainy day.

I am crying because I remember.

I remember why.

They died.

All of them.

And yet, here they are.

“Hera. Whatever is the matter, come on you know you can tell us anything.”

I look up at my sister Greta who had gone to bring everyone else.

I look at the fullness of her hair, the pink in her cheeks.

She looks alive. Alive and real.

They all do.

From my grandmother to my brother.

I shake my head, the tears still on my cheeks and in my voice. “How can this be?”

“How can what be darling?”

“The girl has lost her mind I tell you. This is what over sleeping gets you.”

“Oh Grandmother do not be that way. I am certain Greta had a valid reason for bringing us all here.”

I stare up at the face of my other sister Mira when she speaks. At the way her mouth moves and the very real way that she throws an arm over my scowling grandmother.

I am trying desperately to remember more.

To remember why I am so certain that they are not real when they so very clearly are.

Mother smiles softly at me, the worry never leaving her eyes.

“Oh sweetie did you have a bad dream?”

A dream...

Is that why I feel this way?

Yes. That makes perfect sense.

I must have fallen asleep and had a horrible, horrible dream.

One I cannot remember.

One that makes me think that somehow my entire family had died.

I throw my arms around my mother.

“Oh mother. It was just awful. You were all gone and I was all alone and...and...”

“Ahhh...it’s okay. You’re okay now.”

I am still crying but I can hear the sigh of relief that escapes everyone’s mouth.

Even my grandmother, the old grouch places a wrinkled hand on the center of my back.

“See lass, why I always say one must be up at the crack of dawn.”

I laugh into my mother’s shoulder.

Why in all the realms did I think anything was the matter?

Dead.

I shiver and push the words away.

Nothing but a dream.

So why do I still feel like there is something missing.

My mother pulls away and studies my face until I start to squirm. “So you are absolutely sure that nothing more than a simple nightmare ails you?”

No.

“Yes.”

“Want to tell us about it?”

I twist my fingers in my lap. “That is the thing. I do not remember.”

“Then how do you know it was bad?”

This from my brother who all this time has been quiet.

One would think being raised in a house of girls would make him more used to the sight of tears but he appears so out of depth, that were the situation different, I might have found it in me to laugh.

He stands at the foot of the bed, somehow taller than he should be.

As a matter of fact, everyone looks different.

Almost like they had all aged overnight.

Grown in my sleep.

But everyone is staring at me now.

Eyes wide and wondering and waiting.

So I clear my throat and look away. “I just know.”

“You do know we would never leave you don’t you? Ever ever ever ever.”

And there is a way she says it that makes me both want to shiver and laugh.

But then Greta is climbing over me and Mira is wedging herself between us.

“What about me mother?”

“Yes mother what about us?”

And my Grandmother is dragging Greta’s shirt to get her off of me and laughter fills the tiny room in a way that is achingly familiar.

Nothing but a dream.

A dream thank the Gods, that I have finally woken up from.

The day passes much like all days with my family tends to do.

Our tiny village robust and beautiful in the heart of summer.

Although, last I remember... was not summer come and gone?

Another thing to yet push to the back of my mind.

But try as I might, I am unable to stop feeling that something is wrong.

There is something missing.

Something I feel incomplete without.

Something...or someone.

And then an image flashes in my head.

The face of a man with eyes the color of liquid gold.

A bolt of pain that threatens to bring tears to my eyes races across my chest.

“Who...?”

Great looks up from where she is kneading dough for tomorrow’s bread.

“Did you say something sister?”

I shake my head. Because how do I explain that I miss some imaginary image in my mind.

I reach for a piece of raw dough and she laughs and slaps my hand away.

“Ouch! Little kids today. No respect whatsoever for their elders.”

She scoffs. “You are barely a moon’s harvest older than me.”

“Still. You think it is easy to have been the one who came first?”

A laugh. Loud and sweet in the quiet of the steaming kitchen.

“Gods am I glad you are back Hera.”

I freeze, my stolen dough half way to my mouth. “What do you mean back?”

But she is kneading again.

Kneading and humming and seemingly unable to hear me.

“Greta...Greta...”

I reach for her.

To place my hand on her shoulder and once more gain her attention.

But my hand stops.

Hovering in mid-air even as my heart starts to pound again.

Many years ago, when we were but little children, I had convinced Greta to climb up a tree of honey sap with me.

It had been stupid and reckless.

But I was older and Great had been eager to please.

But the upper branches of the honey sap tree are slick and slippery and she had fallen.

Fallen hard.

And when she had gotten up, crying and screaming, her hand had been hanging limp from her body.

Her shoulder swinging in a manner that was frightening and unnatural.

It is why growing up she never joined in the heavy work.

Because even though the healers managed to “pop” it back, for that way the sound it made, the pain never really went away.

And it was something I had always blamed myself for.

And yet here she is.

Kneading dough and rolling her shoulders like it never happened.

Almost...almost like she might be a different person.

Just like that, the feeling of wrongness returns.

And with it, a pain in my head.

One so strong that it threatens to drown everything else.

“Who are you?”

She freezes.

Her hands, her body, everything, stopping in mid movement in the most impossible of ways.

And then, like she did not hear me, she continues to knead.

Kneading and humming.

“Say Hera, would you help me fetch that bowl of dried raisons?”

“Who are you?!”

“It is by the window sill. I must remember not to put it there again lest the birds find it.”

Gods above...

What is going on?

I stumble outside, barely able to even stand.

They are all there.

All doing one thing or the other.

Smiling and laughing.

Exactly the way I remember them.

Exactly the way I had pictured them to be.

Over and over again.

As I cried myself to sleep and blamed myself for their death.

And then the memories come flooding back.

I stagger and almost fall.

She sees me first. The woman who looks like my mother.

Who smells and moves and speaks like my mother.

The woman who is most definitely not her.

“Hera! There you are. Come show mother how you are able to weave those flower crowns you like so much.”

Oh Gods.

Tears spring to my eyes, my fingers tightening on the door frame.

Gripping so hard that it starts to hurt.

If this is a joke, it a cruel and heartless one.

“Where am I, who are you people?”

I step into the sunlight that suddenly now seems much too bright.

Unto grass that is so green, it appears unreal.

My mother....the woman reaches for me.

“Hera... darling...”

“No!... do not touch me. What is happening?! Why are you doing this to me?!”

I am screaming and crying now but I do not care.

Skies above...Midas!

“Where is he? What is going on!!”

“You are frightening them.”

I whirl around, back towards the doorway through which I came.

But it is not Greta who steps out.

My eyes double in size and I take a step back.

“You...I know you.”

“Do you?”

“I do.”

And even before I say it, I realize that it is true.

Even though I have never seen her before. I know her.

I know the startlingly brightness of her eyes and the ethereal beauty of face.

Slanted eyes over a wide mouth.

And the fiery redness of her hair.

“But you are dead.”

The Oracle of Daphne steps out into the light.

“No. Not dead. Not anymore. I am you now.”

“Where is this place?”

“The realm of chaos and shadows. Where the past comes to rest. what could have been...what never was. Everything.”

What a load of poppycock.

“Why am I here, who brought me here?”

“Does it matter?”

“Of course it f*****g does!”

How in all the realms am I the incarnate of this woman?

She floats towards me, her face soft and smiling.

“You could stay here you know. Could spend a long and happy life with the family you thought lost to you forever.”

“But they are not real.”

She smiles softly at me. “Does it matter?”

This Hades blasted question again.

I open my mouth and close it

A fish out of water.

There was a time. A time where I would have given up anything... everything just to be able to see them again.

But that was before.

Before the dragon realm and it's King snuck their way into my heart and etched their name upon it's surface.

“I have to go back. He needs me.”

“You would give everything up, all of them, to help the man who took it all from you in the first place?”

I notice for the first time how quiet this place truly is.

No bird song or noisy crickets.

No scurrying squirrels or snapping branches.

A place in my imagination. Limited to my memory.

"I love my family and if I could do anything to bring them back, Hades help me I would do it without a moment of hesitation."

Daphne stops and covers her head, her beautiful smile faltering

"And yet?"

"I could not help my family when they needed me. Instead I chose to run away and took the easy way out. I will not do the same thing to him."

The Oracle is silent and I do not realize I am holding my breath until she speaks again.

"The Fates were right. Fine Human, have it your way."

She turns around and begins to head back into the hut.

"If you will leave you must do so now. It is almost too late."

"Wait! You cannot just leave me."

I am beginning to panic. But she turns around and smiles at me again.

"You are stronger than I was. You do not need my help."

"But I do...I really do."

"Wake up Hera..."

"What?"

"Wake up."

"How?! Tell me how?!"

"Wake up..."

"But I can't..."

"Wake up!!"

My eyes fly open and I jerk up out of bed.

One smooth, violent motion into a sitting position.

"Oh praise the Gods.. Your Highness...your highness...wait!!"

But I do not wait.

I push past a panic stricken Henette and I rush out of the room.

The castle stone is freezing cold against my bare feet but I can barely feel it.

The servants step out of my way. Then stop and stare but I do not care.

I have never covered a distance so fast in my life.

Not stopping to breathe until I am standing in front of his door.

My right hand is shaking when I lift it to the knob and I have to hold it with the other hand to keep it steady.

“Midas?”

The room is dark. Dark and silent.

So dark that I do not even see it at first.

But my eyes adjusts to the light fast enough.

“No...”

Time has stopped for me many times before.

Slowing down until all that is left is the sound of my own beating heart.

Loud and deafening.

The only difference is this time, my heart shatters right along with it

The Dragon King's Substitute Bride Chapter 109

HERA

The funny thing about pain is, when it is at its worst, that is when you stop to feel it.

And as I stand there, in the dark, cold room of the west tower, rug beneath my feet and stone walls all around me...

Watching the dragonkin man I love, holding a very naked woman pressed to the bed, I realize I am done feeling.

“No...”

The words tumble out of my mouth; a choked, strangled sound that carries surprisingly well in the vast wideness of the King's chambers.

“Hera...”

He lets her go immediately and starts to move towards me but I barely even notice.

All I can see is her smile.

He had been holding her down, his back to me and so she had seen me first.

And the look on her face.

The stupid beautiful smile that pulled her mouth at the corners and did not quite reach her glassy green eyes.

It made me want to charge at her and rip out her hair and break every single bone in her evil, miserable body.

Even when he turns around and lets go of her, she makes no attempt to cover up.

Instead she leans back on her arms and tilts her chin up at me.

She does not care that she is naked in the King’s bed while his wife stands barely a foot away.

No.

All she cares about...is.letting me know that she has won.

And that I am nothing but the stupid, silly human girl who let herself fall in love with the dragon king.

The one foolish enough to believe that the ruler of the 5th realm could perhaps feel for her, as strongly as she did for him.

The one who had let her heart get broken and revived and broken again. All by the same man.

There is a tingling sensation spreading through my body.

Like the flowing smoothness of liquid heat.

It takes me a moment to realize it for what it is.

Blinding rage.

But before I can act on my impulse and rush the smirking b***h, Midas is in front of me.

“You are awake.”

Relief seeps out through every pore of his body and his eyes when they take me in are wide and uninhibitedly happy.

But I am too angry to see it.

Too angry to care.

He reaches eagerly for me, but I step out of reach.

If he touches me with the same hands he just used to touch her, Hades help me someone would die today.

And it would not be me.

He frowns slightly. "When did you wake up...why was not anyone with you, you should not be running around just yet."

"My apologies your grace, if I had known what it is you were up to, I would have awoken at a later date or even better not at all."

A look of utter confusion passes across his face "Whatever do you mean..."

I see it the moment realization comes into his eyes.

I see him falter, the shining brightness of his excitement dimming.

I watch him glance back at Minth and the way he looks at her has her scrambling to put on her clothes.

The evil glint in her eyes and the smirk she had on when she looked at me is gone.

In its place is a tiny sweet smile. One that would have fooled even the hardest of hearts.

She blinks up at him and bites her lip even as she pulls up a sleeve.

Shy and submissive.

It makes me want to spit.

"Your highness I..."

He does not even let her speak. "Get out."

"But..."

"Minth I have half a mind to kill you where you stand. Do not test my patience any further. Get out."

I scoff.

"Oh no. Please do not send her away on my account. I will gladly leave you two be."

“No stay, it is not...”

“Oh it most definitely is”

He whirls on her. “By all the gods Minth if you do not leave right this instant.”

I want to laugh and cry and throw something.

Instead a bitter sound between a croak and a sneer finds its way to my lips as I stare up at him.

“If I did not know better I would have thought you looked disgusted and angry but that cannot be given how only but a few minutes ago you were all too eagerly pinning her down beneath you”

“Hera, this situation is not as it appears.”

I am uncertain what serves to send my anger to the near feverish pitch that it is dangerously close to approaching.

The smug look on the mistress I so desperately desire to slap into the next moon harvest,

Or the utter calm with which he utters the words.

I stare at him, eyes wide, mouth open even as I start to shake.

“It is not as it appears? It is not...as it appears?! Were you or were you not holding down some naked whor...woman on your bed while I lay a few towers away, trapped in my dreams?!”

A crease appears in his brows and he reaches for me again.

“You are upset. Let me explain.”

“I neither want nor need any explanation from you Midas. I know what it is that I saw”

“Be that as it may Hera if you would just let me...”

“No!” My voice cracks, the pain beginning to slip out from beneath the fissures of my anger.

“In the Fairy realm you made it seem like I was the one who was going to hurt you, that I was going to betray your trust...and now...”

I close my eyes and press my lips together as hard as I can to stop the tears that threaten to fall because the last thing I want to do is cry in front of either one of them.

I had thought I was past feeling.

It would appear that I am not.

I need to leave here. Before I completely break down or attack her.

Whichever one happens first.

I turn around to leave but he reaches out and grabs my hand.

Firm enough to keep me in place.

Soft enough to make my heart ache.

“You do not understand.”

I have never heard him sound this way. This worried and desperate, all the calm of the dragon king gone from his voice.

But I am finished with trying to listen.

“You owe me no explaining Midas. After all she is your Mistress and I am nothing but the human girl you were forced to marry and who is now destined to betray you. So do as you please but do not insult my intelligence by telling me I do not understand.”

“Why won’t you let me explain?”

“Because it hurts Midas! It f*****g hurts and I want to cry and shout and hate you and I cannot do that if I have to keep looking at you and listening to you...”

The tears are falling now.

Even without my permission and I angrily sniff them away before turning around to glare up at him.

“I chose you. I had a chance to have the life I thought lost to me forever and yet I chose to come back to you...to us. Gods I have been stupid haven’t I?”

I snatch my hand out of his grip.

“Hera... please.”

“I regret a lot of things in my life Midas. Many thanks your grace for adding one more thing to the list.”

And with that I walk out of the room.

“Hera...”

“Do not follow me.”

“Hera...”

“Midas... please “

Maybe it is the way my heart shatters on the last word making it come out in a breathless, strangled whisper, maybe it is because the tears are flowing freely, wet streams racing down my cheeks.

Maybe it is both.

He stops. "Hera...I love..."

But I am done listening. So I walk away and then I run.

No one asked why I had run breathless to the King's room.

No one asks why I am running back, soaked in tears.

But somehow it feels like they all know.

As I race through the winding corridors and across arching doorways back to my tower, I am almost certain I can hear them laughing.

Laughing and shaking their heads in pity.

I push past Henette at the door to my room and then I lock it behind me before she can enter.

She knocks and pleads for me to let her in but I refuse.

I hear Leo come up. I hear Henette in tears telling him that I have locked myself in and have refused to tell her what is wrong or open up to her.

A knock, firm yet gentle rattles the door behind me.

"Your grace...open the door."

"No."

"Your Majesty..."

"I wish to be alone."

"Very well. If that is what you need, we shall leave you be. Come Henette."

I wait until I hear their retreating footsteps before I finally allow myself breakdown.

Silly...silly...silly...

How could I have been so blind and stupid?

I am not sure how long I remain in that position.

Crouched down with my back against the door, crying my eyes out but it feels like an eternity.

If loving him hurt this much then I was better off hating him.

He did not deserve my tears.

None of them did.

And that Minth...that two faced, green eyed snake...how dare she?

She must think me weak and pathetic simply because I am human.

Perhaps they all did.

The dragonkin who raided and plundered my realm.

How they must all look down on me.

Then get even...

What?

Get back at all of them...

I could help you.

“Who...”

“Your highness please open up. I just wish to make sure you are fine.”

I turn my ear towards the knocking on the door and away from the strange dark voice that I could have sworn had been whispering in my mind.

Leo is back.

He knocks again. “Hera please.”

“No! And as your queen I order you to leave me alone.”

“You are hysterical and distraught. It is my sworn duty to make sure you are safe and not attempting to harm yourself. As Chief Ryder...and as your friend.”

I stare at the floor for what feels like an eternity.

I do not wish to talk to anyone

But I must be tired of crying to myself because I start to get up, one hand on the door knob for support.

Turning my back when he walks in because I do not want him to see how swollen and red my face must be, helps me maintain some semblance of dignity.

“As you can see I am not hysterical or distraught or about to hurt myself. So thank you for checking and you may leave.”

The door closes softly behind me.

“You can lie all you want Hera. I am not going anywhere.”

I whirl around. “Leo I said ... skies above what happened to you eye?”

He winces when I stand on my toes and brush the tip of my fingers against it.

“The dragon king.”

“He hit you?!”

“In all fairness. I hit him first.”

“You did what?!”

“I am quite lucky all I got was one measley black eye.”

“Have you gone insane?”

I walk up to my armorie and rummage among the vials and glasses until I find some soothing balm.

He reaches to take the jar from me but I slap his hand away.

The balm is a light green color and feels cool against my fingers when I dip it into the jar.

Once more I have to stretch to the tip of my toes to reach his face.

“You did not have to hit him.”

“He hurt you. I do not care what his reasons are. One does not hurt their tether the number of times and the number of ways he has done so.”

“So no excuses for him this time?”

“No.”

“He could have killed you.”

“I know.”

“So why did you do it?”

His eyes find mine. “You know why.”

Everything seems to slow down.

Perhaps I was wrong.

Maybe I fell in love with the wrong person.

“Hera...”

And maybe... maybe it is not too late to change it.

A tiny voice is telling me that is not how love works but I shut my ears to it.

I am done listening.

Leo cups my cheek in his hand.

“Your highness...are you okay, what are you...”

He stiffens at first but when I do not step away he gives in.

And soon his arms slide around my waist, his mouth slants over mine and the jar of green balm lays discarded on the chamber floors.

The Dragon King’s Substitute Bride Chapter 110

MIDAS

The dragon king has never actually thought of himself as a violent being.

Strong-willed...yes.

Ruthless... sometimes.

Bloodthirsty...perhaps.

But never violent.

Until today.

He does not realize the exact moment he had known that something was not right.

No, that is not true.

As he had lain in that bath, surrounded by the steam and heat, his head had suddenly began to feel foggy and clouded.

His mind a murky pool of thoughts he struggled to chase after but could never manage to grasp.

And then she had shown up.

The single focus of all of his existence.

Yet from the minute she had kissed him the second time, he had known that something was wrong.

She looked like his Hera.

Sounded like her even.

But when he wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her against the hardness of his bare chest made slick by the lather and the water, she had not felt like her.

She had not made those tiny sounds that drive him insane with need or kiss him in the way that makes all the blood rush to his head.

She did not smirk at him or call him “dragon king” in that admittedly disrespectful manner that even though he would never admit it, made him feel like she actually saw through him.

And when he pulled her bottom lip softly between his teeth and slid his tongue into her mouth, she did not taste like the woman who set his blood ablaze and his heart aflame.

He had stiffened and frowned and told himself that perhaps he might be more exhausted than he realized.

But even that did not make it feel right.

And that is what Midas loves the most about his human tether.

The way being with her always feels right.

Even when he had been desperately fighting against it.

So he had pulled away slightly from the woman in the tub who had somehow managed to get herself naked.

“Hera...”

She had not answered, so intent had been her concentration on trying to kiss him and force herself down his throat.

“Hera...”

“Yes. My Lord.”

The crease between his brows had intensified.

Was he perhaps going insane or did she no longer sound the same?

She would not stop trying to kiss him.

Would not stop trying to touch him even though he had stopped responding.

He struggled to to drag himself out from beneath whatever unnatural haze that seemed to have clogged his head.

But it had been hard.

Like clearing spider webs that have somehow managed to wrap themselves around ones face.

Difficult and elusive.

Wrong...wrong...wrong

“Hera...”

“What is it...I mean yes my Lord.”

“That night in the Elder forest, do you remember it? “

A pause.

And then she had lowered her head, her mouth grazing his shoulder, his neck.

“Of course my Lord. How could I ever forget?”

Midas struggles not to shudder at the feel of her tongue against his skin.

Struggles and fails.

“Do you remember how frightened you were when you first saw my wings?”

Her hands slide down his chest. “Oh most certainly, they were big and scary. Much too hideous and complex for my tiny human mind.”

Midas nods.

He remembers how he had saved her from falling out of that tree by catching her in mid-air.

He recalls how he had refused to look her in the eyes because he had been absolutely certain that she would be scared out of her mind.

Knew she would think him a monster, would look at him like he was one.

Everyone else did.

Except that was not what had happened at all.

Instead she had leaned in. The tiny human slave who should have been frightened of him.

She had reached out and brushed her fingers against the darkness of his dragon's wings.

Her eyes locked on his had held not fear but fascination and wonder.

And to the ruler of the fifth realm who was used to being looked upon with fear and trembling, it had felt like she had seen past the dragon king and the monster and to the man who lay beneath.

She had touched the very fibers of his soul.

Even though he would not know it for many moons to come, It was in that moment, with her injured ankle in his hands that Midas had first began to fall in love with her.

Whoever this person was, she was not her.

And another thing...

His Hera, would never, ever, call her mind tiny.

His hands start to shake.

Anger and rage driving away the rest of the haze around his head.

He grips the arms of the woman whose face is hidden in the crook of his neck.

She froze.

And then she raised her head.

Her eyes green and flat and much too bright to be sane.

Then she had smiled sweetly at him.

"Your highness."

The urge to fling her across the room had been immense but he needed answers so he settled with pushing her away from him and out of the bath.

"Minth. How. Dare. you?"

She had landed on her rump, her hands falling behind to break her fall.

But instead of looking afraid or contrite, she had continued to smile up at him.

He reached for his trousers, wet and soaked as he was and angrily pulled them on.

"I should have you drawn and quartered. What did you do to me?"

Rather than answer she had gotten up and gone towards him. “Nothing that human witch has not already done.”

“Speak of her like that again and I will kill you where you stand.”

“Oh your highness. Do not be this way. Surely you can already see how much better I am at everything than she is.”

He had pushed her hands off.

Hard enough that she stumbled back.

But she is dragonkin material and she had not fallen a second time.

She followed him.

Followed him when he walked around the bed to pick his shirt.

He pushed her again and she fell on the bed, giggling and laughing.

Crazy and insane, he wanted her as far away from him as he could get but he also needed answers.

How did she...

The answer had come even before he could finish asking himself the question.

The f*****g tumbler of mead.

He whirled on her.

“What did you put in it?”

She had not answered.

Instead she had leaned back.

That incessant, smile appeared to be carved almost perfectly into her face.

Her lips stretching in a way that had been oddly familiar.

Familiar and wrong.

Yet he had not realized how wrong everything was.

Until he had tried to reach for Er’gan.

Tried and failed.

Tried...and failed.

Fear as cold as ice wrapped itself around his heart.

He roared and the dragon king does not roar...not without the anger of his dragon.

He pinned her arms to the bed.

Teeth bared and eyes blazing.

“What have you done?”

But she would not answer. She had only laughed and smiled and asked him to sleep with her.

He had nearly killed her then.

And perhaps he would have.

If Hera had not walked in right at that moment.

He knows now that even if he lives for a 1000 years more, he would never forget the look on her face.

Or the fact that he had been the reason.

Maybe that is why when Leo had barged into his study, angry and raving, he had let his chief Ryder hit him twice.

Why he had hit him back only once.

His best friend who is so clearly in love with his tether.

Perhaps the gods made a mistake.

Perhaps they should have given her to Leo Instead.

Leo would know how to love her.

How to never hurt her.

Not Midas, with his sharp, rough edges and brash tongue.

With the crown that bent his neck double and threatened to snap his back.

But immediately he thinks it, he hates it.

He knows he does not deserve her. Knows he still has so much to learn.

But the thought of her being another's is a thought so painfully enraging that Midas would rather not even consider it.

If he has to learn to love it has to be with her.

It just has to.

The bell rings for the 13th time that day.

He should go to her.

Perhaps she is calm now, and would be more inclined to listen to him.

He would rather spend this rest of his immortal life trying to atone for his mistakes that give up on her.

The one good thing he still had left.

But the dragon king is flesh and blood.

And he has had barely any rest in the past three days.

So what had begun as feverish thinking, exhausting enough to make him rest his head on the table of his study, eventually slows down and stops completely.

But It is not the sound of the bell, loud and sudden that so jars him awake.

It is something else.

The sense that something terrible is about to happen.

“Er’gan can you feel that?”

But Er’gan is still silent and the dragon does not answer.

Midas tries again.

Trying and reaching out more times that his heart has strummed in the past few minutes.

Nothing.

At first he had almost panicked but after a few moments of clarity, he realizes he can still feel the dragon inside of him.

It is just...asleep somehow.

Whatever was in that brew that witch gave him, it must have affected Er’gan too.

Put the dragon to sleep so it would not warn the king.

But that would have to be powerful magic.

Immensely powerful magic.

Where would a member of the dragon court get such....

Midas' blood runs cold.

“Oh by f*****g Hades.”

And as he paces the length and breadth of his room, wanting to go after Hera and make her understand, yet unable to do so least seeing him would only hurt her more,

Midas realizes what about Minth smile had unnerved him the way it did.

Hermani.

It had looked exactly like the smile of the dark elven queen locked away in the far end of the castle.

Gods above.

If she managed to get to one...there is no telling the amount of damage she might have already done.

The number of castle inhabitants she has managed to turn to her side.

He should have killed her when he had the chance.

Deep down he knows why he did not.

Because he had wanted to prove to Hera that he is not the bloodthirsty monster everyone thinks him to be.

Now look where it had gotten him.

He has to find out what is going on.

Now.

And gods help him if that darkness ridden elf has done anything more to destroy his realm, he would slice of her head and send her body in pieces back to her sister.

His tries to mind link Leo but his chief Ryder remains strangely silent.

Unable to wait any longer he makes to leave the room.

He should not have let Minth go before getting the truth out of her.

But he had been completely distracted.

His attention completely on the woman he loves who he had just seen him holding a naked woman who was not her.

That, and falling asleep is why up until now he had not gone to find the dragonkin witch who hexed him.

Now it is no longer an option.

He has to find her and find her now.

But before he can step out...

He feels it.

A tingling in the back of his neck.

Down his shoulders.

Burning as it travels the length of his arms until it becomes tiny pricks of heat on the tips of his fingers.

A portal had just been opened.

A portal at Mount Anikanii to the east of the dragon castle.

But who...

Midas blood runs cold.

Because just as he had started to think, another one had been opened.

Then another...

And another...

And another....

“Impossible...”

Someone is opening portals all over the dragon realm at almost the same time.

Again he tries to mind link Leo and once again the Chief Ryder is bloody silent.

Midas reaches for his swords and slides them into his back.

“Er’gan...”

Silence.

“Er’gan... Are you there?”

“Goddamn it Er’gan...wake up!... please”

But the only thing the ruler of the fifth realm gets is silence.

And as he rushes out of the castle and into the courtyard, calling loudly for his men and assembling his soldiers against a threat he does not yet understand,

Midas realizes that for the first time in his life, he feels well and truly alone.