

The Dragon King's Substitute Bride Chapter 11

HERA

When I was younger and in the days before it happened, my mom would always tell me.

“Someday Hera, that fast moving, pretty mouth of yours is going to get you into real trouble.”

She had been right.

I had the scars on my back to prove it.

What she hadn't factored in was that when you're me, you can get in real trouble a great deal more than once and that on some days; you wouldn't even need your mouth to help move things along.

Today is one of those days, but even I don't know that yet.

I watch him ride out the palace grounds.

Certain any moment now, he would turn around and come back to lock me somewhere where all my plans would be ruined.

But he doesn't look back.

Maybe the gods are finally on my side for once.

Even though I was unconscious when I first landed here, I can tell from my vantage point and how it overlooks the rest of the kingdom that the dragon castle sits ominous and tall on very high rocky hills the color of ash and shadow.

A little beyond the rocky terrain surrounding the castle, with a backdrop of emerald hills of grass stretching out into the grey horizon is the dragon's capital.

With their stone arches, tall spires and squat brick buildings, tiny puffs of smoke floating from their chimneys and I find myself wondering what a summer morning in the dragon realm is like.

But going there isn't even an option.

A lone human girl, walking around in the dragon's capital, it would not only be dangerous but stupid as well. Besides, he would find me too easily there.

And my attention is drawn to the dense canopy of trees along the right border of the bustling city, separated from it by a ribbon of water that glistens with a strange shimmering purple color in the sunlight.

It would have to do.

I steel myself and take a minute to calm my nerves, listening hard for any sign of movement; a whisper, a sneeze, maybe even a shuffle of feet, anything to tell me if there's actually someone outside my door.

Nothing.

Is it possible he somehow forgot to actually post a guard?

No.

I smash my hopes to the ground before they can find their footing and wrap their tendrils around my pounding heart. Hoping was a luxury I couldn't allow but the thought persists.

He wouldn't be that careless... would he?

He had all but rushed out of here, an urgent matter he said.

Maybe he had been too preoccupied to remember the slave girl masquerading as his wife

Gods above let it be so.

At this point, you all owe me.

I step across the wide center rug, my feet sinking into the plush softness of whatever poor animal had died to decorate the King's chambers.

Pressing my ear against the door doesn't help either. It's almost as if the room is sound proof.

Or maybe there's nobody there.

My mouth is dry and when I lick my lips in nervousness, it tastes like him which does not help.

Okay Hera, what the worst that could happen. Just do it.

So I pull the door open.

Or at least I try to.

It doesn't budge.

"No...No....No." I whisper furiously tugging and pulling, rattling the knob with all my might. Tears threaten to spill down my cheeks and I bite my lips hard to stop them.

He must have locked it.

I swallow the scream of frustration rising in my throat.

Okay think Hera think. Did you hear keys rattling in the locks?

But it's hard to think when you're on the verge of tears so instead I close my eyes.

When my family first died, there were nights I would wake up on the brink of a panic attack certain the people who killed them had somehow found out they missed us and were even at that very moment, on their way to correct their oversight.

My throat would close so tightly I would be unable to breathe and the edges of my vision would turn grey seconds before tears rolled down my eyes.

There was only one thing that would drive the grey away, calming me down until my lungs could finally get air.

It is that one thing I do right now.

I breathe in and out with deliberate care, forcing my heart to slow its rhythm and recall the last time I had felt absolutely, perfectly safe.

No, that can't be right...

I try again, shutting my eyes tighter in an effort to concentrate but the imaged burned in my brain is the same.

Oh, you have got to be kidding me.

But it works and my heart begins to slow, my body remembering the warmth of being cradled in his strong toned arms.

Of my head resting in the nook of his neck as he carried me out of the darkness of the cellars and into the light

I disagree with that. I tell my mind. I disagree very strongly.

But it worked did it not? My mind retorts and I decide to ignore it.

Now isn't the time.

Besides, being stuck here must be affecting me more that I thought, once I find a way out I'll be normal again.

I look at the door one more time.

Now that I am no longer nearing hysteria, I can think clearly and my mind is telling me No, I had definitely not heard the sounds of keys in the lock when he left.

Although with the rubbish she was churning out a few seconds before I am not sure I trust her very much at the moment.

Just try the blasted door Hera and how about you turn the knob this time, instead of just pulling eh?

So with one more deep breath for courage, I try the door again.

The knob turns smoothly in my hand, the hinges creaking gently as the door swings open.

My joy lasts approximately one second.

The Ryder is there, barring my way before I can even blink, moving with unearthly speed and silence and my heart falls to my feet.

He doesn't say a word. He doesn't have to.

I close the door as quietly as I opened it.

What had I been expecting, he had said he would post a guard and I am fast coming to the realization that when the dragon king says something, all the realms would freeze over before he went back on it.

I sink to the floor, back against the foot of the large ornate canopy bed and when a knock sounds on the door a while later, I bid them entry in a quiet defeated voice.

The door opens and a row of maids come in lead by a tall, severe looking woman with grey hair, parted in a shiny white line down the middle and tightly packed in a bun at the nape of her neck.

Her long black dress with its buttons running all the way to her neck reminds me of the governess who used to mind my siblings and me in the days before we lost everything.

I blink rapidly, more than a little lost for words.

He said 'a maid' would be coming, he didn't mention anything about a train.

The maids all have their hands full and as I watch they arrange themselves in a line in front of the bed, with the older looking woman closest to the door and as if in response to a cue only they can hear, they all curtsy low.

It's almost overwhelming and I standing slowly to my feet unsure of what to do besides gape stupidly.

Gosh they must think I'm slow or retarded

When I say nothing, the woman clears her throat stiffly. "May we, your grace?"

May you what?

The Princess of Averia would know and right now I am her, at least to everyone else so rather than ask that and accidentally reveal my true identity, I start to nod then catch myself at the last minute. "Of course...y...you may"

I see the way she's looking at me, her barely concealed disapproval at my cuts and bruises, my bare feet and scanty tunic shirt.

She's discreet about it, saying nothing but I can only imagine the thoughts running through her head about Averia's so called princess.

I can't imagine they are very flattering.

They move in busy flurries of motion, I don't even know where to look. There are questions flying left and right but I pretend not to hear them.

Clothes, Jewels and boxes overflowing with shiny pretty things I don't even recognize being folded and arranged in the drawers around the room.

Someone drags a cart of food in behind her.

She uncovers the food with a bow, sending smells up in the air, assailing my nose and suddenly reminding me of how hungry I actually am.

While I eat, they begin filling my bath with steaming hot water, stirring in scented oils and flower petals.

Then just as orderly as they entered, they file out leaving just one girl behind.

She is a little taller than I am, most dragon folk are but her diminutive posture and unassuming clothes make her appear smaller than she actually is.

She curtsies shyly "Your bath is drawn my queen. I shall set out your clothes while you take it."

The way she looks everywhere but directly at me reminds me of...me

"What's your name?"

She looks up, surprised someone so important was actually referring to her. "Henette, my queen. I am to be your personal maid."

"Well thank you very much Henette"

She flusters and curtsies again, unsure how to respond but I can see the relief in her eyes. "...Thank...I mean, you're welcome your grace."

I undress behind the elaborate room screen blocking the view of the bath from the rest of the room.

At first, the heat of the water stings my wounds but soon, I find myself closing my eyes against my wishes, the horror of the past two days washing away in a haze of jasmine and lavender.

"Would her highness prefer silk or velvet?"

I mumble an answer but I don't really care.

My mind is elsewhere. The seedlings of an idea are beginning to form in the back of my brain, like tiny little bean sprouts, pushing through soft dark soil to reveal little green leaves of hope.

Henette helps me dress in the unfamiliar clothes of royalty.

The dress, an iridescent midnight blue velvet with a scoop neckline and baroque embroidery in silver is so beautiful it takes my nearly takes my breath away.

But then she ties the black corset with the same silver embroidery around my waist and that actually does take my breath away. Literally

I sit, hand in my lap, in front of the tall mirror resting at the top of the armoire while she does my hair, braiding it with blood red rubies and dark sapphires to match the blue of my gown and when she finishes I can barely recognize myself.

I look exquisitely breathtaking.

I feel like an imposter.

Tears brim to the surface and I sniff them back, not wanting her to see. "You may go Henette."

As she leaves, bowing low and closing the doors behind her, only one thought is in my mind, growing bigger and bigger until it chokes out everything else.

I can't stay here any longer, doomed forever to keep up with this pretence and be something... someone I am not

Maybe it is irrational, maybe it isn't.

But I need to get out of here.

And I know exactly how.

The Dragon King's Substitute Bride Chapter 12

HERA

I wait a while until I'm sure she would have gone far and then I open the door again.

As expected, my prison guard appears instantly.

I infuse a courage I don't feel into my voice. "Get me the chamber maid Henette"

As expected, He does not move. “I was given very specific orders not to leave this door unguarded.”

I try hard not to swallow. “And something tells me you were also given orders to make sure I am properly attended to.”

He remains silent and still but his brow twitches and I know I’m right.

I continue as casually as I can, grateful he cannot see how fast my heart is pounding “Well, I require a bath, so fetch me the chamber maid.”

“But you just had one.”

I rise to my full height and say words I never thought would come out from my mouth.

Indignation lends a cold steel to my voice that surprises even me. “I would think the Ryders of the dragon realm know better than to question their queen.”

Uncertainty creeps into his eyes. “I’m sorry your grace but I cannot leave you unguarded. If the King found out, he would have my head.”

“And you think I won’t?”

He bows his head but refuses to move an inch.

Damn Midas and his Iron fist rule.

I struggle to keep the authority in my voice even though all I want to do is curl up in a ball and cry. “What is your name?”

He hesitates. “Garwith my queen”

Little wonder he looked familiar.

“Well Garwith, you can be rest assured the King will be hearing about your insubordination. I hope your affairs are all in order.”

And I slam the door in his face.

By Zeus and Hades let it work.

I wait three pounding heartbeats, tying a velvet hooded cape of the same dark blue color around my neck to hide my hair and face before cautiously opening the doors again and when I do...

There is no one in sight.

You know that feeling of unease that sneaks up on you when you do not expect some plan or event to work out the way it is supposed to and yet it does.

The way it feels like the gods might be playing with you, luring you into a trap.

Distrust seeping in through the cracks of your skin like smoke slowly filling up a room until it chokes out all the courage you fought so hard to build in the first place.

And suddenly you find yourself afraid, unable to take that next vital step.

As I stand in front of the king's chambers, staring down the short strangely quiet, yet empty hall with its grey stone walls and dark purple rug, I can feel the smoke trying to creep in, making my heart pound and my palms sweaty but I shut it out.

It is a skill I excel in. A skill burned into my memory.

Every day, just before the palace bells in Averia struck for the twelfth time at high noon, my brother and I would set up in opposite directions towards our marks for the day.

We'd scale walls and fences to land on the balls of our feet in the grounds of houses whose occupants we had been watching for days before and knew would most definitely gone about their activities for the day far away from their homes.

Hoping against hope that there was an open window, a faulty lock, a carelessly abandoned door and barring all three options, that there were no passersby to hear when the kitchen window's glass shattered from the rock carefully aimed at it.

But even when we found that open door the merchant's daughter or farmer's wife forgot to lock, there was always the possibility there was someone sick, someone who hadn't stuck to their pattern and was still inside, someone who would catch us legs first crawling into their houses to steal.

This meant we only had two options;

Block out the smoke threatening your courage and break that window or starve to death.

A few nights of crippling hunger soon taught us option two was no option at all and we learnt to shut out the smoke before it came knocking.

You call it impulsive recklessness, I call it survival.

And it is that need to survive that has me stepping into the hall and closing the doors softly behind me.

I knew from looking out the window in my...his room and from the first time Leo had led me out that the King's chambers was located at the top of a tower and that there was only one way to access it; a set of treacherous, winding, smooth stone steps.

The same steps the guard would be returning up on any moment with the chamber maid I most definitely did not need.

This means there is absolutely no time for me to even think, it is either now or never.

I follow the curve of the wall on my right to reach the top of the steps. A quick glance shows no one but the gods have been playing favorites recently so I can't trust that to hold up for long.

I gather up the skirts of my gown, bunching up the rich soft velvet in one hand and leaning the other hand on the wall to steady myself.

The stones are warm beneath my hand from the brilliant sunlight streaming in through the open window in the left wall of the staircase.

Over the pounding of my heart, I can hear birds chirping happily and a soft breeze brings in the scent of the ivy creeping on the outside of the castle walls.

What a beautiful day to escape captivity.

If I wasn't nearly breathless with fear, I would have laughed.

I start down the steps, fast enough to match my fear at being caught yet being careful not to miss a step.

It would not do to escape my marriage only to end up with a broken neck at the base of the dragon castle's tower.

Halfway down the steps, my luck runs out.

I freeze in place, not even daring to look down as voices float up like grey misty ghosts to haunt me from the base of the steps.

I look around me in a panic.

The stairway is narrow and surrounded by smooth walls of grey stone on both sides.

Unless I hurled myself out the window I just passed, whoever came up the stairs would definitely find me.

The voices seem to be coming closer and I feel a bead of sweat roll down my back.

But just before I can drop dead of a panic induced heart attack, the voices begin to move away from the steps.

I don't even wait for them to disappear completely before I pick up my pace and hurry down the remaining steps.

I reach the foot of the tower in a breathless huff and follow the short passage that soon branches off to the left and the right.

Where to now?

I try to remember the path Leo led me but my ever helpful brain refuses to produce anything but endless warnings of exactly what would befall me should I be caught by the guard or heavens forbid, Midas himself returning early.

Approaching footsteps and the distinct clang of moving armour from my right decides for me and I quickly step to the left, hiding in the arched doorway of a room leading god knows where.

The guard passes the passage I just left, an obviously nervous Henette trailing behind him.

She's bending her head and wringing her hands and I instantly feel sorry for her.

Then she raises her head just before she passes.

A millisecond later and I would have been safe.

But in my rush down the steps, my hood had fallen off and the reflection of the jewels in my hair catches the sunlight from a window and our eyes meet.

She starts in surprise.

My heart drops to the floor and breaks into a thousand pieces.

The flickering flame of hope I have extinguished in that very instant.

"Henette?"

It's the guard, calling out to her.

When she doesn't answer, I hear him turn around.

I hear the clanging, ominous sound of his metal boots as he retraces his steps towards us and yet I never take my eyes of Henette.

Please..... Please...Please. I hear my head screaming but I know it's no use.

And just inches before he can reach her, she turns towards him with a sad smile.

"Sorry Garwith, I dropped something. I must be so nervous. Let us go before she finds out you left your post by the door."

I stand still for a full second and even when I hear them start climbing up the steps, I am still unable to move.

Instead I stand blinking in confusion at the now empty space where a few seconds ago Henette had deliberately misled the guard and let me go.

Why?

Why has she done this?

But I don't have time to think about it.

Any moment now, Garwith will knock on my door and he will get no answer. He will knock again and again and then finally he would open the door to the king's chamber, his heart in his throat.

And then all hell would break loose.

I must be long gone by then.

Think Hera, think.

Henette is a chamber maid like I used to be. This would mean, she spends most of her time either cleaning or in the kitchens.

And castle kitchens always, always have a servants' door that leads to the back of the castle.

I hurriedly take the passage they had just come from, taking care to walk up straight and to put on my hood.

I know no one would recognize me at first glance but the other maids had seen me and royal servants were nothing if not accomplished gossips, at least among themselves.

Take it from me.

For the first time in my life, my nose is my saving grace and after a few false starts, I find myself in the hot, humid, castle kitchen smelling of freshly baked pies and mouth watering golden roasted pheasants.

But the gods must be looking upon me with mercy because there is absolutely no one in sight.

And straight ahead, a wooden door from which slants of sunlight cast bright reflections all across the kitchen floor beckons me with whispered promises of freedom and escape.

I hurry towards it and not a second too soon because I hear a loud shout a moment later.

But it doesn't matter to me anymore.

I am finally free.

The Dragon King's Substitute Bride Chapter 13

HERA

Freedom at last.

Or so I thought.

It isn't until the whistling, biting winds that tend to prevail on high hills press my cloak against me that I realize my foolishness.

And I stop with a loud gasp, digging in my heels and gripping the door hard.

Just in time to avoid falling to my death.

I stare out the door at the dead drop of over a hundred feet.

Another step and I would have fallen headlong into the waiting arms of the many small rocks littered at the feet of the castle's dark hills.

Unless I turned into a mountain goat and learned to climb down or I suddenly grew wings and flew over the jagged peaks of Dragon's mount, there was no getting away through this door.

A strangled laugh finds its way to my throat, breaking into a sob at the end.

Why is there even a door here?

Whose dastardly idea had it been for crying out loud?

I close my eyes and push all my panic to the back of my mind.

The only way to get out of this accursed place and to the foot of the what I have now decided is more a rugged mountain than an hill, is through the tall, ribbed castle gates that lay between two heavily manned, guard towers.

From there I could make my way down the winding rocky path I had seen Midas ride off this morning and to the forest I had seen from my window.

But to do that, I need to find and get to the courtyard and out the entrance of the palace itself.

Only one problem; assuming I do manage by some stroke of luck- unlikely given how I had fared so far- but suppose I did manage to get to the castle entrance.

The tower gates would be swarming with guards, even more so with my noticed disappearance. What then?

I say 'pretty please', but my lashes and hope the guards are so smitten by my beauty they fall over themselves trying to please me?

I would have better luck hurling myself down that chasm.

Getting away just went from a ridiculous fool hardy plan, to a sheer impossibility.

But damn it, I had started this and I would either finish it, or get caught trying.

I cautiously step out of the kitchen. I can hear hurried footsteps and excited, agitated voices echoing all around the palace and I know they've found out I'm not in my room.

I decide against retracing my steps to avoid running into Garwith.

But it's been a minute since I heard the sound of alarm.

What if he's ahead of me now, wouldn't it be wiser to go back and hide in a place he most certainly would have already looked?

My indecision causes me to stand rooted to a spot in the passage in front of the kitchen door.

Then I hear hurried footsteps coming from my right and I quickly duck back in, holding the door shut with my back pressed against it as I scan the room, heart pounding, for suitable hiding places.

I find myself actually considering if I can fit in the oven and even though I'm the farthest thing from amused, I have to hold my hand over my mouth to stop the sudden burst of hysterical laughter at the absurdity of this entire situation.

They are barely inches away and I can make out the words from their hushed voices

"Do you think it's true?"

"Does it matter if she's human or not? If we don't find her, the king will have our heads before we can even blink much less try to explain."

"Let's go this way, there's only one way out the palace and she could not have gotten far."

I wait half a second then open the door cautiously, just in time to see the two guards take a left turn further down the hall.

There is only one way out the castle and those guards were headed there.

So I do what any logical, sane slave trying to escape a heavily guarded dragon castle does.

I follow them.

Pressed flat against the cold walls, making sure to keep to the darkened areas and walk on the balls of my feet so I do not make a single sound.

I look both ways, to make certain they are completely gone before I turn into any passage behind them but by the time I turn around a corner the second time, they are gone.

Almost like they have evaporated into thin air and I am left, vulnerable and thoroughly bewildered.

Then just as suddenly, a strong arm wraps itself around my waist.

Before I can cry out in alarm, short bony fingers clamp against my mouth, digging into my cheeks and cutting off my scream.

And one moment, I'm standing in the passage, the next I'm being dragged into a dark room smelling of moss and mildew.

I struggle against the grip of whoever has found me and finding purchase; I clamp my teeth around a finger and bite hard.

My assailant struggles not to shriek in pain and instead flings me across the room.

I land back first against the hard wall.

Stars explode in my head and pain travels down the back of my neck.

"By the gods I did not mean to. I swear on my life."

I struggle to a seating position, my entire body screaming in protest.

"Henette?"

Dragon folk were not just physically bigger than us humans, they were much stronger too.

That is why this girl with big, sad eyes and her stained white servant's apron was able to so easily toss me around like a rag doll.

A decision she so obviously regrets.

She scrambles towards me and despite the fear and remorse I can see in her eyes, I'm the one who scoots back even though there is nowhere left to go.

"What are you doing?"

She opens her mouth to answer but a shadow falls over the closed door.

She puts a finger to her lips instead indicating for me to be quiet.

When the shadow moves away, she moves towards the door, standing on her toes to peep through the rectangular opening at the top.

She reaches out to me. "They are gone. Come."

I shake my head and the small movement sends bolts of pain shooting down my spine. Distrust adds a bitter taste to the dryness of my mouth.

"Answer my question first."

She shakes her head too, desperation tinting her urgent whispers so that it sounds like she might burst into tears at any second.

"No, you don't understand your grace. You come with me now or it will be too late."

I stare at her and her outstretched hand for a second.

I take it.

She helps me to my feet and opens the door carefully.

“This way your grace.”

She leads me down a short dark corridor with no windows and opens the doors to a flight of stairs with barely 7 steps.

The floor becomes hard packed rocky soil at the foot of the steps and I can see a single lone torch illuminating the cramped space covered in dust and cobwebs.

The noises of the palace are barely audible and I have the sudden mind numbing realization that perhaps she meant to kill me and hide my body in some dark abandoned castle room.

She takes the torch off the wall and turns to me repeating that single word, the same quiet, insistent urgency in her tone. “Come”

I follow her through what looks like a basement passage with wooden boards above our heads, shaking slightly and raining down dirt and dust on us whenever someone above walked across them.

Finally we come to a large wooden door with three bars across it.

She gives me the torch and quietly sets about trying to lift off the heavy wooden planks barring the door.

Dragon folk or not, the bars are very heavy and I lean the torch against the wall and help her lift them off. As we set the heavy board on the floor, Henette turns to me.

“Yesterday, the stable boy was sent to the market to buy hay for the palace steeds.”

What?

We lift off the second plank. “He bought the wrong kind and today, the horse master insists he must return the bad hay and get the specific grass type he asked for.”

“Henette...”

She powers on, ignoring me. “As we speak, he is on his way to do exactly that. When you come out this door, you will see a covered cart filled with hay on the ledge right above you and a mare attached to it.”

The third plank comes loose and drops to the ground with a muffled clatter. “Your grace must climb into that cart and cover herself with bad hay if she wishes to successfully leave the palace.”

She pulls the door open, and at first it resists, like doors tend to do when they have not been opened for a long, long time.

And then suddenly it gives, flooding the dark space with bright light.

She presses something cold and steely in my hand.

I look from the small dagger to her wide expressive face.

She nudges me towards the door. "You go now."

I shake my head. "I don't understand. Why are you doing this?"

Her gaze drops to the floor, and her voice is barely a whisper.

"My father stole from the king and to save his own neck sold me here the second my hands could grip a cleaning cloth. I have worked in dragon castle many years your grace, working till my hands bleed and my back aches and not once, has anyone bothered to say thank you..."

She raises her head and her eyes are brimming with tears. "...until you."

I reach towards her but she shakes her head. "Go now and may the dragon gods guide you."

I would prefer if they didn't. But I don't tell her that.

I step into the light and I can see we are below the palace courtyard.

A short flight of steps to my right lead straight towards where the guards are milling noisily about and parked inches from the wall, hitched to a grazing muddy red horse with a swishing black tail is the wooden cart filled with the bad hay.

I turn around and open my mouth but she is already gone. The door closed firmly behind me like it was never open.

I creep hunched over, up the steps so I am hidden completely behind the back of the cart.

Lifting the brown canvas, I climb in and arrange the hay over and around me as best as I could.

Even if you lifted the canvas covering the cart, all you would see is the huge lump of hay the horse master did not want.

And no sooner have I finished, that the whistling stable boy appears. Humming a merry tune that grates on my ears and irritates me.

I hear him settle into the seat and moments later, we begin to move.

A rhythmic swaying motion punctured by bumps that send flares of pain everywhere.

I do not dare to breath.

Not only because there's grass sticking painfully in my nose but also because I'm sure any second now someone would shout and halt the cart before it made it out the castle gate.

But nothing like that happens.

And when I finally summon the courage to peak out from my hiding place, I see the dragon castle, magnificent and ominous, receding slowly but steadily in the distance.

The Dragon King's Substitute Bride Chapter 14

MIDAS

Midas had very few memories from the time before his dragon awakened on the day of his 24th birthday many many years ago.

It wasn't like they weren't there or that they had disappeared.

They were just locked up in that box where old memories and painful memories go to wither and hide.

Blanketed under a fog of forgetfulness and eclipsed by the event that had made him immortal Ryder and marked him heir to the dragon throne.

But as he rode towards the dark forest, struggling to keep his rage and his dragon under control one of those forgotten memories slipped through the cracks and snuck to the front of his mind.

One minute he's riding his horse, galloping towards the forest at an unearthly speed and the next, the memory expands, filling his mind, blocking out the other sounds.

And he is little again, running from the monsters all around him.

An image of a small Midas swerving and stumbling blindly through the ebony shadows of gnarled ancient trees with mottled bark bubbling like a witches broth. The image of branches like bent and twisted limbs that slapped at his arms and face floods his vision until he can see nothing else.

He can feel the ghastly shrubs with their venom tipped thorns reaching out to tear at his shirt and skin until blood trickles down his leg in tiny red rivulets.

Then his small feet trip on a rotten, moss covered root and he's falling hard, landing on his chin and nearly biting out his own tongue.

As the oily taste of blood fills his mouth, the monsters finally find him.

Their shadows falling over him.

The moonlight catches the glint of upraised steel seconds before it comes down.

Pain, instant and raw shoots up his thigh from the scar he had gotten that night and he jumps out of the memory, like a man who has been held under water. Gasping and dripping with sweat.

It's a miracle he was able to even remain on his horse and that the animal was still running at that same neck breaking speed.

The memory was locked for a reason.

And with his eyes still open he shuts it out, returning it to that old wooden box in his mind and locking it before it or anything else can escape fully.

This was all her fault. How dare she?

Coming up out of nowhere, disobeying him and dragging up memories like that one. Memories of a time before his powers had awakened.

Of a time before his parents were cruelly and suddenly taken.

And now here he is, riding like a mad man towards the one place dragonkin knew well enough to avoid.

What in the gods had possessed her to hide here?

The Elder Forest, of all accursed places!

Dragonkin kept well enough from the Elder forest during the day unless it was an absolute necessity and even then, Ryders had to accompany them.

But no one would ever dare to cross the purple river of Emil and step within the boundaries of those dark trees once the sun had set.

When the ancient forest, rich and earthy during the light of day, transformed itself into a ghoulish nightmare filled with those who worshipped the shadows instead of the light.

It was then that those who preferred the cover of darkness came out to play, to hunt and kill, to slurp on the marrows of those stupid enough to be caught on the wrong side of the river at night fall.

Stupid like her. Stupid like him.

"Let me out."

He ignores the growling angry voice in his head.

"I said let me out Midas."

"No"

“Why?”

“Because the last time I listened to you and let you take control you sent her to the cellars.”

“And you brought her back. Now look where that has gotten us; riding like fools to the Elder forest at night.”

Midas presses his lips tightly together and says nothing in response to that.

Mostly because he knows the voice is right.

His dragon did not speak often.

In fact it wasn't until 5 long years after the ritual that he heard Er'gan the Dark's voice for the first time. It was an event that had left him disoriented and confused.

Ryders were simply dragonkin who carried The Curse and possessed the ability to transform into dragons at will.

The dragons did not exist as separate entities in their heads or bodies and they most certainly did not talk.

So when he had first heard the dragon's voice in his head, his initial thought was that someone had placed a spell on him to perhaps drive him to insanity and when barely days later, Er'gan took control of his body while choosing to remain in human form, he had thought his descent into madness complete.

It took many years for him to understand what exactly the ritual had done especially since his father, the only who could explain was dead by then, his mother with him.

Er'gan The Dark was the very first dragon and as such he could control and mind link any other dragon that ever or would ever exist.

And the ritual that had bound their souls together had inadvertently given him, Midas, that same power.

It is Er'gan who is truly immortal but as long as he remains bound and inside of the ruler of the dragon realm, so is he.

And now after many years, Midas and the dragon inside of him are separate and yet one.

Er'gan never took control without Midas' permission.

Choosing only to come out when Midas was in pain, on the verge of blind rage or in times like this; heading head first into danger.

“Why won't you let me out?”

“Because you'll kill her.”

“I thought that was the whole point to this mad rush. To punish her for her daring to disobey you. What use is a prisoner that escapes without consequence?”

Midas struggled to come up with a logical answer. “I never said she won’t be punished.”

“You are making no sense. Your feelings on this matter are an even bigger mess I can’t seem to comprehend. Is this simply because you wish to bed her?”

“Oh for f**k’s sake Er’gan”

“It is not my fault you cannot control your fantasies. Anyway it doesn’t really matter if she dies by our hands anymore. The sun has since set and she is in the Elder forest. If we don’t kill her, they will.”

A shiver runs down his spine, turning his blood to ice in his veins. He tightens the reins and pushes the horse harder.

“You...You are afraid... for her”

There is surprise in Er’gan’s voice and somehow it irritates him more than the realization that it is true.

He clenches his jaw and hisses through his teeth. “I am not.”

The dragon actually scoffs. “Why bother lying to me? I’m inside of you and I can feel your emotions even better than you can. You do not want her dead. Why?”

“I don’t know”

“But she lied to you”

“I know.”

“Well do you know, or do you not know. Pick one.”

“Er’gan I am trying to ride us to certain doom here and you are being a big distraction.”

“Well if you truly want to save that lying human, I suggest you ride faster dragon king. For all you know, she is already dead.”

And with that Midas’ dragon falls silent. Quiet but not asleep.

Choosing instead to simmer at the edge of his consciousness, beneath the haze of his anger and fear until he would need him.

Damn it!

He draws his horse into a trot and stops her at the edge of the stream lining the boundary of the Elder forest.

The artery of iridescent purple water, running in a circle around the tall dark trees that stood like watchful sentinels, is now a deep indigo in the moon's waning light.

It comes winding around the edge of the forest and thinning out so that when it gets to where he now stands, it is barely a leap across.

He ties his mare to a stump at the water's bank. If he dared to ride her in, she would not return.

The sounds of the forest, eerie and deadly, reach him from the darkness on the other side.

He had ridden at a speed beyond what any of his Ryders could keep up with but he also knows that Leo is not far behind.

If his Chief Ryder and best friend were here, he would tell him, even with the danger of risking his wrath, that he is being extremely stupid.

Then he would cross over the stream with him. Leo would never let him go into danger by himself.

But he cannot wait. Not when she is in there.

With Them and the gods know what else.

He crosses the stream in one broad leap to land softly on the mushy mesh of grass on the other side.

And with one last look behind him, he disappears beneath the dark canopy of the Elder forest.

He just hopes he is not too late.

The Dragon King's Substitute Bride Chapter 15

HERA

The wearing off of adrenaline is a gradual process with stages I have now come to hate.

The first thing that happens, the first thing you notice as your heart rate slows down is the cold.

It is like the air drops a million degrees in aftermath of your...adventure and now that you no longer have your need to survive as a blanket; all you're left with is bone chilling fear.

And then, before you can get used to the cold, pain shows up.

Shooting up and into the crevices of your bones, into every inch of your body until it hurts just to even breathe and your lungs feel like they might give up on you any minute.

Especially if like me you spent the night locked up in some sordid cellar, deep in a tunnel below a mountain and then spent the better part of your day getting tossed around, slammed against walls and then plotting and executing your escape from one of the most dangerous beings in the realms.

You forgot to add kissing handsome, irresistible said dangerous being. My ever helpful, treacherous brain quips.

As if I could forget.

Although, having to spend the rest of my day covered in prickly, itchy hay, and cramped up in the back of some rickety wagon was certainly helping.

The cart jostles and shudders with nearly every step as if to constantly remind me of exactly why I hate life.

The journey down the winding, uneven path with its rocks and stones that led down Dragon's mount had been slow and the most excruciating part so far.

I thought it was never going to end but after what seemed like an eternity, we were now finally moving on smooth even plains.

But my mood is very much still sour.

Anyone would be too if they also had grass sticking in places grass should not be sticking in.

Oh and the darn stable boy's whistling, an irritating jolly tune that serves as a cheery backdrop for my predicament is definitely not helping.

I want to yell at him to stop.

He is a f*****g stable boy being made to take the same tiring exhausting journey four times in two days.

Exactly what in Hades did he have to be so damn happy about?

But I also want to get to my destination without having him scream 'bloody murder' so I grind my teeth through song after unending song and keep my mouth shut.

Despite the way the sky remains an unusual grey color, I realize the dragon realm is an undeniably beautiful place.

Once I manage that is, to get past the fact that is chuck full of dragons and murdering Ryders and gods know what else.

The landscape changes quite abruptly here. The features rather than blend into one another, change so fast it's almost disorienting.

We move from rocky, hard terrains, to gentle slopes carpeted in emerald green grass and littered with sweet violet.

We pass golden fields of thigh high wheat and acres of corn with their crowns a blazing golden yellow, then a fruit grove on either side of a dirt path.

Tall Trees and short trees in full bloom scattered around the area. Heavy with fruits and punctuated by flowers of natures and hues I am not even entirely certain I recognize.

I note from the peep hole I created for myself through the hay, that for some reason colors seem brighter here. Almost like they have a life of their own.

I can hear buzzing bees as they flit from flower to flower and the beaked chorus of birds in flight.

Once I swear I even hear a falcon swoop low over the cart just out the corner of my eyes.

Now that I am finally out of the castle and able to breathe in fresh air, I start to feel marginally better and I begin to weigh my options.

Henette had said the stable boy intends to return the bad hay and get fresh good hay at the market which means he is definitely headed into the capital.

I know I have to get off before he stops to off load the hay.

This means, if I wanted to get as close to the forest as possible while simultaneously avoiding the capital, it would better and less risky to get off just before he got into town.

Less risky??! Sensible Hera shrieks from the place I've hidden her in my head.

Less risky would have been staying silently in your room till he returned. But Noooo.... you just had to escape. Now here you are, planning to jump out of a moving cart and hide from the dragon king in some forest most definitely teeming with creatures you know nothing about; talking about less risky. Try again.

But it is the only real option I have. I can't afford to be seen in the city, it would be too dangerous.

For all I know, Midas himself might be there.

So I shut the sensible, cautious part of me up and ignore it.

The journey is farther than I thought it would be and maybe it's the rhythmic undulating nature of the mare's canter down the road or even the stable boys darn whistling but somehow my eyes start to feel heavy.

Then suddenly I'm standing in the most beautiful glades I have ever seen, drifting through waist high grass the same magenta purple as the setting summer sky.

I can hear bird song and smell citrusy blooming pears. It's an absolute paradise; whole and ethereal in its perfection.

I feel happy. More happy than I have ever been in my life and not just because of where I am; basking in the magnificent, bright sun of this heavenly place.

It's because he's here to too.

I can sense him before I see him standing ahead of me, hands behind his back and I can tell he's hiding his gift for me.

He's smiling that beautiful mischievous smile that makes my heart swell and nearly burst from joy.

But as I float towards him, my happiness morphs into bone chilling fear. There's something else here.

Something behind him.

A flash of lighting rents the sky, filling the air with the acrid, choking smell of thick smoke.

He keeps smiling at me even as the sky turns the color of blood and heavy dark clouds writhe and gather above our heads.

He doesn't feel it, this overwhelming sense of doom that sends tears running down my cheeks.

Doesn't see the blackness like thick, cloying ink creeping up behind him.

The darkness is alive. I want to shout, to cry out and warn him.

But before I can open my mouth, ghostly dark tendrils like twisted, clawed arms wrap around his hands... his legs... his neck.

I see the horror in his eyes seconds before they drag him with them into that vast chasm of abysmal darkness.

"MIDAS!!!"

I scream his name. Again and again and again

But the sound disappears in the sudden howling winds and the darkness reaches for me too.

My eyes fly open and I jerk up, gasping and shivering.

Somehow I have managed to fall asleep.

But that isn't why my heart is racing like I am being pursued, why my mouth feels wooly and bitter and why my hands won't stop shaking.

It's okay Hera. It was just a dream

"Just a dream" I repeat out loud.

Then why had it feel so real and why even now that I am awake, do I still feel that overwhelming sense of approaching yet far off doom?

Suddenly I can hear voices.

Lots of tiny, loud, chattering voices moving in different directions

That's when I notice. The cart is no longer moving.

“Shit... shit... s**t”

I peep carefully through my hole in the hay and the view in front of me causes my eyes to go wide in alarm.

I had slept longer than I realized and sometime during my...nap, he must have ridden in town.

I listen hard for that persistent, needless whistling among the murmur of voices but I can't hear it.

Where is he?

And if he had arrived, why hadn't he uncovered the hay and discovered me by now?

I decide I am definitely not sticking around long enough to find out.

Looking out again I notice we're not in the market, not exactly.

I can see from my position behind the cart, a road running perpendicular to me and across from that is the market but the cart itself is parked in some sort of alley between two tall stone buildings.

I wait till there is no one walking close to the alley then I gently ease up the canvas and crawl out from under the hay.

My feet touch the ground and I stifle a cry of pain as I stretch out my sore, cramped body.

As it turns out, velvet and hay are not the best of combinations and I step out looking a ruffian who went tumbling in the manor's ranch.

I try to dust off myself as best as I can and assess my situation.

I still have no intention of staying in the capital. When they decide to come looking for me, I am almost certain this will be the first place they check.

So I still have to find my way out of the capital without drawing attention to myself, running into a Ryder or the gods forbid it, Midas himself.

I step out the shaded darkness of the alley and my senses are immediately assaulted from every corner.

Colors of every shade, goods of every type stand in stark relief to the grey stone of the city.

There are dragonkin everywhere.

I can hear them calling out to each other; laughing and yelling, peddling their wares...pushing carts over flowing with goods.

They look almost...human.

I see little dragonkin children dashing through the streets giggling and chasing one another in their tunics and leather shoes. Shy girls clinging to their mothers' apron as she haggles prices with the plump hulking baker.

If I try hard enough, I can almost imagine I am back home in Averia's own capital.

Almost.

I walk down the noisy streets keeping my head down and making sure to maintain a pace that doesn't draw attention while simultaneously looking round for any guards.

I pull my hood tight over my head.

They might not recognize me as the King's runaway bride but dragonkin all have either snow white hair or hair the same pitch black as tar.

One look at my flaming red hair and they would know instantly that I am not one of them.

A man bumps roughly into me and moves on without apologizing.

As I near the end of the road, the rowdy market square now behind me, I see an off beaten path to the left that leads towards a short wooden fence and beyond it lies my destination.

The forest.

Just as I'm about to take it, a little boy tugs at my dress.

"Miss...you dropped this."

I reach for it. It's a ruby that must have fallen off from my hair when the man from earlier bumped into me.

"T...thank you."

He smiles a cherubic smile, his mouth covered in dustings of sugar. "You have pretty hair."

That's when I realize in horror that my hair is no longer covered and that the boy's mother who was running towards him has now stopped to stare open mouthed at me.

Eyes wide, she points a shaky finger in my direction. "human..."

I take off before the words are completely out her mouth, my cloak flapping behind me as I stumble down the dirt path.

Running without looking back till I climb over the fence and land smoothly on the other side.

By the time I do look back, a small crowd has gathered around the little boy and the mother who is still gesturing wildly in my direction.

I attempt to leap over the small purple river but end up slipping at the last moment, twisting my ankle and falling head long into the icy water.

And it is wet, hungry and limping that I drag myself into the thick forest.

Praying to every god I know that they do not come after me and that whatever lies within the secret shades of the trees isn't worse than what I have just so narrowly escaped.