

# The Dragon King's Substitute Bride Chapter 111

Minth

She laughs.

Laughs and cackles and giggles.

Over and over again.

The bones beneath her chest have begun to hurt and the skin across her cheeks feel tired and strained

But she does not care.

She continues to laugh and laugh and laugh.

Tears have filled her eyes and they run down her cheeks in tiny, eager rivulets.

And yet she keep at it.

Sniffing and sighing as if done, only to burst into loud noises immediately after.

It does not matter that she is not alone.

That her maid stands cowering in the corner, shaking like a leaf in the wind, tears running down her cheeks.

Nor does it matter that like one who is half insane, she has been doing the exact same thing since she stumbled into her chambers, half naked, hair amiss and began breaking everything in her room.

She had laughed when her maid startled by the noise of shattering glass and against better judgement, had appeared in the open door way to check on her mistress.

Still laughing Minth had swung and swayed towards her.

Hands graceful and hips swinging from side to side, she had pulled the shaking, flabbergasted dragonkin girl into the room by her hands.

Her movements almost gentle and kind which of course, only served to make the maid all the more frightened.

When her mistress smiled, nothing good was brewing and when she laughed like this, then the brewing calamity must finally be ready.

She had been right.

Minth still smiling, had positioned her against the far wall.

And then as she threw glass after vial after bottle at the wall behind the shaking maid, sometimes missing, sometimes not, she had laughed and laughed and laughed.

She laughs not simply because she wants to.

But because she finds it nearly impossible to stop.

How can she stop when they are all so stupid?

A bunch of morons content with whatever scraps the Fates have thrown their way.

Stupid...stupid....stupid...

And oh so very easy to play.

To string along like a fiddler's harp and watch them scramble and dance to her tunes.

Every single one of them.

Fine so maybe not everyone.

Somehow the dragon king had managed to slip through her fingers.

He is the reason why even through the haze of her madness filled euphoria she is still very much unsatisfied and angry.

She had known it was an insane plan, down right batty if not impossible.

A plan that should it fail, could get her executed publicly.

Hung, beheaded, maybe even drawn and quartered.

And she had told the voice and it's messenger just as much.

Told the castle's prisoner to go to hell and find some other fool stupid enough to play the putty and bell the cat.

But then they had showed her the truth.

Shown her how she had been called, chosen.

She was not to be some putty, dancing to the music of the puppet master.

Had she not herself made her way to the the voice?

Had she not outsmarted the guards who stood watch at the door to the concealed, forbidden tower where the prisoner was kept.

Getting information about the prisoner from the chief steward had been as the pulling of a horse's teeth.

Tricking the guards had been even harder.

But she had done it.

So what if the voice had told her what to do and how to get to the tower?

Everything other thing had been her.

Her and her alone.

She had planned and she had executed. Until she had finally found herself standing in front of the one they call the queen of elves.

"We have been waiting for you."

The witch, for Minth is beyond convinced that is what she is, had been The most beautiful thing Minth had ever laid eyes on.

As beautiful as the setting sun.

The radiance that kisses the earth before darkness takes over.

Yet the voice that had come out from between the elven queen's lips was not that of any woman Minth had ever heard.

It was dark and deep and made the skin on the back of her arms prickle and itch.

She had almost turned back then.

Almost.

But then the woman has spoken again.

And just like that, Minth had found herself unable to move. Barely able to even breathe. All she could do was stand and watch in wonder.

Heart racing, mouth dry, she had struggled to clear her throat and find her voice.

"Who are you?"

The woman smiled at her, bright red lips against a pale white face and this time when she answered, her voice was normal.

“who I am or what I am does not matter. What matters is you.”

“Me?”

“Yes you.”

She had not looked like any prisoner Minth had ever seen before that day.

Even trapped and locked up as she was, the elven queen moved around the stone walled room like she was home.

Perching on the edge of the bed and smoothening down the covers like she hadn't a care in the world.

“We are very much alike you know.”

“We are?”

“Of course. Beautiful... intelligent...ready to do what everyone else is much too...scared to do. Ready to get our hands dirty.”

Every word she spoke, like a fisherman's reel had pulled Minth forward.

Step after step after step until she found herself standing directly in front of the dragon castle's most feared prisoner.

The woman had patted the bed beside her and Minth had sat. Her hands falling limp by her sides.

Almost like she was no longer in control of her body.

The longer she had looked into the shadowed eyes of the queen of the dark elves, the more the feeling had intensified.

And when the woman had laid a hand on her arm, she had to struggle not to shudder and snatch it away.

“Just like me dear Minth. You have had to fight for what you have. Tired of feeding off the crumbs of others you have had to tossle and scrap and claw your way to get to where you are now, Mistress of the dragon king...the one who should rightfully be queen...”

Minth had nodded like an eager child.

Agreeing with every word that fell from the woman's mouth was easier than trying to think through the effect the elven queen was having on her.

“...And yet dear Minth, despite your struggles, you have had things taken from you. All the things you so rightfully deserve taken by those who have spent all their lives in luxury. As the favorite, the most beloved. After all your years of fighting some human now wears your crown and dons your robes while you wander the castle grounds nothing more than a glorified, forgotten maid.”

Minth had snatched her hand away then.

She had been more angry than she had ever been before.

But she was not angry at the woman who was exactly like her.

No, her rage was at everyone else. All the people who had taken from her, those who would not acknowledge her and give her what she deserved.

The b\*\*\*h who stole her throne.

“What do you want from me?”

“I believe the right question dear Minth, is what can we do for you?”

She had hated the way the woman said her name. The way it made her feel.

She still does.

“What do you mean ‘we’?”

But the elven queen had ignored her, standing up and putting her arms around Minth’s shoulders.

“You see Minth, we can give you everything your little mind desires. Everything you have ever dreamed and more could be yours.”

Even through the seduction of the woman’s voice Minth’s mind had managed to put her first. Her natural instinct to survive kicking in

“Why?”

The elven queen had frowned then. As if surprised by the question.

“Why what?”.

“Forgive me but you do not exactly strike me as one who would do anything for free. What is in it for you?”

“Let us just say we know what it is like to have what you deserve taken from you and we have grown tired of waiting. Tired and angry. And now ...now we wish to take it back. To take and to punish.”

To take and to punish.

To Minth That had sounded just about right.

“What would you have me do?”

“Oh nothing much...”

And then the voice had told her what needed to be done.

And she had done it.

Well... almost.

The dragon king was not supposed to have woken up from his slumber.

Neither was he supposed to have broken away from the spell as quickly as he did.

And it bothers and irritates Minth that she had not be able to have him completely to herself.

But the look on the face of that little human usurper...that insipid b\*\*\*h had made everything worth it.

Minth knows she should be concerned.

Worried for her life even.

The dragon king had caught her red handed.

But she is not.

Because it is too late.

She finally manages to get herself under control, to stop laughing.

Swinging like one drunk, she steps over the pieces of shattered glass scattered across her room.

Making her way towards her maid who is now making no pretence of hiding her tears.

“Oh stop that stupid sniveling at worse. Honestly you should be grateful.”

Leaning over and grabbing the girls chin forcefully in her hands she smiles. “Very soon you will be maid to the queen of the 5th realm. So stop crying or I shall have you replaced. Now laugh.”

“My lady...”

“Laugh I said!! Now sing me a song while I get ready.”

Minth dresses to the tear filled voice of her maid.

Twirling and dancing as she slips into a dress the color of darkened blood and weaves gems of jade and onyx into her hair.

An emerald necklace cool against her chest, her arms nearly covered beneath the rows and clasps of golden bracelets.

An attire fit for a queen.

All that is left now is the crown.

She does not even notice when she steps on a piece of glass and slices open the skin of her feet.

She simply slips her foot, bloody and all into her sandals, smiling at her reflection in the mirror.

Minth knows she has never looked more beautiful.

Knows it without a shadow of doubt.

She turns to the maid who is still singing while sniffing back tears. "Run along girl. You might want to hide somewhere. Perhaps if you are still alive when all of this is over I might even consider promoting you. Now go. Run."

With one last look in the mirror, Minth waltz out of her chambers.

Knowing deep in her mind that she would not return back here.

The next time she laid her head to sleep it would be in the King's bed.

With or without him.

She makes her way around the castle.

Cutting across the gardens and through the well positioned groove of trees.

Towards the part of the dragon castle that lay in shadows.

Which each step she takes, she watches the sky begin to change.

The sun loses its shine and the once constant grey sky slowly becomes even darker.

A mass of writhing heavy clouds like a thunderstorm floating gradually towards dragon's mount.

So what if the dragon king woke up early.

It was already too late.

Everything was going according to plan.

The voice may have called her first, she being the most important of course, but it had called to others too.

Had reached into their darkest of desires and brought their most secret of fantasies to the fore front.

And once one is promised whatever it is they truly, truly desire then they would do whatever it takes to get it.

Even if it meant betraying the king and the realm they swore allegiance to.

The tower is unguarded.

Little wonder there.

The wooden door is heavy and creaks loudly when she pulls it open.

She does not bother to close it behind her.

She hums as she walks up the steps, a meaningless tune that Minth does not remember knowing.

“You failed.”

“I did not fail. She simply returned too early.”

The Elven queen sneers at her. “You disobeyed my orders.”

“Please. He is of more use to me alive than dead.”

“I did not intend to kill him”

“You told me to pour in everything.”

“Because it was the exact amount that was needed to...”

“How was I to know that? Anyway, you should have seen the look on her face when she saw us...him. Priceless.”

Minth does not see her move.

Before she can blink, she is clutching at the hands wrapped around her throat, her feet dangling a few feet off the ground.

“It would appear you have forgotten your place.”

Woman or not, Minth is dragonkin.

Tall and strong boned.

And for the elven queen to be able to lift her so easily, her powers must have returned.

Just like she said it would.

The dragon within the king must well and truly be asleep.

The hand squeezes harder, the runes across the elf's pale white skin beginning to glow and writhe again.

“Shall I remind you?”

“No.”

‘Louder.’

How can I be louder when you’re trying to kill me you f\*\*\*\*\*g b\*\*\*h.

But she does not say that. Instead she coughs out another choked no.

“Good. I’d hate for our guest to have to meet your dead body. Does not set for a good precedent now does it...oh here they come now.”

Minth drops down to the floor like a bag of stones. Coughing and retching.

Foot steps.

Slow and hesitant.

Minth turns her head and frowns. Wondering whether to run and hide.

“Who...”

“Oh relax. It is one of us.”

Minth dusts off herself. It would not do for whoever it is to meet the future queen of their realm coughing and covering in dust.

She listens... listens to the footsteps getting louder and louder and louder ... until.

The shadow at the door steps into the light of the stone chambers and Minth gasps.

She stumbles back, nearly falling over and twisting her ankle.

“You!”

Her head snaps towards the woman through which the voice had called to her.

“How did you...”

The elven queen smiles.

“Everyone has their darkness Minth. Everyone. All we have to do... is call to it.”

The dark elven queen spreads out her arms and turns towards the door and it’s visitor.

“Welcome... we have been waiting for you.”

# The Dragon King's Substitute Bride Chapter 112

HERA

I tell myself that it is all in my head.

When Leo's hands cup the small of my back and pull me against the lean, muscular frame of his body I tell myself that it is my mind overworking, overthinking...under reacting.

I tell myself that all I need to do is simply to shut it off and just feel.

That perhaps if I stopped trying to think, my heart might race the way it does when Midas kisses me.

That my knees would crumble and that the liquid pool of lust that forms in my belly even when he simply looks at me might make an appearance.

Only one problem stands in the way.

Pulling at the seams of my mind and fraying the edges of my anger induced stubbornness.

I try to push it down, to sink it below the weight of my rage and hurt.

But like a body bloated and filled with air, the thought always floats back up.

With him, the dragon king who shattered my heart, I have never have to work to shut down my mind.

All he has ever had to do is stand close to me and my would brain immediately forget how to process thoughts.

The way his golden eyes would darken when I brushed up against him.

The way he looked at me, watching my every move even from across the room like he was simply dying to get me alone.

The way his mere presence made it impossible for me to focus on anything but him.

Unable to think about anything but wanting him.

Needing him.

And when he touches me...

Gods above when he touches me.

A tiny breathless sigh escapes my lips and Leo takes it for encouragement.

He deepens the kiss, sliding his hands into my hair.

But it does not feel enough.

Not enough to make me forget.

So I squeeze my eyes as tightly as I can and lift myself on the tip of my toes.

Leo takes the the hint and lifts me off the floor and properly into his arms.

He tastes different...the second kiss of my entire life.

Like spice and danger...and guilt.

And he is gentle.

The way he takes my lower lip in his mouth, the strokes he makes with his tongue even as his hands grip my thighs that are wrapped firmly around his waist.

So gentle it is almost hesitant.

So gentle it makes me want to groan in frustration.

I want him to wrap my hair around his hands and tug at it.

To press my against a wall and drag the sharp edges of his teeth along my neck until he left tiny red marks behind.

To say my name in that part longing, part frustrated voice that makes me absolutely weak in the knees and causes me to throb and ache with barely disguised wanton desire.

I want...

Oh for Hades sake stop it Hera.

Concentrate.

He broke your heart and trust, he barely even believes you and yet here you are.

Fantasizing about him while in the arms of another man.

My Grandmother, callous cold woman that she could be, used to say this one thing.

That the greatest fool of all, was the one who tried to lie to themselves.

I am almost certain that were she able to see me now, she would most certainly change her mind.

The greatest fool of all, is the one who thinks she can get over the only real happiness she has ever known by making love to his right hand and best friend.

Well, no one ever said being foolish was difficult.

Somehow we have made it to the bed and Leo lowers me down gently.

His mouth fixed on my mine.

As he presses me down into the softness of the sheets, I pull on his lip and he groans into my mouth.

Then he breaks the kiss, his fingers brushing the hair from my face.

I can feel him staring at me but I do not open my eyes.

If I open my eyes I might come back to my senses and right now, the last thing I wish to do is apply common sense.

He places a kiss at the corner of my jaw. His breath deep and heavy beside my ears.

Almost like he is struggling to get it under control.

“Your highness...”

“Don’t you dare.”

He chuckles. Rich and dark into the crook of my neck.

“Hera...”

“Yes?”

“Are you sure?”

I swallow and shake my head, my eyes still closed.

He kisses the hollow on the center of my neck. His words mumbled against my skin.

“I should stop.”

“So why don’t you?”

“Because I have wanted to do this for so long..”

His fingers deftly slip beneath the thin sleeves of my dress, “wanted to touch you, kiss you...”

He pushes them down, finger tips cool as they trail a path down my arms to my wrist.

“...and now that I have you here, I do not think I could possibly stop again. No matter how utterly insane it is.”

At first he had kissed me like I might be breakable and he is afraid to hurt me but now he was taking control.

Pinning my hands above my head when they reached for him and sliding his tongue into my mouth.

Teasing and tasting so that the next time I moaned it was not entirely distracted.

I arch and strain against his grip around my wrist, my back lifting off the bed.

My mind might be resisting. Desperate to tell me how big of a mistake I am making.

But my body, betrayer that she is, is done fighting.

And when he thumb brushes across the tip of my hardened n\*\*\*\*s, I actually feel my toes start to curl.

Until...

Gods above you have got to be f\*\*\*\*\*g...

The thought never fully forms.

The pressure slams into my head like a barrel of something packed and packed hard.

My neck snaps forward and I am nearly knocked off from the horse I am suddenly now riding.

My scream is lost to the howling wind as I jerk forward, grabbing almost viciously at the neck of the brown, colossal animal I would never in a million years have tried to ride.

The sky above is noisy and grey. The clouds churning and swirling like a witch's caldron of poisonous brew.

“What in all the realms...”

Wind, biting and sharp and bitter blows up in my face. Snatching the words from my mouth and making it difficult to even keep my eyes open.

Dirt and tiny rocks kicked up by the horse's pounding hooves swirl around in the air. .

Blurring my vision as the stead gallops at neck breaking speed towards the capital.

My heart is racing and my mouth is dry.

I whip my head around, watching through squinted eyes as dragon mount and it's castle rapidly becomes smaller and smaller.

I turn my head back around but before I can make sense of why I am alone, riding across a dragon realm that looks to be on the verge of some catastrophe, the pressure slams into me again and the scene changes.

I am suddenly now riding through the dragon capital.

But the streets are empty.

Doors locked, windows barred and not a single soul in sight.

“Gods above...what is going on?”

This time the pressure knocks me clean off the horse.

I shout and flail my arms but I never reach the hard, cobbled streets.

Again I jerk forward, the force of being pushed into my own body almost sending me to the ground.

The horse is gone.

So are the rolling fields and the capital I was so furiously riding through but moments ago.

But I am not back home.

I gasp and stagger.

I know this place.

I know the path of cobbled stone leading up to long, wide, numerous steps glowing a pallid grey in the waning light.

I know the four colossal pillars covered in the creeping greenery that flutter and writhe like snakes in the windy darkness.

And I recognize the fierce horned dragon made of pure stone with it's sinister snarl and bared teeth that sits on the top of the dragon temple.

The temple of the fire gods.

Where Midas and I were bound to each other.

Where I was made queen of the realm that now so obviously sits on the verge of chaos.

The pressure slams into me again and I cry out.

Parts pain, parts frustration.

Danger.

I can feel it on my skin.

Can taste like a coating of metal upon my tongue.

But I am not entirely certain why I feel so afraid.

Then I hear it. A far off sound like the rushing of wind except more deliberate and controlled.

As I watch I see a darkness in the grey sky.

A patch of shadow far off in the distance, growing closer with each second.

The darkness draws closer and with it my sense of doom grows.

Expanding and swelling until it threatens to choke out my very heart.

The darkness takes shape, forms....solidifies...and lands.

“Oh thank the gods.”

I know that dragon. Recognize it.

But before I can move towards it, someone slides down its back.

Someone with skin as pale as bone and lips as red as blood.

I stagger back, pressing my hands over my mouth to keep from shouting.

It can not be...

What are they doing together?

The pressure, harsh and relentless slams into me again and the scene changes for the umpteenth time.

I stagger and blink furiously.

My head struggling to keep up with speed at which I am being knocked from one premonition to another.

I am still in front of the temple.

The sky is darker, the wind louder.

Blowing my own hair into my eyes, sand into my mouth.

The dragon and it's rider are gone and in their place.

And in their place I see...

“Midas!!!...Midas!!!”

But the dragon king does not hear me.

I try to run to him but my body is suddenly unable to hear me, unable to move.

Because of course it is.

f\*\*\*\*\*g gods.

Forced to do nothing but watch, I see him glance around.

He looks enraged and worried as he jumps down from his horse.

Blood streaming from wounds that were not healing as fast as they are supposed.

He races towards the dark, yawning entrance of the dragon temple.

“Midas...no don't. It's a trap!!”

I am not sure how it is that I know this. I just do. With every fiber of my panic stricken being I know that should he go in there all of us are doomed.

But it is no use.

He cannot hear me.

And he passes by me. Barely inches away and straight into the arms of whatever awaits him within the temple.

What happens next happen so fast that I am unable to even fully process it.

Like flashes of lightening or like glimpses from out a hazy window...

I see the arch deep within the temple.

The one beneath which I had pledged my allegiance to the dragon realm.

The two dragons, the one of pure gold and the one of ruby red intertwined together

I hear a peel of laughter.

Laughter so dark it causes my skin to pebble and crawl.

A necklace...

Swords drawn...

“Let her go!”

Midas' voice yelling...

I see the coils of darkness reach out from the churning, rippling mass beneath the arch.

I see them wrap themselves around the dragon king.

Gripping firmly, pulling...

Sinking their tendrils into his very soul.

And then blood. Oh skies above so much blood.

I think I scream. I am not certain.

My eyes fly open and I awake to myself pressed into the bed and soaked in my own sweat.

I lift myself shakily unto my arms, my head aching, my mouth tasting like I have been chewing on ashes.

And the sinking feeling that I had to go to Midas and I had to go to him now.

"You would not stop saying his name."

My head snaps to the side.

That is when I remember.

Oh crap. Leo.

He is standing off to the side. His face shuttered.

Still partly dazed and disoriented, I pull up my dress and crawl off the bed.

"When you kissed me back and made those tiny sounds of pleasure it was not me you were thinking of. It was him wasn't it?"

I swallow and struggle to keep the panic out of my voice.

I push back the premonition I had seen.

The dragon on which Hermani had arrived at the dragon temple.

It just could not be.

I grab at his hand.

"Leo I am sorry but Midas...we have to...I need to..."

"Go to him?"

He scoffs. Loud and bitter.

“Why?”

“I...”

“Even after everything he is has done, you still want him...still choose him. He shatters your heart and makes you cry over and over. He does not even know how to trust you let alone love you...”

“Leo...”

“The dragon king does not possess it in him to care wholeheartedly for anyone but his kingdom. To love you...or anyone else for that matter.”

“Leo you know that is not true.”

“I know that I love you Hera.”

“Leo...”

“More than anything that I have ever loved before. I tried to hide it, to fight it, to bury in the deepest and darkest parts of my mind. Forced to stand by and watch you struggle and fight while yearning... craving to give you everything you could ever possible desire. Tell me Hera, how am I supposed to watch you give yourself away for someone who is not even capable of returning it.”

“Leo...”

I squeeze my eyes tightly, my voice tiny and strained.

He grabs my hand between both of his. His eyes searching mine... reaching into the very depths of my soul.

“Come away with me. I promise on everything I have.. everything I own...everything that I am, that I would spend the rest of my days showing you exactly what it means to be loved.”

I stare up at him.

At the broken sincerity I can see spilled all across his face.

I stare at him and I think about the premonitions I had just seen.

About the chaos and the blood...and the death.

And for one stupidly insane moment, I am tempted.

To say yes.

To turn my back against all of that pain and fighting that awaits me.

To run far far away and leave it all behind.

To forget.

I cup the bristled face of the chief Ryder in my free hand and stroke his cheek with my thumb.

“You do know that I love you don’t you?”

He closes his eyes and sighs into my hand. “Not in the way that I want you to.”

I smile up at him, finger tips reaching out to brush against the scar above his eyes.

“You deserve all the happiness in the 7 realms Leo. And one of these days, you will find one who is more deserving of all of the love in your heart and when you you do, you will be infinitely glad I said no.”

“Hera...”

“Leo... He needs me...He needs both of us”

“And me... does what I need not matter even in the slightest?”

Before I can think of how to respond to that he is backing away.

He face closed off and emotionless.

The face of the chief Ryder who had taken me to the cellars.

Eyes like steel and almost just as cold.

I can feel myself losing him.

To what I am uncertain.

I reach for him but he steps back.

“I apologize for my indiscretions your grace.”

“Leo...”

“I believe you will find the king in his study.”

And with that he walks away.

I do not watch. My eyes remain fixed on my hands in my lap.

I hear him reach for the door and pull it open.

Hear him stop and turn back.

“I would have loved you until the farthest ends of the seven realms.”

I twist my fingers, watch them bend. “I know.”

It is a barely a whisper yet I have no doubt that he heard it.

“And now your highness, I can only hope that you do not regret this decision that you have made.”

And then the door closes gently behind him.

I want to go after him but my body refuses to move.

I am uncertain how long I sit there trying desperately to swallow past the lump in my throat and the tears threatening to spill out my eyes.

Enough Hera.

You made your choice.

And if I did not get up now and stop him from making any other mistakes, I might never get the chance to make things right again.

But before I can take a step out of my room, I notice how dark it is starting to get.

I try to think about how many bells I have heard.

Certainly not enough for it to be this dark already.

I run to my window and look out and my blood turns to ice.

Jagged, tearing ice.

Oh Gods above...

Whatever is coming....It had already begun.

## The Dragon King's Substitute Bride Chapter 113

MIDAS

The first time was a cold, moonless night.

The one night when restless and swatted in sweat he had been unable to fall asleep.

So bored and wide awake, he had wandered the castle grounds aimlessly, his small feet soundless against the cold stone.

Like a moth to the flame, a Midas that had been barely 10 years of age had found himself heading towards the burning torches of the guards who kept watch over the castle at night.

And it was with his legs dangling over the precipice of the guards watch tower that the dragonkin Ryder who would be Leo's father, had first told him the story..

Once, upon a time so long ago it has almost since faded from living memory,

There was a war in the 7th realm.

But before the war even began,

Before the realms as they are now known were even divided.

There was order and there was chaos.

Light and dark existing side by side.

The Elders gods-no one can agree on who came first-did not care much that there were those among them who practiced magic of a much more selfish nature than was "normal" for the gods.

Until the chaos began to plot to overthrow everything else.

That was when the war began.

A war between those who ruled the darkness and those who wished to remain in the light.

The Elder gods fought and order won.

But as is the manner of gods, they were satisfied with just the acknowledgement of defeat by the opposing side.

Or perhaps it was simply was not their way to crush their enemies as thoroughly as possible least they rise again.

So they split the fabrics of existence into 7 realms and those who worshipped chaos were stripped of their magic and flung down to the farthest of all the realms

As far away from the gods as possible.

Tossed aside and forgotten they became known as The Shades.

Their shadowed paths growing weeds and thorns until like a forest abandoned, they could barely even be reached, much less passed through.

And just like that, dark magic and those who practiced it were forgotten.

Almost like they ceased to exist.

Until one, consumed by greed and a desire to possess an entire race for himself, brought it back.

When Azarath, after seeing that the dragon realm would not be given to him began his rebellion, he decided to walk the abandoned paths of dark magic.

He reached out to the shades and asked for their help.

If they would help him learn to possess and use magic like they once did, he would return them to their former glory.

They agreed.

Patron god of magic and now of the shadows as well, Azarath found a way to open a portal to the shadow realm and bring them back.

And so, along with all the others he managed to convince to join his cause, they went to war.

Again.

And the battle for the ownership of the realm of dragons began.

Again they fought.

And again, they lost.

And once more, they were cast down. Azarath with them.

Except this time the gods were wiser.

They did not just cast them down.

They cast them down and then they locked the doors behind them.

All the portals opening into the shadow realm were sealed.

One could go in but none could come out.

Except they had the key.

A key that ironically the gods had hidden somewhere in the dragon realm.

When Midas had first heard the tale, eyes half closed with sleep and his hands sticky with the honey from the kitchen, he had thought the gods terribly brilliant.

And as the guards had carried his sleepy form into the castle he remembers the awe that had followed him even into his dreams.

But as he grew older, the dragon king began to realize the truth.

That the gods may be all powerful but they were not all knowing.

Perhaps they were not even as wise as they tried to make their creatures believe.

For not even they could predict the erratic ways of all the creatures they had created.

That curiosity and an obsession with knowledge would expose the flaws in their plans to those who wished to use the knowledge for evil.

If they had known, perhaps they would not have given their creations the choice of free will.

Or perhaps they simply would not have created them at all.

Midas knows he personally, would not have.

A dragon, swoops low into the castle ground.

Nearly extinguishing the flaming torches and casting a shadow over an already darkened courtyard before landing somewhere towards the left.

Midas who is too busy barking orders left and right while knowing he cannot under any circumstances show the turmoil running through his mind, pays it no mind.

Moments later a soldier comes running towards where the King's stands.

"Your grace!"

He answers without turning towards the panting, haunched over Ryder.

"Speak."

"A scout from Radarth and Adarin. They were the first of the clans to be attacked my king and they send word asking for reinforcement."

Midas' jaw ticks but he is not surprised.

The clans of Adarin and Radarth are the clans farthest from the castle.

If the dark elves meant to advance on his realm while ensuring that they did not get attacked from behind, that is where they would begin.

But he also knows that no portal had been opened there.

The danger the clans face while great, is not as dangerous as the others that lay ahead.

"Denied. They will have to fight as they are."

The Ryder nods his head, knowing better than to argue.

Adarin and Radarth are strong. They could hold their own a little longer.

Whatever it is that came in through those open portals needed to be stopped and stopped now.

He turns aside to another dragonkin warrior.

“Captain.”

“Yes my king.”

“Your troops?”

“We are ready my king.”

“And the captains?”

“A top their horses and in front of their men. We only await your orders.”

A brisk nod from the king is the only indication that he has heard the captain.

“We march out on my signal.”

“Yes my king.”

The Captain hesitates and Midas sees it out the corner of his eyes.

“Say it.”

“It is about the Chief Ryder my Lord. We cannot seem to find him.”

Midas voice betrays nothing. “Does your ability to fight and defend your home lie in the chief Ryder’s presence? Is it he who fuels the dragon in your veins or the fire that poisons your blade?”

The captain bows his head. “No my king.”

Midas turns away. “Go to your men. We ride out on my signal.”

What the dragon king does not tell the captain is that he has been trying non-stop to mind link his right hand to no avail and that he himself is now beginning to get very worried.

He may not show it but he needs Leo by his side.

Both as his warrior and as his friend.

Could they have poisoned him as well?

Mead laced with magic...a platter of food coated with spells?

Was Leo right now lying down somewhere in the castle unaware of all that is going?

He is about to for the first time in a long long time, go into battle with neither his dragon nor his most trusted warrior by his side.

And the woman he loves.

“Captain!”

The dragonkin stops and turns back to the king.

“New orders. You and some of your men. Find the the queen and take her to her chambers. I want her tower surrounded and defended. Until this war is ended, one way or the other you are to guard her with your life. She must under no circumstance whatsoever be put in danger or I swear by all the gods not even Hades will be able to save any one of you from me.”

The Captain nods once more and hurries on his way.

Midas strides towards his stead.

Even with Er’gan asleep he can still feel the familiar buzz of energy he always feels before a fight.

The warmth wrapping itself around his bones... swelling... expanding.

“Er’gan?”

Silence.

As he mounts his horse, the dragon king looks up and towards her window knowing even as he does so that she would not appear.

One brisk whisk and a sharp command later, he turns his horse around.

“Open the gates!!”

The dragon king who does not fear war or death is afraid now.

Afraid not of the battle ahead but that he may have missed his chance to tell her the truth.

Afraid that he may never get it again.

She had been his healing and yet he had brought nothing but pain to her.

And when he died, the memory of him that would remain for her would be of the one who broke her trust and shattered an already fractured heart.

And as he rides out towards an enemy who’s strength he does not yet know, it is that single thought that haunts him the most.

# The Dragon King's Substitute Bride Chapter 114

MIDAS

The dragon army rides out as one.

A mass of rolling thunder and pounding hooves.

At the base of dragon's mount, two straight lines appear within the sea of dark amour and like a practiced song and a choregraphed anthem, the army divides into three and rides off in seperate directions.

Further down the road, each of the troops will divide once more.

Each company to be led by a Captain of the third highest rank.

Each headed towards where Midas had felt a portal opening.

The largest of the first divisions remains with the king.

Headed straight towards the portal Midas had felt the strongest.

The one in the center of the Elder forest.

"Halt!"

The dragon army stills.

The only sound is that of the breeze rustling through the trees but even that stops soon enough.

Midas senses them before they appear.

As with most things, no one remembers when the path of lost memories was found bit everyone seems to agree that it's initial intent was not malicious.

But as is the way with creations, it's use was soon corrupted.

With it's discovery came a way to access the chaos or shadow realm without necessarily getting trapped within it's depth.

There is no doubt in Midas' mind that it was through this path that Hermani, filled with jealousy, had first made contact with the darkness.

Those who went into the realm of chaos of their own free will, as long as they remained on the path, could make their way out again.

But those locked within it's darkness are unable to find this path and thus could not make their way out.

To use the path for an escape, The Shades would first have to find it and to find it, they would need not just to be led by someone, they would also need light.

Midas raises his left hand, fist clenched and all heads, Ryders and soilders turn towards it.

Many had tried to bring The Shades back.

Hermani herself included.

But only one source of light could burn in the land of chaos.

The light from the dragon crystals that grew under the castle.

Deep within the bowels of dragon's mount.

If somehow Hermani had managed to get some of his Ryders on her side then she might has well have convinced them to find the crystals, to walk the path of memories.

To find them who lay wait in darkness and show them the way to the path.

To open portals and bring The Shades back to the surface realms once again.

He barely catches the first shadow as it darts behind a gnarled trunk.

A darkness different from the shade of the tall trees of the Elder forest.

A darkness that breathes and moves and gives off an aura of evil so strong it makes the hair at the back of his neck stand on end.

The dragon king closes his eyes and slows his heart rate.

Er'gan if you will awaken then you better do so now.

He waits but all he gets is silence....and then a flicker of heat.

His dragon maybe asleep but it was by no means gone.

His right hand clenches and releases...once...twice...

"Now!"

Midas' fist slices through the air and his army moves without warning.

Like lightning.

But the enemy, full of rage at being locked up for almost an eternity is faster..

They swarm out of the forest like a mass of locusts.

A dark, shrieking cloud made up of snarling jaws hanging impossibly wide open and disproportionately long limbs ending in razor sharp claws.

The shadows dart between the horses, sending them into a fray of confusion.

Knocking the large animals to their knees and toppling their riders.

But the dragonkin soldiers recover quickly.

Finding out that the enemy though fast and filled with dark magic, was not immune to the steel edge of a dragon sword.

And soon enough the battle begins in earnest.

Shades and dragonkin falling in almost equal numbers.

Midas' swords swing through the air like extensions of his arms as he ducks and weaves and parries.

The air is filled with the smell of dirt and blood and a stench that rank of evil hangs over the battle field like a blanket.

Each time a Shade is struck, they let out a blood curdling scream as the swords sizzles and tears through their shadow cloaked flesh.

But no sooner would one shadow fall, that another two would take its place

And soon enough, the sounds of the Shades falling becomes few and far between and dragonkin blood begins to flow and cover the forest ground.

Midas slides underneath the outstretched claws of a snarling shade. Swinging his sword at the same time and cutting the offensive being in half.

"Take to the sky!"

The smaller of the dragons fly high in the sky, spotting enemy shadows and incinerating them to the ground

But the minute he utters the command, another set of Shades, these ones possessing dark, shadowy wings take to the sky as well.

They screech as they attack.

Horrid sounds that manage to both be deep and high pitched all at once.

They strike the dragons mid air, clawing and tearing at their wings.

Sending the big, roaring animals crashing to the ground in clouds of dust and blood.

The shadows are far too many and far too fast such that the Ryders risked burning to death some of their own.

.

Midas feels claws sink into his arms, and into his thighs.

Because his dragon is weakened, the wounds do not close up like they normally would and for the first time in a long time the king feels blood trickle down his skin.

The dragon army is outnumbered.

Severely so.

At this rate, not only would they lose...they will all die.

The soldiers and Ryder's stand with their back to each other, swords out stretched even as the shades circle them, herding them in.

Suddenly they stop.

They might be smiling but with how distended their jaw are it is hard to tell.

Yet even without that it is obvious that they are gloating.

One of them steps forward, towards Midas.

"I...we....are... disappointed"

Its voice is coarse...the angle of their large mouth creaking open like a door that has not been opened in a long long time.

"We expected more of the... dragon...king. Not this small, measly army that bores us to death!"

The Shades shriek and cackle and it takes Midas almost a full moment to realize that they are laughing.

Midas jaw clenches, his grip on his swords tightening. "Do you what the problem is with you creatures that have been locked up for too long?"

The shade c\*\*\*s its angular head and spreads out its long long hands. "We are bored. Entertain us."

Midas' eyes narrow into golden slits and he takes one step forward.

"You waste too much time by talking too long."

The shade screeches its laugh once more.

“Silence mortal. Do not....cover up your failure with ineffective...meaningless words. You are weak and we shall take... your...realm and all the others as well. Perhaps then...the Gods shall take that as a lesson to know that...”

The Shade falls to the ground with a loud cry.

His companions startle and begin to attack but before they can even lift off the ground fire rains down on them from above.

All around, all at once.

Incinerating almost the entire army of dark creatures.

The dragon king rolls his shoulders and advances on the talking shade who somehow managed to survive the burns.

The thing shrieks up at him.

“How dare you!! We shall tear your limbs apa...”

His sword swings in one clean arc.

“It is like I said, You talk too much.”

Midas had indeed felt all the other portals open.

But he had also sensed that they were weaker somehow.

That nothing came through.

That they were nothing but distractions.

So while he had indeed split his company, he had not done so to simply fling them out to various corners of the realm.

Like fools chasing ghosts.

Instead he had deliberately come with a disproportionately small army in order to lure the enemy into a false sense of security...

And while they had gloated and goaded, the rest of his army had been surrounding the forest.

The enemy barely even saw the swords that killed them.

Lead by their king the dragon army runs forward from all sides.

Attacking and winning.

Filling the air with the sound of the inhuman screams of dying evil.

“Midas.”

A whisper in all the chaos.

“Midas...”

The dragon king stops. His head spinning from side to side.

He knows that voice.

The voice he heard in his head.

He swings his sword at an oncoming shade without even looking,

That should not be possible. He had not even opened his mind.

But the relief rushing through his veins is so strong that he does not immediately question it.

“Leo..Thank the gods...where in Hades...”

“Come to the temple Midas.”

The dragon king stops.

“What do you mean? Why did you not answer when I called?”

“Come to the dragon temple...”

“Leo...”

“Come to the dragon temple now...or she dies.”

## The Dragon King’s Substitute Bride Chapter 115

HERA.

If I did not find it so tiring I would have been fascinated.

For fear remains one of the strangest emotions to ever perturb mortals and immortals alike.

The odd thing about fear, is that everyone reacts differently to it.

Some people discover that for themselves when trouble arrives, it is far less arduous to fold their bodies up in a ball, to make themselves smaller targets.

Others get violent and begin to look for the nearest weapons with which to defend themselves.

To strike first before they themselves are struck.

And others still are content with simply falling into shock.

Becoming immobile, freezing up like water in the winter months and breaking apart just as easily when hit.

Then, there are those like me.

The ones whose desire and instinct to survive is so strong that it rides over every other part of their brain.

The stupid parts that tell them to scream and call for help.

The even more stupid parts that tell them to freeze or make themselves smaller.

These are the ones who when faced with danger think of doing only one thing.

They run.

The only difference is this time, I am about to run in the most stupid of directions.

Not away but towards.

If the old Hera could see me now...

The one who did whatever it took to keep herself and her brother alive, I have little doubt that she would spit at my feet and hit me for good measure.

She would not understand why I am not fighting harder to stay well and away from whatever threat it is that slowly but steadily approaches.

She would not understand why I am so willingly to risk it all for the king of the dragon realm.

But she would understand that being alive meant nothing if I had to lose one more person I loved.

I push away from the window with its fearsome view of dark grey skies and far off lightning.

Rushing from one end of the room to another, swinging a dark green cloak around my shoulders and slipping my feet into firm sandals, I feel inadequate...confused even.

I am trying my hardest not to panic but it is hard.

Very hard.

All my earlier anger at whatever it is I had seen between him and Minth is almost entirely forgotten.

Extinguished like a single flame in a raging storm.

I am not entirely sure I know what it was that I saw in my premonitions

They had been too fast.

Too sudden to make any sense of and it is becoming increasingly clear from the eerie, howling wind outside my window and all the commotion I can hear from the courtyard below, that I do not have the luxury of time to sit down and think.

But I know enough to be certain that I need to find someone.

Midas, before he goes to the dragon temple for whatever reason.

And Leo before he does whatever it that he is planning to do.

What I will say to either dragonkin man or where I will find them is of little consequence to my panic filled and harried mind.

I abandon my attempts at packing up my hair and just stuff it beneath the hood of my cloak before rushing towards the door.

Looking outside the window of my chambers had shown the courtyard in a state of ordered hysteria.

There had been soldiers running afoot, horses and dragon Riders readying themselves as if to march out into battle, dragons of all shapes and sizes flying in and out of the castle grounds...

I may not know much about whatever in Hades is going on, but I do know that if I want to find the dragon king then that is where he would be.

At the forefront of it all.

Dragon Rider and warrior king.

Unlike other monarchs, he would never sit at the back or in the center of his army, safe from the brunt of the attacking forces.

If there is an on going attack on the dragon realm like I suspect there is, then I have little doubt in my mind that the one leading the army, sword drawn and teeth bared, would be Midas.

My Midas.

I just needed to make sure he comes back to me.

Alive.

I need him to come back to me alive.... please dear gods... please

....the life you have given me so far, you owe me. I swear

“I promise if you bring him back safe I’ll never ask for anything ever again... except on special occasions.”

One wrong step and I almost slip down the winding steps leading to the foot of my tower.

My ankle hurts but I barely notice it.

I hear them before I see them.

The clanging of metal feet against smooth stone and it feels like a bucket of cold water had just been tossed over my entire body.

Breathing through an open mouth and struggling to control my racing heart, I watch two dragon Ryders turn appear at the foot of the steps.

Then two more...then two more...then two more...

What if they are here because...

No, snap out of it Hera.

Nothing has happened to him. He is the dragon king remember. Immortal and everything.

He is perfectly capable of taking care of himself.

He has to be.

I take deep breaths. Breaths to remind myself that I am queen of the fifth realm and that breaking down in tears is not appropriate.

Not matter how badly I wish to do exactly that.

A dragonkin warrior I recognize as one wearing the colors of a Captain appears between the two soilders in front.

He bows low. “My queen.”

“You may rise. What is going on? Where is the king...is he safe?”

“His Majesty is fine my queen, he is about to lead the dragon army into battle.”

I wonder if they can tell how dry my throat is or how badly it is that I am shaking.

“Ba...battle... against what enemy?”

The silence that follows tells me all I need to know.

“Gods above, you do not know do you?”

“You need not be afraid your highness.”

“Do not lie to me Captain. I do not need it.”

What I need to do is to go out and find him myself...to touch his face and tell him that I...

That I need him to come back.

And to warn him about what I had seen.

But when I try to pass between the guards, they cross their spears and bar my way.

“What in all the realms is going on, I demand that you let me through right this instant.”

“I am afraid we cannot do that your Grace. Please return to your chambers at once.”

“How dare you?”

“You will be safer inside...”

“I do not care. On whose orders do you dare block my path?”

“The King.”

With the visor of his helmet down and over his eyes, it impossible for me to read his face.

But I do not need to.

If the King said it, then queen or not, they would die before they let me leave the tower.

I open my mouth but before I can say anything else, I hear a loud horn.

Two of them to be exact.

“What was that?”

The captain looks down and all the other Ryders glance at each other but no one gives me an answer.

“I asked you a question. What. Was that?”

“Tis the war horn my queen.”

“What?”

“The army...they are marching out.”

“No...no...no”

My only chance of finding Midas before he left for the war is now almost throughly gone.

I blink back the furious tears that have suddenly appeared in my eyes.

I could scream and try to run but short of jumping out the window in the stairwell, there is no way I am getting off this tower.

“Very well then. Do what you must.”

And then struggling not to cry, I make my way back to my room.

But I am unable to sit still.

Not with what I know...

With what I had seen.

I know that pacing is a stupid, pointless activity that only serves to make me more restless but I am unable to bring myself to stop.

There is a tightness in my chest that threatens to suffocate me.

Pain and regret like barbed ropes wrapped around my heart.

Squeezing and wounding until it hurts just to breathe.

I should have let him explain.

I should have calmed down and listened.

And when he wanted to tell me..to tell me that he loves...

I should have waited.

I should have said it back.

If I had not been so hell bent on being angry, we might even have been together when I had the premonition.

I could have warned him then.

Now it might be too late.

I look out the window for the umpteenth time.

The sky is getting darker and heavier...like clouds on the edge of a thunderstorm.

I stare down at the death white grip of my knuckles against the window sill.

Please...gods...show me a way.

When I pull open my door with a nearly violent swing, the guards are directly outside of it.

I swallow and fold my hands.

“I would like my maid brought to me please.”

“Your highness our orders...”

“Were you asked to keep me safe or to starve me to death?”

“To keep your safe your highness. But it is not wise to let anyone up here. Not until we can be certain of what threats are coming.”

“You may have been instructed to keep me from leaving this tower but do not forget that I am still your queen and I demand that you send for my maid right this instant.”

I know it must seem like I am being deliberately stubborn but I do not care.

It is the only chance I have.

The captain bows his head and turns around.

“Wait!”

“Yes, your grace?”

“I would like a meal.”

Even covered as his face his, I would have to be stupid to miss the confusion and slight judgment in his voice.

“A meal, your grace?”

I raise me chin to stop from gulping nervously.

“Yes. To help me calm down. A bowl of dates and raisins. Bread and melted butter as well. It would be most delightful if she could add some meat and pie...and mead...and honey wine as well.”

The captain’s hesitation is almost barely noticeable.

He nods once more before disappearing between the gap in the guards.

I close the door of my room.

Then I wait.

And I wait.

And I wait.

Sitting crouched down and back against my door.

As I sit, I start to feel a warmth on my chest.

I frown and lift my hands towards it.

My wedding gift.

The necklace with the dragon pendant that I have not taken off since the morning the dragon king and I were bound together.

I frown even harder.

Am I cold or did the necklace seem warmer in my grip?

But before I can fully think about it, I hear a knock on the door.

Hesitant and unsure.

“Your Highness?”

I scramble to my feet and brush off dust from the sides of my gown.

When I place my hand on the door knob I am not surprised to find myself shaking.

“My queen.”

“You may enter.”

I stand aside for her to come in.

Her and her cart.

And then I close the door softly behind her.

She pushes the cart towards the feet of the bed where I usually sit to eat and then turns to face me.

The fear and uncertainty in my face is mirrored in her eyes and shaky voice.

For the first time in gods know how many years, the dragon realm is under attack.

Even worse is how they do not know who the enemy is or how to even arm themselves.

And for a warrior nation like the 5th realm, being unable to defend themselves is a scarier fate than death.

I may be worried for Midas but all the other dragonkin could be on the verge of having their entire homeland destroyed.

“Oh Henette.”

I throw my hands around her larger frame.

She hugs me back. Her shoulders quivering.

“Hera...I am scared.”

“You do not have to be. Have faith in your king and your Ryders. Has he ever let you down before?”

She pulls away, sniffing and swiping her arm across her nose.

“But this threat your grace, an enemy that possessess the ability to darken the skies and shake the ground. What if...what if we lose?”

“No.”

I am shaking my head so hard I worry my neck may come unscrewed.

“We will not let that happen.”

“We?”

I turn away to avoid looking directly at her but she follows me.

“Hera... what do you mean by we?”

I glance furtively at the door.

“Henette I have to leave this castle.”

She rushes towards me and grips my arm gently. Her voice quiet and beseeching.

“No...No your Majesty. You cannot go out there. It is too dangerous”

My whispers are harsh and urgent.

“I have to.”

“No. You most certainly do not.”

“But I do. I have seen...I have seen things. Things that must be stopped before they happen or we die. All of us.”

“All the more reason for you to say here, safe behind the castle walls.”

“And let the man I love run to his death?”

“If something should happen to the king, the dragonkin would need at least one of their rulers to remain alive, to guide them.”

“But don’t you see Henette. I love him.”

“Hera...”

“I love him!!”

I glare at her through the haze of my tears.

“If he does not return...”

My voice cracks.

“If I lose him...the dragon realm will not just lose their king... they will lose their queen as well.”

I sniff back my tears with more force than is necessary. “So will you help me or not?”

Henette watches me for a long time.

“You better not die out there.”

I startle myself by laughing at the disrespect in her tone.

“I will give it my best.”

“So what insane scheme do you have in mind this time your highness because I doubt you brought me here because you were in need of a meal.”

I point at the cart of food as I walk towards the door.

“Wait you really wish to eat?”

“Heavens no. Food is not even the last thing on my mind right now.”

“Then I do not understand....”

“Shhh...”

I press my finger to my lips to quieten her and then press my ears to the door.

An effort to ascertain if I can tell whether someone is leaning against the door or listening in.

I get nothing.

I move away from the door. “I do not need the darn food. This...this is what I need.”

The cart that was used to bring the food in.

It is the same cart that is used when bringing up laundry and anything really.

A rickety metal structure made up of four squeaky wheels, a flat surface above for carrying food, and a mini cupboard like compartment in the middle for carrying everything else.

“You my dear Henette...”

I pull open the two small doors and examine the empty, doubtlessly cold metal space.

“...are going to wheel me out.”

## The Dragon King’s Substitute Bride Chapter 116

HERA

Henette’s eyes widen in understanding and she haunches over to whisper furiously at me.

“Your highness, surely you cannot seriously be thinking that you will fit in there?”

I stick my tongue in my cheek.

“Only one way to find out.”

“But...”

“No buts Henette. It is the only chance we have.”

“But what if as I open the door they notice that the room is empty. Or...or what if they stop me or ask me to open up.”

“Oh I am certain you are clever enough to come up with something.”

“I am not that clever. If I were I would have been a lady of court and not a maid!”

“Well then you better start thinking of what to say!”

Who knew you could yell and whisper at the same time.

I used to hate being shorter than most people.

Even more so when I arrived in the dragon realm with it’s hulking, hardened giants all around.

Who in all the realms would have thought there would come a day that I would be thankful for it.

The space is cold like I suspected it would be.

It is also much smaller than I had imagine it would be and I am forced to contort myself into an almost inconceivable position.

“Forgive my choice of words Hera but this is stupid “

“Your words are forgiven. Now close the doors and push.”

I swear she throws me a dirty look before slamming it shut.

I may have put on a brave face for Henette but in all honesty....I think it is a stupid plan too.

But what choice did I have?

I wait but we do not start moving.

“Henette...”

My furious whispers loud in the silence of the tight space.

“Henette!”

“I am coming!”

One more heartbeat and then we start to move.

If I believed it painful to squeeze myself into place then it is only because I did not know how mind numbingly excruciating it would be to ride in this thing.

I feel like I can hear both our heartbeats pounding loudly in fear as we move across the room.

We stop and I hear the doors swing quickly open.

Gods above please don’t let them look inside the room.

We move again and then I hear the doors swing shut.

Nothing else.

Oh thank the go...

“The queen...!”

Henette what in all the realms are you doing?

I hear her clear her throat awkwardly in an effort to force her voice back to a less suspicious volume.

“...the queen, wishes to rest and has asked that unless the roof is caving in, no one is permitted to come in or disturb her.”

Oh Henette...bless her poor heart.

I can only imagine the way she is refusing to look anyone in the eye right now.

If the Ryders say anything in return, I do not hear it.

The journey down the steps is the longest one of my life.

Even worse than the carriage ride I took in the back of a hay cart oh so long ago.

I feel every bump, every step...

Once I can swear the cart free falls for a short while as I struggle not to scream and I make a mental note to kill Henette when I get out.

It is a miracle that I get down in one piece.

It also helps that Henette is dragonkin and as such is freakishly strong.

It feels like I am in locked up in the cart for an eternity.

My breath starts to mist up the tight space and the necklace against my chest feels even warmer.

Suddenly the doors swing open and I all but tumble out unto the stone floor of the kitchen.

I glare at her. “You did that on purpose.”

At least she has the decency to look away.

“What now your grace?”

Maybe I am too late to warn Midas.

But if I could find Leo, stop him before he does anything he regrets then maybe just maybe I can make everything right.

“Your highness!”

I burst out of the kitchen doors and almost run straight into another startled maid.

Henette sighs and follows behind me.

“You have to tell me what you want to do before you start running!”

I stop so suddenly that she almost runs into me.

“Gods above Hera...”

“Henette...”

“Yes your grace.”

“Do by any chance know where the chief Ryder is?”

“I do not.”

“Fine. I’m sure we can find...”

I have to slap my hand over my mouth to keep from screaming.

Henette however does not.

I stand on my toes and clamp my hand over her mouth

“Stop or you shall blow our cover.”

“Th...th...those are feet.”

Any wider and her eyes will simply burst out of their sockets.

“I know what they are Henette.”

“They are feet sticking out of a storage door.”

“I know.”

From the metal boots covering the famous feet Henette cannot seem to keep quiet about, I can tell that it is a dragon Ryder dressed in full armour.

I push the door slowly open, praying all the while that there is a body attached to the legs sticking outside.

Because even I would not be able to keep my cool if there isn’t.

There is.

I let out a breath I did not even know I was holding.

My eyes trail their way up the body of the unconscious soldier and up to his face.

“It’s Garwith!”

“Again Henette I know who it is.”

“Is he...” Her voice breaks. Almost like she is unable to bring herself to say it.

I kick...nudge him slightly with my feet and he whimpers softly.

“No he is not. Let’s go.”

She looks at me like I have grown an extra head.

“You mean just leave him lying here?”

“He is alive isn’t he? You know what else he is Henette? A member of the guards who are supposed to keep me locked up in my tower. Let. us. go.”

“But...”

“But nothing Henette. We do not know how he came to be lying here but I need to find the chief Ryder now or all of us will soon be in that exact position.”

“He is gone”

I think my heart nearly flies out of my chest and I stumble back, hand over my heart.

“Gods above..”

“Garwith! Oh thank the gods.”

The way she bends over him and brushes the hair from his eyes tells me that there may be something I have very thoroughly missed between my maid and my guard.

I cannot wait to tease them about it...If we survive this.

He holds on to her hand as she supports his back and tries to lift him up.

“Garwith are you okay?”

“Garwith. What do you mean he is gone?”

I almost feel bad for doing this but there is no time anymore.

“I saw him...going towards the tower....”

“What tower?”

Garwith moves his head and whinces.

“The one where that queen...the dark elf is locked up. I saw him headed there and the way he was moving...glancing over his shoulder. It did not feel right.”

“So you followed him.”

“I did or at least I tried to. Should have known that trying to sneak up on the King’s right hand was a stupid idea.”

Henette sniffs. “You poor baby.”

“Garwith. I need to know exactly what happened.”

“I do not know for sure your highness but yes he caught me. I thought I lost him as we rounded a corner but he appeared behind me somehow and next thing I knew I was seeing black. But not before I heard him whisper that this was for my own good.”

“For your own good?”

He nods and whinces again.

“He must have dragged me back into the castle and hidden me here. The chief Ryder has betrayed us all.”

I stand up straight, shaking my head.

“No. It can’t be. There has to be some sort of explanation.

The premonition flashes through my mind again.

Hermani sliding down the back of dragon that looked just like Leo.

No. I refuse to believe that.

The Leo I know would never betray Midas.

Even if he thinks he loves me.

There is no doubt in my mind what I need to do next.

I think about the part of the premonition that had me riding across the dragon realm on a horse nearly twice my size and I think f\*\*k that.

“Garwith...”

The dragon Ryder looks up at me, the color slowly returning into his cheeks.

“Yes my queen?”

“Do you think you are strong enough to fly?”

I stand at the open door of the kitchen and look out unto the gully where I almost lost my life.

Twice.

“Is there any way I can convince you to not do this?”

I turn to glance at the dragonkin woman who somehow became the sister I never thought I’d have again.

“It is the only way.”

“So you keep saying.”

“Henette I...”

She throws her arms around me. So tightly it almost hurts.

I smile into her hair and struggle to sniff back my tears.

“I thought hugging the queen was highly improper.”

She scoffs.

“Oh bugger that. Just come back alive you hear. Both of you.”

“I will. Garwith.”

He nods “I am ready my queen”

I pretend not to see him when he reaches out and touches Henette’s face.

I do not tell them but for her sake, I will leave him behind at the capital.

There is no reason for us to all lose the ones we love.

Garwith is by no means a big dragon but I am only thinking this because I have seen Leo and Er’gan.

I garb unto the scales that line his neck and lean forward.

I can see something going on in the distance...towards where the elder forest is.

I see dragons fall and dark shodws streaking through the air.

Gods above please keep him safe.... please.

I have no idea how many prayers I have offered today but they had better work.

Garwith swoops into the capital and it is just like I saw in my premonitions.

Doors barred, windows boarded up.

I do not need to look to what is going on inside those shuttered houses.

The fear and confusion as families huddle together.

The fathers and brothers standing at the door, weapons in hands.

I know it because Averia has lived it all before.

“Take me to Arydian’s Apothecary.”

The dragon banks sharply to the right, flying over the capital’s square and landing a short distance later in front of the red brick building and the bent old dragonkin man standing in front of it.

I slide down the dragon’s back.

“Arydian!”

The howling wind steals the sound from my voice so that I have to shout to be heard.

The old man leans on his staff and I find myself wondering how he is not being carried by the wind.

“I was beginning to fear that you might not arrive in time.”

“How did you...”

“Elian told me you were coming.”

I look around but I do not see the other kingmakers.

“They have gone to seal the open portals through which the enemy arrived. I shall be joining them shortly.”

“The king... Leo...we have to stop them. Before things get out of hand.”

“I know.”

I reach out and grab onto his arm as gently as I can.

“Come with me please...I need your help.”

He lays a gentle hand on my arm and when he looks at me I can see the kindness on his expression.

“You are stronger than she was.”

“Bullshit. I have done absolutely nothing to give you all that perception. “

If my choice of words affects him he shows no sign of it.

“You gave up yourself to save a people who sold you out.”

“The royal family made me. I had no choice.”

“But that is not true is it Hera?”

I bite my lip and look away.

A scene I had thought long forgotten flashes through my mind.

The night before I left Averia.

Waking up in that strange room in the palace.

A door left ajar and unguarded.

“The guards assigned to your door were careless. You could have escaped. Taken your brother with you. You could have run away and left the entire court...the whole of Averia to either give up their princess or face the wrath of the dragon king and yet you stayed. Why?”

“Because... because...”

“Because someone needed to save Averia. To make the hard choice and give themselves up for their people and you did that. Queen Hera.”

“But this is different.”

“Is it? You did that when you had no idea the powers that lay inside of you. Now you do. Do not let it go to waste.”

I sigh and turn back to Garwith who is still in his dragon form.

“Go back to her.”

The dragon grunts. Stamping his foot and swaying his head gently to one side.

“He says No.”

“Yes Arydian...I got that. You all are putting too much faith in me. You seem to all have forgotten that I am human.”

Arydian places his hand on my shoulder.

“We put our trust in you because of it...not despite. You are the Oracle of Daphne Hera, queen of the most powerful mortal realm. Act like it.”

## The Dragon King's Substitute Bride Chapter 117

MIDAS

The dragon king wonders if this is what it will feel like to go deaf.

Everything around you becoming almost deathly silent.

He is unable to to hear the cries and shrieks of the dying shades as they fall to the ground.

The sounds the swords make as they slice through skin and bone to maim and kill.

Everything else fades into the background.

Everything but the pounding of his own heart beat and the voice in his head.

He struggles to slow his breathing.

“What did you say?”

“Midas. Hermani has her. She says if you do not come right now, she is going to kill her.”

“I did not open up my mind.”

A pause.

“Does it matter?”

“Leo... I did not open up my mind. How are you able to mind link me?”

The quiet that follows will be one of the longest of the dragon king’s life.

Who knew silence could be so painful?

“Leo what have you done?”

“Come to dragon temple now Midas. Time is running out.”

The mind link drops and just as suddenly as it had disappeared, the noise and rancour of the battle returns.

But it is distant.

Like it might be coming from a place far far away and he is somewhere different.

Somewhere under water and drowning.

A place where the only thing that matters are the words he has just heard.

“Come to the dragon temple or she dies.”

“Your highness...”

What did this mean? She should be safe in the castle. Did they manage to take her somehow?

“...your highness”

And Leo...his best friend and right-hand...He would never...

Was it all some sort of trap?

“...king Midas!”

The firm hand on his shoulder like a fishers hook grabs unto him and pulls him back into reality.

“Your highness...is everything okay?”

Chest heaving, Midas looks around him, watching the last of the Shades fall beneath stormy skies to the swords of the dragon Ryders.

A few manage to escape, fleeing into the Elder forest.

“Speak.”

The Captain stands up straight.

“The battle is almost won but a few have turned tail into the forest. What will you have us do?”

The dragon king gazes out towards the weathered, ancient trees that have for time immemorial been a landmark of the dragon realm.

A place that over the years had somehow managed to become a twisted nightmare housing unspeakable horrors and standing in the center of his realm like a large blot of evil.

“Come to dragon temple...or she dies.”

“If we go after them and comb the forest, we might be able to...”

“Burn it down”

Barely audible but loud enough that the Captain stops.

“My king?”

Midas sheaths his sword and with a loud whistle calls for his horse.

The animal gallops towards him, stepping over the bloodied remains of shades and dragonkin soldiers alike.

“You heard me. Gather up your men and raze it all to the ground. No more hiding places. Not anymore.”

“As you wish my King.”

“And when it is done, ride out to Adarin and Radarth. Not a single one of those dark elves must escape.”

Come to the dragon temple...or she dies.

The captain frowns slightly.

“What about you my king?”

Midas swings his legs over the horse and turns it around with more force than is necessary.

“I am going to finish this once and for all.”

“Shall I gather some men to...”

But Midas is already riding away.

If they have touched a single hair on her head then hades help him, they would be the ones needing men to defend them.

Every gallop send jolts of pain up his body.

He grits his teeth and wipes at the blood dripping into his eyes from a cut on his head.

“Gods be damned Er’gan you need to wake up right now!”

Again, the only thing he gets is a faint stirring.

Like an echo of the heat that would normally be rushing through his veins.

Er’gan the First is immortal.

And as long as their souls were bound together, dragon and dragon king, his powers made Midas immortal as well.

But now somehow, Hermani and her blasted dark magic had found a way to seperate them.

By sending Er’gan’s magic to sleep, they had weakened it’s powers.

And weakened Midas as well.

His extrasensory abilities...

His immortality.

If someone were to drive a sword through his heart right now, he could very well actually die.

It would be slow...but he would die eventually.

And yet not even knowing that scares him as much as knowing that she is being held hostage by forces too evil to imagine.

That he might lose her in this stupid war.

Gods above...if you can hear me... do not let them hurt her... please.

He jumps down from the horse before the animal even fully stops.

The clouds over the dragon temple are darker than everywhere else.

They writhe and crackle with an aliveness that sets his teeth on edge.

Flashes of red and purple, like veins of blood streak through the heavy grey skies and the smell of smoke and black magic hangs thick over everything thing.

He races up the steps to the yawning darkness of the temple's entrance.

Blinding pain shoots up his side from where a shade had sunken its claws into his skin and he staggers slightly but he does not stop.

And the minute he is through the doors they swing shut.

Leaving him in stifled, dusty silence that is so sudden it is almost a shock.

The altar where he was wed stands in the distance.

The light from the arch of the two dragons usually bright and warming suddenly seems eerie.

His footsteps bounce off the far, moss covered walls so that it sounds like he is not alone and that each step he takes is followed by another behind him.

He can hear himself breathing loudly in the seemingly empty space as he swivels his head from side to side.

"Hera!!....Hera!!... Hermani I swear by all the gods if you've hurt her!...Hera!!"

But all that greets him is silence.

And then like a bolt of lightning he hears the voice in his mind.

A voice he has been calling to all day.

"Trap"

“Your highness.”

Midas turns around to watch the man he called his right hand step out from behind a pillar and into the light.

“Leo.”

“Given the circumstances I believe you would not mind if I called you Midas instead.”

The dragon king narrows his eyes.

“Where is she?”

“Do you remember the manner in which my father died?”

Midas stills.

Because he remembers.

He always will.

Like every other kingdom and as with every other ruler, there would always those who were discontent.

Those who believed themselves capable of doing a better job,

And those who were ruled and driven by nothing more than sheer greed.

In Midas’ case, it had been the latter.

A group of foolish mecenaries who believed they could plan a coup and take the throne for themselves.

They knew the king was immortal and so in their desperation to get information with which to plan their attacks, they connived and executed the kidnap of the chief Ryder and his son.

Thinking to torture him for information about the king and how best to kill him.

But Leo’s father would not breathe a word.

Not even when they beat him and broke his bones.

And so they turned to his son instead.

Said they would take out his eyes one after the other and kill him if his father did not give to them what they wanted.

But the chief Ryder simply shut his bloodied, swollen eyes and looked away

So to prove their point, they started to tear open the skin above Leo's eyes.

And perhaps they might have even succeeded if Midas, who had somehow found out the plan, did not show up when he did.

He tried to save them but in the resulting fight that ensued, the building where the traitors were hiding out was set ablaze.

The Chief Ryder died in the fire.

And his son Leo, was scarred for the rest of his life.

And now, as Midas watches him glare at him with eyes cold as ice, he realizes that that night, the boy who would grow to become his best friend and right-hand, had been scarred in more ways than one.

Leo clenches his teeth.

"I asked you. Do you remember how my father died?"

"He died saving the kingdom."

"He died saving you!!"

"Leo..."

"Even my own father choose you over me. He was willing to give up his child, his only son before he gave up you."

"Leo."

The chief Ryder shakes his head and both men start to move at the same time.

Predators circling each other.

Steel grey against liquid gold.

"I have always lived in your shadow. I was never as important as you were...not even to the man who bore me. And I believed that I could live with it. Told myself that it was my fate, my lot in life. You are King after all."

Midas eyes narrow.

"Leo. I understand your anger. But I will only ask you one last time. Where. Is. She?"

The Chief Ryder scoffs and draws his sword.

"You do not deserve her"

And then he attacks.

Midas slides out of the way drawing his swords at the same time.

“Leo. This is madness.”

“Is it?”

The Chief Ryder swings at him again and Midas ducks under the sword, diving around and kicking him in the back of knee so that he staggers.

“Stop this. I do not want to hurt you.!”

Leo regains his balance and turns around to face him once more.

“Well that makes one of us.”

Any other Ryder and even wounded and bruised, the fight would have been over in mere moments.

But Leo is second in command for a reason.

And Midas is injured in more places than he can count.

Their swords clash against each other, steel edges fighting for dominance.

Midas stares into the face of the dragonkin man who used to be his friend...his brother.

“What have they done to you?”

Leo stares back, grunting and straining.

“Nothing. They simply showed me the truth!”

He pushes Midas back and knocks the King’s sword to the ground.

“Leo..”

But the Chief Ryder is done listening.

Grinning, he swings at the king again but Midas is quicker and he steps out of the way in time.

Leo, who had swung with so much force ends up spinning around and losing his balance.

Midas grabs him and forces his sword arm behind his back.

Bending it in an excruciating manner and forcing him to drop his sword.

Then he wraps his free arm around the Chief Ryder’s neck until he starts to turn blue.

Leo grabs at the arm around his neck but it is no use. Midas is stronger.

He coughs and chokes.

“You always were faster than I ever was.”

“It does not have to be this way.”

“Yes it does.”

Midas grunts. His voice strained with hurt and confusion.

“Why now, all this years I trusted you. You know everything about me, you could have gotten even whenever you wanted. So why now?”

“I love her”

Midas’ grip slackens. “What?”

He realizes his mistake but it is too late.

Leo takes advantage of the distraction.

He drives his elbow backwards into Midas’ wound with enough force to crack the ribs of a lesser man.

A blow that dragonkin or not Midas feels through every part of his body.

Leo slips out of the choke hold and spins around to push Midas away from him.

Midas stumbles forward then turns back around to face him.

Leo coughs and spit to the side.

“I love her and I have had to sit back and watch you hurt her over and over and yet...yet she still chose you. Once again.”

“Leo why did you not...”

The dragon king falls to one knee as white hot pain shoots up his thigh.

It is a pain he has felt before and he knows she is here even before she appears from behind the dragon arch.

He clenches his teeth to stop from screaming out in pain.

“Hermani.”

She giggles as she walks down the steps of the altar and towards them, finger outstretched.

Twisting this way and that way.

“Oh what a wonderful show it is all been. I almost hate to have to interrupt.”

“You evil... arrgh!”

She twists her finger again and stars explode behind Midas’ eyes.

She stops besides Leo.

Midas snarls up at her and attempts to get up by the pain drives him back down.

“I should have killed you when I had the chance.”

She laughs.

“Yes. You really should have. But instead you let some stupid human girl change you.”

“I swear to all the gods Hermani if you hurt her I will...”

“You will what...bite me?”

The dark elves queen pouts softly.

“Tsk...tsk...tsk...To be honest dragon king, you have become quite the bore and I am a little disappointed in you.”

Still twisting her finger and using pain to keep him immobile, she squats in front of him and tucks his hair behind his ears.

“You used to be so strong and ruthless. Your enemies feared you because they knew how blood thirsty you were and that you would sever their heads from their bodies without blinking an eye. Now look at you.”

Midas turns away from her.

“What do you want Hermani?”

“What do I want? Well it’s simple really...give us the key to unlocking the portal and freeing Azarath”

“You already know how to open portals.”

Her voice and manner changes so suddenly that Midas is almost taken aback.

“Oh do not play stupid with me Midas.”

Azarath had been a god.

An extremely powerful one at that.

To keep him locked up, the Elder gods knew they could not just cast him down like they did with the shades and hope he stayed down there.

So they took away his true form.

And hide it the key somewhere in the dragon realm.

“Give us the key and maybe we won’t slaughter every single one of your miserable people.

Midas stares up at her. His eyes still and unblinking.

And then he spits at her feet.

“Over my dead body.”

Her smile returns and her voice becomes sweet again. “We had a feeling you might say that didn’t we Leo?”

The Chief Ryder says nothing but Hermani continues anyway.

“We knew you would be uncooperative which is fine. Because your right hand already brought me the key. Leo?”

“Actually...”

The sword moves so fast all that is visible is an arch of sweeping light.

Hermani gasps and stumbles backward, her hands clutching her middle.

Midas stares up at him and Leo bows his head.

“My apologies your grace. She can listen to mind links. It had to be real.”

The Chief Ryder reaches out to help but Midas slaps his hand away and gets up himself, grimacing at the pain.

“If it was all a ruse, Did you really have to hit me so hard?”

Leo grins and tosses Midas one of his swords.

“Well, that part was real”

Hermani stares at the Chief Ryder. Her voice tiny and small....almost like one who is heartbroken.

“You played us?”

Leo shrugs.

“If we’re being honest here you played yourself. To think I would betray my only family because you brought your foolish whispers into my mind .”

Dark blood appears between her fingers, running over hand and dripping to the earthen floor below.

She gasps again...

And again...

And again...

And then she starts to laugh.

Loud and hard until tears begin to roll down her cheeks.

Leo and Midas glance at each other and back at her.

She wipes at the corner of her eyes. “Oh my...I take it back. Definitely not boring.”

She lets go of her stomach and where there should be blood and a gaping wound..

There is nothing.

## The Dragon King’s Substitute Bride Chapter 118

HERA

I am still in the air when I see it.

A fire ball as high as the heavens and the Elder forest burning to ashes.

I turn my head around and lean forward once more, hoping that the dragon king is the cause of the fire and not caught inside of it.

I see the mass of clouds hovering above the dragon temple.

But as we near them, the clouds with their streaks of red and purple, I can feel Garwith start to weaken.

There must be something in the air.

Something draining the dragon of it’s energy.

I know because I can feel it too.

Like a fog around my brain, threatening to drag me under.

I shake it away and lean forward, my grip on his scales tightening.

“Almost there Garwith.”

But the dragon is already starting to drop downwards.

I can feel the scream as it makes its way to my throat.

“Garwith!”

But the dragon’s eyes have started to droop, his wings hanging limp in the air.

And just like that, we were freefalling.

Plummeting through the sky at a speed that would no doubt break every single bone in my body.

“Garwith!! Wake up!!!...”

We fall through the mass of dark clouds like a boulder tossed over a cliff.

“Dammit Garwith... please.”

The wind is like a rushing roar in my ears.

Stealing the sound from my lips and the tears from my eyes.

No.

This cannot be it.

I did not contort myself into a human coil and roll down the steps in a death trap simply to plummet to my death before I even got to him.

I could not let that happen.

I will never know what makes me do what I do next but I push my hand firmly against the centre of the dragon’s head.

I feel the familiar pressure start to build up in my head.

And suddenly I can see him.

Garwith the man and not the dragon.

He is laughing.

He and Henette.

Strolling through the dragon capital

There is a little dragonkin boy between them.

A boy with pitch black hair and Henrtte's beautiful, sad eyes.

A gasp leaves my lips.

I know where he is.

It is the same place where I had been trapped.

The place where my memories and wishes of my family had been used to try to keep me locked under.

I push through the darkness to him.

It is hard, like wadding through sticky mud.

"Wake up Garwith!"

He turns around frowning but he does not see me.

I push harder. "Garwith!"

He stops.

"Wake f\*\*\*\*\*g up!!"

I feel the warmth as it rushes through every part of my body to concentrate in my hand.

Its eyes snap open inches before we can hit the ground and the dragon swoops upward again, turning almost vertical.

If I had not been holding onto his scales as tightly as I was I would probably have been thrown off.

I have no idea in hades what just happen but it made me want to laugh and cry at the same time.

A tiredness I did not recognize washes over me and I struggle to keep my head clear.

I grab onto his scales and lean forward again as the dragon temple comes into full view.

"There Garwith!!"

The dragon swoops downwards and I see the horse before we even land.

Black and large and very agitated.

He is already here.

Gods above, am I too late?

I slide down Garwith's back and start to run towards the temple.

I remember only when I am mid-way up the steps and I turn back to look at the dragon.

I know it is no use telling him to return to Henette.

But I also did not take any clothes with us so unless he wanted to run around the dragon temple naked and weaponless, then there was only one thing left for him to do.

I yell across the distance.

“Stay there.”

I turn back around and rush up the rest of the steps, silently cursing whoever thought it was good idea to make them this many.

I run past the pillars with their burning flames, my eyes fixed on the dark opening leading into the temple.

I never see her coming.

But one minute I am heading straight for the temple doors and then the next I am sprawled out on the ground off to the side.

A weight like a ton of brick sitting on my chest and driving my hands to the floor.

“You stupid b\*\*\*h. You just always have to ruin everything!!”

MIDAS

The dragon king knows dark magic when he sees it.

Knows exactly what it is capable of.

But what Hermani had just done...

To heal a wound that large and that deep that quickly....the level of magic it required...

Wishing he could reach the other one, his grip on the lone sword in his right hand tightens and out the corner of his narrowed eyes he sees Leo do this same.

The runes etched into her bone white skin start to glow brighter and Hermani grins at them, the canines in her mouth inching outwards until they hang over her bottom lip.

“oh come on dragon king do not look so surprised.”

Leo charges at her and she dives out of the way as easily as breathing.

“Surely you did not think I would come to a fight such as this unprepared did you?”

Both men move at the same time.

Swords swishing through the air.

Left and right.

Faster than they have ever moved before.

But Hermani, fueled by her magic is even faster.

It is almost like a dance.

A deadly dance with swords and dark magic.

The smell of blood and sweat and evil hanging in the stiff, airless of the temple like a rank miasma over everything.

Midas swings his sword at her but she dives out of the way on all fours, the claws of her hands sinking into the hardened floor.

“Oh come on Midas! If I did not know better, I would say you wanted me to win!”

The chief Ryder attacks from the other side but she ducks low, grabs at his sword hand and throws him over her head and towards Midas.

The dragon king moves effortlessly out of the way just as the chief Ryder catches himself and lands on his feet.

“Leo look out!”

But it is too late.

Her claws swish through the air and across Leo’s back.

Piercing through metal and clothing and skin and muscle to leave deep gorges across Leo’s back.

The chief Ryder cries out and falls to his knees just as Midas moves across the space to throw himself at her again.

She tries to parry the hit with her hands but the dragon king is done playing around.

He swings again and again.

But then her feet brush against his second sword that had been lying on the floor.

He sees what she is about to do but it is too late.

She dunks under his sword and placing her hands on his chest, pushes him away with unnatural force, sending him skidding backwards.

Then with one quick smirk, she steps hard on the handle of the sword and grabs it when it flies in the air.

She rolls her shoulders, her tongue flicking out to slide against the row of her grotesquely sharp upper teeth.

“Ah...I have always wanted to use one of these.”

Midas stares at her, eyes unblinking, the only evidence of his exertion in the fall and rise of his chest.

He sees Leo struggle to rise.

“Stand down!”

“But your highness...”

“That is an order Leo.”

Hermani sneers.

Her voice dripping with venom and disgust.

“Yes Leo...be a good little puppet and listen to your king.”

She narrows her eyes at Midas, her voice changing.

“I will ask you one last time dragon king. Where is the key?”

HERA

“Get off of me!!”

She is much stronger than I am and struggling is almost useless but I struggle anyway.

“First you take him away from me and steal my crown. And now you want to ruin this too?”

I try to twist away from the spittle flying from her mouth.

“Minth can you even hear yourself! You sound f\*\*\*\*\*g insane!”

She is quite literally frothing.

Sneering and baring her teeth like some sort of rapid dog.

Her feature contorting into an angry mass of unadulterated rage.

“Insane? I’ll show you insane you little human w\*\*\*e!”

Her hands wrap themselves around my neck, crushing my wind pipe and making it impossible to breathe.

I slap at her hand and claw at her hair but nothing works.

“I shall kill you with my bare hands and spit on your grave.”

“Minth...’

I start to choke out her name and fail.

My vision starts to blur and my chest is burning from the lack of air.

My hands fall from her head, flexing and clawing at the ground.

Searching for something... anything...

I am very close to passing out.

I can feel it in the darkness creeping around the edges of my vision

The fingers of my left hand brush against the edge of a pillar and I try to wrap my hands around it.

To gain some leverage and push myself up.

But her hand shoots out and grabs my wrist.

Pressing it into the ground and cutting off my escape while still continuing to choke me to death with her other hand.

“Oh no you f\*\*\*\*\*g don’t.” She laughs hysterically.

“Wait till they find out that I am the one who...”

My right hand closes around it.

A rock the size of my fist with sharp edge.

I slam it into the side of her head with enough force to dig it into her skull.

She shrieks and grabs her head.

I push her off of me and scramble to my knees, coughing and choking on the air that rushes into my bruised throat.

She turns around and sneers at me, blood dripping from the wound in the side of her head.

“Oh you little human b\*\*\*h!!”

She flies at me again but before she can reach me, something large and heavy slams into her side and pins her against the wall of the temple with so much force that it actually splinters and cracks.

I stare at Garwith’s dragon form pinning a now very unconscious Minth to the wall with it’s claws.

Laughter bubbles to my lips.

“Oh thank the Gods...”

Pressure worse than anything I have ever felt before slams into me and the words die in my throat.

I see the spear dripping with dark magic as it dives through the air.

My eyes fly open.

“No Garwith!!!”

I dive towards the dragon, arm outstretched, but I am too late.

The spear pierces through the back of the dragon’s neck and out the front, straight through Minth’s head.

“No!!”

I think about the image I had seen in Garwith’s mind.

Henette...the small child with the black hair and beautiful eyes...

A future that suddenly was no longer possible.

Hurt blossoms in my chest.

Flooding my veins and threatening to drown out everything.

I crumble to my knees beside him.

“Garwith...Gods above...No”

MIDAS.

Swords clash and sparks fly.

Dragon king and elven Queen.

Flying across the room in a blur of motion that is too difficult to even follow.

But dragon king or not Midas is hurting and without the healing powers of his dragon, he is starting to weaken.

Hermani sends Midas' sword flying, forcing the dragon king backwards until his back hits the hard surface of pillar.

Her eyes shine with glee and madness

"Tell me dragon king. How does it feel?"

Her claws, seeping with dark magic, dig into the skin of his shoulder, pinning him against the pillar and Midas has to bite down on his tongue to keep from crying out.

He clenches his teeth and hisses through his jaw.

"How does what feel?"

She grins at him. "Mortality."

And then without blinking drives the sword towards him.

Midas grabs it.

Stopping the blade with both hands inches before it can sink into his stomach.

She grins harder.

Even as the double edges sink into his palms and slice them open.

His blood, warm and bright red runs down his hands.

Turning dark when it drips down his elbows and touches the earthen floor.

Midas eyes are focused even as his arms flex and strain in an effort to stop the sword forwards.

Every inch of his body feels aflame with pain.

Pain...and something else.

A something else he knew better than the back of his own hands.

"Dragon king..."

Midas grins, his face hurting from the effort.

"What took you so bloody long?"

Hermani c\*\*\*s her head, her brows drawing together in confusion.

“What are you talking about?”

Their head whips backwards and then forwards again so fast that she barely has any time to react.

A crack, loud and startlingly echoes through the room and her head snaps backwards with enough force to break her neck.

She shrieks in pain.

Stumbling backwards, her grip on the sword falls away as her hand fly to cup her bleeding, disfigured nose.

She pushes gingerly at the shattered bone and cartilage.

“What have you done!!! I am going to f\*\*\*\*\*g kill you!!”

She flies at them but they catch her mid air.

Their hand wrapped firmly around her neck.

She struggles against their grip, her legs thrashing violently almost an entire feet off the ground.

“Stupid elf.”

With one quick movement, they send her flying across the room to crash into the base of a pillar at the far end of the room.

Mortar and dust fly up in the air.

Before she can even blink, they are on her again. Grabbing her by the roots of her hair.

“No. You should be asleep!!”

She claws at their hand.

Talons digging into the skin deep into the skin and drawing blood.

But they barely even notice it before flinging her across the room again, a broken, discarded rag doll, to crumble at the base of another pillar.

The sound her back makes as it connects with the pillar...

Were she human she would most certainly be dead

Her spine broken in half from the impact.

She drags herself into a sitting position, groaning and coughing out dark blood.

Dark magic came with a price.

And dark elven queen or not, there is a limit to how much of it she could use for long stretches at a time.

And they knew it.

They stalk towards her, dragon and dragon king as one once again, the wounds on their hand already starting to close up and heal.

They grab her again and once more fling her cross the space.

This time sending her into the bottom step at the base of the altar.

They turn around, walking towards where one of Midas' swords lay discarded.

"Er'gan"

The dragon closes the King's hands around the hilt of the sword.

"You do not have to say it dragon king. I know that you have missed me."

Midas scoffs on the inside.

But he does not deny it.

She charges at their back, leaping unto them and trying to wrap her arms around their neck.

But they simply throw themselves backwards, crushing her against the nearest pillar.

She lets go and crumbles to the floor.

They squat in front of her and force her to raise her head so she can see the color of their eyes.

The bright vivid red of it.

She spits blood into the sand beside her.

"That stupid Minth. She was supposed to give you the entire bottle."

Er'gan stares down at the dark elf through Midas' eyes.

"We are going to kill you."

There is no feeling in the words.

Not gloating or vengeance.

Just a cold statement of fact.

But suddenly she starts to grin, blood smeared across her teeth.

“Are you now?”

Their expression does not change.

Hermani smiles.

“Turn around dragon king. You might want to think again.”

The figures step through the door of the temple and into the light.

One holding the other, the glint of steel pressed against her neck.

“Midas...”

There are tears in her eyes and her voice when she calls out to them is tired and broken.

The sword starts to slip from their hand.

Midas immediately takes back control. His eyes fading once more to gold.

“Hera...”

The dark elf holding her hostage tugs violently on her hair in order to bare her neck even more to the knife and she cries out in pain.

Midas and Er’gan growl as one.

He turns to Herman who is struggling to rise to her feet.

“Let her go.”

Hermani smirks up at him, trying to wipe the blood from her nose but only managing to smear it across her face.

“Give me the key...or watch her bleed to death.”