

The Dragon King's Substitute Bride Chapter 16

MIDAS

The entire forest goes silent the minute he takes the first step into its shadows.

Like a single organism holding its breath in anticipation.

Or a predator watching its prey; stalking...observing...waiting for the perfect moment to pounce, to attack.

Midas rolls his shoulders and breaths in the stale, unmoving air.

“Let them come.”

He walks beneath sunless copses, into pools of darkness punctuated only by thin shafts of silvery moonlight passing through the leaves.

The towering trees stare baleful down at him as if disapproving of his intrusion into their space.

Screaming oaks of magnificent mahogany brown in the day, transformed in the darkness into grotesque faces contorted in pain, twisted bloodwoods with scarlet sap running down their trunk as if from bleeding wounds and spotted, stark white birches, ghostly in the night light.

He c***s his head to listen as he walks carefully through the forest.

The only sounds are the crunch and crackle of twigs and dried fallen pods snapping beneath his boots, loud in the unnerving stillness of the forest.

Grotesque fungi litter the forest floor, leaking out their sticky poisonous sap when he steps on them and every now and then, he can hear the scurrying of strange creatures that crept under the twisting, sprawling limbs of the trees above him.

He can hear them crawling in the gloomy foliage.

Their feverish yellow eyes, shiny with hunger, watch him between the rotten, moss covered boughs but they do not dare to come any closer.

Thigh high creepers snag at his trousers, pull at his clothes like tiny hands and when he tears them off, they leave a sticky, rancid slime on his palms.

For Hades' sake where is she?

“Er’gan.”

Silence.

“Er’gan, cease your sulking at once and answer me.”

The dragon slithers and stretches to the surface of his consciousness, filling his mind with the full force of its disapproval.

Midas sighed. “The sooner you help me find her, the sooner we can get out of here. Do you sense her?”

Er’gan says nothing but Midas can feel his senses sharpen.

Suddenly, the forest is alive with sounds. He can hear every falling leaf and every scurrying insect.

The smells of the forest also become sharper, stronger.

The moldy, rank smell of decaying plants, the tangy, cloying sweetness of the poisonous forest fruits; sharp and stinging in his nose.

And beneath it all, he can sense them; a fetid stench of corruption that rises and oozes through the curtain of leaves, infecting everything.

“I sense nothing human dragon king. Maybe she is already dead”

“Try harder.”

The dragon bristles beneath his skin but says nothing, opening and reaching out through Midas’ senses once more.

Then it comes; drifting and gliding towards him.

A scent so completely different from the pungent odor of the Elder forest at night, it is almost a physical shock.

“By the gods...” he whispers breathlessly.

It is faint. Barely even a trickle yet it fills every part of him.

The aroma of elderberries and wild cherries dipped in honey.

So exquisite in its teasing perfection, it raises the hairs on his arm and makes his insides clench with fierce longing.

He starts in the direction where the scent is slightly strongest but even then it keeps fading in and out like smoke; elusive, slipping between his fingers and he has to struggle not to lose it.

Not to lose her.

A twig snaps loudly to his right and his head jerks sharp towards it.

Another, loud and crunching, the sound of movement beneath padded feet comes towards him from his left.

He glides smoothly beneath the darkness and into the shadow of a large tree. It's brown trunk rough and hard when he presses his back against it.

Er'gan is alert within him now.

He closes his eyes and slows his heartbeat so he can hear theirs; unhurried and rhythmic as the hunters stalk silent and deadly towards him on both sides.

He would not have heard them were it not for his heightened dragon senses and as they creep closer, their claws sinking into the soft mulch of the moss covered forest floor, he can smell them too.

He reaches behind him and draws both swords from their scabbards with the barely audible sound of metal sliding on wood.

A familiar, comforting hiss.

The obsidian steel glistens dark in the moonlight and he tightens his grip on them.

A rustle in the foliage in front of him snaps his eyes open just in time to notice a flash of fur the color of tar in the bushes ahead.

There are two more of the predators in the shrubs straight ahead and they appear first.

Slinking out of the bushes, with their shiny black bodies gleaming wet in the darkness, illuminated by the swirls and whorls of blue light that writhes beneath their skin like magic runes.

The other two have appeared now and the four predators circle him slowly.

Their tails swishing lazily as red eyes bright and shiny in narrowed slits watch him carefully.

Long bared fangs hang out over open jaws and saliva drools down their chins to drip on the dark, rich soil below.

The wild cats know this is no easy prey and they stalk him cautiously, their jaws pulled into low, fierce, feral snarls.

"I guess it's no use asking you to let me out."

A cruel dark smile curls up the dragon king's lips and he can feel the familiar, bitter sweet rush of blood lust gliding like poison in his veins.

His fingers flex around the hilts of his sword. "And let you have all the fun. I do not think so."

For a single moment the forest goes silent again and it's like everything slows down, holding its breath.

Then they attack.

The two cats in front leap throw the air, launching on their larger, longer, more powerful back legs, teeth bared and claws extended.

Midas dives sharply to the right and throws his left sword with startling accuracy.

It pierces straight through the eye of the closest cat ahead, passing with effortless ease through flesh and bone and a loud strangled cry escapes the beast's mouth.

The cat on his right leaps claws first and in one powerful swipe, tears the sleeve of his shirt to shreds below his amour plates and slices open the skin of his right arm.

Midas growls low and swings his arm hard, throwing off the hunter attached to it with so much force, the wild cat crashes into a tree and snaps the trunk in half.

Too late, he hears the one behind him charge with a loud snarl.

But before it can pounce, sink its teeth into the sides of his neck, he swings the sword in a dizzying arc and the animal's head goes flying in the opposite direction.

The other two cats, including the one with his sword in its eye seemingly enraged, dive at him with inhumane, feline speed.

He dives low on his knees, plunging his sword all the way to the hilt right below the neck of the half blind one while it is still in the air and slides under the blackness of the animal.

The cat lands on its feet and for one second, its single red eye blinks as if confused.

Then it crumbles to the ground, its belly slit open, entrails and blood, spilling first unto the forest floor.

Midas sends his sword singing through the air again.

But the other one catches itself in the last second and dives out of the way of his swinging sword, claws sliding and gripping hard on the ground.

Demon red eyes clashing with the molten gold of the ruler of the 5th realm.

Hunter and prey stare at each other.

Except now, the roles are reversed and the animal knows it.

It roars and sneers, teeth bared but Midas knows it won't attack. Not anymore.

Not that it matters.

That smile, dark and dangerous stretches his face again.

The monster beneath Midas' skin has tasted blood and it wants more. Nothing else matters.

He knows that even if the cat turned around and runs, tails between its legs, he will go after it.

If it hides, he will find it.

He will not stop...can not stop until he has killed it.

Something claws persistently at the back of his brain.

It is trying to tell him something.

Trying to remind him of the exact reason he had been walking in the forbidden grounds of the Elder forest at night in the first place.

But he cannot hear it... will not hear it.

Nothing can get past roar of the blood lust rushing through his veins, staining his vision a hazy, cloudy red.

Until his sword slices through flesh and muscle and passes through the heart of those who have dared to attack him, nothing else matters.

The cat seems to know this too and it takes a step back, no longer snarling.

A pitiful whine of fear emanating from its throat causes Midas to laugh cruelly. It knows it will die that night and it is afraid. Good.

Nothing...else...matters.

A loud scream tears through the forest and like a shaft, a hot sword of bright light, it slices through the darkness around his head and Midas jerks forward as if physically pushed, his hands clutching his head.

The animal senses his killer is now distracted and slinks away quickly, disappearing into the darkness.

"How did..."

But Midas is no longer listening to his dragon and does not care for the surprise in its voice.

There it is again. A scream that sends fear gripping coldly around his heart.

Because even infused with blood curdling panic, he recognizes the voice.

He drags his second sword from the eye of the dead animal and races through the forest.

He's running with all the speed of a dragon Ryder but it doesn't seem to be enough and when the scream comes again he feels his heart tighten.

Gods above do not let me be too late.

“HELP!!!”

“Hera!!!”

He screams back but she doesn’t respond, maybe doesn’t even hear him.

She’s too far away.

So he yells her name again, until the back of his throat hurts. “HERA!!!”

“MIDAS?! MIDAS!!!”

And maybe it’s the sound of his name falling from her mouth in that strangled, heartbreaking, hope filled voice that pushes him even faster.

He sees her at the last second.

“Hera!”

Her head snaps towards his and for one brief, beautiful moment those luminescent, glacial blue eyes look at him with something other than hatred.

And as his heart swells he sends the sword hurtling, through the air and towards her.

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HERA

In Averia, the mages say, no matter how it happens, either one of three things will occur when you’re seconds away from breathing your last.

Your entire life flashes before your eyes, every bad decision and every good one.

All the people you love are suddenly there, surrounding you with a sense of inexplicable, overwhelming peace.

And lastly, you see what your life could have been...you see the future.

Well, either none of them knew what it was like to die at the hands or jaws of a fierce monstrous beast from the dragon realm looking to make you its dinner, or they were all a bunch of poppycock peddling charlatans.

I am inclined to think it is the former.

But then again I am also about to die so I am not in a very tolerant mood.

Saliva, warm and slimy, drips from the jaws of the wild beast with the shining blue whorls writhing beneath its dark fur as it advances slowly towards me, shaking the tree and the branch I am clinging to for dear life.

The tree shakes even more as the beast gets closer, snarling and growling low in its throat and I wonder what will get me first. The snapping, hungry wild cat that is both a panther and not...

Or falling from this high up and breaking every bone in my body.

So maybe climbing this tree had not been my most intelligent idea but it is not the most stupid decision I have taken today.

It is not even deciding to hide in this cursed forest in the first place; that ranks second.

No, the most stupid thing I had done today was deciding to escape in the first place.

The dragon king is a cold heartless bastard who would send me to hang faster than I can blink but at least he would not have tried to eat me.

Crossing that river and stepping into the shade of this forest is the act I am coming to regret the most.

I should have known something was wrong when the villagers did not pursue me any further, choosing instead to stand in clusters opposite the fence separating them from this...place and watch me drag my drenched aching body out the stream.

There had been something in the way they looked at me, a mixture of pity, surprise and amusement.

Something I had not recognized or understood at that moment.

I do now.

They had thought I was crazy.

And maybe they had no idea why a human girl was running around in their world but they knew it was going to be the last time they saw me.

And as the cat advances close enough for me to almost feel its fetid, hot breath on my face, I realize they were right.

I remember running for a very long time after I first entered the forest, afraid that the dragonkin would change their mind and decide to come after me.

By the time I finally decided I had run far enough, the sun was already completing its day's journey through the sky, bathing the forest with thin arrows of orange red sunlight and tinting the edges of the broad leaves overhead a shimmering gold.

I am not sure exactly when the forest started to change. .

But somehow, between the moment when I decided to drop down and rest against an old gnarled trunk and when I woke up to a sudden chill in the air, the ancient forest had transformed into a dark, twisted nightmare filled with this horrible smell and a sense of raw, undeniable evil.

When I opened my eyes, the first thing I had noticed was the silence.

It was like everything in the forest had died.

I dragged myself shakily to my feet, eyes darting around in fear of a danger I could sense but could not yet see.

I gingerly placed my feet on the ground, testing my weight on my bruised ankle.

A bolt of pain shot up my leg and I had to bite down hard on my tongue to stop from crying out.

I pushed through the pain and started walking. It was already dark by then and the only sources of illumination had been slants moonlight that managed to pierce the gloomy canopy of leaves.

My rumbling stomach reminded me that breakfast had been my only meal of the day but living on the streets and as a slave, you get used to hunger.

As such eating had not been my main or immediate concern.

But I knew I had to get off the ground or I would become dinner for whatever predators roamed this forest.

So I climbed up the tallest tree I could find and sat on a branch.

Nothing would find me here.

Now as I grip the shaking branch harder, salty tears running down my cheeks and into my mouth, I want to laugh at my own foolishness.

The cat had appeared seemingly from nowhere.

Growling and sniffing furiously at the base of the tree.

I drew my knees together and held my breath, hoping it would go away.

Then to my horror, it had begun to climb.

It leapt from branch to branch, claws gripping the bark of the tree and holding fast.

I scrambled to my hands and knees in panic.

I knew I couldn't go down so I did the next best thing.

I went higher.

Grabbing the branch above me and propelling myself up.

Another stupid decision to add to my ever growing list.

But the cat had been wiser and it came from around the tree and leapt unto the branch I was hanging on to; now effectively concerning me.

There is no longer any escape.

Overwhelming sense of peace my foot, the only thing I can feel in this moment besides blood curdling fear is anger.

It is not fair that I should die this way.

The gods had decided to make my life so filled with misery and pain, to take everything away from me and the only way they can think to finish me off is by feeding me to one of their worst ideas?

It just isn't fair.

And maybe that's why even though all I want to do is close my eyes and wait for it to be over, I find myself screaming instead. Calling for help at the top of my voice, till my throat is almost raw from the effort.

"HELP!!"

"HERA!!!"

I close my eyes tight and shake my head. No, his voice cannot be the last thing I hear before I die.

It just cannot be. Surely the gods would not be that cruel.

"HERA!!!"

"Stop please." my voice is tiny, broken...defeated. "No more... please."

HERA!!

For Hades sake Hera, answer!

The thought is so clear and sudden it almost doesn't sound like me.

But I do it, what else do I have to lose.

My mouth opens and my lips form the name.

His name.

“MIDAS?!”

“HERA!! Where are you?!!”

“MIDAS!!”

He sounds like he is barely a stone throw away but I still do not believe it. Maybe this is one last joke by the gods at my expense.

“Hera!”

I do not think I will ever be able to truly explain what I feel in that second when he bursts through the trees and my eyes meet his.

But he is too late.

The cat senses it is about to lose its meal and leaps through the air to cover the short distance and sink its sharp jaws into my neck.

The sword cuts through the air in an arc of steel before disappearing into the side of the cat’s neck, sending it hurtling from the branch.

Dead before it even reaches the ground.

“Midas...” My throat is too clogged up with emotions to make any real sound.

He walks up to the tree and cranes his head to look up at me. “Hera...”

This time there is no denying it.

It is in the soft way he whispers my name, his voice raw with barely concealed emotion, the way those golden orbs are flooded with what can only be described as relief.

I want to throw myself into his arms and have him hold me against him.

But it would be stupid and I have had enough of stupid decisions to fill a life time.

While the giant wild animal that had just tried to eat me may now be dead, the true danger is yet to pass.

Not while he is still alive.

Which is why when he asks me to come down I sniff and shake my head.

“What?”

“I said I will not be coming down.”

Even this far up, I can see the incredibility of my words register on his face. He frowns.

“The beast is dead.”

“It is not the beast I am afraid of.”

“Hera, do not test my patience any further.”

“I do not intend to test your patience my lord. I am only saying there is no way in all the 7 realms I am going to come down to you standing there, obviously livid and holding a blood stained, eerily sharp sword.”

He growls...he actually growls. “For Hades sake woman do you intend to stay up there the entire night?”

I clear my throat. “Are you angry at me for escaping?”

“Of course I’m f*****g angry. Not only did you deliberately disobey my clear instructions, you put yourself in mortal danger.”

“Then yes I am.”

He paces at the bottom of the tree. “And what makes you think I can’t come up there and drag you down myself?”

Yes Hera you dumb broad, answer the man.

He tilts his head sharply as if listening to something. “What?”

“I didn’t say anything.”

“Not you” He snaps.

His head swerves quickly to the left. “I don’t hear them.”

I lean forward, arms still tightly hugging the branch.

Who is he talking to?

But before I can ask, his head snaps up to me again. “Hera, come down right now.”

“To the crazy, livid king talking to himself? I do not think so.”

“Hera...”

There’s a strain to his voice that wasn’t there before and I immediately know something is very...very wrong.

“My lord?”

“If they find you, they will kill you. So come down now...” he stretches his hand towards me.
“Please.”

Maybe it’s the way saying the word ‘please’ seems to take something physically excruciating out of him but I find myself nodding.

I start to crawl forwards, towards the trunk.

Crack!

What was that?

It comes again, clear and unmistakable.

No...no...no...

The branch is breaking from the weight on it, about to drop tens of feet in the air, with me dangling helplessly from its end.

Oh gods not again. Are you not tired of trying to kill me?

But before I can move another inch, the branch snaps with a loud crackling sound.

And I am falling. The wind rushing in my ears, the ground and my death getting closer with every heartbeat. I close my eyes and brace for impact.

It never comes.

“I’ve got you.”

My eyes fly open at the warmth of his voice, those strong, steel arms wrapped around me.

But isn’t just nearly plunging to my death that has me breathing hard, clinging desperately to his neck and unable to believe my eyes.

No.

It is the gigantic black things protruding out his back.

Flapping gently, luminescent and breathtaking in the full silver moonlight and keeping both of us suspended in mid air.

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The first time Midas flew, his parents had been dead for 3 years.

He was still in denial, still hurting and still very angry.

The anger would remain the longest.

The dragon realm had and still has a lot of enemies and everyone knew why.

Take the dragon realm and you were one step closer to the realm of the gods.

So the dragonkin had always lived with the knowledge that they could be attacked at any moment.

But in the years following his parents' demise, Midas found out just how bad the situation was.

The king, his late father had been lenient with the surrounding realms, using treaties and blood bonds to keep war at bay.

It had been his greatest mistake, a mistake that took his life and the life of his queen.

A mistake Midas was determined not to make.

In the year following his family's... death, all portals to the dragon realm were not just heavily guarded, trespassers from other realms were killed on sight.

Dragonkin found lurking around portals were branded traitors and sent to the cellars.

Messengers were sent to all the realms bearing a simple direct warning; Attempt to enter the dragon realm and meet with dire consequences.

Attempt to attack and die.

But not all the creatures in the 7 realms had taken the warnings seriously.

The giants from the 3rd realm had thought they could take advantage of the seemingly inexperienced new dragon king and attack the dragon realm.

Claim it's territories for themselves.

They had snuck in through the forbidden portal in the Elder forest, let in by the traitors who made its darkness their home.

The result of another mistake his father had made.

The giants had intended to march straight to the castle and take the throne from the young King.

They had not even bothered to bring an army. They would come to regret that decision terribly.

Midas and his Ryders rode out to meet them halfway.

It was there, in the vast stretch of land between the forest and dragon's mount that Midas had learned that not only could Er'gan take over his body without transforming into his true dragon form, Midas himself could take on Er'gan's form in any way he wished without having to transform completely.

And he had soared over the giant warriors. Black luminescent, nearly transparent dragon wings protruding out his back, glowing with a wash of multiple colors in the sunlight.

He was an Angel of death.

Slashing off heads with furious, reckless abandon and incarcerating the towering enemy fighters where they stood to blackened bones and ash.

The battle had begun at the break of dawn and lasted till the sun was high in the sky.

And when it was over, the head of the giant clan was hanging on the end of Midas' sword.

Summons were sent to the neighboring realms.

And when the rulers came, they saw Midas on his throne; eyes blazing a fierce red and the giant's head, lay bloody and unseeing below the heel of his armored feet.

The message had now changed. .

The dragon realm would attack before it could be attacked.

And they would show no mercy.

The rulers went back to their realms in ominous silence.

None would dare undermine him ever again.

His father had chosen peace to rule his kingdom and protect his realm and it had killed him.

So Midas chose fear instead.

And as he holds her in mid air, he knows if he looks, it is that fear he will see in her eyes.

But for the first time in his long... long life since the death of his parents, Midas does not wish to see it.

So he does not look at her even though he can feel her staring wide eyed at him, even though he wants nothing more.

It is almost torture.

Her arms wrap tightly around his neck.

Her scent, that faint alluring sweetness is now everywhere and he has the strangest urge to bury his face in the soft hollow of her neck.

He wants to flood his senses with the deliciousness of her and send the blood rushing in his ears till he feels nearly drunk with it.

Her voice breaks through the fog of his thoughts “My...my Lord...are those...?”

He still does not look at her and instead drifts them both gently through the dark trees and to the ground.

She falters when he sets her down on her feet letting out a low, stifled cry of pain and clinging to him in a way that makes him feel needed.

Her right ankle is slightly swollen and he feels anger rise in him again. A low growl escapes his lips.

Midas realizes he isn't just angry at her disobedience, he is angry because she got hurt and realizing this causes his brow to furrow and annoys him even more.

He welcomes the rage because the other emotions are a confusing mess he neither understands nor wishes to deal with.

He lowers her down to a sitting position, her back resting against a tree.

When he lifts the hem of her torn dress and takes her feet in one hand, the other cradling and brushing against the softness of her calf, trailing gently down to her ankle, a sharp startled gasp escapes her lips at his touch and he hears her swallow.

Midas does not think it is pain that caused that sound and it sends the wanting in his chest into acute overdrive.

“Does it hurt?” His voice is gruff with what he hopes is irritation.

She doesn't respond and he is forced to finally look at her.

And when his eyes meet hers it isn't fear he sees.

She inches closer to him, lips parted and this time it is the dragon king whose breath hitches in his throat and he swallows, his Adam's apple bobbing up and down.

“Your heart beats faster dragon king...”

But Midas can barely hear the dragon inside of him. All of his attention is fixed on the tiny red haired slave inching closer to him.

She brushes her hands along the tips of the dark wings and there is no disguising the awe in that low, sultry voice. “You can fly.”

He feels the touch as acutely as he would have had she brushed up against an actual sensitive part of his body.

Delicious shivers run down his spine, leaving behind tingling sparks of pure liquid desire.

Desire so strong he can hear nothing else.

By Hades he wants to kiss her...

More than anything he has ever wanted in the hundred years of his life.

He frowns and takes a step back and it is like stepping out of a fog. "Can you walk?"

Bracing a hand on the tree trunk, she gets up shakily to her feet and Midas has to fight the urge to simply take her in his arms again and fly them both home.

But maintaining Er'gan's wings while in his normal form is a daunting task that requires a lot of his concentration and abilities.

The longer he sustains it, the weaker he becomes and he can not afford to become weak, not with the warnings Er'gan is growling in his ear.

"How far out are they?"

"Not very far dragon king."

He can smell them himself now, that rank miasma of evil that corrupted the elder forest at night and it is getting stronger every second.

Midas turns away from her, ignoring the way she looks at him seemingly talking himself.

Add that to the growling and killing and dragon wings even now slowly receding back into his body and she must think him partially unhinged.

He walks up to the dead cat that had fallen at the base of the tree when he hurled his sword at it and retrieves his weapons.

Sheathing them back into place behind his back, he steps towards her. "You have not answered my question."

"I'm sorry my lord, I must have been distracted by the giant dark things sticking out of your back."

Gods she tested his control.

He clenches his jaw and speaks through his teeth. "I asked if you can walk."

She gingerly tests her feet on the floor and when she raises her head to look at him he sees that fire in her crystal blue eyes.

A fire that means she is about to defy him.

A fire he is beginning to both loathe and desire in equal measure.

“Yes I can.” she announces.

“But...”

“But I am not going anywhere with you.”

“You seem to think this matter is up for some sort of discussion or that you have a choice.”

She tilts her chin in deliberate defiance and damn it if he doesn’t feel that part of him that wants to take her against that tree this very second stir.

“I am not going anywhere with you until you tell me what you want to do to me.”

He can think of a hundred things he wants to do to her, a lot of them involving her pinned below him, considerably less dressed, shaking with need and calling out his name but he doubts that is what she means.

He folds his arms across his broad chest and feels a perverse sense of satisfaction when her eyes linger on his bunching muscles.

“You flaunted my direct instructions, disobeyed me and ran away from the castle to hide in a forest that is very... very much forbidden after dark. What do you think I am going to do to you?”

Her gaze lowers to his feet and she chews nervously on her lip. “Will you...will you send me back to the cellars?”

Maybe it’s the frigid air of the forest, maybe it’s the rush of adrenaline or maybe it’s the way her lower lip quivers and her voice unintentionally cracks with fear and pain.

But Midas feels a tightening in the region of his chest.

He walks up to her and when he tilts her chin up to look at him, her eyes are brimming with barely restrained tears.

He brushes his thumb across her cheeks, catching the salty wetness before it can drip to the ground.

“I swear on my honor as immortal king of the fifth realm that I will never again send you to that place. I give you my word.”

And as she gazes up into his eyes, he knows he would die before he breaks a promise to her.

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MIDAS

"I swear on my honor as immortal king of the fifth realm that I will never again send you to that place. I promise."

He wants to kiss away her tears but instead Midas lets go of her chin and she wipes hurriedly at her cheeks.

"Do you mean this my lord?"

He nods once. "But do not think you will not be punished for your actions. You disobeyed me and that is something I cannot allow to go unanswered."

"Your great punishment is that you wish to bed her? You are slipping dragon king."

Midas growls out loud at his dragon. "Shut up."

She gazes at him curiously and in confusion. "What?"

"Not you."

"You know dragon King that is not the reassuring answer you think it is."

He raises one perfectly shaped brow. "How is it that you can manage to make my title sound like an insult?"

She remains quiet for a while, thinking.

"What do you intend to do to me?"

His eyes drop to the plump redness of her lips.

Again with that question, by all the gods, one more time and he would not be held responsible for his actions.

He drags his gaze back up. "I will think of something."

Her gaze drops worriedly to the floor again.

"Dragon king...they are nearly here."

Midas clenches his jaw. "Look at me."

She can't seem to bring herself to so Midas cradles her face in both his palms. "Hera"

Somehow he can't manage to say her name in anything other than a gentle whisper and she meets his eyes.

"The forest thins out to the right and we are not very far from the edge."

Her brows draw in confusion. "I do not understand my lord."

"Do you remember the purple river you crossed at the border of the forest?"

She nods but he can see she is still very confused yet he has no time to explain.

"When I give you the signal, you are to run straight in that direction. No matter what you hear, do not stop running until you cross it. They cannot pass beyond its bank. Do you understand?"

There is fear in her confusion now and it shows in her voice.

"My...lord...I"

But Midas' voice is insistent, giving no room for questions. "Do you understand?"

She nods again.

His lips tug up for a flickering second with the ghost of a smile. "Good girl."

"They are here dragon king."

He steps back from her.

The smell is beyond strong now, lining the back of his throat and he resists the urge to gag.

It seems to be coming from the east

He pushes her behind him and turns towards the direction. The bushes rustle slowly.

"You want me to leave you to face whatever is coming on your own."

He answers without turning to her, his eyes darting from point to point. "I am asking you to run away from me. I would think you'd be leaping for joy."

"I can't exactly leap my lord, my ankle hurts."

He almost laughs.

The first two arrive from the left and right, stepping out of the shadows as if materializing from nothing.

He hears Hera suck in her breath in surprise but he isn't fazed.

He has seen their kind once before.

The memory returns unbidden.

Little Midas running through the moonlight darkness appears in his mind again. Tears and blood running from different openings, he staggers, trips, his mouth filling with blood.

He tries to fight them off but he is barely ten years of age and no match for their strength or their cruelty and when the dagger slices through his skin, white hot pain nearly blinds him.

He shakes the image away.

Now is not the time to get distracted.

The next two follow closely behind and then two more appear from the rustling foliage straight ahead and Midas and Hera are soon surrounded.

The would be attackers are as tall as dragonkin.

Except while people of the dragon realm are brawny and brash, as if forged of steel, their strength visible in their hardness, Elves are the complete opposite.

They were wiry and lithe, full of sinews and lean muscle with stark white skin and pointed ears, long limbs and dexterous slender fingers.

Moving through the foliage and trees with as much grace, silence and speed as the forest animals they controlled.

They are also breathtakingly beautiful with soft beguiling features.

Speaking a different harsh sounding tongue only they and the animals of their forest can understand.

And they most definitely did not belong in the dragon realm.

But dark elves did not follow the rules.

They were distinguished from their kin by the shiny amber and jade runes and spirals that danced and jumped beneath their white skin.

Driven out from their own realm by their people for following after the Fallen one, dabbling in dark magic and worshipping the shadows, dark elves had chosen to hide here in the dragon realm and they made the Elder forest their home.

Coming out to hunt at night and corrupting everything around them with their evil magic.

Midas hated them more than anything.

Hera says nothing behind him but he can feel her hands clutch his arm fearfully.

The elves stand completely still, their faces devoid of any emotion and Midas says nothing to them.

The two in front step aside and something begins to materialize from under the shrubs between them.

It would have been described as smoke but it was much darker.

It has a thick cloying smell that is strangely sweet, almost citrusy yet you could feel the malignancy at its core.

The inky black smoke that is not truly smoke starts to rise steadily in the air and begins to take shape.

The outline of a head appears first covered beneath a dark hood.

Then a slender, graceful neck follows attached to a narrow, sensually curved, willowy body. Thin sinewy arms with bony fingers and sharp curved nails.

The outline begins to fill out, until standing before him is the most beautiful woman Midas has ever seen.

She takes off her hood and pitch black hair falls down to brush the base of her neck.

Her blood red lips, startling against the paleness of her skin draws into a creepy yet strangely seductive smile.

“Dragon King.”

“Hermani”

The woman smiles wider, revealing two very sharp, very bright canines. “Long time no see.”

Midas stares expressionless at the queen of the dark elves. “Not long enough.”

“Oh come now, don’t be like that. One would think we aren’t friends.”

Midas clenches his jaw but says nothing.

The elf queen laughs, a strange lilting sound, unnerving in the dense quiet of the forest.

Her long blue gown has long slits cut out in the sides and when she steps forward, sylphlike with her long, beautiful legs crossing each other, she’s as alluring and captivating as she is dangerous and evil.

“I was starting to think you had forgotten all about me. My feelings were hurt.”

The pain of memory flares up from the wound in Midas’ thigh. “Trust me; it’s not from lack of trying.”

“You wound me dragon king.” Her words are soft but her smirk is anything but. It is a predatory gleam that lends an air of viciousness to her otherwise striking appearance.

Her eyes, an odd, vivid shade of dark green widen with amusement as she notices Hera. “And who do we have here?”

He moves in a single protective step to completely block off her view and hide Hera’s small frame entirely behind his solid body.

Hermani c***s her head slightly at his actions, raising one perfectly arched eyebrow. “Interesting.”

“Let us pass Hermani.”

The woman takes a few steps back to stand behind one of her stoic companions.

She wraps her arms around his chest so her fingers are splayed across his front and peeks over his shoulders to stare at Midas and Hera. She lets out a small giggle. “You broke the bond.”

Midas is alert and calculating and he can feel Er’gan at the very edge of his consciousness but he makes a deliberate effort to keep his voice level and disinterested.

“I have broken nothing. Not yet anyway.”

She clicks her tongue against the roof of her mouth, her voice taking the tone of one addressing a wayward child “Tsk...tsk...tsk...Now dragon King let us not lie to each other.”

“I have no need to lie to someone who can do nothing to me.”

Hermani throws her head back and laughs long and hard. She steps out from behind the guard, Her unnerving green eyes very slowly running the length of Midas’ body, dropping down...down below his waist and he fights a wave of disgust.

She points one bony, red tipped claw at his thigh. “The dark magic used on the blade that caused your wound still calls to me.” She rotates the finger slowly as if screwing something tighter.

And as she does this, Midas feels searing pain so intense running up his thigh from the old scar, burning and scalding at the same time.

It clouds the edges of his vision and threatens his concentration.

Er’gan growls in response to his pain.

“Let me out.”

Not yet.

He clenches his jaw and refuses to show anything beyond cool disinterest.

The dark elf is not fooled.

She drops her hand and her lips pull back in a smirk of pleasure at the pain she has inflicted. “I believe that was enough to jug your memory.”

She takes a step back, arms outstretched. “When you came here that night oh so many years ago, our people found you and in exchange for your life, your father made a blood bond with us, he gave us the elder forest at night to do as we pleased...”

The smile disappears. “...You have no right to be here.”

Midas stares unflinching at her like he has heard nothing she said. His voice drops to a low, controlled timbre. “Let us pass Hermani.”

Hermani lowers her head and stares up at them, the pupils of her green eyes dilating so that her eyes were now nearly black.

Her fangs gleam in the moonlight and her lips stretch into that creepy smile once more.

“I’m afraid I cannot do that your highness.”

The Dragon King’s Substitute Bride Chapter 20

MIDAS

“Let us pass Hermani.”

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

“Dragon king I do not understand why you entertain this. Let me out.”

But Midas refuses to listen to his dragon. He cannot give Er’gan control to attack just yet.

Not without his making sure she is safe.

The elf queen lifts her head and sniffs the air. Her narrow nostrils twitch and flare and suddenly her eyes widen slightly in realization.

“What do you hide a human behind your back. I thought you hated their kind?”

He feels Hera start behind him, her eyes drilling holes in the back of his head but he chooses to ignore it. “I hate your kind even more yet here you are, living in my forest.”

The elf queen raises one perfectly arched brow and clicks a long slightly curved nail against her sharp teeth.

“Curiouser and curiouser. Who are you little human and why does the dragon king defend you?”

A surge of protectiveness surges through Midas, catching even him by surprise and when he speaks, his voice is an angry growl. "Speak to her again Hermani and blood bond or not I will cut out your tongue"

"Testy are we? Now I am even more interested. Who is she?"

"I was not aware of the fact that I now answer to you and that what I choose to do and not to do is any of your business."

Hermani smiles but it doesn't reach those cold, emerald eyes. There is no warmth in it, only pure unadulterated malice. "You see that is where you are wrong dragon king..."

She raises the same finger and points it at his wound again. "Everything... everyone who dares step to foot into my forest is my business."

She makes that same twisting motion with her hand, her gaze cruel and piercing.

Midas braces himself in expectation but the pain is even worse this time and it rushes up his body with a burning fury.

A grunt escapes unbidden from his lips.

"My lord!" Hera calls out in alarm her grip on his arm tightening, searching his face.

When she sees the pain etched there, for a brief second, she forgets she is in danger as well. She yells at the woman standing with a grin on her white, ethereal face.

"What are you doing to him?!"

But Midas doesn't hear her call out.

The sounds of the forest fade out until it seems like it is coming from far away and soon he can barely hear anything at all. Nothing else seems to be able to penetrate the fog of pain around his head.

The pain isn't entirely physical.

It had been his fault.

Perhaps not their arrival in the elder forest itself, but their continued presence in his realm, their claim on a land that was never theirs to hold in the first place.

That had been entirely his doing.

Since he could walk his mother warned him about taking things from strangers no matter how charming they looked.

"You are crown prince Midas..." she would say as he held him down and tried to brush a comb through his unruly white locks that even then hung all the way down to his shoulders.

“...you are heir to the dragon throne, the most dangerous seat in all the 7 realms and there are people who would take it from you and see you dead. You must be careful.”

He would nod, not really listening. Even then he had been hard headed.

Hard headed and entirely too trusting.

That was why when the pretty woman with shining green eyes, hair like pitch beneath her hood and red... red lips had given him that big, shiny apple in the market he had taken it without a second's hesitation.

Apples were a rare thing in the dragon realm and a big one like this was nothing but a delicious, scarce and treasured treat.

She told him to eat it at night because if the guards saw it they would make him share and wouldn't that just be a shame? Besides it would be sweetest in the darkness, when the moon was a gleaming solitary eye in the pitch black sky.

Her smile had unnerved him even then but she ruffled his head and called him the dragon king and he pushed past the tinkering in his belly.

And young Midas was nothing if not patient. He waited till he was alone in his room that night, the sound of the tolling bells signaling when it was safe to bring out his precious treat.

But it hadn't tasted very good at all.

He had forced himself to chew and swallow but the fruit left a bitter disgusting coating on his tongue and the back of his throat.

So he threw it out the window, watching it roll and roll, a tiny shadow disappearing beneath a gloomy hedge bush.

Before he slept he remembers thinking how maybe the nice, pretty lady with the pointing ears probably wasn't so nice after all.

What Midas hadn't known then was that the apple had been no true precious apple at all, it had been a lure fruit poisoned and laced with the dark magic of a controlling spell.

And when next Midas came to, he was completely alone and no longer in his bed.

Instead he now stood under the dense canopy of menacing shadowy trees, in the middle of the Elder forest with no memory of how he had managed to get there.

Dazed and disoriented as he was, he had known screaming would be no use and even then, the echoes of the fierce, brave ruler he would be stirred in him.

He boldly began to try and retrace his way out the forest and maybe he would have made it but then they set their flesh eating monsters on him.

Black, fearsome looking beasts with runes of dark magic writhing beneath their dark fur.

The cats had chased him, herded him deeper into the forest and right into their trap.

They surrounded him, attacked him and when even confused and hysterical, he would not go with them quietly, they had stabbed him. Slicing open the flesh of his skinny child thigh with that poisoned gleaming silver dagger like it was nothing.

The dark elves needed a lair to hide out after being exiled from their home in the 4th realm and they had chosen the elder forest of the dragon realm in it's place.

But now they needed to make sure they would not be driven away from their new home as well.

So they had cast a spell on him, lured him into the forest with that apple and now sent word back to his father, the King.

It was a simple message. "Let us stay in the Elder forest or lose your son and only heir forever."

The king's response had been immediate; requiring no thinking because there was only one option.

He made a blood bond with the woman who had given Midas the apple that had not really been an apple.

The dark elves could make the Elder forest their home. From the minute sun sets till the moment it break over the horizon at dawn, the land within the forest was theirs.

To roam freely and act as they saw fit. To kill, hunt and feed on whatsoever or whosoever trespassed within its borders when the sun no longer kept watch over the sky.

As long as the bond held, the royal family would never attempt to enter the forest under the cover of darkness and drive them out. In return, the dark elves would never again leave their forest to cross into the dragon capital or its surroundings.

The minute the bond was sealed, the purple river had appeared around the forest, marking their territory.

Midas would never forget the face of the woman from the village square; the elf queen who had tricked him.

She haunted his dreams, green eyes blazing, her blood red lips stretched into that cold evil smile as she pushed a rotten apple full of worms into his tiny hands and many a nights, he would wake up in a cold sweat, the wound in his thigh burning.

But he had never seen her again.

So he locked away the memory.

Until today.

“Midas...”

Her panic, teary voice, frantic and worried beside him pulls him out of the pain induced trance.

He glares at the elf that must be over 200 hundred years old yet appears the exact same way she had that fateful day in the village.

Would you like a juicy red apple?

He grits his teeth, rising to his full height. “I will ask you one last time Hermani. Let. Us. Pass.”

But Hermani smirks. “You see dragon king...”

She takes a step back, her nails growing longer, sharper, redder with each word.

“...my people have grown and the elder forest is no longer enough. There is almost nothing left to hunt and no one strays in here by... accident anymore. We need more land.”

The stoic elf body guards begin to slowly move closer.

And Hermani stretches out her hands, a smile on her beautiful face. “With you gone, what to stop us from taking everything? The entire dragon realm would be ours.”

“You forget something Elf...”

“And what is that dragon king?”

The corner of his mouth tugs up in a dangerous smirk. “The blood bond was between you and my father...”

She sneers at him. “And?”

He straightens, the dragon King standing tall in all his glory. “I am not my father.”

And in a blur of motion he whips out a small dagger and hurls it at the elf to the right.

The knife passes cleanly through the center of his forehead and his legs fold beneath him, the tall, white elf warrior crumpling soundlessly to the ground.

“Now Hera!!”

He doesn’t look but he hears her take off in the direction he instructed.

The elf queen, distracted turns her head sharply towards Hera’s receding figure. “Do not let her escape!”

Midas lunges at her, swords unsheathed. “Your business is with me!”

She step sides the attack at the last minute but he manages to nick her in the arm and dark almost black blood drops to the ground.

The other elves see their queen in danger and at the sight of her blood, they forget about Hera and attack him.

He slashes and doges, feints and blows but they are fast, almost as fast as he is.

He doesn't let Hermani out of his sights or his attacks. He cannot afford to let her go after Hera.

So he focuses more on attacking her than fighting off the elf guards' attacks.

A knife pierces through his arm and he cries out, a roar of pain that shakes the forest.

He hopes she has gotten far enough.

Another knife slices through his calf and he kicks at the assailant.

"Dragon king..."

"Yes Er'gan"

"Let me out."

A dark cruel smile tugs up the lips of the ruler of the dragon realm.

"With pleasure."