

The Dragon King's Substitute Bride Chapter 21

HERA

I remember what it is like to run for your life.

The only thing faster than the force and speed at which your feet hit the floor is the racing of your pounding heart; loud and brutal in your ear as it struggles to pump enough blood through your veins in an effort to keep up with your unrelenting speed.

Trying your best to avoid stumbling because falling would mean certain doom and it was not an option you could afford, yet having no time to look at the rapidly changing, uneven treacherous floor disappearing beneath your feet.

The air around you suddenly starts to feel thicker, almost like you are struggling to cut your way through it, to fight against its resistance and get away from the monsters that are coming after you.

Your muscles want to cramp up from exhaustion but you push through the pain and the fear and keep running because you know that should you dare to stop, it is all over.

And as Midas stands in front of me, dangerous energy radiating of him in waves, I know that soon, this is what I will have to do.

I do not want to.

He is glaring and talking through his teeth at the woman who is not really a woman.

I do not know her kind.

She has narrow pointed ears like the Fae from my mother stories and her skin is alabaster porcelain, as white as the elves they say inhabit the realm below the dragon's realm yet she and the creatures with her are different.

They have runes and sigils similar to but not quite like that which the healers of Averia used to draw.

The marks squirm and wriggle in flickering colors of jade and sickly amber beneath their skin and when the one who is their leaders speaks, her scarlet red mouth stretches in that unnerving smile like a stain across the stark paleness of her beautiful face

and when her lips part slightly open.

Skies above

I fight a shudder at the deadly sharpness of her teeth, involuntarily imagining her sinking those deadly fangs into my neck, draining me of my blood and my life force.

It is not a picture I wish to think about again.

I want to look away from her but it is almost like I am under some sort of spell.

My hands hang limply by my sides, mouth dry, heart pounding even as my mind cries, screams for me to look away before I lose myself completely.

But I cannot bring myself to do anything besides stare at her. My mind no longer has any control of my body.

I cannot even close my eyes.

I exist simply to gaze on her malignant perfection, to please her, to feed her.

I find myself remembering the tales we were told as children.

Only one form of sorcery in all the realms has the ability to induce hypnosis.

But why would creatures that look like elves be in possession of dark magic from the shadow realm?

Then he steps in front of me, an act of protection that surprises me.

His actions completely cut me off so I am no longer looking directly at her and the spell instantly breaks.

I gasp lightly, one hand flying to clutch at my chest.

It is almost like emerging out of a smoke filled haze and I feel bile rise to the back of my throat.

I struggle push it down and focus on the solid wall of muscle standing between me and that monster, for I have since concluded that is what she is.

His voice is calm and disinterested even though I can tell she is trying to provoke him.

Somehow looking directly at her places me under some hex that apparently has no effect on him.

But I can see in the way he holds his hands to keep from clenching into fists that though he hides it well, her words are getting to him.

And when she points her finger at him and does whatever she does to him, he doesn't cry out but I can see the pain in his stance, in the way the muscles of his shoulder clench and tighten.

I want rest my head against the firmness of his back and wrap my arms around him.

Which I realize is an odd way to feel about someone I loathe with every fiber of my being.

Gods above, what is happening to me?

I bite my lip and stare at his back.

There are rips in the fabric of his shirt and through it I can see rapidly fading scars, surrounded by red inflamed skin and somehow I just know.

That the wounds healing even before my very eyes at a speed beyond normal, had been where those magnificent dark wings, now long vanished, had initially torn out of his skin.

I know I should have been frightened of them and of him, and maybe for a moment, when I first saw them, large and looming, a wide span of colorful iridescent darkness blocking out the moonlight behind him, I was.

But as he held me cradled against him in the air, my fear became awe and when he lowered me to the ground, refusing to meet my eyes, my awe became curiosity.

I wanted nothing but to feel its texture beneath my hands, to brush my fingers against it, to touch it.

To touch him.

The same feeling courses through me even now as I watch him struggle with a pain I do not understand.

So I give in.

I reach out, hands shaking to place my hand on his arm. I feel incredibly stupid.

What was I thinking? That he cared one wit for the touch of some human slave girl?

You're trying to tell him he's not alone. And maybe your touch doesn't manage to erase the fact that you're standing there shivering like a coward behind him, utterly helpless but you hope it's helping in some way.

I know what my mind is telling me is true but I refuse to believe it.

Because why would I want to help the King whose Ryders attacked my home realm murdered my family?

I'm so focused on this tiny new piece of information, I don't even hear her ask me a question but Midas does.

"Speak to her again Hermani and blood bond or not I will cut out your tongue"

The defensive, possessing way he utters those words, like I am something more than just the slave who tricked him, does something to my insides and my knees that I do not wish to feel.

I know he does not mean anything, by it, not truly anyway but even knowing that does nothing to stop my heart from soaking up the words.

She does it again, pointing and twisting her finger at him and this time he groans and nearly doubles over.

I yell at her to make it stop but she merely laughs at me, enjoying the agony splayed on his features.

And when I look at him, it's almost like he isn't here anymore.

I know that look.

He has gone somewhere, somewhere in his head, in his memories that he does not wish to be.

"Midas...Midas, please come back to me."

His eyes snap back and focus on me like a man drowning.

Dazed, searching and filled with so much pain it makes a tiny part of my chest hurt.

And in that moment I hate her for doing this to him.

But there is something else there, a message passed in that that brief second when our eyes meet.

His pupils are dilated and the golden orbs are rimmed with red.

I can tell he's fighting to retain control of his rage. I just don't understand why.

But the message is so clear I can almost hear his voice in my head.

It nerves me how easy it is for me to read him.

His eyes are asking me if I remember.

They are asking me if I am ready to run.

I hope mine tell him the message running through my head.

That I have been running for as long as I can remember.

That it is all I know how to do.

And when he throws the dagger with alarming, sudden speed, instantly killing the elf blocking the direction through the trees that he said was closest to the edge of the forest, I am ready.

I don't even take one last look at his beautiful face.

But as I tear through the forest, headed in as straight line as I can manage, I realize I don't want to run anymore.

I know he is immortal but he can still get hurt. I don't want to leave him alone to face whatever those creatures are.

It is my fault that we are here anyway.

I also know it is no use going back. I would only be a distraction to him.

But what's worse is that I would definitely be killed and I could not afford to die.

Not before getting my revenge on all the people responsible for putting me in this situation.

The debt collectors who had driven us from our home, the royal house of Averia, and the ruler of the 5th realm to whom I now belonged.

Maybe that is why I do not want him to get hurt at the hands of those monsters.

Because I want to be the one who hurts him the most.

Too late I hear something behind me, advancing at a speed greater than my own.

I try to run harder but I am no match for whatever they are.

I shout in fear seconds before a blinding flash of white hot pain sears through my side and I am knocked off my feet and sent flying into the side of a tree.

It knocks the wind out of me and I am unable to even muster up the energy to scream a second time.

Groaning and clutching the side where they had struck me, I roll unto my back on the muddy forest floor.

I must be near the edge of the forest. There are no trees directly overhead.

What a beautiful moon.

A shadow falls over me and the moon disappears behind it.

Claws extended, the tall shadow opens its mouth to reveal terrifyingly sharp teeth, runes of dark magic dancing beneath its stark white skin.

I feel a tear roll down the side of my face, salty wetness on my cheeks and I drag myself up to a sitting position, back resting against the tree I had hit.

At the very least, I would get to see my family again.

Then a flash of blinding light rents the shadow in half, black blood sprays and the elf guard crumbles in two separate gory parts to the floor.

I am still unable to move and I stare unblinking at my savior.

My knight in shining Chief dragon Ryder amour.

He stands over me, his sword shining silver in the full glare of the moon.

“Where is the King?”

The Dragon King's Substitute Bride Chapter 22

Er'gan

The dragon is angry. Very... very... angry.

It does not understand why the dragon king has chosen to allow this charade...this insult to be placed on his...their person by creatures so very beneath them.

It does not understand why he would not just give it control and let it kill these dark elves reeking of black magic, sharp and stinging in their nose.

It is not that it does not know the reason, it does.

The dragon king's thoughts are not hidden from it.

in fact in a way they are its thoughts as well.

So it knows that this sudden increase in the tolerance of the otherwise short tempered ruler has to do with the mortal slave girl who even now cowers behind them.

But knowing something and understanding it are two very different things.

The king wishes to protect her and Er'gan does not understand this.

Even worse, it does not like it.

When that old wound starts to burn again and Midas is forced against his wish to remember a memory which it, Er'gan the First had helped them forget, it feels the king pain as its own because in a sense, it is.

And its rage begins to reach a fever pitch.

Er'gan had wanted this particular brand of vermin called dark elves out of the forest the minute they had ascended the dragon throne but Midas had stayed their hand.

Sometimes, it suspects the King has more of his father's blood running through his veins that he would care to admit.

And it is becoming even more apparent with the sudden appearance of the deceitful human with the flaming red hair and piercing blue eyes.

Leniency begat weakness and Er'gan cannot allow the ruler of the 5th realm to be weak.

They have too many enemies.

The human girl takes off running to the right, through the thinnest part of the forest just like the King had instructed her to.

It does not trust her.

It does not like her.

And soon, it will have to do something about her continued presence before it is too late.

But now Midas is pushing their body forward, lunging to attack the leader of the vermin surrounding them.

Er'gan's magic courses through their body and lends speed to their movement and it is pleased when he sees blood the color of ink flow from a wound they have inflicted.

Yes... It thinks and a smile tugs on their lips.

This is what it has been waiting for. The elf guards enraged, charge at them but they do not even flinch.

Let them come.

Not only had these rodents who worshipped the shadows insulted their person, they had dared to hurt the one who Er'gan was bound to, that is a crime punishable only by death.

A stab of pain flares from a knife wound in their arm.

Another one in their leg.

Er'gan is surprised. Surprised and now even angrier.

The dragon king is bent on aiming his attacks on the queen.

Indirectly letting these cretins inflict harm on their body all in an effort to keep the focus of the guards on protecting the leader so the elves have no time to go after the human.

This ends now.

He growls in the king's head.

"Dragon king..."

"Yes Er'gan?"

"Let me out."

He feels it the moment Midas surrenders control.

"With pleasure."

Er'gan feels himself expand.

Not their body, it is not shifting into its true form.

No, this change is something that is happening to its very essence, to its consciousness.

It bubbles and swells from behind the consciousness of the one to whom he is bound until it pushes past the dragon king's free will and takes its place at the front of his mind.

Its essence extends from their centre, curling and wrapping itself, like growing vines or tendrils of fire around the long, strong bones of their limbs. Er'gan can feel itself take control of their hands and their legs.

Alone Midas and the dragon are two incredibly powerful beings but together, their abilities exceed even the most intelligent of comprehensions.

It flexes their fingers against the grip of the sword and rolls their shoulders.

Then, they move like lightening.

The elves barely have anytime to attack.

The movement of their swords is almost an invisible blur.

They swing the blades soundlessly through the frigid night air, strike without warning, and slicing through skin and muscle with unerring accuracy.

They do not wish to kill the attackers all at once. That is not Er'gan's style especially not when they have been hurt.

So instead they maim in strategic locations, draw out the suffering they intend to inflict. A slice of skin here, a limb sent flying into the air there.

They are systematic in the way they cut down the ones who had dared to confront them, enjoying the smell of the black blood that flows from their attackers' wounds and the sound of their screams.

Like them, the dark elf guards do not understand the meaning of the word retreat.

Even more so when their elf queen has been wounded and even though the aggressors can tell that the one who now holds control of the dragon king's body is a sentient being far older and far greater than they are, they still continue to fight.

Er'gan does not care. It welcomes their foolishness; thinks them eager to die and this suits it just fine.

But even though the elves are greater in number, Midas and Er'gan are stronger and it doesn't take long.

Soon the dark elves are lying in tiny blood stained pieces at their feet.

Bodies lay littered in fragments all around the rich forest floor that greedily soaks up whatever blood is spilled on it.

All the elves that had appeared, that had surrounded and attacked them are now dead.

All except one.

The cowardly queen has somehow managed to slither away.

This is of little consequence to Er'gan and Midas. They know she will be back.

She will resurface like all unwanted vermin do.

And they will kill her then.

They re-sheath their swords and glance down at the wounds on their body that are even now rapidly healing. Torn muscle and skin stitching themselves back together under the invisible needle and thread of the dragon's magic.

This is the result of the ritual that had bound them together.

For as long as Er'gan remained inside of the dragon king, Midas could get hurt but he would not die.

A scream rents the quiet stillness of the forest and their head turns sharply in that direction.

It hears her name whispered quietly on their inside.

"Hera is in danger, give me back control"

"No."

“What do you mean ‘no’? They are dead Er’gan, give me back control.”

“I am afraid I cannot do that dragon king.”

“What?”

It feels the shockwaves of its refusal run all through their body.

It is breaking an unspoken agreement between them and the resulting effect is almost a physical pain.

From the first day it took control of the king’s body and the day it first lent him its wings in battle they had both accepted this unuttered yet binding rule.

No one could take the form of the other without their permission and refusing to return it was akin to betrayal.

But its actions, its refusal to let the king take over is for his own good.

The king may not see it that way at the moment but he will...soon.

“Er’gan. Give. Me. Back my body.”

“That human slave has done something to you, she has you wrapped around her finger, has you bowing and bending to her will and running to save her when you should be punishing her for her deceit.”

It feels the dragon king’s anger as its own.

“I am Midas the immortal, ruler and guardian of the 5th realm, my decisions are entirely my own. I bow to no one.”

“That may be so dragon king but earlier today, you regretted a decision I made for you on our behalf.”

“What in all the realms do you mean?”

“I had her sent to the cellars and you brought her back.”

“That was...”

“A hundred years we been bound together and not once have you ever regretted a decision I made for us, yet you have done so today. I mean to find out why.”

“Er’gan...”

“If she has done something to you, cast upon you some human spell, I intend to break it and save you.”

“Er’gan listen to me...”

“Do not despair dragon King, I do not intend to harm her...yet. I simply wish to ask her a few questions.”

It turns their head once again in the direction from which the scream had come. “But if I find I do not like her answer...let us just say, you will have another decision of mine to regret.”

Er’gan can hear the king calling its name in anger from behind its consciousness but it is not longer listening.

And without a second glance at the havoc of bodies behind him, it sends their body racing off into the trees and towards her.

The Dragon King’s Substitute Bride Chapter 23

MIDAS

He is silent as Er’gan takes their body rushing at lightning speed towards her.

A part of him hopes that whatever caused that scream was nothing more terrible than her perchance slipping on an errant, unseen root.

The dragon king was never one to depend on hope. Hope was for those who weren’t ready to do what needed to be done.

Those who left their fates up to the gods and wishful thinking

Yet he finds himself hoping she made it away to the edge of the forest where he knows Leo would be.

That she crossed that river and is far away from the reach of the elves, and now with Er’gan’s intentions, far away from him.

He knows he should be angry at the dragon.

It is breaking an unspoken pact between them by refusing to return his body and Midas knows if he tries hard enough, he can break Er’gan’s hold and take back control of his body.

Neither one of them is at their full capacities when inhabiting or using the form of the other.

So if he really and truly wanted to, he could snatch back the reins and return his consciousness back to the fore front.

But he does not do this.

Because while he admits that he does not wish to hurt her and he most definitely does not need or even want Er'gan to do so either, Midas knows that the dragon is right.

He had indeed regretted the decision to send her to the cellars, so badly that he had been uncomfortable till he got her out alive and unharmed.

If anyone else had dared to do what she had done; tricking him into their marriage, disrespecting him, flouting his direct instructions and trying to escape.

If anyone else had done even a fraction of all those things she had done in the space of two days he would not have sent them to the cellars.

He would have killed them on the spot.

Not come running into the elder forest at night, risking body and limb to save them.

And he most definitely would not be so irresistibly attracted to them.

Maybe the dragon is right about other things too.

Perhaps this, his leniency and inclination to protect her is all simply because he desires to have her, to bed her and claim her for his own.

And by the gods did he want to.

He is not a man unused to desire or want but this...this all consuming need is something beyond all that.

He does not just want her. There is something basal and instinctive about this wanting that takes it far beyond that.

Something almost animalistic and primitive in the way he craves her.

It clouds his senses whenever he is near her, making him unable to think about anything else but the feel of her in his arms, the curve of her back beneath his eager, exploring hands, the taste of her on his tongue.

So it could be that Er'gan is right.

Maybe she has indeed cast some human spell on him that is causing him to act this way.

Maybe it is all part of Averia's scheme to get their revenge on him and make sure he never again returned to their realm to plague them.

And if that is true, Hades help him, nothing in all the realms would stop him...stop them from killing her.

But what if it that is not the case

That is even more confusing.

The idea that all this is all completely natural stirs up feelings in him that he is not ready to admit to.

Feelings he is not even sure he likes, no matter how good they make him feel because they remind him of his father and the way he had ruled.

And Midas has sworn he would never rule like his father.

Maybe his people and the other realms did not love him but they sure as hell feared him.

Love was not always enough to keep trouble away but fear...fear got the job done and for Midas, that is more than enough.

It is a lesson he learnt many...many years ago and one he does not intend to change.

It is why even though he has lived for so long, he has never formed any real attachments, has never let anyone except his chief Ryder get close to him.

It is why he has never ever let himself care for anyone.

Caring for someone made them your weakness and Midas cannot allow himself have any weaknesses.

Not with all the people that had their eyes on the dragon throne and the crown on his head.

This is the reason why he does not fight Er'gan for his body.

He feels the branches trying to grab at their clothes.

Notices the leaves brushing against their skin as Er'gan sends their body racing closer and closer to her.

They are separate yet one at the same time and when Er'gan catches her scent, that tingling sweetness of berries and honey, Midas can smell it too.

It sets his senses on edge and he has to once again fight that need to take control, to make sure she is safe.

The trees are getting thinner, the space between them getting wider and allowing more of the moon's light to stream through as they near the edge of the forest.

The sky is getting lighter, and he can tell the morning is not that far over but that is not what is on Midas' mind as they step into that clearing and he sees her.

His heart begins to pound faster.

Faster than it had when he had fought off those wild cats, faster even than when they had killed the dark elves.

Leo sees them first. “Your highness...”

But Midas might as well have been deaf. Only one holds his complete attention.

She is sitting slumped against a tree, Leo holding her against him.

Her eyes are closed and she does not seem to be moving.

Gods above no...

Then she stirs like she can somehow feel his presence.

Her eyes open, and Midas does not remember ever being that relieved to see a particular shade of blue in his entire life.

She raises her head and looks in his direction. “Midas....?”

He wants to go to her. To hold her and stroke her hair, to whisper in her ear that he has her and he is never letting her go again.

“My lord...” She says and attempts to get up but she is much too weak and she stumbles.

Leo catches her, his arms wrapping around her waist to hold her and Midas feels a surge of possessiveness, primal and instinctive come from somewhere deep in his core.

He wants to rip her from the chief Ryder’s arms and hold her in his.

But the suddenness and intensity of this strange emotion is not what surprises the dragon King the most.

No, his surprise is because the surge of possessiveness he had felt and still feels is not solely his.

It is Er’gan’s as well.

But either the dragon does not know and recognize this emotion or it is choosing to ignore it.

Leo takes his hands off her waist much to Midas’ relief and steadies her by her arm instead. He turns to the King. “Your highness, are you okay?”

“Step aside Leo.”

Three simple words are all it takes for the chief Ryder to know that the one who speaks is not his King, not really.

But Leo is a Ryder and Er’gan is the very first dragon.

His words controlled not just dragons but weredragons as well.

Leo's body moves of its own accord. He releases her and steps aside.

She sways on her feet but she remains standing. "My lord, are you hurt?"

Er'gan moves the king's body slowly towards her. "Who are you?"

A frown creases her forehead and she glances up at him as they draw closer.

She gasps and steps backward.

Midas know what she sees, his eyes the color of burning flames. But Er'gan does not care for her sensibilities.

"I...I do not understand."

Her back hits the tree.

They step even closer. "I know most humans are rather simple minded and lacking in anything beyond the most basic of intelligence..."

There is no where left to run and their body looms tall over her. "...But you, slave girl do not strike me as particularly stupid so I will ask you only one more time. Who are you and what have you done to the dragon king?"

She stares at him a moment longer.

"You speak differently" she says and those dreamy, bliss blue eyes widen in sudden realization.

"You are not him are you?"

Midas is startled and so is the dragon but it recovers quickly.

"Well...well...well. It would appear humans may have evolved since the last time I saw your kind."

"Who are you?"

The dragon sneers. "I ask the questions here slave."

But it is almost like she does not hear him.

"You look like him, you walk like him, you even smell like him but the manner in which you speak, and your eyes...they are his and not his at the same time."

"Too many words"

She stands up to her full height, a move that astounds Midas. "What have you done with him? I demand that you bring him back."

Er'gan is taken aback as well. "I am unable to decide if you are as brave as you act or merely just stupid."

Midas feels his heart skip a beat at her words. What did this mean?

She folds her hands in fists to hide their shaking. "Midas?"

The sound of his name falling from her mouth sends a feeling almost as acute as a shock running up his body and for a brief second he feels Er'gan's control slip.

His eyes flash from red to gold and then back to red again.

She notices this and a small startled sound escapes her throat. "Midas...Midas can you hear me?"

Er'gan grabs her by the throat with their hands and lifts her off her feet. "I asked you a question and you will give me an answer or you will die."

She clutches at his hand wrapped around her neck, her voice small.

The dragon presses harder. "Who are you?"

She is struggling to breath but she doesn't take eyes of his. "Midas...if you can hear me, come back. Please. Come back to me."

The dragon stretches their lips in a cruel smile. "Wrong answer."

And it tightens its grip, intending to crush her windpipe.

Her eyes start to close

Suddenly pain beyond anything they have ever felt shoots up their entire body.

It feels like barbed claws and thorny vines wrapped around their brain, squeezing it till their entire world is engulfed in a blinding, white hot, torment.

Er'gan drops her to the floor as if stunned and steps back in alarm.

It glances at their hand.

"No...this cannot be."

"Er'gan..."

"No...no...this is wrong."

Werewolves had mates, humans had soul ties, Dragons and Ryders had tethers.

And Er'gan had just found his.

The last thing Midas feels as Er'gan suddenly lets go of his body and gives him control, is her arms wrapping around him as he collapses against her.

The Dragon King's Substitute Bride Chapter 24

HERA

I awake to a world of pain.

My neck is stiff and my mouth is dry, almost like I had spent the night downing tankards of ale in some gods forsaken tavern.

Or fighting for my life.

Sunlight much too bright even to my half awakened brain streams in from the window to my right and I struggle to open my eyes.

Except they feel like they have been glued shut and the bright light makes the headache I have suddenly just discovered I have all the more worse.

I decide there and then that for the reminder of my mortal life in the dragon realm I would not be caught dead within so much as a whiff of the Elder forest.

When I finally do manage to open one eye, the light feels like hot coals on my eyeballs and I raise one hand to shade my face.

Any other day, any other place and I would have given up anything to wake up between warm, soft sheets.

To open my eyes and begin my day with the beautiful white rays of the early summer's sun, to hear the happy sound of birds chirping merrily as they call out to each other and the wonderful smell of blue mountain roses filling the chambers, carried in on the cool morning breeze.

But this time around I'm left wishing the birds would just take their racket elsewhere and that I can pull the windows closed.

No sooner have I finished the thought that someone, who to my half open, sleep filled eyes, is of more of a blurry figure than anything, walks across the room and draws the heavy, dark red blinds closed; mercifully cutting off the blinding light entering the room.

Well if the dragon realm is full of these mind readers ready to bring my wishes to realization without my even needing to speak then perhaps being stuck here for the rest of my life would not be so dastardly horrible.

I immediately feel much better now that my eyes are no longer slow cooking in the sunlight.

The silky white sheets are warm beneath my hands as I brace myself and try to sit up in the ornate king-sized four poster bed with its heavy velvet draping of a rich plum color decorated with fine silver.

I manage to rise a little before bolts of pain shoot out from every part of my body.

When a cry filled more with surprise at the pain than actual hurt escapes my lips, a voice I recognize calls out to me and the once blurry figure rushes to my side. "My queen."

My eyes are finally adjusting enough to the fact that it is a new day and they cannot continue pretending not to work.

And I see that it is Henette.

"My queen, are you awake?" she asks beside me.

I bite down the sarcastic retort on the tip of my tongue. I really wish she would stop calling me that.

I try to rise again but it hurts so I stop.

She inches closer "I would advise you do not try to move on your own right at this moment, you have been hurt quite badly."

What am I to do then, lay in bed all day like some invalid?

Serves you right for running away in the first place. My mind throws back at me.

Henette must notice the displeasure on my face because she reaches towards me. "If I may your highness."

I grit my teeth and nod even though it feels like my head may have secretly been unscrewed the night before and somehow replaced with an impossibly heavy watermelon just on the verge of splitting and bursting open.

She puts her arms around me and helps me slowly to an upright position. It still hurts and I have to bite down on my lip most of the way but at least I am now sitting up.

"Thank you Henette."

She blushes and looks away.

The once emerald bed coverings have been replaced with a different one, and I arrange the soft midnight blue material around my legs.

It feels more lavish than an ordinarily bed covering should be and it affirms what I may have been otherwise too preoccupied to notice since I arrived here.

The dragon King and his castle are in possession of a ridiculously vast amount of wealth.

I have to try twice to make my throat work and when it finally does, it sounds scratchy and hoarse even to my own ears. "What time is it Henette?"

"It is about high noon your highness."

"High noon?! How...how long have I been asleep?"

Henette reaches behind her towards the bedside table, a glided stool rimmed with intricate carvings and sitting on three legs. "A day and a night have passed since your return my queen."

I had slept almost two entire days! Little wonder I felt like run over cow dung.

When she turns back towards me, she's holding up a half filled glass cup.

I recognize the murky green liquid and just like that I'm thinking about him again.

She offers me the glass. "If her grace will take this healing potion, she will be returned to perfect health in no time at all."

"And if I refuse?" I can't resist asking.

She looks down. "His highness has instructed I fetch him at once."

I instantly remember the last time Midas and I were alone in a room with that ugly green drink and my body involuntarily shivers.

But I decide to behave and reach for the glass. Besides, Henette is the only one in this dark castle I trust.

I hesitate. Unless... her helping me escape and the entire horrible night in the elder forest has all been some plot to punish me or teach me a lesson.

Oh gods above Hera, would you listen to yourself? You sound stark raving mad. Might as well tear off all your clothes and run naked in the streets while you're at it.

I raise the cup to my lips and it feels different on my tongue until I realize it wasn't the taste of the potion that had filled my senses the last time, it had been him.

I gulp down the potion and hand her back the cup.

Almost immediately I start to feel my body begin to settle down, the pain slowly ebbing away.

The last events of that night flash through my head, along with it, the eyes of the one who had been Midas and not Midas at the same time.

"You mentioned the King...I take it he is well?"

She seems confused by my question but she hides it well enough. "Yes your highness, the King is in perfect health."

Well that makes one of us.

“Shall I draw you a bath my queen?”

I nod and she hurries to the door.

“Henette.”

She stops, turns to me. “Yes my queen.”

I sit up straighter. “You may call me Hera.”

If I meant to put her at ease, my words have the exact opposite effect.

She steps back as if I have just punched her in the belly and her eyes go wide in alarm. “Your highness I could never. It is forbidden.”

“Says who?”

She stutters, looking for an appropriate answer and coming up with none. “It...it just isn’t done.”

I raise my brows. “And if I insist?”

Anymore wringing and she will twist her fingers into unrecognizable misshapen lumps. “You are queen of the 5th realm, wife to the immortal dragon Ryder. If the king should find out, he will be greatly displeased.”

I dismiss her excuse with a wave of my hand. “Oh poppycock, it is my name and I chose to be addressed by it...at the very least you may do so when we are alone.”

She hangs her head so low I fear it will fall off. “As you wish my queen....I mean...as you wish Hera. Oh you see, it doesn’t sound right at all!”

I cannot resist laughing at the almost adorable helplessness on her face as she leaves the room.

My head no longer feels twice its size and I tilt it back to rest on the headboard.

Queen of the 5th realm....What did that even mean?

How do I rule over and be a queen to the people responsible for almost every bad thing that has ever happened in my life?

And to do all that while at the same time planning my revenge against their king.

Don’t forget trying not to kiss him again.

It is enough to start my headache up again.

Especially because I know I want to do so much more than just kiss him.

Henette returns with a brisk knock on the door and I bid her entry.

Four other maids enter behind her, bearing copper iron buckets filled with steaming hot water for my bath.

They curtsy prettily before they start to quietly and with diligent efficiency begin filling up the large bathtub hidden behind the decorated room screen.

Soon the King's chamber is pleasantly steamy and smells sweetly of lemon and roses.

The other girls leave as Henette announces "Your bath is ready my queen."

"Henette..." I say in a tone of mild warning.

She sighs quietly. "Your bath is ready Hera."

"See, doesn't that feel so much easier?"

"It most definitely does not, my queen."

I ignore that last part.

Averia was not built in day after all.

As I swing my legs over the bed, my body feels completely different from when I had awoken; more alive somehow and definitely not like I had spent an entire day cramped up in a wagon and getting tossed around into trees in an ancient forest like some abandoned rag doll.

It's almost unreal how fast the pain has disappeared.

I look down at my clothes expecting a muddy, shredded, straw stained mess.

"Henette..." I call out in a quiet tiny voice.

She turns towards me. I do not look up, continuing to stare at what I am wearing and hoping my eyes are somehow deceiving me.

"What happened to my clothes?"

Her brows draw in confusion at my strange question. "Your clothes...my queen?"

I'm too preoccupied to correct her. "Yes Henette, the attire I wore to...leave... the castle. You should remember it, you picked it out."

"Oh, that was disposed of your grace."

The way she looks away when she speaks tells me one of the servants, most likely her had probably taken it to mend and sell.

It had been very expensive, fine material and would fetch a tidy sum at the market and I would have done the same had I been in her shoes but at the moment I could not possibly have cared less and I tell her as much.

“It is no concern or worry of mine what you have done with them Henette. I just want to know why and how I have come to now be wearing something different.”

She visibly relaxes “Oh, when you would not wake up the next morning, we couldn’t possibly leave you in those conditions so you were changed.”

I sigh and speak slowly. “I know that. I am asking you, who...who changed me?”

Who took off my clothes...who most likely saw me completely naked.

And somehow I already know her answer before she even says it.

She utters the answer like she is unsure of my reaction. “The king did your grace.”

Skies above

The Dragon King’s Substitute Bride Chapter 25

HERA

I am unsure what to feel.

One part of my brain is absolutely mortified and yet the other...the other wishes I had been conscious while he did it.

I turn to Henette. “Where you there...when he...oh relax Henette there is no need to look so mortified, I am just curious as to how it happened.”

She bows her head. “In that case you would have to ask the king himself your grace.”

Well that is one thing I most definitely will not be doing.

“He sent me to have a bath drawn for you and when I returned your old clothes were in a pile at the foot of the bed.”

“I beg your pardon?” The shrill pitch of my voice surprises even me but I cannot seem to help it.

“I said your old clothes were already removed upon my return.”

I shake my head furiously because surely I must have misheard her. “Not that. He asked you to go do what?”

“Oh, he asked for a bath to be drawn for her highness.”

So not only did he change me, he may have given me a bath as well?

I sit with a plop on the soft bed, my hands in my hand in my laps.

By the gods, this just keeps getting worse and worse.

Henette inches closer. “Are you okay my queen...I mean Hera?”

“Hmmm hmmm” I say, nodding rapidly, my lips pressed together because at the moment, I do not even trust myself to speak.

Unbidden, I think about those dark brilliant eyes fixed on my body as he slowly, but carefully takes off my clothes.

My mind filling in the blanks with fantasies of his hands, warm from the steaming water running over the sensitive parts of my skin.

Gods of my mother I hope I had been unconscious enough not to make any embarrassing sounds but even as I think about it I do not trust myself.

Unconscious or not, I probably did.

Oh dear Zeus.

“Your highness, are you sure you are fine, your face is absolutely red.”

My hands fly to my crimson cheeks. They feel warm.

I do not even try to deny it.

I get up hurriedly with the lame excuse that my bath water is getting cold and disappear behind the room screen and out of reach for her probing, attentive eyes.

I take off the clothes I have on.

It is a simple night gown, although much different in appearance and texture from that which I have seen Averia’s royalty dressed in.

While the night gowns of Averia’s queen and princess are drab, long and cumbersome attires with lengthy, voluminous sleeves and so many buttons, they required assistance to remove; the gown I am dressed in is flimsy at best.

Stopping mid thigh and bearing a close resemblance to a chemise with its soft creamy material and thin almost non-existent sleeves.

Just the thought of him seeing me, dressing me, in this, has my cheeks burning again.

I take it off in one move and step cautiously into the bathtub filled with warm water and floating rose flower petals.

The water is almost scalding at first but after a few minutes I begin to enjoy the heat.

Henette dutifully washes my long hair into a bucket behind me as I recline fully immersed in the tub, pinning it into a bun when I tell her I do not like it sticking limp and cold on my neck.

She finishes quickly and leaves me to my bath.

She says she is setting out my clothes but seconds later, I hear the chamber doors open and close quietly.

Absent mindedly, I cup the water in my hand and splash it over my skin, letting the warmth and steaminess of it drip down my shoulders.

The lard based soap, a luxury I could only dream of in the past few years as a slave, lathers and foams in my hand, smelling pleasantly of lavender and sandalwood.

I slather my body generously with the sweet smelling foam and my eyes, initially half lidded, drift shut.

My hands, slippery with soap and warm from the water have a mind of their own.

Except in my head, they are no longer my hands.

These are much bigger, much rougher and they belong to a dark, dangerous king with eyes of molten gold.

These hands, his hands, slip and slid over my body, the curve of my stomach... the slopes of my breasts.

Fingers gently circling my n*****s until they harden and stand to become erect sore peaks and I have to bite my lips to stifle a small wordless sound.

And as my toes begin to curl beneath the water, my breathing gets faster and faster and the faint, unusual throbbing between my legs isn't so faint anymore.

I do not even hear when the doors open and shut again.

His hands slide lower and lower and lower....

“Would her majesty prefer silk or cotton....”

My eyes fly open in a panic and I practically leap out of the bathtub, splashing water everywhere.

My legs are shaky and my knees are weak.

Sweet mother of Zeus what was that?

When I don't reply, Henette continues, taking my silence to mean she can pick whatever. "I shall set out the cotton. I fear the weather is rather hot today and a slip of cotton would be much preferable"

But I can barely hear her over my racing heart, the heart of a girl who had been caught doing something she most definitely should not have been doing

I need no mirror to know my cheeks are flaming red like I have been caught doing something wrong.

And maybe I have.

But if that is true then by all the gods, why had it felt so damn good?

"My queen..." Henette calls out cautiously at my continued silence.

"Hera?"

I clear my throat and breathe in and out in an effort to force my heart to calm its erratic beating.

Yet when I finally find my voice, it still does not come out as firm and guilt free as I would have like it to be. "I am okay Henette...just...drying off."

I wrap a clean cloth around myself and step out from behind the screen, hoping my face is no longer red and feeling like what I had been doing just moments ago is written on my forehead.

It is ridiculous to think this I know, yet I cannot bring myself to look directly at Henette for fear that she will somehow be able to tell.

And I am slightly relieved when she momentarily disappears behind the screen to clean up whatever mess I may have made during my bath.

I rub in the expensive oils of lavender and the creams mixed with crushed amethyst that she has laid out for me. Massaging them into my skin until it gleams and glows.

She soon reappears and helps me into the dress she had set on the bed.

As expected, it is beyond stunning.

The dress itself is a sleeveless and nearly backless affair made of a white airy material with a sheer, virtually transparent front designed with intricate lacy flowers and inlaid silver crystals.

It hugs my upper body and cinches at the waist before falling gracefully to my feet in a weightless haze of white gossamer fabric managing to somehow be both elegant and scandalous at the same time.

The cape she gives me is a milky off shade of white lined with silver embroidery and consists of a single band of soft material clasped around my neck and from it drapes gentle flowing fabrics of

the same color with cuts in them so that my arms and shoulders and even a bit of my back, lays bare.

I have come to the realization that the clothings of the dragon realm are more revealing than those worn by my people, especially when, as Henette had so graciously announced, 'the weather is rather humid'.

Should the royal house of Averia and its myriad of servants set eyes upon me now, they would be horrified.

It is almost funny to imagine the look on their faces.

And yet, I have never felt more beautiful.

As she did last time, Henette styles my hair in a loose bun, reddish orange strands falling daintily down to brush the base of neck.

I catch her expression in the mirror as she does this.

"You wish to ask something." It is a statement not a question and she does not deny it.

"My que....Hera, does all of Averia have hair like yours or is it a gift of the gods belonging only to the royal house?"

I avoid her eyes in the mirror's reflection, once again reminded of the lie I now had to uphold for the rest of eternity. I answer without truly answering "It is a gift."

She finishes quickly.

"The hour for lunch is long past but if her majesty wishes, I shall have something brought up for you."

I want to deny it, tell her I will wait for dinner but my stomach betrays me.

"I shall be but a moment." She turns away and leaves the room but not before I catch her hiding a laugh at my noisy stomach.

I glide towards the window.

Now that my head no longer hurts, I am anxious to see the sunlight, feel its heat on my skin and think about something...anything else than him and what I had done in that bathtub only moments ago.

It doesn't work.

Gods above, what had I been thinking?

Oh you know exactly what you were thinking. Want me to show you again, because I can? My mind chirps happily in response. ...I don't mind and you know you don't either.

I also don't even realize what I am doing, leaning out the window and craning my neck from side to side, my eyes sweeping over the busy castle grounds.

I am looking for him. I catch myself at the last second.

"Oh stop it Hera."

Luckily, Henette's reappearance saves me and my wandering eyes.

I sit on the bed as she drags in a cart with covered trays.

She uncovers it with a curtsy and a flourish. "Lunch is served you grace."

If I hadn't spent so many years slaving away in Averia's kitchens, perhaps I would have been overwhelmed by the sheer amount of food arrayed in front of me.

The delicious smells assault my nose and my mouth waters, my stomach growls louder.

Thick slices of freshly baked brown bread sit beside a bowl brimming with hot venison stew. Fruits and cheese arrayed in a small dish besides a platter of dates and raisins and roasted brown nuts. A tankard of honey mead brewed with spices and grapes and a jar of spiced warm wine.

I want to ask Henette to join me but I know she would only blush and act horrified again, so I don't and she busies herself with some mundane task regarding my clothes.

I must have been hungrier than I realized for I eat it all, every last bite.

Henette observant eyes watch me closely.

Only when the deed is done do I realize my mistake but it is much too late by then.

Her eyes narrow slightly.

"You are not the princess of Averia are you?"

My heart drops to the floor.