

The Dragon King's Substitute Bride Chapter 26

HERA

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

I freeze.

Here's the thing about Averia's royalty or any form of royalty in general.

They do things...everything really, differently than a commoner would, no matter how high bred.

From the minute the ladies of the royal house are old enough to sit at the dinner table, and dine in all the splendor and finery their position allows, they are taught a thousand and one rules.

Chew daintily, swallow completely before you drink, at no moment should you ever speak with food in your mouth, your elbows must never make an appearance on the table, you must use the soup spoon for soup and soup alone and heavens forbid you ever...ever used your hands to bring food to your mouth.

These distinctions are what make royals... royals

They are so glaring and observable, that every servant who works or has ever worked in a palace knows these rules themselves.

I know them and Henette most certainly does as well.

And in that short moment of eating, I have broken every single one of those rules and she has noticed.

Maybe I could have laughed it off or pretended to be angry at her because in my defense, I was beyond hungry.

What did it matter that I had forgotten to use a spoon, or a fork, or any kind of cutlery really.

But I am so completely thrown off by her question that all I can do is gape stupidly at her.

Or maybe it's because deep down inside I want someone else to share the burden of sustaining this lie with me.

She stares at me calmly, her voice not rising a single octave higher and she repeats her question. "You are not the princess of Averia are you?"

I bite my lip and look away. "Oh don't be ridiculous."

But it sounds false even to my own ears. “Whatever gave you that absurd idea?”

“The only people, who gossip more than maids my queen, are the palace guards and Ryders. And we have all heard the tales of their conquests in far off lands and with these tales, came stories of Averia’s royalty and their fair haired princess whose beauty is known to be greater than any before her.”

She is speaking quietly, almost as if she is trying to convince herself and not me.

“but your hair...it is far different than the stories say....”

“That doesn’t prove anything.”

But she continues speaking like I said nothing, raising her head to look me in the eye. “I for one thought maybe the rumors were mistaken but you...you do not speak like royalty, neither do you move like one and your hands...”

I glance down at them, open in my laps, my eyes trailing over the calluses and scars from years and years of scrubbing and scraping and serving.

Scars that a Princess would must definitely not have.

Her voice is barely a whisper. “Your hands...they look just like mine.”

I grab her arm, abandoning all pretence. “Oh Henette, you don’t understand.”

“I think I do.”

I shake my head furiously. I can feel my eyes brimming with hot tears threatening to spill over any minute. “No you don’t.”

I wasn’t just afraid for myself.

Doubtlessly, if she were to expose my secret to the other maids and word got out, the King would be forced to punish me for my crimes regardless or else his people would think him weak.

But I am also beginning to like Henette and if the Midas found out she knew, there’s no telling what he would do to her.

“Henette, oh Henette you must tell no one about this. You see...”

It is she who shakes her head gently this time, her palm coming to rest gently over mine. “You owe me no explanations your grace.”

“But...”

A soft rueful smile plays on her lips. “We all have our demons Hera, the things that haunt us...”

She bows her head. “For you my queen I shall keep my mouth shut.”

I can scarcely believe my ears. “Do you mean this?”

Her head bobs up and down in a quick nod, eyes dropping to glance shyly at her feet. “You no longer have to bear your demons alone.”

My voice breaks, the tears I have been trying to keep hidden find their way to the surface. “Henette...thank you”

She nods sharply one last time and without another word, sets about clearing the empty plates.

She doesn't look at me again till she leaves the room, pulling the noisy, squeaking cart behind her but I know I have just found my first real friend in a long...long time.

And it feels really good.

She doesn't return for a while after that and I am at a loss for what to do.

There is something at the back of my mind that is making me restless. Something I am not ready to acknowledge so I ignore it

I want to leave my room, to walk around and at least know the palace that I am to be queen of but I am unsure if I can do so.

For all I know there is another guard stationed outside my door again and the thought of being cooped up in here for another full day is going to drive me insane.

At least that is what I tell myself because I would never admit that I want to see him.

I pace around my room, back and forth, around the bed, to the window and back to the bed again.

I mean I know he doesn't care one wit about me but couldn't he be bothered to see if I was at least conscious again or even still alive?

Ugh, what does it even matter if he checks on me or not?

“Besides, it's much better this way. He makes me angry and afraid and I'd much rather be left alone than have to endure seeing him.”

But saying it out loud doesn't make me feel any less jittery.

Moreover, Henette must have sent word to him that I am awake already, so it really doesn't matter if he comes or not.

I do not even realize I am wringing my hands this way and that way with nervous energy until they start to hurt.

My mind keeps going back to that night in the forest, when he had collapsed in my arms, his weight dragging us both to the floor.

I'd seen his eyes change back from red to gold before they drifted shut and when they had met mine, the way he looked at me...

"Oh for Zeus' sake get a grip Hera. You can't possibly think..."

Mercifully a knock comes on the door before I can completely lose my mind.

"You may enter" I call out and the door opens with a creaking sound I am coming to loathe.

In comes the last person I expected to see.

"Leo?"

He bows low, his right hand on the hilt of his sword. "My queen"

Again with this 'my queen' business.

I know it is no use to tell the chief Ryder to call me something else. Something tells me he would sooner cut off his own tongue.

Besides, he may have tried to save me a few times but he also seems to be Midas's right hand man and that means I dislike him just as much.

Birds of the same feather and all that.

When he does not straighten immediately I realize quickly that he is waiting for my permission. "Oh...uhmmm...you may rise?"

Pretty sure I was not supposed to make it a question but luckily he straightens to his full height without so much as a raised eyebrow.

For the first time I take a good look at the man who appears to be the closest to my husband.

He is as tall as Midas is and almost as big too, but while the dragon king fills up a space, moving and brimming with a burning danger that consumes everything in his path, his chief Ryder is the complete opposite.

Leo with his short pitch black hair and silver grey eyes, sharp and piercing like he can see right through you, moves with a cat like stealth and calculative, deceptive silence.

The expressionless steel of his gaze and the brushing of tiny dark hairs above his upper lip lends an air of aristocracy and danger to the hard, handsome planes of his face.

He is the calm to Midas' storm and the exact kind of deadly danger you do not realize or recognize until it is about to kill you.

His eyes sweep briefly across the room before coming to rest squarely on me. "I am glad to see you have awakened your grace."

“As am I Chief Ryder.”

“Please, call me Leo your grace.”

The one who led me to prison... right hand to the man I hate.

I laugh; short and sarcastic. ‘I do not think so Chief Ryder.”

His expression remains unflinching and emotionless.

If he is here, could that mean...

I find myself craning my neck, looking behind him and he notices.

“His majesty is busy but he is glad to hear that you are now in perfect health.”

I turn away, masking my disappointment and move towards my window “You know Chief Ryder, somehow I highly doubt that.”

“Nonetheless, he has sent me in his stead.”

I glance at him, making sure to keep my face disinterested even if I am feeling the complete opposite of that. “Has he now?”

“I am to accompany you around the castle grounds. That is, if you desire to do so.”

This time there is no hiding the surprise or relief on my face and in my voice. “Is this true, am really free to leave this chambers?”

“My queen, I don’t think you understand, you are not his prisoner.”

I scoff. “You don’t say.”

“However...”

My ears perk up and I raise one cynical brow.

He does not look away when he speaks to me like Henette does and I find myself wondering how he got the little scar that sits just above his right eye, passing through and dividing the brow above it.

“However... you are never to walk around unaccompanied and once dinner is past, your door will be locked and you are not to leave your room until the morning comes.”

“You have got to be kidding me.”

He frowns as though confused. “‘Kidding’...I am afraid this term is unfamiliar to me your grace.”

I laugh bitterly. “That is Averian for you must be taking lessons from the court jester. You say I am not a prisoner yet I am to be locked up in my room at night and not allowed to move around the castle grounds without armed guards watching my every step?”

“It is for your own safety your grace.”

I scoff in disbelief.

He doesn't look away, his gray eyes holding mine in place. “Besides, you have proven to be a flight risk and a danger not only to yourself but to his majesty as well. So until the king can trust you, I am never letting you out of my sight again.”

The Dragon King's Substitute Bride Chapter 27

MIDAS

The edges of their swords clash against each other.

Sparks flying, their reflections distorted in the glistening silver of the blades.

The steel edges press against each other, neither giving in.

He is distracted, not really paying attention to the match and he sees the feint of the opponent's second blade a moment too late.

He is forced to step out of the way of the sword, breaking the face off.

They circle each other slowly, each waiting for the other to make their next move.

His eyes and his hands know what to do. Fighting is in his blood, it is instinctual and he does not really need to think about the motions, so his mind wanders; like it has been prone to do in the last few days.

He has been in a bad mood since that night.

And Er'gan's continued silence has done nothing to help him.

He spins suddenly on the tip of toes, his blade moving in a singing arc and driving the other's sword to the ground.

“Again.”

He announces and the opponent picks up their sword.

They have been at the training grounds since the break of dawn and it is almost past noon. But Midas isn't even close to satisfied.

He still feels the exact same way he did when he woke up this morning.

He ducks and parries, feints and attacks, relentlessly driving his opponent back yet barely breaking a sweat himself.

But no matter how hard he tries to focus, his mind always wanders back to that night...to her.

She had seen him...truly seen him.

Even with his hands wrapped around her neck and choking the life from her.

She had looked past the rage and the dragon trying to kill her and had seen the king beneath, had called out to him, ultimately doing what no one else could have done; handing him back the control of his body.

And what had he done the minute he was in charge again?

He had fainted...bloody hell fainted.

Midas had been alive a long...long time and never, not once in his entire life had he ever fainted.

Yet he had done so that night.

True, Er'gan had pushed his body too far by remaining in that form for too long and without his consent to boot.

And the tether bond getting activated had been the straw that broke the camel's or in this case, the dragon king's back.

The strain had been tremendous even for his dragon.

Yet fainting...of all things.

His face twists in disgust.

What in all of the 7 realms was next, would he begin to sew and knit as well?

He sends the opponents sword flying into the hedges that surround the fighting arena. Then he ducks under the swinging fist, dragging his attacker by the arm and flipping him squarely unto his back.

The chief Ryder grunts on impact. "No more your highness or I shall have to resign."

"Good, you are becoming way too familiar anyway."

Midas helps him up and Leo grins. "Ten out of eleven... You must be severely distracted your grace."

"I just let you have that one. What sort of ruler would I be if I do not let my subjects have a few crumbs off my table? Besides we all know how much of a sore loser you can be."

Leo dusts himself off and sheaths his swords. "Ah. For a moment there your grace, I could have sworn you were describing yourself."

"You dare address your king in such manner? I should have you flogged for your disrespect."

His best friend merely grins in response.

He sheaths his swords again, handing them to a nearby servant for cleaning and sharpening.

If it weren't for his chief Ryder and his council members with their never ending list of 'pressing matters' providing ready distractions, Midas would have probably driven himself insane with thinking.

It has been almost two days.

Why wouldn't she just wake up?

Leo glances at him. "I can tell from your expression that you are thinking about her again."

"I am not."

The chief Ryder shakes his head. "I do not understand why you bother. I can always tell when you're being less than honest."

"You know too much, does your offer to resign still stand?"

"You wound me my king."

This time it is Midas who smirks in response.

They approach the castle courtyard from the right, turning and heading towards the main entry way.

A guard runs up to them and bows low.

"My King... Chief Ryder."

Midas stops. "You may rise."

"The Ryders from the watch of Adarin and Rardath's borders are here with the daily reports." The guard announces.

Midas knows he needs to attend to them. His soldiers have ridden a long way and will definitely be exhausted.

But how can he focus on them and whatever report they bring when his mind keeps wondering to her.

His eyes of their own violation look towards the window in the tower that holds his...their chamber.

The chief Ryder touches his shoulder. "I shall check on her for you while you attend to your meetings."

He nods briskly, gratefully and the chief Ryder starts on ahead.

"Worry not your highness. I am sure she will awaken any moment now."

"Who says I am worried?"

"Of course not my King, how presumptuous of me. Please, forgive your servant's impropriety." Leo says with a bow as he walks away and Midas doesn't need to see his face to know he is laughing.

He heads towards the throne room, sending the servant on ahead to gather the men there.

"Er'gan." He calls out for the umpteenth time that day as he nears the doors.

As expected the dragon remains silent.

"Er'gan you did not know. You made a mistake and sulking in silence is not going to change anything or undo what has already been done."

Still nothing

Midas bristles but he understands.

When a dragon or weredragon is born they are born with only half of their soul and in time, the other half awakens in another being, usually dragonkin and very...very rarely, other kinds as well.

They called these beings Tethers.

A Tether is the other half of a dragon's soul and from the second the dragon finds them, they are bound to protect them, whether they want to or not.

Even if they are...as in Midas' case, yet to recognize the bond.

For weredragons, like the Ryders of the dragon realm, they usually end up married to their tethers but for normal dragons like Meirsul and like Er'gan once was, they remain beside their tethers.

Bound to stay and live next to them as loyal, faithful helpers for life, sworn to protect them even at the cost of their own existence.

Losing a tether is akin to death and hurting your tether is beyond taboo.

The effect is pain unimaginable, close to what Midas and his dragon had felt in the forest that night.

He knows that Er'gan had a tether once before, a tether it lost.

Midas does not know much of his dragon's past from before the time they were bound in the ritual so he does not know exactly how this happened.

But he does know that whatever had occurred to take away Er'gan's tether had been an event so devastating, it had almost destroyed the dragon itself, making it so weak, it needed to be bound to the once mortal dragon king to survive.

Everyone knows a dragon only gets one tether so Midas does not know how or why, but fate has given Er'gan a second chance.

And since they are bound together, indirectly making Midas a weredragon, it means Hera is his tether as well.

And Er'gan had almost killed her.

So yes, maybe part of his annoyance was directed at the dragon within him but it this is no reason for it to stay quiet and refuse to respond to him.

"Sooner or later Er'gan, you are going to have to come out and learn to deal with shame and regret just like the rest of us lesser beings."

And because he cannot help it, he mind links Leo.

"How is she?"

"The maid has just informed me that she has awoken your grace."

Midas does not recognize the feeling that courses through him as he hears this but he does not dislike it...does not dislike it at all.

Except now, even though he would never admit it, he wishes he did not have to attend this meeting.

He needs to see her with his own eyes.

But he is King of the 5th realm and tethered or not, his kingdom and his people come first.

So he lets the servant at the door fasten the cloak around his shoulders and place the crown on his head.

He walks into the throne room and they all bow low, remaining bent over till he ascends the steps and sits on his throne.

Not much has changed since the last time he got a report, the last time being yesterday.

Matters were still tense between the two clans of Adarin and Rardath.

But for some reason the pranks and provocations seem to have stopped almost as suddenly as they began.

He narrows his eyes and scratches his chin.

It does not make any sense and things that do not make sense tend to upset him because they more often than not mean trouble.

He straightens when they are finished. "You may leave. Rest well and prepare to return in two days to replace those who went today."

The Ryders bow and exit the throne room.

He mind links Leo again.

"Leo?"

"If it isn't the king who claims to not be worried"

"Your disregard for my crown is startling."

He can hear the chief Ryder's laugh, loud and clear in his ear.

"Fret not my King, your bride is safe."

"Have you told her?"

"Yes your grace."

"And how did she take it?"

"Not...very well. She has sent me out of her room."

The corner of Midas' lips lift in a half smile. Yes she is most definitely okay.

He leaves the throne room, his red cloak trailing behind him.

His feet have a mind of their own and he takes the turns and the passageways through his castle without even actively thinking about it.

By the time he is at the foot of the tower he can sense her already, can smell her scent.

How is it possible he has never noticed it before that night?

As he nears the door to their room, it gets stronger.

The bond pulling him in until his hands begin to itch with something he recognizes to be longing.

The chief Ryder stands up straight as Midas walks past but he doesn't even glance at him.

He pushes open the doors.

Standing in front of the window, framed by the golden orange rays of the setting sun and even with her back to him, she is the brightest thing in the room.

"Chief Ryder I thought I said..."

She stops mid sentence even though he has not said a word, her head turning sharply to face him.

"Hera..." Her name is like a whispered prayer falling from his lips.

She doesn't say his name, not out loud but her lips form the word.

And even though it probably isn't true, for one brief moment, Midas can convince himself that she has been pining all day to see him.

That the look in her eyes reflects the craving in his.

"I was beginning to think you had decided to escape me by refusing to wake up."

"And make things easy for you? I do not think so my lord."

He isn't aware that they are moving towards each other until they meet in the center of the room.

She looks up at him, gaze searching. "Are you really him this time?"

They are barely inches apart now.

Her scent is messing with his head.

He wants to pull her against him, to bury his face in her hair... to crush his lips against hers until he is drunk with the taste of her.

But instead Midas cradles her cheek in the warmth of his palm even though he hungers to do much more...touch much more.

He lifts her face to his so she can see the color of his eyes.

"You tell me."

The Dragon King's Substitute Bride Chapter 28

HERA

I know he is here before I even turn.

My heart starts to beat faster and my mouth is dry.

it's almost like I am afraid to look. Afraid to turn around and see that it is not him after all.

I exhale quietly in an effort to calm my racing pulse and turn around.

And when I do, I see him standing in front of the door, handsome and resplendent in his kingly attire.

He is looking at me like he has been waiting all day to see me.

I know that most likely is not the case but even knowing that doesn't change how I feel.

It doesn't matter that I hate him.

Not in that moment.

All that matters is that he is here and I want to run to him.

He calls out to me and I say his name in response.

At least I think I do but no sound leaves my throat.

I am gliding towards him, my feet moving of their own accord.

Then I stop, inches away from him.

I am almost certain that he is the Midas I know and loathe and not the one who had attacked me in the Elder forest.

But still, I find myself involuntarily remembering the feeling of his hands wrapped around my neck, squeezing the life from me, making it impossible to draw breath and my hands fly on instinct to brush against my throat protectively.

"Are you really him this time?"

I do not realize how worried I was about him until his warm palm cups my cheek and tilts my face towards his.

"You tell me." he says in that rough, deep voice.

Relief washes over me as I gaze into eyes that are mercifully no longer the color of fiery nightshade.

I have to fold my hands in fists to keep from stroking my fingers against the perfection of his face.

“Well seeing as you aren’t actively trying to kill me, I’d have to say you’re you.”

He scoffs lightly in disbelief. “You do not exactly make it very easy to not kill you.”

“Or maybe you, my Lord just need more lessons on restraint.”

His eyes darken and his voice becomes thick with barely disguised lust.

The pad of his thumb reaches out, feather soft, to trace my lower lip and it tingles beneath his touch.

“Trust me Hera, restraint is the last thing on my mind when it comes to you.

My eyes start to drift shut when he does this and I have to concentrate to keep them open and to force them to look somewhere else...anywhere else than at his mouth.

There is barely any space left between us.

Somehow we’ve been drifting even closer.

I can feel the heat reflecting off his body and mine buzzes in response.

If I stand on my toes like this, lift myself just an inch higher, just an inch closer and tilt my head just right I could probably...

He steps away and around me so suddenly, that for a few moments I am left blinking my eyes in dizzy disorientation.

Skies above, what is wrong with me?!

A second longer and I would have kissed him.

The worst part is I am unsure if my irritation is at myself for almost doing something so incredibly stupid, or at him for moving away before I could do said stupid thing.

I want to bury my head in shame but instead I turn around to face him just in time to catch the smirk that flickers on his face.

He did it on purpose the bastard.

He does not look directly at me but I glare at him anyway.

“I see the maid has attended to you.”

He walks around me slowly, his eyes covering every inch of my appearance in that quiet, serious manner one studies something they have only just purchased and I am instantly more aware of ever transparent, exposed part of my dress.

I feel like a piece of new pottery on display or a fattened cow at the farmer’s market.

But I find I do not hate it; the way he is looking at me, his brows drawn in total concentration.

If he stares any harder, he is going to melt these clothes right off with just his gaze.

You would like that wouldn't you Hera?

I shake away the thought just as he comes to stand in front of me again.

He says nothing but I hear the low sound of approval he makes in his throat.

I glance down at the rich, expensive dress and a sudden thought strikes me, causing me to frown in confusion.

"How did they know?"

He drags his gaze slow and burning, up the front of my body, lingering on my transparent, flowery torso before finally getting back to my eyes.

"How did who know what?"

"This dress, it is a perfect fit, as well as the one before it. How did the maids know?"

"They didn't."

"What?"

"After I brought you out of the cellars and you were unconscious, I rode out to a dress emporium in the capital with the castle seamstress and picked them out myself."

I glance down at the rich, beautiful dress. He picked this out for me...himself?

I feel myself blush for gods know what reason.

My hands fly to my flaming cheeks.

"That doesn't...how did you even know what size would fit me?"

He shrugs; a very uncharacteristic, human gesture that surprises me. "I looked."

"That is not an answer my Lord."

But he isn't listening anymore.

He takes a piece of the dress' full skirt between his thumb and forefinger, rubbing the airy material back and forth.

"Is it to your satisfaction, this...attire?"

I tilt my chin up towards him, not bothering to hide the amazed, bewilderment in my voice.

“Are you asking me if I like it my lord?”

His eyes lock on mine, unflinching. “Yes.”

He is close again.

Much too close and as expected, my brain and voice box choose this exact moment to abandon ship and my answer is a barely audible and very breathless “Yes.”

But he hears me, hears the way I say it and I can swear a ghost of a smile flickers across his face and in those liquid golden eyes.

“Good.”

Gods above I want to kiss him.

I want to stand on the tip of my toes and lay my palms flat against the strength of his chest and press my lips to his.

I want him to stop touching my dress and touch me instead.

To feel the broadness of his hands run down the small of my back when he pulls me closer.

And then just like that my mind wonders back to earlier in the day, to when I had taken my bath and to what I had done.

He tilts his head slightly.

“Your cheeks are getting redder by the second. Why?”

Of course his asking only serves to make me blush harder.

Remember how I said I would die before I let myself be sent to the cellars again?

Well I would rather spend another night in that accursed place than tell Midas I had touched myself thinking of him.

I glance down, avoiding his probing gaze. “Nothing”

His eyes narrow and he lifts my chin with one finger so there is nowhere else for me to look but at him. “Do not lie to me Kāmahi, Not anymore.”

“My lord I do not...wait, what did you call me?”

“It is Dragon tongue. It means one who has been touched by the sun.”

His hand brushes over my hair that glows a bright orange in the last rays of the setting sun.

The motion is a gentle caress that sends my foolish heart fluttering as he repeats the word, the vowels rolling and lilting. “Kāmahi.”

Maybe it’s the way it sounds, maybe it’s the way he says it, his voice a quiet, velvety whisper.

I don’t know which reason it is but I find that I do not dislike it.

Quite the opposite in fact.

Before I can tell him so, the bell tolls six times as the sun dips and disappears beneath the horizon.

He steps away, unclasping his cloak and laying it on the bed, questions about flaming cheeks forgotten.

“So Leo tells me he has delivered my message”

And just like that I am reminded of every reason why I hate him.

I bristle all over.

What am I doing, thinking and fantasizing about him, of all the beings in the 7 realms.

My family would be ashamed.

I fold my arms squarely across my chest. “He says I am not your prisoner.”

“You are not.”

He moves to take off his trousers and I turn quickly, whipping my head around so fast, it hurts.

He laughs but I don’t care.

I do not trust myself.

If I wanted him this badly fully clothed, then if perchance I were to I see him naked...

Gods of my mother...help me.

I swallow and force my mind back to the issue at hand.

“If I am not your prisoner then why do I need to be followed everywhere... to be locked in every night, forbidden from leaving this room.”

“It is for your own protection.”

I swing around in disbelief at his statement. “My own protect....”

And the words die in my throat.

Luckily he has already changed into a new set of trousers but it doesn't matter.

Even though I have seen him shirtless before, it still feels like the first time.

Skies...what were the gods thinking?

It has to be a sin for one person to look this irresistibly...desirable.

I force myself to regain my composure and muster up as much indignation as I can manage.

"And what in all the realms do I need protection from besides you?"

He ignores my comment, putting on a long sleeved, velvet blue shirt that accentuates the silver of his hair and the gold of his eyes.

"Well for one...given the events of the past few days, I'd say yourself."

"So I am not a prisoner but I am to be locked up every night like a common criminal?"

"And is that not what you are?"

It hurts to hear him say it even if it is the truth.

It actually physically hurts.

But he does not notice this. Or if he does, he doesn't care.

"I may not have ended your life Hera, or sent you to the cellars for your crimes but you came into my realm, into my castle under false pretences, attempting to trick and mislead me."

He clasps jewel studded iron cuffs on his wrists and places his crown on his head.

"The only reason I am not exposing you for the liar that you are is because were they to find out, my people will demand for your blood."

My heart twists at his words and his eyes when they finally meet mine are cold and unflinching.

"You may not be paying for your crimes with your life Hera, but make no mistake about it. You and your people lied and deceived me and tether bond or not those are two things I do not know how to forgive."

The Dragon King's Substitute Bride Chapter 29

HERA

“Join me for dinner.”

No one but the dragon King would call me a criminal and invite me to dine with him all in the same breath.

“I am not hungry.”

“It does not matter and there are no options. You will join me for dinner.”

I do not want to sit next to him, pretending to smile and trying to stomach food while having dozens of dragonkin eyes stare out at me like the latest attraction at the country fair; watching my every move, questioning me, judging me.

I just know I am going to slip up and someone will notice or even worse maybe like Henette, they would realize that I am not who I claim to be.

Just the thought of it is so terrifying; it makes me sick to my stomach with worry.

So I hide my fear behind defiance and fold my arms across my chest.

“And if I refuse?”

He glances at me with indifference.

“I do not care one wit for your hunger or your temper tantrums. I intend for you to meet with the rest of the castle today and you can either join me quietly or have the castle think their new queen is a lunatic that needs to be dragged to the table, kicking and screaming.”

I bite my lip and glance at my feet, resisting the urge to wring my fingers in distress like Henette does.

The words are scarcely out his mouth when a knock comes on the door and his head turns towards it.

“Enter.”

“My king” The servant girl curtsies so low her brown apron dress touches the floor.

“You may rise.”

She straightens but continues to address him with her head slightly lowered, not meeting his gaze.

“Everything had been readied my King and as per his highness’ requests, all are even now gathered in the great hall awaiting your arrival.”

He nods once, brisk and sharp. “Good. You may return Anith. We shall be with you all shortly.”

The girl curtsies once more and backs out of the room, pulling the doors shut in front of her as she goes.

He walks towards me, now fully dressed and it is difficult to remember exactly why I dislike him when he looks so damn good.

“Are you going to stare at me the entire time or are you going to decide if you would much rather walk yourself or have my men drag you?”

Ah there it is.

I frown, thinking.

Dragonkin all over the dragon realm, those in the castle not excluded would have a hard time swallowing the fact that they now have a human queen, a species they consider to be much weaker than they are.

Some would probably even hate me and maybe they would be right to.

But I am not about to make matters worse by creating a scene or appearing weak and end up losing their respect before I have even had a chance to earn it.

So I swallow my fear, set my mouth in a grim, determined line and lift my head up to meet his steady, observant gaze.

“I have made my decision. I’m afraid I might get too used to being carried around.”

He voices nothing but raises one brow in response as if to say we haven’t got all day.

I steel my nerves and take a deep breath. “Lead the way my lord.”

I am unsure if the expression that flickers across his face is relief or surprise at my sensible decision.

Mine however, is most definitely surprise when he offers me his arm.

I hesitate and he smirks.

“Relax slave, I do not bite.”

I resist the urge to scoff and roll my eyes. I had thought we were past this ‘slave business’ but it would appear I was wrong.

“So you say my Lord...so you say.”

I hook my arm through his and wrap my hand around the bulging hardness of his arm.

Skies, is this man made of flesh or steel?

He clears his throat conspicuously. “While I quite enjoy your fascination with my body, you may want to postpone feeling me up till after dinner.”

My cheeks flush and I force my fingers on his arm to stay still.

The doors open as if on cue and as we step out.

The chief Ryder is outside and he bows, before proceeding to take his position.

I am confused to note him walking behind me and not the king.

Although I know Midas does not really need any protection and is more than capable of defending himself, I would still expect that Leo would be by the king's side and his staying by my side instead, surprises me.

I turn my head slightly to look at him and meet the steely grey coolness of his gaze.

Maybe he notices the nervousness on my face, heavens know, but when our eyes meet, he winks.

He bloody hell winks and I am so astounded by this completely unexpected gesture, that I momentarily forget my panic.

I did not realize anyone in the dragon realm was capable of doing something as mundane and human as winking, much less the stoic Chief Ryder with his calm, expressionless face.

Yet for some unknown reason, his doing this makes me feel marginally better.

But it doesn't last very long and I am soon very worried again.

I gather up my gown and hold it in my other hand as we descend down the winding steps so I don't trip on it and fall flat on my face.

My pulse quickens as we walk arm in arm through stone arches and long castle passages.

All the torches lining the walls are lit, casting warm golden lights on the grey slate walls.

When the maid had said everyone was gathered in the great hall, she had well and truly meant everyone.

Because the only people I see are the castle guards who bow low as we pass by them and the only sounds other than the echoing of our footfalls, are the noise of crickets and night birds carried through the palace on the howling wind.

Then I begin to hear a faint buzzing.

It gets louder as we walk and I realize it is the far off sound of many people whispering and talking, wondering what in all the realms could have possessed the dragon King to take a human bride.

My palms are sweaty and my heart is pounding so fast I would not be surprised if he can hear it.

"You are nervous."

The words come out of nowhere, breaking into my jittery thoughts.

It is not a question but a statement and yet when I glance up at him, he isn't even looking at me, his gaze fixed straight ahead.

But I do not bother to deny them.

For one, if I try to speak, I do not trust my voice not to come shaky and besides he can most likely even feel the clammy, sweatiness of my palm, seeping through and wetting his sleeves.

The buzz is much louder now as we near two impossibly high, golden doors.

The doors are decorated with unnervingly realistic carvings of dragons, swords and strange reliefs of hand painted blue mountain roses.

The doors loom imposing and frightening even in the distance.

Each step we take brings me closer and closer until we stand right in front of them, inches away from whatever and whoever lies behind the closed doors of the castle's great hall.

My breath escapes my mouth in shaky puffs and my heart is throwing itself around in its rib cage in protest.

It does not think we can handle this and neither do I.

I barely notice him glancing down at me nor do I notice the fact that we are no longer moving.

"Hera..."

Gods above, I cannot do this.... I just can't.

"Hera..."

What if I fail, not just at keeping this dangerous secret but at everything else?

How do I be queen over a people I intend to get revenge on?

Maybe it would be better if they just found out now because to have to uphold this lie for the rest of my life...

He spins me towards him and grips my face between his palms, jerking me out of my panic and forcing me to look at him. "Hera."

My eyes are brimming with unshed tears of panic and I chew furiously on my bottom lip, nervousness seeping from my very pores and mixing with my sweat.

He reaches out and gently pulls my bottom lip out from beneath my teeth with his thumb before I can cut myself.

“Stop doing that, it’s distracting.”

I gaze up into the nectar gold of his eyes, knowing what I want to say but not how to say it.

He beats me to it, his eyes dropping momentarily to my chest as if he can somehow look through it and see the pounding organ beneath.

“I can hear your heart racing.”

Of course he can.

I shake my head slightly and drop my eyes to the floor. “I can’t do this...My lord I...”

“Hera...” He cups my chin and tilts my face towards his. “Look at me.”

And I do staring up at him through the haze of the tears that are dangerously close to falling because he is so very close and there is nowhere else to look but at him.

The pad of his thumb is still resting on my mouth, sending shivers down the rest of my body.

Those impossibly beautiful eyes hold me in place. “You are queen of the 5th realm, consort to the dragon’s throne and my bride. If anything, they should be the ones nervous to meet your approval.”

His words calm my erratic heart until I can breathe again without bursting into tears.

“My lord, what if I can’t do it? What if I can’t be the queen you want me to be?”

“You have to Hera...”

He straightens, taking the warmth of his body with him. “...There is no other choice.”

I take in one last deep breath and the doors are pulled open.

The buzzing stops instantaneously.

The great hall of the dragon castle does not vary too greatly from that of Averia.

It is an impressively large chamber with a high vaulted ceiling and three doors that led in and out of the vast room.

One to the far right for the servants bringing in trays and carts of piping hot food, one on the opposite end for the guests and whoever else would enter the hall and the one reserved only for the King.

It is through this door that Midas and I have had made our appearance.

We are standing at the top of a set of steps, and below it, at the end of the dark purple carpeting running down the center, are all the castle’s inhabitants.

Midas steps forward first and then reaches out to me.

It is now or never Hera. You either do this or you die.

So I place my hand in his and he pulls me into the room.

Dozens of dragonkin eyes stare out at us...at me.

Then just as suddenly, as if listening to a cue that only I am unable to hear...

They all bow.

The Dragon King's Substitute Bride Chapter 30

HERA

My younger brother hasn't always been my only sibling.

Before they died in the attack on our village, I used to be the first born of four children.

I had two younger sisters and we were born with barely a moon's harvest between each of us.

So in the years when my father was alive and we had enough to eat and little to nothing worrying our tiny little hearts, we would play in the large lush grounds surrounding our manor.

We would play house, sneaking out my mother's cookery pots to make and occasionally eat little mud cakes and bowls of sandy flower soup.

We would run around, skinning our knees and ignoring our mother's warnings as we played catch and sunflower hop.

And when my brother grew old enough to run around with us we would go on great, far off adventures to find buried treasure in our garden.

But our favorite game of them all had been playing royalty.

My brother would always be the prince, even when he could barely speak.

But my sisters and I on the other hand, would argue for hours on who got to be the queen; never princess, always queen.

More often than not, I am partly ashamed to say, I would win these screaming matches and my siblings would grudgingly place the crown of roses we had made on my head.

They would announce me before I entered a room, holding my dress behind me as I walked, bowing and rushing to do my every bidding for the entire afternoon.

Being queen was the highlight of my play times.

I would relish the feeling of having subjects beneath me willingly to do my every bidding even as they gave me stink eyes and threatened to tell papa on me.

And in my little heart I would wish to all the gods I knew and the ones I didn't that one day I would wake up and be a real queen, not with a crown of roses but one of pure gold.

For the Hera who had barely seen eight moon harvests, nothing could have made me happier.

How foolish I had been.

As I stand in the great hall of the dragon realm, looking out with wide, shaky eyes, staring at all the dragonkin of the castle bowing before me, I want to go back to the days when I used to be happy and shake the younger me until she ceased her foolish wishes and prayers to gods unseen.

She had no idea what she was asking for.

I chew on my lip furiously, unsure of what next to do.

I know bursting into tears or nervous, hysterical laughter would definitely be the wrong decision but that is all I want to do.

Then the warmth of a large hand encloses mine, anchoring me to the ground until I no longer want to run screaming and inadvertently reminding me that this was the price I had to pay to save my life.

I glance up at him and he nods; an imperceptible, barely there movement of his head but one that helps still my racing heart.

I let go of the breath I do not even realize I am holding.

Gods above do not let my voice fail me now.

He lets go of my hand and I look out towards the people who have remained in their position.

"You may all rise."

Now that my heart is calm and I have had a moment to collect my hysteria I see that there are not as many people as I had initially thought and I raise my head in an effort to hide how unsure I am feeling and appear more in control of my emotions.

They may be stronger and bigger, faster and more intelligent.

They may have taken everything away from me and my people but they would never have the satisfaction of seeing me weak.

I raise my voice an octave higher and it carries across the room, echoing in the quiet stillness of the great hall.

“I am Hera. Once princess of the human kingdom of Averia and now wife to King Midas the immortal. I am Consort to the throne of the 5th realm, Lady of the castle that sits on dragon’s mount and from this moment on... your queen.”

Before I can worry that I have perhaps said too much, Midas steps up beside me.

“I, King Midas of the dragon realm have decided this and if any of the inhabitants of my castle wish to show their displeasure at my decision do so now for if after this night I should chance upon or get wind of any sort of conferring or whisperings in disregard or disrespect to the queen, I shall treat the perpetrators as traitors to the throne”

No one stirs, no one murmurs, yet to my nervous ears, the unnerving stillness that seems to have settled over the hall is much worse.

The dragonkin who serve in the castle are clearly displeased but no one is willingly to risk the dragon king’s wrath by opposing his decision yet it is obvious in the way they cast furtive glance at one another that the news of a human queen is not one that falls pleasantly on their ears.

Their displeasure both frightens and pleases me.

Why should they be happy when my realm has been in turmoil for so long on account of their King?

As long as the truth of my identity remains a secret, their approval and acceptance mattered little to me.

So let them murmur all they want.

Three men step out from the crowd and my brows crease in a frown.

Surely they wouldn’t dare...

The men are weathered and small which is strange because as far as I know, dragonkin are never small.

Despite their bent over and wrinkled appearance, there is something ancient and powerful in the way they walk yet the keen brightness of their eyes is that of those half their age.

The only thing is the eyes though bright are a cloudy grey, almost like all three men are blind.

Yet they do not seem to have an difficulty stepping forward or looking directly at us.

A chill runs down my spine.

They all have bushy, white beards hiding the lower half of their wrinkled faces and they each carry finely carved wooden staffs.

All three men bow low.

And to my greatest surprise, Midas inclines his head in a gesture of respect.

I am unconscious of the way my brows draw together in confusion.

Who are these men and why does the ruler of the 5th realm bow to them.

“Dragon King.” They call out in unison.

Midas gaze is unchanging and when he responds his tone is flat yet filled with the quiet authority of one who knows he is in charge.

“King makers”

The one in the middle is the one who speaks next.

He appears to be the oldest and has the longest beard of all three men.

It flows white and curly to the centre of his round belly and curves slightly upward at the tail end.

As he speaks he strokes it...once... twice...stopping abruptly in the middle of the third stroke.

“You dragon king are the representative of the fire gods who rule over the affairs of our realm and your decisions echo their wishes.”

The one to his left speaks next. “And as the oldest of the castle’s inhabitants, we know that while we may not always understand them...”

The third one completes the sentence. “...far be it from us to question them.”

Their voices all sound the same. A low, slightly unnerving roughness that sets my teeth on edge and makes me want to clear my throat.

The one in the middle is speaking again “So on behalf of all who serve and are loyal to the dragon throne...”

He bows and the rest of the castle bows with him.

“...May your reign be long and wise oh queen.”

Midas straightens to his full height, somehow standing even taller than he already is.

“So let it be written, so let it be done.”