

The Dragon King's Substitute Bride Chapter 31

HERA

The castle servants all rise and begin to set about preparing the hall for the evening meal.

I take his arm again and Midas leads me down the steps.

A proper look around the room once again reinforces the extensive, boundless wealth of the dragon king.

Tall, gray pillars run on both sides of the large, rectangular room, holding up the high vaulted and impressively decorated ceiling.

There were many large windows lining the walls.

A few of which are open, bringing in the now familiar smell of blue roses and light drafts of the mountain's chilly air.

But a centrally placed hearth, filled with glowing, cackling logs, provides merry warmth and keeps the room from getting too cold.

The stone walls are decorated with bejeweled weapons easily worth twice my entire village's fortune and murals of battle scenes painted in rich resplendent colors design the floor of plaster and beaten earth.

Entertainers and musicians set up in a corner, ready to provide entertainment in between meals.

I do not assume to be an expert on the trappings of court in the dragon realm but no matter how wealthy he is surely dinner every night is not this fancy an affair.

He must have set all this up for me and knowing this causes my heart to skip a bit even though I am sure it has more to do with him maintaining a certain standard as king than making me feel welcome.

At the head of the vast room and in front of a large painting of the dragon king's crest, is a raised platform of the same grey stone as the walls and on it sits the high table and the only armless high backed chair in the hall.

And it is towards that raised platform that Midas leads me.

The room fills with the buzzing busyness of the castle's servants and guests as they serve and sit at the tables lined along the walls and covered in red cloth, made of a rich gleaming material that I do not quite recognize.

In the main area, the hard wooden benches for sitting one would have seen in Averia, have been replaced with plush purple pillows and the guests sit cross legged on them sipping from cups filled with honey mead and spiced wine.

But some things remain the same even across realms.

The seating arrangement is hierarchical.

Nobles and members of the council are seated closer to the royal platform.

The King's chair is also of a fascinating style I have never seen before.

Having its seating parts level with the raised floor and cushioned by ruby red pillows with golden tassels so that the king could also sit cross legged while resting his back comfortably.

There are also purple pillows extending out on both sides of the chairs for close, high ranking members of the king's court.

As we approach the royal platform, the room slowly descends into silence and everyone rises.

We and the small entourage that has somehow appeared behind us ascend the two short steps to stand behind the table.

Then just like back home, the chamberlain blows the horn that is the signal for dinner to begin and the room fills with the lively noise of everyone going about their meal.

I feel a slight tug on my sleeves.

A tall man dressed in a manner that immediately identifies him as the chief steward bows low.

"This way your highness..." He indicates towards a pillow two seats away from the King's chair and at the end of the table.

It is two seats too much.

I stand, lips pressed together wondering how to politely tell this tall, severe looking man that I do not want to sit there, next to some royal council member who I do not know and who I would most definitely end up embarrassing myself in front of.

But I know I do not have choice.

Even slaves like me know seating arrangements in royal gatherings are serious traditions that could not be broken.

Wars had been started over less.

So I resign myself to spending the rest of the night a nervous wreck beside some strange dragonkin and take my hand off Midas' arm.

Midas who has since been talking to Leo turns towards us instantly.

“Where are you taking her?”

The steward stops, glancing from the King to me with a stunned, unsure expression. “To her seat at the other end of the table my Lord.”

Midas frowns, a gesture that pulls his brows together and causes a single crease to appear in the middle of his forehead. “Why?”

“Be...because that is the queen’s place my lord?”

He probably hadn’t meant for it come out like a question but he also most definitely did not expect the king to be interested in something as mundane and established as seating arrangements that were probably decade old traditions.

Midas however isn’t about to just let this go. “And who decided this?”

The poor man looks helplessly around as if searching for the ancient ancestor who had decided the queen of the dragon realm should seat at the end of the table.

A bead of sweat rolls down the side of his face from beneath his wig and I can’t help but feel sorry for him.

So I do something I do not quite believe. I lay a hand on the arm of the flustered butler.

“If his highness wishes and it is of no great inconvenience perhaps I could be seated closer to the king.”

The part of my mind that never lets me forget, screams at me.

What are you doing Hera?

I wish I knew.

I realize that I should be trying to stay as far away from him as possible yet I have just done the exact opposite.

But at this moment, surrounded by all these strange faces in a room filled with dragonkin watching my every move and waiting for me to slip up, he is the only thing that is stopping me from dissolving into a pool of blind panic and worry.

Ironic because he is the very cause owing to why I even have a reason to be panicking and worrying in the first place.

And yet...I do not want to leave his side.

It is a madness that astounds even me.

The steward does not hesitate to take the out I have given him. “Of course, your grace. Anything for the king.”

I sit cross legged on the soft pillow besides his chair, hands in my lap. The position is uncomfortable because I am unused to it but I force my legs to adjust to it.

Midas sits to my left and seated immediately to my right is one of the old men with the long white beards that Midas had referred to as a Kingmaker.

And at the end of the table, in the spot that would have been mine is Leo.

The Kingmaker smiles at me and I smile politely back because while the man with his ancient, wrinkled appearance and sightless grey eyes frightens me to no end, it is the first genuine smile that I have received since my arrival in the dragon realm.

His two colleagues sit on the other side of the King and at the opposite end of the table is a woman I do not know.

She is strikingly beautiful with black hair that glistens in the warm light of the many candles that lend light to the hall.

Almond shaped green eyes that narrow cautiously as she watches me.

I know this because while she has taken great precautions not to make it obvious, I catch her throwing glances at me.

They are not glances of curiosity.

I am not sure what they are but I find I do not like them.

Servers bring the food in great platters, laying mouth watering delicacies before everyone.

There are foods I recognize and others I don't.

I observe Henette standing close by with a few other personal servants ready to be called should the need arise.

I try to catch her eye and smile at her but she doesn't glance directly at me.

A server sets a plate in front of me and I stare at it.

It is some sort of roasted bird surrounded by vegetables and a delicious looking sauce. It seems absolutely divine and my mouth waters.

The only problem is I have absolutely no idea what to do with it.

I pick up the knife set out beside my plate and try my best to discreetly copy what I see the others around me doing but it quite doesn't work out.

So occupied am I in my quest to conquer my meal that I do not even know he has leaned in till I hear his voice low in my ear and feel his breath hot on my neck.

“I promise you it already dead and will not feel a thing you do to it.”

“What?” I whisper back glancing up at him, as surprised that he has been watching me as I am that the dragon king has just made jest of me.

He smirks. “You cut it like you are afraid to hurt it.”

“I’m sorry my lord but not all of us grew up eating...roast peacock for dinner.”

“It is not roast...do you not know what to do?”

I bite my lip and look away. “I shall figure it out.”

I go back to my task but after a few seconds he groans.

“No more, I cannot bear to watch you mutilate this animal any further. Give it to me.”

He pulls my plate towards himself and proceeds to smoothly cut it into tiny bite size pieces, separating the meat from the bone without even touching it with his hands.

I lean in to try and follow the deft movement of his fingers but I get lost halfway.

He pushes the now neatly cut up pieces of meat back towards me.

“There. That is how it is done.”

I pout. “I would have gotten it eventually.”

He scoffs and that is when I realize that the hall has gone completely silent.

Everyone’s attention is fixed on the two of us and the dragon king who doesn’t even cut up his own meat but has it brought to his table already prepped.

Midas looks up and the noise resumes as everyone immediately pretends to go back to their meals.

I lower my head and lift a bite to my mouth and a moan escapes my lips before I can stop it.

Skies, if I got to taste food like this every day I might forget everything that brought me here.

But because the gods hate me, a piece of my food goes the wrong way and I begin to choke.

Tears run down my cheeks as I clutch at my chest coughing violently.

Midas promptly pulls me into his laps and that only makes me cough harder.

He lifts his cup to my lips and I wrap my hands around it and his hands holding it up, gulping down the wine greedily.

“Slowly, Hera...slowly. There you go.”

He lowers the cup gently. “Feeling better?”

I nod, and wipe my mouth with the back of my hand embarrassed at the sorry sight I must make.

I don’t even dare look out at the people below.

Gods they must think me a mess.

I resolve to promptly bury my head in shame the minute I am back in my seat and ever look up again.

Except he does not let me go.

Master of the castle or not, this is improper.

I look around cautiously expecting looks of shock at the king’s actions but everyone at the table and in hall continues their meal as if this is normal.

Everyone but the woman at the end of the table whose discreet narrowed eye glances are not so discreet anymore.

So it is strange for Midas to cut up my food for me but acceptable that he drags me unto his lap in the middle of dinner?

What an odd bunch.

I turn back to the dragon king who still has his arms wrapped solidly around my waist.

He wipes at a drop of wine on the corner of my mouth and suddenly it is all too much for my poor heart.

He must somehow notice because he smirks. “If I did not know better Hera, I’d say you are thinking about kissing me in front of all these people.”

My eyes double in size as all the blood in my body rushes to my cheek and my brain dries up, suddenly incapable of forming a complete coherent sentence.

“I...That is...”

“You are flustered.”

“And you my Lord have a knack for stating the obvious.”

His arms tighten around me, pulling my closer. “So am I right? Do you wish to kiss me?”

Yes. By the gods, a thousand times yes.

“If the idea is in my head now it is only because you my lord put it in there.”

His gaze, hot and heavy drops to my mouth. “Good.”

Luckily before I can lose whatever shred of sanity I still possess, Leo appears behind the king, whispering something in his ear.

Midas stops and listens. “Where are they?”

“They are in the throne room your Grace.”

He nods and the chief Ryder walks away.

He turns back to me. “I am afraid, dear wife of mine that we will have to continue this at a later time.”

A part of me actually has the nerve to be disappointed.

He sets me back in my seat and gets up, striding from the hall after announcing that all is well and dinner may continue in his absence.

The minute he leaves I feel utterly exposed and finish my meal in silence.

“Long live the queen.”

I turn towards the soft voice.

It is the woman with the black hair and green eyes who has been looking at me all evening.

I stare at her, unsure of what to say in response.

Sometime during the meal, the kingmaker by my side has left and now she takes his place.

“You know when I heard the king had taken a new bride, I did not believe it for a second. But now...seeing you...”

Her eyes look my up and down. “I am no longer surprised. Who can resist the lure of a shiny new toy, especially one as easily disposable as a human?”

I feel myself flush with anger at the thinly veiled insult. “I beg your pardon?”

She laughs and it is a beautiful sound I instantly detest because I can smell the manipulation beneath it.

“Oh dear me, wherever are my manners?”

I glare at her. “I was just beginning to wonder the exact same thing.”

She inclines her head. “My apologies, your grace. Please, allow me to properly and formally introduce myself.”

“Please, by all means.”

She smirks. “I am Minth your Grace...Midas’ mistress.”

The Dragon King’s Substitute Bride Chapter 32

MINTH

She enjoys the way her words shock the so called princess of Averia.

The way hurt creeps into those crystal blue eyes and steals the blood from her cheeks.

The poor, poor human simpleton had probably thought she was going to have Midas all to herself.

Maybe, somewhere in her tiny brain, she has even managed to convince herself that she could come to love the devastatingly handsome king irrespective of his cruelty and what the dragon realm has done to her kind.

Ah! Minth wants to laugh in her face and spit all over whatever fantasies she may be harboring.

Midas’ new bride.

Just thinking the words is enough to send her into a fit of blind rage and she struggles to keep the smile on her face.

When in truth, she wants to pick her cup of freshly pressed red wine and dump it all over the head of this...this... human w***e and afterwards, drag her kicking and screaming out of the castle and back to whatever wretched hole she may have crawled out from.

Before this night, Minth had heard the rumors like everyone else, curtsy of her handmaid Anith who would always bring the day’s gossips to her door.

Eagerly telling tales of this noble and that Ryder as she washed Minth’s hair and tended to her needs.

She would bring news of who had done this and who had said that and did her mistress know the chamber maid to lord so and so was now with child?

Minth did not out rightly encourage her maid’s daily reports to her but she did nothing to discourage her either.

Her position as King’s Mistress in the palace is a precarious one.

One she had gotten by staying ahead of all the other maids.

By shifting through their constant gossip; discarding the meaningless chatter and picking the bits and pieces of information that best suited her purposes and that had ultimately given her the life she now led.

And only a fool discards the ways that have proved beneficial to them in the past.

Yet when on the day of the king's return from battle in the human realm of Averia, Anith had come to her chambers bearing the rumor that while the King had indeed returned in good health, he had also brought with him a woman who would be his bride, Minth had slapped her.

Knocking the maid to the ground and splitting the poor girl's cheek open with her sharp nails.

"How dare you?"

Minth yelled till she turned red in the face, standing and spitting over the cowering girl, not caring that she herself was almost practically naked from just having taken her bath.

"How dare you peddle such foolish lies about the king?"

"But...but..."

"Another word from you and I will have you flogged and run out of the castle. If the king were ever...ever...to take a wife, it would be me..." She stabbed at her chest furiously and repeatedly with one finger "No one but me! Do you understand?"

The girl had been too scared to even respond and this had only angered her further.

Her eyes had darkened dangerously, her voice becoming deceptively lower.

"I said... do you understand?"

The girl nodded furiously, on the verge of tears.

Her tears had meant nothing to Minth. "Say you understand."

"Ye...yes my lady, I understand."

"Good, now get out of my sight."

Yet even after the maid had left, she could think of nothing else.

She had spent the rest of the day in a distracted rage. Snapping at her maids and carrying out the day's activities with unfocused anger.

She had dressed and prepared herself, telling her wandering mind that there could be no truth to the maid's words and that he would come to her as soon as the sun set.

He had not.

And Minth had nearly driven herself mad.

She sat in bed, wringing her hands, sitting down and jumping up, pacing frantically from one end of her room to the other.

And just when she would have snapped and gone to him herself, he had barged into her room.

She had pretended to be surprised but inside she was nearly faint with relief.

She didn't care about where he had been before now.

All that had mattered to Minth was that he was here now, with her and it could only mean nothing had changed.

She would make sure to have that maid of hers stripped and flogged for daring to upset her so.

Yet even though she had taken great care to dress up in her most seductive attires and the jewelry that she knew pleased him the most, he had barely even looked at her before dragging her towards him.

And when he kissed her it was different; even more distracted and detached than usual.

It had been the kiss of a man with something else on his mind.

Something else...or someone else.

But before Minth could come up with some sly, clever way to draw out the reason for his distraction, he had pushed her away and barged out of the room as suddenly as he had entered, barely even putting his shirt back on.

And he would not come back even when she called after him in tears.

Minth had exploded.

No....No....No!!!

She threw her vase to the ground and knocked over everything on her armoire, shattering and spraying glass everywhere as the bottles of her sweet scented oils were smashed into the walls across her.

This could not be happening.

Not after everything she had done to get here.

Not after everything she had sacrificed.

Even getting into the castle in the first place had been no easy task.

The gods had never given her anything.

Everything Minth has, everything she now possessed, she had to fight tooth and nail for.

Had to take it from the hands of those who were too weak to deserve what they had been so generously given.

When the castle steward had come calling to her tiny dragonkin village tucked somewhere in the hills, to handpick new castle servants and chambermaids, she had been beyond certain that luck would favor her.

After all, among all the girls in the village, she had always been the most intelligent, the prettier one, the more interesting one but even then the gods had turned their face from her and her sister was picked instead.

Minth had been livid but even in her anger she knew what had to be done.

She knew something the rest of her tiny village with its stone wells and quaint conservative life did not.

Something her sister had done that she did not want anyone else to know.

So Minth exposed it in the cruelest way imaginable, embellishing the tale where she could so that it appeared even worse than it was and when everyone found out, her sister became an outcast, no one would have anything to do with her.

And of course, going to the castle was no longer an option.

So Minth's family, desperate not to lose this rare opportunity, had sent Minth in her place.

But just slaving away in the castle, scrubbing floors and cleaning after royals was never Minth's idea of a good life.

It was only the beginning.

She had a sharp mind and even sharper ears.

She had been cunning and keen, willing to do whatever it took to get what she wanted and if anyone stood in her way, heavens help them, she would step all over their heads and snap their neck without a second's hesitation.

And it didn't take longer for her to move from chamber maid to laundress to even attending to the king and his council until she became the dragon castle's first female stewardess, the most important of all the people who served in the castle.

But even that had not been enough.

Not for Minth.

So when the news reached her ears that the royal council had began to press the young, attractive yet cruel king to take a bride or at least a mistress, Minth knew her time had come.

She began to make herself move visible, wearing inappropriate clothings for one who was supposed to be a representative of the castle and attempting to get as close to the king as she could without losing her head.

But the king would not even look at her.

He was entirely uninterested in getting a bride or even mistress for that matter.

And when the council would not relent, he flippantly asked them to get whatever or whoever if they so desired and that he did not care one wit who it was.

So Minth bribed and cajoled, begged and threatened and all she got were meaningless reassurances and empty promises from members of the dragon's court who were more interested in her sensual curves and supple body than they were in giving her what she wanted.

And eventually someone else, some council Lord's daughter who no doubt had been handed everything she ever wanted on silver platter, was given the promise and position as Midas' mistress and perhaps someday, could the king be convinced, his queen.

A position that Minth felt rightly belonged to her and her alone.

So on the night the new mistress would meet with the king, Minth had gone into her chambers as chief steward to make sure all was as it should be, bearing in her hands a tray laden with delicacies for the new mistress to satiate her hunger.

Come the next morning, the King would wake up in Minth's bed instead and the Lord's daughter would be sick for a long... long time.

There was never any official announcement as to why things had changed.

Some would say perhaps it was a bad fruit or unagreeable water that had caused the Lord's daughter's sudden illness and once in a while, the truth, like it tends to do would float in whispers down the castle's walls.

That the one who had taken the sick girl's place that night and snuck into the King's bed, had poisoned her.

But Minth did not care one wit for their gossip and suspicions.

As the king's official mistress, no one would dare say it to her face and Minth had finally gotten everything she so rightfully deserved.

Everything she had worked so hard for.

Minth did not care one bit for the king's affections. Not anymore.

She has since concluded him incapable of caring for anyone else, much more loving any being besides his dead parents.

So she is no longer interested in winning his heart.

But the position of consort to the dragon's throne. The queen's crown.

That...that belongs to her.

And if gods think she is about to let some stupid, miserable human princess who had probably never known what it meant to struggle, to starve and lack, to work until your hands bled.

If they think she would let anyone at all, take what is rightfully hers away from her...

Then Hades take her soul because Minth would rather die.

But not before she dragged the king's new wife right down to hell with her.

The Dragon King's Substitute Bride Chapter 33

HERA

She meant to shock me and it worked. Like a charm.

But I'll be damned if I let her know it.

"Midas' mistress is it?"

The woman who calls herself Minth, with her beautiful green eyes and long black hair that cascades in luxurious waves all the way to her waist tilts her chin up in gloating defiance.

I make a sound of pity in my throat, sighing and shaking my head. "You poor darling. How dreadful all that must be for you."

She did not expect this and she appears taken aback.

Good.

I know her type. I can tell from the glint in her eyes and the way she carefully measures her words before saying them.

Cruel and ambitious, she is the sort of person who would do anything to get what she wants, consequences be damned.

The kind of woman who would do anything to survive.

I know this because I am the built the exact same way.

The only difference is I do not walk all over others to do so and if she thinks she can come up to me and intimidate me because she believes me to be some weak, silver spooned princess, then by the gods have I got a surprise for her.

She recovers quickly, her eyes narrowing. “Whatever do you mean?”

I ignore her and I can almost hear how hard she’s grinding her teeth, struggling to maintain that fake smile.

“Your grace, what did you mean by that?”

I take a sip from my cup and glance at her like I had almost forgotten she was still here and only just remembered.

“Oh it’s just...” I shrug and smile ruefully “...we both know the king is a very cold man, and he does not strike me as the type to be very affectionate.”

I lean in and lower my voice to a conspiratorial whisper, as if talking to an old friend I am about to tell my deepest secret.

“As a matter of fact, between me and you, he softens very little around me, his wife. So I can only imagine how dastardly he treats someone as...disposable as a mistress. You must not lead a very happy life.”

She doesn’t stop smiling but I see the way her eyes dim and the way she sifts slightly in her seat and I know I am right.

I pat her hand gently before she can come up with an adequate response. “But not to worry, Now that I am here, he will no longer be needing you and you will be free to pursue whatever passions interest you. Who knows you might even choose to leave the castle entirely.”

At this point the smile has disappeared completely from her face and while it feels good, I do not know how much longer I can keep this up.

Luckily, the bell strikes 8 times and I seize on the opportunity. “Oh would you look how late it’s gotten. I believe I must go and prepare to meet with the king tonight.”

Skies, what are these words leaving my mouth?

I get up with more grace and poise than I feel and Henette accompanied by two armored guards appears by my side.

“Now if you will excuse me. It’s been absolutely delightful meeting you...”

I pretend to forget her name and smile sweetly. “...Mistress.”

And with that I proceed to leave.

The room falls silent as I descend the steps; a sea of not so friendly eyes following my every move.

I don't let out the breath I do not even realize I am holding until the large golden doors of the great hall swing shut behind me.

My hands fly to my chest and I close my eyes taking in and letting out short, shallow breaths.

Henette touches my arm hesitantly. "My queen...my queen are you alright?"

I only nod, not trusting myself to speak just yet.

Mistress... Mistress... He has a damn Mistress?!

Then what in all the 7 realms did he need the princess of Averia for when he could have so easily married his precious, beautiful mistress.

At this point I am now convinced he only had asked for the princess in order to spite the king of Averia, to rob my country of the only heir to the throne.

But why?

What could my people have possibly done to make him hate us so?

I collect myself and straighten my clothes.

Henette is still watching me nervously so I tap her hand gently to reassure her.

"Oh relax Henette, I am perfectly fine."

She nods and I glance at the two guards standing stonily behind us.

I suppress the urge to groan.

I do not need them; protection my foot.

He simply does not trust me.

I do not intend to run away anymore...not yet at least.

But he does not know this and to be completely fair, with all I have done in the past two days, I would not trust me very much either.

"I wish to return to my room."

She nods again. I know that in time I will come to learn to navigate my way around this castle that is to be my home or a long...long time but for now, Henette leads the way and I follow.

As we walk, I see her out the corner of my eyes open and close her mouth repeatedly like she wants to say something but is unsure about how to proceed.

Eventually I cannot stand it anymore.

“Henette, what in all the realms is the matter now?”

She bites her lip. “In...in the great hall, I saw you speaking with the lady Minth.”

Ah, the mistress.

Just thinking the word leaves a bad taste in my mouth and causes my stomach to clench with mild annoyance.

It is a feeling I recognize but refuse to admit because it simply cannot be true.

I am most definitely not jealous that Midas has a mistress.

Most definitely not.

In fact if anything I am relieved. He could have a thousand more concubines for all I care.

Which I don't.

I force my voice to convey disinterest and indifference, my tone dry and biting. “Ah yes, she is quite the delight isn't she.”

“She is dangerous my queen.”

I turn to glance at Henette. “Dangerous...and may I ask what she has done to warrant this assessment?”

She shakes her head. “Only rumors your grace, but you will soon come to find that in this castle, rumors are more often than not truer than the words spoken aloud. Her highness would be wise to avoid her.”

I stare at her a moment longer. “Why are you telling me this?”

“The gods forbid it but if something were ever to happen to you my queen, I would be sent back to scrubbing the kitchen floors. I detest those floors, you scrub and scrub but they never seem to get any cleaner.”

I smile slightly to put her at ease. “Ah, so your reasons are entirely selfish I see.”

She shrugs and says nothing more but she stops wringing her fingers and raises her head.

We ascend the steps of the tower in silence and as we near the doors of the king's chambers, unable to resist, I turn to the two guards who this entire time are yet to utter a single word.

“What are your names?”

The two guards turn their visor covered faces to each other and back to me.

"I am called Dorian my queen." His voice muffled by his helmet, the guard on the right is the one who speaks.

But when I turn to the other he says nothing and instead sighs and takes off his helmet.

I almost laugh. "Well, if it isn't my favorite Ryder."

Garwith says nothing. Staring at me with a mixture of wary suspicion and trepidation.

I realize Midas must have given him a tough time after my escape the first time and I almost feel sorry for him...almost.

"Well Dorian... Garwith, I believe I must bid you both goodnight unless of course the king has instructed you to stand over my bedside like evil spirits and watch me sleep."

Skies above, what if he has?

Thankfully the guards shake their heads and bow low.

Henette opens the door for me and I turn towards it but stop to look at Garwith who is still staring at me like I might push past them any second and attempt to hurl myself out the stairway window.

"Oh for Hades sake there's no need to look so traumatized Garwith, I promise I shall not attempt to escape...this night."

If my assurances relieve him, he does not show it and Henette and I close the doors to them standing unflinching in the same positions.

The fireplace has been set ablaze and the room as well as the sheets is pleasantly warm.

Henette helps me out of my dress and into another one of the flimsy night robes of this realm, except this one is a brilliant red color.

Why anyone would to be wearing something so...so...scandalous to bed is beyond me but it feels silky and smooth against my skin.

And when I look in the mirror, I see the way the attire hugs my curves deliciously while still managing to remain loose and free and I feel...powerful somehow, which is an odd way to feel when one is in a nightdress.

It makes me almost wish there was someone here to see it.

No, both someone. Him.

She also helps me loosen the bun my hair is held in and proceeds to comb it, carefully and gently.

Normally, the repetitive back and forth movement of the brush against my scalp should have made me feel sleepy but not tonight.

Tonight my mind is too busy to fall asleep. Much too busy.

“Henette.”

“Yes my queen.”

I narrow my eyes at her reflection in the mirror and she glances stubbornly away.

A brief smile finds its way to my face, she may not look it, what with the constant nervousness in her eyes and the hand wringing but beneath all that bowing is a back bone of steel.

But my mind wanders back to the one thing that has occupied my thoughts since I realized something.

I bite my lip nervously. “Do you by any chance know where the King might have gone? He suddenly disappeared in the middle of dinner.”

She thinks about it for a moment. “I am unsure my queen.”

I play with the single tear-drop pendant that rests against my skin, twisting it this way, twisting it that way. “Do you...do you think perhaps that he will be back...”

I am unable to complete my sentence because in truth I am unsure of what exactly I am asking.

Henette of course does not know this so she frowns in confusion as she finishes with my hair and goes round to draw the drapes closed. “Of course he will return my queen. Why wouldn’t he?”

I shake my head and climb into bed. “Never mind Henette, you may go now. I wish to retire for the night.”

She curtsies. “May the gods bless your sleep my queen.”

I nod as she leaves. “And yours as well.”

But even long after she is gone, I am unable to fall asleep.

And it is for one reason and one reason only.

Should he return soon which he most likely will, this would be the first night the king and I would spend together with neither party... and by that I mean me...being unconscious.

My stomach is a mess of nerves and my heart refuses to stop racing.

I cannot tell if it is apprehension or...excitement.

Maybe I should pretend to be asleep so that when he comes in he will not...

Don’t you dare. A part of me warns.

The part of me that has been unable to think of anything else since the first time he kissed me, and the time after that, and the time after... after that in the bathtub.

Only two kisses. Two kisses my body refuses to forget.

Except she isn't just refusing to push him out of my head, she is demanding more, so much more.

And when my eyes finally do drift shut, I swear I can feel his hands touching me in those places I ache to be touched, his mouth hot and needing at my skin, taking with reckless abandon.

Pushing me towards the edge of feelings I do not even know exist.

The Dragon King's Substitute Bride Chapter 34

MIDAS

She says his name.

Over and over again and he kisses the words from her mouth, drinking in the taste and softness of her lips.

He kisses her once, twice, three times...pulling her bottom lip between his teeth and teasing her with his tongue her until she is breathless with need and he is completely incapable of thinking properly.

There is an incessant sound coming from some place far away but he does not wish to acknowledge it.

Not when he finally has her where he has wanted her since the minute he first laid eyes on her; naked beneath him, her fullness spilling out of his arms, hair like fire splayed across the stark white of his sheets.

She presses against him and when he feels the hardness of her n*****s graze against his bare chest, he has to bite down on a groan.

Skin against skin, burning and sizzling, his appetite for her only increasing with each second.

A little sound of sinful pleasure escapes her lips and it is the most beautiful thing he has ever heard in his life.

His hands have a mind of their own, running eagerly down the sides of her body and back up again.

They want to touch everywhere...every inch of her all at once and he can't imagine what the gods were thinking when they gave him only two.

He cups the fullness of her breast in one hand, thumb tracing slow, languid circles around the little, stiff brown peak of her left n****e and she gasps against his mouth.

Gods above...

His mouth in return, hot and hungry dips to the hollow of her neck, where her scent is strongest, his body craving that intoxicating vitality that is her.

He can feel her hands tangle in his hair as he kisses her there, his teeth grazing against the creamy, satin vulnerability of the skin of her neck.

Her hands slide over his back, fingers digging in, leaving marks.

If she keeps touching him like that, he is not certain he can hold himself back for much longer.

The sound comes again, banging, loud and incessant, refusing to go away.

It is closer now, louder even but Midas will not listen.

Not now.

Gods above not now....

Her body flushes with need and desire and he pins her arms above her head, pressing her body into the bed with the large warmth of his and keeping her in place.

Firm but not forceful.

Just enough so he can watch what his touch does to her.

Watch the way her sapphire blue eyes darken with decadent desire when his fingers slide between her legs...towards the warm wetness of her center.

If he is to be completely honest, the heavens could fall through his roof right now if they so pleased, but unless the gods were about to strike him dead, nothing in all the 7 realms could...

His eyes fly open and he lets out a string of angry curses that do not bear repeating and would have given his mother a heart attack were she still alive.

Sweat soaked sheets lay half rumpled and twisted around his limbs and he lies in bed for a few moments simply blinking up at the ceiling, his breath coming out in short, ragged bursts.

Emotions flood his body in sudden unexpected waves, mixing and churning together until he can no longer tell which is which and what exactly it is that he is feeling.

Anger? Confusion? Unadulterated s****l frustration?

What... in all the realms... was that?

A stupid question considering he knows it was a dream.

But it had been unlike any dream Midas has ever had.

This one had been different somehow, more...real.

He can still feel her, still taste her.

He groans again.

Definitely s****l frustration.

The knocking on the door that had dragged him out of his...dream, forcing him back to reality is still there, a consistent banging that threatens to tear his aching head apart.

It does nothing to help his sour mood and fantasies of chopping off the head of whoever is at his door, takes the edge off the dream for a second.

Throwing the covers off, the king groans for what feels like the thousandth time that morning and moves to get up.

But then he feels it, the way his pants have tightened around his crotch.

Oh for Hades' sake.

He sits back on his bed and attempts to calm down.

It would not do to greet whoever it was beating his door with a hard on the size of a steel rod.

Although maybe it might shock them into learning a very valuable lesson; that unless you wished to be greeted by the sight of an extremely turned on, extremely angry king, one does not go banging on doors so early in the morning.

What if it's her?

It is a thought so sudden in its wildness that it shocks him and does nothing to help him or the other very eager and quite stiff part of his anatomy.

Especially because he finds himself hoping it is true.

He breathes in and breathes out very slowly.

Breathes in and breathes out...in....out...in...

It does not work.

Not in the least bit.

The dream would not leave the fore front of his sub-consciousness.

It might as well have actually happened and the knowledge that it did not isn't just frustrating. It is pure, liquid torture.

He can still feel the luxuriant lushness of her lips against his, can still taste the sweet tanginess of her skin, can still hear the absolutely immoral way she had said his name.

He glances down at the still very present evidence of his arousal.

"Well if you keep that up you're going to be trying to 'calm down' for a really long time."

Oh look who finally decided to show up. Days of silence and this is what brings you out?

"Because I know if I do not intervene you are going to be sitting there staring at your crotch the rest of the day."

Midas makes a bad face.

I really do not want to be having this conversation with a five thousand year old dragon.

"Five thousand, six hundred and thirty seven. And I am in your head dragon king, if any one should be repulsed and appalled it is I."

He is about to say something snide in response but another voice, this one from behind his door, interrupts him.

"Your majesty if you do not open this door or bid me entry, I am going to assume you were attacked in the dead of night and are even now lying in a pool of your own blood."

"You will be lying in a pool of your own blood soon Leo if you do not cease that incessant knocking."

The chief Ryder pushes open the doors of the chambers where the king had chosen to sleep and bows low.

"It is way past six morning bells your grace. The steward is beside himself with worry."

"Pray tell chief Ryder, what use is it being King if I cannot even wake up when I damn well please."

"You may wake up whenever you please your grace, as long as you do not blame me for not waking you earlier besides, we both know the concept of rest is foreign to you."

Midas groans and Leo grins. "Dare I even ask how your night went?"

"No."

"Very well. I still however do not understand why you chose to sleep here in the west tower instead of the royal chambers."

Midas frowns, getting up to stalks angrily to his drawers.

“Like you said Leo, it was a choice. It is my castle and I can sleep in whatever room I so desire, yours included. Besides, I am unused to...having someone else in my bed.”

“Liar.”

Be quiet Er’gan.

Leo pretends to understand, nodding his head gently. “So this choice of yours then, it has nothing to do with a certain red haired queen?”

He stops and turns to glare at his closest and only friend. “I am already awake Leo. Remind me why you’re still here again?”

Leo stands up straight and says nothing but Midas can see the laughter in his eyes.

He bows and heads towards the door. “I shall inform the steward that you are in fact not bleeding all over the fur rug of your room and have the maids bring up hot water for your bath.”

“Never mind the heat, have them bring it up cold.”

The chief Ryder raises the brow with the scar so far up his forehead it almost touches his hair line and Midas growls.

“One more word from you Leo and I shall have you drawn and quartered.”

The man leaves without another word but Midas can still hear him laughing as he walks down the hall.

His closeness with Leo surprises him most times.

One because it had happened without his even knowing it and two because he is in fact over a hundred years older than the chief Ryder.

Dragonkin, although mortals, age very slowly and though appearance wise, he and his chief Ryder looked to be around the same age, there were many years between them.

Leo’s father had served Midas’ father and his father before him and when the king had died, he had served Midas as well.

Leo, his son had been born scarcely 25 years ago.

A little boy with grey watchful eyes and a quiet curious intelligence.

He would not speak until spoken to but he was forever getting underfoot and following his father and in turn Midas everywhere they went.

Even then, though Midas would never admit it, he had been fond of him.

Entertaining his never ending questions and his persistent presence even if sometimes it irritated the king to no end.

And when Midas had saved his life in the incident that had taken the former chief Ryder's life and gave Leo the scar above his right eye, the bond between them had grown; welded stronger by the similar loss they now shared.

Two dragonkin orphans left to fend for themselves.

Leo of course had chosen to follow in the footsteps of his father, and when his dragon had awakened on his 18th birthday, he had joined the Ryders guild with no hesitation.

He had been good, eerily so for one so young and he rose quickly and steadily through the ranks.

And when he wasn't training or on missions, he was by the king's side.

Until Midas without even knowing it found himself beginning to rely on him. It was as close to trusting another being he had ever and would most likely ever get.

Appointing him as Chief Ryder hadn't been a decision Midas even needed to actively make.

No one else would have sufficed.

The maids knock on the door and he bids them entry.

He opens his window as before he goes behind the screen and the cold bath, aided by the sharp bite of the mountain's morning air helps.

But he should not have bothered because by the time he is putting on his shirt, his mind wanders back to her, like it has been doing for the past two days since he introduced her to the castle and it is like the cold bath never even happened.

It was going to be a very long day.

The Dragon King's Substitute Bride Chapter 35

HERA

I most definitely had not started my day intending to end it hiding under the desk of the dragon king like some pesky palace rodent.

But then the earlier parts of the day had not gone according to plan either so this is no big surprise.

The morning itself had deceptively started just like the one before it.

For the second time since my introduction to the inhabitants of the dragon's castle, I had awakened with my head on a soft feather pillow, sandwiched comfortably between soft silk sheets and a warm blanket.

And just like the night before, I had found myself imagining that I was ten again.

But I knew from the previous day that it would not do to begin the day by wallowing.

So I had pushed down my yearnings and fantasies of home.

I had not even needed to glance at the other side of my bed to know that just like the morning before this one, it would be empty.

Once again I had awakened alone.

He never came.

Not last night. Not the night before last.

He never showed up. At least not in reality.

But in my dreams...gods above in my dreams.

Just thinking about it had been enough to get me all hot and bothered again.

And even cowering and hiding as I am right now, it still is.

But then I had known Henette would be at my door any second and she would ask me why I was turning red again and I did not think I could have come up with a convincing enough excuse so I tried my best to shake away the thought which of course had only made it cling harder to my mind.

Like clockwork Henette had knocked on my chambers and cautiously pushed open the door at the stroke of the sixth bell.

She had not been surprised to see I have been awake for quite a while and did not need her to rouse me from sleep; not now that she knows the truth.

Slaves in Averia awake at the crack of dawn and six long moons of continued servitude, has conditioned my body to do the same.

If she noticed that my husband the king had once again failed to make an appearance in our chamber, she said nothing of it.

It had not stopped me however from wondering where in all the realms he had gone to.

I knew he had not gone on a trip because while I had indeed seen him ride off on his horse in the morning the day before, I had also seen him return to the palace that night.

Yet in two days, the only times I had seen the dragon king were through the window of my tower.

And even then he never once looked up at me.

If I did not know better I would have assumed he was avoiding me.

Where was he even sleeping?

Minth...

A chill spread from my heart to the tip of my fingers.

“Surely he wouldn’t...Oh who am I kidding of course he would. She is his mistress after all and I am nothing but the slave who tricked him into marrying her.”

If Henette had heard me talking to myself she again made no mention of it.

I had tried very hard not to think about it; to at least pretend that it did not bother me.

But as Henette helped me dress, my mind had eventually wandered back to him no matter how many times I tried to steer it away, because forcing yourself not to think of something only makes you think of it even harder.

And the realization that not seeing Midas bothered me this much, had only served to bother me even more because I should have been happy to be away from him.

Yet I was not.

Now that I think about it from my delightful little hiding place with the dust and cobwebs under the King’s desk, the trouble itself had not began with Midas’ continued absence.

For while it may not seem like it, the dragon king still frightens me more than anything, I have only grown accustomed to hiding my fear behind snide words and sarcastic comments.

And not seeing him in two days had somehow made it marginally easier for me to begin accept my fate.

It is a madness of the highest order.

On the one hand, it is easier not to see him because he scares me and on the other hand I can not help but be disturbed by his sudden desire not to even look at me.

And the fact that he might be spending the nights with his mistress.

Arrgh, Hera. Stop it. If he doesn’t want to see you then you do not want to see him either.

His chief Ryder however had meant it when he said he was not going to let me out of his sight.

After Henette had helped me into the day's attire, a simple silk dress of the lightest of blues with a long slit in one side and wide voluminous sleeves, I had decided I wanted to see the castle grounds that were now to be my home.

But no sooner had I opened the doors that Leo appeared, insisting on accompanying me against my express, vehemently demonstrated disapproval.

I had even told him I would have preferred the still sulking Garwith and would much rather chew on rusted nails than have to spend my entire morning being watched and baby sat by the king's right hand man.

His response; "If that is the case your grace, I believe the castle marshal can be convinced to send up a bag of said nails. Would you prefer them long or shortened?"

Delightful man.

So with no choice in that matter I had resigned myself to spending the better part of my morning wandering the dragon castle grounds with Leo by my side.

That is until I caught myself sub-consciously looking for Midas around every corner.

Leo himself was no help.

Granted, in an effort to pretend like I did not care one way or the other, which I still don't, my questions had not been direct inquiries, but I could tell he had understood my intentions because he kept smirking at me.

But he refused to be forthcoming about the king's whereabouts or whether it was indeed true that Midas was trying to avoid me and would only give sarcastic unclear comments in response to my questions.

In all honesty, he is even more sarcastic than I am and as he led me around me around the castle he made me want to pull out all my hair as well as his.

Which, in hindsight is how I assume most people feel about me.

Maybe that is why, even though I would rather swallow my own tongue than admit it, I had not entirely hated walking with him as much as I thought I would.

I had even found myself shocked into laughter once or twice.

There is also the added benefit that he does not terrify me like the golden eyed suddenly elusive dragon king I happen to be married to.

But no matter how hard I tried, he still would not tell me anything about Midas or where he was.

So I had forced myself to stop looking for him and maddening chief Ryder or not, I was determined to spend a pleasant, strangely beautiful morning, touring and trying my hardest to commit to memory the many turns and twists of the dragon's castle.

And for a while it had not be entirely horrible.

That is until we walked past the royal fitting room and I decided out of curiosity to take a tiny peek.

It is here my troubles began for if I had simply walked past that room, I would not have had to do what I did that resulted in my now having to hide under a desk like a rodent.

My heart pounding in my chest because I know I am not supposed to be in here but unable to escape because I can see through the gap between the desk and the floor that I am no longer alone in the room.

But how was I to know that things would end this way?

Or that the seamstress upon seeing me, would delightful grab my hand in a vise like grip and pull me into the room.

Leo, traitor that he is, had somehow managed to conveniently make himself scarce between my opening the door and my being dragged inside.

Perhaps ‘never letting me out of his sight’ did not include when I was about to be tortured by the castle’s seamstress.

Thinking about it now, I think he must have been sent to lure me there.

It’s amazing really; the wonders panic at being caught in a awkward situation can do for your understanding.

The seamstress herself on first appearance gave no indications of the horrors to come.

She was a rather round, jolly looking woman with white hair packed in a bun and half-moon spectacles balanced on a rather cute button nose.

I had tried to tell her I was fine, that I had enough clothes already.

She had stared at the dress I had on, picking it between her fingers and wrinkling her nose in what can only be described as disgust.

“Surely her highness does not mean these...”

I looked down in confusion at my perfectly fine, perfectly beautiful clothes, my voice uncertain at the appalled look that had suddenly appeared on the woman’s face.

“What is wrong with them?”

“Oh nothing, your grace.” She said while still clutching at her chest and looking at me like I had mortally wounded her.

“It’s just... those clothes were bought in the market when we were pressed for time and to think that some...some commoner might be even at this moment wearing the exact same dress as her majesty.” she had sucked in a deep breath as if in actual physical pain.

“Oh it simply will not do. Besides, his highness has expressly instructed that you must be fitted with an entirely new wardrobe.”

“But...”

She maneuvered me unto a dressing platform. “I promise it will only take a moment.”

It had not taken a moment.

And I spent the better part of my day on my feet being measured and poked and prodded with surprisingly sharp pins and frightening long needles.

How something so tiny could inflict so much damage I have no idea.

To make matters worse I was being pelted entire time with questions that to my non-princess, entirely clueless head felt like I was before the grand council fighting for my life.

Silk or satin...pink or coral... high neck or low...dinner gown or marquee ball.

Gods above, it had been enough to drive a girl mad.

So I began to plot my escape...again.

And given my track record with running away, it’s no surprise things ended up the way they did.

I pretended to be interested in a bale of lace hanging in the inner room and then by ‘accident’ somehow knocked over an entire stack of baskets filled with tons of equipment.

The seamstress and her assistants, startled by the clatter, had promptly come in to investigate and make sure I was alright.

And when they had been sufficiently distracted, I snuck around them, hiked up my...commoner dress and made a mad, definitely un-queen like dash for the door.

There were startled cries of surprise and calls of “your majesty” but I refused to even look back.

In case they had decided to come after me brandishing those weapons of mass destruction they deceptively called needles, I snuck into the first open door I found.

Closing it shut behind me and pressing my ear against the wood, I attempted to slow my breathing.

I could hear them calling out for me and a burst of laughter had escaped my lips.

It was almost like I was a child again and for the first time in a long while; I had felt something other than fear.

Their voices faded and I looked around.

The room I had stepped into is a study of some sort and It had been immediately obvious exactly who it belonged to.

I remember how I had walked slowly around the room, my fingers brushing against the oak shelves that lined the walls; filled to bursting and bending under the weight of heavy, leather bound tomes.

I had immediately noticed that the room, like the man who owned it is immaculately in order.

Not a quill out of place.

His cloak had been laid out on the back of the chair behind the large stone table that appears to be built into the right wall and is almost entirely covered in stacks and scrolls of parchment paper, pots of ink and fine feather quills all neatly arranged in their place.

Who knew being a king involved so much writing.

There was a large book lying open in the center of the table, like he had been sitting here only seconds ago and had merely stepped out a moment before my arrival.

If only I had escaped a second earlier, I might have...

I sighed away the thought and reached for the book that had most definitely been none of my business.

And that is when I had heard the voices; two men, coming closer with each passing second.

I had recognized only one.

The one I had been aching to hear since I woke up two days ago.

“Midas...”

The voices were nearer now and as I looked on in horror, the door knob began to turn.

So I did what every self respecting queen caught snooping in their husband’s study would also have done in that moment.

I hid.

The door had opened the very same second and someone, most likely him, had entered into the room.

Hiding had seemed like a stroke of brilliance at the time, crawling under the table and making myself as small as possible.

Maybe he simply wanted to take something and leave.

But now, with dust in my nose threatening to make me sneeze and what I am almost entirely certain is a spider in my hair, I am beginning to seriously question my decision making abilities.

Suddenly through the gap, I see his feet turn and begin to head back towards the door.

The gods be praised. Please let him be going away...let him be...wait...what was that click?

Did he just...lock the door?

Of all the rotten luck.

His feet stop inches away from. my hiding place.

“So how long until we stop pretending I do not know you are hiding under there?”

The Dragon King's Substitute Bride Chapter 36

MIDAS.

He catches her scent, sweet and heady, before he even opens the doors to his study.

He has not seen her since the night of the introduction.

Though he would never admit it, would die before he says it out loud, he has been avoiding her.

Because if he has to sleep with her in his bed, he is not certain he can keep his hands to himself.

And the way she looks at him, that mixture of fear and hate...having him in her bed is probably the last thing she wants.

He steps into the space and his study is saturated in her scent.

He does not see her, but he can hear her hiding under his desk, trying not to breathe too loudly.

What in all the realms is she up to this time?

She does not realize that he knows she's there, that he can hear how fast her heart is beating all the way from where he's standing.

He walks towards the door and locks it.

Her heart rate triples and he smirks in wicked fascination.

“So how long until we stop pretending I do not know you are under there?”

She says nothing and he takes a step forward.

“Am I to assume you intend to remain there the entire time or just until after dark?”

Still no answer.

“Hera...”

She sighs. “It is hard to pretend I am not here if you keep talking to me.”

“That is kind of the point. Come out.”

“No.”

Maddening, deliciously frustrating woman.

“Answer my question then.”

“If I give you an answer will you pretend you never saw me and unlock the door?”

“No.”

“Then what does it matter?”

He advances nearer, enjoying the way her heartbeat increases with each step he takes closer to her. “You’re right, it does not. Nonetheless I am curious about one thing.”

“Which is?”

He stops directly in front of the table, leaning on it and folding his arms in a relaxed gesture of nonchalance. “How in all the realms, does hiding under my work bench, factor into your escape plan this time around?”

“I wasn’t...”

He hears her shuffle to her feet and he turns around to watch her crawl out from beneath the opposite side of the table.

“I was not trying to escape.”

It has been two days. Only two days.

Yet even with cobwebs in her hair and a smear of dust across her left cheek, seeing her causes something in his chest to tighten and release.

It makes him want to take a step back just so he can drink in the sight of her properly. A man whose thirst is finally being quenched by something he did not even know he needed.

He raises one brow at her words. "Is that so?"

"I really wasn't."

He makes a show of thinking her answer over. "Does this then perhaps have anything to do with the castle seamstress and her assistants who are even now running all around the palace grounds hunting for you?"

She lowers her eyes, her cheeks flushing a pretty shade of pink and Midas bites back a groan at the not so faint stirrings of arousal he instantly feels.

"In my defense, they were attempting to poke holes in me."

The corners of his mouth tilt upward in amusement, bordering on the edge of a smile but not quite reaching it.

"So you wish for me to believe that this is not all part of some elaborate scheme on your part to run away from me again?"

She tilts her chin up at him. "Believe me or not dragon king, it does not matter to me either way..."

Her eyes meet his and hold. "...I am done running."

He feels it instantly, that acute, intoxicating flush of sinful, primal craving made even worse by the tether bond.

She is right there, as if taunting him, so very much within touchable distance.

Were it not for the table between them Midas would have...

He cuts the thought off before it can form fully and folds his arm across his chest instead, desire making his voice rough.

"So what exactly are you doing here Hera?"

"I...I..."

"At a loss for words I see... I did not think that was possi..."

"You never came."

He frowns slightly. "What?"

She looks as surprised at the outburst as he is but she repeats it again, her voice tiny and quiet this time. "You never came."

"Never came where?"

She lowers her head and exhales softly. "Every night I go to bed thinking you'll be there when I wake up yet the morning comes and half the bed is cold and empty. You never come."

His feet are taking him around the desk, pulling him towards her.

His heart pounding just the tiniest bit faster. Surely she couldn't mean...

"You wanted me to come?"

She bites her lip, suddenly finding the surface of his table immensely interesting. "I...I do not even know what I want anymore."

He stops at the edge of the table, just short of reaching her and tilts his head. "Are all humans always this fickle and indecisive?"

Her head snaps up at his words. She narrows her eyes and squares her shoulders, her voice dropping many degrees to land at ice cold. "Forget I said anything. I apologize for my sneaking into your study without permission..."

She curtsies; she has never curtsied to him before.

"I shall take my leave now."

She bows her head slightly and readies herself to walk away.

Except the right side of the stone slab that serves as his table is built into the wall and so the only way to get away is by passing around the table on the left side, the same side where Midas' presence has left little room in the way of movement for her.

Of course he could move out of the way, take one small step to the side so she doesn't have to brush up against him on her quest to leave but he does not do so.

Does not want to.

Yet she attempts to pass any way.

Turning to face him so she can walk sideways and slip through and around him with the little place left.

But as she does so, her front brushes up against him like he knew it would.

The bodice of her gown snags on the roughness of his shirt causing her to tug at it and Midas clenches his jaw at the jolt of liquid lust, hot and burning, caused by the friction between their bodies, that sends blood rushing somewhere below his belly.

And he might have left it at that, his hands balled up in fists at his side.

He might even have opened the door and let her pass.

If she had not done what she did.

If when their bodies touched, she had not made that sound of sharp breathless surprise.

But she did and his entire being is set on fire.

He moves without even thinking about it.

Lifts her off the ground, ignoring her little squeal of surprise and turns around to promptly place her on the table.

His arms planted on the table on either side, hedging her in.

She stares at him lips parted, blue eyes wide at the suddenness of his actions.

“What are you doing?”

Her hands are gripping the hard muscles of his arm and his biceps tingle wonderfully beneath her touch.

She is attempting to control the breathlessness in her voice but he can see the pulse jumping erratically in her neck.

And he knows...just knows from the way her skin flushes and her tongue flicks out to wet her lips that he isn't the only one feeling everything.

Which of course only makes his own appetite grow and the part of him he has been trying to keep under control the entire day goes rock hard that same instant.

When he eventually does speak, his voice does not sound like his voice.

It is rougher, deeper, the voice of a man tempted with the one thing he wants most in the world; a man on the very edge of his restraint.

“Do you mean that?”

She swallows, her eyes staring at something on his chest, almost like she does not quite trust herself to look up at him.

“Mean what my Lord?”

Her hands are moving on his arm. Tracing small circles with her fingers and making tiny gripping motions she probably isn't even aware she is doing.

Movements he however is painfully aware of because they are making it harder and harder for him to keep thinking...to keep talking.

She pulls her bottom lip between her teeth and his gaze heavy with pure unadulterated lust drops to it.

A nervous habit she has that threatens to drive Midas to the brink of his sanity.

He touches it, pulls it out from beneath her teeth with his thumb, resisting the urge to take it in his mouth and taste it.

“Stop that. I’ve told you it’s distracting.”

She lifts her head at the dark gruffness of his voice, her eyes holding his ransom and there is no denying what he sees there.

Gods above...

She wants him...she wants him almost as badly as he wants her.

He leans in closer, enjoying the way her breath quickens when he presses their bodies against each other. “You say you do not know what it is you want...”

He tilts his face towards hers, his eyes dropping to that pretty, inviting mouth. “...Shall I help you decide?”

She doesn’t say anything but her hands slide higher on his arms, over his shoulder and towards his neck, her lips part in anticipation and her eyes begin to drift slowly shut.

But just when he would give in, his control about to snap, a loud knock, exactly like the one from this morning echoes around the room.

She jumps as if coming awake, her hands falling from his shoulders and just like that, the moment is broken.

Midas does not remember if he has ever hated a sound more in his life.

He straightens and takes a step back to lift her off the table. She wobbles on her feet and he reaches out on instinct, arm around her waist to steady her.

“In the future...”

His reaches out to remove the white, silky strands from her hair. “I would prefer...”

Thumbing wiping at the smudge of dirt on her cheek. “...if the queen of my castle is not found hiding under tables like a common thief.”

She gazes up at him, all traces of earlier gone like they were not just moments away from tearing off each other’s clothes and shrugs, a movement only she somehow manages to make graceful.

“What can I say my Lord, must be the echoes of my criminal past you are always so quick to remind me about.”

He narrows his eyes at her flippancy but whoever is at the door knocks again before he can say anything.

“Are you going to open the door and let them in or...?”

His grip tightens around her waist.

He is pulling her closer again without even knowing it. His face dipping towards hers. “Or...”

“Your majesty, are you in there? The kingmakers are here and they request your audience.”

He groans and she smirks up at him which of course only makes him want to kiss her even more.

But Midas is a king with a strong sense of duty who prides himself on his control.

So he pulls on that control with all his might and steps away from her.

He opens the door and the guard bows low.

“Show them to the throne room and inform them I shall be with them shortly.”

“Yes my King.”

When he turns back, she’s already behind him.

She hands him his cloak that he didn’t even realize she had taken and he holds out the door for her sending a mind link to her two guards to meet her on her way.

She bows her head and starts off in the opposite direction.

“Hera...”

She turns back to look at him.

“The seamstress is hiding out by your door waiting for you to return.”

Her eyes narrow in suspicion. “Why are you suddenly on my side?”

He fastens the cloak around his neck and adjusts his crown.

“I am not. I simply do not want you hiding under any more tables if I’m not there to find you.”

She laughs, sudden and unexpected and Midas feels something in his chest fall defiantly into place.

The Dragon King’s Substitute Bride Chapter 37

MIDAS

He does not hate the gods but he does not necessarily like them either.

Ancient all powerful beings who sit high above in the 7th realm, altering and meddling in the lives of all the other beings they deemed as lesser than them.

It also goes without saying that with his occasional hard headedness and knack for doing whatever he darn well pleases, he is not the favorite of the gods or their messengers.

But one did not have to like them to listen to them.

Besides feelings aside, only a fool turned a deaf ear to the words of the gods and Midas is anything but foolish.

He mind links Leo as he heads towards the throne room.

The Chief Ryder's response is instant.

"Your highness"

"The kingmakers..."

"I heard. They have not requested an audience in years. What do you think they wish to say now?"

"Damned if I know. Perhaps the gods have grown bored with how well things have been going in the dragon realm and wish to once again drag us into their messy schemes."

His chief Ryder laughs at the nearly blasphemous words of the King. "Careful my Lord, you do not want the Fates to cut your life thread shorter out of spite."

"Let them try. I believe they will find their shears are not sharp enough."

Leo laughs again. "I shall await your arrival at the entrance to the throne room"

Midas does not know how long the kingmakers of the dragon realm have been alive, with their long white beards and wrinkled skin.

No one really does.

But everyone knows they have been walking the 5th realm for a long, long time.

It is also no secret that they are the messengers of The Fates.

The Fates or The Apportioners are three in numbers, the three daughters of Nyx, the Night god.

Three spinners responsible for assigning individual destinies at birth; Clotho the Present who spun the thread of life, Lachesis the Future who measured its allotted length and Atropos the Past who cut it up with her shears.

Their words are law and once they decided a being's fate at birth even Zeus has no power to overturn their decrees.

But like all the gods who occupy the 7th realm or the heavens, the Fates think themselves too important to communicate directly with the beings whose lives they control and so they had messengers in all the realms.

The kingmakers are their mouthpiece to the dragonkin of the 5th realm and as Midas walks towards the ancient, powerful beings who await his audience in the throne room, he wonders what message of doom they have brought with them this time.

Leo is standing by the door like he said he would.

"The Ryders from the two clans have also returned with their daily reports."

"I shall hear whatever news they bring afterwards."

The guard heralds their entrance and Midas ascends the steps to sit on his throne, Leo standing tall and motionless by his side.

The three men bow in unison, their voices one smooth timbre, like water flowing over a rock.

"Long live the King."

Midas inclines his head, a small gesture in respect to their position as messengers of the gods.

"I would wish you the same but considering how long you three have been roaming my realm I do not think you need it. You may rise."

"King Midas, It warms our hearts to see you are in good health."

"It has been many years. I was surprised to see you three at the royal introduction two days ago. You know funny thing is... I do not remember inviting you."

The short, bent men stand like they always do with the messenger of Clotho the Present, the one with the longest beard standing in the middle, the other two by his side.

"The gods have been watching you all this time dragon king..."

"I would prefer if they did not."

"And the Fates send their greetings."

"You will forgive me if I have not been bothered enough to think about them in the same manner."

The one in the middle who seems to be their official spokesperson this time smiles and the weathered skin around his grey unseeing eyes crinkles at the edges.

"We have missed your fearless wit King Midas."

He smiles too but it is a cold smile and it does not quite reach his eyes.

“I am afraid I cannot say the same Arydian. You are here which means they must be bored. Tell me, what new ways have the gods thought of to meddle in the lives of their creations this time?”

“What the gods do dragon king, they do for the good of those they made.”

He does not bother to hide the scoff. “You know what else is funny? I think you actually believe that.”

“The gods are on your side Midas.”

“The gods have and will always be on the side of the gods. I tire of this old man. I am certain the messengers of the Fates did not request an audience for the first time in a hundred and fifty years simply to bring greetings.”

He straightens in his chair. “So what do they demand now?”

Arydian leans on his cane. “The Fates do not send us with demands this time around oh King; Only advice...and a warning.”

Midas leans his cheek against one hand and says nothing in response, quietly watching the three men.

Igor, messenger of Atropos the Past is the one who speaks next.

“The human bride you brought into the 5th realm.”

Midas does not flinch or even bat an eyelid but he is instantly more alert.

He can feel Er’gan perk up as well and when he does speak, his voice is an octave lower, all the earlier brevity gone from his tone.

“What about her?”

“You know the customs of our people Dragon king.”

He raises one eyebrow at Igor, messenger of Atropos the Past. “I did not think it was necessary. We have already been wed.”

“In Averia perhaps, but not before the dragon gods and until the binding and bedding ceremony is carried out in accordance to our traditions, the dragon throne will not accept her.”

Midas’ eyes narrow as he observes the men before him, his gaze shrewd and calculating.

“I do not believe for one minute that the only reason you are here is to tell me I have to have a wedding.”

Arydian meets the King’s eyes with his cloudy grey ones.

“She is your Tether isn’t she?”

“She is.”

“But do you know who she really is?”

A surge of protectiveness, sudden and intense runs through Midas.

He does not want the gods taking an interest in her. It is never a good thing when the gods take an interest in anyone.

But he shows nothing of this on his face. “The Fates do not ask a question they do not know the answer to. So you tell me Arydian, who is she?”

Arydian and his colleagues glance at each other.

Midas does not like the look that passes between them. Does not like it all.

Finally Arydian turns to him.

“If you do not know then it is because the Fates will it to be so and we will not interfere with their work.”

A bark of laughter, harsh and bitter escapes his lips. “Of course”

The day the gods began to send clear messages, would be the day Midas gave up his throne.

They preferred to cause problems, send their messengers with vague riddles of doom and watch the beings they made scramble to solve them.

And his many years alive have taught Midas it is no use trying to convince them to tell more than a portion at a time.

So he simple nods once and sits up straight. “I have heard your words wise ones and I will heed your advice. The binding ceremony shall take place in two days.”

The men nod in response to his words and bow again. “You are a good King Midas and the gods are pleased with you.”

Midas tilts up his chin and gazes down at them “I do what I do for my people not for the gods or their pleasure.”

“Be that as it may, you have it either ways.”

They turn to leave but before they can get to the door, Midas calls out to the oldest of the three men, the one called Arydian.

“You said you brought advice and a warning. You have only told me one of those things.”

The kingmakers and the king stare at each other in thick, charged silence.

His question was aimed at the messenger of Clotho the present but the one who speaks next is Elian, messenger of Lachesis the Future who has not said a word this entire time.

His voice is an eerie, croaky whisper and he makes no attempt to raise it yet it carries across the room as well as it would have had he been shouting on the top of his voice.

He stares at the king, eyes unseeing.

“The skies are dark and the clouds are heavy with the whispers of rain and the echoes of far off thunder. A storm is brewing dragon king. A storm that will shake your realm and all the others with it. And at the center of this storm lies the human girl you have brought into your castle. Be very... very careful.”

And without so much as another word, the three Kingmakers depart from the king’s presence.

Their words however remain in the throne room long after they are gone.

Midas can feel his Chief Ryder looking at him.

“Speak Leo before your eyes drill holes in the side of my head.”

Leo stares straight ahead. “What do you intend to do?”

“I intend to do nothing.”

He does not need to glance at his chief Ryder and royal advisor to know he is raising the brow with the scar, the only indication of his surprise at the king’s words.

“Nothing?”

“Nothing” He repeats.

“Tell me Leo, of what use is a warning from the gods if our fates and destinies have already been decided at birth by the very same gods?”

Leo says nothing like Midas knew he would.

“What will happen, will happen, with or without our contribution and I will not be ruled by fear. Send in the Ryders with the daily reports from Adarin and Rardath. “

“Yes my King.”

“Oh and Leo... have word sent across the realm and inform the chief Steward that we have a royal wedding to prepare for.”

“Of course, Your Majesty.”

The chief Ryder leaves the room with a bow.

Midas sits alone in silence, the only sound echoing in the room are those of his finger drumming quietly against the hand of his throne.

The dragon stretches inside of him.

“A storm eh...”

“So it would seem Er’gan...so it would seem.”

Midas wonders vaguely if this has anything to do with the problems between Rardath and Adarin’s clans.

A hundred and fifty years of relative peace and now... this.

“Fine. Let the gods bring what they will...we have been getting bored anyway.”

The Dragon King’s Substitute Bride Chapter 38

HERA

His scent.

I can smell it the minute I awake.

It is the scent of a man who spends most of his time in the crisp freshness of the outdoors; that delicious mix of pines and musk...of spice and danger.

Yet when my eyes eventually fly eagerly open, the other side of the bed we should be sharing is still empty like it has been for the past few days.

But it is not cold, not this time.

There is an indentation on the pillow beside my own and the sheets on the side I was so careful not to roll towards, are rumpled like they would be had someone slept there.

I did not see him, did not even hear him.

He must have come in when I was already fast asleep and left before I could wake up and see him, which is a feat considering my eyes had opened even before the morning’s fifth bell.

He must have been very determined that I not wake up to him sleeping in bed beside me.

I am not sure how I feel about this, but there is no question about it now.

He is definitely avoiding me.

And heaven alone knows why.

This realization should not bother me as much as it does yet I find myself just the slightest bit discomfited by the notion that he would think it necessary to stay away from me.

Not that I blame him.

Not after what I did.

His words, cold and unflinching push to the surface of my mind.

“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.”

So was it really that big of a surprise he hated me so much, he did not wish to even sleep in the same room as me, never mind the same bed.

But I push my worried musings to the back of my mind because for all his actions and cold words, he had been here.

Had slept beside me in this bed...our bed and left behind the traces of his scent to torment and tease me.

And I feel the stirrings of something pleasant blossom stubbornly inside of me.

But just as suddenly as the feeling appears, it is pushed almost immediately aside by something else.

Guilt...sharp and stinging chokes out whatever tiny happy feeling had been trying to push its way through the gloom of my heart.

I cannot allow myself to forget his crimes against me, against my family, against all of my kind.

Neither can I dare to forget what it is I have to do to avenge their death and all the heartache he and his Ryders have caused.

It is just hard to keep a firm grasp on how much I am supposed to hate him when half the time I see him all I want him to do is push me against a wall and kiss me and touch me and take me with a rough fierceness as if both our lives depended on it.

My mind, because it loves to torture me, flashes back to yesterday, when he had caught me in that entirely awkward situation, hiding under his table.

By the gods I had never felt more embarrassed in all of my very short life.

Then I think about what had happened next, what he had done when I tried to leave.

The way he had wrapped his big, strong arms firmly around my waist and lifted me, breathless with surprise unto that stone table.

All traces of my earlier embarrassment were instantly forgotten, to be replaced with something else; something much more instinctive in its decadence.

I think of the way he had looked at me and the way it had made my belly clench with a feeling I recognized to be desire.

The way his gaze heavy with what could only be described as lust, plain and simple had moved from my lips, to my eyes and back to my lips again, almost like he was asking for permission to take my mouth in his.

By all the realms I would have let him.

The force with which I feel the memory is sudden and fierce, it's effect instantaneous almost like it's happening right now and I find myself having to press my thighs together.

To try and still the pulsing wetness that I am starting to feel between my legs.

Okay easy now Hera,

When did I become this wanton woman ruled by needs and cravings for a man who makes me so angry it defies belief?

I groan and toss and turn in my bed, my limbs tangling and pulling at the white sheets as I try to force my mind to think of anything else.

To get the image of a golden eyed king with eager hands, deceptively soft lips and a hard muscled body out of my head.

It does not work.

And soon, just pressing my legs together is not enough, not even a little bit.

The ache between my legs is refusing to go away.

I can feel myself getting wetter by the second.

I am not entirely certain I understand what my body is doing, all of this... these feeling are new to me.

My body wants him and it feels like there is something missing, a craving of fullness that the very centre of me wants...no not wants...demands.

And I do not know how to stop it.

So I bunch up my blanket into a hard ball and place it between my thighs, separated from my sensitive wetness only by the undergarments I had slept in.

I am not sure exactly what it is that I am doing but I simply want to still the persistent aching there.

And at first, for a very brief second, it works.

But then I am thinking about yesterday again and what would have happened had we not been interrupted by that knock.

I am thinking about how his mouth would have felt against mine.

Hot... possessive... all shades of passionate unrighteous bliss.

I imagine him trailing kissing down my neck...going even lower...grazing the top of my breast...taking one hard, slightly sore n****e into the heat and wetness of his mouth...his tongue...

I am beyond wet by this point and I move against the thickness of the cloth I had placed in that place between my legs.

Delicious shivers shoot down the entire length of my spine and I gasp in surprise.

I have never felt this before; this flush of unadulterated sinful pleasure.

So I do again and again and again.

Pressing my core against the hardness of the balled up cloth and moving my hips up...and down...grinding out a steady rhythm that makes it difficult for me to keep my eyes open and causes my breath to come out in short, soundless gasps.

I am moving faster now...breathing harder....

My back arches, lifting off the bed and my toes curl as my body chases wave after wave of elusive carnal pleasure.

I don't even realize how hard I am gripping the sheets, or that my breathless gasps have turned into not so quiet moans.

Hands, my hands, slip beneath my night gown, over the curve of my stomach, the slopes of my breasts, grazing and teasing at the hardness of my n*****s.

I take them and roll them between my fingers and let out a cry at how good it feels.

I can feel myself getting closer and closer to something.

A peak of blinding pleasure I have never felt before so I ride faster...harder, my hips lifting off the bed.

Gods above...

"Midas..."

His name falls from my lips over and over again.

I am aware that I am no longer quiet, but I don't care. At this moment nothing else matters.

Eyes closed, my body on the very brink of losing control, I do not even hear the door open.

Do not see him stop suddenly, dark golden eyes, watching me please myself.

"Midas..."

He groans and I hear his sword fall with a loud clatter to the ground.

My eyes snap open.

But it is too late... I am unable to stop, not when I am this close.

And seeing him standing there, watching me, is the last push my body needs to tip me over the edge and head long into the complete ecstasy of my first o****m.

My eyes meet his and hold as wave after wave of intense sensual delight crashes into me, until I am unable to keep them open anymore.

Unable to think or say anything besides his name.

"Midas."

I fall on the bed, my knees weak and shaken, breathless and utterly spent.

Without even touching me, he has managed to take me to the highest level of s****l satisfaction I have ever felt.

It takes a minute, maybe even longer for me to begin breathing again, to slowly return back to normal.

But as the fog clears, with it comes the startling realization of what had just happened, what I had just done.

And who had seen me doing it.

Sweet mother of...

My eyes fly open in horror.

But there is no one else in the room.

And maybe I could have managed to convince myself that in the throes of my bliss I had somehow managed to conjure up the object of my desires and that he had not really been there.

Until I see the sword that had fallen to the ground while he stood there; watching me.

My heart drops a thousand feet into my stomach.

No...No....No.

“Oh dear Zeus, what have I done?”

The Dragon King's Substitute Bride Chapter 39

HERA

“I Hera, once daughter of Lord and Lady Edwards of Averia and now wife to King Midas the immortal hereby solemnly swear that I will never ever again set one foot outside of this chamber.”

“Your highness!”

“Never, ever... neither in this life nor in the life to come.”

“Surely you do not mean that!”

“Oh on the contrary my dear Henette I most certainly mean every word. I shall never leave this room ever again.”

“My queen, please do not say things like that. What in all the 7 realms is prompting this radical decision?”

I turn beet red again and proceed to promptly bury my head further into my pillow, dragging the covers over my head to hide my shame.

For there are no other words to describe how I am feeling.

I mumble sorrowfully and incoherently into the feather filled pillow.

“I am sorry your highness I cannot hear you.”

“I did not intend for you to.”

“At least tell me what it is that ails you so, maybe I can be of help.”

Unless being a chamber maid comes with the power to reverse time or erase a person's memories I very much doubt it.

Henette has been attempting to get me out of bed for at least the past hour but I refuse to be convinced to do anything more than lie here and wallow in self-pity.

She tugs on the blanket I am holding over my head. "Oh come on Hera, whatever it is surely it cannot be that bad."

"You are only saying that because you do not know what I have done."

"Then tell me."

"Oh but I can't. " I peek at her from under the blanket. "You know this is partly your fault anyway."

She drops the blanket as if shocked and steps back, mouth falling open like I had just accused her sneaking behind my back and sleeping with Averia's pope.

"My fault?"

I sit up. "If you had come to wake me earlier you might have stopped me before I could...do what I did."

"But...but your highness it was you who said you did not require me to wake you and instructed that I sleep more and knock at seven bells instead of six."

I narrow my eyes. "So did you sleep longer?"

She looks away and I smirk. "Ah, so you see, you could have knocked earlier."

"But I was only following your instructions!"

"Well stop listening to me. If this morning's events are anything to go by I should not be trusted to make any decisions for myself."

She sniffs. "My apologies your grace, you have my word it will never happen again."

I glance at her. "Knocking at the 7th bell or listening to me?"

"I shall use my discretion."

You would never guess she is being sarcastic from her bowed head and joined hands were it not for her dry, slightly miffed tone.

I almost laugh.

Sarcasm from Henette. Who would have thought it possible?

"Be that as it may, I am still never leaving this room again."

She moves towards the door. "Shall I fetch the king then, maybe he can...?"

My eyes widen in sheer panic and I nearly leap at the poor girl. "Oh gods no...anything but that."

"Then I do not know what you want me to do Hera."

Great now I've managed to upset Henette as well.

I hold unto her arm. "Oh Henette you don't understand."

She sighs. "No my queen I do not, because you have given me absolutely nothing to go on." Her hand covers mine gripping her arm. "You can trust me my queen, you know that."

I let go of her and sit back on the bed, hands in my laps. "Oh it was horrible..."

Lies.

It had been the most wonderful, exhilarating experience of my altogether meager existence.

"...I shalln't be able to look him in the eyes ever again."

This however is very much true.

Henette drifts towards me.

"Whatever it is your highness I am sure it is not as bad as you think."

I think back to when my eyes had opened to see him standing there.

I do not even know how long he had been there, eyes dark, watching my hands tease my body to a climax.

And the look on his face, almost as if he was in pain, chest heaving gently with deep, drawn breaths of what I am certain was anger because what else could it be?

And to make matters worse I had said his name as I came, over and over again.

I do not even dare to think about how he must see me now.

Now I am not only the human girl lying to an entire realm and pretending to be someone I am not, I just had to go and throw in wanton seductress into the mix.

"Your highness?"

Henette calls out to me. I have been silent for a while

I sigh and move to get up.

Well, what's done is done. Done and thoroughly enjoyed.

No use bothering over it now.

I am simply going to have to avoid him for the rest of my mortal life.

How hard can it be?

No sooner have I finished the thought that there is a knock on the door.

Oh dear Zeus...

I jump slightly, my heart instantly starting to race until I realize that the dragon king would not knock, he would simply enter.

Still I tell Henette to answer the door just in case, so should the need arise I can easily pretend to be asleep.

She shakes her head at me and goes to the door.

Whoever it is does not come in.

I strain my ears to make out the words from the whispered exchange between them and Henette but I get nothing.

She returns but a few moments later, dragging a heavy chest with her.

I raise my brows. "What is that?"

"A wooden chest my queen."

I sigh. "I see that Henette. I am asking you about what is in it."

She grunts, the sound of the heavy wooden box dragging on the floor punctuating every word. "New...clothes...for her highness."

I sit up straighter. "What new clothes?"

"From the castle seamstress at the request of the king."

My eyes go wide. "Impossible, how could she possibly have made them so fast?"

Especially given the stunt I pulled.

Henette exhales loudly as she finally pushes the box into place at the foot of my bed.

"That is why she is the royal seamstress your grace and not I. As for how she managed to accomplish such a feat, you will have to ask her yourself. I shall have the maids bring up water for your bath...oh and she asked that I ready you for your fitting before breakfast."

I frown. "What Fitting? Whatever for?"

But Henette is already out the door.

She returns soon, the other maids in tow and I take my bath as quickly as possible because given my recent behavior I do not trust myself or my hands to behave.

I dress simply in my chemise and undergarments and manage to convince Henette to let me eat breakfast before I am subjected to whatever it is the seamstress has in mind for me.

Despite all my vows never to leave my room, I try to tell her I would much rather go to the woman than have her come here because at least then, should the need arise, I can escape again.

But Henette insists that there is no need for me to wear my clothes if I was simply going to take it off immediately after for my fitting.

Again I am unable to ask her exactly what is so important about this 'fitting' business that would have warranted my being denied breakfast.

Whatever it is, as long as it does not involve me having to see the king then it is perfectly fine by me.

She offers to bring my food up to my room and I jump at it with both hands.

I am not ready to run the risk of colliding with him in the dining hall.

Besides, seeing me would probably ruin his appetite anyway or remind him to punish me.

So I sit down in solitude to my delicious meal of honey-mustard eggs and freshly baked white bread served with a bowl of whipped butter and a tankard of spiced wine.

I am scarcely done eating when the seamstress comes knocking.

Henette lets her in and she floats in with her spectacles and loud laugh on a cloud of powdery perfume, her two assistants behind her nearly invisible behind bundles and bundles of laces and silk and cotton.

Good heavens, what in all the realms is going on?

She glances disapprovingly at my empty plates and because I cannot help it I start to apologize.

"Oh never mind that your grace, shall we begin?"

I nod even though I am not entirely certain what is even going on.

After all I put her through yesterday, the very least I can do is suffer her poking and prodding in silence.

Besides she can't possibly be here the entire day.

Many bells later and it turns out she actually can.

My skin is red from the needle pricks that I am no longer sure are accidental, my feet are about to give out beneath me and so help me Zeus if I have to answer one more question about a silk ribbon or lace hem, I am going to lose my mind.

“My apologizes your grace but we must have everything ready in time for your binding ceremony tomorrow.”

I frown. “My what?”

“Your binding ceremony. It is tomorrow. Surely you must know about this.”

She glances from me to Henette who bows her head and wrings her hands worriedly.

“I was going to inform you this morning my queen, but then you started talking about doing horrible things with the king and never leaving your room and I just...”

I glance at the seamstress who is beginning to look at me funny and quickly cut Henette off before she can embarrass me any further.

“Yes, Henette. I believe I remember well enough. So this...binding ceremony...what is it?”

“I believe your people call it a wedding my queen.”

I frown even more, my brows drawing in confusion. “But Mi...the king and I are already wed.”

“In Averia perhaps but not here, not before the dragon gods.”

“So I am to be married...twice?”

It is the seamstress who responds this time.

“The binding ceremony is more than just your wedding my queen. It is your coronation as well. If all goes as it should, it would mean the Fire gods have deemed you worthy and the dragonkin of the 5th realm willingly or not will have to accept your reign and your place besides the king.”

I resist the urge to chew on my lip.

“And if it does not, what then?”

The women glance at each other and say nothing.

They do not need to.

The Dragon King's Substitute Bride Chapter 40

HERA

As it turns out hiding from a king in his own castle is surprisingly easy when he going out of his way to do the exact same thing.

I kept waiting for him to come barging in, eyes blazing in righteous fury, if not to accuse me but at the very least to take the sword he left behind.

But bell after bell rings out and he never comes.

I try to tell myself that this is a good thing.

But that would mean he did not even care enough to be bothered by what he had seen me do.

I am not certain this realization makes me feel any better.

Because some tiny part of me wants him to be as affected by me as I am by him and knowing the he most likely isn't, does nothing for my wounded, nearly non-existent ego

At the 12th bell he sends some servant to come fetch the sword for him instead.

I briefly consider hiding it.

Maybe that would show him, force him to come here himself.

But common sense prevails and I do not do this, deciding instead to resign myself to the tasks at hand.

Luckily enough, thanks to Henette and the seamstress and this binding ceremony business, I have more than enough to keep me busy.

I do not leave my room for almost the entire day.

Unfortunately the seamstress and her assistants are also present for all that time as well.

And though I would never tell her so, least she take it as an encouragement to visit me more often, poking and prodding aside, the plump dragonkin woman with her clean powdery smell and loud laugh is beginning to grow on me.

But dinner time soon comes around, much too quickly in my opinion and with it returns my pounding heart and dry mouth because now I have no choice but to get dressed and leave my room.

It takes a lot of convincing on Henette's part and a very, definitely not accidental poke from the seamstress' needle before I eventually agree to calm myself enough to dress up in the simple lilac, cotton gown with its square neckline and long transparent sleeves and finally step out of my room.

As it turns out, just like in Averia, the great hall is only used for special, royal occasions and unless otherwise required by the king, dinner every other night, takes place in the more modest dining hall.

We walk down a short passage that leads up to a single wooden door with black bars running horizontal to it.

Despite my best efforts my heart won't stop racing and I can feel a single bead of sweat, cold and wet rolling down my back.

I tell myself it is the balmy weather of a typical summer night but I know that is a lie.

What would I do when I finally saw him, when I had to sit across him and pretend to enjoy my meal.

Do I look away like I'm guilty or smile like nothing happened and ask him if he would be so kind as to pass me the butter?

I exhale deeply.

Get it together Hera.

I had done nothing wrong. At least I did not think so.

It was his fault for coming in without knocking anyway.

So do I lift my chin and glare at him over the pot roast instead?

My imagination runs wild creating all the possible things he could say and how I would respond to them but it does nothing to help me and as we stand in front of the door leading to the dining hall, I actually consider faking an illness.

But before I can decide between fainting or clutching my head, my guards are pushing the door open.

I sigh.

Fine, best to get this over and done with.

The room is an average sized rectangular space with the same grey stone walls as the rest of the castle.

The floors themselves are also cut stones smoothed out from the years of constant, trampling feet.

There is a fire place, cackling merrily at one end and another door at the other.

There are no windows but the walls are once again decorated with shields emblazed with the Ryder's sigil and bejeweled swords crossing each other.

Gods...did dragonkin never take a break from reminding themselves about war?

A large circular and impressively beautiful candle chandelier burns over a long ornate table, covered with a cloth of deep purple and surrounded by six high back chairs.

And like all the others, the one at the end of the table, bigger and more artfully crafted, is very empty.

I let out a tiny sigh in an attempt at relief but his absence does nothing to console me.

For all I know he is on his way even this very minute.

The servants have already set the table and delicious smells from beneath covered trays waft up to tease my nose and remind me that dragon king or not I am actually quite hungry.

The room is empty save the chief steward who had tried to direct me at the royal introduction.

He bows as I enter but this time he does not tell me where to sit.

It does not take a genius to figure out why.

Just as well because I already have my sights set on a seat, the one as far away from the King's chair as possible.

I sit in silence for a while.

My stomach is grumbling and my mouth is watering for all the food laid out on the table but I am unsure how to proceed.

Do I just start eating alone or do I wait for his arrival...and six chairs, who else would be joining us?

The answer to my last question appears at the door barely moments later in a brilliant red dress, her maid trailing behind her.

The poor girl has a fresh cut running down the side of one cheek and I have no doubt it is only the latest addition in a string of many such, most likely undeserved wounds.

Mint takes one look at the empty room and the empty chair at the end of the table and smirks knowingly at me before bowing, if what she does, the slight incline of her head can even be described as bowing.

I say nothing.

She could take her bows and stuff it the same place her heart and conscience are buried.

She does not wait for me to tell her to rise which is just as well because I have no interest in saying anything to her.

I have a lot on my mind at the moment and I am in no mood to for mental sparring or cutting words.

She however promptly proceeds to seat herself as close to the King's chair as she can get and I find my eyes narrowing at her.

By all the gods Hera are you...jealous?

No.

I force myself to look away ignoring the twig of annoyance in my chest.

At this moment, she could sit in his lap if she damned well pleased as long as it meant I did not have to speak or look directly at him.

That is, if he even bothers to show up at all.

Without even knowing it I find myself twisting at the straps of my dress.

I try to hide it, my nervousness, but I can tell the moment Minth notices the way my eyes keep darting, fearful and expectant towards the door.

Her green eyes gleam and she opens her mouth to say something no doubt spiked with venom and intended to bruise.

A shadow falls across the doorway before she can do so and I look up, heart in my throat.

Leo.

I am both relieved and discomfited.

If Leo is here then surely the king would not be far behind.

Right?

The chief Ryder bows.

I tell him to rise and he does so casting one sparing glance at Minth before sitting down directly opposite me.

He reaches for an empty bowl and begins to ladle soup into it. It smells absolutely divine.

I clear my throat and he glances up at me, questioning.

I resist the urge to squirm under the intensity of his gaze, my heart skips a beat and I can feel my cheeks beginning to turn red.

Skies above, what if Midas told him?

I clear my throat again in an attempt to steady my voice. "Will...will the King be joining us?"

Minth scoffs all the way from her seat. "Why would he, when a human seats at the table with us? I barely have an appetite myself."

I tell myself not to listen to her.

That she is just saying those words to wound me but it by Hades it works and I bite my lips, suddenly unsure of myself.

Was he really that angry and disgusted with me that he could not even bare to eat in the same room as me?

Leo does not take his eyes off me for a second.

“Watch your tongue Minth. You speak to the King’s wife.”

She scoffs once more but says nothing more.

Leo’s gaze holds mine for a second longer and for a moment I am almost certain he knows.

However, before I can work myself into a nervous frenzy, the chief Ryder shrugs calmly.

“I do not presume to know the king’s mind your grace.”

Then just as casually, he pushes the bowl of piping hot soup towards me, the corner of his mouth tilting ever so slightly upwards with the ghost of a smile.

“You should eat. I can hear your stomach growling in protest all the way from my seat.”

I have never eaten faster in my entire life.

I should not have bothered because he never comes.

I rise a few moments later, my chair making a loud grating sound as I push away from the table.

“If you both will excuse me, I am tired and must retire to my chambers in preparation for tomorrow.”

I avoid Leo’s gaze because for some reason it always feels like he can see right through me.

“My greetings to the King.”

And with that, I leave the room before either one of them can say a single word in response.

I can feel their eyes follow me out the room.

I barely sleep a wink that night.

But it is not this morning’s events that occupy my mind and keeps me up all night, listening to the sound of night creatures outside my window calling eagerly to one another.

Neither is it the knowledge that come tomorrow evening, I would officially be wed to Midas before the Fire gods and almost all of the dragon realm’s inhabitants.

No, what keeps me awake, tossing and turning, unable to fall asleep and instead chewing on my lip till the sun's first rays light up the sky, is what the royal seamstress and Henette have told me will come immediately after the Binding ceremony.

Before I could be made Midas' queen and the ceremony considered a success, Midas and I would have to prove our compatibility in the way those before us had.

So come tomorrow night, the dragon King will have to sleep with me.