

The Dragon King's Substitute Bride Chapter 41

MIDAS

If he was unsure before, he is beyond certain now.

This woman will be absolute end of him.

If not by running headlong into danger and dragging him with her, then it would be by torturing him until he went insane with lust and need.

At this point he is almost certain she is doing it on purpose.

All day he has been trying, more than he has ever had to.

Trying to force himself to think about something else...anything else but his mind refuses to cooperate and has decided to do nothing but play out the events of this morning over and over and over again until Midas is sure he is only but a few steps away from madness

He groans for the one hundredth and seventy fourth time and pushes the papers on his desk away.

Forget concentrating on royal treaties and proposed alliances, he could barely even focus long enough to finish reading a line without the image of her interrupting his flow of thought.

To make matters worse, he has been sporting a raging hard on for the better part of the day.

Whenever he thought he had managed to sufficiently distract himself enough for it to abate, he would find himself suddenly thinking of her again, would hear his name falling from her lips and just like that, he would be right back where he started.

Hard as a rock and very thoroughly turned on.

Safe to say he had spent the entire day in a haze of frustrated irritation.

One hundred and seventy five.

Why in all the realms had he even gone back to the room?

Sleeping beside her had been hard enough.

Before the scent of her and utter exhaustion had finally lured him into blissful oblivion, he had spent the better part of the night staring up at the ceiling, feeling like a stranger in his own bed and fighting the urge to pull her into his arms.

There is no question about it, he wants her; more than he has ever wanted anything before her.

He wants to do things to her that would probably condemn his soul straight to the underworld.

But the issue is he does not know how she would react to him and if he is to be completely honest, he is not even sure he wants to find out.

Midas has never before had to wonder about how a woman would react his advances.

In fact, now that he really thinks about it, he has never even had to make any 'advances' at a woman before.

As it turns out, a crown is all the persuasion most women need and they fell at his feet without so much as his lifting a finger.

They fell when he wanted and how he wanted. They fell even when he did not want them to.

He made no promises and offered them no illusions.

His heart was an unattainable, unreachable goal he neither knew how nor even wanted to give and they all knew it.

Those who did not, found out the hard way.

So for him, s*x had always been simply that... s*x.

Nothing more than a physical act he did once in awhile because dragon king or not he still had blood flowing through his veins.

And this is why he has been trying so hard to stay away from her.

Because he knows...is absolutely certain that nothing will ever be 'just' physical... not with her.

Throw in this damned tether bond into the mix and this entire situation became a recipe for complications and emotions Midas has spent the last one hundred and fifty years of his life trying to avoid.

He has no desire to go down that route.

Besides Midas does not trust her and he does not think he ever will.

And this is not simply because of what she has done and how she came to be in his realm but because of what she is.

A very painful memory and his many years alive, have taught Midas what he already knew; that humans were selfish and deceitful creatures who cared only for their own skin not even each other.

He will never ever trust their kind.

His father had done so and he and Midas' mother had paid the ultimate price for their mistake.

Sure, over the years, he had made sure the humans paid for what they had done to his family but it did not erase the years of hurt and anger he still carried around.

And he'd be damned if he let her with her seductive blue eyes and entirely too kissable body send him spiraling down that hole.

But his body is not ready to listen to his head and it with each passing day, it was getting harder and harder to remind himself of exactly why he hated her and her kind.

And now...one hundred and seventy six...

She just had to go and make matters worse by doing what she did.

He closes the books in front of him, giving up on any attempt at distracting himself.

She is nothing but trouble, coming into his life and turning everything on its head.

Thinking back now, he should never have gone to her last night in the first place.

If he had not done that then he would not have had to sneak out of his own room this morning and he would not have forgotten his sword behind and had to go back to get it.

But her words when he had found her hiding in his study...

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

And the look on her face when she had said it, head bowed, gaze cast down.

Disappointment? Uncertainty?

Midas is not sure but whatever it was, it had done something to him and against his better judgment he had come to their room that night.

He made sure she had been fast asleep already when he pushed open the door.

He had thought that would make things easier.

It had not.

One look at her long, lashes casting dark, sweeping shadows across her cheekbones, red lips parted in the gentle breaths of one who is deeply asleep and Midas had known he would get no sleep that night.

He had found himself sneaking glances at her as he took off his swords and his boots ...his armor...his shirt.

There was something different about her and it wasn't simply the fact that for once both were in the same room and neither one was attacking the other.

It was something else. Something that he could not quite lay his hands on yet it tugged and pulled at him, drawing his brows together in a frown of confusion.

It would not come to him, what this 'something different' was till many hours later when his eyes finally began to drift shut in sheer tiredness.

Whatever demons she carried around with her, had been left at the feet of consciousness and now deeply asleep, it was the first time since the moment he laid eyes on her that she had finally looked peaceful.

And when he had eventually drifted away towards the oblivion of sleep's welcoming arms, Midas had found himself wondering if to her he was one of those demons.

He had slept soundly.

So soundly, he almost would not have awakened in time where it not for Er'gan, who of course spared no hits in telling him exactly how ridiculous this entire thing was, stirring him awake at the last second and he managed to leave the room before her eyes could open.

And that would have been the end of the entire thing if had not been for that dastardly sword.

For in his haste to leave the room before she awoke, he had left one of his swords behind.

No harm done. He remembers thinking.

Even if she were to be awake, he is king of his realm and he would not be made to walk on egg shells in his own home.

If anyone should be doing so, it is her.

And arming himself with that thought, he had stalked towards the room.

He would laugh at himself now if he were not so thoroughly aroused and thus utterly annoyed.

If he is to be completely honest he had heard her cries and moans, had known exactly what she was doing even before he opened the door.

Yet he had been powerless to stop himself from lifting his arms, from turning the door knob and pushing the door open.

But knowing something is completely different from seeing it.

So very different.

By all the gods...she had been f*****g beautiful.

Eyes closed...touching herself to his name... hips grinding against the cloth bundles up between her legs.

He had never been more jealous of an inanimate object in his life.

Hands in fist by his sides, heart pounding, mouth dry, he watched her drive herself to a climax.

It had taken every ounce of his self control to stop himself from going to her.

To use his tongue and fingers and show her exactly how much he could make her come undone.

And when she did come, head thrown back in a cry of absolute, s****l pleasure, her hand clutching desperately at the sheets Midas' control had finally snapped.

And it was either leave the room or take her in his arms and f**k her brainless till she melted in his arms, a pool of naked satisfaction.

He almost hadn't left.

Midas also did not see her for the rest of the day. He made sure of it.

Not even to go back and take the blasted sword which of course he had forgotten...again.

The bells ring out for the tenth that time that night.

Midas pushes himself from the table and turns around to stare out the large window behind him, at the stillness of the castle grounds.

The moon is a glittering ball of shimmering white light and he can hear the song of noisy crickets and the far off hooting of a red-beaked mountain owl.

The lights are almost all out in the direction of the capital, and within the castle's walls everyone will be settling down for the night, the Ryders on duty falling into position for the night's watch.

He wonders vaguely if she will be disappointed or relieved that he has once again not come to her this night.

One hundred and seventy seven.

A knock, loud and clear mercifully interrupts his train of thoughts.

"Enter."

He does not need to turn to know who it is.

"Your highness."

"You may rise Leo."

The chief Ryder walks up to his table.

If he wonders why the king did not come to the great hall for breakfast or dinner and insisted on attending to matters outside the castle when he should have been behind the castle's walls, Midas does not know but he is sure Leo knows something is not quite right.

But the chief Ryder does not pry, he knows better.

He simply goes to the decanter of spiced wine on Midas' shelf and sloshes the dark amber liquid into two glasses.

"You called."

Midas accepts the offered drink and sinks into his chair. "I did."

Leo stares at him for one silent moment. "Shall I hazard a guess?"

"I would say No but I doubt that will stop you."

"Pre-binding ceremony jitters?"

Midas groans.

One hundred and seventy eight.

"Do not remind me."

A grin splits Leo's otherwise stoic face. "The dragon king finally getting married, Never thought I'd see the day."

Midas' drink disappears in one go. "Well, neither did I"

"And to a human nonetheless..." Leo's smile disappears, all brevity gone from his tone. "...are you okay?"

Midas stares at nothing in particular. "If I refuse, the dragon throne will not accept her."

"I would think the thought of a human having any sort of control in the 5th realm would be enough reason for you to want exactly that. "

"As did I"

"And yet..?"

His fiery golds lock unto Leo's calming greys.

If Midas knew the answer to that question he would not be sitting in his study, trying to drink his thoughts away on the night before his binding ceremony.

He slides a wooden box with intricate carvings and a silver clasp across the table and towards his only friend.

“Give this to her. Tomorrow morning, before the ceremony.”

“Ah, so my presumptions were right, you are avoiding her. Tell me, will you have me marry her in your place tomorrow as well?”

Midas scowls. “Do not think the thought has not occurred to me.”

Leo shakes his head and rises to his feet. “You know you do not have to do this. She is just one human girl.”

“That’s the thing Leo. I am no longer sure if I am doing this simply because I have to...”

“Or...?”

“Or because I want to.”

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HERA

They call it the Bedding Ceremony.

When they told me about it, I had not exactly taken it in the best of ways.

And as I lay in bed, unable to fall asleep, the entire scene from that afternoon plays itself in my head until I can recall every sentence by heart.

The seamstress’ voice... muffled by the pins she holds in the corner of her mouth...

“...and after you swear the sacred oath before the Fire gods and the dragonkin, the Kingmaker Arydian, messenger of Clotho the present will place the crown on your head and you would officially become the King’s wife and queen consort to the dragon realm.”

I glance at both women.

“That’s not all is it? I can tell from the way Henette keeps looking away.”

The seamstress, not quite meeting my eyes, goes back to poking me as she attempts to pin a piece of cloth in place.

“Oh, just... the bedding ceremony your grace. Nothing at all to worry about.”

“The bedding...ouch” I start, accidentally flinching and a pin pricks me, draws blood. “...the bedding what?”

The woman sighs and dabs at the wound. "The fires of the dragon gods burn in many ways your highness. The King and his new wife not only have to prove the fires of their loyalty but the fires of their passion as well."

My eyes widen in horror and my legs nearly give out beneath me.

I laugh quietly in the darkness now as I remember the startled look on the seamstress face as she watched me wobble on my feet, my face drained of all color.

"Oh dear you've gone pale as a ghost. Sit...sit."

I sit, not really even conscious of the action.

Surely she can't mean that my first time with the king or anybody for that matter is to take place with thousands of dragonkin eyes watching me...watching us?

"Are you okay your grace?"

"Of course I am bloody well not okay!" I say, leaping quite dramatically to my feet.

Everyone gasps at my outburst.

The seamstress most of all who steps back, hand flying to her chest. "Goodness gracious darling. Shall I have the maids bring up some calming salts?"

"Calming...I do not need calming salts."

"But...but you are pacing around the room."

"Of course I am pacing around the room. You mean to tell me that the first time king and I...make love it will be with all of you watching?!"

Her eyes watch me cautiously. "The first time...does that mean...?"

I whirl on her. "Not the point!"

She approaches me like you would a dangerous animal, carefully pats my arm and makes me sit again.

"After the binding ceremony, when you and the king leave the dragon's temple, you will return to the great hall for the festivities..."

"That does not..."

"Let me finish your grace. It is during the festivities that you would be led up to your chambers, the both of you. Two guards will be placed at the foot of the tower and the festivities shall continue in your absence. Neither one of you must leave the room before the break of dawn. If you do, the ceremony will be considered unsuccessful."

“But... how would they know if we actually...”

The woman stares at me from above her half moon glasses, gaze unflinching. “Oh but you must your grace. For if you do not, you risk bringing bad luck not only upon your marriage, but upon the entire dragon realm as well.”

And now, as I blink up at the ceiling, her words echo in my ear, drowning out the night’s sounds from outside my window.

Bad luck.

What bad luck could the gods possibly bestow on me that has not already in some way befallen me?

What more could they possibly take from me?

Me who has lost everything I ever cared about.

I have nothing left to give them. Nothing else to lose.

What I cannot decide however, is if the nervousness pooling in my belly is from trepidation or excitement.

My eyes are only just finally beginning to drift shut when the bell sounds for the break of dawn.

No turning back now.

I sigh and rise from my bed the same time I hear the knock on my door.

“You may enter.”

Like she has every morning since my arrival in the dragon’s castle, Henette walks in, hands clasped in front of her and head bowed.

Except this time, she is not alone.

There are about four more maids with her and leading the train is the woman who I had not seen since that first time I awoke in this room; the stern looking woman with the tightly packed grey hair and stiff, high collared dress with all the buttons.

She must be the one in charge of all the castle’s maids.

She frightens me, the way her mouth seems to be set in a perpetual frown of annoyance.

I am not surprised by their entrance.

Henette has told me this would happen.

It did not matter that the ceremonies would not begin till high noon.

The binding ceremony of the dragon king is a very... very important and rare occasion that most dragonkin, and I am quoting the seamstress here, 'most dragonkin did not expect to see in their lifetime' and as such, preparations must begin in earnest from the first light of day, me included.

It takes time.

Way more time than I would have thought imaginable but when they are finally done and I stand in front of the mirror, I almost stop breathing.

Because for a full minute, I do not recognize the woman staring back at me.

I let out a shaky breath and run my hands down the cinched waist and full skirt that hugs my hips before flaring out to pool at my feet, flowing out a good length behind me and ending with a broad train.

I don't know what to say, because what do you say when you've been transformed from a simple slave into this ethereal, beautiful being decked in a dress of soft, fine silk colored in deep jewel tones of ruby red and covered with thousands of tiny crystals that catch the sunlight from my window and cast luminescent sparkles on the stone walls with every step.

A dress so beautiful and regal it makes your breath catch and your eyes feel with tears.

Especially when deep down inside of you, you know you really do not deserve it.

Suddenly the off shoulder lace sleeves with its floral embroidery of the same deep red feels itchy against my skin, and the flower crown of tiny roses with the pearls at their centre, that sits on my head is heavier than it was a moment ago.

How much heavier would a real crown feel?

I turn around and the room is empty.

Just as well because I am not sure how long I can keep pretending I do not want to cry.

I walk up to my window.

Despite the constant grey of the sky, there is no denying that it is a beautiful day, the sun is bright but not hot enough to be uncomfortable and I can smell the sweet scent of mountain jasmine.

Down below, in the castle's courtyard, I see the tiny dragonkin all getting ready, running this way and that way, calling merrily to one another.

The carriage that will take me to the dragon's temple where the ceremony will hold is already drawn and set, attached to two proud stallions, the color of midnight, kicking up dusts and swishing their bushy tails.

In a few hours my fate will be completely sealed to that of the man I have vowed to destroy, yet there they are, going around laughing and making merry, utterly unaware of the sorrow they have caused me and my people.

Anger, hot and bitter rises in the back of my throat.

“If you keep twisting your fingers like that my queen, I’m afraid your ring might not fit.”

I whirl around at the sound of his voice, my hands falling to my sides.

“Chief Ryder.”

He bows low till I tell him to rise.

He cuts an imposing figure, tall and handsome in his armor of dark silver and for a minute I actually forget about how angry I am.

He has done something with his hair.

I don’t know what it is but it suits him.

Extremely well.

As always his gaze, sweeps around the room as if checking for signs of danger before coming to rest on me.

He starts when he finally sees me, just for a split second, so fast I almost do not even notice it.

“You clean up nice for a human your highness.”

“I am unsure whether you mean that as a compliment or an insult.”

Those steely grey eyes, cool and appraising lock on mine. “A compliment”

I do not like how it makes me feel when he looks at me like that, so I look away.

“Why are you here Chief Ryder?”

“Many reasons your grace. One, to make sure you are not attempting to escape...”

I sigh. “Neither one of you is ever going to let me forget that are you?”

He smirks and I resist the urge to roll my eyes.

“Well, you will find Chief Ryder that wedding gowns make any plans of escaping a rather tedious affair. State your second reason.”

He lifts a tiny wooden box I had not noticed before and stretches it out to me. “His highness asked me to give this to you.”

As usual just the mention of Midas is enough to set my heart racing.

I hesitate and he raises one dark brow, the one with the scar.

“I would assure you that it is perfectly safe but I have not opened it myself. Do you perhaps want to wear my helmet and shield while you perform this treacherous task?”

“Aren’t you so funny?” I scowl at him and snatch it from his hand.

The box itself is deceptively light and the woodwork is exceptional. In my nervousness, I fumble with the silver clasp for a moment before it finally gives and I slowly lift the box open.

For the second time that day, I forget how to breathe.

I glance up from the most beautiful piece of jewelry I have ever seen to stare up at the face of a frowning Leo.

“You look almost as shocked as I am.”

He frowns even harder. “That is because I am. I have not seen that necklace in many years your grace, and even when I did, it was in paintings long gone.”

I glance down at the box, at the small black pillow and the necklace laying in it.

Sitting daintily in the middle of a single silver strand is a tiny dragon, its silver wings spread out as if on the brink of take off and tiny jewel rubies for eyes that glimmer and shine in the sunlight.

But it is not just the exquisite, magnificent detail with which it’s carved that makes it so beautiful.

There is something about it, something that makes it feel almost alive.

Leo is still frowning as he watches me lift it carefully out of the box. “It is the only thing he has left of them. To think he would give it to you...”

“I do not understand...”

He shakes his head. “Never mind your grace. You should put it on.”

I set the box on the bed and lift it to my neck fumbling with the clasp. My hands are shaking and I am unable to wear it properly.

After a few minutes of watching me struggle, Leo sighs. “Your grace...”

I ignore him.

If I cannot do something as simple as this how do I expect to be queen over an entire realm, to avenge my people and my family?

It is an irrational thought, I know but I am not exactly in a state of mind to be rational.

“Your grace...”

“What?” I snap, my voice cracking a little at the end.

He beacons me. "Come here."

"No thank you..." I say, continuing to struggle to hook it behind my neck. "I am perfectly capable of doing something as simple as..."

I never get to finish the sentence.

He pulls me suddenly towards him, taking the necklace from my hands. "You are just like him..."

He motions for me to turn and I do making sure to glare at him first.

He steps closer and sweeps my hair to one side, his gloved fingers grazing the skin of my neck.

"...asking for help is not a sign of weakness your grace. It does not make you any less strong than you really are."

The dragon falls just shy of my breasts, the metal cold against my skin.

I turn around.

"How does it look?"

He stares at me a second longer than is necessary and when he speaks, there is a roughness to his voice that I do not recognize. "It looks..."

But instead of completing his sentence, he exhales and straightens, suddenly backing away from me.

"Leo...?"

When he finally speaks again, his voice is cool and expressionless. "The carriage is ready your grace and the king is already en route to the temple. We must leave at once."

I nod and take one last deep breath.

Here goes everything.

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MIDAS

She made him promise.

The day before they made the journey from which they would never return, she had taken it off her neck, pressed the pendant into his hand and made him promise.

It had been a gift from his father on the day of their binding ceremony and she wanted him to do the same.

So she made him promise that he would give it to whoever would sit beside him on dragon throne.

He had not wanted to take it.

He did not see the point.

She could give it to his bride herself if it was so important to her.

Besides he had not liked the way she spoke; like she would not be here with him when the time finally came.

If only he knew.

Midas sighs and pushes the feelings away before they can wrap themselves around him and bury their sharp, guilt tipped, venomous thorns deep into the flesh of his nearly non-existent heart.

Thinking about that time would only making him angry and he does not want to make the day any more sour than it already is.

It is his binding ceremony after all.

He lets out a few curse words and walks out of the chambers he has now made his own, slamming the doors so hard, the sound echoes and travels through the walls of the entire west tower.

He stalks down the steps and towards the entrance of the suddenly very busy castle grateful it is the castle steward and not he who has to make sense of all the chaos.

He had wanted to dress up in his full armor.

The one with the terrifying dragon helmet he wore for battle.

But Leo would not allow him, not even when he promised to leave the helmet at home.

Something about bad taste and the proper attire for what was to be a wedding not war.

Which Midas had hardly found fair especially since the chief Ryder in question was going to be dressed fully in his own armor.

But his growling protest fell on deaf ears and the chief Ryder and the steward had ganged up on him to force him into long pants below a short length velvet tunic with long sleeves and an open round neckline designed with intricate gold embroidery.

Shiny plates of thin, gold armor sat on his shoulders and as cuffs wrapped around his wrists.

But he had drawn the line when they pointed at the two swords now confidently strapped to his back.

His page had tried to take them away.

Midas had nearly bitten his head off.

He should be happy, or at the very least satisfied.

Dragon Ryders could go their entire lives not finding their tethers, especially if they were in other realms and yet, here he is about to marry his.

So maybe the circumstances surrounding their meeting had been less than ideal but he could have learned to live with it.

If only she was not a part of the realm that had taken away the only people he has ever loved.

The crown on his head glistens in the sunlight as he steps out of the castle.

The grounds are saturated in a flurry of activities.

There are dragonkin everywhere.

Readying carriages and horses, instructions and questions being shouted from one end to another as the castle's many servants run all over the courtyard carting and carrying barrels and sacks of food, dragging squealing animals about to lay down their lives for an impromptu ceremony Midas would rather not have at all.

Even though the announcement had been sudden, in their faces is reflected a joy and excitement Midas is unable to feel.

Because human or not, his people did not think this day would ever come.

And quite frankly, neither did he.

Because who in their right mind would want to be bound to a king who had so much blood on his hands.

"Your steed is ready your highness."

Unlike the bride, the king and his entourage would ride to the temple on horses, decked and decorated for the ceremony.

He nods at the bowing servant. "And the queen...?"

"The maids are with her at the moment. But I believe the chief Ryder has gone to fetch her."

He grunts his satisfaction with the news.

“Have the guards watch her carriage carefully, two of them riding on either side at all times. And tell them that if for any reason the queen does not make it to the temple, they might as well fall on their own swords.”

“Yes my King.”

“Oh and No matter what she says, do not let her out of that carriage until we get to the temple.”

No doubt his Ryders would think he is doing this for her protection and maybe that is partly true.

But there is another reason too.

He does not trust her, plain and simple.

She is cunning and crafty and insanely determined and it f*****g turns him on almost as much as it annoys him.

But if she should try to escape again, Midas will not hold back from teaching her a very overdue lesson in obedience.

Feet in the stirrup, he hoists himself up to mount the decorated horse.

Taking the reins from the servant, he resists the urge to look up at her window and without a moment's hesitation, sends his horse on a steady canter out the castle's gates, his entourage of Ryders trailing behind him.

The red and gold of the dragon realm's flags flutter in the wind behind him as they ride at a steady pace towards the capital.

And the entire time, he can only think of her.

Did she hate that this was happening as much as he did?

Well, considering what he had done to her realm, the answer to that is most certainly yes.

His chest tightens and he struggles to breathe the pressure away.

But they deserved it. They did.

Why should he feel sorry when he has nothing to feel sorry for?

By the gods even when she is absent she still manages to mess with his head.

The streets of the capital are lined to bursting with dragonkin.

Almost every inhabitant of the 5th realm's capital is standing in the streets, waiting to watch the wedding procession, children running about in excitement and anticipation of an event they may not even fully understand.

They cheer when he and his Ryders pass through the cobbled streets but Midas knows they are not lining up to see him, not really.

It is her they are most eager to see.

The human bride who has somehow managed to capture the dragon king's heart.

They could not be more wrong.

There is no denying that even against his wishes she has somehow managed to sink her talons deep into the recesses of his mind but Midas barely has any heart left to be captured.

Most of it had shriveled and withered away the same day he found out his parents were killed.

And whatever little of it is left, he sure as Hades is not about to gift it to the one responsible for breaking it apart in the first place.

The dragon temple looms large and imposing a short distance from the capital's west gate.

It is a magnificent structure made entirely of dark, polished, obsidian stone.

A long set of steps lead up to four gigantic pillars covered in creeping greenery and on which burn blue flames that are never extinguished.

In the middle of the pillars is the temple itself and on the very top sits a fierce, horned dragon made of pure stone, teeth bared and claws extended, its life like appearance and startling realistic snarl is enough to strike fear into the heart of all who see it.

No one knows how long the dragon temple has been in existence, or even how it came to be, but spectacular and ominous, it is the symbol and home of the Fire gods who give the 5th realm life and grant its dragons their powers.

Er'gan, as the very first dragon to ever exist is the physical embodiment of their vast power and as always, the closer they come to the temple, the stronger and more present the dragon inside of Midas became.

He can feel his veins pulsating with the ancient song of the gods who ruled over them, can feel their heat beneath his skin radiating out from his centre to every part of his limbs.

The line of dragonkin extends all the way from the capital to the temple's very doors and Midas stops his horse a few paces from the feet of the temple.

As he dismounts, a herald blows the horn and every dragonkin in sight bows.

The three kingmakers are standing at the top of the steps that lead to the temple's arched doors and he inclines his head at them.

He takes his place at the feet of the steps to await the one to whom he is about to bound to for all of eternity.

A sharp pain in the region of his chest spreads out as a chill to the tip of his fingers.

His dragon feels it too.

No...not for all of eternity.

Because Midas is immortal and she is not, he is going to watch time take its toll on her.

While he stays the same year after year, he is going to be forced to watch his tether grow old and die.

And when she did, the tether bond would nearly tear him apart.

Er'gan as well.

It is not an experience he is looking forward to.

But when her carriage finally arrives and Midas sees her, not even that matters.

He feels it in the top of his stomach, a feeling so strong and sudden in its intensity, it is almost like a physical blow.

Everything else fades into the background until there is only her.

Gods above...

How was it possible for something to look so delicately breathtaking?

Even across that distance, her eyes search the crowd till they meet his and hold.

She reminds him of the hurricanes he reads about in his texts.

Turning everything in his life on its head and causing a wide wake of destruction in her path yet he had never seen a more apt definition of a natural wonder.

Only one thing echoes in his mind over and over again as his chief Ryder leads her towards him.

The voice of the dragon and the dragon king blending into one.

Mine...mine...

"Mine."

Even though she is trying her best to hide it, He can sense her nervousness, can smell the uncertainty in her steps.

Her hand is placed in his and she looks up at him.

The effect she has on him is even stronger up close when he can see the brilliance of her eyes and the blush in her cheeks.

“Dragon King...” She whispers.

“Slave...” He whispers back.

She scowls at him and rolls her eyes but by the time they start up the steps, her shaking has stopped completely.

And the satisfaction Midas feels at being able to do that is almost worth everything else.

Almost.

The Dragon King's Substitute Bride Chapter 44

HERA

The rhythmic, undulating ride through the capital's cobbled streets is nothing like I had thought it would be.

No one is throwing rotten eggs or spoilt vegetables at the human who must have bewitched their king into marrying her.

Instead I can hear music and laughter; the happy sounds of a people in the throes of festivities.

And when I look out my window, into the sea of faces lined along the streets that are bursting with colors and merriment, not a single one of them is staring at me and my passing carriage with anything more hostile than open curiosity.

Could the dragonkin of the 5th realm not be as villainous as we have been led to believe?

The thought makes me uncomfortable so I direct my gaze away from the window and the people celebrating outside.

The chief Ryder has not said a word to me since we left the palace gates.

Even though he sits directly opposite me, he feels far away.

He is being careful to keep his distance.

His gaze, stern and alert is fixed on something outside the single window of the velvet padded carriage and he does not turn even when I know he can feel me glancing curiously at him.

I see the temple long before we arrive and the pitter patter of the horses' hooves against the uneven street, echoes the racing of my heart that is steadily increasing with each step that brings me closer and closer towards it.

Towards him.

I chew on my lip and twist my fingers nervously.

The carriage stops with a jolt and the doors swing open, flooding the small enclosed space with bright sunlight.

Suddenly it all feels too much...too real.

There is a lump in my throat and I can feel tears welling up in my eyes.

"He is not the monster you think he is."

I blink up at Leo through the wetness of my lashes.

A tiny part of me wants to believe the words of the chief Ryder who has since highlighted and is even now standing outside, holding out his hand to me.

I want to believe it so badly it hurts.

Because then it would make me feel less guilty about the way I sometimes forget to hate him, about the way I think of his strong big hands and all the things his mouth could do to me.

But to my realm and all the humans of Averia who had to suffer for so many years under the relentless attacks of him and his Ryders, the dragon king will never be anything else.

Which is why I have to do this; to give my people and my family the justice they deserve.

So I sniff my tears away and push past my fear and my inhibitions.

He is the first person I search for the minute my feet hit the ground.

And when my eyes finally meet his, there are absolutely no words to describe how he looks, standing there, waiting for me.

Dressed in a rich, embroidered tunic the same deep red as my dress and fitted with metal plates on his shoulders, armor sheaths on his forearms and his two swords strapped to his back, managing to look impossibly handsome and twice as deadly all at the same time.

And just like that my heart is racing for a completely different reason.

The pooling heat in my belly and the weakness in my knees is not fear, it is desire.

The distance between us is closing with each step and I struggle to keep a firm grasp on the exact reason I despise him but it keeps slipping through my fingers.

The way he is looking at me, like I am the only thing that matters, the only thing he sees is definitely not helping.

By the time I reach him, I am so nervous I can barely stand. I want to say something but I don't know what.

"Dragon King..."

"Slave." He whispers the word and smirks, deep gold eyes beneath dark brows twinkling with amusement.

I resist the urge to roll my eyes and just like that I am too annoyed to remember my fear.

He takes my hand from Leo and we ascend the steps towards the doors through which the three king makers have disappeared.

The chief Ryder follows closely behind us, followed by the nobles of the dragon realm.

With one last peek over my shoulder at the sea of people trailing behind us, I step into the stifling darkness of the dragons' temple.

The air in the impossibly vast room is stale and unmoving, smelling mildly of wet sand.

The walls are so far apart I can barely make out the tiny circular windows running along the very top of both walls.

Tall, moss covered stone pillars run on both sides in the middle of the temple creating a sort of path leading towards another set of steps that ascend up to a high altar.

Blue flames burning on the pillars cast a dull colored glow on the smooth stone path but it is the strangely intense light, coming from the altar that actually fills the large chamber with a warm glow.

I exhale quietly as we move toward the altar, completely mesmerized.

As we draw closer, I can see the altar clearly and the sight nearly stops my racing heart completely.

At the top of the steps and just before the altar are two immensely large dragon statues.

One the deep, fierce red of pure rubies and another made from spotless molten gold.

Intertwined together to form a sort of arch, the two dragons seem to be glowing from within.

There is something about the statues, beyond their almost realistic appearance.

An awe inspiring beauty and an immense power emanating from them that makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end and my mouth feel like I swallowed a ball of dry cotton.

The room is buzzing with the quiet voices of the many dragonkin below and the King makers stand beneath the arch the dragons make, silently watching Midas and I ascend the many steps to the raised platform.

The oldest kingmaker, the one with the longest beard who I assume must be Arydian, messenger of Clotho the present steps forward.

He holds out his staff and all at once everyone falls dead silent.

Then he begins to speak, his voice carrying loud and clear, echoing throughout the temple in a way that quite frankly should not be possible.

There is something almost hypnotic in the way he is speaking.

The words ancient, the vowels rolling and lilting in a manner that is both fearsome and awe inspiring.

It is the language of the people who walk the path of the two fire gods.

Dragon Tongue.

I do not understand a single word.

Which is just as well because I am barely even listening.

All of my attention belongs to the king standing before me.

He needs to stop looking at me like that; like he might be thinking of doing things he should not be thinking of while standing before the gods and their messengers.

But now the ideas are in my head too and I do not hear the question until it is asked the third time.

“If there be any before us this day, who bear in their hearts and in their minds any reasons at all for which this solemn union may not take place step forward now and declare it before the gods and the people or forever remain silent.”

The large space is so silent, I can hear the sound of birds calling to each other from outside.

I wonder how the crowd would react if I raise my own hand.

Midas narrows his eyes at me almost like he can tell what I am thinking. And for a moment I swear I can almost hear him in my head.

“Do not even think about it.”

I narrow mine back wondering if he hears the scowling reply in my head.

“Relax dragon king. I am not stupid you know.”

He straightens and there is no mistaking the message in his slightly raised brow.

“Could have fooled me.”

“Why you...”

Arydian’s voice cuts through our silent exchange. “If there are no objections, will the both of you please step forward?”

We step beneath the arch of dragons and I feel it again, that unnerving warmth of ancient power.

The small man with his grey, unseeing eyes turns towards Midas. “Dragon king.”

“King maker.”

“Are you here of your own volition?”

“Yes.” His voice is flat, impossible to read.

“And you, Hera...”

How does he know my name?

“...beloved daughter of the human realm of Averia...”

Wait, he called me beloved daughter, not princess. Is it possible...?

His voice interrupts my thoughts before they can spiral out of control “...are you here of your own volition?”

No.

“Yes.”

“And do you, on this day, before the dragon gods and the people who walk their path, wish to be bound to King Midas the immortal, master of dragons and ruler of the 5th realm, to rule by his side, forsaking all others and to do all that is in your power to uphold the sanctity of the dragon realm?”

I don’t know.

“Yes.”

“Speak up child.”

I attempt to clear away the lump that has formed in the back of my throat. “Yes I do.”

“Kneel.”

Heart pounding, I lower myself to the ground, head bowed.

And there, before the fire gods and under the watchful eyes of hundred of dragonkin, I swear an oath I have absolutely no intention of keeping.

When it is done, the three men suddenly raise their hands in the air, gaze upward.

It is only Arydian who speaks but his voice is like the voice of more than one person speaking in unison, a quiet, deep rumbling so obviously charged with power it sends chills running down my spine.

“And so by the power vested in me as messenger of Clotho the Present, I, Arydian and my brothers beside me, proclaim you Hera, wife of King Midas the immortal and queen of the dragon realm.”

He steps forward, holding a crown that was not there a minute ago.

A wave of his hand and the wreath of roses on my head disappears.

And in its place is the jewel studded crown of the 5th realm.

It feels like the final nail in the coffin of my fate.

Wonderful and scary all at once.

The wrinkled old man helps me to my feet, eyes crinkling at the edges and his face beaming with a wide smile.

He turns towards Midas, kissing him on each cheek.

“I bestow upon you a kiss of peace and the blessings of the Fates. You may now kiss the Bride.”

Midas steps towards me.

My palms are sweaty and I swallow gently, finding myself suddenly incapable of doing anything more than stare at him as he closes the distance between us.

Oh for heaven’s sake move your body Hera. Are you going to keep standing there watching...

His mouth closes over mine and everything else disappears.

There is nothing peaceful about the way he kisses me.

Hard and fast and insistent.

Gods above...

My fingers clutch desperately at the front of his shirt because my knees are threatening to give way beneath me and his arms wrapped firmly around my waist are the only thing keeping me from melting into a pool of mushy desire.

Then just as suddenly as it began, it is over and he moves away from me, leaving me disoriented and breathlessly dizzy with longing.

Not enough...Not enough...Not enough.

My eyes blink slowly open in an attempt to regain my composure.

It had lasted barely a fraction of a minute and yet my heart refuses to stop pounding.

But I can tell I am not the only one who is feeling the effects of those few seconds.

His eyes have darkened and beneath his armor, his chest is heaving gently, almost like he is struggling to settle his breathing.

He did not want to stop.

And if the way he is looking at me is anything to go by then Hades help me, this night could not come fast enough.

The Dragon King's Substitute Bride Chapter 45

HERA

If anyone were ever to write a book about my life, three very crucial events will mark the turning points from which there was no return.

The day my Father died.

The day my village was razed to the ground, everyone I loved burned to ashes with it.

And the day I wed the dragon king in the temple of the fire gods and became queen.

The dragonkin below erupt in howls and cheers as we turn around to face them, a rumbling sound that seems to shake the very foundations of the temple itself.

If they knew what I planned and my reason for becoming queen, I doubt they would be so quick to rejoice.

The crowd parts as we descend the steps, exposing the path between the burning pillars.

Tiny, sweet scented flower are tossed in the air from eager baskets, floating gently to land on our clothes, in our hair, at our feet until the path we walk is almost completely covered in white and yellow petals.

I force myself to walk with my head held high, keeping the semblance of a smile on my face.

Not too little so they do not think I am in mourning and not too wide that it seems fake.

Just the right amount that reveals nothing to the cheering crowd about how I may be truly feeling.

And through it all I can feel him beside me, my hand wrapped around his arm.

He seems different somehow.

Less angry, less wound up, almost like the happiness of his people is something satisfying.

I frown.

The idea that the feared, cruel Midas might actually be a good king has never crossed my mind and the realization is unsettling because it threatens to upsets everything I have grown to believe.

We step out of the dark temple and I have to blink many times to adjust my eyes to the brightness of the world outside.

The day has flown by faster than I realized and the sun is already beginning its fiery, orange descent through the sky by the time we finally step into the carriage that will take us both back to the castle.

The other dragonkin are beginning to disperse, heading back to the capital.

The festivities in the great hall will only be for the nobles and important guests of the king who also begin to mount their horses and carriages.

The door swings shut and our horses pull out behind the Ryders who have gone out ahead.

The nobles and other dignitaries following behind us on the journey back home

And for the first time since that morning two days ago, Midas and I are completely alone.

I sit with my hands in my lap, my gaze fixed stubbornly on the small window to my right watching the changing scenery and houses as we pass through the capital and eventually leave it far behind.

He sits across from me utterly silent without even so much as a muttered word the entire time.

I want to look at him but I am afraid to.

The gentle swaying of the carriage is doing nothing to calm my nerves.

Our knees keep brushing up against each other in the small, confined space and every time it happens, small, flapping insects buzz around in my stomach.

Being this close to him in such a tight space is messing with my head especially since he is sitting there so calmly, completely oblivious to the turmoil of my racing heart and shot nerves.

I sneak secret, hopefully inconspicuous glances at him

Say something goddamit.

“You do realize that I am right across from you and can see you pretending not to look at me.”

Skies...did I say that out loud or does being dragon king come with the ability to read minds?

“I was not pretending.”

“Ah so what were you doing?”

I press my lips together and blurt the first thing that comes to my mind.

“Just wondering how hard it must be trying to avoid me even in such a tiny space.”

I am beginning to realize that it is a good idea to think before I speak.

His expression does not change and the only indication that he heard me is an almost imperceptible movement of his left brow.

“What makes you think I have been avoiding you?”

“Oh please do not even try to deny it.”

“I am neither denying nor confirming anything. I simply ask what made you arrive at such a conclusion.”

But I am on a roll and I barely hear him. “You have not said a single word to me in days, you do not sleep in our room, you do not come down to dinner and all this ever since that morning after you saw me...”

Suddenly the wheels roll over a large stone and the carriage jostles roughly, stealing the words from my mouth and throwing me from my seat and face first into the king’s crotch.

If one could die of embarrassment...

He grips my arms firmly, catching me before I can lose whatever shred of dignity I have left and pulls me up and into his lap to steady me.

But he does not let go, instead his hands encircle my waist, strong and unyielding in a way that tell me I will not be going anywhere anytime soon.

He’s staring at me so intently it makes my heart skip an actual beat.

“After I saw what?”

The way he asks the question, voice rough, eyes dark, tell me he knows exactly what it was he had seen when he opened that door.

Doesn't just know, he remembers... in exquisite detail.

I bite my lip and feel myself blush from the top of my head to the tip of my toes.

He lifts my chin with one finger, forcing eyes to meet his. "After I saw what Hera?"

The butterflies in my stomach have since become a stampede of wild animals.

We have left since left the smooth roads and rolling plains and are now on the uneven rocky path that is closest to dragon's mount on which the castle sits.

As a result of the rough road, the carriage keeps swaying more than it was before causing me to bounce about slightly in his lap.

The movement pushes my breasts up in his face and I feel a perverse sense of satisfaction when his eyes, half-lidded and heavy drop to them.

He lets out a quiet curse and forces himself to drag his gaze back to my face.

His hands, large and calloused slowly push my dress up, causing it to ride up my thighs.

"You are yet to answer my question."

To be honest talking is the furthest thing from my mind at the moment and it is starting to become increasingly difficult to keep a steady train of thoughts when he keeps looking at me like that.

The carriage rolls over the increasingly bumpy road as it ascends slowly up the mountain and I wiggle around in his lap in an effort to steady myself.

The only thing I succeed in doing is inadvertently rubbing my bottom back and forth over his crotch.

He inhales deep and sudden and I feel him harden beneath me.

One hand runs down the curve of my back, the other up my thigh to cup my a*s firmly and still my movements with a growl.

"If you do not stop doing that, we are not going to make it to the bedding ceremony."

His words send a thrill of excitement running down my spine.

But just as instantly, doubt creeps in.

But, what if I am reading this entire situation wrong and he is in fact still mad about what happened?

I look away. "Forget I mentioned it."

His brows draw together in a tiny frown that only serves to make him infinitely more attractive.

“Forget... How can I possibly forget when you are the only thing I have been able to think about in two days?”

I glance up at him, hating how tiny and unsure my voice sounds.

“So you have not been avoiding me because you were disgusted with me?”

His frown deepens.

“Why would you think I was disgusted?”

I shrug helplessly.

“I had just assumed...”

His grip tightens on my a*s and this time when I rub against the gradually increasing hardness of his c**k, it is because he is making me do it deliberately.

“Trust me Hera, I felt a lot of things when I stepped into that room and saw you...touching yourself...saying my name...”

“Yes...?”

I am nearly breathless now and I can feel a warm wetness beginning to pool between my legs.

He shakes his head like he is at a loss for words. “It was all I could do to stop myself from...”

“Stop yourself from doing what?” I wrap my arms around his neck.

My movements against him are slow and deliberate; tiny circular motions across the length of his arousal and the bulge straining the crotch of his pants grows even harder.

He groans and throws his head back against the chair. His voice strained, hands clenched in fists by his side.

“By the gods Hera, are you trying to kill me?”

I can see how hard he is fighting to remain in control.

But I want him to stop fighting. I want him to give in.

Just rubbing against him isn’t nearly enough.

I want more. I need more.

I press my chest against him, can feel the way my n*****s harden to erect peaks.

There are way too many layers of clothing between us.

I increase the pace at which I am grinding against him and with another groan he buries his face in my neck.

“Gods above you smell f*****g amazing.”

His teeth scrape across the sensitive skin there and I shudder and gasp at the shock that rushes down every inch of me.

“Midas...”

And then the carriage stops.

Oh for Zeus’ sake, you have got to be kidding me.

This time, as we ride through the castle gates, I am the one who groans in frustration.

I feel him smirk against my skin just before he plants a tiny, feather soft kiss in the hollow between my neck and shoulder.

“Patience Hera...patience. All good things come to those who wait.”

“But I don’t want to wait...”

His eyes drop to my mouth and his lips graze mine with the promise of what is to come. “Me neither.”

I sigh just as the doors swing open and if the sight of me flushed and fluttered in the king’s lap is unusual to the castle’s inhabitants lined up in the courtyard then I barely notice it.

Only one thing is on my mind at the moment.

How in all the 7 realms am I going to survive an entire evening of festivities while being this incredibly turned on?

The Dragon King’s Substitute Bride Chapter 46

HERA

The cheer from the castle’s inhabitants does not sound as loud or as happy as that of the capital.

It sounds purely perfunctory and not at all genuine.

And as we walk past them I swear I can see more than a few disapproving glances.

Minth most especially, who isn't even trying to hide her disdain and hatred and is openly glaring at me.

It should not bother me but it does.

The dragonkin of the capital may have accepted me but the people who live and work in the castle are not all pleased with the King's choice of a wife.

But none of them would dare show it, especially not today and not with the king by my side.

Midas leads us through the castle and towards the golden doors of the great hall, his hand on the small of my back.

An unconscious, possessive gesture that causes my heart to flutter foolishly.

The doors swing open and a horn heralds our arrival.

We walk towards the raised, royal dais where the king and his council sit and I notice that the once single chair has been joined by another, and against my better judgment, I feel a smile begin to form on my lips.

The other guests have begun to arrive as well and soon enough, everyone is assembled in the hall and the festivities begin.

Servants bring in plates and carts of a seemingly endless supply of food.

Roast meat and veal covered in pomegranate seeds, sugar plums and sauce, large bowls of hot soup and platters of fruits and vegetables sitting besides slices of cheese and slabs of stuffed pies.

There are jars of honey and creams covered with strawberries and fennel seeds and everywhere I looked, gold and silver cups overflowing with wine and ale of every shade and color.

Music and songs from various instruments fill up the room with melodious, happy music.

For all their war and hard ways, the dragonkin sure know how to throw a celebration.

I watch the splendidly dressed nobles in their livery and silk, sitting at the long tables, laughing and making jest with one another, cups clanging together, faces stuffed with food.

But my attention is drawn to the non-dragonkin dignitaries who sit quietly at a table not too far away from the king's own table.

There are fae and elves from the 4th realm, recognizable by their white skin and pointy ears and even two members of the giant clan who call the 3rd realm their home.

This is unexpected because most creatures from other realms do not usually venture out of their home realms, especially not into the dragon king's territory.

So it does not surprise me that those who are here do not look very comfortable.

I can tell from the way their eyes dart cautiously from one end of the hall to another and the way they sniffing discreetly at their drinks before lifting it to their mouth.

Soon, however, it becomes clear to me the purpose for their presence when they so clearly would rather be anywhere else.

They are not here to celebrate with him;

They are here because they are afraid of him.

They are the olive branches the other realms constantly send to show the king that they do not mean him or his realm any harm.

And I find myself wondering; if perhaps the portal were not sealed, would there have been dignitaries from Averia as well?

A sharp pain blossoms in my chest.

I miss my home.

I may not have had the best life there but it was home and I miss it. So much so that it actually hurts.

“You are unhappy.”

I turn to look at him and tell him I’m fine with a shake of my head because what else can I say?

He narrows his eyes at me. “You’re lying. I can tell.”

I attempt to protest but he stops me and points at something on my forehead.

“When you’re unhappy your brows draw together and a tiny line appears right there, between them. It is there now and it was not there a moment ago. So tell me what it is that just happened that is making you this way.”

I stare at him in surprise.

“How did you...?”

He clears his throat awkwardly into his fist and looks away.

And for some strange reason it not only makes me feel better, it makes me want to tilt up and kiss him.

But instead I shake my head again and offer him a tiny, rueful smile.

He turns back towards me and pushes his plate in my direction. “You should eat...”

His eyes lock onto mine, drop to my mouth and then back up to my eyes again, heavy with a promise that sets my heart racing. "...you'll need the energy."

The way he says the words, slow and deliberate only serves to make me too nervous to eat anything.

It is already night fall but the ceremony shows no sign of winding down. If anything, it seems to be getting even more frenzied.

All of a sudden Midas leans in.

His mouth rests a mere inch from my ear and when he speaks, his breath is hot on the side of my neck in a way that makes me temporarily forget where I am.

"Don't start without me."

Before I can ask him what he means, I feel two different pair of arms lift me up from my seat.

The rowdy, half drunk crowd below erupts in loud, raucous cheers and I feel myself turn the color of scarlet.

The time had come.

The women holding me on both sides lead me down the steps and out the hall, a small crowd of maids gathering behind us and the loud, suggestive cheers and whistles getting louder with each second, follow us out the door.

They take me up to my room, Henette leading the way and I see they have already drawn a steaming hot bath filled with roses and scented oils.

If I wasn't so nervous I might have found the entire setting ridiculous.

But I am barely conscious of the many hands that prep and dress me.

The dress they have given me to replace my wedding attire is barely a dress at all.

It is a simple silk slip of shimmery white with barely any sleeves save two tiny straps and a skirt that barely manages to graze mid thigh.

They comb my hair until it gleams and shines and falls in soft curls around my shoulders and then they dab tiny, cool drops of blue ivy at the base of my neck.

They want me to take off the dragon necklace but I refuse.

I don't want to.

It came from him and I want him to see me in it.

The women leave me sitting at my armoire and in front of my mirror, nervously twisting the necklace between my fingers.

And I am still sitting there when the door opens again a while later.

For a few seconds I can hear the noise from the revelry going on all the way from the hall.

Then the door closes again and the noise disappears.

I don't dare turn around to look at him, but I watch him through the mirror as he walks across the room.

I watch him take off his swords and lay them on the dresser.

Watch as he systematically disposes of his boots, the metal plates of his armor...

My heart is pounding so loudly I know there is no way he cannot hear it.

He moves to take off his shirt and my breath hitches but then he stops suddenly, his eyes meeting mine in the reflection of the mirror in front of me.

He sits on the bed, studying me.

I twist my fingers and bite my lip.

What in Hades do I do now?

Why didn't those blasted dragonkin women tell me anything?

"Hera..."

I jump slightly. "Yes my Lord?"

"Do you intend to sit there the entire night?"

I exhale and stand slowly to my feet.

Okay get a grip Hera, you don't want him to think you know absolutely nothing do you?

Especially not when he has a mistress who most likely already knows exactly all the ways to please him.

Doubts and insecurities I did not know I had begin to creep in.

What if I fall short?

Has he ever been with a human before, what if he hates it?

I shake the thought away and begin attempting to take off my clothes.

He frowns slightly, watching my movements, a thread of amusement in his tone.

“What are you doing?”

My hands still, the hem of my dress bunched up in them. “Taking off my clothes?”

He shakes his head. “Come here.”

The way he says it, that deep commanding growl has my insides melting into a soup of liquid lust.

My feet take me towards where he’s sitting on the edge of the bed.

He leans back on his hands. “Sit.”

So I sit, dipping into the edge of the mattress beside him.

He rolls his eyes and proceeds to promptly pull me into his lap so that I end up straddling him.

I chew nervously on my bottom lip, my hands resting on the broad muscled hardness of his shoulders.

His eyes go dark.

“I’ve warned you to stop doing that haven’t I?”

Then before I can say anything, he pulls it out from beneath my teeth again...with his mouth.

My eyes flutter shut and shivers shoot up my spine, goose bumps covering my bare arms.

He pulls back. “You’re shaking.”

“I am not.”

He smirks, fingers trailing down the arch of my back to slip beneath the hem of my dress. “Really?”

There is nothing underneath and I gasp at the coolness of his hands as they slide across the bare skin of my thighs, the curve of my a*s and up my back, resisting the urge to shudder at the pricks of electric sensations that his fingers leave all over my skin.

“Really.”

But my voice is breathless and he isn’t fooled.

He leans in, lowers his mouth to the hollow of my neck. “Then I guess I have to fix that.”

He flicks his tongue over my skin...one... twice... a third time and I feel it all the way to my toes.

My grip tightens on his shoulder, fingers clutching at his shirt.

He pulls me even closer against him and when he bites me, I cry out in surprise.

Who knew pain could feel this good?

His hands slip out of my clothes and run down the sides of my body, rubbing the soft silkiness of the dress against my skin.

“Don’t start without ma.”

Bafora I can ask him what ha maans, I faal two diffarant pair of arms lift ma up from my saat.

Tha rowdy, half drunk crowd balow arupts in loud, raucous chaars and I faal mysalf turn tha color of scarlat.

Tha tima had coma.

Tha woman holding ma on both sidas laad ma down tha staps and out tha hall, a small crowd of maids gatharing bahind us and tha loud, suggastiva chaars and whistlas gattling loudar with aach sacond, follow us out tha door.

Thay taka ma up to my room, Hanatta laading tha way and I saa thay hava alraady drawn a staaming hot bath fillad with rosas and scantad oils.

If I wasn’t so narvous I might hava found tha antira satting ridiculous.

But I am baraly conscious of tha many hands that prap and drass ma.

Tha drass thay hava givan ma to raplaca my wadding attira is baraly a drass at all.

It is a simpla silk slip of shimmery whita with baraly any slaavas sava two tiny straps and a skirt that baraly managas to graza mid thigh.

Thay comb my hair until it glaams and shinas and falls in soft curls around my shouldars and than thay dab tiny, cool drops of blue ivy at tha basa of my nack.

Thay want ma to taka off tha dragon nacklaca but I rafusa.

I don’t want to.

It cama from him and I want him to saa ma in it.

Tha woman laava ma sitting at my armoira and in front of my mirror, narvously twisting tha nacklaca batwaan my fingers.

And I am still sitting thara whan tha door opans again a whila later.

For a faw saconds I can haar tha noisa from tha ravalry going on all tha way from tha hall.

Than tha door closas again and tha noisa disappaars.

I don't dare turn around to look at him, but I watch him through the mirror as he walks across the room.

I watch him take off his swords and lay them on the dresser.

Watch as he systematically disposes of his boots, the metal plates of his armor...

My heart is pounding so loudly I know there is no way he cannot hear it.

He moves to take off his shirt and my breath hitches but then he stops suddenly, his eyes meeting mine in the reflection of the mirror in front of me.

He sits on the bed, studying me.

I twist my fingers and bite my lip.

What in Hades do I do now?

Why didn't those blasted dragonkin woman tell me anything?

"Hara..."

I jump slightly. "Yes my Lord?"

"Do you intend to sit there the entire night?"

I exhale and stand slowly to my feet.

Okay get a grip Hara, you don't want him to think you know absolutely nothing do you?

Especially not when he has a mistress who most likely already knows exactly all the ways to please him.

Doubts and insecurities I did not know I had begun to creep in.

What if I fall short?

Has he ever been with a human before, what if he hates it?

I shake the thought away and begin attempting to take off my clothes.

He frowns slightly, watching my movements, a thread of amusement in his tone.

"What are you doing?"

My hands still, the hem of my dress bunched up in them. "Taking off my clothes?"

He shakes his head. "Come here."

Tha way ha says it, that daap commanding growl has my insidas malting into a soup of liquid lust.

My faat taka ma towards whara ha's sitting on tha adga of tha bad.

Ha laans back on his hands. "Sit."

So I sit, dipping into tha adga of tha matrass basida him.

Ha rolls his ayas and procaads to promptly pull ma into his lap so that I and up straddling him.

I chaw narvously on my bottom lip, my hands rasting on tha broad musclad hardnass of his shouldars.

His ayas go dark.

"I've warnad you to stop doing that havan't I?"

Than bafora I can say anything, ha pulls it out from banaath my taath again...with his mouth.

My ayas fluttar shut and shivars shoot up my spina, goosa bumps covaring my bara arms.

Ha pulls back. "You're shaking."

"I am not."

Ha smirks, fingars trailing down tha arch of my back to slip banaath tha ham of my drass.
"Raally?"

Thara is nothing undarnaath and I gasp at tha coolnass of his hands as thay slida across tha bara skin of my thighs, tha curva of my a*s and up my back, rasisting tha urga to shuddar at tha pricks of alactric sansations that his fingars laava all ovar my skin.

"Raally."

But my voica is braathlass and ha isn't foolad.

Ha laans in, lowars his mouth to tha hollow of my neck. "Than I guass I hava to fix that."

Ha flicks his tongua ovar my skin...ona... twica... a third tima and I faal it all tha way to my toas.

My grip tightans on his shouldar, fingars clutching at his shirt.

Ha pulls ma avan closar against him and whan ha bitas ma, I cry out in surprisa.

Who knaw pain could faal this good?

His hands slip out of my clothas and run down tha sidas of my body, rubbing tha soft silkinass of tha drass against my skin.

He slides his finger beneath the straps and pushes off the thin sleeves, making them fall down the sides of my arm.

His gaze is intent and focused as he watches the dress fall off to reveal the top of my breasts.

“Gods Hera...”

He lowers his head again. Kissing down my neck, nipping at my collar bone...tiny feather soft kisses down my chest.

“You have absolutely no idea, how long I’ve wanted to do this.”

Then the heat of his mouth covers my right n****e through the cloth...then my left...then my right again.

Oh sweet mother of...

“Midas...”

My hands are in his hair, pulling, grasping as he sucks and licks and teases until I think I am going to lose my mind.

The top of my dress is wet now and he flicks the sore, sensitive tips underneath with his thumb.

Watching and enjoying the way it makes it difficult for me to even keep my eyes open.

Then he twists and he pulls and I lose all sense of everything else.

“F**k...Midas.”

He hardens instantly beneath me. “Ah, so the little human slave swears.”

“I...I try...” He’s still rolling my n*****s between his fingers and it’s hard to think let alone speak when he keeps doing that. “I try...not to make a habit of it.”

His eyes darken even further.

“Well, I wonder what else that pretty mouth of yours can do.”

Then he crushes his lips to mine.

And by Zeus and Hades and all the gods of the 7 realms, the way he kisses... it feels a talent the gods gave specially to him.

He breaks the kiss for a second and I pull him back.

“No...”

He laughs and kisses me again. “So impatient.”

Then he moves away, takes off his shirt and claims my mouth again.

Being in his arms...kissing him.

It's a thousand times better than I imagined.

It makes me want to taste him, properly.

So I do. I sweep my tongue across his lip and take it between my teeth, to suck and pull and nibble.

He growls against my mouth, his grip on my waist tightening.

He kisses the corner of my mouth, the angle of my jaw, that tiny sensitive spot just below my ear.

"Damn it Hera, you make it so easy to forget."

I sigh and moan. "Easy to forget what?"

He starts like he did not realize he had said it out loud.

He raises his head and his eyes find mine. "That you're human."

My entire body freezes. "Do you really mean that?"

His hands still and he frowns.

Hera...for Hades sake, do not do this. My body begs but I'm no longer listening to her.

I move to get up, pulling up one sleeve roughly, the other hand running through my hair.

"How dare you?"

He does not move, doesn't even say a word yet it only makes matters worse and I can feel myself getting angrier and angrier by the second.

"Forget?! Forget!! You and your Ryders destroyed my realm, murdered my people for no reason and you think sleeping with me is enough to make you forget?! Am I to be the absolution for your crimes? "

His eyes narrow and I can see he's starting to get angry too. "You have no idea what you're talking about."

I whirl around, my mouth open in disbelief.

"Oh trust me dragon King I have a very good idea about just how much pain you've put us through and all because of what?"

A chill settles over my body and the words flash through my mind.

“I thought you hated their kind”

The dark Elvin queen.

“What in all the realms could we possibly have done to you?” My tone is sarcastic, unbelieving.

They were so powerful, how could we possibly hurt them...hurt him?

He clenches his jaw and grabs his shirt. “I knew it.”

“Knew what, that you are a heartless bastard who delights in torturing those weaker than him”

“That all of you humans are the same. Blaming others for your misfortunes yet never taking responsibility for what you’ve done. And you... you are no different.”

There is no mistaking the spite in his voice, in the way he looks at me.

He shakes his head and reaches for the door. “I never should have come. Should never have let myself be tied down to you”

My heart cracks.

He slams the door behind him.

Then it breaks.

Gods above it hurts...it hurts so f*****g much.

My eyes fill with tears.

But I am not sad.

I am angry. Absolutely livid.

So much so, that I am actually, visibly shaking.

How... dare... he?

The door suddenly flies open again and I whirl around ready to tear into whoever is at the door.

He’s standing there, glaring at me, chest heaving, eyes dark.

He kicks the door closed with his feet and the shirt in his hand drops to the floor.

“f**k it.”

Then he covers the distance between us with inhuman speed and slams his lips against mine.

The Dragon King's Substitute Bride Chapter 47

HERA

I... I should push him away.

I should lay my hand on his chest and shove him off and punch him in his annoyingly perfect face.

Those are the thoughts running through my head as Midas crosses across the room to take me in his arms.

I should not be letting him kiss me.

Yet the minute his lips touch mine, all my protest die and I feel ridiculously weak, powerless to resist, to fight against the surge of desire that washes over me.

And when I do place my hands against the hardness of his chest, it is not to push him away, it IS to steady myself.

My fingers holding on, pulling him closer instead of away.

There is nothing gentle or unsure about this kiss.

Nothing indecisive about the way his mouth moves against mine.

Hard and fast and demanding.

Like I am water and he is a man in the desert finally quenching his thirst.

And before I can stop myself, I am kissing him back.

My fingers trailing up his neck and tangling in the silky softness of his hair.

Wrapping it around my hand, tugging it.

He growls against my mouth in response, his lips moving along my cheek, down to my neck.

Little bites and tiny kisses that send the blood rushing in my veins, my heart pounding in my ears.

Somewhere in the haze of this madness, I manage to find my voice even though it is shaky and breathless.

"I...I hope... you do not think this makes me any less mad at you."

His hands slide down my back and under my dress. He fills his large hands with the bareness of my a*s cheeks, cupping and squeezing.

“f**k no...”

Then he lifts me up and I wrap my legs around his waist, my arms around his neck, gasping slightly when I feel the solid evidence of his arousal press against my sensitive wetness.

His eyes meet mine.

They are filled with a smoldering heat that pierces all the way to my belly; dark gold and rimmed with red and when he speaks, his voice is husky, desire and lust making it rough around the edges.

“You make me so angry it defies belief. But if I do not make love to you today Hera, I am going to lose my f*****g mind.”

Then he crushes his mouth against mine again.

Skies above...

I am aware that we are moving but quite frankly I do not care where.

He bites my lips and licks away the pain.

My mouth parts open in a wordless moan as the shock of the sensation hits and he takes advantage of it.

His tongue slips in, touches mine and sets my entire body on fire.

Keeping me up with one hand, he uses the other to knock off all the contents of my armoire to the floor, sending them crashing and tumbling across the room with one broad sweep of his arm.

He lowers me down to the hard surface, not breaking the kiss for even a second.

The glided table feels cold against my naked bottom but then he pushes off my sleeves, pulls the dress down and takes my n****e into the wet, heat of his mouth and suddenly nothing is cold again.

Skies how is possible that the one person is I hate the most in the entire world is also the one able to reduce me to this writhing, arching mess.

His hands slide down.

Past my stomach... between my legs...over the mound of my curls.

He sighs. “Damn it you’re soaked.”

His fingers slip between the wetness of my swollen lips, one slick upward motion to reach and slide against my clit and I swear my entire being clenches and dissolves with that tiny motion.

“You’re trembling.”

“It’s because I’m angry.”

He smirks, his finger moving in a deliberate firm motion. “That is not why.”

He does it again and again and again.

Rubbing his finger back and forth against the sensitive little knob, sending shock waves of pleasure through my entire body.

I try to grab at his hand, press my legs together but it does nothing to slow his movements, only makes the sensations more acute.

My muscles clench, my toes curl and I press my lips together to try and keep the sounds in but he rests his forehead against mine.

“I want to hear them. I want to hear how I make you feel.”

His fingers achieve a steady rhythm and keeping quiet becomes nearly impossible.

But then he tries to slide in a finger and I let out an involuntary whelp at the tiny shock of pain.

He stops. His eyes latching on mine.

I bite my lip and look down, turning the intense red of nightshade.

“I...I have not done this before my lord.”

He raises one brow and tilts up my chin up so I can look at him.

And then he kisses me, so gently it makes my chest hurt.

“Then let me make this easier for you.”

He pushes my dress up and further away from my thighs.

“Midas...”

He ignores me, his head dropping lower.

He places a kiss between my breasts...on my stomach...against the inner part of my thigh.

His grip on my hips tightens slightly. “Try not to scream.”

“Midas...Midas...what are you...Oh my f*****g god...”

I grab his hair... his shoulders... the edge of the table, anything to keep myself from coming completely undone.

If I thought his fingers were enough to make me fall apart, then his tongue is going to drive me to the brink of extinction.

His assault is relentless.

Sucking and licking and flicking.

Broad sweeps of his tongue followed by gentle, barely there kisses that make me groan in frustration.

I can feel myself tipping over the edge, losing my grasp on whatever shred of control I have left.

Then he slows down, one gentle lick after another.

He's teasing me, drawing it out... torturing me.

I growl. "Midas..."

"What?"

"I already hate you and this...you are not making things any better."

He chuckles, low and deep in his throat and presses the tip of his tongue against my throbbing clit. Moving it in slow, barely there circles and holding me down so I am unable to lift my hips or move closer.

I shudder and moan; my breathing labored and heavy. "Midas...please."

"Please what?"

I do not know what I am asking for, not exactly so I just repeat the word again, a tiny whisper. "Please..."

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Past my stomach... between my legs...over the mound of my curls.

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"What?"

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I shuddar and moan; my braathing laborad and haavy. "Midas...plaasa."

"Plaasa what?"

I do not know what I am asking for, not axactly so I just rapaat tha word again, a tiny whispas.
"Plaasa..."

He raises his head from between my legs. "Good enough."

I can taste myself on his mouth when he kisses me.

He pulls back, drops his trousers to the floor.

My eyes go wide and I momentarily forget how breathing works.

He looks like he was sculpted, not just merely made like the rest of us and the sight of him naked and bare fills me with an unexpected warmth.

He catches my gawking, my mouth half open. "If you do not stop looking at me like that this isn't going to last very long."

I shrug but I can't help it.

I want to touch him, everywhere. To slide my hands against the smoothness of his skin, graze the weathered roughness of his calluses and kiss away his scars.

I want to take him, that velvet, hard length of him in my hand...in my mouth.

But before I can complete the thought, he wraps my legs around his waist again and my arms around his shoulders.

I feel the tip at my entrance, his mouth against my ear. "This might sting a bit."

Then he pushes in, the slippery wetness of my slit making it slightly easier. I feel him tense and shudder against me.

He's filling me with a deliberate, slow gentleness that surprises me and nearly brings tears to the corner of my eyes because how is this brute of a man capable of such delicateness.

I let out a quiet whimper as pain blossoms out, shooting up my spine and his arms tighten around me.

"I've got you."

The last of him slips inside and he stops. Giving me a moment to catch my breath, to learn to accommodate the largeness of him on my inside.

Then he begins moving again, in and out...and in and out.

Slow, languid thrusts until the pain vanishes completely only to be replaced with something much stronger, much more instinctive.

He groans. "By the gods Hera..."

His voice is strained and I can tell how much effort it is taking for him to keep from going faster all at once.

But then I grind my hips against him and he takes the hint, picks up the pace, gradually moving faster and faster and harder until the small table is rocking beneath my weight and the force of his thrusts.

I bury my face in the crook of his neck to muffle my cries of pleasure.

He smells like sweat and pines, safe and warm and....and....

Oh dear Zeus...

My thoughts are beginning to fade as I get closer and closer.

I can feel the muscles of his back tighten beneath my hands and somehow I know he too is very close to tipping completely over the edge.

He just wants me to get there first.

So I let go, my head falling back as stars explode behind my eyes in bursts of white light, wave after wave of blinding pleasure crashing into me.

It feels like drowning and flying all at the same time.

I can sense my hands digging into his back, breaking the skin, drawing blood but I have no control over anything.

Not anymore.

And the last thing I hear is the sound of my name falling from his mouth. Over and over again.

The Dragon King's Substitute Bride Chapter 48

MINTH

It is late, very late.

She can hear the sounds of the festival, the noise from the great hall dying out as people fall into dreamless and most likely drunken stupors.

The creatures of darkness have begun to crawl out of their hiding places.

Owls and bats waking up from their slumber to fly across the bright moonlit sky, rodents crawling around the empty cobbled streets of the capital now that the inhabitants of the dragon realm have all since closed their eyes and laid down their heads down to rest.

But not her.

Her eyes are wide open.

Staring unseeing at the wooden ceiling of her ornate four poster bed with its velvet green drapes decorated with embroidery and tassels of gold.

She has always hated the color which is ironic considering they are almost the exact shade of jade as her eyes.

Staring up at them now, the ugly drapery she hates, they only serve as k****e to the fire of rage simmering beneath her clear, perfect, porcelain skin and angelic face.

She sneers at it and were it a living thing, it would have shriveled and withered beneath the malignant, malice of her gaze.

But no such thing happens and Minth has something else to add to her ever growing list of nothing that was going the way it should.

She has not been sleeping well.

Not since that insipid little human crawled into her life and stole what should rightfully have been hers.

The king has barely even glanced at her, let alone visited her chambers.

Since the night he stormed out of her room to rescue that trash from the cellar, she has seen neither hide nor hair of him beyond passing glances as he walked through the castle or trained in the courtyard.

It bothers her. Terribly.

Twisting her belly into knots and causes her head to ache wickedly.

But she hadn't known the worst of it and she managed to swallow most of her bitterness or at least keep it beneath her perfect, smiling surface.

It was especially easier after she had gone down to dinner yesterday and seen the poor little sod sitting alone at the table, eyes down, twisting her fingers nervously.

Minth had wanted to throw back her head and laugh till her sides began to hurt.

The king obviously was not interested in being around the wench and it kindled the tiny flame of hope that had begun to burn in Minth's chest.

The tiny flame that told her all hope was far from being lost.

Had she not always been a quick thinker?

Not to mention skilled with her hands and her mouth and all the job requirements that came with her position as the King's mistress.

All she had to do was remind the King of exactly why dragonkin women...her most especially...were a thousand times better than any stupid human girl.

That was until she found out about the binding ceremony.

And Minth had nearly gone blind with anger.

Not only was Hera, for that is the insufferable little troll's name, not only was she going to be lady of the castle, she had managed to sink her disgusting little claws so far into the king that he was now willingly to be bound to her before the fire gods and all the inhabitants of the dragon realm.

No. Minth could not allow it to happen.

Yet even as she had thought about it, she had known there was nothing she could really do about the ceremony.

She had found out about the news too late and now she would be forced to suffer in silence, while she watched some weak, human b***h take away her crown.

She had refused to go the binding ceremony and forbade her maid from doing so either.

Choosing instead to stay locked up in her chambers, stewing in her rage and anger.

She had paced around her room, knocking things over and sending her maid cowering in tears to a corner of the room to avoid being the focus of her angry tirade.

Of course she could hope that the Fire gods would reject the b***h and that the ceremony would fail, but Minth has never and will never be one to leave her destiny up to the Fates.

Especially not now, when the threat is so real and very much present.

This is not the first time.

Minth has come close to losing everything once before.

Years ago, her sister had appeared out of the blue, banging on the castle's gates and Minth's doors.

She was angry.

She had heard about Minth's appointment as the King's new mistress and now with many years to think about all Minth had done to her; she was now determined to pay her back in her own coin.

So she had stormed the castle, armed with secrets and damning information about the poisoned Lord's daughter who Minth should have killed, and threatened to bring everything Minth had built crumbling down around her ears.

Minth had been blindsided by her sudden appearance but she had recovered quickly.

Lucky for her the King had been away from the castle on a journey.

She met her sister's rage with tears in her eyes and deep remorse engraved on her face.

She fell at her feet and wept and begged.

She had been desperate she said. She knew she had hurt her own flesh and blood and even though she now had everything she could ever want, Minth could barely sleep at night for how sorrowful she felt.

Minth's sister was beyond confused.

She had come expecting a fight, not this slobbering, pleading mess.

Yet she was still angry and not ready to forgive everything her own sister had done to her.

But Minth had taken advantage of her confusion and begged her to stay the night and think things over and if when the morning came, she still wished to have her revenge, then Minth would take her punishment with grace and remorse.

Her sister had reluctantly agreed.

The foolish girl had always been too trusting, too ready to give second chances.

It would turn out to be her undoing.

For when the castle awoke the next morning, the maids had gone to clean and had found the royal scepter missing from its place in the king's study.

The castle dissolved into wide spread panic, everyone searching everywhere.

And where else was it found than inside the bags of the lowly village girl who Minth swore was no true relative of hers but some wicked soul who had come to blackmail her and when she would not give in, had stolen the King's scepter.

Her sister had cried and shouted and proclaimed her innocence.

But it was her word against that of the King's mistress. Who would believe her?

So Minth gave her two options; Be brought to trial before the dragon king when he returned and risk spending a long time in the castle's goal or run far... far away, never showing her face anywhere in the capital again.

There was only really one option and Minth had never seen her sister ever again.

That was just one of the many battles Minth has had to fight to keep her position and her life of ease.

Fights she had met head on, teeth bared.

Fights she had won.

And it is this realization that serves to calm her down and slow her breathing.

Enough for her to stand at the gates with all the other castle's inhabitants and watch them walk past her without lunging at the King's wife and clawing the harpy's eyes out.

It was what had allowed her to sit in the great hall while everyone celebrated the marriage of that wretch to their king.

Her wine and food tasting like ashes in her mouth; it was what had allowed her to think clearly enough to begin coming up with a suitable solution.

If the king's wife insisted on occupying a position that rightfully belong to Minth then she would make it so unbearable for her, that the b***h would have no choice but to run far...far away.

Just like her sister had done.

So when the King and his bride went up for the bedding ceremony, Minth pushed her blinding jealousy and rage to the bottom of her mind and set about the beginnings of her plan.

It had not been too difficult a task to find to find servants and castle workers who felt the same way as she did.

The people of the dragon realm may not know exactly what happened to the former King and queen and why Midas had made it his life's mission to wage war on the human kingdom of Averia, but Minth did.

And so did all of the castle's inhabitants.

Most of who have been working within its walls for a very... very long time.

So they may not hate her as much as Minth did but they disliked the human girl well enough.

And that was all Minth needed.

A few choice words and carefully timed sighs and touches.

The cracks in her voice that showed just how concerned and worried she was for the king and his well being and they were on her side.

They would treat the new queen so terribly that she would have no choice but to leave the dragon's castle for good.

A spoilt, little princess like that would surely not be able to stand being so thoroughly slighted and mistreated.

And should she perhaps decide to report their slights and actions against her to the king, the servants would band together and deny everything.

There was nothing the dragon King hated more than a liar.

It would only serve to be her undoing.

Yes...it was a wonderful plan.

Minth would have laughed, laughed long and laughed hard if she wasn't suddenly so damn sleepy.

As she runs over the details of her plans, her eyes finally began to drift shut.

Calming thoughts of the success of her plans and the queen's crushed face, lure her into a state of dreamy, peaceful bliss.

It would work. Minth is sure of it.

And if by any chance it did not...well, Minth would get rid of her herself.

After all, the dragon's castle is a very large structure. Very large and very old.

Accidents were bound to happen all the time.

The dumb b***h would never even know what hit her.

The Dragon King's Substitute Bride Chapter 49

MIDAS

Something feels odd.

Not necessarily bad odd...just...different.

He frowns, his eyes still closed as he slowly pushes his mind from beneath the fog of sleep and into the reality of a new day.

And no...it is not just the very naked woman snoring gently into the nook of his shoulders that is making him feel this way.

She murmurs in her sleep as if in response to him, nestling closer and his arms subconsciously tighten around her, pulling her to him without his even needing to think about it.

His eyes blink slowly open as if resisting his efforts to awaken.

And it takes Midas more than a few minutes to realize exactly what it is that has been needling at him.

He has just slept through the entire night and well into the morning without waking up even once in between.

The last time Midas had slept this well was the night before he saw his parents for the very last time.

Of course he did not know that then.

All he had known, that fateful morning, was that they were about to embark on a journey to the 2nd realm, to the human kingdom called Averia to resolve an important issue between the two realms.

It was the journey from which they would never return.

And ever since that day, the day they brought the young prince, suddenly turned King the news of his parents' passing, Midas has been unable to truly sleep well.

Unable to give himself up fully to the blessed oblivion of dreamy unconsciousness for more than one or two hours at a time.

Because every time he closed his eyes, his mind beginning to drift off, he would find himself reliving that last day over and over again.

In his dreams...his nightmares, he tries to stop them from leaving.

But every time, his voice would disappear and they would be unable to hear him, unable to understand his frantic efforts to stop them.

Every time, they would leave, with the loud crackling sound of their drawn carriage rolling across the stony courtyard following them out, the gates falling shut behind them, and every time... everytime, they never came back.

He would jerk awake, soaked in sweat, his heart pounding,

His mind would be reeling with all the things he could have said, could have told them if he had only known it would be the last time.

He would have hugged his mother back when she wrapped her arms around him, her head barely coming up to his shoulders.

He would not have argued with his father, their last words to each other harsh and biting.

Especially since now he does not even remember exactly what had brought about that fight.

One out of the so many they'd had over the years; two stubborn, strong willed men.

Yet if he had known it would be the last time he saw the man who raised him in his own tough yet strangely loving way, he would not have said the things he said.

A hundred and fifty years had done nothing to dull the pain of having them suddenly snatched away from him before he could say goodbye, before he could make things right.

And thoughts like that were what made it impossible for him to sleep for longer than two hours at once.

His nights were sporadic, filled with sleeping and waking and sleeping again.

And when he could take it no more, he would rise from his bed at the 4th bell, always awake before the servants even came to his door. Always.

Yet since her appearance in his castle, in his life, he has woken up late not once...but twice.

His dreams filled not with the echoes of regret and guilt he is familiar with but rather with the vibrant fire of her hair and the softness of her lips.

And today, were it not for her hair tickling his nose as she buried her face closer to his chest, he might not even have awoken until noon.

He has almost forgotten what it feels like.

What it meant to have a good night's rest.

And the reason for the difference sleeps on in his arms, mouth parted, cheeks pressed against his bare chest.

Utterly oblivious of the effect she has had on him.

The corner of Midas mouth lifts up in the ghost of a half smile.

Wait till he tells her she snores in her sleep.

He watches her sleep for what feels like a long time, knowing he should get up but not wanting to.

He can see a tiny little red mark on the base of her neck.

His mark

The one his hungry kisses had left behind.

And Midas finds himself aching to press his lips gently against it.

His hand hovers over her... her hair...her cheeks and he swallows, his throat bobbing up and down with the force of the motion.

He wants to touch her, to stroke her cheekbones and trace the planes of her sleepy face with the pad of his fingers.

To kiss her awake and repeat last nights' events all over again.

He sighs and pulls his hand back, letting it fall to his side.

Because no matter how much he wants to, he knows he can't.

Not yet.

Not until he knows who she really is.

What... she really is.

The prophecy of the king maker Elian, messenger of Lachesis the Future comes back to him.

Those haunting words etched into the folds and recesses of his mind.

She is to be the center of a storm that will shake all of the 7 realms, his included.

What did that even mean?

Is she going to be the problem...or the solution?

Midas does not know but the king makers have told him to be careful. Very careful.

And while he has no plans to run helter skelter trying to solve their riddles, Midas intends to heed their warnings.

He turns slightly and feels warm light falling on his skin.

From the amount of it that is streaming in from between the heavy drapes neither one of them had remembered to draw close, Midas can tell the morning is already fully here.

No doubt the castle's servants had already begun clearing up all the evidence of yesterday's celebrations.

And no doubt Leo already had a list of 'urgent matters' at least half a foot long waiting for him in his study.

As expected, no one has come to knock on their doors today and no one will until they sent for them or in his case, until he came out himself.

He does not look at her again.

If he does, he will never be able to leave her side.

He tries to ease himself away from her without waking her.

He manages to free his arm from underneath her head but as she turns away, her hand brushes up against the early morning hardness of his c**k.

He inhales sharply, through his teeth.

The effect of that brief contact traveling through his entire body with startling heat.

Gods above, how in all the realms is he going to be able to stay away from her if all it took was a simple brush of her fingers to reduce him to one large mass of throbbing need?

The truth is, he does not think he can.

Prophecy and warnings be damned.

If she came up to him, if she asked him to, he would make love to her a thousand times over.

But then he remembers what had happened last night before he left...or at least tried to.

The fight they'd had before he managed to lose himself in her perfection and the heat of the moment.

He remembers the way she had looked at him, those piercing blue eyes flashing with hate.

"...You and your Ryders destroyed my realm, murdered my people for no reason and you think sleeping with me is enough to make you forget?!"

No, the probability of her even wanting him again is in all actuality most likely closer to zero than it is to happening again.

Her asking him to...

He shakes his head as if to clear away the thought.

That is only wishful thinking on his part.

She is most likely even going to regret everything that had happened between them the moment she wakes up.

A tiny prick of pain, surprising and startling, blossoms in the region of Midas' chest but he snuffs it out, pushes it down, and buries it.

And then he lifts himself up and away from her.

He walks stark naked to where he had left his pants, stepping carefully over all the things he had knocked over in his haste to make her his.

He pulls them on and reaches for his shirt.

Then he hears her stirring slightly behind him and because he cannot help it he turns.

Sees her hand reaching out, sees the way she frowns slightly in her sleep when she touches the side of the bed that is now empty.

He has managed to hurt her even in her dreams.

He wants to crawl back into that bed and hold her until the lines between her brows disappear completely but he does not dare.

Every time he touches her, every time he makes love to her, the tether bond would only grow stronger and he cannot afford for that to happen.

Because if it should eventually come down to it...if he has to eventually choose between her and protecting his people from whatever storm her presence in his realm is bringing, the dragon king knows the path he would take.

And he does not need the tie between their souls getting stronger and making it any harder.

He is King of the 5th realm and protector of all its inhabitants before anything else.

And even if the bond tore whatever little is left of his heart to shreds, Midas' duty to his people will always come first.

Even before his own happiness.

And so he turns away from her, his hand lifting to turn the engraved knob on the door.

She calls out his name, her voice on the verge of consciousness, raspy and tiny as he closes the heavy doors behind him and it takes every ounce of his control not to turn around and climb back into that bed with her.

It had been the most amazing night of his long... long life.

And yet...it could not happen again.

The Dragon King's Substitute Bride Chapter 50

MIDAS

He has always loved to read.

Loved the smell of old books and the sharp scent of ink on paper.

From the minute he learned the script of the dragon tongue, he read everything and anything.

And by the time he turned nine, to the amazement of all the tutors his father had hired, not only had Midas mastered how to read the ancient books written in dragon tongue but he could read with startling ease books written in the flowing letters of the humans.

The harsh sounding, yet beautifully penned words of the Faes' massive, magic tomes, and even the nearly illegible, and incredibly difficult chirography of the angel realm came to him with almost alarming ease.

His brain was like a sponge, soaking up all that information yet ever thirsty for more.

And for a while, it had been enough.

Until he turned 16 and discovered the joys of the outdoors, the wild pleasures of running free.

Nothing, nothing could make his blood rush with near delirious sweetness than riding hard and long and far.

Feeling the hard, powerful muscles of father's midnight Andalusian bunch and tense beneath him as he drove the animal racing through the dragon realm at neck breaking speed.

It was then that his father and he had first begun to argue.

He wanted to be able to go far, see the realm he was to be king of without all the guards and Ryders he father constantly put to watch him and he did not understand why his parents were so reluctant, so afraid to let him be alone.

And since his father would not listen, would not call off his men, Midas was always giving his guards the slip.

Tricking them and escaping.

Sending the entire royal household into fits of panic until he returned, sometimes late at night, untucked and sweaty, sheepishly pulling the horse behind him and trying to sneak back in without his father's notice.

And no matter how much trouble he got into, he would still do all over again the next day.

The wind blowing in his hair and scratching at his face, the smell of the dust and dirt his horse kicked up as it rode through grassy plains and muddy swamps, it gave him energy, helped him temporarily forget all the heaviness that awaited him in his future.

And it still did, whenever he could manage to get away that is.

But the times were different now, his responsibilities weightier.

Now, most times when he rode out, it was to settle one matter or the other.

A hundred and fifty years had passed since the time when his only worry had been coming back home in time to avoid his father's stern gaze and giving his mother a heart attack but he still misses it.

Especially on days like this when he has to sit cooped up all day in his study, responding to letters and treaties and proposed alliance between clans and even the neighboring realms.

It is enough to drive a man mad.

"You and I both know it is not just the need to ride that bothers you."

Give it a rest Er'gan.

"Being in the castle means you are closer to her and the bond can sense it, take advantage of it. That is what is really driving you into this petulant state."

"You know you do not always have to point out everything Er'gan. I know my own mind."

"On the contrary dragon king, I do not believe you do."

Midas scowls at no one in particular, his face the very picture of annoyance and it is because he knows the dragon is right.

It has been roughly one week since their binding ceremony.

He has had most of his things moved into the west tower in an effort to keep his distance from her.

But he hates the room because it does not smell like her.

Hates sleeping in the bed because she is not in it with him.

But she sleeps like the dead and sometimes, for the first four nights when he could not fall asleep, when the dreams of guilt and regret made him uneasy, he found himself making his way to her.

Pulling her sleeping form into his arms in the middle of the night and holding her until the softness of her cradled against his chest lured him into perfect, peaceful oblivion.

But the tether bond is a cold demanding b***h and it had gotten harder and harder to leave her each morning before she awoke, so he stopped going to her.

And now he has barely seen her in three days.

Not really anyway.

He sees her from a distance.

When she wanders the castle grounds with Henette or Leo or the tutor he has hired to teach her of her duties as queen and the basics of dragon tongue.

He smells her scent everywhere, that delicious aroma of berries and summer, floating in the passages and the corridors long after she has passed through them and when he rides out of the castle, he pretends he does not see her, does not feel her watching him from her window.

And quite frankly he does not know how much of this he can take any more.

A knock on his door pulls him back to the present.

He straightens. "Enter."

He frowns as she walks in, filling his study with the heavy tanginess of her perfumes.

"What are you doing here Minth?"

She bows low, her breasts threatening to spill out of the low cut amber dress. "Your highness."

He ignores her greetings, the mistress his council had forced upon him.

Midas neither likes nor dislikes her.

Of course she is a startlingly beauty, with her full hips and bright green eyes and yes, she has served to warm his bed on certain nights but his feelings for her are quite simple really; simple in the sense that they are non-existent.

He could not have cared less about her even if he tried.

And her presence here, unsolicited in his study is breaking an unspoken rule.

He came to her whenever the fancy took him, not the other way around.

And lately he has been completely uninterested in going to her.

Quite frankly he had almost even forgotten she existed.

“How have you been your highness?”

He watches her approach him cautiously, the deliberate sway of her hips.

“You have not answered my question Minth.”

Minth smiles, a gesture that reveals the dimples in her angelic face, her voice low and sweet.

“I have not seen you in a while my lord, I was beginning to get worried.”

He raises one eyebrow as she glides closer to his table, reaching it, sliding one finger around the stone edge.

Midas has to give it to her, she has definitely grown more brazen and he would have found it fascinating if he was not so thoroughly annoyed by the fact that she would even dare to do this.

That when the door had opened it had been her and not Hera who was standing behind it.

“Since when did it become your business to worry about me?”

She actually has the wherewithal to look hurt. “You wound me dragon king. Of course I worry about you. I always have and now...with that human around you...”

Midas bristles, his voice changing. “If value your head Minth you will not complete that sentence.”

She bares her neck and bows her head in a gesture of remorse. “Forgive me your highness, I mean no offence.”

“You are threading on thin ground Minth, state your business and leave.”

She pouts and instead of leaving crosses around his table. “You look troubled my Lord.”

“Whatever troubles me is not your business.”

She moves behind her chair. “At least let me help you...relieve some of that tension.”

Her hand slides down his shoulders to his chest, the full softness of her breast pushing against the back of his head. "Of what use am I as your mistress if I cannot even help you do that."

Yes, of what use indeed.

Midas sighs.

He does not want her here, in his study or around him, touching him.

But maybe it would help, help him stop thinking about her if he gave his body to another.

Minth can sense his resistance ebbing slowly and she lowers her head, kisses the side of his neck and Midas has to fight the urge to shudder in disgust.

Now that he has had Hera, has tasted the heights to which she could bring him, he wants nothing else.

No one else.

And this...the woman nibbling at his earlobe, kissing him...is not enough to make him forget.

He doubts anything will.

Midas shrugs off Minth's hand, shifts his body out of her reach.

"Is...is something the matter my king, am I doing it wrong?"

Before Midas can answer and tell her to get out, another knock comes on his door.

Oh for Hades sake why in all the realms is his study no longer off limits to everyone?

"Who is it?" There is no hiding the annoyance in his voice.

"It is I my Lord."

Midas could have sighed in relief. "Yes Leo, come in."

The Chief Ryder opens the door. "Your highness."

Midas nods at him before turning to Minth. "As you can see, I have a lot of things to attend to. It would be in your best interest to leave now."

The woman stutters, her eyes wet and shiny. "B...but."

Midas is neither fooled nor interested. "Minth you have but a few moments before I remember that you came here without my permission."

The door closes behind her.

Leo raises a questioning brow. "Did I interrupt something?"

Midas shakes his head.

"Nothing worth discussing. What is it?"

"The Ryders from Adarin and Rardath are here with the daily report."

The king studies his friend. "And..."

"And apparently the troubles between the two clans have begun again."

Midas pushes open the doors to the throne room with more force than is necessary, sending them flying back on their hinges.

He starts speaking before he even gets to his seat at the far end of the room.

"What do you mean 'started' again?"

The Ryders assembled before him bow and the captain of the small band of soldiers steps forward.

"The pranks my lord and provocations; missing animals, stolen goods, destroyed properties in both clans."

"And none of you happened to catch the culprits in the acts or crossing across the border between the two clans?"

"No your grace."

Midas' eyes narrow dangerously. "You mean to say they managed to get past you and do all this without a single one of you seeing them?"

The captain a strong willed man confident in his abilities and not one to crack under pressure snaps to attention. "My men and I were at our posts the entire day my Lord. Not a single one of us slept, we barely even blinked. No one could have gotten past us without our knowing."

"So what you are telling me captain, is that it is ghosts who are behind these acts or that perhaps the dragonkin of Rardath and Adarin have learnt the art of invisibility or vanishing into thin air?"

The man says nothing.

And then a Ryder makes to step forward but stops at the last minute, his head bowed, eyes darting nervously like he is afraid or unsure if he can speak.

Midas tilts his head, notices him. "You...yes you. Step forward."

The man shuffles to the front, standing beside his captain and bowing low.

"My king."

“You have something to say. Out with it.”

Midas watches as the soldier glances nervously at his captain as if seeking permission to overstep his rank and the man simply shrugs in response.

The Ryder steels himself, speaking without glancing directly at the king.

“Last night, while we were preparing to return, I had gone into the bushes to...relieve myself. Then I heard the scuffle of feet, soft against the ground but loud in the silence of darkness and when I looked up, I saw a flash of white, a person dashing from the edge of Rardath’s encampments and into the forest beyond.”

The man swallows, his voice shaky. “I tried to follow...but I had to put my armor back on...and it was dark... I wasn’t fast enough...”

As he recounts his tale, it is obvious he is afraid they might blame him for losing what could potentially be the only clue in this strange situation.”

“Breathe Ryder. No one is accusing you of anything. So did you eventually manage to go after the fleeing figure?”

“Yes my king.”

“And did you catch them?”

“N...no...”

“See them?”

“No my Lord.”

“Not even a glimpse?”

The Ryder shakes his head and Midas has to stop from growling at him.

“Then pray tell soldier, why exactly are you standing here?”

The man reaches into his armor and pulls out a tiny piece of cloth. “I...I did find this, caught on the edge of a thorny branch. It must have gotten torn off in their haste to escape.”

“Bring it to me.”

Leo walks down the steps and brings the piece to Midas.

It is a tiny scrap of material, barely the width of Midas’ palm.

The color of dried leaves and so light it felt like it is barely even there.

Midas’ eyes narrow.

Only one set of creatures made clothes this light and effortless.

He lifts it to nose and his dragon stirs.

“I smell black magic dragon king.”

It is as I feared.

Midas frowns but says nothing out loud to his Ryders.

He dismisses his Ryders and Leo, always attuned to his king’s mood, turns to him. “You are frowning. What is it?”

Midas’ jaw clenches, his eyes momentarily flashing red. “The cloth is steeped in dark magic.”

The chief Ryder is frowning now as well.

“But why would they be in the clans of Rardath and Adarin?”

Midas scoffs. “No wonder none of us have felt the effects of breaking the blood bond. The bastards broke it first.”

It must also be why it had been so easy to defeat them.

But what in all the realms are those blasted dark elves up to?

Why, after all this time are they suddenly now interested in causing chaos?

Why Adarin and Rardath?

Leo straightens. “What will you have me do?”

Midas stares straight ahead, his gaze unflinching.

“It would appear Leo, that I might be forced to pay the queen of the dark elves a visit in the Elder forest much sooner than I originally intended.”