

The Dragon King's Substitute Bride Chapter 51

HERA

The first thing I notice is the cold.

It is like the cold of winter, sharp and freezing, the kind that should I open my mouth, would fog up my breath.

But there is something about it that I do not like.

Something beyond the way the cold buries itself deep beneath my skin and sinks its teeth into my bones until the freezing chill of it starts to feel physically painful.

Something that frightens me.

I shiver, rubbing the skin of my arms and the goose bumps that have appeared on them in an attempt to keep warm.

Why is it suddenly so cold?

We are in the middle of summer...are we not?

My head feels heavy, fuzzy and I struggle to clear it.

Had it been this cold when I had gone to bed last night?

No...not last night, it is still dark. So dark I can barely see.

So it must still be night.

But then why am I not in my bed?

I look down and see I am not longer dressed in the red night dress I had worn to sleep.

I am wearing what appear to be riding clothes, I can feel a cape tied around my neck and when I glance at my feet, they are covered in leather boots and beneath them...a floor of hard packed dirt.

That is when I finally realize that wherever I am at the moment, it is not my room in the dragon castle.

My heart is pounding and my tongue, dry and bitter, sticks to the roof of my mouth.

Where am I and how did I get here?

What in all the realms is going on?

I can hear whistling. No... not whistling...rustling; the sound of wind blowing through dry leaves.

It at first seems to be coming from everywhere all at once but a closer listen tell me it is loudest directly above my head.

I look up.

The wooden ceiling of my four poster bed has been replaced with low, thatch rafters.

The whistling is the sound of the howling night wind, the kind that blows over a plain, unbroken by trees or tall buildings, passing through the leaves of the thatch house and rustling them with an eerie, crackling sound.

I am scared, very much so, even though there is nothing here to indicate any danger.

Not yet at least.

But the air is stale and still, heavy with a thick, cloying smell that sets my teeth on edge and sends the blood rushing through my veins in apprehension.

A smell that reminds me of the Elder forest.

I shut my eyes, squeezing them tightly.

It is a dream. It has to be.

But when I open my eyes, nothing has changed. I am still here.

My eyes in question are beginning to adjust to the darkness but it does not help, not really.

I can make out a few things. Tiny shadowy bits and pieces.

A wooden bed... a swinging, carved bird with a strangely bright yellow beak hanging on the far wall...a herder's staff in the corner.

But it is like seeing out of a tunnel, a fog filled tunnel where nothing is clear and when I try to focus everything stretches and fizzles.

Yet it isn't this that has the hairs on the back of my neck standing up in alarm.

I can hear something else, beyond the howling wind and the hooting of night owls coming from outside.

It sounds like moaning, low and continuous.

It is the noise of a person who is in pain but is much too weak to do anything about it.

I narrow my eyes, squinting, trying so hard to see through the hazy web that seems to hang in the air and over my eyes.

My head begins to hurt from the effort, right between my eyebrows.

But it pays off.

I can vaguely make out a figure lying on the wooden bed.

The moaning seems to be coming from them...a sound so sad and hopeless it makes my heart hurt.

But there is someone else in the room.

A taller, skinner figure in a hooded cloak standing over the moaning person.

A pressure begins to build in my head as I look at them and my hands start to shake. My throat tightens...constricts... hurts.

I want to run, to hide before whoever it is turns around and catches me watching.

But I seem to be incapable of doing anything, incapable of moving any part of my body, forced to stand and stare and watch them, their hand stark white in the darkness hovering over the moaning person.

Then just as suddenly as it started, the moaning stops.

And somehow the silence that prevails in its place is so much worse.

The standing, hooded figure freezes, hand still outstretched.

My blood runs cold.

They know...they know I am here.

The pressure in my head is stronger now. Pushing its way from the back to pulse and stretch behind my eyes.

Gods above...

The wind from outside is louder too...more alive...almost violent in the way it shakes the tiny building.

My head feels it is going to cave in, implode on itself.

I can't breathe...tears cold and wet run down my cheeks.

I can feel myself dying, losing my grip on whatever tiny string is keeping me tethered to this existence.

I am fading...

Falling.

Falling fast...falling hard.

Rushing headlong into the freezing arms of darkness...

My eyes fly open and I jerk awake, hands clutching my chest and gasping for breath.

My night dress, soaked in sweat, sticks uncomfortably to my back.

Strange that I should be sweating so much when I still feel freezing cold.

I still can't seem to breathe and my chest hurts.

So much.

It takes me a moment longer to realize that I am holding my breath and have most likely been doing so for quite a while.

I let it out and force myself to remember how to breathe until the simple familiarity of the motion helps to calm my racing heart.

I clutch my sheets and pull my blanket tighter around my shivering form.

All to remind me that this...the white, warm sunlight streaming in through my window, the sound of the morning bell and the clean scent of creeping ivy...those are real and whatever that...dream had been, it wasn't.

But the feeling doesn't go away and neither does the shaking.

My eyes fill with tears.

No...gods above...not again.

The tears fall, wet and salty into the corners of my mouth.

A loud knock breaks into my thoughts, startling me back into reality and I wipe hurriedly at the tears running down my cheeks, pressing the heel of my hand against my eyes in order to stop the flow.

"Yes..."

My voice is not as stable as I'd like it to be. I clear my throat...try again.

"Who is it?"

The voice on the other side hesitates. "...It is I your grace...Henette."

Of course.

It is morning after all, who else could it be?

This dream has unsettled me beyond what I wish to admit.

I sit up straighter, pulling down and arranging my blanket around my legs. "Come in."

Henette steps in cautiously, her eyes momentarily sweeping across the room. "Good morning you highness."

"Yes good...good morning. I trust you had a good night's rest?"

"I did your grace. Did you?"

I nod, not fully trusting myself to speak.

She watches me closely, studies my face. "Your highness...Hera, are you okay?"

No.

I turn away; pretend to be captivated by the open window. "Yes I am, just...a little nightmare is all. I'll be right as rain soon enough."

The maid watches me for a moment longer and when I say nothing more she simply nods. "You know the good thing about nightmares your grace, is that they end the moment you open your eyes."

She says it with so much conviction, my throat tightens and the tears threaten to return.

I stare at my hands in my lap and nod. "Yes..."

Nod harder, more for my sake than hers. "Yes of course, you're right. It was nothing but a dream...nothing but a dream."

I sigh.

Henette smiles and begins moving about the room, getting things in order. "It is a beautiful day your highness, a lukewarm bath will do wonders to make you feel so much better."

This time I say nothing in response.

However, it turns out she is right.

Taking my bath, surround by slithery, soapy bubbles and the sweet scent of fresh lilacs, helps drag my mind out of that cold dark place.

Nothing but a dream.

The dress she has laid out for me is a simple off-shoulder, cream colored gown, sporting a plunging v-neckline and two slits in the sides.

The long strappy sandals feel firm beneath my feet and around my calves and a black lace up corset sit comfortably on my waist to provide some sort of definition.

When she attempts to pull my hair up however, I stop her with a wave of my hand.

My head still hurts a little so I opt to wear my hair loose, letting it fall in soft curls down my back and around my shoulders.

My only accessory is the dragon necklace he gave me.

I have not taken it off since the ceremony.

I still feel strange however.

Like a part of me has not truly woken up just yet and staying cooped up in my room is most definitely not going to do me any favors.

“Henette...”

No response.

“...Henette?”

She pokes her head out from behind the bathing screen where she’s working.

“Yes your grace?”

“Do I have any lessons today?”

She thinks on it for a while before she answers, like she does with everything.

Then she shakes her head. “No your grace.”

“Good.”

I rise, smooth down the edges of my gown with the flat of my hand and reach for my cloak. “Do you also perhaps happen to know where the king might be this morning?”

“I believe he is in the dining hall, having his breakfast.”

Fastening the cape around my neck, I nod, exhaling quietly. “Good. I believe I am hungry as well.”

She wipes her wet hands hurriedly on her apron. “Do you wish for me to accompany you...”

I wave away her offer. “I shall find my own way.”

And with that I head for the door.

It is high time I left the castle and saw the rest of the dragon capital, this time without half his guards searching high and low for me.

Maybe...just maybe, going outside will be enough to scrub off whatever left over feelings have followed me out from that...nightmare.

At least, that is what I hope.

The Dragon King's Substitute Bride Chapter 52

HERA

The castle itself is wide awake by the time I leave the passage that connects my tower with the rest of the building.

All the duties and activities of the day have begun as early as the 4th bell and while it is nowhere as noisy as it will be by the time the sun is high in the sky, the passages are already busy and I can hear the sounds of everyone going about their business for the day.

As usual, most of the castle's servants pass by me without as much as a glance in my direction.

Moving past me with no regard or with so much speed that I keep having to jump and slide out of the way to avoid having them run into me.

And they would, with almost no hesitation.

I sigh.

At least no one has said anything to me today...yet.

Must be too early for open hostility I presume which, though I hate to admit it, is something I am grateful for.

Because with the state I am in at the moment, I do not think I can stomach any of their mocking looks or whispered comments without bursting into tears.

Henette has told me to report them to the king or at least to the chief steward who surprisingly, is among the only ones besides Garwith and Henette, who does not seem to so thoroughly dislike me.

But what good would that do besides making them hate me more?

It would only make me seem like some spoilt pampered princess who is unable to handle anything on her own.

But I must admit that being the butt of their cruel jokes and barbed, thinly veiled insults is beginning to get to me.

It was easy to ignore them most times at first.

One because I have been too busy with my lessons and two, I did not come to the dragon realm to make friends.

But my continued silence only seems to have infuriated them even more and now they are getting more direct...more aggressive.

Just two days ago, a maid 'accidentally' threw a bucket of rotten cabbage water into the courtyard while I was standing by the door.

My dress had been completely ruined and the smell would not leave my hair for a day and a half.

I have not had breakfast or lunch or any meal really in the dining hall for the last four days but I figure with the king there today, no one would dare bring me spoilt, nearly rotten food like they have been doing whenever I mustered the courage to go down there.

I know I am made from tougher stuff than they give me credit for but being so openly disliked, well it starts to take its toll after a while.

And no one seemed to be enjoying all this more than the dragonkin woman headed my way at this very moment.

I try to avoid looking directly at her incase making eye contact with a witch is enough to summon her.

But it is a narrow passage and Minth would never give up an opportunity to ruin my day.

She makes a beeline straight for me.

Her bearing, the smile on her face all coming together to make her the very posture of some beautiful, angelic being.

She smiles and curtsies, bowing her head to me.

And because Minth never bows to me, I know this is not going to end well.

I raise my chin to hide my apprehension.

"You may rise."

She does so, smiling sweetly the entire time.

“Beautiful morning isn’t it your grace.”

I smile back, just as sweet, just as fake. “If you say so.”

“Oh but I do.”

And then suddenly she leans in, bringing her face closer to mine.

I jerk back involuntarily, suspicion seeping out of every pore in my body.

“What are you doing?”

She frowns slightly, her eyes going wide.

“Oh you poor dear, would you look at the size of those bags under your eyes...oh you must be sleeping really terribly lately.”

I know she is most likely lying but the effect of the dream comes back in full force and I find myself raising my hand to my cheek before I can stop it.

She tuts gently, laying a hand on my arm.

Anyone within earshot would praise her for the concern in her voice.

“You should have your maid put a cold cloth over your eyes, helps me every time. Although...”

She is smiling now, a little too wide, her voice dropping an entire octave lower. “...with the king tiring me out so much every night, I must admit I have been sleeping quite well...one might say almost like a baby in fact.”

Then she laughs. A beautiful, gentle sound.

But it does not reach her eyes; green and cold and calculating and just a little too bright.

Watching me to see if her words have had their intended effect.

And by all the gods they have.

The words feel like a slap to my face.

Sharp and stinging and sending my mind on a downward spiral to places I should not have to go.

Tiring her out....how exactly has he been doing that?

I have a pretty good idea how and it does nothing to help my mood.

I press my lips together, willingly myself to say nothing to her in response.

To walk past her and not give her the satisfaction of seeing how her words have affected me.

But my cheeks flush red in anger and my mouth forms the words, sending them tumbling out before I can stop it.

“The king has been spending the nights in your chambers?”

She covers her mouth with the tip of her fingers.

“Oh dear, it appears I have let the cat out of the bag. My apologizes your grace, I most certainly did not mean to upset you...”

She most certainly did.

“...I just figured you knew. Seeing how the king has not been sleeping in your room all this time. I mean...” and at this point the gleam in her eye is sharp and deadly and there is nothing kind about the way she laughs.

“...where else did you expect he would be?”

The west tower.

At least that is what Henette had told me.

But now, the more that I think about it, the more stupid and unreal it sounds.

Why would the king stay in some other room, all alone when he could lie in the arms of his beautiful, willing, mistress?

I am not naïve enough to think that one night...one perfect, absolutely incredible night would be able to change everything.

He is still him and I am still me.

But goddamn it I thought it had counted for something, no matter how little.

Certainly people do not do what we did, do not make love the way we made love only to spend the next seven nights tiring out someone else.

Well, it only goes to show how much or rather how little I actually know.

There had even been times though, in the middle of night; times where I could have sworn he came to me, held me in his arms.

But he was never there when I awakened in the morning and I could never be sure if he truly had been there or if it had all been the product of a vivid imagination.

Nothing but a dream.

Now I know better.

He could not have come to me.

No....not when he was much too busy being with her instead.

I feel my body tense with hurt and anger.

I bury the hurt and embrace the anger.

Anger is easier...less gut wrenching, less painful.

He only slept with me in order to fulfill their stupid traditions; to avoid bringing bad luck to his realm and his people and once that was done, he had gone right back into her arms.

Hades take them both.

I lift my chin, stand up straighter.

“Upset? Now why in all the seven realms would I be upset about a mistress doing her job?”

“I’d assumed....”

“Do not assume with me Minth. That would be a mistake and we would not want any of those now would we?”

Her eyes narrow but her smile ever fades.

It is quite a frightening combination.

One that raises the hairs on my arms.

“Ah...we most certainly would not your grace. Mistakes can be quite...deadly.”

And with that cheery little statement she steps back, her gentle angelic smile back in place.

“This has been quite fun your highness. We should do this more often.”

Hah! I’d much rather chew on broken glass.

“If you do not mind, may I ask where her grace is headed?”

I am tired of this.

Sick and tired of acting like all is well...like it does not drive me insane to keep standing here, smiling with Midas’ mistress.

“As a matter of fact I do mind and you may not ask. Now let me pass.”

From the look on her face, if I did not know better I would think she was actually hurt.

“Oh come on your majesty; please do not be like that. Jealousy is an ugly color on humans. Besides, I was only going to wish you a hearty breakfast.”

“Thank you.” Curt and dismissive.

I attempt to step side her just as her maid whispers something in her ear.

Then suddenly she turns around and has the actual gall to link her arm in mine.

I am so shocked by the action that I do not say anything for a full second.

She smiles. “On second thought, I believe I shall join you. I am beginning to feel a bit peckish myself.”

Peckish my foot.

She has probably just found out that the King is in the dining hall and now she wants to go there so she can rub their relationship in my face.

I grit my teeth and resist the urge to pull my arm away and throw her off least I end up looking like the crazy, jealous queen.

The door to the dining hall is open and as always he is the first person I see before we even get to the entrance.

And like a million times before, my heart skips a beat.

He is sitting at the head of the table, Leo by his side on the left.

The sleeves of his white shirt tunic are rolled up to his elbows revealing the sprinkling of dark hair on his forearms and the strings at the top of his shirt are undone, and I can see the top of his chest muscles, bulging and tensing with the movements of his arms.

The chief Ryder says something and he smirks in response.

He looks relaxed and at ease...it is almost...almost human and seeing him like this quite frankly knocks the wind out of me for a few seconds.

Enough to make me forget my anger.

But before I can go in, Minth breaks away, shoving and pushing past me to go in first.

She floats across the room and as I watch, promptly places a wet, sloppy kiss on Midas cheek.

I can feel my eyes narrowing to slits.

That...darn...harpy.

“What in all the realms do you think you’re doing?”

His voice is cold and menacing.

If I did not know better, if Minth had not told me all they had been up to, I would almost think he was disgusted by her touching him.

I exhale and walk in.

“How dare you...”

He stops mid-sentence, his eyes finally falling on me.

“Hera...” He looks surprised, corned even.

As if the one thing he has been trying so hard to run away from, has just walked into the room.

Well screw him.

I curtsey, refusing to meet his eyes. “Your highness.”

“You may rise. Why are you here?”

I step side Minth, still refusing to look at either one of them.

“I believe the dining hall is where one comes to have breakfast my Lord.”

He watches me quietly and I swear I hear him growl when I sit down next to Leo and not him.

“That is not your seat.”

“It isn’t?” I raise my head, fake surprise plastered all over my face.

“No...it is not.”

I smile sweetly at him. “Well you see my Lord I would know that if you had bothered just once to eat in the same room as me.”

“Hera...”

Yes...definitely growling.

Leo pushes his chair back, gets up. “I believe the Lady Minth and I have some important matters to attend to.”

“I don’t...”

But Leo is already dragging her out of the room, leaving the king and I sitting in thick, charged silence.

“Come closer.”

“Why?”

“Because I want you here.”

“Are you absolutely certain? For all we know my sitting so close to you might have some untoward effect on your digestion for instance.”

“Gods above Hera, just come here.”

I sigh and get up, because I can hear the warning in his tone.

I sit on the chair on his right, shifting it just the tiniest bit away from him.

But he hooks his feet around the leg of the chair and with one smooth movement drags it across the floor and closer to him.

“You seem upset.”

“How observant of you.”

He narrows his eyes. “Are you...are you angry at me?”

The way he asks it, like the very notion of being angry at the dragon king is beyond absurd.

I clench my teeth and reach for a piece of bread, slathering it generously with warm butter even though I dislike the taste of butter on bread.

“Hera...”

I ignore him and reach for a cup.

He grabs my wrist. His grip firm and warm, sending tiny sparks all the way up my arm.

“Stop doing that.”

I feign ignorance. “Stop doing what my Lord?”

“That...ignoring me.”

“Oh, you mean like you have been doing to me the past seven days?”

He frowns. “I have not been ignoring you.”

“Oh you haven’t?”

“I’ve been...busy.”

At least he has the decency to look away.

I laugh, harsh and bitter. “Oh trust me Minth told me all about how ‘busy’ the two of you have been.”

He frowns again but then it disappears quickly...too quickly.

He leans in, one eyebrow raised. “Are you...jealous?”

“No.”

“I think you are.”

“Well you think wrong. I am not jealous and stop looking at me like that.”

“Like what?”

“Like...like you are hungry and I am food.”

“Can’t help it. You are f*****g breathtaking when you get mad and it drives me insane because I should be punishing you for your disrespect but all I can think about...”

His eyes roam every inch of my face and every inch below it too.

“...all I can think about is how badly I want to rip that dress off you and take you right here, right now.”

Oh dear Zeus....

Am I sweating? Yes I think I’m sweating.

“Are you deliberately trying to distract me?”

His thumb traces over the sensitive, inner part of my wrist, right above my racing pulse.

“Is it working?”

Yes.

“You really need to learn to stop answering questions with more questions dragon king.”

“Hmmm...” He mumbles distractedly.

And without taking his eyes off mine, lifts my hand to his mouth and places a gentle wet kiss on the inside of wrist and by the gods I feel it all the way to my toes.

He is pulling me closer, the kisses moving higher and higher up my hand.

My eyes are beginning to flutter close and I almost forgetting what it is that brought me here in the first place.

One more kiss and I'll lose my train of thoughts completely so I blurt it out before I can completely lose myself in him.

"I wish to leave the castle."

He freezes, my arm still in his. "What?"

I gently pull my arm back and repeat myself, quieter this time.

"I wish to leave the castle."

His eyes flash red and I already know what the answer will be before he even says it.

The Dragon King's Substitute Bride Chapter 53

MIDAS

"Absolutely f*****g not."

"Midas..."

"No." He lifts the cup to his mouth, can feel the way his grip tightens around it.

"If you would just listen..."

"Listen to what Hera? You expect me to let you leave the castle when we all know exactly what happened the last time you went beyond these gates."

Does she think he is stupid?

He can see her struggling to keep her composure, the way her hands close in fists but he does not care. How dare she think he would fall for this?

"I told you...I am done running."

He sneers. "And why in all the realms would I believe the words of some human slave."

The words find their mark and her eyes narrow.

She exhales slowly and when she finally does speak, her voice is like ice, freezing the air between them.

“You forcefully took me away from my home and now the portal stands closed for a thousand years. Where in Hades could I possibly go?”

A scoff; well timed, accurately delivered.

“Yes, because we know how well that stopped you the first time.”

Her eyes literally flash at him. “Oh by the gods Midas, can you just let that go?!”

Her cheeks are flush with anger and the way her chest heaves with deep controlled breaths, it is obvious how infuriated she is getting and how hard she is trying to control her tone.

Midas has never wanted to kiss her more.

She exhales again. “You would have done the exact same thing if you were in my shoes and just forced into marrying the one who took everything away from you...”

Her voice cracks and Midas almost reaches out on instinct to pull her into his arms then he realizes it is him...he is the one she is talking about and he pulls his hand back.

She recovers quickly and tilts her chin up to stare at him defiantly. “So do not sit there dragon king and act like you did me some favor by bringing me here.”

He says nothing in response.

She reaches out tentatively to lay a cool palm on his arm, a peace offering and he stiffens beneath her touch.

“You say I am not your prisoner my lord. Prove it.”

He sticks his tongue in his cheek and folds his arms across his chest, his face giving away nothing.

She sighs and the sound her chair makes as it scrapes backward on the floor echoes in the silence of the nearly empty room.

She does not look directly at him. “I should have known it was no use trying to reason with you.”

Then she moves to leave.

His arm shoots out without he’s thinking about it, one large hand wrapping around her wrists and holding her to the spot.

It feels so small in his grip. So small and so very breakable.

He pushes away from the table, loving the way her heart races and her breath hitches when he towers of her, the tips of their shoes touches.

“Fine.”

“Fine what?”

His jaw works and the words taste like ash in his mouth.

Having his mind changed and taking back his words are two things Midas is not used to doing.

“Fine, you may go outside the castle.”

The way her eyes light up and the wide smile that appears on her face makes it almost worth it and dulls the annoyance he feels at giving in to her.

“Do you really mean that?”

“Do not make me repeat myself least I change my mind. Plus...”

She does not let him finish, throwing her arms around his neck and standing on the very tip of her toes, her body pressed up against him.

Midas freezes, his arms hanging limp at his sides.

It feels like having the wind knocked out of him, sending the blood in his veins rushing at insane speeds to keep up with his racing heart.

But she barely notices this.

“I’ll go get ready.”

He pulls her back. “Slow your horses. You are only going on one condition.”

As expected her eyes narrow suspiciously and she deflates slightly. “What condition?”

“You can go...But I am coming with you.”

She thinks it over, chewing on her bottom lip.

Midas growls. “You never listen do you?”

Then he wraps her hair around his hand and kisses her.

Hard and fast like he has been dying to do all week.

The ride to the capital is almost uneventful.

Almost being the keyword because by all the gods she knows exactly how to push his buttons and it was either argue with her or keep her quiet in other ways.

So a tiny, enclosed space was not the best idea when it came to the king and his queen.

But to Midas’ credit he manages to keep his hands and his mouth largely to himself.

The carriage pulls up at the edge of the capital to avoid drawing too much unnecessary attention to their presence.

He helps her down, taking the excuse to lift her by her waist and set her on her feet and they proceed to walk into the capital on foot after instructing his guards to stay back.

He and Leo had quite a lot they had planned to get done today and so to say the chief Ryder had been surprised at the king's sudden decision to accompany the queen through the capital would be an understatement.

In all his one hundred and fifty years on the throne, he has never once put aside his duties to do anything else.

But his presence in the capital is not merely for pleasure or to make sure his tiny, human wife does not 'accidentally' get lost.

There is something else he needs to do.

Someone he needs to see in relation to the situation with Adarin and Rardath and the cloth seeped in dark magic his Ryders had found.

There are a few glances and pointed fingers and bows sent their way but it is the first day of the week in the dragon realm and the capital's cobbled streets are filled to bursting.

The capital's square is especially busy.

Vendors and merchants from all around the realm have flooded the capital, calling out their wares in loud booming voices, sweaty bodies pushing past each other, children running around and ignoring the calls of their exasperated mothers.

Everything and anything could be found in the capital's large market. A cart of fresh fruit lying right next to a store selling shiny new swords and armor, clothes and dresses being sold beside things like rat poison or thick bound ropes.

Smells of all kinds, pleasant and unpleasant fill the air in the busy streets and every now and then a breeze, the kind that announces the end of summer would blow, sending banners and signs fluttering.

She takes in everything; eyes wide, mouth open.

He pulls her out of the way of a rolling cart.

"Keep swiveling you head back and forth like that and you are going to hurt your neck."

"I cannot help it. It all looks so...so..."

"Chaotic, loud, noisy?"

"Normal."

He raises one eyebrow at her comment but says nothing in response.

As they pass by a shop with large open display windows, a sweet, sugary scent fills his nose and his mouth waters.

She stops, her nose twitching in the air like a lost puppy. “What...is that?”

He takes her hand in his like it is the most natural thing in the world and tilts his head towards the door.

“Come on.”

Before they even step fully back into the bright sunshine, the door of the pastry shop swinging shut behind them, she bites eagerly into the powdered pastry.

She moans loudly and Midas is surprised both at how pleased she seems and at how much such a small sound is able to affect him.

“Gods above...you know dragon king, if you had brought me earlier, I would never have tried to escape in the first place.”

He looks at her, the corners of his mouth inching upwards and before he can stop it he is laughing, his eyes crinkling at the edges.

He brushes off the dusting of sugar that has settled on the tip of her nose.

“Gods...you are impossible. What, why are you looking at me like that?”

She smiles. “You laughed. I have never heard you laugh before. I like it.”

And then she begins walking away, leaving Midas standing beneath the awning of the local bakery; utterly flustered and with a little tiny fluttering in his belly.

He catches up to her and points at her nearly empty hand. “Want another one?”

“Do the cats of Averia like milk?”

He frowns and she laughs at the confusion on his face.

“That means yes your majesty.”

He puts a bag of coins in her hands.

She stops, glancing from him to the bag and to him again. “Wait, you’re letting me go in alone?”

He shrugs. “It is like you said. Where in all the realms could you possibly run off to?”

She bites her lip, her entire face lighting up then she smirks.

“Are you sure you aren’t worried I am going to sneak away through the back door?”

“Now that I think about it...” He reaches for her and she ducks out of reach, laughing.

“I’ll be right back.”

And it isn’t until she comes back out, practically grinning from ear to ear at the box in her hand, does Midas realize he had been holding his breath the entire time.

The bell rings out, echoing through the square and Midas turns his head towards it.

“Come.”

She falls in step beside him. “Where are we going?”

“I need to see Arydian”

She frowns, noting the seriousness of his tone. “The king maker?”

He makes a sound in his throat but says nothing more.

“Why exactly are we meeting with him?”

“Not ‘we’...I am”

“Has something happened?”

“You could say that.”

“What is it?”

“Do not bother yourself with it.”

“How am I to be queen if you will not tell me what is going on?”

He sighs. “It is...complicated.”

“Uncomplicate it.”

“Later Hera. I’ll tell you later.”

And he is surprised to find that he actually means it.

They turn a corner and meet Leo standing at the stoop of a small building made out of faded red bricks.

The chief Ryder bows. “Your majesties.”

“Rise Leo. Is he in?”

“He is.”

Midas nods. “Watch her.”

And then he pushes the arched wooden door open and disappears within.

The small exterior of the building is an illusion to hide exactly how large this place is.

A set of steps begin from the door, going downwards to quite a distance below ground level and into the home and workshop/magick apothecary belong to Arydian.

“Arydian.” He calls out as he descends the steps to enter further into the musty room.

Low hanging lamps cast dim orange glows all over the shop. Illuminating the enormous shelves stuffed to bursting with every weird thing imaginable.

Jars and bottles and books and was that a sack of gold feathers?

The room is so full Midas has no idea how the small, stooped man manages to even remember what he has stored here.

“Arydian!”

Still no answer.

“Old man, where are you?!”

A tiny, wrinkled face peaks out from beneath a mountain of books stacked so high, the king wonders what would happen if anyone asked for something from the middle.

“Midas! What a pleasant surprise.”

“You do not look very surprised.”

The man laughs, hopping off a ladder with the grace of someone half his age.

“You’re right Elian told me you would come.”

“Did he also tell you why?”

“Now dragon king. You know I would not remember.”

Midas nods as he stares into the bright green eyes of the man smiling at him.

Arydian the shopkeeper and Arydian, messenger of Clotho the present are almost two completely different people, and while one could switch to the other almost instantaneously, they sometimes did not even remember what the other did.

The man reaches for a bubbling kettle from the stove stashed in the corner and then rustles about in his cupboard before pulling out a dusty teacup from beneath a pile of what Midas suspects might be a bag of rat droppings.

The steamy green liquid sloshes into the cup.

“Tea?”

“No thank you.”

The shopkeeper shrugs and sips happily from his cup. “Ah...that hit the spot. So Midas, I do not think I have seen you here in a long... long time.”

The king reaches for a jar of something black and gooey, sniffs at it and is surprised to find it smelling pleasantly like of a freshly baked cake.

“Where is Milo?”

Arydian glances around. “Probably out scratching out the eyes of some poor street dog.”

Milo is Arydian’s cat, a mangy, scrawny beast that tried to chew off Midas’ toes when he was much younger.

He wonders how it is possible that it is still alive.

“Why are you here Midas?”

The king snaps a book shut, sending dust motes floating up into the air.

“I wish to speak to Arydian, messenger of Clotho the Present.”

The man hops up spryly unto a stool, his legs dangling childishly from it.

“Oh dear, that cannot be good. What is it about?”

“Do you know about the clans of Adarin and Rardath and the troubles they have been having?”

“A vague recollection, yes.”

“Well, something new has come up and I have reason to believe the dark elves are behind it.”

“If you know this already, why do you need Arydian’s help?”

The king stares at the wrinkled old dragonkin man gently sipping from his cup.

“Because I need to know, before I take any decisions if what is going on has anything to do with the prophecy they gave me.”

The man blinks slowly saying nothing.

Once... twice and when his eyes open the third time, the bright green orbs have been replaced by the cloudy grey circles of Arydian, messenger of the Fates.

The kingmaker stares at Midas, eyes unseeing.

“I believe you know the answer to that dragon king.”

“So what do you advice I do?”

“The wheels have already been set in motion Midas and there is little you can do at the moment. But when the time comes, all will be made clear.”

Midas bristles. “And Adarin and Rardath, do I just fold my hands and watch two of my strongest clans kill each other? Ever since they cut off his fingers, Adarin son has been lying in bed sick.”

“Hmmm...I am afraid it might be a little too late for him. I believe even the queen knows that.”

“Hera, what does she have to do with any of this?”

A pile of heavy metal contraptions comes crashing down with a loud jarring sound and Milo slinks out from beneath the pile.

“Oh, dear you are my little monster.”

The cat jumps into the old man arms and when Midas looks back at him, Arydian’s eyes have become green again.

“Are you okay your highness, we heard a crash.”

Midas glances up at Leo who is standing halfway down the steps. “I am fine. I just...wait, where is Hera?”

“She is right behind....” Leo glances back to stare at the empty space where the queen should be.

Arydian’s eyes turn grey again.

“Elian says you better hurry.”

Midas does not wait to hear the rest of the sentence.

The Dragon King’s Substitute Bride Chapter 54

HERA

I did not run away.

But I am certain the king and his chief Ryder will not see it that way.

Especially when Leo comes back and does not see me standing at the entrance like I am supposed to.

I can already picture Midas' face and the way he will react.

There is no doubt at all in my mind that he will be livid, his eyes changing to that crimson fiery color that frightens me to no end.

He will also think I have lied to him again and maybe in a way, I have.

I can only hope he will let me explain because I did not have a choice.

My heart struggles to keep up with pace I have set, feet slapping loudly against the floor as I push my body relentlessly forward.

The closer I get to my destination, the stronger the pressure in my head becomes, until it pushes everything else from my mind and fills me with a sense of urgency that I cannot even begin to explain.

Gods above do not let me be too late.

It had started from the bakery when Midas had let me go in myself, a slight pressure in my head that disoriented me for a few moments.

I had assumed it was nothing more than a left over side effect from the dream I had this morning so I shook it off, managed to ignore it.

And for a while it had gone away.

But then it started again, growing steadily from the very moment Midas left me standing outside with Leo in front of the tiny red building until it became a banging headache.

Leo, keen observer that he is, had noticed immediately.

He asked me if I was okay.

I had simply nodded, not trusting myself to speak but even that simple up and down motion had felt to me like I was suddenly moving a head that was twice its original size.

I blinked many times, as if that might help dislodge the blooming headache from its position in the center of my forehead.

But when next I had opened my eyes again, the red brick building behind me had disappeared, Leo along with it.

There were still cobbled stone beneath my feet and I knew I was standing in the dragon capital but I was in a different street.

It was darker and narrower and filthy.

There was a stench in the air.

Sharp and metallic; the smell of blood and sweat and fear.

And in front of me, was a dragonkin girl...crying, bleeding

And standing over her, a brute, some monster of a man with a bald spot in the centre of his round meaty head and baggy stained trousers that hung low on his waist, his belly protruding disgustingly and stretching his shirt to its limit.

The image had disappeared just as suddenly as it had appeared.

I had staggered, disoriented and dizzy, dropping the box in my hand and sending tiny, drizzled cakes rolling down the streets leaving behind trails of sugar and cream and floury crumbs.

Leo's firm grip around my waist had been the only thing that kept me from crumbling to the floor along with them.

He asked if I was okay again, those slate grey eyes with their piercing bluntness tell me not to even bother lying.

By then the pressure had become beyond anything I had ever felt before and I had honestly been on the verge of telling him how unwell I felt.

But then we heard a crash from inside, loud and jarring and both our heads had turned to towards the noise on instinct.

"Your highness..."

"Midas..."

Leo stepped towards the door, then remembering me, he stopped, glancing back as if seeking my permission.

I waved him away. "Go. I will be right behind you."

And I had honestly meant it.

But the moment my foot stepped over the threshold, the image had returned.

In a flash, I was there again, back in that alley.

He had been whipping her, the girl with the matted white hair, the clothes on her back torn to shreds.

I had to hold onto the door frame to regain my balance.

I wanted to ignore it. Tell myself I was imagining things or better still, pretend I did not see anything at all but then the scars on my back tingled as if coming alive and I knew that I could not do it.

Not again.

So I turned around and ran down the street in the opposite direction.

Away from the open door through which Midas and Leo had disappeared and away from whatever little trust he may have begun to harbor for me.

Somehow I knew where to go, which turns to take.

A left, two rights, running down long, nearly deserted streets.

The sun is beginning to set and I know that I could get lost but I also know that I cannot stop.

Not now, not with the scars on my back, the criss-cross of faded red marks burning and stinging with the reminder of exactly how I had gotten them in the first place.

It had been the day of my 18th moon harvest.

The moon harvest is the day that marks the completion of a full cycle of Averian seasons.

A time period, as I have now learnt, that the dragon realm refers to as a 'Year'.

Back in my home realm, every Averian gets a new number added to their age during the Moon harvest.

It is a time of celebrations and loud music, fireworks and late night dancing, a time of mooncakes and strawberry creams and jellies made from elderberries.

The day of the moon harvest was a special day and even after my father died and we were driven out of our home by creditors, we still made sure to celebrate it as best as we could.

There would be pancakes and homemade ginger ale and my grandmother would even sacrifice one of the precious geese that served as our only source of livelihood.

And when night fell, we would go to the bonfire in the village square where we would laugh and dance and exchange presents wrapped up in colorful leaves or tied in pieces of shiny cloth.

We may have been poor but we were happy.

But that moon harvest, the one that had ultimately changed my life forever was nothing like the ones before it.

It would be the first moon harvest for my brother and me since the death of our entire village, the first one without our family.

There would be no pancakes or ginger ale and certainly no roasted geese soaked in mother's special sauce.

But I had no plans to let us sit and starve in the cold, damp darkness of our shed while the entire realm went about celebrating.

So I had offered to clean the baker's kitchen, scrubbing pots and pan until my nails bled and in turn he had given me a fresh loaf of mixed fruit bread and a tankard of ginger ale, just like the one we used to have.

But it had not been enough.

I was determined to buy my brother a present, something to make this day less painful for him.

So I put together every single coin I had managed to squirrel away since the day we ran away from the ashes of our village and I bought him a tiny gift.

But no sooner had I bought it that it was ripped violently out of my hands by a gang of boys on my way home.

They pushed me around, tossing my precious gift back and forth between each other, enjoying the way I cried and begged for them not to break it.

Eventually they told me that they would only give it back to me if I agreed to steal something for them.

I was good with my hand and quick on my feet and they knew it.

They would watch the door and all the entrances while I broke into a rich merchant's house and brought them back as many coins as I could carry.

I had not wanted to do it, but I also had no desire to lose my brother's gift to bunch of lowlife bastards.

So with no choice, dejected and angry, I turned to one thing that that had help keep us alive all this time.

I broke into the house.

The streets were busy; everyone was out celebrating, watching the fireworks.

No one was supposed to have been home.

But fate had other plans for me.

The merchant had come home early and the boys, cowards that they were, had fled without giving me so much as a warning signal and I was caught fist first with my hands in his pouch.

He dragged me out by my hair and had me locked up.

I was old enough to be tried before the capital's magistrate and come the next morning they would send me to him, hands bound to receive my sentence.

The moon harvest I had so badly wanted to celebrate with my brother was spent in a dark, damp cell.

But I did not intend to go down without a fight. I was going to tell the judge everything.

Surely the boys who had put me in this situation deserved to be punished as well.

How little I knew.

As it turned out, the leader of the gang had been a Lord's son and on my way to be tried, the guard dragged me by my hair, his breath hot and garlicky on my face.

They gave me only one option. If I promised not to say anything about the boys, they would let me off lightly and the Lord whose son was behind this would make sure I got a job in the palace.

It had almost seemed too good to be true.

It was.

Turns out getting off lightly meant being whipped publicly within an inch of my life as a deterrent to other would be criminals.

Sometimes, at night, I can still remember how each individual lash of the horse skin whip had felt as it struck my back and split the skin open.

The searing, burning pain that had knocked the breath from my lungs and made me unable to move without wincing for weeks after.

But the worst part of it all had been the sweaty, swollen man who had delivered them.

Each time he struck me, each time I cried out in unimaginable pain, he would laugh and swear and tell me I deserved it.

Just like the man standing in front of me now.

Towering over the dragonkin girl huddled in a corner, so weak but unable to even weep for fear that she would anger him more.

She is already bleeding but he does not care.

The whip rises in the air again, ready to land once more on the battered, wounded body.

Back in Averia no one had come between me and the man who had whipped me half to death.

No one told him to slow down...to stop.

No one told him that the only crime I had been guilty of was trying to survive.

And I'd be damned if I let the same thing happen again.

I step further into the shadow of the alley, panting and breathless and angry.

Angry for me, the Hera who had cried and bleed and angry for her, the dragonkin girl I do not know.

"Touch her again and I promise you it will be the last thing you ever do."

The man freezes and I see the girl glance at me, one eye swollen shut.

I try to nod reassuringly but the fear in her eyes does not go away, not even a little.

The man turns. "Who the hell are you to tell me...?"

He stops, takes in my appearance, the red of my hair and the crown on my head and I can see the moment recognition comes into those lifeless eyes.

"You are the queen."

I raise my head.

"That is right and as queen I demand that you release that girl to me at once."

But rather than back away, he sneers, the scar on his face stretching grotesquely. "Human. You have no right to demand anything from us. Now get out of here before I forget who you claim to be."

I am shaken but I refuse to back down. If I turn around, if I run, he will only continue beating her.

"You dare to disrespect your queen?"

He turns fully towards me. "You are no queen of mine. You may have half the capital fooled and you may have bewitched the king but the rest of us, we know what your kind did."

And then he spits at my feet, his face cruel and red.

"Respect? The only thing you deserve is death and I will be happy to give it to you."

"You would not dare. The king..."

"Isn't here and once I kill you, whatever spell you have placed on him would be gone as well."

Then he laughs, revealing yellow, stained teeth. "Who knows, he might even give me a knighthood for my service to the kingdom."

I know things have not gone according to plan but it isn't until he starts advancing towards me in the narrow, shadowy space that I actually realize just how much danger I am in.

"Somebody....Midas...Help!!"

Then a tiny voice, loud in the silence of my fear, kills the words in my throat just before the man's hand closes around my neck.

You just ran away from him for a second time, what makes you think he is coming?

I feel the man's large beefy fingers tighten around my neck, crushing against my windpipe.

I slap and claw at it but it doesn't move.

My lungs hurt, grey spots beginning to float before my eyes and I know that even if somehow he has chosen to come after me again, he has no idea why I am.

And by the time he does manage to find me, it would be too late.

The Dragon King's Substitute Bride Chapter 55

MIDAS

He is angry.

No, that does not feel strong enough.

Livid...infuriated...seething.

Yes that's the one. He is seething, the anger bubbling over, spilling out of every pore in his body.

How stupid he had been.

"Your highness I..."

"I know Leo. You were only doing what is expected of you. It is her who is to blame."

"Your majesty, I sincerely do not believe she ran away, she did not look so good when we were standing outside."

But Midas is no longer listening.

The door of Arydian's tiny red apothecary is thrown so violently open, it hits the other side of the wall hard enough to chip the brick, raining down a shower of sand and dust.

"Let's split up, cover more ground."

The Chief Ryder nods and starts down the left.

His jaw works, teeth grinding hard against each other.

He had listened to her, had let himself be fooled by the righteous anger in her eyes and the warmth in her laugh, the way her voice cracked when she told him she was done running.

He had believed her.

Well, it would be the last time.

But he is not just angry.

Arydian's words...

"Elian says you better hurry."

He is worried and knowing that...angers him even more.

"Er'gan."

"Dragon king."

"Find her."

"As you wish."

His eyes turn the color of blood and his pupils narrow to thin black slits.

Er'gan's power, hot and burning floods through his veins and instantly his senses sharpen.

He can hear the conversations of his people in their homes, the sound of a tired dragonkin woman pulling her crying, reluctant child down the street, heading home, the noise of the merchants and vendors as far as the capital square, their activities beginning to wind down for the day.

It all flows to him, a loud, largely incoherent buzzing of noise but nothing concrete, nothing that tells him where she is.

So he tunes it out, focuses on his other senses, lifting his nose in the air.

He can smell the rabbit stew bubbling on a stove two streets away, the sharp, sickly sweet smell of three day old fruit sitting in front of the window above him.

He groans. Come on...come on....

Then he catches it; Elderberries and honey.

Her.

But just as quickly as he smells it, it disappears.

It is too faint...too elusive.

The wind blowing down the street is not making things any easier.

The tether bond is a tricky thing; both a peace and a torment.

It may be helping him sleep better at night but it also the reason why he is unable to concentrate, his fist clenching and unclenching as beads of sweat roll down his back.

She is in danger.

He can feel it and his heart is pounding in response, so hard and so fast he can feel the blood rushing between his ears.

“Calm down dragon king.”

“Do not tell me to be calm Er’gan. You heard what the king maker said. If something happens to her...”

“Something will happen to her if you do not calm down. Trust me dragon king I know exactly what it means for your tether to get hurt and I wish to find her just as badly as you do.”

He stops running, his head swiveling from side to side.

“So why can I not sense her?”

“Your emotions are getting the better of you.”

Midas scoffs. “You are one to talk. Between us both, you are the one with the anger issues.”

“Now?...of all times, you wish to do this now?”

“No...goddamit. I am trying to calm down.”

“Might I suggest closing your eyes instead?”

The bland sarcasm in the dragon’s voice is unmistakable and Midas scowls.

“Oh f**k off Er’gan.”

But he does as the dragon suggests.

He swallows and closes his eyes, ignoring the urgency and the urge to take off running again.

“Now what?”

“Focus dragon king...focus.”

“It is not working Er’gan.”

“Try harder.”

This is exactly why he has stayed away from relationships all this years.

Things were so much easier when you just did not care.

Midas takes deep breaths and forces himself to slow his heartbeat.

Pushing all emotions to the back of his mind until all that is left is the calm, cool collection of the dangerous predator that is the dragon king.

He centers himself, feels Er’gan power curl out from his center and wrap around his limbs.

“Good. Now open your eyes. Can you see it?”

“What am I supposed to be...” He opens his eyes and the words die in his throat.

The street has narrowed, faded somehow, as everything around Midas has been drained out of its color.

The only thing left, bright and shimmering is a thin gold thread that stretches out from Midas and disappears down the narrow, foggy street.

Midas knows what it is, he has read about it, even expected it but seeing it, the physical representation of the tether bond is something awe inspiring.

The thread, which only he can see, a connecting line that attaches him to the other half of his soul would have appeared the minute he first recognized her as his own.

It is faint now, fading in and out but the stronger the bond became, the more corporeal the thread would become.

And although he has no plans of letting that happen, of allowing the bond grow any stronger, as long as he could focus enough to see it, he could always find her.

Would always find her.

Then he feels it, hears it...just like that time in the Elder forest when she had screamed his name.

A sharp spear of pain and light piercing through his thoughts, knocking him forwards.

“MIDAS...Somebody....Help!!”

He takes off the direction of the thread, using Er'gan power to propel himself at inhumane speeds down the nearly empty streets.

He would transform but the streets are too narrow and Er'gan is a massive dragon, transforming here would no doubt attract more attention that he needs, not to mention it would in all likelihood break down, or chip off the walls of quite a few houses.

Besides, he has no time to waste.

He is close, he can feel it.

But he can also feel her getting weaker...fading.

Goddamit Hera, don't you dare let go.

The rope is getting shorter and shorter with each step that brings him closer to her.

Just a little more, it bends around a corner...into an alley.

As always, he smells her before he even sees her.

But see her he does and blinding, red hot pain stabs at his chest.

She is slumped against the filth covered walls, her hands hanging limp by her sides, finger twitching.

And the man...the man still stands over her with his teeth bared, his hands stills wrapped around her neck.

Midas' visions fogs over, his rage boiling over to a fever pitch and Er'gan takes over his body, curling out from his centre and claiming control with a loud, angry roar.

The man barely has time to turn, to notice them standing at the entrance the alley.

Their movement across the distance is a blur of motion, snapping the man's neck in the space of a single heart beat.

His legs fold beneath him and the round, disgusting dragonkin man crumbles, dead before he even reaches the floor.

They stare at him, at the man lying at their feet with his head bent at an obscene angle, eyes wide open but seeing nothing.

But they are still angry.

It is not enough that he is dead.

Not enough at all.

Not for Midas...not for Er'gan.

He had dared to touch her, to hurt her and that deserved a punishment much worse than death.

His entire family should perish with him...mush perish with him.

They can find them. Of course they can.

All they need to do is rip his heart out of his chest...to smell his blood.

And then they would find them....

His father...his mother...his daughters...his sons...everyone who has his vile, disgusting blood running through their veins.

And they would make them pay.

Makes them bleed and suffer and...

“Midas?”

Tiny, faint, barely even there yet strong enough to pierce through the haze of blood lust rushing through his veins and hand Midas back the control of his body and his mind.

He rushes to her side, cradles her against him.

“Hera...”

She coughs. “Midas...Midas...I...”

“Do not try to talk just yet. Let’s get you home first.”

She coughs harder, her voice raspy and hoarse. She is obviously in pain but when has she ever listened to him.

“Are you mad at me?”

Mad...he is beyond mad.

He wants to hug her and kiss her and shake some goddamn common sense into her.

He clenches his jaw.

All that can wait. He needs to get her back to the castle now, needs to make sure she is alright.

That is all that matters to him.

He lifts her up, one hand around her back, the other under her knees. “I knew letting you out of the castle was a bad idea.”

“It was not...wait...the girl.”

“What girl?”

“There was a girl...he was beating her...that’s why I...”

She is weak, half conscious, yet she struggles around in his arms, trying weakly to turn her head and see behind him.

He had not noticed anyone but then again he had barely been able to see past her hurt form, slumped against that wall.

He looks around now.

“There is no one else here Hera.”

She sighs, her body relaxing in his grip. “At least she got away.”

She coughs again and her head falls weakly against his chest.

He can see the marks the beast left around her neck.

Wide and red and raw and all the anger comes rushing back, almost taking control again but she raises her hand and places a cool, shaky palm on his cheek.

“I did not think you would come.”

“Why wouldn’t I come?”

“I thought...” cough “...you would be...” cough “...angry.”

“I am and by all the gods will you stop trying to talk.”

He walks out of the alley.

“Leo”

“Your highness.”

“I have found her.”

Silence. Then.... “Is she okay?”

“She is alive if that is what you mean.”

The chief Ryder’s relief is palpable even through the mind link.

“Thank the gods.”

“Take the carriage and meet us at the castle. I will fly us home.”

“Yes my Lord.”

Black and wide, Er’gan’s wings rip through his skin, to unfold and stretch out and with one powerful flap, he lifts them both in the air, sending them soaring over the capital.

“So why did you come?”

“What?”

She hangs unto him, her eye closed.

She repeats the question like she is afraid of the answer.

“I broke your trust and ran away again. Why did you come?”

He hesitates and then sighs in resignation.

“I will always come to you Hera...always.”

The Dragon King’s Substitute Bride Chapter 56

MIDAS

She is unconscious, completely out cold by the time they arrive.

He takes her up to her room without a single word to anyone.

Every time...three times now, that he has brought her into the room in his arms, she is once again just barely alive.

He lays her gently on her bed, trying his best to avoid looking at the marks on her neck because if he does, he will lose his mind and by Hades nothing would be able to stop him...stop them until they had rid the realm of every single person related to the man who had done this.

She stirs gently and he pushes her hair back from her forehead sighing as he does so.

So much for staying away from her.

A knock on the door pulls him back to the present and he straightens.

“Enter.”

Her maid, a diminutive dragonkin girl with strangely large, brown eyes pushes the door open.

She bows and like all of them, avoids looking directly at him as if his eyes were coals of fire that incinerated people on the spot.

That had been the one thing he had first noticed about Hera.

Even afraid and shaken, from the second they had met, she had looked directly into his eyes and turned his whole world on its head.

Yes she annoys him, does stupid things like running off for Hades knows what reason and yes maybe...maybe she does hate him.

But when she looks at him, he does not feel like the dragon king...he feels like Midas...like himself and it is a very addictive way to feel.

“You may rise.”

“How...how is she my lord?”

Midas is slightly surprised.

The way the maid asks the question, it is immediately obvious how concerned she is about the queen and Midas realizes that however Hera treats her, it must be kind enough that it has endeared her to the handmaiden’s heart so quickly.

And for some reason knowing this pleases him, immensely.

“She’ll live. Is that the elixir?”

“Yes my lord, the steward saw you bring her in and he sent me to the physician immediately.”

Midas nods, glancing once more at the woman lying in his bed, eyes firmly closed.

He wants to stay by her side but the longer he sees her unconscious, the angrier he becomes.

Angry at the dead man responsible for it, angry at her for putting herself in danger and angry at himself for not finding her faster.

What kind of dragon Ryder is unable to protect his own tether?

“Notify me the second she is awake.”

“Yes my lord.”

He goes to the room of his self-imposed exile in the west tower.

A quick shower is followed by a change of clothes into a simple cotton shirt without rips in the back and a pair of simple brown pants.

He can feel a shadow of prickly stubble on his chin but he cannot be bothered to do anything about it.

He knots his hair into a bun at the back of his neck, looking around the room for something with which to distract himself.

Finding nothing strong enough to take his mind off worrying about her, he forces himself to go to his study.

To focus on some of the things he should have attended to earlier in the day.

Adarin and Rardath for one.

He has asked Leo to double the number of Ryders and to make sure the borders of the two clans are completely surrounded and not just the shared border.

But he has also chosen to keep his findings about the dark elves between himself and his chief Ryder.

At least until he can come up with a way to handle the situation appropriately.

Adarin and Rardath, the leaders of their respective clans, are both brash, hard-weathered men and while he appreciates their bravery and passion, they would react to the news without thinking.

Storming the Elder forest with their men and only end up creating even more problems.

But not telling them also means each one still thinks the other clan is to blame for all the trouble.

And now with Adarin's son not getting any better, the situation could escalate at cataclysmic speeds.

He would need to ride out there again.

To sit down with the clan leaders so that together they might come up with a suitable solution before it all gets out of hand.

He also needs to pay the dark Elvin queen a visit.

The only problem is one did not just go looking for Hermani and expect to find her.

She is like an eel.

Slimy and dark and slippery.

A knock on his study jars him out of his thoughts.

It is Leo.

"The maid says to tell you that she is awake."

And just like that, everything else takes a back seat.

He open the door without knocking, stepping into the chamber that should be ‘theirs’ and not just hers.

She dives down quickly, covering her head just as he steps in but he sees her.

Her attempts at trying to convince him that she is asleep are quite laughable.

Her breathing, the rise and fall of her chest is not calm or even enough.

“You do know that I can tell you that you are awake?”

She says nothing.

There is a small carved stool beside the bed on which sits the empty glass that had contained the elixir and a plate of fat purple grapes.

Their glistening skin thin and nearly bursting with the swollen, juicy flesh beneath.

He sits beside her, popping one into his mouth and savoring the tangy, sweet flavor that explodes on his tongue.

“Hera.”

She does not answer but he can see her stiffen beneath the sheets.

“Hera...what are you ten?”

“I am sleeping.”

“No you’re not.”

“You don’t know that. For all you know, I talk in my sleep.”

He scoffs, resisting the urge to laugh.

“You are right. I do not know about you talking in your sleep, if however you mean snore like a wild bear then I would have to agree with you there.”

She gasps, sitting up and glaring at him. “I do not snore!”

“Hate to be the one to break it to you but you do, really loudly.”

“Didn’t your mother ever teach you that it is bad manners to tell a lady that she snores in her sleep?”

“Didn’t yours ever teach you that you it is wrong to avoid your problems by pretending to be asleep...or to be a lady?”

She gasps again and glares at him. “Well now I am just offended.”

He scowls. “Wait your turn. You ran away...again”

“Oh Yes, dragon king I am feeling so much better, thank you for asking.”

He brushes the back of his hand across at the marks on her neck.

The elixir is beginning to work and the red marks are starting to fade.

Then because he wants to and because he knows it will fluster her he leans in and presses his lips gently against the sensitive skin there.

A soft, barely there kiss.

And like he predicted she hiccups, her eyes growing to twice its size even as she turns beet red all at once.

He gazes up at her. “There, happy?”

“W...what was that for?”

“What, you mean this?” he does it again and is rewarded when her heart rate triples and her eyes momentarily drift close.

“Yes...that.”

He backs away from her and the breathlessness in her voice even though it is the last thing he wants to do.

“Why did you run away again?”

She opens her eyes and meets his. “I didn’t. I told you, I am done running.”

He bristles. Why is she denying it?

“Do not lie to me Hera.”

“I am not lying.”

“You keep saying that. That you are done running and yet the minute I leave you alone you go and do exactly that and now you won’t even admit it?”

“I was going to come back to you Midas.”

That grabs his attention, and momentarily knocks the wind out of his anger.

“You expect me to believe that?”

“Believe it or not dragon king, it does not make it any less true.”

“If what you say is true, then why did you leave in the first place?”

She sighs and looks away, twisting her fingers nervously. “I...I had to go help her.”

“Help who?”

“The girl in the alley. He was...hurting her. He was going to kill her I just...I just could not stand by and let that happen. Not again.”

He notices the way she is shaking slightly as she speaks, the way tears threaten to fall.

He wants to pull her into his arms but he is not sure how she would react to that so he watches her in silence.

She sighs, sniffs back her tears, blinking many times so they do not fall.

“He was whipping her, breaking her over and over again and enjoying it. Maybe this makes me a bad person but I am glad you killed him.”

The way she speaks about it, the venom in her voice.

“Is that how you got them?”

“What?”

“The scars on you back.”

She stiffens and her hands ball up in fists and then slowly, she nods.

Her shoulders quake and her lips quiver, the tears she has been trying so hard to hold back rolling in salty trails down her cheeks.

He wants to kill them.

The men who did this to her.

He wants to find every single one of them and rip them apart.

But instead he pulls her into his arms, holding her against his chest and stroking her hair.

Being the one solid thing she can hold onto until she is ready to forget again.

She finally stills herself and pulls away, not totally but enough to be able to look at him and the wet patch on his shirt.

She sniffs. “I appear to have ruined your shirt.”

“So it would seem.”

“I am sorry.”

He stares at her, tilts his head.

“Make it up to me then.”

Her eyes narrow in suspicion.

“How?”

He shrugs, keeping one hand firm around her waist.

“I do not know but I am sure you can come up with something appropria...”

She does not let him finish before pressing her lips against his and for a short moment Midas temporarily forgets everything else, even how to kiss her back.

She pulls away, much too soon in Midas’ opinion.

“There, would that suffice my lord?”

He makes a sound in his throat. “Not even close.”

And then he kisses her again.

Properly this time, until she is breathless and flustered, her lips red and just the right amount of swollen to send the blood rushing to the other parts of his anatomy.

She smirks. “I thought I was supposed to be the one making it up to you?”

“Well, I guess now you owe me.”

She blushes and warmth floods Midas’ insides.

“Wait...Hera...”

She glances at him, questioning.

He frowns. “The alley, where I found you...that was many...many streets away from where we were.”

She pulls away from him, refusing to meet his eyes.

“So...?”

Then he asks the one question that has been bothering him about the entire situation; the one thing he is yet to understand.

“Hera, if you did not run away...if you left because of them. Then...”

He frowns even harder.

The wheels in his head spinning, turning and grinding to an abrupt halt

“...then how in all the realms did you know what was going on if you were miles away when it was happening?”

The silence that follows is louder than any answer she could have possibly given.

The Dragon King's Substitute Bride Chapter 57

¡Hola mi amigos! ¿Cómo estas?

And now that I have completely exhausted the vast knowledge of Spanish I have,(thank you Dora), I shall return to my default settings.

...Hey, guys.

So there was a little glitch in the system and a chapter got uploaded twice yesterday (the same chapter two times) but the issue has been fixed and there is now a new chapter right below this note Titled ‘Unlikely distractions’.

It's a steamy one, the type you write in the closet because you don't want your family members to catch you writing it.

I hope you like it.

and I also want to say a big thank you to all the people that have stuck with this story so far.

I honestly did not expect this book to do half as well as it is doing right now considering this is my first story on Dreame so trust me when I say it makes me so so happy to see you guys enjoying reading even as much as I am enjoying writing.

So here's to more amazing chapters and coffee fueled insomnia.

Yours in penmanship.

Ashely.

The Dragon King's Substitute Bride Chapter 58

MIDAS

If there is one thing he possesses and will always be able to do, it is the ability to tell when someone is being less than completely honest with him.

When someone is lying.

And now as he looks down at her he knows; she may not have lied yet but she is thinking about it, weighing her options.

“Do not even bother.”

“Bother doing what?”

“Lying to me.”

She frowns, tracing out the embroidery patterns on the edges of the blanket that has somehow suddenly become infinitely more interesting to her than it had been a few moments ago.

“What makes you think I am planning to lie or that there is even something to lie about?”

He tilts up her chin, forcing her gaze upwards. “The way you keep refusing to look directly at me.”

“And that is enough to make you think I am about to lie to you? Your deep mistrust for me is astonishing dragon king.”

“Do not change the subject.”

Her eyes dart away, across the room and back. “I am not trying to.”

“Then what were you doing in that alley?”

“I already told you my Lord. I do not know what else you wish for me to say.”

He lets go of her chin but narrows his eyes at her.

“Then why do you not look directly at me when you speak?”

She is kneeling on the bed beside him, playing with the bed sheet by his side; picking at it, pinching it and rubbing the fabric between her fingers.

“That...that is for a completely different reason.”

He folds his arms and watches her quietly.

“Tell me then. This perfectly rational reason why your eyes are suddenly too heavy to go past any point higher than my shoulders.”

“Okay.” She whispers the word.

So low he is not even sure he heard it.

“What did you say?”

She finally raises her head, meets his eyes. “I said okay”.

And then she kisses him, cradling his face between her hands, small and warm on both sides of his cheeks.

She pulls back, just a fraction of an inch, her bottom lip still touching his and setting every nerve of his body on fire.

His eyes open just a few seconds slower than usual.

“Is this really your reason?”

A shrug, tiny and almost imperceptible.

“I never said it was rational.”

He swallows, hard. “I think you are trying to distract me.”

“Is it working?”

Marvelously well. “No.”

She smirks, her eyes dark.

“Ah, now who’s the one being less than honest here dragon king.”

Then she presses her lips to his again before he can come up with a response.

He lets her set the pace even though his fingers are itching with the need to take control, to satisfy his hunger.

She kisses him softly, his bottom lip, then his top lip.

Slow and tentative at first then firmer, becoming more sure of herself the minute he wraps one arm around her and pulls their bodies flush against each other.

She tastes like the ripe purple grapes sitting on the stool beside them, sweet and intoxicating and it is becoming increasingly hard for Midas to remember that he is not supposed to be doing this.

Her fingers play with hairs at the nape of his neck, moving up to tangle in his curls, ruining his bun.

He is supposed to be staying away from her, not sitting in her bed and giving the bond an opportunity to grow stronger.

Not wishing to all the dragon gods and a few others besides that he could make love to her.

“Hera...” He sighs against her mouth ready to lift her away from him.

But then she buries her face in his neck and kisses him there, just under the angle of his jaw and his gentle sigh of resistance becomes a growling moan.

By Hades what is she doing to him?

Midas knows that if he wants to have any real chance at leaving he has to do so now.

Before he completely loses whatever little grasp he still has on his control.

Yet when she tugs on the end of his shirt, trying to pull it out from where it is tucked into his trousers, he helps her.

He leans back on his arms, inhaling sharply when her hands slip beneath the hem of his shirt to run across his hot, weathered skin.

She is shy at first but one look at him, at the effect her touch is having on him and her explorations become much firmer.

Tracing the hard grooves of his stomach, sliding up the bulging muscles of his chest, over his n****s.

She is exploring him, her fingers eagerly drinking in every inch of him and leaving behind a trail of burning sensations everywhere they touch until Midas begins to feel himself becoming undone beneath her.

But it is not until her hands begin to slide lower, moving past the tiny line of hair that disappears below the band of his pants, that Midas finally realizes that the heaven could fall down right not if they so wished, but Hades take his soul, he would not be leaving the room.

He wants her too much, needs her too badly to pull away.

To Midas' credit and because he does not really wish for Hades to take his soul just yet, he does try to stop her.

Admittedly he does not try not very hard but he does wraps his hand firmly around her tiny wrist, stilling her hand before it can go any deeper.

“Hera...” His voice is rough, strained, breathless.

“...Hera if you do that I will not be able to stop myself.”

But rather than move away she kisses him harder, deeper, her teeth running against his lip. “Who says I want you to?”

The words tear away at whatever shred of resistance he has left.

He kisses her back, brushing the tip of his tongue against her bottom lip in silent request and she gives in, opening up her mouth and moaning softly when his tongue touches hers.

His grip on her hands go slack as the kiss deepens and she takes advantage of it.

Her fingers slip beneath the bands of his pants and when they wrap around the throbbing evidence of his arousal, she gasps as if surprised at the hardness, the size of him in her hand.

Midas groans, his head falling back and his eye rolling up to disappear into his head.

By the gods...it has never felt like this before.

She watches him intently.

Swollen lips parted, eyes turning dark with lust and the sudden powerful realization that she is able to do this to him.

Able to reduce the powerful king into a swollen, hard length of uncontrollable need.

He adjusts himself, giving her access and allowing her to take him out of the tight confines of his trousers.

He loves the way she looks at it, at him.

The tip of her pink tongue flicking out to wet her lips, eyes open wide with a curiosity and innocence that, gods forgive him, he is just aching to completely corrupt.

She wraps both her hands around it, like one isn't enough and just the sight of his swollen c**k in her small hands is enough to drive away any whatever tiny amount of rational logic he has left.

"Goddamit Hera..." he whispers, begs, his voice an angry growl of impatience.

With her eyes locked on his, she slides her hand slowly down the entire length of him and Midas shudders and shivers, his entire body tensing up.

His chest heaves with heavy, ragged bursts.

Forget control, he can barely concentrate enough to remember how to breathe.

She does it again, but her movements are unsure, gentle, like teasing motions that only serve to feed his need but not satisfy it.

"Not enough..."

She bites her lips, gazes at him. "Show me."

So he does.

Wrapping his large hand around hers, and showing her exactly how to please him, how to lead him to the very brink of his sanity.

She learns quickly, moving faster and faster even after his hand drops away.

Midas head falls weightless into the crook of her shoulder, inhaling her scent, kissing her there.

He is dangerously close to coming and if she does not stop...does not slow down he is going to...gods above.

“Enough” he growls.

She squeals when he lifts her up suddenly and turns her around.

Placing her in his lap, so that she is straddling him backwards with her back pressed to his front, her knees bent on either side of him.

His hands slide greedily up her thighs, bunching up her dress and pushing it up and out of the way so that he can pull down the tiny garment underneath and bare her to him, to his touch.

His left hand cups the soft mound of her breast, squeezing gently, then harder, rolling the erect n****e between his thumb and forefinger.

She gasps, her body tensing up when the fingers of his right hand slide under her and between the swollen wetness of her folds to stroke her clit.

One hand stroking and circling the little sensitive button, the other rolling her n*****s until they hardened and swelled and she completely dissolves.

She moans, twisting against him, reaching out behind her to grab his hair, press him closer.

“Midas...please...I want...”

He kisses her neck, whispers in her ear. “I know.”

He lifts her up slightly, one hand clutching her hips, the other positioning his tip at her entrance.

Then he lowers her down, penetrating her, feeling the velvety smoothness of her walls clench and tighten around his c**k.

She feels like heaven; soft and hot and so impossibly wet that he almost comes with just that one single motion.

She cries out in ecstasy as the shock of the sensation hits and he groans, has to take a moment to catch his breath.

She fits around him like a glove, her body completely swallowing the entire length of his hardness like she was made especially for him.

Then he places his hand in the middle of her back, gently arching and her bending her over, so that she has to place one hand on the edge of the bed and the other on the bedside stool to steady herself.

Then when she is comfortable, his hand tightens around the curve of her hips and he begins sliding her along his length, grinding his hips to meet her halfway and burying his c**k inside her with slow, languid thrusts,

Deliberate and teasing, drawing out the pleasure and the torture.

She tries to move faster but his grip is firm, making her unable to do anything but submit to his control.

“Midas...”

He lifts her up and slides her back down again, enjoying the way she moans and groans in frustration.

“Midas...”

“Tell me...”

“Harder...faster...please...”

The way she says it, the neediness in her sultry voice...

By Hades how could he ever deny her anything?

So he gives her everything she wants, pounding into her until she screams his name, begging for release.

His arms wrap around her, pulling her closer so her head rests against his shoulder even as he relentlessly drives her over the edge.

She is close, he can feel it.

He kisses her neck again, whispering into her ear. “Come for me Hera...” One deep, hard thrust after another. “...come for me my little human slave.”

And so she does, crying out his name.

Her walls clench and spasm against him and he groans, his head falling to bury into the hollow of her shoulder as her tightness drags him over the edge along with her, his seed spilling into her in warm, long ropes.

He is falling, drowning in billowing ripples of pleasure beyond anything he has ever felt before her.

She straightens and he slides out of her with a quiet pop.

She turns around and moves to get up but he pulls her back to him.

And for a long time afterwards, even after he hears her breathing even out to become the gentle sighs of one who is deeply asleep, he sits there.

Holding her his arms, her head cradled against his shoulder and wondering how in all the f*****g realms he is supposed to be able to let her go now.

The Dragon King's Substitute Bride Chapter 59

HERA

I know it before I am even fully awake, before I even open my eyes.

Without even needing to reach out and feel, I can just tell that he is gone and that when I do open my eyes, the other side of the bed will be empty.

It may be because for as long as I can remember, I have always had someone I had to share my bed or sleeping space with.

With my mother and my sisters when we had to squeeze into my grandmother's tiny house.

With my little brother when he and I had to huddle together under leaking, abandoned sheds to avoid freezing to death in the night.

And even with the other maids in the cramped up quarters that Averia's chamber maidens were given and forced to share.

I have always had someone there.

And in the times when I would jerk awake in the middle of the night drenched in sweat, I would hear the comforting, familiar sound of another person breathing beside me.

The gentle rise and fall of their chest confirming to me that I had indeed woken up and left whatever have troubled me in my dreams.

So, when I finally do open my eyes, and discover him gone, I tell myself that is why I feel this way.

That is unease and not disappointment that makes me feel slightly deflated at not seeing him.

and that the realization that once again, I have woken up alone does not bother me.

I sigh and stare up at the dark stain in the right hand corner of the wooden ceiling of my bed.

There is a pleasant, barely there ache between my legs and when I lift my fingers to my lips, they feel swollen by just the tiniest of bits.

It means I must not have been asleep too long.

But all the strangeness of the morning, the echoes of that horrible nightmare that had followed me around... all that, everything has faded into the background.

All that is left behind is a warm, buzzing sensation.

And it takes me quite a few moments to realize it for what it is;

satisfaction.

I have been utterly and thoroughly satisfied, taken to heights of pleasure I did not even know existed.

I allow a small smile pull up the corners of my mouth, basking in an afterglow so strong, that it is quite enough to temporally push away the guilt of what I have done.

I do not wish to get up, to even move, least I burst this wonderful bubble in which I seem to have found myself so warmly encased.

But I do know that sooner or later, I am going to have to deal with the fact that I have had mind-blowing s*x not once but twice with the very man I am supposed to destroy.

I sigh again and move to lift off the heavy coverlet that is over my body but my hands still, the cloth bunched up in them.

It is not a sound as much as it is a feeling, the sudden realization that I was wrong.

I am not alone.

There is someone else in the room with me.

No...not someone else...

I sit up slowly, pushing back on my arms so I can see the entire room fully.

And there, at the far end of the room, with his arms folded across his broad chest, sits the Dragon King.

Shoulders squared and back ramrod straight.

How in all the realms did he manage to fall asleep in such a position?

The chair is next to the fire place but just off to the side a little, blocked by the hanging drapes of my bed which is why I had not noticed him when I first started to get up.

I drink in the sight of him; stoic, unmoving and so impossibly handsome that it still manages to surprise me everything I see him

I breathe quietly, not daring to move, not wanting to wake him yet filled with the sudden urge to touch him, to run my hand through his hair and ask him why he is frowning even in his sleep.

I needn't have bothered.

"You are awake."

Startled, my hands fly to my chest at the unexpected suddenness of hearing his voice.

I peer at him. His eyes are still closed.

How is he doing that... how does he know that I am awake?

"Your heartbeat, it changed."

I sit up, mimicking his position and folding arms across my chest to hide how impressed I am.

"Does being dragon king come with the ability to read minds?"

He says nothing in response and instead keeps looks at me with such a fierce intent and concentration that I can feel my cheeks starting to burn.

I look away first and start to chew on my bottom lip, catching myself at the last minute when he raises one brow as if in warning.

I clear my throat even though there is nothing in it that needs clearing.

"I am surprised to see that you are still here."

"You seem to have forgotten that it is my room as well."

"I am sorry my lord, I believe I may have gotten confused the day the servants came and moved everything of yours out."

"It does not matter. It is my castle so therefore every room is mine."

"Fair enough. And do you always sleep like that, sitting upright, in the many rooms that are yours?"

Including your mistress'

He unfolds his arms. "I was not asleep. I simply did not want to leave before you awoke."

My heart skips a beat and my insides fill with pleasant warmth.

I look away, blushing. "Why?"

“Because...” He leans forward, his elbows balanced on his knees. “...you are yet to answer my question.”

And just like that the bubble bursts.

Of course.

Why did I even think....

I want to slap myself, maybe then I will finally realize that my life is not one of those fairy stories mother used to read to us and that while Midas might look like it, he is in fact no charming prince.

Stupid...stupid...stupid.

I sigh. “I have told you why I left dragon king.”

He gets up slowly. “You have told me why but that is not the question of which I speak and you know it.”

I look away, pulling my pillow into my lap and holding it like it could somehow separate me from the advancing king.

“I do not know what it is you wish to hear dragon king but I...”

He is standing over me, filling my vision and blocking out the last rays of sunlight streaming in through my window.

“I will only ask you one more time Hera. How did you know what was going on in that alley?”

I swallow and force myself to raise my head and look directly at him.

“If I tell you I ran, that I was indeed trying to escape you and that was how I found them would you believe me and drop the matter?”

His eyes momentarily flash red. “No. But if you are trying to anger me then it is working.”

My voice cracks. “Why...why won’t you just let it go Midas?”

The answer he is looking for is buried in the darkest part of my soul.

A place...a place I have absolutely no desire to return to.

He leans in, one hand gripping the head of the bed behind me, caging me in.

“Why won’t you tell me the truth Hera, what are you hiding?”

“I am not hiding anything.”

But he is not listening. His eyes narrow suspiciously. “Who exactly are you?”

His voice has changed, the way he says the words, it frightens me, sets my teeth on edge.

“Who...I do not understand you. You know who I am.”

“No, I only know what you have told me and as we are both painfully aware, you are quite apt at bending the truth.”

“That is not fair Midas.”

He shakes his head.

“You are trouble Hera, coming into my castle, changing things. I can smell it, sense it, even without the warnings of the kingmakers.”

“What warnings....”

But he ignores me.

The man who had made love to me, who held me in his arms and kissed me until I shivered and shook...

That man is gone and the only thing left, the one gripping my chin firmly in his hand, eyes cold and gaze unflinching, is the dragon king, ruler of the 5th realm.

“Whatever storm it is that you are bringing into my realm Hera, whatever calamity follows you, I intend to stop it before it affects my people and you better pray to all the gods you know that you do not get in my way. My kingdom will always come first, do you understand that? Nothing else matters to me.”

He says the last part quietly like it was meant more for him than it was for me but the words find their mark.

I sniff and push away the hurt.

“Nothing else matters uh?”

His eyes drop away from mine and for one insane heartbeat, I watch him and tell myself that maybe he does not actually mean it in that way.

But then he straightens and looks down at me, whatever warmth I had once seen in his eyes is gone, gone like I had imagined it.

“Nothing else.”

I scoff, turning away to hide the fact that I suddenly feel like crying.

“Then why...why do you even bother saving me if you are so convinced that I am nothing but trouble?”

He does not notice, does not care, does not bother to reply.

“Answer my question Hera.”

I sigh and look up at him. “I have nothing more to tell you Midas.”

The part of his eyes that is rimmed with red is growing larger, consuming another inch of gold.

“I have been quite lenient with you slave, do not push it any further.”

I fold my hand in fists and hide them under my pillow, to hide how badly I am shaking.

Then I lift my chin defiantly to meet his eyes.

“Or what dragon king...will you try to kill me again?”

His jaw works and he clenches his fists.

One step closer and he is leaning in again, his breath hot on my face.

“No Hera, I will not kill you. But there are so many other ways I can get you to talk. It would be in your best interest to do so willingly.”

When I still do not say anything, he straightens again.

“You have until tomorrow morning. The door will be locked and you will not leave your room until then.”

“Midas...”

“Your maid will bring up your meals.”

“You said I was not your prisoner.”

“Tell me what I want to hear.”

“I can’t...”

He nods once and turns away from me.

“If you still refuse to tell me the truth come tomorrow, the door will remain locked until you are ready to come clean.”

And then he walks away.

I throw off the covers, jump off the bed. “Is that why?”

He stops, his hand on the door. “What?”

“Is that why you made love to me? Did you perhaps think that it would soften me up to your inquisitions and your interrogations? Or maybe even make me willing...to tell you all it is that you wish to hear?”

I exhale, glaring at his back and struggling to keep the hurt from my voice. “Is that why?”

He does not turn to look at me but his voice is flat, expressionless.

“And if I say yes?”

My heart cracks.

Hurt and anger making me shake and filling my eyes with hot tears.

“You cold bastard.”

He looks away, his grip on the door knob tightening. “You have until sunrise tomorrow morning.”

He does not slam the door but the silence he leaves behind is worse.

Much worse.

The Dragon King's Substitute Bride Chapter 60

HERA

I HATE HIM

Gods above, I hate him so much.

I cannot believe that there had been a moment...moments, where I had ever considered him to be anything more than a cruel, heartless king.

And what in all the realms did he mean by warnings?

What warnings?

Could it be...

I cease my pacing around the room and my blood runs cold.

Could it be that he knows the real reason why I had agreed to this sham marriage in the first place?

Why I had accepted my fate without fighting, why I had not even attempted to escape or run away from the palace that night before the wedding in Averia.

Could it be that he somehow knows?

I shake my head, willing the thought to go away. “No...he can’t know.”

If he did, if he had even the slightest inkling of my real reasons for coming into his realm, I have no doubt he would have killed me by now.

So he can’t know.

But then his words come back to me again.

The conversation playing itself over and over again in my head in some sort of endless, infinite loop until the words are seared into my brain and anger pushes everything else into the back ground

“You are trouble Hera, coming into my castle, changing things. I can smell it, sense it, even without the warnings of the kingmakers.”

Trouble... I’m trouble?!!

The one dragged from her realm and forced to marry the man she hates most is the one who he calls trouble?

Oh he has no idea what trouble really is.

Not yet.

When they had told me, that day in throne room, that I was to take the princess Cassiopeia’s place and be wed against my wishes to the man responsible for destroying my realm, a part of me had died inside.

The thought of leaving the only home I had ever known and turning my back on my brother, the only family I had left without so much as a last goodbye was more than my heart could bear.

But as I had lain in bed that night, weeping quietly to the sound of chirping crickets and noisy, croaking frogs outside of my window, I had realized something.

A thought, like a tiny flame of white light, pierced through the fog of my hopelessness

And like a phoenix rising from the ashes of my broken heart, that single thought, had been the only reason, the one thing that had kept me from losing myself completely.

The dragon king may be immortal and powerful beyond a mere human’s comprehension, but he is still a being created by the gods.

And as with every one of their creations, for everyone the gods have gifted with immense power, there is and would always be a weakness.

Some sort of loophole that could weaken them, something that could take away their powers, something that could destroy them forever.

I came into the dragon realm with this one aim bundled tightly to my chest, keeping me warm against the cold harshness of what had seemed like a very bleak reality.

To find the dragon king's weakness, to hurt him exactly the way he had hurt my people, to destroy him forever.

But then...then he had come for me in that forest.

Even after I had lied to him and ran us straight into danger he had come for me, had saved me.

Had made me begin to doubt everything I had been so absolutely certain of before the first time I ever looked into those liquid gold pools.

And yet, everything that had previously made me unsure seems to have disappeared in the space of one afternoon.

I think about the look in his eyes when he had asked me who I was and what I was hiding.

Cold and unfeeling...exactly like the first time, the day of our return from Averia, when he had discovered that I was not who I claimed to be.

It hurts...to see him look at me that way again.

It actually bloody hurts.

But more than that, it makes me angry.

Because who in Hades does he think he is to threaten me and ask for answers to questions that threatened to take me back to memories I would much rather forget, memories I had buried in the shadows of my mind?

How dare he make me feel like a criminal when he is to one who is to blame for everything?

I exhale shakily, feeling the first throes of a budding headache beginning to sprout its ugly wings.

Everything, all this pacing and thinking, switching from anger and fear to hurt and then back to anger again is beginning to make me immensely exhausted.

I keep waiting to hear a knock at the door.

No, not waiting, wanting...wanting terribly for him to come back, to change his mind, to understand me.

But my door stays closed, lifeless.

No one comes, not even Henette.

I can feel myself starting to panic.

Did he change his mind about having Henette bring up my meals?

Perhaps he now intends to starve me to death or until I break and give him the answers he seeks.

Gods, he really is heartless.

And I have been the great fool.

The one who let herself be deceived by the way he had kissed me, like a man starving, obsessed.

The one who let herself get lost in the heat of our bodies moving together, each curves and angle falling into place like we were made to fit against each another.

The one who had let herself get lost in his beautiful eyes and started to foolishly believe that maybe everything would somehow be okay.

A quiet voice, tiny and unsure... Why don't you just tell him?

"I can't! I just can't!!"

I am aware that I am yelling but I do not care.

The yelling helps; helps to scratch at the raw itchiness that I feel, helps to drown out the voice in my head asking me to trust him.

I sit on my bed, shaky hands holding my head. "I just....can't"

And it is not just because he might think me insane or a liar.

But telling him the truth would mean admitting to something I have tried so hard...so bloody hard to deny.

A secret so heavy and dark, I hid it away, pretended it never happened.

And If I have to say those words out loud, to give him the answer he is asking for, it would rip open a wound that is much too fresh, much too raw and it would leave me bleeding and exposed, the darkest parts of my past laid bare. Read more free novels at Jobnib.com

I have fought so hard, for so long to crawl out of that place, that memory and if I had to go back to it, I do not think I will be able to return again.

I wipe at the tears threatening to fall.

"Enough Hera. No more tears. Not for him."

Deep breaths...in and out...until I can finally breathe without feeling like I am on the verge of dissolving into a pool of tears.

The bell rings out for the seventh time as if mocking my predicament.

The grey sky has already begun to turn a deep inky blue, and the moon, a single round diamond has taken its place high up in the night's sky, casting brilliant light on some areas while throwing the far corners of my room into semi-dark shadows.

Much like my heart.

Still, no one has come and angry or not, my stomach is beginning to make little un-lady like noises.

I look out the window, at the main courtyard far, far below at the little people walking about the castle grounds.

Ryders and workers that do not live in the castle are heading home for the day.

Heading home, unafraid even though it already almost dark, to their loving families and giggling children, to bowls of hot soup and warm beds and pleasant dreams.

Everything I had been denied of for so many years.

And as I watch them, I feel the strangest of urges to scream, to shout at the top of my voice until someone hears me.

But I know it will be no use.

Even if they heard me, no one would care.

And I have never felt more alone in my entire life than I do right at this moment.

I turn away from the window.

If this is his intention, then I am not about to make this easy for him.

He thinks that I am going to just sit here quietly and starve to death or lose my mind well have I got a surprise in store for him.

I have no plans of running away, not before I get my revenge, but I also do not plan on telling him anything.

So I need to make sure I can leave this room, one way or the other.

I glance back at my window and dismiss the idea immediately.

It is much too high up although if it eventually came down to it, I could always tie together a rope from my wonderful new clothes and lower myself down.

But it is much too risky, not to mention extremely stupid, seeing as I cannot possibly get revenge if I am lying at the feet of some tower with my neck snapped in two.

Unless of course mother was right and ghosts are real.

In which case the dragon king had better be prepared to be haunted for the rest of his goddamn immortal life.

This leaves me only one real option.

I steel my nerves and walk cautiously to the door, raising my fists and rapping loudly on the hard surface.

No one answers.

I knock again.

“Garwith...Leo...anybody?”

But the only response I get back is cold silence.

He must think me so completely helpless, so utterly at his mercy locked in here that he has not even bothered to station someone outside of my door.

The corners of my mouth lift in a cold smile.

His mistake.