

The Dragon King's Substitute Bride Chapter 6

HERA

It lasts exactly one heartbeat and a half.

For that incredibly brief second, with my eyes closed, clinging to the only solid thing in that dark, villainous space, I could pretend everything had been some fever induced nightmare.

That when I open my eyes, I would be back home, with my family who are still very much alive and that the arms around me, holding me tightly against them didn't belong to the person responsible for taking everything away from me.

But before that second heartbeat is over, I open my eyes and everything is still painfully the same.

The lights from the abysmally few torches scattered around the tunnel walls into which the cells are carved, are barely enough to see with.

Yet when I tilt my head to look up, everything about his face is achingly clear.

I find myself wanting to swipe my thumbs across his cheekbones, wipe the smudges of blood and dirt from his face but I force my hands into tiny fists, digging my nails into the skin of my palms.

He's staring hard at me and I swallow at the sudden lump that forms in my throat.

I can't tell if the way my heart is racing is from having my sorry, miserable life, flash before my eyes just moments ago or if it's something else entirely.

It almost feels like a betrayal when the thought races stubbornly through my head. How could someone who looked so impossibly flawless be so cruel?

My chest pressed against him, rises and falls with each breath that escapes through his parted lips.

He's looking at me with an expression I do not quite understand or maybe it's the other way around.

Maybe it's me refusing to acknowledge the slight relief I see in his searching gaze.

In the way his eyes pore over every inch of me.

No longer red but now returned to that startlingly shade of liquid.

How dare he look at me like that?

Then he blinks and it's gone, so fast I can't even be sure I didn't imagine it.

I push away from the embrace, furious at him for sending me to what would have most certainly been my death.

But I'm even more furious at myself for running straight into his arms despite knowing that.

He gathers up the discarded, blood stained swords that had clattered to the ground when I'd thrown myself at him like some untrained hussy. "Did they touch you?"

"What, now you care for my virtue? Why are you even here?"

Easy Hera, we do not want to remind him to close the door on his way out now do we?

But I'm still too shaken to think properly and it's either lash out or start crying and I am sick to death of crying.

His brows draw together and he frowns at nothing in particular. "I don't know."

I throw him my best withering look. "Maybe you were worried your little band of vile prisoners would not be able to do a good enough job of ending me, is that it?"

"No, they would certainly have killed you."

The matter of fact way he says the words only serves to feed my burning indignation.

"I am surprised you are not leaping for joy at the very thought. Did you come down to watch and then decide to do it yourself?"

He scowls at my disrespectful tone.

"You would think a slave girl who just got sent to the most dangerous prison in all the 7 realms would have learnt to bridle her tongue and show more gratitude that she gets to keep her pretty little neck."

Honestly, I would think so too.

But my mouth has always had a mind of its own, and now, fueled by all these mixed emotions, it won't stop.

Not until I run out of steam.

"You should have let them kill me. What good is staying alive if I'm still going to be married to you?"

The minute the words tumble out of my mouth, I want to catch them and put them back in but it's too late.

He steps towards me and for all my mouthing off I take a step back but he steps even closer still.

The tension between our bodies is intensified by the heat radiating of him.

A palpable, tangible thing reminding me against my best intentions of what it felt like to have his lips against my skin. The way he had kissed me, possessive and consuming

His eyes are darker now and when he speaks, his voice is rough and somehow, I know I'm not the only one remembering.

I am aware of a shuffling of feet by the entry way to my cell. I know I should call out, warn him but I can't seem to look anywhere else but at him.

"Because you're mine Hera..."

A bent over, hulking shape, appears at the door, sneering loudly but Midas doesn't look.

"...no one gets to touch you..."

The prisoner charges at him

"...except me."

And in one single fluid movement, without so much as a backwards glance, the criminal falls on his own back, impaled on the end of Midas' sword.

Never mind that he just killed a man without even looking.

The sound of my name falling from his lips, like some dark whispered secret and the way he keeps looking at me, sends an ache tingling somewhere below my belly.

It's a strange sensation, one I am unfamiliar with and yet I find I do not hate it...quite the complete opposite in fact.

Hera, you stupid, stupid girl

He wraps a lock of my hair around his finger. "Besides, killing you would be letting you off easy. Given the severity of your crimes, why would I do that when I can have all the time I need to come up with more suitable...punishments."

By now, my little betraying blood pumping organ is leaping about in its rib cage so loudly I could swear he can hear it. My mouth is dry and when I open it, nothing comes out.

His nearness is messing with my head in ways I do not appreciate and I swallow hard.

My head is nearing dizziness. Both with fear and with...

No Hera, remember who he is, what he's done.

Mercifully, the bell rings out before I can make a greater fool of myself and He tilts his head towards the ringing that somehow manages to seem both close and far away all at once.

He turns away and I let out a breath I didn't even know I had been holding.

Striding towards the entrance, he retrieves his weapon, pulling it with a squelching sound from the body of the fallen man as he exits the small enclosed space. "The morning approaches"

Heavens above don't let him leave me here.

The bell rings out again and I can hear still hear violent noises from beyond my cell and although they are few and far between but I can't seem to bring myself to move.

Maybe if I stay very very still...

He reappears at the doorway once more. "Have you already grown so fond of this place that you no longer wish to leave?"

I have to stop myself from running towards him again.

I cautiously step out of my cell behind him.

My eyes have adjusted to the dimness of my surroundings but it's still quite dark and I lose my footing, stumbling on the uneven path.

He lifts a torch from the wall without so much as a sideways glance, lighting the path for what I can tell is more my sake than his.

I hadn't been able to look around properly when I was first dragged in her kicking and screaming.

The rock tunnel the cells are built into extends behind me, shrouded in an even thicker darkness that has me increasing my pace to stay close to him.

The bell rings out again for the fourth time as we pass dead prisoners and groaning prisoners, bleeding and moaning.

Others still, missing limbs and bearing wounds that could only have been inflicted by a sword.

Or in this case, two swords

There are others even stupidly still fighting among themselves.

Midas makes no move to stop them and they scamper out of his way, sneering and baring their teeth yet shrinking away from the light of his torch, not daring to come closer.

"Did you do this my Lord?"

I didn't care for the question, I cared even less for the answer but I needed to say something.

Now that the initial rush of fear has somewhat abated, I can think clearly enough to know it would not do to annoy the one leading me from this hell hole.

Although I'm whispering, I know he can hear me. He's just deciding to ignore me.

When the bell rings for the fifth time, the criminals suddenly stop moving and I stop with them.

Then just as suddenly as they stopped, they begin to take on a frenzied pace to reach their cells, pushing and falling over each other .

They are voluntarily locking themselves back in.

Why?

My first thought is that maybe they are simply afraid of him.

But I have since discovered from my stay here, however brief, two very important things.

Whoever had come up with the cellar and it's peculiar, gruesome brand of punishment was nothing less than a fiend.

I have no doubts it was his idea.

and that while sound travels eerily well in dark spaces, any noise in this accursed place could only spell certain doom.

So when a low strumming sound echoes through the length of the tunnel my heart fairly stops...again.

Oh gods what now, was there to be no end to this nightmare?

The sound grows louder, distorting the air around it and advancing at a rapid pace.

"M...my Lord..."

He stops so suddenly I almost crash into his back, steadying myself at the last moment.

"Stay behind me."

A loud, bloodcurdling scream rents the air from the darkness ahead of us just as a sudden bright light illuminates the space and a burst of fierce warmth rushes at us.

"Is that...fire?"

I hear Midas mumble something along the lines of "fools" but I'm too distracted and frightened to care.

I don't even realize I'm gripping the sleeves of his shirt till he tilts his head and stares pointedly at my fingers, wrapped around his arm.

But I pretend not to notice.

If he wants my fingers off him he's going to have to pry them off with a crowbar.

I keep staring into the dim space beyond, waiting, breath shaky for whatever had caused those screams.

And that's when for the very first time, I see it.

I stand petrified.

I want to run but my feet are rooted to the spot and I can barely breathe.

Narrow openings in the creature's bony angular jaw and the luminescent jade eyes with their narrow slit pupils shining from within give it a truly frightening reptilian appearance.

Two small horns sit atop its head just above its tiny round ears, its winding serpentine body a mass of scales that crackle with sudden bursts of electricity.

My grip tightens imperceptibly on his arms. He's staring straight ahead, not moving.

Is he blind, did he not see the massive beast hurtling through the air towards us or did he care nothing if we roasted to death in this dark cramped tunnel?

"M...my lord!!"

Smoke pours out of its snout from two warped wide nostrils.

It opens its large mouth as it draws closer, revealing terrifyingly sharp teeth and from the dark depths of its yawning jaws, I can see a ball of fire beginning to form.

Then it clicks.

He is immortal and I am not.

And just when I think I am done for, the dragon lands in front of us, stirring up enough dust and wind in the tight space, that my hair is blown back, sand and grit finding their way into every opening in my face.

Its horrendous scythe-shaped wings beat with a rush and its massive tail, ending in a fan-like tip begin to swish from side to side.

And as I watch, scarcely able to believe my eyes and ears, a distinct rumbling sound emanates from its throat and when I can finally remember how to make my voice work, its tiny and filled with wonder.

"Is it...purring?"

The Dragon King's Substitute Bride Chapter 7

HERA

Everyone had heard the tales.

Some knew them by heart.

They were bed time stories for little ones in the villages of Averia. They were drunken tales for tired workers holed up in taverns littered across the cities.

When the night fell and the moon shone bright to guide weary shepherds leading their flock home, they were tales told in hushed voices and in a cautionary tone.

Stories of witches and curses and the Ryders in a far off realm.

Beings with the ability to turn into fearsome fire breathing creatures with burning eyes the color of precious gems, amber and jade pools that turned you to stone when you gazed into them and fiery balls that razed down cities, reducing them to ash in a single breath.

I had heard them all and loved every single one.

I didn't see it as a curse like the rest of them did. Surely possessing the power to change at will into such imposing creatures was a gift bestowed by the gods themselves only to the strongest of men.

And when my father managed to drag himself from the gambling houses that saw him more often than we did, I would beg and beg till he told me the stories I wanted to hear.

But when the dragon realm descended on Averia, bringing their monsters and their Ryders with them and gradually wiping out my people, the awe with which I had once held them morphed into fear.

In my mind's eye, they became blood thirsty, mindless creatures with a singular purpose; kill and destroy.

And yet when I failed to set my eyes on even one of them, the curiosity in me would not be satiated.

That day, when I had run into the burning, smoke filled ruins of what was left of my village with tears streaming down my soot stained cheeks, voice hoarse from screaming names and getting only silence in return, I had found among the glowing embers the first proof of their existence; a single dark grey scale that remained untouched by the flames around it.

It was the size of my palm, with a smooth, strangely warm surface and when it caught the light, it gleamed with an unearthly sheen.

It was the only evidence of the monsters who had taken everything from us.

And I kept it.

But even then I still hadn't understood the magnificence and sheer terror of being in the presence of a dragon.

Until today.

It was an experience beyond words. My words anyway.

And now, as the enormous reptile sits on its hunches before him, wagging its tail like a tame pup and nudging his chest with its large bony head so that he could scratch it between the ears or in this case, between its horns, I realize a startling truth.

While dragons might be fierce, vicious beasts that strike fear in the hearts of all who see them and those who possessed the ability to become them even more so, there was one who sat above the rest.

With the power to control both dragons and weredragons alike.

A monster above monsters.

He ran one gloved hand down the head and snout of the dragon, gazing at the animal with a look I did not think he was capable of.

It's a look of familiarity and comfort so gentle it's almost...warm.

He takes my hand loosely in his.

Long slender fingers wrapping themselves around mine and I look up at him in confusion that lasts barely a fraction of a second.

When I realize what he's trying to do, my eyes become the size of saucers. "My Lord...I don't think..."

But before I can even fully form the sentence, he places my palm on the head of the beast, keeping his hand on mine so I do not jerk it away.

"You have nothing to fear slave, not while I am here."

I wish he would stop calling me that.

I shrink away in fear, or at least that is what I know I should do but with his palm callused and large, resting on my hand, sending delicious sparks of warmth down the length of my arm, it's hard to and even when the beast moves its head against my palm, I find myself strangely unable to pull away.

As I tentatively run my hand between its horns, the jade green eyes flutter briefly, a sound of satisfaction coming from it.

A startled laugh, unexpected even to me escapes my lips.

This fire breathing monster was nothing short of a colossal puppy and for a second, I forget everything else.

“Does it have a name?” I raise my head to look at Midas with surprise and wonder only to find him already staring at me.

He clears his throat and looks away. “Meirsul, Lord of the red. He’s a herding dragon.”

“Meirsul...” I say quietly, finding it strange and difficult to pronounce with the hiling, rolling consonants of the dragon realm.

It reacts to its name, nudging me with its large snout and pushing me against Midas who instantly wraps one big muscled arm around my waist to steady me.

The way my body reacts whenever I come in contact with any part of him, this acute awareness of exactly where I stop and he begins is something I need to fix, fast.

I force myself to remember.

The dragon’s scales smooth and warm beneath my palm are the catalyst. Reminding me instantly of the day I lost them and I snatch my hand back as shame and guilt floods me.

My entire village had been wiped out in a single day and here I was, petting and caressing the very reason for their deaths.

He lets me go, frowning slightly at my sudden withdrawal and stiffness but says nothing.

The wind from Meirsul’s wings had extinguished the torch and he lights it again, sparking flames out of nothingness with simple a flick of his finger.

And with a whispered command in the dragon’s ear, he guides us past it and the beast takes off again heading further into the passage behind us.

Apart from a single scream a few seconds later, our footsteps are the only sound echoing in the tunnel. The air is getting lighter, the smell of blood and sweat no longer hanging thick over my head.

I don’t even remember it being this far to the outside but I had been dragged in, kicking and screaming, slung over the shoulder of the guard, I doubt I could a reliable judge.

I watch his tall, imposing form ahead of me, a latent leonine command in his strides, each silent step taken with the commanding confidence of one used to power.

The manly way his broad shoulders stretch out the shirt across his back and outlines the contours of his thick muscled arms, has my cheeks flushing with heat and I force myself to look anywhere else but at him.

Skies, what is wrong with me?

It was just a single kiss...one blood stirring, sinfully decadent kiss.

Granted, it had been my first and only but even then.

It had come from the man who I hated more than anything in the world.

Why couldn't I stop thinking about it?

I press my lips together in an effort to stay silent but my curiosity soon gets the better of me and I welcome the words because they take my mind off...other things.

"What did you mean by a herding dragon...my lord?"

He replies without turning. "He herds the prisoners, making sure they go back into confinement at the fifth bell just before the sun rises."

"So those screams we heard?"

"Fool hardly criminals who would not return to their cells."

"Why do you even let them out in the first place?"

He is silent for so long, I don't think he's going to answer but he does, his voice betraying no emotion.

"What better way to punish traitors to the throne than to set them against one another."

Of course.

I can see the light from the entrance and my knees buckle with barely contained relief.

The giant guards are both staring through the bars and somehow I can tell from their faces, they've been on the lookout for quite a while.

The grates rise slowly open and when I finally step out of the cellar, it's all I can do not to crumble to the floor.

The Chief Ryder is outside too, leaning against the hard packed wall.

He stands up straight before bowing low when he sees Midas walk out and if he feels anything at my sorry but alive state, he hides it well.

"I came as fast as I could."

The king tosses his swords at the feet of one of the guards. "You need not have bothered Leo."

"The guards in the palace saw you running through the halls and alerted me."

He ran...to save me?

Midas scowls and looks away. “I was hardly running. It was more of a brisk walk.”

“Of course your majesty.”

Their voices are becoming somewhat blurry.

Now that I am out of that horrid place, all the events of the day just past come crashing down on me in a wave of nausea and weakness.

Everything had happened so fast, it seemed my brain was just now catching up and she did not like what she saw.

My leg is bleeding from stumbling around in the dark barefooted and I have had nothing to eat or drink for over a full day.

His arms catch me before I can collapse to the floor in sheer exhaustion. He says something to Leo that I don't quite grab and the Chief Ryder rushes on ahead.

“Can you walk?”

I nodded vaguely but when he notices my bleeding feet, he silently sweeps me off them, cradling me against his chest and begins to walk out of the tunnel and back to the palace.

My stomach squeezes with hunger and I whimper slightly. His arms tighten imperceptibly around me.

“It's okay, I've got you.”

My heart skips a beat at the words as I wrap my arms around his neck, too tired to fight how safe I feel with my head resting against his shoulders.

My eyes open halfway and I stare up at his chin, covered in prickly dark stubble and I have to fold my hand in fists to stop from reaching out and gently brushing my fingers across the chiseled jaw line.

Even if I cannot remember wanting to do something so badly in my entire life.

“Careful dragon King, one would think you were actually concerned about me.”

And I can swear he rolls his eyes.

The Dragon King's Substitute Bride Chapter 8

“Careful dragon King, one would think you were actually concerned about me.”

He has half a mind to drop her on her romp.

Instead he ignores her goading him and quietly takes her back into the light and warmth of the palace.

She is small and tiny in his arms, so very breakable.

Granted Dragon folk are of a much bigger build than average humans but she is definitely among the smallest of her kind.

Probably the most exasperating too.

For the second time in two days, Midas pushes back the dark red brocade hangings, pulls back the emerald green coverings and lays her quietly on the silk white sheets of the four poster canopy bed in his chambers.

When the nursing maid arrives led in by Leo, she is still asleep, stirring only slightly when her cuts are dressed and cleaned.

“She is to take this when she wakes My Lord” the maid announces, placing a glass quarter ways filled with some green looking potion on the dressing table beside the bed and with one last bow leaves the room, the chief ryder following closely behind.

He should never have sent her down there. Not because he thinks her crime to be any less than before but because he knows she did not deserve it. Not really.

He knew he had a temper.

When his dragon’s rage burned brightly with his own, turning his eyes the color of a blood moon, it became even more difficult to control.

To him, it was his one and only flaw.

He opens his drawers and takes off the ripped shirt and breeches stained with dirt and the blood of the inmates who had been foolish enough to charge at him.

She stirs awake just as he finishes and her eyes open as she sits up.

Once again he’s struck by just how soulful they are until they fall on him and darken slightly with hate and fear.

It’s the only way those eyes have every looked at him.

But at this moment, as they hold his, neither one of them saying a word to the other, the silent question hanging thickly in the air is mirrored in them.

What now?

Damned if he knows.

He watches her silently as she looks down at her dressed and tended cuts and says the first thing that comes into his head. "What are you wearing?"

Obviously he isn't the only one thinks it is the least intelligent thing he could say because she draws her brows together in a frown of confusion.

"What?"

Never one to be embarrassed, Midas folds his hands across his broad chest. "Has your brief sojourn into the cellar made you hard of hearing? I asked what this... thing you have on is."

She stares at him like he might have lost his head. "Oh I'm sorry my Lord...does my lack of a proper attire offend you? I shall remember to find something more fetching the next time I am being sent to my death."

"You test my patience."

And when she folds her hands too, inadvertently drawing up the already short piece of clothing, causing it to skim up her thighs in a very distracting way, she tests much more than that.

Including his ability to keep his hands to himself.

She shifts uneasily in the bed.

"I take it this means I am not to be publicly executed anymore?"

He can tell she means for it to be sarcastic but her voice comes out small, betraying the uncertainty she's obviously still feeling and so he chooses to ignore her question and instead nods towards the glass beside her. "Drink that."

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She narrows her eyes at the murky green liquid. "May I ask why my lord?"

Honestly he would be suspicious too but he doesn't tell her that. "No. Drink it."

She makes to reach for the glass but draws back at the last minute "how do I know you haven't decided to poison me instead"

"Why would I do that?"

"Surely you don't think it's that farfetched an idea given how you tried to have me publicly executed only yesterday"

"Tell me; are all slaves in Averia this disrespectful to their king?"

“You are not my King.”

Her eyes gaze back at him in defiance.

Hate and fear he was used to. Throw in reverence and awe and you had all the ways people had ever seen him right from childhood but this...

...No one had ever dared to look at him like this.

And by all the gods it excited him as much as it annoyed him so much so that when he speaks again, he can't tell if it's anger or desire that lends the roughness to his tone.

“You're right; I'm not that lily livered ruler of yours. I am something much worse, and you would do well to remember that. Now Drink it.”

“Tell me what's in it”

When he scoffs and looks away she scowls. “You have no idea do you my lord? You expect me to get up and drink some suspicious vile looking thing when even you...”

A low growl comes from somewhere deep in his throat and his control snaps.

She doesn't get to finish the sentence.

In one long stride he walks up to the bed, pours the contents of the glass into his mouth and dragging her by the arm so she falls on top of him does the one thing he's been dying to do since the first time she opened her eyes.

The liquid has no taste of its own, which is just as well because when the tip of his tongue touches hers, and she lets out a small sound of satisfaction, she is all he can taste and it sets his blood on fire.

He tells himself he merely meant to make her take the damn medicine, but even when the liquid is gone, forced down her throat, he is unable to stop.

He can't even say if he wants to.

The silk softness of her lips against his drives him to the brink of his control and his mouth claims and devours, stroking her tongue with his and swallowing her moans of protest.

His hands have a mind of their own and when he runs them, splayed down her back, she arches it, pushing her chest with their stiffened peaks against him in a way that sends his head spinning with pure liquid desire.

Somehow, she's straddling him now and his fist is in that flaming orange hair, the full wildness of it spilling over and through his fingers. He wraps it around his hands and tugs sharply telling her exactly who is in control and when she gasps against his mouth...gods above, he instantly goes hard.

His fingers itch to feel the smoothness of her skin beneath his palm, to touch every inch of her till she is a trembling incoherent mass unaware of anything but the pleasure he gives her.

But just as his hands slip beneath the hem of her tunic to brush against the taut skin of the small of her back, she suddenly pulls away from him.

It's so unexpected the way one moment she's in his arms, clouding his thoughts and making it hard to think straight, and the next she's not, knocking him back to reality so instantly that he doesn't even react fast enough to stop her.

She stands a foot away, skin flushed and breathless from his kisses. Her lips are swollen and her hair is a mess.

Absolutely f*****g breathtaking.

He narrows his eyes at what he now knows is almost certainly a tunic belonging to a male who is not him and finds he does not like it. Not one bit.

"Take it off"

She shrinks away from him. "No."

"No?" He gets up steps towards her and as expected she steps back.

"I..."

He reaches behind her slowly, enjoying the way her breath quickens when he's near and takes a shirt from his own already open drawers to toss it at her.

"Calm yourself, it was a mere kiss and I have no desire to see you naked at the moment."

Good, now she was turning him into a liar as well.

"But you are my wife and it is unbecoming for you to be seen sporting a guard's tunic. Now take...it off."

Her tone is even drier than his but there's no mistaking the relief in her eyes. "I guess it's no use asking you to turn away?"

He doesn't think that deserves an answer so he gives her none and she in turn, turns her back to him

When she slips the ugly brown cloth over her head, leaving her completely undressed Midas meant to look away.

He truly did.

And not because he wanted to help her retain whatever ridiculous modesty she thought was necessary but because he didn't need any more images of her trespassing around in his head.

Yet when she does take it off, accidentally lifting up her transparent chemise in the process and for a split frozen moment revealing the skin underneath, he finds he is unable to look away.

And it isn't just the sensual way her back arches with the movement that makes him unable to tear his eyes from her.

She quickly puts on the new shirt but it's too late. He's seen them.

"Who did that to you?"

He did not intend for it to come out in the growly possessive way it did, but the tingly sensation that had started at his tips of his fingers is spreading to the rest of his body and without even knowing it, he closes his hands in fists.

She doesn't answer, doesn't even turn to look at him but he sees the way her body freezes and he knows she's heard him.

"Hera, when I ask a question I expect...no I demand an answer. Who gave you those scars?"

Her silence only serves to further infuriate him and he spins her around by the arm, forcing her to face him.

Tilting her chin upwards so she can look at him, he prepares to issue a final warning but the look of utter loathing in her luminescent blue eyes is so unexpected, that for one brief second Midas finds himself taken aback.

But it's her words that manage to send him reeling.

"You. You did this to me."

The Dragon King's Substitute Bride Chapter 9

HERA

I hadn't always been a slave but I had always been a fast learner.

It was how I had learnt to adjust when scarcely three days to my 16th Moon Harvest, my father after losing all we had to gambling debts, died of a heart attack.

When the creditors had come to seize everything we owned, forcing my mom, my siblings and I desperately clutching one another's hands to flee the capital with barely the clothes on our back.

After the rest of my family died in the Ryders' fire, it was what had taught me to keep my head down, to observe my surroundings, knowing when to run and when to kick and scrap my way on the streets of the same capital that had spat us out.

It was what made me learn to be light on my feet and quick with my fingers, stealing from stalls and carts so that my orphaned brother and I could have scraps to fill our bellies and a place to lay our heads.

And when a royal merchant caught me fist first with my hands in his purse and ordered me to be flogged and thrown in the goal, it was my quick thinking that had kept me out of a cell, cutting a deal and becoming a palace slave instead, scrubbing floors till my hands bleed.

Learning to bridle my sharp tongue and take every hurled insult and striking blow with nary a whispered word was the hardest of all my lessons but even that I learnt soon enough.

Which is why just one day in the dragon realm, half of which I had spent unconscious has already taught me a few very important things;

I would die before I let myself be thrown into the cellars of the 5th realm a second time.

The dragon King could hide his emotions with startling speed but if you were watching closely which I was not, the moment just before his face became a mask completely devoid of expression; his eyes always gave him away. Always

And absolutely under no circumstance could I ever let him kiss me like that again.

My body still hummed and buzzed with the madness of it all.

The way his mouth and tongue took with reckless abandon made me feel craved, desired....breathless with need.

I had placed my palms on the hard planes of his chest, painfully aware of the alluring firmness of him below my fingertips, and fully intending to push away from him

Then his hands were...everywhere.

Firmly and confidently fraying the edges of my control until my bones became liquid beneath the urgency of his touch and all I could do was moan against him.

It was too much and not enough at the same time.

And when for a few dizzying moments, the evidence of his desire pressed against my center, everything else faded.

Melting away in the heat of my need till there was only him and it is the realization of this one thing that snaps me to my senses and brings me my fourth lesson.

In that moment I wanted Midas.

I had wanted the man responsible for all the hurt in my life.

More than anything I had ever longed for before then.

It was a craving from somewhere deep inside me and it was unforgivable.

It could never ever happen again.

That is why even now, as he stares at me, hands that had just moment ago made me come so dangerously close to forgetting, gripping my arms and holding me in place; I force myself to remember every single reason why I hate him until resentment pushes every other thing to the background.

I didn't want anyone to see them; The marks on my back.

Least of all him.

But the angry, possessive way he asks the question, voice like bottled thunder as if he isn't ultimately the reason for their existence, makes me boil with rage and lends venom to my voice.

"You...you did this to me"

His face is a blank slate of deliberate disinterest now but seconds ago I had seen the confusion that had clouded his hypnotic nectar-gold eyes and it filled me with a perverse sense of satisfaction.

He lets me go. "You're lying. You know very well what I do to people who lie to me."

I do. The freshly tended cuts on my feet are more than enough proof but I press my lips together and say nothing more.

Tears sting my eyes, threatening to fall and I furiously blink them away.

The scars across my back are from a memory I still fight so desperately to forget and if I had to talk about it to him of all people, I don't think I could bear it.

And just when I begin to fear I can't hold it in anymore, someone knocks soundly on the door.

I could kiss them.

He turns his head towards it and I angrily wipe at the wetness on my cheeks with the heel of my hand.

"My Lord, there is an urgent matter requiring your attention in the throne room."

Midas frowns slightly, returning his gaze back to me. "Can it not wait Chief Ryder?"

"I'm afraid not your grace, the dispute is getting out of hand and the two clans are moments away from taking up arms against one another."

He swears quietly under his breath

Please go.

He looks at me for a second longer before walking out of the room without so much as a backwards glance leaving me with my clenched fists.

My lips still tingled and my blood still boiled.

Two completely different feelings that resulted in nothing short of a messy soup of confusion and a pounding headache all thanks to one person.

I collapse on the bed with a sigh, truly alone for the first time since I was brought here.

My relief however, is short lived and I've scarcely begun to calm my erratic pulse when the doors swing open and Midas appears once more.

I fight the urge to scream into my pillow.

But he doesn't spare me more than a fleeting glance as if to make sure I'm still here before beginning to undo the strings of his shirt.

Look away Hera I tell my stubborn brain but a tiny part of me isn't interested in doing so and when he takes it up and over his head in one fluid motion, his wavy winter hair falls in tangled, frizzled waves and my mouth goes dry.

Skies above.

I have no idea what the gods were thinking when they made him but they must have been in a very...very good mood.

He is an absolute beast of a man carved entirely out of stone with weathered tan skin peppered with battle scars and pulled taut over bulging muscles positively begging to be touched.

Not just with my fingers.

And when my roaming eyes follow the smoothness of his chest to the tapered V of his waist disappearing somewhere below the folds of his trousers, a dull throbbing begins in parts of me I didn't even know could ache.

Oh for crying out loud get a grip Hera, you are practically drooling.

I don't realize to what degree I'm ogling him till he catches my gaze and folds his arms, sending the muscles bunching up and rippling in protest.

If he means to discourage my staring at him he is choosing the worst possible way.

"So you are permitted to watch me undress but when the table turns I am to look away?"

Luckily, I'm saved from having to chase after my thoughts and come up with any kind of sensible, coherent response by a page boy who comes running in with the King's garments folded in his arms.

Something sharp and acute slices through the region of my heart and I look away.

Images of my brother, light brown hair of the exact same shade flashes in my mind's eyes.

I wonder what they told him, when he woke up that morning without me by his side. I wonder if they kept their promise.

His voice cuts through the grey fog of my gloomy musings. "I am leaving the palace to settle matters concerning the realm. A maid will be here to tend to your needs."

My snaps up to face him. I couldn't have cared less about the maid. The only needs I have is to get out of here and all I hear is that he hopefully will be gone for the rest of the day.

"Under no condition are you to leave this room before I return."

"No...condition?"

He sighs and stares at me. "I would think my words were clear enough."

"What if there were to be a fire?"

"That would be quite unfortunate but rest assured your charred remains would be well taken care of"

Heartless bastard.

Irrespective of what he says, he will be far from the palace ground for the rest of the day.

It is more than enough time.

He must see the hope shinning in my eyes because he frowns. "But because I know you are already thinking about disobeying me..."

"I am not!"

The false indignation in my voice does not deter him.

"...a guard will be stationed outside your room to ensure you don't."

I turn to scowl at him.

I expected him to be dressed in his amour with the terrifying horned helmet that hides his face and turns him into the stuff of nightmare but he isn't.

The glistening silver metal plates on his shoulders and short bands around his wrist of the same material are the only protection in sight.

That and the two heavy obsidian swords with their bejeweled hilts strapped to his back.

He is every inch the embodiment of a warrior.

A dark, handsome warrior as terrifying as he is magnificent.

He crosses the room and throws apart the heavy red drapes with their vivid tapestry of bright shimmering colors.

Bathing the slate gray walls and everything in the vast royal chambers in dazzling bright sunlight.

I instantly feel less imprisoned.

He strides across the room again, my eyes following his every step as he opens the door. "I shall be back by nightfall and upon my return you will be introduced to the rest of the palace."

"As what?"

He pauses and I silently curse my inability to keep my thoughts in my head.

Then without bothering to answer he stalks out of the room, slamming the doors hard in his wake and I can still hear the echoes long after he's gone.

The Dragon King's Substitute Bride Chapter 10

MIDAS

She is the most maddening, exasperating creature he has ever had the misfortune of crossing paths with.

And yet, half the time he is unsure if he simple wishes to push her up against a wall, with her legs wrapped around him and kiss her senseless or have her sent to the gallows and hung for her disrespect.

He strides through the halls of the palace, almost but not quite oblivious of the heads bowing in his path.

What in all the realms had she meant?

The image returns to him with startling clarity. The crisscross of faded pink lines stark against her pale skin and a seething anger snakes its way around him.

Only a monster would do something that cruel to someone so...so...defenseless.

A monster like him

Damn it, why did it even bother him so much that she thought him in some way responsible for whatever... whoever had caused it?

He who had her sent to the cellars barely hours ago.

And yet, the sight of her scars had filled him with the need to tear apart the person responsible for inflicting them on her.

The sun is a glittering eye of luminous gold in the vast cloudless sky of the dragon realm that remains a pallid grey color even with the breeze bringing in the smells of golden wheat fields and late summer apples.

Leo appears at his side as he steps out of the palace, seamlessly falling in step with him as his feet cover the transition from smooth stone to rough uncut rocks.

“Speak”

“The Clan of Rardath claim there has been deliberate provocations from Adarin’s men months in the making.”

He stalks towards the waiting horses. “And Adarin’s men?”

“Deny any such acts being directed at their neighbors and feel that Rardath’s attempts at retaliation are not only misplaced but go beyond the bounds of what is acceptable and will no longer be tolerated.”

Midas stops and turns to look at his Chief Ryder, one brow arching in question. “Why was I not informed of this earlier?”

“The clans initially thought to settle their squabbles among themselves my Lord”

“And now?”

Leo’s voice is a calm, monotone delivering facts with no bias. “Now Adarin’s son has been hurt in a recent skirmish and his father is beside himself with anger.”

Midas tilts his head slightly in silent contemplation before taking the reins of his stead from the waiting servants.

Relations between the dragon clans of Adarin and Rardath have always been tense.

The results of a feud hundreds of years in the making.

But acts of aggression from either side given how closely situated they were to one another was not only strange, it could not be tolerated.

And now someone had been hurt.

Both men had been leaders during the time of his father and despite the many years of his own rule as dragon King, with him no longer ageing and his appearance remaining that of a young man maybe they still thought him too young to handle matters with origins preceding his birth.

It seems he would have to ride out and remind both clan leaders of exactly who decided what would be tolerated or not.

The deep ebony Andalusian brays when he mounts it, swishing its thick neck and kicking up dirt with its hooves.

The horse had been a favorite of his father and now, it was simply a reminder of what he had lost.

He finds himself looking up, somehow knowing she's watching him even before he sees her.

Hair blowing in the wind and framed by the window like a portrait of a Fairy queen captured in mid motion.

He can't see her expression, not from this far away but he doesn't need to.

He flicks the reins and the horse turns away beginning a brisk canter towards the gates and as he rides out, descending the steep rocky hills on which the dragon castle sits, his mind completes the image for him.

Her glacial blue eyes awash with defiance as real as the rocky path ahead of him.

And he knows....just knows she's going to do something stupid.

What he can't decide is if the rush in his blood is from the adrenaline pumping through his veins as he drives the horse hard, tearing through rolling vistas in a blur with Leo following closely behind

Or if it's her.

And even though he doesn't know it, one side of his lip curls up in cruel anticipation of the challenge.

Adarin and Rardath are clans of herders and breeders and are both located far beyond the city walls.

This journey is not one he intended to take today and it irritates him to no end.

He decides not to pass through the heart of the city. While it is the shorter route, it would doubtlessly require him to slow down and he did not wish to do so.

He had a lot of....frustration to ride out.

So instead he banks a hard right and sends his stead galloping towards the wooded darkness of the Elder forest.

The serenity of the forest is interrupted by the pounding hooves, sending bird squawking loudly above the trees that towered like sentinels with their rich brown barks and broad wide leaves blocking out the sunlight so everything below is shrouded in a sort of semi darkness.

If his travelling companion finds it strange that the King has chosen the most unsafe route he makes no indication of it.

His body is wound up like a tight coil and he welcomes the danger, wishes someone or something would dare attack him.

But it would not be enough, he knows that.

Not with the way wanting her had snuck under his skin and sank its claws so deep in him, his bones fairly ached with lust and his mind burned with something bordering on the edge of curiosity but not quite reaching it.

What had her life been like before now?

He's not worried about Leo as he races through the trees at neck breaking speed. His chief Ryder would keep up; he was the only one who could.

The landscape changes suddenly and the sun is high in the sky as they break through the trees, bearing down on them with a fierce, unforgiving heat and although it is still a quite a number of paces of hard riding, he can see the smoke rising from the settlements of the closer of the two clans.

That they had allowed this disagreement, whatever the reason, fester to the point of violence right under his nose was a slight Midas would not....could not allow to go unchecked and as he flicks the reins of the horse sending t he Andalusian races across the rolling fields, he pushes Hera with her supple skin and intoxicating lips with great difficulty to the back of his mind.

Where she sits, waiting to sneak back in the minute he lets down his guard.

The leaders of both clans sit stiffly on their horses beside each other with their men behind them.

The meeting point is a few miles north of the Rardath encampments of fire pits and tents made from deer skin.

As he nears they dismount, bowing low before he even arrives.

Midas pulls hard and sharp on the reins of his horse, causing the animal to stop suddenly.

Its front legs raised high in the air and inadvertently kicking sand into the faces of the bowing men.

"Dragon King" Both men chorus in unison.

He says nothing in response, and even when Leo dismounts, coming to stand to his right he remains on his horse staring coldly at the two men bent over at the waist.

Sensing his displeasure from the continued silence, the leader of Rardath speaks first. "We meant to tell you earlier my Lord"

"But, you had trouble recollecting the way to the palace?"

"We did not feel it necessary to inconvenience or displease his majesty with what were merely lies being peddled by Rardath's men"

"And yet Adarin here we are. I am the exact opposite of convenience and the very image of displeased."

Neither man dares to raise their head.

He dismounts with the lithe gracefulness of a man half his size. "You both may rise. Now what is this I hear about taking up arms?"

The two men begin speaking at the same time, each proclaiming the other a liar and raising their voices in a competition to be heard.

Words like gollumpus and addle pate flying around from men who looked old enough to be his Father.

It would have been amusing if he wasn't already in a foul mood.

He raises a fist and they both fall silent immediately. "Rardath"

The shorter hard bred man huffs beneath his fur clothes, beads of sweat running down his thickly corded neck.

"Adarin's men started it my lord..."

Gods was he addressing children or grown men?

"...they encroached on our fields, forcing us to find other places for our animals to graze, they stained our sheep with dye and made their wool useless, put wormwood in our wells and make the water too bitter to drink and when we would not rise to such childish provocations, they began to steal our sheep and slaughter our horses."

"We did not!"

Rardath whirls on the paunchy man towering over him who is shaking with so much rage, whatever small skin visible beneath his beard is beetroot red. "If you didn't then who did? We are the only ones for miles in either direction! "

"How in all the realms should I know? And you, claiming to be so high and mighty yet you and your gang of ruffians do the exact same things to us"

"Lies! " Rardath spat, rising to the tip of his toes in an attempt to stare down the other man.

Any more leaping... Midas thought and he'll be straight up flying

Adarin stuck his pudgy finger in the man's face. "For all we know, you did it to yourselves. Now you go around setting traps in land that don't belong to you and now my son lies in bed missing three fingers!"

"Be grateful he still has his hands"

"Why you..."

He has heard enough. "Leo"

The chief Ryder steps forward, hand on his sword. "His majesty wishes me to inform you that the next man who speaks will have neither hand nor fingers to be grateful for and can worry about his dyed sheep from behind the dungeons bars."

They do not speak again.

He frowns. Both men firmly believed the other to be behind their troubles and yet neither one agrees to accept responsibility.

It was moving beyond strange and into suspicious and Midas meant to get to the root of it.

Just not today

"Have your men stand watch at the border between your two camps, no one crosses without express knowledge of the other."

He mounts his horse. "I shall have Ryders sent out to join them and bring me daily reports. In the mean time there will be no more acts of violence from either party"

Both men bow low in agreement.

He turned his horse around. "Oh and Rardath, no more steel traps. The people of my kingdom are meant to have five fingers not two."

Midas rides back home at a slower pace than he left; the formerly high sun beginning a slow descent.

His head is full of the matter between the two clans and mercifully it stops him from thinking about her.

It's getting late and he decides to cut through the capital.

Dragon King or not, riding through the Elder forest at night would be unwise.

Days later, he will ask himself how he knew something was wrong before he even saw the Ryder, galloping towards him from the direction of the castle.

“What do you mean she’s gone?”

He isn’t shouting but the steely coldness in his voice is much worse.

“She went out through the abandoned servants’ door beneath the east tower.”

“And?”

The Ryder trembles before him. “We have scoured the entire city my King. She is not here.”

He struggles to keep his voice level, to stop himself from incinerating the guard where he kneels.
“Well search harder. She couldn’t have gotten far.”

The Ryder raises his head and in a quiet voice says. “A little boy says he saw her on the outskirts of town... running towards the Elder Forest.”

No. Damn it No.

“How do you know it was her?”

“The boy said she had hair the colour of fire...”

Midas doesn’t wait for the Ryder to finish before yanking the horse hard, turning back and racing towards the dark woods.

He would deal with them later.

He isn’t worried that he won’t find her; he knows he will and when he does...

Heavens help them all.