

The Dragon King's Substitute Bride Chapter 61

HERA

I hum quietly to myself.

It is something I do when I need to act or at least attempt to convince myself that everything is normal, that my heart is not pounding and my hands are not shaking.

I mean, would I be humming if I was absolutely terrified about trying desperately to break out of my room for a second time in such a short while?

Of course not.

It had initially started as a song but it has since dissolved into some meaningless tune I do not recognize.

But I keep humming it, because meaningless or not, it is helping me calm my nerves and focus my hands.

If somehow he could see me now, he would not see a terrified, human girl, cowering in the corner and waiting for him to appear.

I am cool, collected and most definitely, not scared witless.

Although, if in fact he can see me, I would be in big trouble and feigning calmness would be the least of my worries.

When you live on the harsh, unforgiving streets of Averia's capital, waking up in the morning, cold and filthy and having no idea if you will even get a chance to eat anything for the rest of the day, you tend to pick up a few, less than savory skills.

And if your first meal in two days is sitting behind a locked door, you learnt very quickly that the lack of keys was merely a pesky inconvenience, a blip in your quest for survival and that every locked door, can be pried open.

I have never been good at picking locks.

Somehow it was like the doors could sense my hesitation and fear and would refuse to open to me.

My brother on the other hand, barely even nine at the time, had been a natural.

There were no doors beyond the mastery of my younger brother's little hands and sometimes, the other people who shared our wonderful gift of homelessness would give him measly sums to pick open doors and pry apart stolen money chests.

He had tried to teach me but I seemed doomed to be unable to learn it properly and on the few times I did manage to get one open, it took so long that we were almost caught.

I hum my meaningless tune a little louder.

Today would have to be the day I finally learned to do it right.

I have no choice.

If I could figure out how to open the door, then it did not matter if he came to me and let me out or not.

He would think he was keeping me here, locked up and at his mercy but I would be able to do as I pleased without needing to reveal anything.

When midnight comes around and the castle has fallen asleep, I intend to sneak out.

Even though I have only been there once, I know where his study is, and assuming he does not sleep sitting up at his desk, I plan on getting inside.

All those books and documents and scrolls; there has to be something in there.

Something that can give me the answers I seek.

Something that can aid me in my quest to destroy the dragon king for good.

I am not afraid of running into him.

Not really.

Minth had made it painfully clear how she and the king spent their nights.

Tiring each other out.

I find myself scowling without even realizing it and I quickly force my face to go back to normal.

She can have him for all I care.

Besides, I have wasted too much time.

Time I could have used to uncover information was spent doubting myself, wondering if perhaps I was wrong about him.

Time spent in his arms, kissing him, touching him and...and...

Skies above...stop it Hera!

Has today not proven what I have already always known?

There should no longer be any doubts in my mind.

The dragon king is a man who cares only for himself and his kind.

Some human slave like me means nothing to him but an unnecessary inconvenience he has to deal with.

Besides I owe it to my people, to my family to make them pay for what they did to us.

If I keep that in mind, I shall be able to push away any inappropriate thoughts about him from my mind.

I am certain of it.

Absolutely certain.

Certain beyond a shadow of doubt.

I have spent quite some time, hunched over and squatting by the door knob but now my knees and back are starting to hurt.

The lock is hard and my hands are shaky and sweaty.

Oh and as I mentioned earlier, I am quite terrible at this.

It does not help my situation that the tools available at my disposal are not exactly making things any easier.

Back home, we used pick lock keys.

Pick lock keys were skeleton keys that could fit into locks and essentially trick the door into opening.

We had been lucky to find one abandoned in one of the numerous sheds that served as our home but before that, we would use any two pieces of thin bendable iron.

And considering how the dragon king has not been considerate enough to leave a set of pick lock keys lying around somewhere in my room...I checked...I have had to resort a more tedious means.

I had emptied the contents of my surprisingly large jewel box, upending the thing and dumping its innards quite unceremoniously unto the table.

A longer than necessary search through sapphires and necklaces of gold and shiny emeralds, had finally given me what I was looking for.

Hair pins.

They were hard to bend and even harder to work with but they would have to do.

There is sweat running down my back and dripping into my eyes making them sting and burn.

But I am not about to give up. To let him win.

That is, until I hear a key fitting into the lock on the other side.

My heart nearly stops.

I had been so absorbed in my nefarious task that I did not even hear the footsteps of whoever was now seconds away from opening the door and catching me red handed.

I dash across the room.

But it isn't until I am sitting in my bed, panting and sweating, while trying to pretend to stare out my window, that I realize that my jewelry and everything is still poured out, scattered all over the table like someone had tried to rob me.

But even worse...

Oh dear Zeus...

Even worse, is the bent hair pin, my make shift lock pick, lying smack down in the center of room for all to see.

One glance at it and anyone would know exactly what I have been up to.

I do not believe I have ever made to fly across a room so fast in my life.

Just as well because the door the opens at the exact same moment.

And all would have been fine if my leg had not gotten tangled up in the sheets, causing me to fall face first towards the floor, arms outstretched, one leg hanging off the bed.

Skies, what a ridiculous sight I must make.

"Your highness! Are you okay?!"

I right myself quickly, my cheeks burning with shame but then I see who it is and I temporarily forget my embarrassment.

A smile breaks out on my face and I let out a sigh of relief.

"Oh thank the gods Henette. You have no idea how glad I am to see you."

She carries in the tray of food and places it on the table beside my bed not saying a single word.

I frown. "Henette? Is something wrong?"

She ignores me and does not look me in the eye.

“Henette...”

But the only thing I get in response is a curtsy and then she immediately turns towards the door.

I reach for her, grabbing her by the arm. “Henette...please talk to me. Are you mad at me, have I done something wrong?”

She turns around and pulls gently away.

“Henette why won’t you speak to me?”

Her eyes finally meet mine, big and wide and sadder than usual. She opens her mouth but before she can anything, the chief Ryder steps in behind her.

“She is not allowed to speak to you.”

I scowl at him, resisting the urge to glance at the evidence of my crimes still lying on the floor.

In the few weeks I have spent in the dragon castle, apart from Henette, Leo is the only one I do not hate quite so much.

He can be annoying and sarcastic and amazingly tight lipped when it comes to anything involving the king but somehow, in his own way, he has tried to make me feel less like a captive.

But not right now.

I see him and I automatically think about Midas and I do not want to be thinking about Midas.

“Poppycock. What do you mean she isn’t allowed to speak to me? Henette...”

“You may leave now Henette.” He says, cutting me off.

And I watch my only friend turn her back on me and leave without another word.

Another thing he has taken away from me.

Leo bows. “Your highness.”

“How dare you order my maid around?”

I pretend to stalk up to him but stop in the middle of the room, my feet planted firmly on the lock pick I had accidentally dropped.

It is a miracle he has not seen yet.

As always his gaze sweeps across the room and then he frowns. “Why is all your jewelry poured out in that manner?”

Skies, nothing got past this man.

I swallow and fold my arms across my chest, taking care to keep my face neutral and annoyed. "It is none of your business. And why are you allowed to speak to me if she can't?"

"Because the king knows you will not be able to convince me to help you escape."

I scoff. "How wise of him."

His eyes finally come to rest on me, slowly raking up my body before meeting my eyes and once again, it feels almost like he is capable of seeing through me.

I resist the urge to look away guiltily. "What do you want Chief Ryder?"

"The King has sent me to ask if you are ready to tell him the truth."

"I have told him the truth."

"He knew you would say that. As a result, has also asked me to issue one final warning."

I tilt up my chin and glare at him. "You tell your king that he can keep his warnings to himself. I have nothing more to say to him."

"Do you perhaps wish to rephrase that?"

"No."

Leo sighs. "As you wish. I shall deliver your message."

He bows one more time and turns towards the door.

He reaches for the door knob and then he stops. His hand hovering mid air.

My mouth instantly goes dry.

He does not turn to look at me but he tilts his head slightly as if considering something.

I can feel myself starting to sweat again. "Is...is something wrong Chief Ryder?"

His answer comes, much too slow for comfort. "No. Nothing at all your grace."

Then he pulls open the door only to stop again.

I almost groan in frustration.

He turns to look at me. "Eat your food Hera and for Hades sake, stop fighting him. You are making him miserable."

And then he slams the door in my face.

I am so shocked by his last words that I do not even realize that this is the first time he has ever called me by my name.

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HERA

Miserable?

I stand staring at the closed door, my mouth gaping up and closed like some sort of fish out of water.

He locks me up, tells my only friend not to speak to me and yet I am the one making him miserable?

Where in all the realms does he get off saying that?

How is he miserable when I'm the one who is locked up in a tower like some sort of captive princess from a fairy story?

I walk slowly to my bed, sitting down on it because suddenly I feel very tired.

All thoughts of hunger however, are driven completely from my mind as I play those words over and over again.

Is it possible that he is not doing all of this simply because he can?

That locking me up here is hurting him almost as much as it is me.

"No..No..." I shake the thought away before it can take hold, squashing the tiny flame of hope trying to flare up in my chest.

I tell myself not to think too much about it, not to read any silly meanings into Leo's words.

For all I know this is all part of his plan to get me to talk and he has merely asked his chief Ryder to say those words in order to try and guilt trip me into giving in.

Just like sleeping with me had all been part of a plan too.

Well, fool me once dragon king...

But still, my heart is stubborn and she refuses to let go.

Choosing instead to plague me with doubts and what ifs.

Stirring the fireplace of my mind and fanning the flames of hope until they flickered and spluttered into life.

He had mentioned warnings from the kingmakers; those three wrinkled men who made the hairs of my neck stand on end with their gravelly voice and unseeing eyes.

What if he is only doing this because he really does feel like I might be planning and hiding something that would have devastating consequences on his realm?

If that is the case, he would be right.

But not for the reason he thinks.

I groan loudly, falling backwards on my bed, arms spread out by my sides.

Gods above, why is this so hard?

Hating him, plotting my revenge against him and his people...it all suddenly seems so much harder than it was before I first step foot in this castle.

But even as I ask the question, I know the answer.

Everything would have been so much easier, if he had never come to take me out of that cellar, if he had not saved me more times than I could count, if we had never touched.

Something has changed and I do not even know what it is.

And a part of me, the part that feels guilty for not... hating him enough, wishes it would just go away.

So I can do what I need to do without all this confusing thoughts.

But the other part of me.

The part that stirs when he looks at me, the part that likes the sound of his laugh and the low possessive growl he makes deep in his throat moments before he kisses me, the part that had fluttered and filled with warmth when he told me he would always come for me.

That part wants to explore what this 'something' might be.

The heights to which it could take us.

Because somehow it just knows that as terrifying as this attraction between us is, it could also easily be the most incredible thing that has ever as happened to me.

But then his words from this afternoon come back to me like a cold steel knife, slicing and searing through my chest.

“And if I said yes?”

He could not even be bothered to look me in the eyes even as he admitted that all that has happened between us was nothing more than a plan to get me to trust him so I would reveal all my secrets to him.

I scoff but its filled more with hurt than anything else.

It may have meant the world to me, may have set my blood burning with a need and desire I did not even know was possible, but to him...to him it had been nothing more than a means to an end.

Just thinking about it is painful.

So I stop.

It is high time I focused all my attention on the one thing that had brought me into his realm in the first place; finding out his weakness.

I eat quickly, barely even tasting the food in my mouth.

Shoveling one spoonful after the other, merely going through the motions of satisfying my grumbling stomach.

Distracted, I end up biting my tongue, so hard that tears spring to my eyes even as the metallic taste of blood coats my tongue.

I tell myself that is why I am crying.

That is has nothing to do with him.

For some reason believing this, accepting that I mean nothing to him is hard to do.

Because for all it's worth I had seen the way he looked at me.

At breakfast...as we walked down the capital's cobbled streets...when I kissed him...

My mother used to tell me that I was much too trusting.

Always ready to believe the best about people.

Well, this just goes to show just how completely foolish I am.

I will not make the same mistake again.

I can hardly sit still.

It feels like forever, waiting for the midnight bell so I can go back to working on the lock.

My legs keep bouncing on the floor even as I chew on my bottom lip nervously.

I have changed my clothes into one of my night dresses, a short skimpy red thing which in all honesty is hardly appropriate for sneaking around the castle at night.

But I doubt there is any attire appropriate enough for that.

The bells finally ring out for the twelfth time that night and I exhale quietly, my ears perked up, listening.

The castle feels dead, utterly silent and a peak through my heavy drapes reveal that all the lights outside the castle are out.

I knock on my door, calling out gently.

No one answers.

Maybe the gods are finally on my side once again.

It takes me a lot of whispered swearing and not so silent curses but finally I hear the quiet click I have been working so hard for.

I decide that it is my new favorite sound.

Then I think about the way he says my name.

Fine...second favorite.

I wipe my sweaty palm against my thighs and with one last shaky breath, pull the doors open.

There is no one in sight.

The hallway is empty, dark and I have to carry a small candle holder in one hand even as I creep bare foot down the stairs of my tower.

The candle casts a ghostly pale orange circle of light but the moon is full and shining quiet brightly.

So much so that I almost do not even need the candle to see where to place my feet.

But I hold onto it tightly anyway.

The stones are cold beneath my feet as I creep through the passage that links my tower to the rest of the castle.

I try to choose what I hope is the shortest route to his study but in the darkness of the night, all the turns and passages are starting to look the same.

Skies...

what if I ended up getting lost and spending the entire night wandering the castle grounds aimlessly like some sort of vengeful spirit?

The route I have chosen takes me past a small open courtyard to my left that leads out into a little in garden.

But just as I pass by it, a gust of wind blows, stirring my hair and extinguishing my light.

Plunging me into semi-darkness and instant confusion.

I resist the urge to panic even as a tiny squeal leaves my mouth.

Suddenly the quiet emptiness is starting to feel more sinister than it was moments ago.

The silence malevolent, crushing.

Its okay Hera...stay calm...

There is bound to be some sort of match box lying around in his study.

I force myself to exhale.

“You just need to get there first and you’ll be completely...”

“Need to get where first?”

I think it is fair to say that my soul quite nearly leaves my body.

I throw my candle holder in the air, ready to scream bloody murder but then long fingers clamp over my mouth and another arm wraps around my middle, pulling my against a large and warm solid wall of pure muscle.

He leans in, his breath against my ear a far contrast to the chilly wind blowing in from the garden to my left and it sends goose bumps running down my arms.

“I do not think screaming is a good idea. Unless of course you’re looking to get caught.”

I recognize the voice and my blood runs cold.

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HERA

Oh skies...dear Zeus.

I am so absolutely screwed.

I swallow and mumble against the hand pressed over my mouth.

“mmmlet mmeee gomm”

“I am sorry your highness, you’re going to need to speak up.”

I roll my eyes at the obvious jest in his voice and repeat myself again, the words merging together incoherently.

But he gets the message, although I suspect he got it well enough the first time around

“If I let go, do you promise you not to scream?”

I bristle.

Of course I bloody well will not but considering the hand slapped over my mouth and the precarious position I seem to have found myself, I simply nod.

He holds me for a second longer than he needs to and then, he lets me go.

I whirl around to glare at him, my head spinning so fast, I nearly hurt my neck.

Of all the blasted luck

I keep expecting him to throw me over his shoulder and lock me up again but he simply stands there with his hands folded, staring at me.

He looks completely at ease, amused even, that is until his eyes take in my bare feet and how little I am wearing and I can swear I see him swallow gently, his eyes darkening by just the tiniest of bits.

We are standing ridiculously close, his eyes a cool steel sliver in the semi-darkness of the night.

He backs away from me.

One step, then another.

“Your highness.”

I sigh. “Look Leo, this is not what it looks like.”

This brings the amusement right back into his features.

“So you are not, at this moment standing outside of your room with a door that I myself made sure was locked?”

“Okay maybe it is what it looks like. But I swear I was not trying to escape...far. Night walks clear my head.”

His eyes drop. “Barefoot?”

I wiggle my toes self consciously.

“Brings me closer to nature.”

He laughs and I frown.

“Wait... you do not seem angry or even surprised. Are you not going to ask me how I got out?”

He shrugs and turns away, stepping out of the passage and towards the small courtyard garden.

“I saw the scratches on your door knob.”

“What?”

I nearly trip over myself, my mouth hanging open in astonishment.

He glances at me over his shoulder. “You are a terrible lock pick by the way.”

I hurry to catch up to him, dark wet soil getting in between my toes and staining my feet before I step unto the smooth terracotta path leading between well kept hedges of roses and marigold and small rounded trees, their leaves dark green in the wane light of the moon.

“You knew?”

“I did.”

The air smells crisp, sweet and it would have been enjoyable if the situation were completely different.

I bite my lip, chew on it.

“Why?”

“Why what your grace?”

“Why did you not stop me? Why did you let me escape? Why did you not tell him?”

I am unable to stop looking at him, my voice thick with disbelief, eyes narrow with suspicion.

What absurd, cruel plan have they come up with now?

“So many questions your grace, I am unsure which you wish for me to answer first.”

And with that wise crack, he turns left, leaving me to glare at his back as he steps off the path and disappears between two tall trees.

I follow him and end up in a small enclave I have not seen before and I momentarily forget my interrogations

and the fact that I have just been caught breaking out of my room.

A grove of trees form a sort of round wall, their branches and leaves extending overhead in a dark canopy of green vegetation, leaving an almost perfect circular patch of midnight sky through which the moon shines brightly.

And in the centre of the space is a large marble fountain, glowing a pale, ghostly white.

It is the statue of a woman holding a large jar from which cascades an endless stream of water.

At least I think it is water but considering how it is such a vibrant shade of sparkling blue, I would not be surprised if it is not really water at all.

The chief Ryder is standing in front of the fountain. His hands clasped behind his back.

He does not look at me when I come to stand beside him.

“I do not want to speak to you Leo.”

“Why not?”

“Because I know you’ll go right to him and tell him everything I say.”

“I won’t”

I glance up at him, surprised. “You won’t?”

He finally turns to look at me, his eyes meeting mine...holding. “I won’t.”

He turns away a second too late.

“Except of course you are planning to harm him in which case I would have to kill you first myself.”

I scowl at him. “You must think yourself insanely hilarious”

He grins, an unexpected action that softens the hard planes of his face. “I do actually.”

I shake my head and turn away to hide the smile on my face.

I sit on the lip of the fountain bowl. The liquid in it is so clear, that I can see all the pink and grey pebbles littered all over the bottom.

I run my hands through it and sigh.

It feels like water, cool and calming between my fingers.

Leo watches me quietly.

“You are exhausted”

A statement, not a question.

I shrug. “You can thank your king for that.”

“Hera...”

I do not care for the warning in his voice and I tell him as much.

“He is not asleep you know.”

“What?”

“The king. I tried to convince him to go to bed, but he refuses, says he is unable to.”

“There is this saying we have in Averia. There is no rest for the wicked.”

The way he stiffens and his eyes flash tell me I may have gone a little too far but I do not care.

“He locked me up Leo. You will forgive me if I am not exactly willing to feel sympathetic at the moment.”

“Did you leave him any choice?”

I glance away, ignoring the prick in my chest.

He sighs, so quietly that I barely even catch it. “He does not enjoy doing this to you.”

“Did he ask you to say that?”

“No.”

“Then why do you speak for him?”

“Because he is much too stubborn to admit it and you are too stubborn to listen.”

I look away, chewing on my bottom lip, hating the way his words are able to so easily weaken my resolve.

“Your grace...” He reaches out and turns my face back towards him with the tip of his finger.

“If the only people you ever learned to love let something in your care, something they would have given their lives for.

If that something was all you had left of them, are there any lengths you would not go to care for it?”

“No...” My voice is tiny, a whisper in the darkness.

But he hears it.

“And if you thought something or someone might be a threat to it, how would you protect it?”

My eyes drop and the answer leaves my lips before I can stop it. “With my life.”

“Then surely you understand.’

I raise my head, meet his gaze. “What he asks of me is hard Leo. He asks me to bring up memories I have fought so hard to forget about.”

My voice cracks and Leo leans in, closing the distance between us by another inch.

“Locking you up in that room was much harder for him and you may not understand it yet but whatever pain it is that you are feeling... he feels it too.”

“How would you know that?”

His eyes roam my face and for the first time I notice that the grey of his eyes have flecks of blue in them.

“Heck I am not your tether but even I can feel it...”

Then his voice falls an octave lower, his gaze dropping from my eyes to my mouth and then back up again

“...He’d have to be blind not to.”

“What is a tether?”

He seems to suddenly realize how close we are because he backs away.

“If he is yet to tell you, then. it is not my place.”

I sniff and stare at him. “You say he is in his study?”

“Yes.”

I nod and take his offered hand, stepping down unto the cool floor.

And with one last nod, I turn away, heading through the trees and back the way I came.

The door to his study flies open before I can even raise my hand to knock.

He is standing there, chest heaving, looking at me like he wants to hold me and shake me all at the same time.

“Hera...”

“Midas...”

He opens his mouth but I beat him to it.

“You were right.”

He says nothing, almost like he knows how badly I need to speak before I lose whatever courage I have managed to muster.

“I can’t...I am not....arrgh...”

The words refuse to come, preferring instead to clog up my throat until it hurts to breathe.

I groan, clenching my suddenly sweaty hands in fists, wiping them on my bare thighs.

He reaches for me, whispering my name but I back away from him, stepping out of his reach.

“You know how you said that we humans are all the same. Always ready to blame someone else for our misfortunes, never willingly to see our role in it.”

He does not need to say anything. His eyes tell me he remembers.

I sigh. “Well you were right. And the reason I could not tell you about why I was in that alley is because...”

I blink rapidly, my eyes brimming with tears that threaten to spill over.

But if I start crying, I will never be able to get through this.

So I fight it. Fight the tightening in my chest. Fight the crack in my voice.

“The reason I could not tell you how I knew what was going on in that alley is because it would mean admitting that I sometimes see things before they happen.”

I exhale, gasping “...And if that is true then your Ryders may have been the ones who burnt down my village...but I...I....”

My vision blurs and the tears win, rolling down my cheeks to drop at my feet.

Tiny wet spots on the stone floor between us.

I raise my head, meet his eyes through the haze of my tears.

“I may not have struck the match that started the fire but I was the one who really killed them. Because I saw it, I saw it happen in my dreams and I could have warned them, could have saved them but instead...instead I ran...”

I ran away, and I let them die.”

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MIDAS

"She is trying to pick her lock"

"She is what?"

His opponent senses his distraction and ducks out of reach of his sword but Midas strikes out in a blur of motion sweeping the Ryder's feet from under him and sending the dragonkin man collapsing to the floor in a haze of dust.

Midas barely glances at him.

Red from exertion and nearly drowning in his own sweat, the man is Midas' best swordsman, but even then, no one but his chief Ryder could ever attempt to keep up with him.

Especially not when he is in a mood like this one.

One where he is simply training because he wishes to forget, pushing his body to the limit so that he can focus on the pain in his muscles and ignore the one in his chest.

"I saw scratches on her door knob. She is planning to escape...again."

It is the best thing he has heard all day.

Enough that he waves his sparring partner away and hands over his swords to a nearby servant..

"Your highness?"

"Yes Leo I am here."

"What will you have me do? Shall I move her to a different room, or place a guard outside of her door?"

"Neither. Leave her be."

"Really?" The surprise in his chief Ryder's voice carries even across the mind link.

Midas steps in the cool shade of the castle.

He had been worried.

Worried that he had managed to break her, to hurt her irreparably.

Yet there she was, trying to break out of her room...again.

He almost smiles.

“Yes really. I should not have...” He sighs.

Regret is still an emotion he is unfamiliar with; another annoying addition to the slew of disconcerting feelings bubbling up inside of him.

“...just keep an eye on her for me but do not let her see you.”

“As you wish my King.”

He is sweaty and tired.

His clothes are sticking to his back and every muscle in his body is stiff and sore from how hard he has been pushing it.

The sun has since set and Midas knows he should at the very least try to rest but he simply walks straight to his study.

His steward sees him, follows him, trying to convince him to at least request for dinner but he ignores the man, slams the door in his face and collapses into his chair.

He cannot give his mind any free time to wander or he will simply end up going to her.

He should be working.

He has so much to do, both within and beyond the castle’s gates.

But how in Hades is he supposed to concentrate when his mind and heart and everything else is locked up in that room with her?

So he immerses himself in his correspondences for the day that he should have attended to much earlier.

Or at least he tries to.

The bell rings out for the eleventh time before Midas finally accepts defeat and leans back in his chair, eyes fixed up at the ceiling.

He was too harsh on her.

He knows that.

The hurt in her voice as he left had nearly knocked the wind out of him.

Even his dragon had felt it, had protested but he had only done what he had to.

He needs to know the truth.

Ironically considering how he himself has lied to her.

He had told her he only slept with her because it was what had to be done, like he did not lay up at night unable to sleep, burning with need for her.

Had looked her in the eyes and told her nothing else mattered to him.

Three words that could not have been any further from the truth.

Yet it does not change the fact that she is hiding something.

Something that fills her with guilt and makes her unable to look him directly in the eyes.

And for both their sakes, he needs to know what it is.

The part of him that wants her by his side is telling him that there is a perfectly reasonable explanation for this but Midas also knows that when one puts their trust in a human, devastating consequences were sure to follow.

Besides, he does not know how to trust blindly, not anymore and he is not willing to start now.

But every fiber of his being hopes that the prophecy is wrong and that whatever secret hunts her is not something that would pose as threat to his realm.

Because if it is, Tether bond or not, he would have to do the right thing.

Whatever that is.

Midas groans, dragging his hand across his face.

He cannot remember the last time he had a headache yet he has one now.

Worry and need, lust and suspicion, everything mixing together in his head like some sort of deadly cocktail.

This is why he had not wanted the bond to grow any stronger.

Why he should have stayed away and kept his distance.

Why he should not have made love to her again no matter how much he had wanted to.

Well considering what he has just done, Midas knows he need not worry about that again.

He has no doubt that she hates him now, even more than she did before.

Protecting his kingdom is the right thing to do.

He knows this.

It is all he has left of his parents, their legacy and his home.

A burden and a gift wrapped up in one that in a hundred and fifty years has thickened his skin and toughened his shoulders.

He has since accepted that his life, no matter how long, will never be easy.

So why does it suddenly feel so much harder now?

He sighs and opens the book in front of him.

It is written in the flowing language of the fae; An Appendix on the Giftings of the Gods.

Midas has his suspicions about what is going on with her.

The only problem is...it should not be possible.

The gods are fickle beings who act on their whims without any form of restraint and sometimes they could be quite generous with their gifts.

But there were unspoken rules to which even they were subject.

Magic existed in varying levels across the 7 realms.

Its purest, strongest form is in the 7th realm, the realm of the gods and it decreases steadily as it descends downwards.

As a result, while creatures like the dragon Ryders of the 5th realm and the elves and fae of the 4th realm possess varying skills of magical abilities, humans of the 2nd realm do not.

Those who did have any sort of skills, like their mages and healers were usually the messengers of the gods who had been granted merely shadows of what true magic really is.

So this...what he suspects Hera is able to do is not just strange, it is downright impossible.

Especially for a human.

The ability to see events before they happened is so dangerous a skill that the gods gave it to only one.

The oracle of Daphne.

A nymph blessed by the god Apollo with the ability to see into the future and deliver prophecies.

The flaw with this theory is not just that the Oracle of Daphne is a goddess.

No, the main problem is that the oracle of Daphne is dead.

Has been a dead a long... long time and her powers vanished with her.

It has been so long ago that most creatures in the 7 realm do not even know that she ever existed.

The knowledge of her existence buried in thousands of years and the pages of ancient books written by those long gone.

Could her powers somehow have been transferred to a human of all creatures?

And if that was true, why now...after all these years?

“That is impossible dragon king”

Midas frowns. “Er’gan”

“It cannot be true. Not only does it make no sense but surely the gods would have known if some human was roaming the realms with the ability to see the future.”

“But what if...”

“There are no buts in this matter dragon king. If there is even an inch of truth in this, this absurd idea running through your head, Hera would be in immense danger. Not just from the thousands of greedy creatures and beings who roamed the seven realms but from the gods themselves.”

Midas has never heard his dragon sound like this. Ever.

“What do you mean?”

“The Oracle of Daphne did not just die dragon king. She was killed.”

There is a wound behind those words.

A wound so great that Midas can feel the pain of his dragon.

“Killed by whom?”

The only response he gets is silence.

“Er’gan...”

“Do not ask dragon king.”

A surge of protectiveness run through Midas and without his knowing it, his hands clench in fists.

He may not understand what his dragon means but he’ll be damned before he let any of them touch her.

The bond must be more active than he thought because he catches her scent even though she is nowhere nea...

His heart begins to pound, the blood rushing in his veins.

She is close, he can feel it.

He almost does not get up.

Almost does not open the door.

Because if he does and she is not there Midas does not know what he will do.

But when the door of his study does fly open there she is, standing there, cold and shivering in a night dress that leaves very little to his extremely capable imagination.

But all of his attention is on her eyes, glassy with barely restrained tears and on the words falling from her mouth.

She blames herself.

For something he alone is responsible for.

And Midas does not know if he will ever be able to forgive himself for doing that to her.

She sniffs, tears rolling down one cheek.

“Well, now you have your answer. I hope you are satisfied dragon king.”

He has never hated the name more.

“Will you not say anything?”

But what can he say, when his heart is breaking for her.

So he says nothing and simply takes her in his arms.

Wrapping his arms around her waist and lifting her up.

Savoring the way she holds onto him, her legs clasped behind his back, her hands around his neck.

“What are you doing?”

He starts moving, away from the door.

“What sort of queen roams the castle barefooted at night?”

She scoffs, so shocked and miffed that she instantly forgets her tears.

“The kind of queen that gets locked up in her room like a criminal.”

He stops walking and meets her eyes wondering if she knows that her eyes turn a dark blue when she is annoyed.

She swallows and he hears her heart rate increase by just the smallest of paces.

“What is it, why do you look at me that way?”

“I am sorry.”

Three words he has not said in a hundred and fifty years.

She stares at him and he knows she is surprised even though she hides it well.

She cups his cheek with one palm, her thumb brushing across his lower lip. “I do not forgive you.”

He kisses her.

Feather soft, barely grazing her mouth with his.

“Good. I am not sure I forgive you either.”

And then she laughs and Midas’ heart for the first time since his parents died, feels, not whole...not even close but all at once...it is no longer completely shattered.

The Dragon King’s Substitute Bride Chapter 65

MIDAS

“Stay still or you’ll send us both crashing to the floor.”

Her attention returns back to him and she stops trying to twist around in his arms to glance behind her.

“Where are we going?”

“Back to your room so you can do what every other normal person is doing at this time of the night, sleeping.”

Midas feels her stiffen. “You are not going to lock me up again are you?”

“No I will not.”

She says nothing but he can feel her relax again, the tension seeping out of her body.

He watches her silently.

His eyes roaming over her face, engraving the details in his mind.

The way her bottom lip is slightly fuller than the other and the roundness of her cheeks when she smiles.

She blushes. “How are you even able to see where we are going?”

“I do not need to see to know where to place my feet.”

“Is this perhaps another of your creepy dragon king abilities?”

He scoffs. “So disrespectful.”

She smirks, lifting the corner of her mouth in a way that quite frankly fascinates him but then again, everything about her fascinates him.

“Just so you know dragon king, if you do miss your step and send me hurtling to the floor I intend to kill you.”

He raises one amused brow. “Finally the truth.”

But instead of laughing, she looks away.

Midas frowns. “I was merely jesting.”

She nods weakly. “I know.” But still refuses to meet his eyes.

So he pretends to stumble with her in his arms.

She screams and then slaps at his arms when she realizes that he did it on purpose.

He laughs, full and hearty.

She is fuming but she is also looking at him again.

Good.

He pushes open the door to her chambers and as they walk across the room, they both suddenly fall silent.

One knee sinks into the soft mattress as he lowers her gently unto the bed, neither one breaking eye contact for even the briefest of moments.

Her legs unwind from behind him but her hands remain clasped behind his neck.

“Hera...”

“Don’t go. Please.”

He is so surprised that his eyes narrow and he frowns, hard.

“You want me to stay?”

“You sound like I have just have just asked to eat your liver in some sweet sauce.”

In all honesty, that would make more sense to him.

She should hate him, not want him in her bed. He does not understand her.

She bites her lip nervously, watching him, waiting for a reaction.

That darn habit

He gently pulls her hands off of him and straightens.

Then he moves away and her face falls.

The door knob is cool in his palm as he carefully pushes the open door shut.

“Have I even told you how bad you are for my health and my sanity?”

“Only a thousand times my Lord.”

And then because he finds it impossible to sleep fully clothed, his shirt drops unceremoniously to the floor and he climbs into bed with her.

Pulling her to him, warming her with the heat of his body.

She sighs quietly against his chest and her eyes drift close.

His hands, unable to stay still stroke her hair, travel down her back and over the skin peppered with scars.

“When did you first know?”

His voice is a whisper above her head and the question is vague.

But she is not asleep and somehow he knows she requires no further explanation.

She sighs again but this one is different; shaky and weary and in response, he holds her tighter.

“The first time was the day before my seventh moon harvest.”

“Moon harvest?”

“It is what your people call a year.”

He nods, absorbing her silence and letting her continue when she is ready.

She takes a deep breath.

“The first time I had a premonition was the eve of my seventh moon harvest and that night...that night I saw my father die in my dreams. Of course I did not know what it was at the time. But it goes without saying that I was beside myself the entire day.”

Her voice is mechanical, stiff and her hands are tracing absent minded circles on the surface of his chest.

He lets her. Knows that she is trying to distance herself from the words and the events so she does not relive them.

“I cried so much I felt terribly ill but they said it was merely a dream, said I was being dramatic and after a while I also started to believe it. Perhaps I was making a big deal of nothing. Especially since my father would not die until a full nine years later. Never mind that it happened exactly the way I had dreamed it would”

Her voice shakes, no longer as emotionless as she has been trying to keep it.

“But in all that time, those nine years, I had many more...episodes. That is what my mom would call them when I came crying to her and the rest of my family about some nightmare I had, some image I had seen.”

“They did not believe you.”

It is a statement not a question.

She scoffs, harsh and bitter. “They told me I was making things up, seeking for attention. So I learnt to dismiss them, to keep them to myself. And for a while...for a while they seemed to stop. The dreams and visions going away just as quickly as they had appeared. I even started to forget, to believe it had been nothing more than been a passing childish phase. Until....”

Midas can sense the climax is coming.

She shifts away from him slightly, out of the circle of his arms and he instantly misses her even though she is technically still there beside him.

Her eyes are fixed on a point above them. “Until... the day your Ryders attacked our village.”

She swallows and Midas almost tells her to stop, that she does not have to do this if she does not want to.

But somehow he knows that she needs it. That this is important.

For her and for him.

“I had a dream the night before, I saw myself standing at the door of our tiny hut or what was left of it. The entire village itself was up in flames and I could smell ashes and the burning flesh and feel the heat on my skin and I was sad...”

Her voice cracks and she sniffs. “...even in the dream, I was so sad that I woke up in tears...unable to breathe.”

His hand reaches across the space between them and touches hers. A large hand covering her own.

An apology, comfort.

He expects her to pull away, after all he is reason for the hurt in her voice, the pain etched on her face but she does not.

Instead her fingers grip his, holding on, finding stability.

She sighs.

“I wanted to tell them...by the gods I did but I did not want them to look at me like they used to; crazy, attention seeking Hera. But I was also too afraid to stay there the whole day with the dream looming over my head. So when my mother announced that she wanted to take our small flock of geese to sell in the capital, I offered to go in her stead.”

She finally turns to meet his eyes.

They are dry, completely devoid of tears but what he sees there causes his chest to tighten painfully.

Hot white pain, her pain, rushes through him.

“I ran away. I should have at least tried, screamed and cried until they listened, until they left with me. But instead I left them to die.”

He wants to pull her closer, to hold her until she stops shaking but instead he just stares at her.

“They would not have believed you.”

“Maybe. But maybe they would have and now we will never know because I was too much of a coward to try.”

And then the tears finally come.

Huge, racking sobs that make her shoulders shake and quake.

Pain so deep that she is unable to even cry out loud.

And in the midst of that, she reaches for him.

Even though he is the very reason why she is this broken.

So he takes her in his arms and holds her even though he has no right to.

He holds her until she stops shaking and her breathing becomes even again, whispering her name into her hair.

“It was not your fault.”

Her voice is tiny, muffled against his shoulder.

“I know that now. It is just sometimes, it is difficult to remember and guilt, guilt is a really strong feeling.”

Midas knows exactly what she means.

He tilts her chin up so she is looking at him. “Hera I...”

She interrupts him. “May I ask you something?”

He blinks. “Anything.”

“Why do you hate humans so much?”

A sigh. Deep and heavy.

How is he supposed to answer this without seeming like a blood thirsty fiend?

How does he tell her that when he had found out that humans had killed his parents, the king and queen who had gone to the 2nd realm to help them, he had gone blind with rage?

That he had made a blood bond not to rest until he made every single one of them pay.

How does he tell her that he has carried that hatred around for so many years that he no longer even knows how to let it go?

So all he does is sigh again. “It is...complicated.”

But instead of get angry at his silence, at his refusal to answer, she simply nods.

Midas sighs for what feels like the one hundredth time.

And then she smirks up at him. “See what I did there dragon king?”

He scoffs because he knows what is coming. “No I did not. I am going to sleep now.”

She ignores his pretence at ignorance. “You see how I am not threatening to lock you up until you tell me everything?”

He closes his eyes ignoring the way she keeps poking him repeatedly. “I am fast asleep and can no longer hear you.”

She laughs. "Fine. Be that way."

Her head falls back to rest against his chest. "Midas..."

"Hmmm?"

"Whatever it is that we did to you...on behalf of my people... I am sorry."

And because he again does not know how to respond to that and does not understand why his throat suddenly feels clogged up, he simply kisses her forehead softly, unable to say anything more.

He barely gets any sleep.

His mind is much too busy.

So when she tosses and turns, thrashing fitfully in her sleep, he is awake, calming her gently, stroking her hair and whispering her name until she finally stills against him.

He wonders if she is having another vision and if that is why tears are rolling down her cheeks even though she is still fast asleep.

He wants to wake her but he is unsure if he should do so.

The morning comes much too quickly and he waits quietly with her in his arms.

Waits for her eyes to open so he can kiss her and make sure she is okay.

But just before the 5th bell he feels it, a slight pressure in his head.

As master of dragons, he is the only one who possesses the ability to directly mind-link a dragon or a dragon Ryder.

However, in cases of extreme urgency, his chief Ryder can attempt to reach him.

Similar to the way one would knock on a door, until Midas opens the link and the words can follow through.

He does so now, frowning deeply.

No formalities.

"Speak."

"Your highness, it is Adarin and Rardath."

Midas sighs and takes one last look at her, knowing immediately that he will not be there when she wakes up.

He pulls away from her and gets up.

“What about them?”

“Adarin’s son my lord...the lad is dead.”

And Midas knows instantly that this new day with the sweet scent of mountain roses and the warm rays of cheery morning sunlight streaming in through the window, is about to become one of the longest days of his entire life.

The Dragon King’s Substitute Bride Chapter 66

HERA

It started with the same premonition as the last time.

I was once again in that thatch hut, dressed in riding clothes and a cape around my neck, shivering and cold and afraid.

Once more, I had watched the tall white figure, with the skinny arms and dark hood, standing with their hand hovering above the moaning figure on the bed.

The only difference was that this time, the picture had appeared to be clearer, less hazy.

And as a result, I had recognized the standing figure.

Not who it was, more like what it was.

The skin of their arm was white, like sun bleached bone and covered in runes and sigils of shimmering jade and amber, markings that danced and writhed beneath the figure’s skin as if with a life of their own.

Exactly like the creatures that had attacked us back in the Elder forest.

The same malevolence that I had felt surrounded by those ancient, gnarled trees had also been all over the hut, and even in the dream, I could smell the same stench, like rotten flesh laced with an undercurrent of pure evil.

The longer I had looked on, the surer of myself I had become.

The creature was definitely a dark elf and whatever he was doing to the moaning person laying on the bed felt wrong.

Terribly wrong.

And once again, as I looked on, unable to move, the moaning had stopped, leaving a deadly silence in its wake.

But rather than wake up as I had done the last time, the dream seemed to fold in on itself.

The images distorting and morphing, the colors beginning to bend into each other, spiraling and twisting until a new image appeared.

I had recognized it immediately.

I was back in the field from my first premonition, the one I had when I was cramped up in the back of that hay cart, attempting to flee the castle.

The one with Midas.

And as before, he was standing far away from me, smiling and handsome.

Utterly and completely unaware of the rolling, crackling storm darkening the skies and hanging above his head, ignorant of the cloud of doom swirling behind him.

The feeling of evil from the hut had followed me here, to this new place.

Except it had become stronger, much stronger.

I had tried to scream, to run to him but once again I found myself unable to move.

The cloud had grown into a swelling, expanding darkness that reached out from behind to wrap its tendrils around him, and just before it dragged him in, I thought I saw a face, hidden in the swirling mass of black ink but I could not be sure.

All I had been able to do the entire time, was stand, hands hanging helplessly by my sides as tears ran down my cheeks and fear turned my blood to ice.

That is until I heard him say my name.

Over and over again, quiet whispers in the real world.

Like a rope tossed out to a man at sea.

I grabbed onto it, holding on, the only thing keeping me from drowning in the darkness and the fear and the building pressure in my head, letting it pull me out of my nightmares and back into reality.

A reality that had me wrapped up in the safety of his arms.

I could feel his hands, large and callused stroking my hair, pulling me closer into the warmth of his body

But I had not woken up, not in the true sense of the word.

So it was not long before I drifted off once more.

But I had no dreams again, and had slept peacefully and soundly until this morning when I awoke to the sound of the bell ringing happily.

Opening my eyes to a new day and discovering that once again, I have woken up alone.

I sigh, not even bothering to hide my disappointment.

After last night I had thought, hoped even that perhaps things would be different.

I shake my head

You never learn do you Hera?

A knock at the door and a timid, sorry looking Henette enters.

A curtsy is quickly followed by a bow, while refusing to meet my eyes the entire time. "Your Grace."

I toss away my covers and swing my feet over the bed. "Henette."

She is nervous, even more so than is usual, wringing her hands and twisting her fingers. "My queen...Hera, about yesterday, I...."

The words die in her throat when I throw my arms around her.

She stiffens and her eyes swell to become the size of dinner plates.

"Your highness!"

I pull away before she can manage to give herself a heart attack but still hold her at arm's length, my hands on her shoulders.

"There is no need to apologize. You were merely following orders."

She hiccups. "Be that as it may my queen, this is highly inappropriate. I am but a lowly maid and you are..."

"Your friend Henette. And I would like to think you are mine as well."

"Rules and social distinctions are there for a reason your grace."

"Pish posh Henette." I grin at her. "...besides, when have you ever known me to follow the rules?"

She shakes her head but I see the tiny smile she tries to hide.

I take my bath quickly.

Telling myself that I am hungry and eager to eat and that it is not the hopes of seeing him at breakfast that is fueling my speed and chasing me out of the bathtub sooner than I usually would.

Henette helps me dress in the clothes she has set out for me and I absentmindedly put them on.

It is a different style from the gowns she usually decks me in but I am not paying attention. My mind is elsewhere

Dreams and premonitions aside, last night had been...easy.

It is the only word that seems to fit.

The words I had said out loud, admitting my less than conventional dreams and the role I had played in my family's death, I did not think I could do that without completely falling apart.

Yet I had done it and he had not called me crazy for saying I had dreams or visions of the future.

He had not looked at me with pity or thought that I was merely fishing for attention.

Instead he had simply held me and listened.

And when I had finally drifted off to sleep in his arms, my head against his chest, listening to the dragon king's heart beat out a steady rhythm, it had felt like a heavy weight had finally been taken off my shoulders.

Somehow it had felt more intimate, more binding than even the times when we had made love.

The guilt is not gone. Not entirely.

But the crushing weight I had carried for so long finally seems to have let up.

At least for now.

I am not naïve enough to think that everything is all of a sudden now fine and dandy.

He still hurt my people and my realm irreparably and while my weight might be somewhat abated, I have a feeling his is still very much there.

And before I can completely let go, I need to know why he did it.

Why he hates humans enough to slaughter us without batting an eyelash.

But even knowing this does not dampen the anticipation pooling in my belly at seeing him again.

I must be losing my mind.

Common sense dictates that I should stay away from the man who murdered my family not run towards him.

But then again, listening to the voice of reason is not exactly my strongest quality.

If Henette notices the tiny smile on my lips or the way my cheeks have turned an obvious shade of pink, she says nothing.

I go to sit in front of the mirror so that Henette, who insists on braiding my hair, can have her way but then I see my reflection, the cape tied around my neck and my heart stops.

My mouth has gone dry and I can feel my blood turning to ice in my veins.

Nothing but a dream...nothing but a dream....

I chant the words over and over in my head, knowing the entire time that I am lying to myself.

Because I have seen these clothes before.

Have seen myself wearing them.

They are the clothes from my premonition.

The one with the thatch hut and the dark elf and the moaning figure who I am suddenly certain is dead.

Goosebumps break out all over my arm and I resist the urge to scream, to tear off the clothes and the scrub their scent from my skin.

Nothing but a dream.

And then the room falls away.

I am still wearing the clothes, can still feel the purple velvet cape around my neck but I am no longer standing, I am kneeling in the dirt.

In the dirt in front of a hut made of thatch and mud and windows covered in animal skin.

The hut from my dreams.

My cheeks are wet, salty liquid running down into the corners of my mouth and dripping...one, two... falling through space to land on the face of the man cradled in my arms.

My mouth opens in a wordless scream and suddenly I am back.

Standing in my room, unable to look away from other Hera who stared back at me from the ornate mirror with her eyes wide open in fear, her face completely drained of color.

“H...Henette?”

She appears beside my reflection, frowning at the shaky tone of my voice and freezing when she sees how white I am.

“My qu...Hera, are you okay?”

“Where is the king?”

“The king your grace?”

“Yes, Henette the king. Where is he?!!”

I stop, lowering my voice when I see the alarm and fright on her face. “Henette please...”

My voice cracks as the image burned into my brain fills my mind’s eye.

The dragon king cradled in my arms, eyes closed, unmoving.

I try to stop my hands from shaking but they won’t stop. “The king Henette...tell me where he is”

She points behind her, towards the window and I run to it.

Warm sunlight bathes my skin and a not so gentle breeze plasters my hair against my face, obstructing my view.

I push it angrily out of the way, eyes rapidly scanning the busy courtyard below.

There he is.

Standing with Leo and a couple of his Ryders.

He is dressed in his armor, his two swords strapped confidently behind his back; handsome and breathtaking and incredibly dangerous.

“Midas...”

A whisper...my throat is closed, refusing to obey me.

Being immortal means he will not age or die without cause.

But he can be killed and If he mounts that horse and leaves this castle, I will never see him again.

And for all my talk of revenge, it is the very last thing I want.

So I suck in as much air as my lungs can handle, lean out of the window as far as my body will allow and scream his name until my throat is raw and bleeding.

The Dragon King’s Substitute Bride Chapter 67

MIDAS

Dammit all to f*****g Hades

The slew of swear words running through his mind are not particularly intelligent but they are the only words strong enough to convey the gravity of this situation to which he has awoken.

He had known that the matter between the clans could escalate very quickly, spreading like a disease, infecting everything in its path.

But this...the death of Adarin's son, this is like striking a match in a forest full of k*****e and wood and dry leaves.

A f*****g wild fire.

Adarin is not a man known for his patience, neither one of them is.

And now with his son dead, if the king did not ride out to Adarin and Rardath's territory right now and attempt to prevent a full out war, this fire could consume his realm and fast.

Adarin and Rardath both had surrounding clans that were incredibly loyal to them.

If one attacked the other, the clans behind them would follow.

This could get ugly, fast.

He storms out of his room in the west tower where he had gone to change into his riding clothes and armored plates and to pick up his swords.

He ignores his throne room, striding straight towards the castle's main entrance.

He knows that even before Leo mind-linked him, the chief Ryder would have begun arrangements for his horse and a small battalion of Ryders to be ready and set to ride out with him the moment he gave the word.

This has to be the storm that the kingmakers were referring to.

But even as he thinks this, he knows that he is wrong.

Besides the shadow realm that existed in a state of constant chaos, the dragon realm is known to have the worst rainy season in all of the 7 realms.

And in the weeks before the weather changes, the dragonkin would begin to read the signs, smell the rain and preparation to survive the weather and approaching storms would ensue.

And the day before the first rain, thunder, loud and fearsome would precede its arrival, and then the showers would begin.

Heavy and often with destructive proportions.

And he has a sinking feeling that this... situation with Adarin and Rardath is thunder, a mere echo of the c*****e to come.

Midas resists the urge to shudder.

If this is thunder then he is not looking forward to the storm.

But when it came, it would meet Midas ready and whoever sent it, would rue the day they were born.

He steps out of the castle and into the busy front courtyard.

It is a beautiful albeit strangely windy day.

The sun is shining high in the sky and the air is ripe with a slight chill, announcing that last days of the blistering heat of summer are now here.

How ironic.

Every war Midas has ever fought always began on a beautiful day.

His chief Ryder meets him at the entrance with a quick bow.

“Your highness.”

There is no time to exchange greetings. “When did it happen?”

“I believe it was sometime late last night my King.”

“How did word manage to get here so quickly?”

“A dragon Ryder, one stationed at the border changed into his dragon form and flew over with the news immediately it happened. The dragon landed in the castle in the early hours of the morning and immediately I heard, I tried to reach you.”

Midas stops in the middle of the yard. “Where is this Ryder?”

The solider appears as if summoned from thin air.

Great... Midas thinks and resists the urge to groan.

It is the shaky Ryder from the throne room, the one who had delivered to him the piece of a dark elf’s cloth but who had also been too scared to even step forward much less speak properly.

After his display in the presence of the king, the man’s captain must have made him the designated messenger boy.

Just the kind of man he most definitely did not need in a crisis situation like this one.

The lad, who in the light of day appears to Midas as barely old enough to have started shaving, bows to his king and salutes the highest ranking Ryder in the land who stands beside him.

“My King.”

“Rise and speak Ryder and if you value your head and wish for it to remain attached to your neck, do not stutter. I am not in the mood to be patient.”

Of course, his words have the opposite effect and do nothing to help the young soldier’s disposition.

But as it turn out, the man does fancy having his head remaining attached to his neck for even though he does not look anywhere past the king’s shoulders, he does not stutter.

“Are you the one who brought the news?”

“Yes my King.”

“What happened?”

“The son of the chief of the clan of Adarin is dead my king.”

Midas growls.

“I know that Ryder. I am asking you how is it that the boy in question came to arrive in the state of being dead when as of yesterday evening I received word that he was in fact very much alive.”

“I...I...”

A warning look from Leo and the Ryder catches his stutter at the last minute.

“We are uncertain as to the exact details my lord but the servant who has been nursing the boy ever since his...accident, went to his room last night to check on him and upon discovering the body, raised the alarm.”

“And the father?”

“Adarin is furious my King. He intended to march on Rardath that very instant convinced they were responsible but my captain managed to persuade him to wait for your arrival and sent me with news of the boy’s passing.”

“How did he die?”

“We are unsure my Lord.”

“What I am hearing from you soldier is that no one knows if the boy simply died in his sleep from his injuries or if he had his throat f*****g slit?”

Midas’ voice is deceptively calm and the Ryder looks fearfully away.

“There were no obvious signs as to what could have resulted in his passing my king however...”

The lad’s voice falters and Midas knows that he had been about to reveal something that he is either unsure of or and this more likely to be true, had not be instructed to say.

The king’s eyes narrow. “However what?”

“However before I left the camp, I heard rumors, whispers among the men.”

The solider hesitates and Midas makes to reach for his sword.

“For Hades sake Ryder am I going to have to bleed this information out of you? Get to the point.”

“The rumors said that the body appeared to have withered, shrunken in on its self. Almost as if...”

The man swallows, as if the mere words of what he is about to say are even more frightening than the angry king glowering at him.

“...as if his very life had simply been sucked out of him, leaving nothing but an empty shell behind.”

Midas’ heart slams against his ribcage and he can feel his dragon stirring, their thoughts racing as one towards the same dark conclusion.

Only one type of magic is capable of doing something as evil as that.

f**k a wild fire, this entire situation had just become a goddamn inferno.

The Dragon King’s Substitute Bride Chapter 68

MIDAS

The first thing Midas had learned from the day he became king, was to keep his emotions and his feelings buried far beneath the surface.

If the shepherd panics, the sheep will scatter and if the sheep scatter...they all die.

The world could be falling around his ears and the dragon king knew he could keep his outward appearance perfectly calm.

So he absorbs the news from the cowering Ryder without batting as much as an eyelid.

His face remaining stoic and impassive, giving absolutely nothing of the thousands of thoughts and possible strategies for averting this disaster that are even now running through his head.

He turns towards the Ryder.

“Where lies the body of the boy now?”

“It remains in the hut where he was found. The door has been sealed and the captain instructed that no one is to go in before your arrival”

“Good. You may go soldier, prepare to ride out with the others. Leo...”

“Everything is ready your grace. We simply await your orders.”

Midas nods, brisk and sharp. “Good. We must leave at once.”

He heads towards his horse, the massive tail of the black beast swinging eagerly as if in anticipation.

If that were the case, then the animal was alone in its eagerness.

He attempts to mount, his feet in the stirrup then he stops.

He could have sworn...

“Midas... Midas!!”

His head spins around and up so fast it nearly falls off his neck.

“Hera.”

Framed by the window, hair blowing in the heavy wind like fluttering tongues of fire.

Midas’ frowns, a question on his heart and on his lips.

He does not like the position she is in, sitting on the edge of the wide window, her body nearly hanging out of it.

“Hera, what in Hades are you doing?”

He did not shout the question and she is too far away to have heard him.

But she leans even further out the window anyway. “Midas! Oh thank the gods I...”

The words die in her mouth, lost to the air and Midas heart stops.

He sees it happen almost before it does and everything slows down, the noise around him seeming to fade...as if coming through a tunnel...a tunnel far, far away.

Moments later, Midas will wonder how it happened but suddenly a strong wind blows and unsettles the tiny human perched on the slippery stones of the tower and she loses her balance.

He sees the way she flails, her fingers grabbing desperately at the walls, looking for something to hold onto.

But there is nothing to hold on, to stop her and she plummets, falling at an unearthly speed, thousands of feet to what is no doubt certain death at the foot of the tower.

Her scream loud and piercing slices through the fog around Midas' head.

He does not even register the pain as his wings break out through his skin, ripping two holes in his shirt and on either side of his swords.

He is not even aware of when he takes off, his body moving on instinct but Midas moves faster than he has ever moved in his entire life.

It is a close call.

Incredibly so and he is almost too late.

But he catches her.

Snatching her in the air, inches before she can reach the ground and shatter every bone in her fragile human body.

Her grip around his neck is tight, painful even as he holds her shaking form in his arms.

But she is not the only one shaking.

Midas' entire body is trembling.

He is livid...rage coursing through every part of his very being.

He floats them down and drops her gently on her feet.

His eyes close for a moment as he struggles ineffectively to slow his heartbeat.

He refuses to think about how close he had come to losing her and how for the first time in his long reign as king, Midas had felt bone crippling fear.

What this means is even harder to wade through...much more complicated so he chooses the easier option.

Anger.

"By all the gods Hera are you f*****g Insane?!!"

His voice is a roar and from the corner of his eyes he can see his Ryder flinch slightly but not her.

She reaches for him, one hand cradling his cheek. "Midas..."

Her touch calms him and he is not ready to be calm, not yet, so he moves out of reach.

If he had not been so angry perhaps he might have noticed that when her eyes meet his, the fear he sees in them is not for her, it is for him.

"Midas...I have to tell you something."

Midas does not know what it is but he is too enraged to pay any real attention to her words.

"And you thought the best way to do so was by trying to kill yourself?"

"I fell."

"Yes, because you were being incredibly stupid."

He can see the words sting and he wants to take them back.

But not now, later when he has calmed down, heavens knows when that will be.

"Go back inside Hera."

"Midas if you would just listen..."

"I cannot deal with this right now."

He is not listening, does not even want to. He points at two guards.

"You and you, take the queen back into the castle and for Hades sake keep her away from anymore windows."

He begins to walk away, back towards his horse and waiting Ryders.

She tries to go after him but the guards hold her back.

"Midas! Midas!!....wait"

But the king is already halfway to his horse and is much too angry to even hear her.

"God dammit will you just listen?! You can't go...please...let go off me!"

He mounts his horse and prepares to leave.

Then he hears a grunt and two yells come from behind him.

He turns around just in time to see her break free from the two guards who had been holding her, leaving them grunting in pain.

And then she runs around to stand in front of his horse, arms outstretched.

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

“Stopping you from leaving.”

He finally stops.

“Hera, move out of my way. I do not have time for this”

But she simply stands there glowering at him, chest heaving and red in the face, her hair going every which way.

An absolute, breathtaking, beautiful mess.

“You can’t go.”

“What?”

“I had a dream. Do not go...please.”

Her voice cracks and Midas can see that she is struggling to hold it all together.

And he wants nothing more than to go to her, but for all he knows Adarin has already grown weary of waiting for his king and is even at this moment charging on Rardath’s men.

“Wait dragon king...listen.”

Er’gan.

Midas frowns.

He might be losing precious time but he is no fool, he knows she is here to warn him about some sort of danger but he also knows he has no choice.

If he wants to prevent a full scale battle, he needs to leave now.

He sighs. “I have to go Hera.”

“But...but if you go, you will not return.”

“It does not matter. My people need me.”

She exhales shakily and her face falls but then, just as quickly, it snaps up again and Midas can tell from the look in her eye that he is not going to be overjoyed at whatever she is going to say next.

He is not wrong.

“Since you won’t stop, then I am coming with you.”

“Over my dead body and in case that is not clear enough I am immortal so that means f*****g never.”

Her eyes narrow and flash that shade of defiant blue he is growing much too attached to.

“You can either take me with you now dragon king, or the minute you leave, I will find some way out of this castle and ride out after you by myself. You choose.”

The Dragon King’s Substitute Bride Chapter 69

HERA

This is quite easily the most insane, foolhardy thing I have ever done in my very short, yet extremely eventful life.

The dragon king sits on his horse, eyes narrowed, gold rimmed with red.

He is looking at me like he is not quite sure I am entirely alright in the head and to be honest, I cannot exactly say I blame him.

I am not quite sure of it myself.

Standing there, with my arms spread out in front of the largest horse I have ever seen and my hair blowing in every direction like some witch from a child’s nightmare.

One part of me, the part my mother tried and failed to teach to sit up straight and not run around the garden like some street urchin, that Hera wants to smack me upside the head and ask me if I have finally lost my marbles.

But the other Hera, the one that spent the most amazing night of her life in the arms of the man she hates, that Hera, knows I am doing the right thing.

Even if it is admittedly, quite a bit bonkers.

I feel like the entire castle is watching me, heads and faces poking out the windows and at the doors; Ryders and servants and courtesans all wondering if perhaps the human has finally snapped.

I do not care.

No one moves.

Even the wind seems to have calmed down, still...waiting.

Midas jaw works as he clenches his teeth and releases it.

I can almost see the wheels turning in his head; can see him fighting the urge to have me locked up again.

Gods above let him see reason.

But if he does not, I meant every word I had said and I very much intended to carry it out.

Never mind that I have never ridden a horse before, especially not the gigantic breed found in the dragon realm, but if he leaves me behind, I would do everything to follow him and stop him from riding straight into what I am almost certain is a trap.

If the dragon king is going to die, I am the only one who is bloody hell allowed to kill him.

Midas sighs and dismounts.

Hope blossoms in my chest but just as quickly, he stumps it out.

“I can’t not go Hera, surely you understand that?”

I do not but I nod anyway, the hope flickering away. “Then take me with you.”

“Can you even ride?”

I see no reason to lie. “I am a fast learner.”

Leaning forward to touch my forehead with his, he groans and cups my cheek in his large palm.

“Goddamit Hera...”

His whisper is rough and deep, filled with the tiredness of losing the internal battle I can see going on in his head and behind his eyes.

I place my hand on his chest, fingertips below his heartbeat. “I cannot let you ride out knowing I could have stopped you...”

My voice cracks and I blink away the tears that seemed to have appeared out of nowhere

“...I will not have your death on my conscience too.”

My family’s is plenty enough.

He sighs and opens his eyes, letting me go and taking a single step backwards.

“Fine. But when we get there, you do exactly as I say...no theatrics and if I say get behind me, I f*****g mean it.”

I nod but I can tell he is not satisfied so I curtsy and bow my head

“Yes my Lord.”

He scoffs. “Now I’m even more convinced you are going to the exact opposite.”

I smile sweetly “Do you not trust me your grace?”

“Not even the slightest bit.”

He moves back towards his horse and I follow him.

“You ride with me. Won’t want you attempting to ride by yourself on these rocks. Given your penchants for ‘accidents’ you’re more likely to break your neck before we even get to the foot of dragon’s mount.”

I resist the urge to roll my eyes at his patronizing tone. “I’ll be fine dragon king.”

“Says the human who managed to throw herself out of a window merely moments ago.”

“I fell.”

“Of course you did.”

His hands settle on my waist and in one smooth movement he positions me on the horse, guiding my feet into the stirrup and holding me as I attempt to mount the braying animal.

I eventually manage to sit myself.

This is not so bad.

Who knew horses were so lumpy?

Then the horse moves slightly and I almost scream.

But then a moment later he climbs up behind me, laughing and gathers the reins in one hand while using the other to wedge me against the solid hardness of his body.

I can feel exactly where every part of me, touches every part of him.

And it is a lot of places.

I blush, glad that I am not turned around to face him so he does not see my cheeks turn red.

How I can somehow manage to feel such desire for this man even in a situation like this one amazes me.

He leans in, his lips brushing the nape of my neck. “Try not to fall this time human.”

I do my best to hide the shiver than travels down my spine and simply scowl in response

We set off at a brisk, yet careful pace.

Heading out the castle and down the rocky, winding path that leads around dragon's mount.

My first ride on a horse is not exactly what I had imagined it would be.

I enjoyed the outdoors and trying new, sometimes stupid things.

As a result I had expected to love riding, or at the very least be able to tolerate it but I do not.

I hate it.

I hate it so much that I tell myself here and now, that I will never do this again.

At first I was merely uncomfortable with the jostling and the rhythmic bumpy sway of the horse's canter, even as I felt every jarring step down the rocky hill.

I had assumed it would get better once we were on level ground.

But it did not.

The rhythmic sway became a steady gallop and I found myself pushing my body closer against Midas, leaning into him to keep from hyperventilating.

To think people thought horses could be ridden for sport and relaxation.

What mad man would willingly get on one of these beasts?

The wind is rushing past my face, bringing tears to my eyes and whipping my hair around in the most annoying of ways.

I want to tell him to slow down but not only would he gloat and hold that over my head for the rest of my life, it would be incredibly selfish of me.

Besides, something tells me that he would have gone even faster were it not for me.

So I swallow my fright and bury myself in the comfort of his body.

For all my talk of riding out after him, I find myself thanking all the gods I know and a few I don't, that he did not leave me behind.

As if sensing my thoughts he lowers his head.

"How in all the realms did you intend to ride after me if you are this frightened?"

"I am perfectly fine."

Nice to see this hellish ride has not dulled my ability to be stubborn as always

I can almost feel him smirk behind me.

“In that case...”

A flick of the reins and the horse picks up speed.

Oh sweet mother of...

We are moving so fast that the changing landscape on either side of us is nothing more than a blur of green and brown, dirt and dust flying up from beneath the horse’s pounding hooves.

Yes definitely a mad man.

“Skies above dragon king are you trying to get us killed?”

“I am immortal remember.”

I scoff. “How good and fine for you, but you are going to be immortal with broken bones if you do not slow down.”

One hand lets go of the reins and snakes around my middle, pulling me closer against him.

“Relax human, I won’t let you fall...” And then his voice drops, wonderful and warm and deep “...ever”

I ignore the fluttering in my belly and focus my eyes on the land ahead.

I see the Elder forest in the distance, approaching fast.

The tall, dark, mud colored trunks with their towering canopy of deep green almost black leaves, standing watch like ancient, gnarled sentinels.

I involuntarily shudder and without a word, his arm around me tightens, the muscles flexing in a way that both warms and sends chills down my spine.

“It is the shortest route I...”

I interrupt him. “Do what you must Midas. I trust you.”

If he hears me I will never know.

Our journey through the thick forest is largely uneventful, save for the scurrying of squirrels and the large woodland creatures that scamper out of the way of the stampeding horses, whose mad dash sends flocks of noisy black birds fluttering as one into the sky.

A dark, squeaking, frantic mass.

An omen I do not like.

We break out of the forest soon enough and ride into a vast plain of rolling emerald hills as far as the eye can see.

I look to my left and for the first time notice Leo riding beside us; the King's brave second in command.

A quick glance behind us reveals the company of Ryders that have followed their King into whatever trouble lies ahead of us.

Dressed in their armor, swords strapped to their backs, ready for war if it should come to it.

And suddenly I feel foolish, unsure.

What had I been thinking?

What did I even really see?

All these Ryders; strong, powerful weredragon soldiers and here I am.

Did I really think that I, of all people, some measly human slave girl would be the one to protect him?

I am only going to get in his way, slow him down.

And then, just like that, my heart is racing for an entirely different reason.

What if...what if that is what the dream meant?

I had followed him thinking I could stop him from playing into the hands of whatever calamity lay ahead.

But what if my presence is not what saves him?

What if I am not the cure but the sickness itself?

What if I am the trap?

The Dragon King's Substitute Bride Chapter 70

MIDAS

He should never have agreed to it.

Should have had her taken back into the castle.

He has no idea what they are riding into.

It could be nothing more than a grieving father, heartbroken about losing his only child or it could be that the men of both clans have already begun looping one another's heads off.

So even if it had meant tossing her over his shoulder and carrying her back in himself, he should never have let her convince him to bring her along.

At least if she were in the castle, he could be absolutely sure of her safety.

But this, his riding out with her into an extremely volatile situation is not just foolish, it is reckless.

Two things the dragon king is not.

It had also been entirely selfish.

He wanted her near him.

Craved the stability her presence, her scent gave him and his dragon.

He tells himself that it is because he knows that had he left her behind, she would have kept to her words and made good her threat to ride out after him.

And that she was more likely to get hurt that way.

But Midas knows that while that is indeed part of his reason for agreeing to this madness, it is not the entire truth.

From the moment she had first asked to come with him, Midas already knew on some level that he would give in.

Not just because saying 'No' to her is becoming increasingly difficult but because she is too damn stubborn for her own good.

Standing in front of his horse like that, arms outstretched, chin lifted defiantly.

She is everything he works hard not to be; Reckless, extremely impulsive and maybe even slightly foolish.

And yet this, her foolhardy determination is one of the things he lo...does not dislike about her.

He can tell she detests the speed at which they are riding.

Can hear her the way her heart is pounding even over the rustling wind.

But he has no choice.

For all he knows it might be too late.

Adarin's son was dead and the clan chief would be out for blood.

Midas is not entirely sure he will be able to stop him.

Not without applying force.

And the worst part of it all, the only part of it that even really worries him is the way his blood thrums with anticipation.

Gods above...

He does not want a war, knows that the consequences will be unpleasant, but his body, the monster in him is craving a fight.

She shifts in the saddle and Midas breaths in the crisp, windblown scent of her hair.

He does not understand it but when he is with her, it is easier...no, not easier, just less difficult to keep his bloodlust in check and he does not know why.

But what he does know is that the last thing on his mind at the moment should be the way her body fits perfectly against him yet he cannot seem to help it

His arms tighten around her middle imperceptibly, fingers splayed at her hips, nudging her and pulling her closer to his chest.

She leans into him and Midas' body hums in response.

He wonders if she knows that she just let out a tiny, little sigh of pleasure and the urge to kiss her is so sudden and intense that his stomach actually clenches.

He swallows, his eyes fixed on the changing landscape in front of him.

The sun is not even yet high in the sky.

Good. Fights on a hot day were an absolute travesty.

He does not plan to let her get within so much as an inch of danger but he also knows that a plan is simply a sequence of events that always goes wrong.

And if something happens to her because of this, because he was too selfish to leave her behind, Midas will never be able to forgive himself.

They crest over a small hill and the fire pits and deer skin tents of the encampment of the clan of Rardath come into view.

Structures that appear small and tiny from this far away.

And blessed be Hades, not on fire.

He exchanges a quick glance with his chief Ryder on his left and without needing to say a word, both men spur on their horses, picking up speed and racing faster towards it.

They race through the encampment of Rardath without stopping.

The pounding hoofs of the horses raising up rich dark earth and flattening leaves as they ride past pens and stables of braying, noisy animals and the curious, nervous faces of the members of the herder clan.

Dragonkin men watch on grimly, the women clutch the hands of their children in fear as the king's procession rides past.

Midas' heart is calm, his breathing level perhaps even slow.

This...this is what he lives for, who he is.

A king...a warrior... a cold blooded killer.

He does not go looking for it.

In fact because of how easy it is for him to slip beneath the red haze of violence and how hard it is for him to come out of it, he prefers to avoid it.

But he is most definitely not afraid of it.

Especially not when it meant protecting his realm or fighting for what he believed in.

Adarin and Rardath were better of listening to him, and coming up with a peaceful, less bloody means of settling this matter.

If they decided to attack each other blindly, the resulting clash could result in a catastrophe and a loss of much more than is necessary.

And Midas could not allow that to happen.

He would much rather kill them both first.

"Midas..."

He keeps silent, pretends not to have heard her.

Just so he can listen to her say his name again.

She does, pronouncing it in that crisp human tongue of hers.

"Midas..."

He does not think he will ever get used to tiny jolt he gets every time she does it.

“Yes?”

She hesitates. “Killing...killing them will not solve anything.”

Midas frowns, feeling his body stiffen.

How in all the realms did she know to say that?

But she does not answer when he asks and he regrets not being able to see her face and gauge her reaction.

When they returned to the castle after this situation ended, one way or the other, Midas intends to make sure he gets to the root of her abilities.

Especially if Er’gan is right and that her ability to see things before they happened could put her in danger.

He just has to make sure they both make it back home in one piece.

As they draw closer to the clan of Adarin, he wonders vaguely what danger she had seen that made her so desperate to stop his departure.

He wonders if she will be the only one to return to the castle.

Adarin’s people, unlike their neighbors who provided the bulk of the capital’s supply of meat, were predominantly simple farmers and their settlement consisted of mud and wooden structures covered in thatch rafters.

As expected the captain of the band of Ryders is waiting for him at the heart of the clan of Adarin where the Chief’s group of huts would be.

Midas brings his horse to a halt with a brisk yank of the reins a few paces away from where everyone is gathered.

One look at the red faced, absolutely livid chief pacing angrily from one end to another, his sword drawn, tells Midas that he had almost been too late.

If anyone is wondering why the human queen is here he does not see it.

He dismounts first but when she reaches out for him to help her down, he refuses.

“Hera, I want you to listen to me.”

She shakes her head, looking down at him, eyes big and so very blue and he finds himself wanting to brush the strands of hair from her face, to cup her cheek in his hand.

But he does neither. “I want you to stay here.”

“But...”

“No buts Hera. I let you come because I knew it was important to you but I will not be able to concentrate if you are in danger.”

“Yet you wish for me to sit here and watch you walk yourself straight into the same danger you are trying to keep me away from?”

He smiles, an attempt to put her at ease. “I am immortal remember?”

It does not work.

“Stop...saying that. You are immortal not invincible.”

“I have to do this Hera.”

She nods but he can see the protests in her features.

Leo appears by his side and he turns to him.

“Do not let her get off this horse”

“Yes my king.”

Then in his mind so she does not hear, he adds.

“And if you see that things are getting out of hand, the tiniest edge of a drawn sword, get her out of here immediately.”

As expected the chief Ryder stiffens. “You are asking me to leave you behind.”

“I am asking...no, I am commanding you to protect the queen.”

“As you wish your grace.”

Leo does not sound pleased but the king leaves him no choice.

And without a second’s hesitation he strides away from her and towards whatever chaos awaits him.

Everyone bows as he approaches.

“You may rise.”

The captain of the Ryder’s immediately attempts to speak to to him but he ignores the soldier and walks up to the father who has just lost his son, laying a heavy hand on Adarin’s shoulder.

No words are needed.

The chief understands that this is his king’s way of offering his condolences and the large bearded man nods, his mouth a grim line beneath the tufts of white hair.

Midas straightens. That part was easy.

Now is when the real trouble begins.

“How did he die?”

“Rardath killed him.”

“And you know this how?”

“Is it not obvious? They were not satisfied with taking his fingers and putting him in a sick bed for months, they had to do away with him as well.” The chief is so angry he is practically roaring.

“And for what, silly accusations that were and still are entirely untrue!”

Midas does not bat a lid, allowing the man’s disrespect of yelling in his face to slide. “Do you trust me Adarin?”

“You are my King.”

“That is not the question I asked.”

The dragonkin man stops. He is breathing so hard, his belly rises and falls with each burst.

He thinks for a moment, truly considering the question and then he finally looks up. “Yes I do.”

Midas nods. “Then do not attack Rardath.”

The chief bristles.

“Talk to me when you have lost a child dragon king.”

This time around it is Midas’ eyes that flash red.

The man notices and immediately bows his head.

“I mean no disrespect my king but you wish for me to let my son’s death go unpunished and I, Adarin the IV cannot do that.”

“I am not asking you to do that.”

“Then you agree with me that the killers must be punished.”

“Yes.”

The man frowns for a second but then he exhales and rises to his full height.

“Rardath must pay for their crimes with blood. A life for a life is not enough. My son is...was worth everything to me and they took him. And in return, I shall take everything away from them as well.”