

The Dragon King's Substitute Bride Chapter 81

HERA

“Watch your step.”

I hike my skirt up with one hand while the other grips his as firmly as I can.

I have a general life rule that I have only now just come up with.

If one is heading anywhere where someone has to tell you to ‘watch your step’, then you should not be going to said place at all.

Those words tell you it is a bad idea.

And this place has all the markings of a bad idea.

“Where are you taking me...why is it so dark and quiet and cold...?”

“You ask too many questions Hera.”

“Forgive me your highness for wanting to know why we are walking down some damp, dark stair well that looks like it has not seen the light of day in a really long time.

“That...” He places two hands firmly on either side of my waist and lifts me up over the remaining steps. “...is because it has not.”

As always my heart flutters like it always does whenever he touches me.

He places me back on my feet in front of him and I smoothen down my clothes and attempt to brush off not quite so imaginary dust in an effort to hide my pink face.

“So where are we?”

He laughs and takes my hand again. “Patience Hera.”

I sigh and follow behind him.

Which is hard to do given how I can even barely see and I find myself wondering how in all the realms he is able to know where he is leading us.

The stone walls surrounding the stairwell we had just come down from had been so cold and felt so damp that I almost expected us to be in a cave or to hear the sound of dripping water and smell mold.

The air feels moist and stuffy.

And just like when I had been taken to the cellar, this place feels like it is actually far under the castle.

The floors for one are no longer the smooth weathered stone of the rest of the castle and the ground beneath our feet has been replaced with loosely packed dirt, the walls now looking and feeling like we have descended into the heart of the mountain on which the dragon castle stands.

“Is this perhaps some sort of punishment?”

He does not stop walking but I can almost hear the frown in his face.

“No. Why would you think that?”

I shrug, flinching slightly when I feel something airy and leg like brush against the nape of my neck.

“So you are not mad at me for destroying your study?”

“I am not.”

I believe him but my eyes still narrow in suspicion.

“And you are not mad about...you know...the other thing?”

He stops at a large, heavy looking door that looks very much out of place in this cave like passage and turns around to smirk at me.

“Oh, do you by any chance mean the reason we are even here in the first place?”

I bite my lip and look away.

After my little... incident in his study yesterday, which by the way woke up more than half the castle and nearly gave the chief steward a heart attack when he saw the mess...

We had gone back to my room, not his and after a bath and his changing out of his riding clothes he had pulled me into bed with him, kissed me hard and then was out like a light before his head even touched the pillow.

I, on the other hand, had stayed awake the rest of the night.

Because I knew that it did not matter how tired Midas was, if I had slept off, I would not have been able to wake up before he did.

And for my plan to work, by the time morning came, he had to still be asleep.

So I had stayed up the rest of the night, watching his tired face and hoping that he was too exhausted to still wake up at the fourth bell like he normally did.

He was.

And so I had snuck out at first light this morning and stolen down the tower and into the castle to find the chief steward with a message to take to the rest of the court when they arrived.

The King would not be doing anything but resting for the entire day and if he as chief steward or any other person for that matter so much as came near the king with even a whisper of work or a problem he had to solve, I would personally see too it that they are beheaded.

But because I knew no matter how exhausted they both were, if Leo came to him with “pressing realm matters” Midas would immediately go with him, I also told the steward to let the chief Ryder know that he was off work as well.

And to make sure that as the chief steward, he and the rest of the court stayed the f**k away from both the King and his right hand man.

From the look on his face, I assume my choice of words may have scandalized him a little bit but he had not needed any more convincing that I was dead serious.

I have no doubt that the dragon king has not had a day without working in hades knows how long, and come hell or high water, I was determined to give him one.

But convincing the king that taking one day of rest did not mean his kingdom and his realm would suddenly burst into flames had been easier said than done.

I had hidden the key to our room and planned to play dumb when he asked why the door was locked and why no servant had come knocking yet.

At least until I could manage to sell him on the idea of doing anything other than working.

But he had seen right through me.

And when he threatened to fly out through the window, I had to resort to more...physical means of distracting him and keeping him there until I could convince him that the idea of taking a day off from being the King was not in fact the “most ridiculous thing he had ever heard”.

After a lot of persuasion...admittedly the kissing and the s*x may or may not have helped speed things along...he finally agreed.

Had even laughed when I told him how I threatened to behead his entire court.

But because Midas is almost completely incapable of doing anything but working or thinking about working, it was up to me to come up with ways to help him...relax

Yes, he had also made a face when I said it.

I asked him what he liked to do when he is not at war or going around the castle or the 5th realm or even in his throne room, trying to solve one issue or the other.

He said horse riding.

I said “Over my dead body, think harder.”

So he did.

And now here we are, standing in some dark dusty passage in front of a door that looks like it has not been opened since the gods last walked the lesser realms.

“You know your highness a day of attempted suicide disguised as horse riding does not sound so bad anymore”

But he ignores me and pushes the door open.

The air that flies out is so much cooler than the stale air in the passage that it is almost a shock.

Now, not only can I hear the sound of water, I can smell it too.

My trepidation is instantly replaced by curiosity.

He takes a torch off the wall and lights it with a wave of his hand.

“I had completely forgotten that you are able to do that. Can all dragon Ryders do this or is it just you?”

“Just me” He raises the torch as if searching for something.

Then he takes a step into the darkness beyond the open door. “Wait here...”

I follow him.

I can see a faint blue light getting brighter with each step we take.

The air is completely different now, lighter.

It feels almost like I am outside and the sound of falling water, a low, deep rumbling, seems to getting louder with each step.

The light gets brighter as we near the opening, a narrow slit between two dark rock walls.

Midas, hulking giant that he is, stands in front of the narrow space, completely blocking my view of what lies beyond it.

“You asked me what I liked to do, in the days before I became King...”

I nod, unable to tear my eyes away from the look on his face.

The gold in his eyes glow bright in the darkness of the cave and he has on a tiny, almost mischievous smile, the type you get when you wish to show a person something that you hope would make them as happy as it makes you.

“Well...here it is”

He steps out of the way and my jaw quite literally drops to the floor.

“Skies above Midas ...how is this even possible?”

“My father used to bring me here, when he wanted me to.... practice changing into my dragon form.”

There is something about the way he says the words but I’m too distracted to really notice it.

The walls of the cave fall away and I take a step forward so we are standing at the edge of a ledge over looking the most incredibly vast space I have ever seen.

It is like a secret underground world, an entire natural paradise tucked away in the darkness of the earth.

There are trees and flowers and fruits of colors and kinds I do not even recognize.

Birds flitting and flying between stark white branches and gold rimmed leaves of a green so rich it looks painted on , calling happily to one another and floating around in the world without a care.

And right across from us, gushing out from a long, horizontal slit in the mountain wall, is a wide curtain of clear purple water cascading down in a rush of sparkling liquid to tumble and fall hundred of feet to a river that flows swiftly to the left.

A winding, swirling ribbon of crystal clear purple water, that cuts through the bowels of dragon’s mount and disappears around a bend I cannot see.

And it is not just the waterfall that threatens to take my breath away.

Hanging from the dark rock roof far above our head, are long, cone like crystals that glow with a fierce light so that it almost looks like we are standing outside and not deep in the belly of a mountain.

“Gods...Midas this is...I don’t even know what to say.”

“Hang on”

And before I can say a word, his wings are out, I am in his arms and we are flying.

Heading down to the rich forest at the bottom of the chasm.

I turn to stare at him, at the black luminescent wings even now protruding out his back.

“Does it hurt?”

“Does what hurt?”

“Your wings. When they rip through you skin, does it hurt?”

“In the beginning, but not anymore. I am...used to the pain now. And they are my dragon’s wings, I merely borrow them once in a while.”

He places me gently on the bright green grass that covers the mountain’s floor.

“Your dragon, you talk about it like it is a separate person from you.”

“That is because he is. I am... different from other Ryders”.

“Does he have a name?”

He looks slightly uncomfortable with this discussion but he answers me anyway.

“Er’gan.”

“Er’gan” I repeat the name, rolling the letters on my tongue. “and that day, in the Elder forest. Was he by any chance the one who...”

Midas does not look away. “Yes.”

Then I say the words the second they pop into my brain, ignoring the part that is screaming at me and asking if I have gone insane.

“Can I meet him?”

I expect him to balk at the idea but he simply stares at me, hard.

“Are you sure?”

“If he is a part of you, then yes. I am sure.”

He sighs. “I should warn you, he is not as...tolerant as I am.”

I smirk. “Tolerant. Never thought I’d see the day that word would be used in a description of the dragon king.”

“You see that, that right there is precisely what you should not do.”

I roll my eyes.

His have already started to turn red. “Just...try not to annoy him.”

“No promises”

I keep waiting for a spark, a growl or something, anything to indicate that something has happened to him but he just looks at me and then...

“Human”

His voice is different somehow.

Harsher, deeper, more rough around the edges but his eyes, the color of blood and roses, that’s how it know my Midas is gone.

I nod slightly. “Er’gan”

He is silent for a long time.

So long that I almost begin to wonder if he is gone.

Then he starts to walks around me, arms behind his back, looking me over.

“You look nothing like her”

At least that is what I think he says but I am unsure so I frown.

“Who?”

He ignores me, still mumbling to himself and then he lifts a strand of my hair.

“Except for this...”

“I’m afraid I do not understand.”

He lets go and comes back to stand in front of me.

“I would think the dragon king would know better than to summon me up for your amusement like some show dog at a fair.”

“You tried to kill me.”

“You disobeyed our instructions and tried to run away.”

“In my defense...”

“You have no defense.”

“In my defense...You sent me to the cellars.”

Er’gan freezes, glaring at me and I almost take a step back cursing my big mouth.

But then he scoffs, loud and unexpected.

“The dragon king is right, you are annoying.”

I roll my eyes and fold my arms.

“Well you can tell him he is not exactly my favorite person either.”

“Who is?”

“What?”

“Who is your favorite person Human?”

I think about it and feel my voice drop several octaves.

“My name is Hera and it does not matter anymore. You and your king took me away from him.”

The Dragon King’s Substitute Bride Chapter 82

MIDAS

“Hera I...”

She beats him to it, placing both hands on his arms and stepping closer like he had not just been possessed by a five thousand year old dragon who had once...twice...tried to kill her.

“No, you don’t have to say anything. I should not have said that.”

“But you meant it.”

He isn’t asking.

He could tell.

From the way her voice had lowered with barely restrained anger and pain when she said it, it was obvious whoever this person was, he had been immensely important to her.

And she does not deny it.

But rather than turn away from him, she shrugs.

“Still. I should not have said it and thrown it at you the way I did. It’s just I have blamed you for everything for so long, it is a little hard to stop.”

He nods at her because he understands.

Yet even then...

Conflicted.

That's how he had felt from the moment he was back in control of his body once again.

He feels guilty because once more he has seen a stark reminder of exactly how much he hurt her.

But there's a new feeling in the mix.

It is a feeling he recognizes but will not admit.

For the sake of his pride, he will call it curiosity, not jealousy...

One only gets jealous when they have to share something...or someone that's theirs with some other person

And the dragon king most definitely does not share.

So he cannot be Jealous.

But who exactly is this human male she seems to miss so much and why in all the realms is he her favorite person?

Before he can ask however, she is moving away, holding up the ends of her dress so it is not dirtied by the wet green grass of the under ground garden.

Referring to this place, as a garden is the dragon king's idea of being modest.

Especially considering how largely like a forest it is, but that is what his mother used to call it.

And it was here his father had brought him, on the day of his 18th birthday.

The day his dragon should have awakened and didn't.

It had been the day Midas had found out that he was not like other dragon Ryders; weredragons with ability to turn into dragons from the day they turned 18.

Not only had Midas failed to change but that was also day, he had found that he was in fact, not born a dragon Ryder at all.

"Why have not you brought me down here before?"

Her voice pulls him back to the present and he watches her, hips swaying as she glides to the edge of the small purple stream.

He watches the way her eyes widen with wonder the closer she draws to the roaring waterfall.

The way she jumps then laughs at herself for being scared when a frog leaps at her feet.

The way the light from the white fire crystals hanging above, glints off her hair so that it looks like there is quite literally a halo of fire around her head.

Gods he could watch her for an eternity and never get tired.

“I believe it might have had to do with the mutual hatred we both shared.”

She smirks up at him when he comes to stand beside her at the bank of the sparkling purple stream. “Shared uh...bold of you dragon king, to assume I no longer hate you”

“Do you?”

She stares up at him and then shrugs, smirking as she does so. “I believe the word you used was tolerance.”

He scoffs and she laughs.

He likes the sound of her laugh.

Next to the way she says his name, it is the most beautiful thing he has ever heard.

He wonders if her favorite person made her laugh a lot more than he does.

“So did you ...”

“Who is he?”

They had spoken at the same time and she turns to look up at him, her brows drawing together in confusion.

“Who is who my Lord?”

He clears his throat, infusing a deliberate indifference into his voice.
MIDAS

“Hara I...”

Sha baats him to it, placing both hands on his arms and stepping closer like he had not just been possessed by a five thousand year old dragon who had once...twice...tried to kill her.

“No, you don’t have to say anything. I should not have said that.”

“But you meant it.”

He isn’t asking.

He could tell.

From the way har voica had lowarad with baraly rastrained angar and pain whan sha said it, it was obvious whoavar this parson was, ha had baan immansaly important to har.

And sha doas not dany it.

But rathar than turn away from him, sha shrugs.

“Still. I should not hava said it and thrown it at you tha way I did. It’s just I hava blamad you for avarything for so long, it is a littla hard to stop.”

Ha nods at har bacausa ha undarstands.

Yat avan than...

Conflictad.

That’s how ha had falt from tha momant ha was back in control of his body onca again.

Ha faals guilty bacausa onca mora ha has saan a stark ramindar of axactly how much ha hurt har.

But thara’s a naw faaling in tha mix.

It is a faaling ha racognizas but will not admit.

For tha saka of his prida, ha will call it curiosity, not jaalousy...

Ona only gats jaalous whan thay hava to shara somathing...or somaona that’s thairs with soma othar parson

And tha dragon king most dafinitaly doas not shara.

So ha cannot ba Jaalous.

But who axactly is this human mala sha saams to miss so much and why in all tha raalms is ha har favorita parson?

Bafora ha can ask howavar, sha is moving away, holding up tha ands of har drass so it is not dirtiad by tha wat graan grass of tha undar ground gardan.

Rafarring to this placa, as a gardan is tha dragon king’s idaa of baing modast.

Espacially considaring how largaly lika a forast it is, but that is what his mothar usad to call it.

And it was hara his fathar had brought him, on tha day of his 18th birthday.

Tha day his dragon should hava awakanad and didn’t.

It had baan tha day Midas had found out that ha was not lika othar dragon Rydars; waradragons with ability to turn into dragons from tha day thay turnad 18.

Not only had Midas failed to change but that was also day, ha had found that ha was in fact, not born a dragon Rydar at all.

“Why hava not you brought ma down hara bafora?”

Har voica pulls him back to tha prasant and ha watchas har, hips swaying as sha glidas to tha adga of tha small purpla straam.

Ha watchas tha way har ayas widan with wondar tha closar sha draws to tha roaring watarfall.

Tha way sha jumps than laughs at harsalf for baing scarad whan a frog laaps at har faat.

Tha way tha light from tha whita fira crystals hanging abova, glints off har hair so that it looks lika thara is quita litarally a halo of fira around har haad.

Gods ha could watch har for an atarnity and navar gat tirad.

“I baliava it might hava had to do with tha mutual hatrad wa both sharad.”

Sha smirks up at him whan ha comas to stand basida har at tha bank of tha sparkling purpla straam. “Sharad uh...bold of you dragon king, to assumma I no longar hata you”

“Do you?”

Sha staras up at him and than shrugs, smirking as sha doas so. “I baliava tha word you usad was tolaranca.”

Ha scoffs and sha laughs.

Ha likas tha sound of har laugh.

Naxt to tha way sha says his nama, it is tha most baautiful thing ha has avar haard.

Ha wondars if har favorita parson mada har laugh a lot mora than ha doas.

“So did you ...”

“Who is ha?”

Thay had spokan at tha sama tima and sha turns to look up at him, har brows drawing togathar in confusion.

“Who is who my Lord?”

Ha claars his throat, infusing a dalibarata indiffaranca into his voica.

An indifference he most definitely does not feel.

“Your...favorite person, the one I supposedly took you away from. Did you perhaps have ... someone back in Averia”

He intended to sound nonchalant about it but the thought of her having a lover somewhere, it darkens his voice and reduces it to a low growl.

She frowns slightly. “Skies no I meant my brother.”

“Oh. Good.”

His relief that she has not always been alone and that she did not actually have someone she was in love with is short lived.

A tiny smile lights up her face.

Tiny and mischievous.

“Wait...you would not by any chance be jealous would you now dragon king?”

He scoffs and looks away.

“Jealous. What a ridiculous idea. I ask merely out of curiosity. I am not jealous”

“I think you are.”

“Well you think wrong and you know why?”

She smirks up at him. “I assume you’re going to tell me?”

He steps closer to her, a sense of warm satisfaction filling him when the smirk disappears of her face and her pulse quickens.

“Because...” He leans in and her eyes drift shut.

He stares at her mouth., “.... I am certain...”

She is rising on her toes, inching closer to him.

Their lips are barely inches apart, breaths mingling in the almost non-existent space between them.

But at the last moment, rather than kiss her like she him wants to, he merely brushes her lips with his and instead lowers his head and places a tiny kiss on the spot below her ear.

“...that no one can make your heart race the way I do.”

It takes her a moment to answer and when she does, her voice is breathless.

“You flatter yourself dragon king.”

“Only because I know I’m right.”

She stares up at him, blue eyes twinkling. “You are.”

So he kisses her then.

Taking her bottom lip in his mouth.

Because he wants to, because he cannot help himself.

He breaks the kiss a moment later, stares at her and then decides he isn’t even close to satisfied.

So he kisses her again.

Kisses her until they are both panting and heaving and she comes apart in his arms, melting against his body so he has to hold her up.

But just when Midas is about to give in to the most basic of his instinct and take her right there, she pulls away, stepping out of reach.

“Hera...”

She takes another step back, her eyes locked on his even as her hands reach behind her back.

Still holding his gaze she pulls at the strings holding up her dress, letting the soft silky material drop to the ground, weightless,

She stands there staring at him in nothing but her chemise and undergarments.

Midas swallows, blood rushing from his head and straight to the growing hardness in his pants.

Whatever it is that she is wearing should be outlawed because how in all the realms is he supposed to be able to control himself around her now that he knows that beneath her dress, this is what she looks like... all the time.

“Hera...”

There is no disguising the need in the roughness of his voice, in the way he says her name..

And she smirks up knowingly at him but rather than come closer, she bites her lip and starts to move backwards...towards the sparkling river.

“What are you doing?”

She steps into the water. “If you want me dragon king, you are going to have to come and get me.”

Midas does not even remember taking off his shirt.

The only thing he remembers is the sharp, biting cold of the water when he wades into it but even then is lost the moment he holds her wet and soft against him and claims her mouth with his own.

How did he ever even think he would be able to fight this?

An indifference he most definitely does not feel.

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She isn't just made for him.

He is made for her.

Two halves of the same soul.

He could try to run if he wanted to.

Could try to deny the bond between them

But it wouldn't matter anyway.

His heart would always beat only for her.

"Your highness!!"

The voice calls out from the ledge up above and Mides feels her stiffen in his arms.

If he had thought she was shaking out of embarrassment he would have been terribly wrong.

She is angry...livid actually and he would be angry too.

But he also knows that if his chief Ryder is here then it can only mean that something very very terrible has happened.

He sighs heavily and long.

She watches him. "We have to go back don't we?"

"I'm afraid so."

"God damn Leo..."

Mides cannot help but chuckle at the growl in her voice. "I would let you behold him but I'm worried I might need him alive a little longer."

She leughs end lets her heed fell so thet her foreheed is touching his. "I just wanted..."

He kisses her softly. "I know... end it hes been the single most emezing helf e dey of my entire life."

For his own pert, the Chief Ryder when they meet him et the top of the ledge, looks contrite about heving to come down here.

"My epologies your mejesties."

"Oh sod your epologies Leo."

Mides holds her beck with one firm hend eround her weist, pulling her to him.

"Whet is it Leo?"

"The Kingmekers, they ere here..."

Mides Frowns.

A second visit in such e short while could only meen nothing good wes on the horizon.

He elmost does not went to esk.

"Whet teles of woe do they bring this time?"

"They would not tell me, not without you present. But they request en eudience... immedietely"

The dregon king nods.

"Teke the queen beck..."

But before he cen finish his sentence she shekes her heed end slips her hend in his.

Mides steres et her.

Uneble to describe the rush of emotions thet single ect stirs in him.

He nods.

"Fine. Go eheed. The Queen end I shell join you in the throne room shortly."

Leo bows end diseppeers down the pessege.

He turns to her. "Are you sure?"

She nods. "Leed the wey dregon King."

He elmost tells her then.

The doors to the throne room swing open and the king and queen of the dragon realm step in.

The three king makers and the chief Ryder bow low as Mides and Here take their seats at the top of the steps.

Mides lifts his head.

“You may rise.”

“Long live the King.”

“I much preferred it Arydien when our visits to one another were more occasional”

“I cannot say the same your highness but I wish our presence here were under more... pleasant circumstances.”

“You requested an urgent audience.”

“We did and I see you brought the queen”

Mides eyes narrow. “Is that going to be a problem?”

“On the contrary dragon king. I believe her majesty’s presence here is of the uttermost importance.”

“You summoned us here Arydien so speak my patience wears thin.”

“A portal was opened your Majesty”

Mides heart slams against his chest.

Herd enough to hurt.

But his face remains impassive. “Impossible Arydien. I would have known the very moment a portal was opened into my realm.”

“Yes because the dragon castle would have told you. But you have not been home have you dragon king.”

“No. I have been gone for weeks. Out searching for a dark elf who...”

Mides freezes. Her words coming back to him with startling clarity.

A distraction.

And just like that everything starts to make sense.

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He could try to run if he wanted to.

Could try to deny the bond between them

But it wouldn't matter anyway.

His heart would always beat only for her.

"Your highness!!"

The voice calls out from the ledge up above and Midas feels her stiffen in his arms.

If he had thought she was shaking out of embarrassment he would have been terribly wrong.

She is angry...livid actually and he would be angry too.

But he also knows that if his chief Ryder is here then it can only mean that something very very terrible has happened.

He sighs hard and long.

She watches him. "We have to go back don't we?"

"I'm afraid so."

"Goddamn Leo..."

Midas cannot help but chuckle at the growl in her voice. "I would let you behead him but I'm worried I might need him alive a little longer."

She laughs and lets her head fall so that her forehead is touching his. "I just wanted..."

He kisses her softly. "I know... and it has been the single most amazing half a day of my entire life."

For his own part, the Chief Ryder when they meet him at the top of the ledge, looks contrite about having to come down here.

"My apologies your majesties."

"Oh sod your apologies Leo."

Midas holds her back with one firm hand around her waist, pulling her to him.

"What is it Leo?"

“The Kingmakers, they are here...”

Midas Frowns.

A second visit in such a short while could only mean nothing good was on the horizon.

He almost does not want to ask.

“What tales of woe do they bring this time?”

“They would not tell me, not without you present. But they request an audience... immediately”

The dragon king nods.

“Take the queen back...”

But before he can finish his sentence she shakes her head and slips her hand in his.

Midas stares at her.

Unable to describe the rush of emotions that single act stirs in him.

He nods.

“Fine. Go ahead. The Queen and I shall join you in the throne room shortly.”

Leo bows and disappears down the passage.

He turns to her. “Are you sure?”

She nods. “Lead the way dragon King.”

He almost tells her then.

The doors to the throne room swing open and the king and queen of the dragon realm step in.

The three king makers and the chief Ryder bow low as Midas and Hera take their seat at the top of the steps.

Midas lifts his head.

“You may rise.”

“Long live the King.”

“I much preferred it Arydian when our visits to one another was more occasional”

“I cannot say the same your highness but I wish our presence here was under more... pleasant circumstances.”

“You requested an urgent audience.”

“We did and I see you brought the queen”

Midas eyes narrow. “Is that going to be a problem?”

“On the contrary dragon king. I believe her majesty’s presence here is of the uttermost importance.”

“You summoned us here Arydian so speak my patience wears thin.”

“A portal was opened your Majesty”

Midas heart slams against his chest.

Hard enough to hurt.

But his face remains impassive. “Impossible Arydian. I would have known the very moment a portal was opened into my realm.”

“Yes because the dragon castle would have told you. But you have not been home have you dragon king.”

“No. I have been gone for weeks. Out searching for a dark elf who...”

Midas freezes. Her words coming back to him with startling clarity.

A distraction.

And just like that everything starts to make sense.

The Dragon King’s Substitute Bride Chapter 83

MIDAS

The silence in the throne room of the dragon castle is deafening.

Deafening and heavy and oppressive.

Filled with a foreboding of the evil to come.

The dragon king had stopped speaking abruptly

. The words on the tip of his tongue vanishing in the wake of the realization of what they meant.

The queen sitting by his left and the chief Ryder on his right both turn to glance at him.

But it is she who speaks first. Her voice firm but laced with confusion

“My Lord...?”

Midas turns to look at her.

A distraction....

Those had been her words. What she had told them after she came out of the hut that had been set as a trap for him.

He did not understand it then.

He does now.

“Remember how you said they...the dark elves and everything going on with Adarin and Rardath was nothing but a distraction?”

He sees it the moment recognition comes into her eyes, watches her remember and shudder.

She nods. “Yes. I do.”

“Well it would appear that you were right.”

She frowns, shakes her head.

“I do not understand.”

The 5th realm, closest after the realm of angels to the gods, has always been the most coveted by all the lesser creatures who walked the seven realms.

Right from the beginning, everyone wanted it.

Fought to possess it.

Even a god had once desired to have it as theirs.

As a result, many years ago when the realms were still young, in an effort to safeguard their people and guard against an ambush of their realm, a warning spell was cast, a bond forged.

No one would be able to open a portal into the 5th realm without the knowledge of the King.

But this spell, it was incredibly powerful magic.

And a spell this powerful, it needed to be contained.

It could not be put directly into the King.

Dragonkin are strong but they are mortal.

So it was placed in the dragon castle, the one that sits upon the dark mountain that served as the embodiment of their powers, a gift from the Fire gods.

As long as the dragon King was in the castle, or even nearby, they would know, would feel it the moment a portal was opened into the dragon realm.

And from the very moment that Midas had been crowned king, this ability to sense open portals to his realm had been transferred to him.

The closer he is to the castle, the faster he would know and the stronger the feelings would be.

Even if he were just some distance away in the capital, he would still have sensed it when a portal opened.

A tingling in the tip of his fingers, warmth spreading throughout his entire body and setting his teeth on edge.

The enemy, whoever they are, knew this.

They also knew that even if they somehow managed to keep him out long enough to open one without his knowledge, if he came back to the castle too early, he might still be able to sniff out the echoes of the residual magic of the warning spell.

And so they knew that not only did they have to lure him far far away from his castle but they also had to keep him away long enough to be able to open and close the portal undetected.

And now with his being gone from the Castle for an entire Fortnight, hades knows what those slimy dark elves had brought into his realm.

“Midas...?”

The King stares straight ahead, his mind whirling too fast to really hear her, or the worry in her tone.

So it is Leo, who speaks instead, voicing Midas’ growing trepidation.

Giving life to the whispers in his head.

“They wanted to open a portal into the dragon realm and they knew if The King were he to be in the castle, would know and so...”

“And so they caused chaos in my realm and sent me on a wild goose chase. Had me riding across the lands for weeks, trying to find the dark elf responsible for nearly tearing two of my clans apart.”

Midas’ jaw is clenched so hard, it would hurt if he could feel it.

But he can barely feel anything, can barely hear anything beyond the blood rushing between his ears.

It is not just Adarin and Rardath who had been played.

They had tricked him as well.

Him.

The dragon king does not roar when he is angry.

He does not shout or yell or throw things.

No.

When the dragon king is angry, his eyes turn the colour of blood and his voice becomes so cold and so dangerously low that all within earshot know that it is their best interest to stay far away.

Or risk bearing the brunt of his anger.

But at this moment Midas is not just angry.

He is seething. White hot rage covering his body in a prickly heat

So much so that Er'gan temporarily takes over.

And the dragon inside of him does the roaring for both of them.

“How. dare. they?!”

They leap from their chair. Anger sending them rising to their feet.

“How dare they think they can come into our realm, without our permission?! Who are they? I demand that you tell me Who they are right now and I will rip their heads from their bodies and grind their bones beneath my feet until they rue the day they were born. Tell me now!”

The very walls of the throne room seem to shake and quiver in the face of their wrath.

Even the Chief Ryder wisely takes a step to the side and away from them.

But the King makers, messengers of the Fates, simply look up at them, dragon and dragon king as one.

Cloudy grey eyes unblinking. The gaze of the three men steady and firm.

Arydian sighs. “Your anger is understandable but it will do no good to attack blindly.”

“Messenger of the Fates, do not test my patience. Tell me who they are. Who is behind all of this? Tell me right this minute or I shall make you regret it as well.”

They feel her hand on their arm, tentative, calming and Midas momentarily snaps back but Er'gan is not ready to let go just yet and the dragon forces himself to the fore front once again.

Midas understands his dragon's rage.

What he does not understand is the fear that fills it's mind and in turn fills his as well.

Er'gan...what is going on, what do you know?

In response the dragon fills the King's mind with another memory.

Midas sees himself reaching out to her, holding her arms the way he had that day when she stepped out of the hut housing the body of Adarin's son.

"Hera...who sent them?"

She finally looking up at him.

"I am not sure but I felt darkness...an evil so strong it had to be chained down, imprisoned. And were it to ever rise again, it would consume us...all of us."

His dragon's voice interrupts the memory, pulling him back.

If there is even the slightest possibility dragon king, that it is what I think it is...who I think it is then, we all are in trouble your Highness. Grave danger.

What are you talking about Er'gan. What do you know?

But before the dragon can answer him...

Arydian stamps his staff once against the marble floor, the sound echoing through the room.

Then he tilts his chin up and meets their gaze.

"Give the King back his body Er'gan."

It is not a question, it is a command.

One backed up with the powers of the Fate.

And first dragon or not, even Er'gan is subject to the will of the gods.

Midas, in control once more, stares back at the small, wise men at the bottom of the steps.

Then he turns around and glances at her.

Her eyes are filled with fear but she does not shrink away from him like he expected her to and for that Midas is grateful.

He turns back to the King makers.

His voice betraying nothing of the chaos that had almost ensued.

Or of the discussion he and his dragon had in his head.

“When was the portal opened?”

His question was directed at no one in particular and it is Igor, Messenger of Atropos the past who answers.

“Five days ago your highness. We tried to reach you but you were too far away.”

Midas sighs.

Five days ago.

Too much time to even try to figure out where and how the portal had been opened.

He knew the dark elves coveted his throne but this...this elaborate scheme...

Who in all the realms were they working with this time around?

Could the giant clan have decided to once more try their luck with invading his realm again?

Gods help him if they did.

Midas would wipe their entire realm from the face of existence.

Elian, Messenger of Lachesis the Future.

“Dragon king, this storm is only just beginning.”

He turns his gaze to the most silent of the three men.

“What realm was the portal opened into?”

The three men look at each other and Igor answers again.

“We are... uncertain.”

Midas sighs.

“Then what did they bring in, do you know?”

The silence that follows his question is deafening and dread steals over him.

He almost does not wish to know.

The king maker sighs.

” It was Wolfsbane your grace. My brothers and I could smell it the moment it was brought in.”

Hades...

She glances from Midas to Leo and notices the look of shock on both the face of the king and his right hand.

“What is wolfsbane?”

The Kingmakers turns to her.

“It is posion your grace. Very strong poison.”

Poison was putting it mildly.

There is a reason it is found nowhere in all the lands of the fifth realm.

It does not just kill dragon and weredragons alike.

It drives them insane first.

One taste of it and before they died, his army of Ryders would go mad, killing everything and everyone in their path.

And for a dragon or dragon Ryder who had been infected with wolfsbane, there is no cure.

Midas sighs.

“What will you have me do?”

“Find the dark elevin queen”

“Do you not think Arydian, that that would have been the first thing on my mind. Why do you suppose that I was gone for so long even though we had by the fifth day already found the the dead body of the elf who Adarin and Rardath identified as being behind it all. He was most likely killed by his own so we would not be able to trace them.”

“Then try harder dragon king.”

Midas has half a mind to sneer at the man but he holds himself and simply nods.

“I shall leave for the Elder Forest at first light tomorrow.”

“You must take the queen with you.”

“Out of the question.”

“They know about her. Suspect that she is the reason their earlier plans failed and they are curious. If you take her with you, they will not resist being able to come out of hiding.”

Midas tilts his head slowly. “You want me...”

One step then another...until he is standing face to face with the King maker in the center.

His hands are clenched in fists and he chest rises and falls with each word. “To use my tether as bait for some blood thirsty elves?”

Arydian looks up at him with something akin to understanding in his eyes and places a gentle, wrinkled hand on the arm of the dragon King.

“The Fates say it is the only way.”

“f**k the Fates. I will make my own path. One that does not involve nearly killing the woman I lov...”

“I will do it.”

Midas turns around to stare at her where she stands, at the tip of the steps leading to the dragon throne.

He shakes his head, his voice firm.

“No.”

” As Queen of this realm, it is my duty to protect it. To protect you. So if my going with you is what will lure them out then so be it.”

Midas Frowns. Shaking his head when she comes down the steps to stand before him “Why?”

He does not understand her.

He took everything away from her, tore her from her home. Why would she do this, deliberately put herself in danger. For the people who hurt her the most.

“Because it is as you said dragon king. Human or not, this is who I am. And I know it seems like I am being...”

“Foolish and reckless?”

She laughs and raises her hand to his face. “Maybe. But I also cannot stand by and do nothing.”

“Aren’t you afraid?”

Then is silent for a moment but then she smiles.

“I am....I just trust you more.”

The Dragon King's Substitute Bride Chapter 84

MINTH

A crash, loud and jarring echoes through the tiny room.

Glass sprays in all directions and the girl barely manages to protect her head.

A strangled cry of distress is scarcely able to leave her throat before she has to once more dive out of the way of another well aimed, potentially lethal object.

“How f*****g dare she!!!”

One after the other, tiny vials made of precious colored glass, bounce against the stone walls... the bed frame...the mirror above the amorie.

Each one of them shattering into tiny fragments,all over the chambers of the King's Mistress.

“How dare she take what does not belong to her? I should be sitting in the throne room beside the king. Me!!! Me!!! Not some godsforsaken human w***e!”

Brushes, jewelry, even a sandal flies through the air in rapid succession.

The scents from the fragmented containers that had once held rare and precious oils and perfumes fill the air even as oily liquids seeps into the rich rug in the centre of the room,

Leaving in their wake wide wet stains that would never come out.

But she does not care.

The steam of her rage and wrath mixing in with the smell of fear that oozes out of the maid cowering in the corner.

The one who had brought her the news.

Minth looks at her and a deep sense of loathing fills her.

Weak, sniveling, pathetic slave girl.

Everything Fate had wanted her to be.

Everything she had clawed her out of.

And now, this human b***h, hades take her, thought she could just come from nowhere and take it No..no

She turned back to the girl.

“Cease that disgusting sniveling at once or I shall be forced to give you a real reason to cry.”

The maid wipes hurriedly at her sloppy nose. “Y...yes my Lady.”

“You say he let her sit with him in the throne room?”

The girl shakes quietly as if afraid to repeat the words.

“You will speak or I will beat the words out of you.”

“I saw them go in together your Grace.”

“And the Kingmakers are around?”

“Y...yes...m...my Lady”

Not even the members of the King’s personal council were allowed into the throne room when the King makers were around, much less when they requested an urgent audience with the King.

The dragon king trusted only one man, his stoic, emotionless chief Ryder who Minth had since given up trying to slide her way to.

And yet he has allowed this human to sit with them.

As if she is now qualified to rule over them simply because he married her.

Over Minth’s dead body.

Was it not enough that ever since the wench had gotten married to the dragon king he had not once, not one single time after their damn binding ceremony, bothered to look at Minth.

He did not even spare her a glance when she walked into a room.

He does not just ignore her, it is almost like she has become invisible to him.

Like he has forgotten about her existence.

It was the most insulting of slights.

However, on the night before the King’s departure a fortnight ago, Minth had devised a plan to fix that little problem.

One that she knew could have gone of either one of two ways.

It could have ended with her being driven from the Castle for disobeying the King’s instructions to never come to him unless he sent for her.

Or, and this is the one Minth is convinced would have happened, it would have ended up with her in the King's bed.

So she had dressed in a sheer, red dress that had more cutouts than it had material.

Excitement and nervousness had pooled in her belly even as she massaged oils into her skin until it gleamed and shone, combed her hair until it fell in luxuriant dark curtains on either side of her face.

Ever since he stopped looking at her, Minth had realized how much she wanted him.

And not simply for the fact that having him would give her the crown.

But because somewhere along the line, in her head, this whole thing had become a competition.

Not only for the dragon throne, but for the King's affection.

She had not thought that the dragon King still had a heart left, but she sees the way he looks at her, the princess he brought from Averia.

The way his eyes light up when she walks into a room or when she lays her tiny human hand on his arm like touching the king of the 5th realm was the most natural thing in the world.

And Minth hates it.

He had never looked at her like that.

So now, she was determined to win not just the crown, but whatever little heart Midas has left.

So she had pinched color into her cheeks, pushed up her breasts until they threatened to spill out of their confines and set out to the King's room in the west tower.

And Minth is convinced that everything would have gone to plan.

He would have opened that door, taken one look at her and that would have been it.

Unable to resist, he would have made love to her and she would have been back in.

But no, the shameless harlot had beaten her to it.

And Minth could hear her cries of pleasure before she had even fully made it to his doors.

It had nearly driven her insane.

And now even worse, the servants who were supposed to be on Minth's side, who were supposed to help her drive out the imposter were instead warming up to her.

They seem to have all of a sudden forgotten the reason they even hated her in the first place.

Forgotten that it was her realm the former King and queen had journeyed to and never returned from.

Now they invite her to sit in on court meetings, their once glaring gazes becoming tentative smiles and helpful answers.

Castle duties, decisions about day to day activities that had once been Minth's have now somehow been handed over to the Queen...

Just thinking about it makes her want to spit.

A witch.

That is what she is.

An inspid, little human witch.

She must have bewitched them.

Yes, she had to have brought some disgusting human spell with her and had now placed a hex over everyone in this castle.

The more she thinks about it, the surer Minth becomes that this is indeed what is happening.

The human princess must have them all under a spell.

She doubtlessly laughs about it in her room. Thinking them all fools wrapped around her tiny, feeble fingers.

Well, she may think she has everyone fooled.

But not Minth.

Never Minth.

The King's mistress can see through her games and fake innocence.

And since everyone else in the castle is blind to it, to the danger this human thing brings, Minth is determined to help them.

She nods furiously like one on the verge of insanity, mumbling to herself, her voice low and incomprehensible.

The echoes of a plan have begun in her head once again.

A plan that had to be acted on immediately.

She just has to find someone first.

So Minth walks up to her mirror to make sure there is no evidence of her near breakdown still etched on her face.

A thousand heart shaped cherubic faces, framed by midnight hair and possessing bewitching green eyes stare back at her from the shattered fragments of her broken mirror.

She smoothens back her hair, speaking without glancing at the maid still in the room.

“Are they still in the throne room?”

“I...I am uncertain my Lady but they were there when I left.”

“And the queen’s guards, the one I believe they call Garwith, is he with her?”

The maid frowns slightly, confusion in her voice. “I...I believe the queen...”

“Don’t you dare call her that in my presence!”

“I believe....she... has been with the King all day. He might be out in the courtyard or at the steps leading up to her tower.”

Minth’s tilts her chin, this way...that way, then wipes at a red stain on her cheekbone just underneath her eye.

Blood.

A stray piece of glass must have flown back at her and cut her and she did not even notice.

She laughs before sticking the finger into her mouth, walking towards her door.

“When I return, this place had better be returned back to the way it was. Do I make myself clear?”

“Y...yes my Lady.”

“And stop stuttering, least I become inclined to cut off a piece of your tongue “

And with that she sets off towards the tower where the queen sleeps.

She finds the guard easily.

The Ryder standing tall and alert even though his charge is nowhere close by.

“Oh you poor thing.”

Garwith inclines his head respectfully. “My...Lady”

He is not wearing his helmet and the confusion on his face is evident. “What brings you here?”

“Oh I was just walking the castle grounds and I happened to spot you, working so tirelessly even though your charge is not here.”

“It is my duty my Lady”

She lays a gentle hand on his arm and bats her eyelashes up at him.

A blush snakes it's way up his neck and Minth smiles.

“I almost cannot believe she did not even bother to instruct you to rest as ease. How heartless of her”

The dragon Ryder frowns and shifts uncomfortably.

Looking at Minth in way that makes her for the first time begin to question the details of her intended plan.

But she forges ahead anyway.

She winks at him. “Come sit with me for a while and rest your feet. I promise won't tell”

“I...I couldn't...”

But when she stirs him towards the steps, her chest pressed against his arm, he does not put up much of a fight.

“You look so strong and diligent. It is a shame you have to be punished like this”

A frown. “Punished...I am not being punished.”

“Oh forgive me. I thought you were. I mean, what Ryder worth anything, a member of the Royal army nonetheless would be assigned to spend his hours guarding a member of the castle. I mean Isn't that work for the lesser guards who work for the king?”

“I don't think...”

“Or maybe you're just not good enough to be an active part of the King's force?”

“My Lady!”

“Or... perhaps you did something wrong? I mean was it not on your watch that...the queen escaped?”

The blubbing i***t stops.

She can see the gears turning in his head and she smirks to herself before looking at him with compassion and pity

. “Ah so it is her fault you are stuck down here.”

“I mean...it is not so bad anymore. She can be a handful but she is kind and generous and...”

Minth resists the urge to roll her eyes and swallows the bile that rises in her throat before she can spit on the man.

And instead she pats his arms again, her voice sweet and comforting. “Oh I just feel so sorry for you.”

“Why?”

“Because I can only imagine how your fellow Ryders mock you. Laughing behind your back when you aren’t around. It can’t be easy.”

She had taken a gamble and the silence that follows tell her that she is right.

It is almost too easy.

She leans in “I am certain you miss being out in the field. Actually doing something useful for the king, for your realm. Why should you have to stay inside watching some human princess, someone who isn’t one of us?”

“I..”

“Do you deny that you miss being an actual soilder?”

“No but...”

“I mean personally I would hate myself if I were reduced from a high ranking member of the Royal army to a mere guard who watches a woman sleep at night...”

Minth leans in, letting her chest push against his arm, close enough that her scent can invade his sense.

The guard pulls on the neck of his shirt, sweating even though the weather is cool.

“Relax Garwith, I promise your secret is safe with me. You see I completely understand, in fact...I would even understand if you wished she were gone.”

He stiffens beneath her arm but he neither denies it nor pulls away and Minth cannot resist the urge to smile to herself.

She had him.

Then suddenly he gets up.

“I believe it is time the Lady left. The queen will be back soon and I do not think she would appreciate your presence here.”

Minth looks up at him, the expression on her face like one who has just been slapped.

She covers it quickly with a laugh as she gets up. “Garwith...I mean no harm.”

“Good then you won’t mind leaving.”

“You don’t understand. I can help you...”

“Not another word my Lady please, or I shall be forced to report this conversation to the King and queen.”

By all the gods she almost slaps him then.

But she controls herself and with a tight smile, walks away from him.

So the witch has gotten to him too.

Fine...

Let the miserable, stupid man play guard dog all he liked.

Admittedly should any... unforeseen circumstances arise, it would have been easier to put the blame solely on him.

But Minth does not need him. Not really

Already she knows what she must do now.

Besides, like her mother would always say, if you want something done right.

You do it your own f*****g self.

Screw a competition.

This is now a fight to the death.

And since Minth had no intention of dying, the human b***h was just going to have to go.

The Dragon King’s Substitute Bride Chapter 85

HERA

“What is a Tether?”

“What?”

Midas turns to look up at me from the papers and rolls of parchment piled up on his study.

He had been so absorbed in whatever it is he is reading that he had not even noticed me walk in.

And considering how incredibly honed the dragon king's senses are, it can only mean that his mind is in a million places all at the same time.

Although truth be told, so is mine.

After the king makers left, the air in the wake of their presence heavy with apprehension, Midas had gone to make arrangements for riding out tomorrow and to organize the small army of Ryders that would go with him.

I had in turn also immediately gone up to my room to get ready for leaving with the King tomorrow.

I knew it was doubtlessly going to be a long, early day so I had aimed to go to sleep on time least I fall asleep on my horse riding out tomorrow.

And I had tried.

Tried really really hard.

Closing my eyes, counting moons, singing myself to sleep.

Nothing worked. Sleep continued to elude me.

And it had been largely due to the fact that the entire conversation with the Kingmakers in the throne room kept playing itself over and over in my head.

Drowning out my efforts to do anything but think and fret over what was said and what was not.

Especially what was not said.

And I had tossed and turned until my sheets were tangled in knots around my legs.

One statement in particular coming back to me over and over again.

"f**k the Fates. I will make my own path. One that does not involve nearly killing the woman I lov..."

The woman he what...

What had he been about to say?

As I had laid down, staring up at the ceiling, everything in me had known that the events of tomorrow, whatever they turned out to be, could end badly.

Really really badly.

And I knew that is what I should have been worried about.

I mean I had chosen to willingly, once more go into the Elder forest even after my near death experiences in those dark woods the first time I was there.

Naive, reckless Hera...

That is what I should have been agonizing over.

And not some half spoken words uttered in the heat of the moment that probably did not even mean what I was imagining them to mean.

Yet my brain had refused to let go.

Like a child whose hands were sticky with honey and could not wipe it off no matter how hard they tried .

Every attempt merely smearing it even more.

The woman I lov...

Could it be?

No it couldn't.

But what if it did

. What if he had indeed been about to say that he....that he....

Skies above...

All my questions had no answers.

At least not answers I could easily deal with.

So I had stayed awake, eyes wide open.

And when I had been unable to take the not knowing anymore, I had slipped on a cloak and made my way out of the room and down the cold stone steps.

The air had been crisp and cold as I glided through the still lit corridors.

Somehow I had known he would not be in bed.

I was right.

The door to his study was uncharacteristically ajar and I had stood for quite a long moment watching him.

He looked exhausted but you would never know it from the determined concentration on his face unless you were looking very closely and I was.

And he had not noticed me coming closer until I stood directly in front of his table, my ridiculous question falling from my mouth.

He stares up at me now, and I can see the tiredness in his eyes.

“Why are you still awake Hera?”

“It is not that late. I believe that is the ninth bell ringing out now.”

“Still. We ride at dawn tomorrow. You should be resting.”

I walk around the table towards his outstretched arm. “As should you.”

He pulls me to him and wraps his arm around my middle, his head resting on my belly.

“I am unable to sleep.”

I do not tell him that I am unable to sleep either, instead I stroke his hair gently, wondering how a man so hard and weathered manages to have hair as soft and lush as a baby’s.

“Did you even try to?”

He does not need to answer for me to know that he did not.

“You work too hard my Lord. If something were to happen to you, who would run the affairs of the realm?”

“No one. My people would mourn me severely and the entire 5th realm would descend into chaos. You particularly would be distraught and unable to go on living”

I do not even realize when I burst out laughing.

“Your humility never ceases to amaze me dragon King.”

“I am merely stating the truth “

I pull back so I can look directly at him

“Midas?”

“Yes Human?”

“You told the Kingmaker Arydian that I am your Tether. What does that mean?”

He meets my eyes and then glances away.

“You really should be in bed.”

His mouth is saying one thing but his hands are pulling me closer and into his lap.

I wind my hands around his neck. “Tell me.”

He sighs but he starts to speak.

“Dragons and weredragons are born with only half of their soul. The other half of them is hidden, embedded somewhere, in someone else. That person, the other being is their Tether.”

I frown, digesting the words.

“How does a dragon or Ryder know when they have found their Tether.”

He shrugs gently.

“You just do. some dragons could go many years, almost entire lifetimes without meeting their tethers but like two magnets, fate usually draws them together, forces them to meet.”

“So when you say I am your Tether that means...”.

“That you are the other half of my soul Hera. Mine.”

A fluttering replaces the beating of my heart and my belly feels like a thousand and one wings are flapping about merrily inside of it.

“Everything we touch....every time we do this...”

His mouth finds mine...kissing me softly at first and then deeper.

“...the bond grows stronger. Whatever you feel, I feel it too.”

Whenever Midas kisses me, it feels like I’m slipping and sliding. Falling beneath a haze of pleasure and happiness.

And I have to struggle to remain focused.

Because beneath all those good things is dread.

Stealing it’s way into my skin and wrapping itself around my mind.

A magical soul tie that pulled two people together and made them feel the other’s pain as theirs.

What if...

The woman I lov...

What if the only reason he had been about to say that is because of some so called magic bond and not because that is really how he feels.

“Hera... what is it?”

I shake my head and open my mouth to say no but he beats me to it.

“Don’t even bother lying. Just tell me what troubles you?”

I twist my fingers, head bowed, chewing on my bottom lip, a bad nervous habit.. “This bond...how...how strong is it?”

He reaches out, frees my lip with his thumb from beneath my teeth and then frowns because nothing gets past this man and he has noticed the shaky tone of my voice.

“Extremely so. Why?”

“Strong enough perhaps to make you...someone...think they feel something when all along it has just been some uncontrollable magic force pulling them together.”

He stares at me until I look away, blushing.

“You think that is why I am... attracted to you?”

I nod slightly, hating and loving how I could never hide anything from him.

He tilts up my chin.

“Hera the tether bond does not cause you to feel things. It only amplifies them. Makes them stronger, more intense than it would have been with anyone else. By hades I wanted to make love to you even before you open those trechrous blue eyes of yours or leaped at my back and sunk your teeth into my neck.”

I blush even harder at the memory of our first meeting.

“So did not know , when we first met that I was ...am your Tether?”

Midas stiffens and looks away.

“No I did not.”

“Then when...”

He is silent for so long that I start to think he wishes not to answer but he does, albeit reluctantly.

“I found out in the Elder forest. When Er’gan...”

“Tried to kill me.”

He clenches his jaw and looks away.

I turn his face back towards me.

“Midas...I do not hold it against you. Not anymore”

“Well you should. I should have known, from the very first moment I saw you. I should have known.”

“Then why didn’t you?”

He sighs. “because...I never thought I would find you. I did not think I had a Tether and so I...”

“Wait, you said all dragon Ryders are born with only half their soul, why did you not think you had a Tether...”

“Because...”

I can see that whatever he is about to say is something that is hard for him.

Something he still struggles to accept.

“I was not born a dragon Ryder Hera. Imagine that. Heir to the dragon throne and I was not born with the ability to transform.”

He drags his hand through his hair, sending it going every which way.

“It did not matter who my father had been, the dragonkin would never accept me, never respect me.”

“Oh Midas...”

But he does not even look at me.

The way he speaks about it, the events surrounding his childhood, It is almost like it is a weight he has been struggling to voice into words and now that he has started, he won’t be able to stop, not until he is done.

“My father knew this and so he made a deal, long before I could remember anything. And he had my soul bond to Er’gan, the first dragon to ever exist. All the while, I never knew that I was different.”

His hand keeps tracing distracted circles up and down my arm.

“Not until the day of my 18th birthday, when my father took me to fly and my dragon would not awaken. To say my father had been disappointed would be an understatement. I will never forget the look in his eyes...”

Midas sighs and shakes his head, once more in control of his emotions.

“Er’gan would not awaken in me until six years later. And so, because I was not born a dragon Ryder, I did not think I had a Tether...much less a human one.”

Then he finally looks up at me again, his hand stroking my hair. “But by hades am I glad I found you”.

I take those words with me all the way back to my room.

Smiling rather foolishly every step of the way.

The dragon king had told me he would be up in an hour and not to wait up for him so I am surprised when a few minutes after returning to my chambers, I hear a knock on my door.

It is a maid.

One I do not know very well.

I try to quickly wipe the frown and disappointment off my face least she think me angry at her.

“Yes?”

“My queen, the king has asked that I send for you”

My heart immediately starts to pound.

Gods above what now...?

I wrap my cloak around my neck and step out barefooted. Not even bothering to close the door behind me.

I make to turn towards the direction of his study but the maid stops me.

“No he ..he is in the kitchen your grace.”

The kitchen?

What in all the realms...

But I do not stop to think long about it.

I hurry there, my bare feet nearly soundless against the floor.

“Midas...” I push open the kitchen door, whispering into the darkened space.

“...Midas you sent for me.”

The only thing I get in response is the gentle howling of the cold, biting wind blowing in from the open back door.

The ridiculous one that opens into a gulley that drops many many feet to the ground.

I step further into the kitchen.

“Midas?”

But he is not here.

What is going on?

I turn to ask the maid who had brought me here but the girl is gone.

Something does not feel right.

I step cautiously towards the open back door.

Could he have flown down...

Did he perhaps wish to show my something?

I inch as close to the ledge as I can.

“Midas I can’t...”

A firm hand in the centre of my back.

Firm and shoving

I barely even have time to shout.

The next thing I know, the wind is rushing past my ears and I am hurtling down thousands of feet in the air, straight to my death.

The Dragon King’s Substitute Bride Chapter 86

HERA

The thing no one tells you about free falling to your death is that you are moving so fast, it can actually begin to feel like time has somehow stopped.

Slowing down to one trickling moment after another.

As a matter of fact, if I close my eyes, and try to ignore my pounding heart.

If I somehow managed to forget about the numerous, razor edged rocks below and my imminent demise...

It almost feels like flying.

Almost.

But then just as quickly as the illusion had appeared, it fades, the panic returning with full force.

And all at once I am no longer flying.

Who would have thought that with everything that has happened, this is how it would end, with me plummeting to my death.

But it is not the thought of dying that scares me the most.

It is knowing that I am never going to see him again.

If I had known that the last time I saw him would be the last I would have...

Would have...

I do not even know what it is I would have done.

I had never settled down long enough to figure it out.

My feelings scared me and so I avoided them, refused to think about them.

And now, I would never get the chance.

And it is that thought that makes my eyes start to sting, tears falling, blurring my vision of the misty floor down below.

Even as I close them for the last time, his name is the last thing on my mind.

But the impact never comes.

Instead inches before I can reach the ground and shatter every bone in my body, I get the wind knocked out of me as what feels like a large hand snatches me out of the air.

A very large, clawed hand.

And that ironically, is when I begin to scream.

The dragon itself seems entirely oblivious to the bone crippling fear that being caught up in its talons is causing me.

.The sound of my screams are lost in the roar of his massive slate grey wings.

Frightening, scythe shaped , membranous things that cut effortlessly through the thickness of the night's air like a knife through butter.

Each flap bringing it and me in its grasp back to the darkened entrance I had fallen out off.

It flies up until it's feet are level with the door and then it tosses me throw the air.

I scream again, landing roughly on the floor of the kitchen.

Skies...oh dear Zeus...

My brain is still trying to comprehend the fact that that I had almost died and I am so shaken up that I can barely breathe.

So I push back thinking about it, delaying the panic for as long as possible.

I scramble to my knees and crawl towards the door.

The dragon hovers in front of the door but it so impossibly big that only the side of it's face is visible through the doorway.

I grip the door with one hand and drag myself shakily to my feet and stare out at my saviour

A bony face covered in scales the colour of stone and one lone eye, with slit thin pupils, blink slowly at me.

My mouth hangs open, my breath coming out in raspy gasps.

And it is not just because of the fact that I had just almost died.

It is the sight before me.

Frightening and scary and beautiful.

Breathtakingly beautiful.

This is not the first time I have seen a dragon.

I remember seeing the one Called Meirsul in the cellars, a time that feels like it was forever ago.

But this dragon...

This one is different.

Not only is it almost twice the size of the other, it is shaped different, more bullish than Meirsul whose body had been long and serpentine and multicolored

And that eye...

Grey and sharp and piercing.

It feels familiar...

Almost as if it can see through me.

Just like...

I gasp, my hand flying to cover my mouth.

But before I can call out his name he is flying away.

Down to the mountain floor that had quiet nearly been my grave.

My cloak had come undone when I fell and the wind outside is sharp and biting.

Or it would be, if I could feel it.

I inch closer just in time to see the it fly around the mountain.

I do not even remember to close the door before running out the kitchen.

Leo.

I have just seen Leo's dragon form.

And he had just saved my life.

How did he even know to find me?

I know he would have landed somewhere to change back and since the main castle entrance would be locked by now, I head towards the nearest open space i know that is not outside of the castle.

A barely there flash of light to my left tells me that I am right and I make my way through the path lined with trees.

I see him in front of the fountain.

"Leo..."

He turns sharply to look at me, his top half bare, one hand still pulling up his pants.

"Your highness..."

"Leo what..."

The words never even finish forming in my head.

He crosses the space, pulls me to him and crushes me to the bareness of his chest.

I can hear how fast his heart is beating, can feel the left over tension in his muscles and back.

And that is how I know that he is just as shaken up as I am.

“I am fine Leo. I promise”

He pulls back to stare at me.

His hands gripping my arm like he wants to shake some common sense into me.

“What in blazes happened, what were you thinking?”

“I ...” I open my mouth then close it again.

A fish in very very murky waters.

What had I been about to say?

That I fell?

But is it truly falling if it were no accident?

Someone had sent that maid and lured me to the kitchen.

Someone had left that door open and someone had shoved me out of it with no hesitation whatsoever

Someone wanted me dead and with every passing heartbeat, it is becoming increasingly clear to me just how close they had come to getting their wish.

If I were not so afraid and shaken up, I would have been quite seriously ticked off.

They could have poisoned me... or something, anything infinitely less painful than having me bash my head against dark, mist covered rocks at the base of a mountain would have been better.

But no, they had chosen to get rid of me in one of the most excruciating of ways possible.

Whoever that are, they hate me enough that they wanted me to suffer

And at the same time they also wanted to make sure there would have been no chances of my surviving.

The more I think of it, the angrier I become.

What in all the realms did I ever do to these people?

I had thought the inhabitants of the castle were... warming up to me, I thought we were making progress.

Well fool on me.

This just goes to show what happens when you let your guard around dragonkin.

But even as I think it, I realize that I am being unfair.

Irrational even.

Henette...Midas...Leo...

They were all dragonkin.

The only ones I trust.

And If Midas gets wind of this, I have no doubt that he would punish and torture the entire castle until the truth came out...Henette included.

and if the culprit is who I think it is then I know the torture of a few castle slaves would mean absolutely nothing to her.

And I could not let that happen.

And that is why I inhale deeply and stare up into Leo's worried face and Lie.

I tell him I was unable to sleep and that I wanted some fresh air and that I wandered into the kitchen, opened the door out of curiosity and then I tripped.

He stares at me for a long time.

And then he tells me I'm lying.

"What makes you think I am lying?"

"Forgive my impropriety your grace but if one wants "fresh air" they go to a goddamn window not open a door that drops hundreds of feet to certain death."

"But you know how clumsy I can be. I fell out of a window once Leo. Is it that far fetched to think I would trip and fall out of a door."

"But I saw the way you jerked out of the door and over the ledge. It was almost like..."

"Like I had been pushed? Don't be ridiculous"

I walk around the fountain.

To put some distance between us and avoid his gaze.

"Who would dare make an attempt on my life while the dragon king sits barely a few steps away and for what reason?"

All questions I would very much like to know the answer to.

Leo shakes his head but he is quiet in a way that makes me think he agrees with me.

“Still your grace...”

“I am fine Leo. I really am.”

“So it would seem”

“How did you...how did you know I was in danger?”

He sighs and reaches for his shirt that is lying on the lip of the fountain.

“I did not.”

“Then how...”

“I was unable to sleep...”

It would appear no one in the castle is asleep this night.

He slips the shirt over his head, the muscles of his arms and shoulders bunching and rippling.

“and it has been a while so I decided to...change, stretch my wings if you will. That was when I saw...”

He stops and I nod, understanding what he means without his having to say it.

“You scared me Hera.”

He is walking around the fountain, the space between us getting smaller with each step until he stands directly in front of me.

“When I saw you fall I thought I would not reach you in time...I didn’t...”

He swallows hard and looks away.

I reach out and touch him, one hand on his arm.

“Leo, what happened tonight, I need you to not tell Midas about this.”

He does not frown but his eyes have taken that stoic serious expression of his.

“You wish for me to lie to the king.”

“No I only...”

I exhale, trying to find the words to convince him.

"It is s just he has so much to worry about. With the dark elves and the opened portal and the wolfsbane...I simply have no desire to make things any worse than they already are."

"You almost died Hera, do you not think you are more important to him than any of those things?"

"I believe that he does not need to worry about something that did not happen. Especially not with all that is going on. So please, do not mention this to him. Please"

"I will do as you wish your grace."

I reach for his hand, gripping it between both of mine. "Promise me."

He looks at me, then at the point where our hands meet and then back at me again.

Our gazes lock for what feels like an eternity and then he sighs.

Long and hard and deep.

"You have no idea Hera, how hard it is to refuse you."

I throw my hands around his neck.

"Thank you...oh thank you so much."

He catches me and holds me against him with one firm hand around my waist.

"But If he asks...I will not lie to him. You know that don't you?"

"I know and He won't."

Leo sighs into my hair, holding me for a heartbeat longer than he needs to.

Then he lets go.

He walks me to the base of my tower.

"Leo."

He stops, turns back to look at me. *Yes your highness?"

"Thank you for not letting me die today."

He smiles softly "I just wish..."

The rest of the sentence never comes.

Instead he stands up straight and bows his head and when he raises it again, the mask of the chief Ryder is back in place.

“Never mind your grace. Have a good night’s rest.”

“You too Leo. Whatever is left of it.”

Come tomorrow, we would both need it.

The Dragon King’s Substitute Bride Chapter 87

MIDAS

His eyes open slowly.

Something is wrong.

And it is not just that he had promised her he would come to her and instead had ended up breaking that promise.

He gets up from where he had fallen asleep sitting up in his study.

The feeling that something is wrong is what had woken him up and it refuses to go away.

Hera.

He does not bother with walking.

One push and the large windows in his study fly open.

He has been lending Er’gan’s wings more often in the past few days.

What was one more time?

He flies up to her window.

It is open and while it is useful for him at the moment, he makes a mental note to tell her that it is unsafe.

He flies in through the window and lands silently in the middle of the room.

She is lying in bed, fast asleep, legs tucked beneath her.

And most definitely not in danger.

Yet the feeling is still there and Midas does not understand why.

Perhaps it is worry.

Maybe that is why it is so unsettling.

He is not used to worrying about someone.

Come tomorrow, when they ride out into the Elder forest, he has no plans to let her out of his sight for even one moment .

Yet he cannot help but feel like something might go wrong.

He tries to tell himself that she will be fine.

But gods help him just the thought of her getting hurt frightens him more than even the thought of whatever battle awaits them.

He takes off his shirt and crawls into bed with her.

Letting the warmth of her body calm his racing heart.

Midas cannot remember the last time he prayed or asked the gods for anything.

But as he closes his eyes and inhales her scent, he finds himself asking the Fire gods and all the others besides them, that they protect her.

Please.

Because he cannot lose her.

He just can't.

The morning comes more quickly than he had expected, announcing itself rather spectacularly with strangely bright sunlight for what should be an autumn morning.

He tries to shield her from it but when the light hits her face, she stirs awake in his arms.

Turning to face him so that he is the first thing she sees when she opens her eyes.

A smile. Wide and uninhibited

“You came.”

He pushes back the hair from her face.

“I said I would. Also it is mortally unsafe to leave your windows open the way you do.”

“Oh that. Well after what happened last night I forgot all about it “

Midas frowns, remembering the feeling of unease that had woken him open.

“What happened last night?”

The frown deepens when she glances away and would not meet his eyes.

“Hera...”

“Look Midas it is nothing to worry about.”

“Let me be the judge of that.”

She sighs and opens her mouth but before she can say anything there is a knock on the door.

It is the servants, come to announce that the time had come for the king and queen to get ready to ride out.

Before he leaves the room to let her maids minister to her, he cups her cheek in his palm.

“You know it is not too late. Stay here.”

“No.”

“You’ll be safer...”

“I do not want safe Midas. I want you. Now go or you’re going to end up being the one who keeps everyone waiting”

And she is pushing him out the room before he can make sense of why her words are able to reduce him to soft smiles and racing heart beats.

He only makes it halfway down the steps leading away from her tower.

“Dear Zeus!...Midas you scared the gods out of me...what are you...”

She is half undressed and only in her chemise when he lifts her up and kisses her hard and fast on the mouth.

Slowing down only so he can do it all over again.

He does not remember the maids standing around pretending not to gawk but even if he did, Midas would not care.

And from her reaction to his kiss, neither would she.

When he places her back on her feet she has to hold onto him for a moment to regain her composure and he feels a primal perverse sense of satisfaction at being able to so easily disorient her.

“What was that for?”

“Incase”

“Incase what?”

Midas refuses to say the words out loud.

Least his speaking them gives them life.

But he does not need to.

She understands.

Midas dresses quickly, refusing as always to let his page help him.

The plates of armour on his shoulders and around his chest are not necessary, they are heavy, slowing down his movements but it makes his chief Ryder and Steward feel better so he puts them on regardless.

He has refused to wear his full armour.

The one with the dragon helmet.

It is what he wore when he and his Ryders rode to attack Averia

And even though it is his favorite armour to wear, light and made from flexible dragon obsidian, He would not do that her.

Dishonour her by wearing it when she is going with him to defend his realm.

His swords slide comforting and assuring into the sheath behind his back as he steps out and into the castle’s main courtyard.

Everyone stops, bows.

The army of Ryders he has assembled to go with him is small.

So small in fact that it can barely even be called anything close to an army.

He did not want word getting out that the dark elves were running rampant in the dragon realm and doing what they pleased.

If the dragonkin knew, they would panic and Midas most definitely did not need panic right now.

So he had assembled only a small band of his finest Ryders.

Dragonkin men he could trust.

Ryders who could hold their tongue as well as they could match the stealth and liveness of the dark elves.

“Leo?”

“We are ready your highness.”

He nods sharply and the men mount their horses.

He turns around just in time to see her step out of the shade of the castle and into the sunlight.

If the dragon king had been in doubt about his feelings for her, the doubts are gone.

Vanquished in the wake of emotions that wash over him as he watches her approach

And when she puts her hand in his, he finds himself repeating his prayers from the night before.

Please...

As he leads her to his horse he expects her to say she can ride alone and he does not have to spend his time babysitting her.

She does.

He says nothing in response as he lifts her onto the large black animal.

But when he mounts on behind her, he tells her that he is not keeping her close for her.

He is doing it for him.

That shuts her up.

The ride to the Elder Forest is uneventful.

Uninterested in drawing unwanted attention, he avoids riding through the capital and instead leads his band of Ryders through the plains and straight towards the tall dark trees.

As they draw closer, Midas can see that the purple ribbon of water that should surround the Elder forest has almost dried up.

He is not surprised.

From the moment the blood bond was broken and the dark elves had crossed the bounds of the forest by day to head into Adarin and Rardath, the river would have started to recede.

They had broken the bond first and so the punishment would be on their heads.

That is how Midas knows that while defeating them will be no walk in the park, it should not be as difficult as it would have been.

But his main problem are two folds.

One, the possibility that the dark elves now have wolfsbane and could use it.

And two, the dark elven queen herself; Hermani

Her ability to change into a non-corpreal form meant catching her was going to be one hell of a challenge.

As always, all horses are left on the other side of the once marshy bank of the binding stream.

Considering how it is day time already, the lack of the usual forest noises make the Elder forest seem and feel a little more dead than usual.

The branches snapping loudly beneath their feet like breaking bones echoing in the unnerving stillness.

The Dragon king and the Ryders he has brought with him are excellent trackers.

And even when it came to dark elves who like all elves could move through the forest without leaving any visible traces, it would only be a matter of time for they found their hide out.

A mind link and a wave of his hands set the small band dividing into two. One with Leo and the other with him.

But before he can do anything more, she steps out from behind him.

“My Lord, if I may?”

“Speak Hera.”

“Remember how you said no matter where I am, you could always find me?”

Midas watches her carefully. Disliking the way she avoids looking direct at him.

But he answers anyway.

“Yes I remember. The thread of the Tether bond. If I can see it, I would be able to trace you but be that as it may I do not understand how this is relevant to...”

But she stands on her toes, hands shaky when they hold unto his arm and then she presses her lips to his and whispers into the space between them.

“Find me.”

And then she takes off in the opposite direction, running through the Elder forest like it is not currently the most dangerous place in the world.

“Hera!”

He is about to take off after her and with his speed he would have caught her in mete moments.

But before he can do so...

“Stop”

Er’gan and because the king is a no mood to listen, the dragon exercises compulsion.

While that is not enough to stop the dragon king, it forces him to momentarily to slow down.

Slow down and listen.

And Midas is in no mood to do that either.

“Er’gan why did you stop me she’s going to get herself killed!”

“She is trying to help you.”

“By dying?”

“No by luring them out.”

All at once, everything falls into place.

They could spend all day tracking the dark elves and they would find them eventually.

But if the spawns of evil think she, the human queen of the 5th realm who they are curious about is running round the elder forest alone...

“They would follow her immediately. Attempt to cut her off. And if you find her...”

.

He would find them too.

Gods be damned...

Beautiful, intelligent, crazy woman.

If he had known that she had been planning to pull something as dangerous as this, Midas would have belted her to his hip.

But now if he wants the chance to be able to hold her again, he needs to push back his fear for her safety and focus.

He needs to be the dragon king. Not Midas.

So he slows his heart beat and allows Er’gan’s power to flow through him.

To sharpen his senses.

A mind link instructs the Ryders with him and those with Leo to stop walking.

Too many conflicting footsteps, too many pounding hearts.

He thinks of her.

The softness and the brilliance of the woman who stole into his realm and somewhere along the way managed to take his heart as well.

And when he opens his eyes, he sees it instantly.

The once faded gold thread is now a thick, shimmery cord.

The physical representation of the tether bond that had only grown stronger despite Midas' attempts for the direct opposite.

It begins from the centre of the dragon king's chest and then snakes its way around the trees and deep into the shadowy recesses of the forest.

And without a moment's hesitation, he takes off after it.

Straight ahead...a sharp left, a swerve around a copse of trees.

He is close, he can feel it.

He knows that Hermani, unable to resist the lure would go after Hera herself.

But she would also be surrounded by guards.

And he does not intend to waste his time fighting some lesser dark elf guards.

But he also knows that the dark elves are masters of the forest.

There is little doubt they already know about the presence of the dragon king and his Ryders in the Elder forest.

And by now, the sound of their racing through the forest, searching, would no doubt send the elves scattering in different directions before he even has a chance to catch them.

He can only hope that the Elvin queen would attempt to take Hera with her.

So he makes as much noise as possible.

He hears the sound of a loud cry to his left.

The whish of a sword arcing through the air and the smell of blood when it pierces the skin.

and then finally a low thud, the sound of a body falling to the dark forest floor.

Another sound to his left... another behind him.

The fight had begun.

But Midas pays no attention to any of the dark elves sent to distract him and his Ryders.

Instead he focuses all his attention on the thread getting shorter and more taut the closer he gets to her.

The thread leads him to a clearing.

And the dragon king slows down...stops.

But before he can step fully into the space.

“Long time no see Midas...”

He turns his head sharply to the left.

Just in time to see Hermani step out of the shade of trees, one arm wrapped around the queen’s neck.

“Midas!”

“Hera!”

Hermani snorts. “Hera. What a stupid little human name.”

Midas turns to her.

“Let her go Hermani”

The dark elven queen smiles.

Those crimson lips of hers splitting and stretching like a blood stained wound to reveal her lethal fangs.

“A human queen. You know I almost did not believe it. With the way you hated their kind for killing your parents, who would have thought.”

He bares his teeth at the beautiful demon barely paces from him.

“Let her go and I won’t rip you apart where you stand.”

“So much anger Midas, one would think...”

She stops suddenly, c*****g her head to the side.

“A gold thread...”

and then her green eyes widen in recognition an exaggerated gasp falling from her lips

“She is your Tether isn’t she?”

Midas does not know how the dark queen can see it but at this moment, he could not care less.

“That is none of your business and I will say it only one more time Hermani. Let. Her. f*****g go.”

But Hermani merely smiles even wider.

“I do not think so your grace.”

And then she raises her hand, One pointy red finger growing...extending into a deadly knife sharp claw in the air.

And with one last wink in his direction, she sends it straight towards Hera’s neck.

The Dragon King’s Substitute Bride Chapter 88

HERA

I knew it was an insane, possibly stupid idea.

But I did not realize how stupid until I was in that clearing and face to face with the most beautiful, most frightening being I have ever seen.

A dark elf, with bone white skin and the shiny colored markings that came alive beneath their skin.

Exactly like the ones from that night in the Elder forest.

Exactly like the one from my dreams.

The one I had seen kill Adarin’s son.

I know it is not the same one.

Midas said that one is dead.

But they all look startlingly alike and I am unable to help but scamper backwards, unable to stop myself from glancing behind me, my hair flipping this way and that.

Come on Midas ..where are you, find me goddamit.

I attempt to run in the other direction only to see another one step out from behind the group of trees to my right.

A quick glance to my left and right tells me that it is too late to run anymore and that I am now completely surrounded.

Their gossamer thin brown cloaks flapping in the wind, the hoods covering their faces well so that most of their face is hid in shadow and all I can see is the lower half of their jaws.

And the expressionless grimness of their small mouths.

But I do not really begin to panic.

Until she arrives.

Appearing seemingly out of no where, cutting me off in the middle of the clearing so suddenly that I almost ram my nose right into her.

This time she is dressed in a long dress the colour of sea foam when it washes against the shore.

An attire so impossibly beautiful and alluring, even I am almost attracted to her.

But then she smiles.

Wide and red and scary.

And all that beauty disappears in the wake of it.

She steps towards me.

“Well...well...well...what do we have here?”

I try not to show my fear on my face.

It does not work and she sees right through me.

All the way to my pounding heart and racing pulse.

The one who I assume must be the dark elven queen called Hermani walks around me.

The tip of her finger in her mouth, a permanent smirk on her face.

Then she stops suddenly, looks me up and down again, then glances at her guards with what one would interpret as confusion.

“I do not see it.”

I swallow and fold my hands in fists.

Gods above please do not let me die before he gets here.

I swallow and tilt my chin up to stare at her.

“I do not believe we have been formerly introduced.”

“Ah would you look at that. It speaks.”

She giggles and claps her hand excitedly like one would do for a dog who has performed a new trick and I find myself fuming even beneath the haze of my fear.

“I am not an it. My name is Hera”

“And audacious too. I can almost see why the dragon king is so fascinated with you. You would make a fun pet.”

“I am not a pet either I...”

But she is talking over me, ignoring my protests.

“What I cannot see however is how a tiny, meaningless human such as yourself was able to spoil our plans so spectacularly.”

“Well maybe you are not as bright as you think and your plans were just not well thought out.”

She raises one brow then sneers.

“Our plans were flawless. To be honest I do not believe some stupid human would have been able to stop anything but he told us...”

I frown. Suddenly my heart is pounding at a rate that makes my chest begin to hurt.

“He...who is he...Is that the person you are working with?”

I see in the way her eyes flash that she seems to realize that she has said too much.

But I also note something else.

Whoever this he is, the queen of the dark elves is afraid of him.

“Hermani...”

She whirls on me, teeth bared. “Don’t you dare call my name like that you inspid little rat. Your insolence has ceased to amuse me and I grow tired of demeaning myself by speaking to you.”

I take a step back she takes one forward.

“What do you want from me?”

“He asked that we bring you to him but no one orders me around and besides, I can see no use for that. Now, before I slit you throat and leave you to bleed out on this forest floor you are going to tell me exactly....what...you...are...”

She is standing so close to me now, bent over and breathing directly into my face so that I can smell the rotten flesh on her breath.

But before I can say anything or begin the almost pointless act of running away, the guards surrounding us start to twitch.

Hermani herself looks up, glances around.

They seem to be able to hear something I cannot.

Hermani smiles and nods and then the guards turn around as one and take off into the trees.

But before I can take advantage of their distraction she turns around and grips my arm.

Hard enough that her razor sharp talons sink into my skin.

“Not so fast. You queen...are coming with me. You are going to be quiet and We are going to lie in wait for your darling husband to join us.”

“And why in all the realms would I do that?”

“Because if you don’t, not only would I break every bone in your body but I will kill your precious dragon king as well”

I laugh, harsh and bitter to hide the bile in my throat. “He is immortal you dumb...”

But the beautiful, cruel smile on her face freezes the words on my tongue.

“Maybe but trust me human. I can hurt him in so many ways that he would wish he were dead. Now come with me.”

She means it. Every word

And so when she drags me with her into the thickness of the trees surrounding the clearing, I do not try to fight.

She clamps her mouth over my mouth anyway and pulls me roughly against her, my hand bent between our bodies.

She is much taller than me and has to bend her head to whisper her words into my ear.

“I will admit you are quite fascinating. It is almost a shame to have to kill you...and him. Ah here he comes now.”

In one split second she lets go of my hand and instead wraps her hand around my neck, so tight that I actually begin to choke and then she drags me out, back into the open

“Midas!!”

“Hera!”

I had intended to be calm, to not give him a reason to panic but the moment I saw him I wanted to scream at him to run...to go away before something happened to him.

I consider distracting her, giving him an opening

But when he glances briefly at me, I see the words in his eyes.

Even as he speaks to her.

He wants me to trust him.

So I do.

Even when she raises her finger and it grows into an impossible long dagger.

Even when she aims it at my neck.

I close my eyes and wait for white blinding pain but it does not come.

Instead she stops, the tip of her extended claw just shy of digging into my neck.

“You know what dragon king. I am in a generous mood. As a result, I will not kill your precious human.... if you tell what she is.”

I can feel a trickle of blood dripping down from the point where her finger broke the skin.

Midas sees it too and even across this distance, I see his eyes start to go red.

He tilts his head slightly to the side.

“You forget something Hermani...”

“Oh, and pray tell what is that dragon king?”

She is enjoying this. The distress she is causing both of us.

Enjoying it, feeding on it.

And then to my surprise, Midas smiles.

But it is not the beautiful warm smile he gives me.

This one reminds me of exactly why the dragon king should be feared.

“You forget...that dark magic or not...”

...I will always be faster than you.”

I do not even see it happen.

My mind is completely incapable of following the movements.

Suddenly I am pushed to the ground and the weight around my neck is gone and when I look back, Hermani is pressed up against a tree, the dragon king holding her up by her neck.

“Do not even try to change. Those iron cuffs I just placed on your wrists, make it impossible for you to use your foul magic.”

Her skin is still as white as ever but the magic runes on have faded to become ugly, colourless markings.

Still smiling, she slaps and claws at the hand holding her up.

“Impressive Midas... everytime we meet you always manage to impress.”

Midas barely even flinches.

“Forgive me if I do not care for your compliments. Now tell me what in hades is going on. What silly plan have you connived to take my throne and who are you working with?”

She tsks.

Even while choking she still manages to keep that gods awful smile on her face.

“So many questions and all the wrong ones. What you should be asking dragon king, is what have we done with the wolfsbane we brought into your realm”

Wolfsbane...the poison that drove dragons and dragon Ryders insane before it killed them.

Midas freezes, the tension in his back and shoulders showing how hard he is struggling to retain control, to hide what he is feeling.

“What have you done Hermani?”

She merely laughs.

“Well in three days dragon king, prepare to begin watching your dragons and dragon Ryders die one by one. Let us see how strong you really are then “

Midas roars but he does not strike her.

Instead he snatches back control from Er’gan and sneers at her. “Tell me where to get the antidote to wolfsbane.”

“And why in all the realms dragon king would I be do that?”

His grips around her neck tightens until she begins to cough.

“You betrayed your kind and joined forces with Azarath the fallen to worship the shadows and use forbidden magic...”

She coughs, choking and laughing at the same time. “Are you going to read me my life’s story now Midas...?”

“When he was cast down, you and your traitors were banished from your realm. My father let you stay here and you betrayed his trust by luring me here and tricking him into the bond that gave you land and food and a place to call your own.

Even after his death, I let you stay here but now, the bond no longer stands.”

“So what dragon king, you will kick us out, slaughter us...get on with it already Kill me!!!”

“I will make a new blood bond with you”

“Midas No!”

But it is like neither one of them can hear me.

Hermani’s eyes narrow. “A new blood bond....”

” I will not kill you and you and your band of vagabonds can have the Elder forest back for a hundred years more. I shall even extend your region of control.”

“In exchange for what?”

“In exchange you will tell me where and how to get the antidote to wolfsbane.”

“Dragon king...”

But Midas is done listening.

His grip tightens till I see the veins in her neck start to swell.

“It is that or death Hermani. And we both know you are too much of a coward to die. So choose now, before I come to my senses and simply kill you.”

The longest minutes of my life pass by as I watch them.

But then Hermani nods.

Faint and imperceptible because she is nearly unconscious.

Midas relaxes his grip but does not let go. “Now start talking.”

She splutters and coughs. “The antidote for wolfsbane exists on only one place in all the 7 realms.”

“I grow impatient Hermani...”

“It exists on the 4th realm.”

“The fae and elves have it?”

“They do...but good luck getting that selfish bastard sister of mine to give you anything.”

“Why are you playing the victim? You tried to kill her and take her throne.”

Hermani smiles and shrugs. “The frigid b***h should have learned to take a joke.”

But Midas is done and he lets her go.

“I shall travel to the fourth realm and upon my return. The bond will be made.”

“How do I know you will do as you have said?”

“You do not. So you better pray to all the gods Hermani that not one single dragon or dragon Ryder dies before my return or you and your kind will be sorry you ever existed. In the mean time, you will be locked up in a magic cancelling cellar.”

“Never...” She sneers and tries to attack him again.

But without her magic she is weak and Midas merely slides out of the way.

“Stop it Hermani”

But she refuses to listen.

Until he has no choice but to catch her in the crook of his elbow and hold her neck in his grip until she slumps against him.

Cold as ice.

That is when he finally looks at me.

“Hera...”

I do not think I have ever covered a distance so fast in my life.

He catches me and lifts me in the air.

Pressing me firmly to his chest.

“You dragon king as the most amazing...”

But then his lips are on mine and the words are lost in the feelings of finally being safe in his arms again.

The Dragon King's Substitute Bride Chapter 89

HERA

She is unconscious the entire time.

I keep wanting to turn around and look behind, expecting her to start struggling in her binds but nothing happens.

“Did you kill her?”

“What?”

There is thread of amusement and confusion in his voice.

I twist around again, attempting to peer over his shoulder to the horse on which Hermani rides tied up behind Leo.

“Keep doing that Hera and you are going to end up throwing us both from this horse.”

“She has been unconscious a god awful long time.”

“I would think that is a good thing.”

I bite my lip and turn around. “Yes...yes...you are right.”

He laughs and pulls me closer. “You human, are much too soft “

I fold my hands across my chest suddenly offended because he is right. “I am not!”

“Yes you are. You like to hide it behind that big mouth of yours but you care too much too fast.”

“I cannot...wait big mouth?”

“Very. Honest to hades I can only imagine how much trouble you have manage to talk your way into.”

This time around I am the one who ends up laughing.

He nuzzles my neck and sighs into my hair.

It is the only sign that he is completely exhausted.

And the fact that he is letting me see it makes my heart full to bursting.

“Would you like me to threaten everyone in the castle when we get back so they leave you alone for the rest of the day?”

He groans. “Oh by the gods yes”

But even as he says it, we both know it is not going to happen.

There is too much at stake.

“I know who she is working with.”

Midas pulls on the reins of the horse so fast that the animal almost becomes vertical and nearly throws us off.

“What did you say?”

Our sudden stop in the middle of the clearing before the landscape becomes the hard rock leading up to dragon’s mount, causes all the other Ryders to stop as well, glancing at each other in confusion.

Chewing nervously on my lip I correct my mistake.

“Apologies my Lord. I should have worded that better. I meant to say that she mentioned something about the person the dark elves are working with.”

“Well what are you wait for? Speak up”

I narrow my eyes at him and he sighs.

“It would be of the uttermost of benefits if you would be so kind as to tell me what you know... please”

I decide to save my gloating for later.

“‘He’ that is what she called him. And from the manner in which she spoke it would appear he is the one running the show.”

“An he...who in all the realms could if be?”

” I do not know but Whoever it is, she...”

I glance back to look at the nearly lifeless body bound in ropes and magic binding cuffs.

“...They are afraid of him.”

Leo’s horse draws closer to us. “Is everything okay my King?”

No everything is not okay.

Three days, that is all the time we have to get an antidote or in three days Ryders and dragons all over the realm will begin to die and we have no idea who is behind it all.

So no Leo, everything is most decidedly not okay.

But I do not say that or any of the other things on my mind.

Midas is silent for a long time but then he nods and grunts in response and the train picks up again.

I deliberately do not tell him all the other things she said.

That the one behind it all has now taken an interest in me, in whatever it is that I can do.

I do not tell him that whoever this 'He' is, he asked for Hermani to bring me to him.

And that now that she has failed to do so, He would probably be even more interested in capturing me.

I am not trying to be a hero.

But if I tell Midas I know he will only worry and get over protective.

And I want to stay by his side.

More than anything else.

Besides, he has enough to concern himself about without me throwing myself into the mix.

The castle gates swing open and we ride in.

The grounds are as busy as usual.

It is evening time and the activities are beginning to wind down.

Because of how secret our movement had been, there are curious glances thrown at us from all corners of the castle grounds.

Especially at the elf who is tied up on the chief Ryder's horse like a festival goose.

Leo brings her down and she slumps in his arms, weightless.

I turn back to Midas. "Are you sure you did not accidentally kill her?"

A hand in the center of my back, steering me away.

"Relax Hera. She is still alive and still very dangerous. You would do well to stay away from her."

I nod and cast one last glance at her before we step into the castle.

He takes me inside and then stops. "Hera I have to..."

I look behind him and through the doorway to the Ryders and guards he has to give instructions to and then to the dark elves queen slumped in Leo's arms.

I sigh. "I know."

He pulls me close to him and kisses my forehead. "Have I ever told you how grateful I am that you stole into my realm?"

"I did not steal into your realm, I was coerced into coming here."

"And while I am not proud of that fact. I am still glad I got you and not the princess of Averia."

I smile up at him. "As am I Midas. As am I. Shall I have the maids draw you a bath on the west tower?"

"I would like that very much your highness."

And then with those last words and a kiss on the tip of my nose, he steps back out into the courtyard.

His work only just beginning.

I walk up to the door of my chambers only to be greeted by a pacing, extremely worried chamber maid

"Henette what are you doing...?"

She throws her arms around me and to say I am surprised would be an understatement.

When she finally lets go, a bark of laughter escapes my lips.

"Would you look at that. I thought you said this was the height of impropriety?"

"Well...that your highness was before I knew you would be riding all over the 5th realm with the King trying to get yourself killed."

"I am fine Henette."

As always she is nervously wringing her fingers but she is no longer avoiding my gaze.

I hug her again and she hugs me back.

"Would you like a bath drawn for you your grace?"

"Yes please and have one set up for his majesty as well."

She nods and disappears down the steps as I push the doors to my chambers open.

Soon enough she returns and the bath is drawn but I tell her that I am fine and that she can leave.

I need some time to think.

I undress quietly, distracted.

So many thoughts are racing through my mind at speeds that make it difficult to grasp.

But there is one thing that sticks out beyond my musings concerning who had tried to kill me and who is actually behind all that is going on.

“Who...are...you?”

That is the question Hermani had asked me and it has been playing itself in my head on an endless loop.

A single path I keep walking back and forth on as I step behind the screen and into the bath

What am I?

Why can I see things, know things before they happen?

Why did my hair change it's color the night after I was born and what in all the realms did it mean?

I lather in silence, covering my arms and body in foam and so distracted that I do not even hear the door open again.

Until I cup my breasts in my hands to wash properly and he clears his throat very loudly.

I jump slightly, splashing water out of the tub and onto the floor turning around to see a very turned on, very obviously aroused King leaning against the edge of the bath screen.

Watching me.

“Dare I ask how long you have been standing there?”

“Long enough.”

“Mides...”

“Long enough.”

His voice is rough and thick and even though I am almost fully immersed in the water I feel like he can see everything and I find myself turning the same scarlet as nightshade.

He steps closer, towards me.

I bite my lip, already beginning to feel that familiar heat of wanting him pooling in my belly.

“I did not think you would be finished so soon.”

“I am not. I just could not stop thinking about you.”

I blush all the way to the tip of my toes.

He pulls on the strings of his shirt, loosening it as I look up at him.

“I had the maids draw up a bath in the west tower for you.”

“I know but you are in this one so this is the one I want but please, by all means do not let me stop you..”

“How can I continue...”

“I insist.”

The gentle command in the way he says the words turns my stomach to mush.

But it is the way he silently watches me...

That is what has me throwing my head back and moving my hands across my body in ways that are most decidedly not intended to clean.

I close my eyes and imagine they are his hands.

And I can hear him starting to breathe heavier, faster .

My toes curl beneath the water as my hand slide down my stomach, heading to the aching place between my thighs.

But just before I can get there I feel his hand, firm and large around my wrist. Stopping me, holding me in place.

My eyes fly open to see him squatting beside me. Eyes dark and unreasonable.

“Let me.”

And then one moment I am staring up at him lips parted in anticipation and the very next I am twisting and straining against the fingers inside of me.

Sliding in and out faster than I can keep up.

“Midas...”

My movements, erratic and breathless is causing water to spill everywhere. But I can hardly begin to bring myself to care.

“Midas!...Midas I’m...”

But his mouth is moving against mine, kissing the moans from my tongue.

His hands are unrelenting.

Pushing me unforgivingly over the edge of blinding bliss until I am falling, gasping for air.

He breaks the kiss to stare at me, to let me catch my breath, his eyes darkening even more when they rake over my body.

“Gods above Hera, it does not matter how many times I see you like this... everytime feels like the first time all over again”

And because I do not know what to say to that, I simply drag him into the bath tub with me so he can begin the process all over again.

Hours later, I lay in his arms tired and spent, a pleasant ache throbbing gently between my legs.

“So what is it that you were you thinking about?”

I glance up at him. “What?”

“Earlier, when I came in you were lost in thought. What was on your mind?”

And I tell him.

Because telling him makes me feel better.

He is silent for a long time but then he gets up suddenly.

“Change into something warmer and grab a cloak.”

I do not hesitate. Because trusting him is becoming instinctual.

I dress as quickly as I can.

“Where are we going?”

“Outside the castle gates.”

“But...it is almost dark outside.”

“It is fine. He is almost always awake. Besides I already almost certain he already knows we’re coming.”

I frown, slipping on my shoes. “Who are you talking about. Who are we going to see?”

He arranges my hair and helps me tie my cloak in front of my neck.

“We are going to see Arydian.”

“The Kingmaker?”

“No. The other version of him. The one that knows everything there is to know about magic spells especially those that can unlock lost memories.”

“I don’t understand.”

He takes my hand and pushes open my window. “Somewhere in your past lies the answers we seek and Arydian is going to help us find them”

The Dragon King’s Substitute Bride Chapter 90

HERA

“Do you trust me?”

Those had been his last words before he stepped unto the window ledge, turned around to smile at me and then proceeded to traumatize me by falling off.

I do not even have time to scream.

I grip the edge of the window and look out into the midnight sky and the darkned floor below.

And then...

If I had thought Leo’s dragon to be the most magnificent terrifying thing then it is only because I had yet to see Er’gan.

“Skies above...”

While Leo’s dragon had been nearly twice the size of Meirsul, Midas’ dragon is almost three times the size of the dragon I met in the cellar.

If I did not know it who it was, I would have been utterly terrified.

But sitting high within the sockets of a bony skull so large I can only see a part of it from the window, are his eyes.

And even though the pupils are now thin black reptilian slits, I would recognize those eyes anywhere.

The bright warmness of liquid gold.

And that is why I do not back away.

But even though I am not afraid, I am also not unfazed by the sight of the rest of it.

Covered entirely in scales that appear to fade from bright blood red to a midnight black just before disappearing under the thick skin of his belly, Midas' dragon possesses a single central horn that sits atop its head just above thick angular ears.

Ever moving long, black, tendrils run along its chin and the sides of its jaws and four powerful limbs that while they would definitely allow the creature stand dignified and sturdy would also doubtlessly allow it to be able to crush buildings beneath its feet.

And its wings.

The colossal largeness of them starting from the point above its shoulders and ending in the middle of its back.

I have seen them before.

The mesmerizing luminescence that makes it look like there is a multitude of colour swirling around in the blackness of its nearly transparent membrane.

But now, attached to the rest of the dragon who owns them, they look almost completely different.

I am unsure if I wish to scream or laugh.

I find myself wishing that there is some sort of text that states how one should react in the presence of fearsome beasts beyond gaping stupidly with my mouth quite nearly touching the floor.

But even then I feel like it would still not be enough.

I step closer to the window, wanting to reach out and touch it but unsure if I can.

And as if things are not already strange enough as it is, I hear its voice in my head.

The deep, gravelly, ancient tone of it.

"Human."

My eyes double in size but I do not stumble back.

"How are you..."

"Do not try to understand it. Somethings are beyond your... human capabilities."

"I can hear you! In my head!"

"Oh cease your theatrics. The dragon king has asked that I transport you across the castle gates and into the capital."

I almost laugh at the offended way it says the words.

“Am I right in assuming that this does not please you?”

“Of course it does not. I am a five thousand year old dragon. The very first to walk the seven realms. Yet he would have me reduced to ferrying people on my back like a common horse or a beast of burden.”

“Well if it makes you feel any better, I have no intentions of riding you.”

“And why ever not?”

“You do not really expect me to climb unto your back while you fly thousands of feet in the air do you? What am I supposed to hold unto to, your scales?”

Now the dragon in my head sounds offended for a whole new reason.

“Are you by any chance implying that I am incapable of delivering you safely across the castle gates and into the heart of the capital?”

“Yes Er’gan that is exactly what I am implying. What if I fall off or...or...”

Before I can finish speaking Er’gan flaps it’s wings once, lifting it’s body up in the air so that all I can see now is a view of it’s pitch black underbelly.

Then it turns around, it’s large tail ending in a club like mace cutting through the air in one smooth single motion.

I lean half way out the window. “Are you leaving?! That is no way to...Ah!!”

I see it too late.

The dragon had reoriented itself so that it’s head is now facing directly towards me and before I can stop it or move out of the way, it hooks it’s horn through the underside of my cloth and drags me out the window.

Then before I am even able to recover from the horror of being snatched out of my window by a five thousand year old dragon, I am tossed into the air like nothing more than a piece of stale bread.

I am not even aware how loudly I scream or of the fact that I am still screaming even though I did not fall tragically to my death but instead am now sitting on the back of the most frightening creature I have ever seen.

I grab onto it’s horn with both hands.

“By Hades and Zeus, Er’gan what in all the realms?!!”

“You were being irrationally stubborn and I...no I will not apologize to her, she was wasting precious time not to mention calling me incapable of ensuring her safety.”

Even though I can still hear it's voice in my head. I feel like it is no longer speaking to me.

"Fine I will...Human..."

"My name is Hera."

"I understand that it might have been less than pleasant to be dragged out a window and tossed in the air."

"You don't say."

Silence and then...

"You see dragon king...she refuses to cooperate."

"Cooperate!! Pray tell Er'gan exactly what is cooperative about being tossed in the air like a common rag doll."

"I only did it because..."

And somehow my very first dragon ride is spent arguing with a five thousand year old creature about exactly what it means to be dragged and tossed around.

The journey to the gates of the capital takes barely anytime at all.

Infact it feels like Er'gan barely even flapped it's wings more than 3 times.

Too big to land directly on Arydian's street without collapsing a few buildings, the dragon lands in the middle of the capital's deserted square.

I let go of it's horn that I had grabbed unto to keep from falling off and slide down to land in a less than graceful stumble.

I turn around to stare at the beautiful dragon sitting innocently on its hunches.

But before I can say anything a small, bent shadow steps out from between two buildings.

Without meaning two, I move closer towards Er'gan.

"If it isn't my favorite dragon."

I do not hear what Er'gan says in response but the man laughs.

A throaty, phelgm filled sound.

The tiny dragonkin man steps closer and into the light and I recognize him immediately

Except he looks...different.

For one his cloudy grey eyes are now a bright emerald green and the way he moves, there is none of the quiet elegance of Arydian the Kingmaker in this man's jolly steps and wide smiling face.

Yet I could almost swear that it is the same man who had stood before the king mere days ago to announce that a portal had been opened.

He bows low when he sees me.

"Your highness. I do not believe we have been properly introduced."

"But..."

"Ah do not think much about it. Your confusion is understandable and as much as I would love to explain I believe the king wishes to transform back."

He rummages in a bag slung over his shoulder that I had not noticed and am almost certain was not there before and from within its depths produces a change of clothes.

He places it in my hands, and turns around still laughing at the confusion on my face.

A flash of light beside me and when I turn my head my heart nearly stops.

My cheeks turn red and start to burn.

But Midas completely unfazed by how naked he is simply reaches for the clothes in my hands, smirking when he catches me unable to stop staring.

"You may turn around Arydian."

The man turns and bows. "My King."

"Need I ask how you knew we were coming?"

"Well, let us just say I was given a heads up."

Unable to take it anymore I interrupt.

"Wait are you not Arydian?"

"Yes indeed your highness I am he."

"Arydian the Kingmaker, messenger of Clotho the present?"

"Yes and No."

"I do not understand"

My confusion is directed at Arydian but it is Midas who answers.

“You see the journeys that the Fates send him on, the things they show him, all that knowledge, most times with the inability to do anything about it... It can be quite debilitating. And in an effort to save his mind, his conscious split into two. One became Arydian the king maker while the other is the Arydian you see before you now”

“Master wizard and sorcerer extraordinaire” Arydian smiles wide, doffing the small cap on his head.

“I have so many questions. How do you...”

I feel Midas hand in mine, stopping me before I can get distracted.

” I will explain later. There is no time. Arydian. I believe you know why we are here.”

“I do. But I must warn you your highness that to walk the path of memory is an incredibly dangerous task. There are some many things that could go wrong. So many twists and turns. Take the wrong step and you could end up getting lost. Stuck forever reliving the past that could have been.”

Midas grip around my hand tightens and I look up to see him watching me.

But I speak first before he can have the opportunity to change his mind.

“We have no choice Arydian. I wish to know the truth.”

The man stares at me for what feels like an eternity.

Green eyes boring into my very soul and then he nods.

Sharp and sudden.

“Very well then. Come with me.”

He lets us from the square to a small alley between two houses.

“Halt!”

Midas and I stop directly behind him even as he begins to mutter words I do not understand.

Then just as suddenly as he started, he stops.

I do not know what it is that I expected but it certainly was not for the alley to remain the exact same.

Cold and dark and with the faint outlines of a dead end stone wall in the distance.

“Only she may enter”

Midas turns to look at me. “Are you sure you wish to do this?”

“I am not. But I have to. For myself.”

He nods and places a soft kiss on my forehead.

“Try not to fall off anything while you’re there.”

I roll my eyes at him but I am smiling.

Arydian speaks without turning to us.

“Now your grace. It must be now.”

I swallow and step around the old man so that I am now standing at the darkened mouth of the alley.

Is it just me or does it suddenly seem darker than before?

“No matter what you see, what you hear, do not stray from the path. The gods be with you.”

And with those last words ringing in my ear, I step into the pitch blackness of the path between the two buildings.