

The Dragon King's Substitute Bride Chapter 91

HERA

Nothing happens.

I take the first step and then the second and when I look back I can still see Arydian small and tiny beside the largeness of Midas who is still watching me with a look akin to worry on his face.

Did something go wrong?

Why is it not working?

But before I can voice out my complaints, I decide to take a third step.

One more.

Just one more and if it does not work I am turning around and going back.

So I steel my nerves, rub my sweaty palms against the silk of my dress and take another step forward.

But the brick walls do not fall away or disappear and I feel disappointment wash over me.

So I decide to go back.

And when I turn around they are indeed still there.

Except now they are no longer alone.

Where there were once two, there now stands a third person.

I gasp, my hand flying to my chest when I realize what is going.

The third person... is me.

Me before I stepped into the alley and unto the path.

I see Midas turn to me, the other me.

And even though they are too far away I know exactly what he is saying.

Because I have lived it before.

As I look on, I notice that I am beginning to have to squint to see them clearly.

They appear to be getting smaller and smaller, more hazy and unclear with each passing second.

And I realize that time is moving around me.

The path is going on even though I have remained standing.

I tell myself not to panic even though that is the only thing my mind wishes to do.

Be calm, Hera you can do this.

The sooner you find what you came here for, the sooner you can get back

Except I do not even know what I am looking for.

Or even how to get back.

Stick to the path.

That is what Arydian said.

So I start walking because what else can I do?

Somewhere along the way, the once cobbled stone alleyway beneath my feet has become a single path that looks more like hard packed dirt more than anything else.

The brick walls have faded.

There one minute, melting into nothingness the next.

And now it feels like I am walking through a giant dark cloud.

One filled with voices.

Loud and incoherent and unending.

I strain my ears, trying to make out what they are saying.

“Hera!”

I turn sharply to the left.

The direction from which I heard the voice.

“Midas!”

Another voice cries out in response.

I recognize the second voice because it is mine but it does not come from my throat.

The swirling dark clouds fall off.

And I see myself being dragged unto a clearing, Hermani's arm wrapped around my neck.

The events from earlier today.

It feels strange but I look on. Mesmerized and unnerved.

A silent observer into my own life.

I move on quickly.

And the scene fades behind me, swallowed once more by the cloud of darkness.

I realize something with each step I take further into my past.

If I pick out a sound in all of the chaos and focus on it, consciously or subconsciously, the image and event associated with that sound suddenly appears before me.

And I end up having to watch the scene play out until I decide to start moving again.

And through it all, it matters little if the scene takes place indoors or outdoors.

The path, dark and like rich, loamy earth, remains in all of them.

Passing through the changing landscape and scenes unaltered and straight as an arrow.

"The king is in the kitchen."

The maid who had been sent to lure me.

I immediately grab at the sound.

Just in time to see myself run into the kitchen.

It feels strange. Watching myself walk into a trap and my first instinct is to shout out. Warn the other Hera to back away.

But before I can do so I see them.

The one who tried to kill me.

I see them step out from where they had hidden behind the open door.

And I see them push me.

Anger, hot and heavy rises in my throat as I watch myself fall to what would no doubt have been my death.

But I do not see their face.

Even in the memory, the kitchen is too dark and they are wearing a cloak with a large hood.

I could pull it off. I want to pull it off.

I want to reach out when they passed by me and yank it off their head.

Maybe drag their hair along as well.

But as I stretch out my hand, I realize that I am too far away and that to touch them, whoever they are, I would have to step off the dark path.

But Arydian's voice pierces through the haze of my anger.

Loud and clear almost like he is beside me.

"Whatever happens...do not step off the path"

So I sigh and pull my hand back.

Hurrying quickly onwards before I can change my mind and go back.

My walk is mostly fascinating, inspiring both awe and deep seated panic.

Awe because how is this even possible?

And fear because...how is this even possible?

But it does not hurt.

Nothing grabs at my heart, threatening to tear it out.

Until the path takes me back home.

Until I hear myself ask my mother if she would not mind letting me take the geese to the capital for her.

I shake my head. Try to stop myself for seeing it.

But the image only sharpens.

It feels like a physical punch watching myself, my brother in one hand, geese in another, turning my back on my family for what will be the last time.

I yell at my mother to get out. To get everyone out before the Ryders come.

I even yell at my old self to stop being such a coward and turn around.

But no one hears me.

I almost step off the path then.

Whatever happens do not...

“Goddamit Arydian!!”

I hurry forward. Past other images.

Grabbing at every sound desperately, opening up each memory.

Unable to bear the pain yet unable to look away.

My brother and I running through the streets, laughing as we ducked and weaved to avoid the merchant chasing after us.

My grandmother and my sisters in the hut as we sat around the dinner table, Laughing and yelling.

The sight of our once plush manor garden and the picnics we would have the days when my father remembered that he actually loved us more than gambling.

My family, whole, complete...happy.

The tears toll freely down my cheeks.

The hardest part of it all is not seeing them.

That is not the part that makes it feel like my heart is being ripped out of my chest.

No. It is seeing them and being unable to touch them.

And in all these memories I can see things I did not know had happened.

Like the time I thought I had been secretive enough to slip out of my vegetables, not knowing all the time that my mother knew.

Or the fact that my brother had been hiding behind the passage on the day I was called to the throne room in Averia. That he had been watching, crying as I was led weeping into the chambers where I would be prepared for my marriage to the dragon king.

If I had only raised my head and looked back.

If only...

It is beginning to get harder and harder to remain on the path.

I want to run to them and hug them and tell them all the things I wish I could have said earlier.

But I dig my nails hard into my palm and the pain helps me stay focused.

I see myself growing younger with each step.

Until...

The night of my birth.

The fear on my mother's face and she grabbed desperately onto the hand of a much younger version of my father.

"Elias...Elias ...I cannot do this."

"You mustn't speak like that Helena"

It has been many moons since I have heard the names of my father and mother spoken out loud.

I step as close to the image as I dared without stepping off the path.

My mother shakes her head, tears rolling down her cheeks.

My father wipes her tears and I can see his heart breaking for her "Do you regret it?"

She shakes her head even harder. "Never and you should not either Elias. We did what we had to do."

"Even though it meant promising your first child to be used by the Fates?"

I gasp out loud. Slapping my hand over my mouth before remembering that they can neither see nor hear me.

My mother is silent, thinking.

"You were going to die Elias. When I took you sick and bleeding to the messenger of the Fates in she told me you had been predestined to die, that it was your Fate. I had to make a choice and I thought.... I thought I would be fine. But what if..."

And at this point her voice cracks, her grip around my father's hand tightening desperately.

"What if the messenger was wrong and they intend to take my baby away from me, what if they want my baby now...what if I never get to see her, hold her..."

"Helena..."

"I know what you are about to say. That I am being irrational."

"I was not..."

But my mother is no longer listening. “What kind of mother trades off the life of her own child. What kind of a mother does that?!”

My mother had always been a strong woman.

Stubborn and relentless and with a heart the size of Averia’s capital.

To see her like this, broken and weeping...

It does not just hurt, it burns.

And without knowing it, I start to go to her.

I step off the path.

Almost instantly the image fades.

I look around in confusion but by the time I realize my mistake and try to correct it...

I realize that the arrow straight dirt path is gone.

Disappeared beneath my feet like it was never there.

And the moment I realize it, I start to fall.

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HERA

Lost.

Lost and drowning.

That is what it feels like.

All around me I can hear voices, catch glimpses of images... people... memories

Not all of them mine.

I try to scream, to call out for Arydian, Midas ...

But nothing comes out.

I know my mouth is open and that my mind is screaming but the sound itself is lost in the surrounding chaos of the noise of memories all around me.

Loud and unending and oppressive.

There are so many, each fighting for my attention, each trying their hardest to be heard and moving past me at such overwhelming speeds that my head struggles to keep up.

Struggles and fails.

There is no direction, no where to turn to and I am getting tired of fighting.

I can feel the sadness and the emotions in all the memories around me.

It does not matter that they are not mine.

They are everywhere, threatening to crush me beneath the weight of their regrets and unanswered wishes.

I want to give up.

Give in.

Let the darkness take me.

But then I think about him.

About never seeing him again.

And suddenly I want to fight. I want to get out of here.

But before I can try.

I feel something around me.

A sense of overwhelming fear as I realize that I am no longer alone.

I look to my left and spot a darkness...pitch black and inky... something alive...

Something evil.

I recognize it almost immediately.

Because I have seen it before.

In my dreams. The cloud of darkness behind Midas.

The same one I had seen in the hut.

The one who sent the dark elves.

An overwhelming force of malevolence radiates from it...it's smoky tendrils reaching out towards me.

And from it's very centre...A face...

I squint, struggling to make out the features.

One eye...then another...

But before I can see anymore, the eyes find me and a voice, deep and smooth and evil calls out in what can only be surprise.

“You!!”

The tendrils of inky darkness lash out, wrap themselves around both my arms.

Pulling me closer and closer towards the centre of the dark mass and the face within.

I try to struggle but it does not work.

Try to fight and pull myself away but my chest is heavy and moving my limbs feels like swimming against a tide of dark sticky tar.

And just when I think I'm about to be sucked in, to go under...

I take in one last burst of air...

And my eyes fly open and I jerk up, panting and gasping for air

Midas crushes me to his chest. “Oh thank the Gods...”

I splutter and cough like one who has been under water for a long time.

I am lying in front of the alley, Midas' arms wrapped around me.

It would appear that while I thought I had taken a step into the alley and begun walking, I had actually in reality, simply crumbled to the ground.

My mind had left, had walked the path of memories but my body had remained at the mouth of the alley between the two stone buildings.

I grip Midas arm like he is the only thing keeping me afloat because he is.

The Kingmaker leans in.

“You stepped off the path”

“Yes Arydian thank you. I was not sure.”

He laughs.

The old man actually laughs.

Even while I am still struggling to catch my breath.

Were it not for his being a messenger of the Fate and looking like he has been alive for longer than a century, I would have glared at him.

Midas however is much more tactful.

“Hera what in all of Hades happened?”

Or not.

But my mind is reeling with all the things I’ve heard, all the things I’ve seen and it is difficult to speak, much lesser answer questions.

Arydian places his hand on my forehead.

“She is exhausted.”

Another brilliant observation on the part of the old man.

I am tired and sore and it is making me snide so I press my lips together and keep my thoughts to myself.

Midas and Arydian exchange a look I do not understand and without another word Midas lifts me in his arms and together they start walking towards what I assume through the haze of my exhaustion is the place we had come to the last we were in the capital.

Arydian opens the door in front of the red brick building and Midas carries me down the dark stairs, setting me down gently on a couch in the corner of the musty space.

The lights come on even though I do not actually see Arydian strike any matches or make a move to light the candles.

The room smells musty and damp, dust mites floating around in the dim orange light.

The small man buzzes around the room for a while, disappearing behind his shaky piles and groaning shelves filled to bursting with things I do not even recognize.

“Here...drink this.”

I sniff at the offered cup.

The murky green liquid smells extremely sweet but it closes resembles the healing elixir I have been given so many times in the castle.

But I am too tired to question it so I simply drink.

And almost immediately, I feel alive again.

“Thank you.”

“Oh make no mention of it my dear.”

Arydian takes the cup from my hands and turns around to drop it on a wobbly pile of books in the center of the table.

“Now that that is out of the way....”

He turns around again so that he is face is now towards me once again.

“I believe you have some questions for me.”

I gasp.

“Your eyes!”

He stares at me through orbs that are now the grey, cloudy and unseeing calm I recognize.

Arydian the Kingmaker.

“Be calm your Highness...We do not have too much time. Tell us what you saw.”

All at once everything comes back and I start to shake.

Midas' hand covers mine. “Maybe we should hold off...”

I shake my head. “No. I need to know the Truth.”

The Kingmakers watches me saying nothing and I swallow, speaking around the lump in my throat.

“I saw my parents...on the day of my birth. My mother was crying, afraid.”

“Why?”

It is Midas who asks this and the sound of his voice, deep and calming helps me steady myself.

“She was afraid that I would be taken...by the Fates.”

At this point I glance at Arydian, something akin to accusation in my eyes and in my mind.

Arydian for his own part does not look the slightest bit fazed.

Midas turns to me.

“Why would the Fates want to take you?”

Arydian is the one who answers.

“Because her parents made a deal with them. In exchange for the life of the man she loved, her mother promised to let her first child be...gifted by the Fates.”

My starts to reel.

All this...it is too much.

“What in all the realms does that even mean Arydian?! You’re saying my mother sold me out before I was even born?”

Arydian blinks slowly, unfazed by my outbursts.

“Have you by any chance your highness heard about the Oracle of Daphne?”

I frown, even more so when I feel Midas stiffen besides me.

“I have not.”

The Kingmaker glances at Midas as if willing the dragon king to speak but Midas says nothing and the man is forced to carry on himself.

“The Oracle of Daphne was a goddess. One blessed with the ability to see the future. To see Events before they happened.”

“Like me”

“Exactly like you. But when she died, the one responsible for bringing it to pass tried to take away her powers.”

The Kingmaker turns to his table. Reaching for something...then another... mixing everything together in a tiny mortar.

“To prevent it from falling into hands, the Fates took it...but as with all powerful magic, they could not hold until it forever. They needed a vessel. Somewhere... someone within which to place this power.”

He throws in a pinch of something white and smoky into the wooden mortar, grinding it with a tiny pestle even as he continues to speak.

“They needed somewhere no one who ever suspect to look.”

Midas jaw clenches. “The human realm”

“Exactly. Hera...”

It is the first time Arydian will call me by my name and it is a strangely warm feeling, like being called by a grandparent.

A kind and gentle one and all my anger dissolves like it was never there.

“Your mother did not give you away. She let you be chosen to bear the Fates gifts. The power of the Oracle of Daphne lies inside of you.”

The Oracle of Daphne...the powers of a goddess...hidden inside of me.

Skies above...

“What are you making?”

Midas’ voice, drags me out of my shock induced stupor.

Arydian’s deft hands work nimbly to turn the black powdery substance from a tiny skin pouch in the mortar.

“A warding potion. For the queen.”

Midas frowns, glancing from Arydian to me and back to Arydian.

“Why would she need a protective spell?”

But Arydian does not answer.

Not until he is done with his task and draws the string on both sides of the pouch, sealing it shut does he then turns to me.

“You said you saw your parents.”

I nod.

“Yes, I did.”

“Was that when you stepped off the path?”

Somehow I feel like he already knows the answer but I nod again anyway.

“But that is not all you saw is it your Highness?”

The face in the cloud of inky darkness.

The eyes that had recognized me.

The voice that had called out to me.

And when I start to shake again, it is not tiredness but fear.

Crushing, bone chilling fear.

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MIDAS

She falls asleep almost immediately after.

Her head starting to droop even before she finishes speaking.

Arydian tells him it is the elixir he gave her to drink.

Midas nods, pulling her closer into the circle of his arms.

He has so many questions, so much he does not understand.

But when he tries to ask, Arydian the Kingmaker merely smiles.

“Soon dragon king. All will be revealed in due time.”

Midas bristles.

He is getting tired of all their riddles and games and pointless prophecies.

He detests being kept in the dark like this. Does not understand why all of a sudden there seem to be so many secrets around him.

Secrets are nothing but a form of deceit.

And there is nothing the dragon king hates more than being deceived.

Especially now that it would appear that it is not just the Kingmakers who are hiding things from him.

Er'gan knows much more than it is letting on.

He felt it in the way the way the dragon stirred when Arydian mentioned the Oracle of Daphne.

And when she had mentioned what she saw, the dark cloud with the eyes that seemed to recognize her, the dragon had immediately withdrew.

Refusing to answer Midas' calls to it or his intenal questions about why it was right now feeling anger and fear and in turn making Midas feel the same things.

But the real reason he is so annoyed is that he is worried.

And the ruler of the 5th realm does not like being worried.

Yet every time he glances at her tiny frame, watches the rhythmic fall and rise of her chest, he cannot help but feel that way.

Most especially now.

The voice of the Kingmaker brings him back to the present.

“Elian tells me that come morning light, you will be headed to the 4th realm.”

“If the Messenger of Lachesis the Future knows so much he should put it to go use by telling me what I do not already know.”

But Arydian, who over the years Midas has come to learn is almost incapable of getting offended, merely laughs.

“Do you think the Fairy Queen will give to you what it is that you desire?”

Midas stares at a point on one of the very overloaded shelves all around the room, his arm subconsciously stroking the hair of his queen, still and asleep in his arms.

The Fae and Elves who call the fourth realm home are the most secretive of all the other realms.

Perhaps that is why the gods chose them to be the custodians of magical knowledge and of potions and spells and the intricate wonders of the natural world.

He speaks without turning to look at the withered old man by his side.

“Perhaps. She is not entirely unreasonable. As long as I remember not to mention her traitor of a sister locked up in the cellars of my castle.”

For many years, even before the time of Midas, like two gifted siblings, the dragon realm and the realm of Fae and Elves have coexisted in quiet rivalry and unspoken alliances.

In sharp irony to all the knowledge they possessed, the creatures of the 4th realm were fun loving people.

So much so that to the hard weathered, serious, war orientated, dragonkin, the Fae and Elves were nothing but wild, unserious creatures who the inhabitants of the dragon realm secretly thought should not be in possession of all the knowledge they had.

It has been for eons past and will continue for eons to come to be the source of silent contention between the two realms.

But as is the way of siblings, Irrespective of Midas' hard hearted, non-negotiable warnings for all other realms to keep out of his borders and the Fairy queen's refusal to share the knowledge of their magic,

The dragonkin of the 5th realm and the Elves and Fae of the 4th realm know that should trouble come, they could always turn to the other.

The only issue is they could both be highly competitive.

The dragonkin with their pride, the elves and fae with their extreme selfishness and belief that nothing should be done free.

It has been many years since Midas has set his eyes on her, many years since the day he killed the king of Giants and sent for all the rulers of the other realms to come and witness what would happen to them should they ever think of invading his kingdom.

But he hopes the queen of the 4th realm will be prepared to listen to reason and give him the antidote to Wolfsbane without any of her theatrics.

He hopes he will not have to take it by force.

Because should it come to that, Midas will not hesitate.

Not with the lives of his entire army and the many other Ryders of his realm at stake.

But if he does not leave Arydian now and attempt to at least get some form of respite before the sun rises tomorrow, he would be too worn out to ride out not to mention wrestling information from the queen of the Fae and Elves.

Arydian as if sensing the King's desire to leave, gets up spryly from his stool.

His eyes changing from grey to bright green the moment he pushes off the chair.

He lifts up the pendant he has been working on and offers it to Midas who in turn eyes it warily.

"I know you do not believe that the gods are on your side Midas but they actually are. On both your sides. The one locked away in the darkness he has seen her, she needs to be protected. So for her sake, take it."

Midas reaches out and takes the locket into which Arydian had placed the powder he had been grinding.

"Are you going to tell me who is behind all this?"

Arydian is silent for a long time.

He even looks like he might be considering it.

"It is not my place..."

“Gods be damned Arydian, how can I protect her from an enemy I do not even know?”

As if sensing his frustration Arydian finally relents.

Reaching out he places a small hand on the King’s arm, his skin weathered and wrinkled beside the smooth cotton of the King’s shirt.

“The answers you seek are on this journey Midas. Go and the Gods be with you.”

Midas lifts her up in his arms, the dragonkin man following them up the stairs and to the entrance.

“Dragon King”

Midas turns around at the door his wings already out , one foot out in the biting chill of the early hours of the morning.

“The dark elvin queen locked up in your castle, ensure that no one gets too close to her. The lure of her magic, the whispers of darkness with their promises and temptations can be quite...seductive.”

And knowing he will get no more from him, Midas nods one last time in thanks and hoisting her up properly, flies them both back to the castle without so much as a backwards glance.

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HERA

It happened again.

Once more I had closed my eyes in one place and awoke in another.

“Stop pouting at least you were not unconscious this time.”

“Still. I am sick to death of having you carry me everywhere like some sort of damsel in distress.”

“But I enjoy carrying you”

I ignore the way he looks at me when he says the words.

Attentive and focused and very clearly thinking about kissing me.

I clear my throat, an effort to pretend like I am not feeling anything.

“Be that as it may...”

“hmmm hmmm...” He steps closer, blotting out the light of the morning sun reflecting on my face.

As always the effect he has on me and my insides is almost palpable and I swallow gently, refusing to step back.

“Be that as it may, I would...very much... prefer if...what are you doing?”

“Distracting you. Is it working?”

I attempt to calm my racing heart.

Attempt and fail.

“Dragon king...we are outside.”

But even as I furiously whisper the words, I make no attempt to move away or still his wandering eager hands and he merely smirks especially when he sees the pulse jumping around in my neck.

“Unconscious or not Hera, I intend to keep carrying you... holding you...”

His dips his mouth towards my ear, his breath warm and tingly on the side of my neck

“For a very, very long time. So you had better get used to it.”

My insides melt deliciously into one big mess.

But before anything more can happen...

“Everything is ready my King.”

This time, we will be only three embarking on the trip to the 4th realm.

The king, Leo and I.

I had awoken fully prepared to argue my case on why I should be allowed to go with them

But before the words were even out my mouth, Midas was asking me to get ready.

In his words. “There is no way in Hades I have leaving you alone.”

Always a man of few words and no plans to admit anything, he did not elaborate further but I knew what he meant.

And as much as I detest playing the victim, I am not willingly to be left alone either.

Most especially not now that some shadowy construct with vague eyes and an indistinct face has apparently decided to take an interest in me.

Ironically my own safety had not even been my primary reason for wanting to go.

And despite my knowing that the circumstances surrounding this situation and our departure are less than ideal, I cannot help not feel a tinge of excitement at an opportunity to travel to another realm.

Even in Averia we have heard tales of the splendor and wonder of the realm of Elves and Fairies and the child in me who enjoyed listening to her father's stories and her mother's tales, yearns to see it with her own eyes.

Midas turns to the Chief Ryder who had just spoken to him.

"What about my instructions concerning the Dark eleven queen?"

"She has been moved from the cellars and contact with her has been expressly forbidden until our return"

When Midas had mentioned what he planned to do, I did not understand it.

But according to him, despite the cuffs inhibiting her dark magic, Hermani still had her powers of seduction and persuasion and the cellars were too full of people who would sooner give themselves over to the shadows as long as they were promised power.

And we could not afford to come home to a castle overrun with worshippers of the darkness.

So he decided to have her moved to a solitary, magic warded part of the castle.

At least until our return where he would make a final decision on what to do with her.

Depending on whether we are able to acquire the antidote to Wolfsbane or not.

I shudder just thinking about what would happen if we can't.

Midas is immortal and Er'gan's magic in his veins would prevent the Wolfsbane from having very strong an effect on him but all his other Ryders, Leo included...

If anything were to happen to them, the dragon king would be unable to bear it.

He would blame himself for being incapable of protecting his people and he would allow the guilt drive him insane.

I cannot allow that to happen to him.

I have asked myself why.

Why every time I look at him, my knees go weak and my heart nearly beats itself out of my ribcage.

Why just the thought of him getting hurt petrifies me enough to make my breath shallow and loud.

And I have come to a conclusion.

One that is independent of whatever magical bind ties our souls together.

One that is almost just as unsettling because I did not see it coming in a thousand years.

One I am not quite ready to admit out loud.

So I simply express it by slipping my hand in his as he leads me to his monster of a horse.

By meeting his eyes when I place my hands on his shoulders and allow him hoist me unto the animal.

We ride out the castle gates and down dragon's mount.

But rather than ride out, towards the capital or the Elder forest, Midas tugs on the reins, turning his stead around and heading around the mountain and in the opposite direction.

We proceed at a brisk pace over the grey rocky terrain covered in tiny stones and shrubs and barely any trees in sight.

I glance at Leo riding by our left.

He and I have not spoken.

Not since the day he saved me from dying.

And even though it may seem like it is because there has been no time, I could have sworn from the way he always avoids my gaze and looks away when I catch him staring at me, that he is avoiding me.

"We are here"

Midas pulls the horse to a stop and I look around.

We are in the middle of what would appear to be nowhere.

Behind us, if I squint, I can see the faint outlines of the dragon castle high and imposing, a stone behemoth against a backdrop of a pale pallid sky.

But that is the only thing in sight beyond rocks and rocks and...oh is that...never mind, it's just a rock as well.

He helps me down.

I stumble slightly, grabbing onto the horse to steady myself but he is already walking forward, his head turning this way and that.

He appears to be looking for something, sniffing the air even.

I hear the sounds of his footsteps as he walks across the gravelly floor to come and stand beside me.

“Leo...”

He bows his head and offers a semblance of a smile but he still would not meet my eyes. “Your highness.”

Chewing nervously on my lip, I look down. “I am sorry.”

“Whatever for?”

“I asked you to lie for me. I understand how uncomfortable that must be for you and that is why you are avoiding me.”

“That is not why.”

I stop and glance at the chief Ryder who is staring straight ahead

“So you are avoiding me. Well if it is not because of that incident, then why?”

He is silent for a long time, watching Midas search for whatever he is looking for and then he turns back to me, staring at me hard.

“Because I want something I am not allowed to have and hiding it is becoming more...tasking than I anticipated”

“What is it that you want?”

No answer.

I open my mouth to ask him again what he means but he shakes his head slightly and the almost pained look in his eyes makes me stop.

I decide not to pressure him and instead turn back to look at Midas.

“What is he searching for?”

“The safest Route.”

“You are going to have to tell me a little more than that.”

“Portals are centers of very strong magic. Pathways through countless worlds and realms. Even beyond the seven we know. You pick the right one and you can arrive in your desired location in the shortest time possible. Pick a wrong one...”

He does not need to complete the sentence.

I already know a little about what it feels like to be lost...stuck in the in-between.

But before I can ask him anything else, lightning, sudden and instantaneous, strikes the ground and I jump back, nearly stumbling into Leo.

The smell of smoke and ash fills the air and then I hear a loud, tearing noise.

Like the sound a seam makes when it is ripped or torn apart.

It seems to be coming from everywhere all at once and as I watch, a large rent appears directly in front of Midas who is standing with his arms outstretched.

It starts from the sky and extends downwards.

Wrinkled, cackling edges pulling apart from each other, the lower one stopping just shy of touching the rocky ground.

It is difficult not to be frightened and immensely fascinated all at the same time.

Midas stands in front of the Portal, and we walk up to stand beside him.

“It has been a while since I opened a portal to the Fairy realm.”

“You are not going to get us missing are you?”

He sweeps me off my feet and into his arms.

“You speak too much.”

I laugh and turn my head just in time to catch Leo looking away.

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Like moving water or glass.

Rippling and swirling with luminescent colours.

Midas’ grip on me tightens.

“I am not going to faint again am I?”

“You might. Just hold on tight”

It feels like passing through a veil.

One that is liquid and alive.

There is a sort of pressure in my head. Almost similar to the one I feel when I am about to have a premonition.

Except worse.

A hundred times worse.

It lasts for barely a heartbeat but it feels like forever.

And the minute my feet touch the ground again I begin to dry heave, coughing and hacking, my insides feeling like they have been turned inside out.

He brushes my hair backwards and holds it away from my face while I attempt to cough out my lungs and spit them unto the grass below.

“You did not faint. I am... impressed”

I raise my head to glare at him through the haze of my tears and tell him that the way u feel now, I would much rather have fainted.

But as I look up my eyes focus behind him and the words die in my throat.

By all the gods...

The Dragon King's Substitute Bride Chapter 94

HERA

It happened again.

Once more I had closed my eyes in one place and awoke in another.

“Stop pouting at least you were not unconscious this time.”

“Still. I am sick to death of having you carry me everywhere like some sort of damsel in distress.”

“But I enjoy carrying you”

I ignore the way he looks at me when he says the words.

Attentive and focused and very clearly thinking about kissing me.

I clear my throat, an effort to pretend like I am not feeling anything.

“Be that as it may...”

“hmmm hmmm...” He steps closer, blotting out the light of the morning sun reflecting on my face.

As always the effect he has on me and my insides is almost palpable and I swallow gently, refusing to step back.

“Be that as it may, I would...very much... prefer if...what are you doing?”

“Distracting you. Is it working?”

I attempt to calm my racing heart.

Attempt and fail.

“Dragon king...we are outside.”

But even as I furiously whisper the words, I make no attempt to move away or still his wandering eager hands and he merely smirks especially when he sees the pulse jumping around in my neck.

“Unconscious or not Hera, I intend to keep carrying you... holding you...”

His dips his mouth towards my ear, his breath warm and tingly on the side of my neck

“For a very, very long time. So you had better get used to it.”

My insides melt deliciously into one big mess.

But before anything more can happen...

“Everything is ready my King.”

This time, we will be only three embarking on the trip to the 4th realm.

The king, Leo and I.

I had awoken fully prepared to argue my case on why I should be allowed to go with them

But before the words were even out my mouth, Midas was asking me to get ready.

In his words. “There is no way in Hades I have leaving you alone.”

Always a man of few words and no plans to admit anything, he did not elaborate further but I knew what he meant.

And as much as I detest playing the victim, I am not willingly to be left alone either.

Most especially not now that some shadowy construct with vague eyes and an indistinct face has apparently decided to take an interest in me.

Ironically my own safety had not even been my primary reason for wanting to go.

And despite my knowing that the circumstances surrounding this situation and our departure are less than ideal, I cannot help not feel a tinge of excitement at an opportunity to travel to another realm.

Even in Averia we have heard tales of the splendor and wonder of the realm of Elves and Fairies and the child in me who enjoyed listening to her father's stories and her mother's tales, yearns to see it with her own eyes.

Midas turns to the Chief Ryder who had just spoken to him.

"What about my instructions concerning the Dark eleven queen?"

"She has been moved from the cellars and contact with her has been expressly forbidden until our return"

When Midas had mentioned what he planned to do, I did not understand it.

But according to him, despite the cuffs inhibiting her dark magic, Hermani still had her powers of seduction and persuasion and the cellars were too full of people who would sooner give themselves over to the shadows as long as they were promised power.

And we could not afford to come home to a castle overrun with worshippers of the darkness.

So he decided to have her moved to a solitary, magic warded part of the castle.

At least until our return where he would make a final decision on what to do with her.

Depending on whether we are able to acquire the antidote to Wolfsbane or not.

I shudder just thinking about what would happen if we can't.

Midas is immortal and Er'gan's magic in his veins would prevent the Wolfsbane from having very strong an effect on him but all his other Ryders, Leo included...

If anything were to happen to them, the dragon king would be unable to bear it.

He would blame himself for being incapable of protecting his people and he would allow the guilt drive him insane.

I cannot allow that to happen to him.

I have asked myself why.

Why every time I look at him, my knees go weak and my heart nearly beats itself out of my ribcage.

Why just the thought of him getting hurt petrifies me enough to make my breath shallow and loud.

And I have come to a conclusion.

One that is independent of whatever magical bind ties our souls together.

One that is almost just as unsettling because I did not see it coming in a thousand years.

One I am not quite ready to admit out loud.

So I simply express it by slipping my hand in his as he leads me to his monster of a horse.

By meeting his eyes when I place my hands on his shoulders and allow him hoist me unto the animal.

We ride out the castle gates and down dragon's mount.

But rather than ride out, towards the capital or the Elder forest, Midas tugs on the reins, turning his stead around and heading around the mountain and in the opposite direction.

We proceed at a brisk pace over the grey rocky terrain covered in tiny stones and shrubs and barely any trees in sight.

I glance at Leo riding by our left.

He and I have not spoken.

Not since the day he saved me from dying.

And even though it may seem like it is because there has been no time, I could have sworn from the way he always avoids my gaze and looks away when I catch him staring at me, that he is avoiding me.

"We are here"

Midas pulls the horse to a stop and I look around.

We are in the middle of what would appear to be nowhere.

Behind us, if I squint, I can see the faint outlines of the dragon castle high and imposing, a stone behemoth against a backdrop of a pale pallid sky.

But that is the only thing in sight beyond rocks and rocks and...oh is that...never mind, it's just a rock as well.

He helps me down.

I stumble slightly, grabbing onto the horse to steady myself but he is already walking forward, his head turning this way and that.

He appears to be looking for something, sniffing the air even.

I hear the sounds of his footsteps as he walks across the gravelly floor to come and stand beside me.

“Leo...”

He bows his head and offers a semblance of a smile but he still would not meet my eyes. “Your highness.”

Chewing nervously on my lip, I look down. “I am sorry.”

“Whatever for?”

“I asked you to lie for me. I understand how uncomfortable that must be for you and that is why you are avoiding me.”

“That is not why.”

I stop and glance at the chief Ryder who is staring straight ahead

“So you are avoiding me. Well if it is not because of that incident, then why?”

He is silent for a long time, watching Midas search for whatever he is looking for and then he turns back to me, staring at me hard.

“Because I want something I am not allowed to have and hiding it is becoming more...tasking than I anticipated”

“What is it that you want?”

No answer.

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The Dragon King's Substitute Bride Chapter 95

MIDAS

The look of pure rapture on her face almost makes having to come here worth it.

They are standing on the edge of a cliff covered in lush, emerald green grass, overlooking the most flamboyant floating city in all of the 7 realms.

It is called that not because the buildings with their pointy roofs and long glass stained windows, hang suspended in midair but because everything is built into the rocky surface of the stark white mountains surrounding the realm's capital.

Giving them the appearance of hanging out and “floating”

Waterfalls cascade down from openings within the mountains' surfaces.

Their low rumbling sound pleasant and calming as they flow and fall between the buildings and houses, continuous glittering streams reflecting the brilliant sunlight.

He initially did not wish to bring her with him.

But he could not bear the thought of leaving her alone with Hermani in the castle and some dark shadow coming after her.

And now, watching her completely mesmerized by the beauty of the realm of Elves and Fae, it almost enough to make him forget all the chaos going on at the moment.

Even if he himself is not particularly fond of it.

The first time he had come here he had been quite frankly blindsided.

He had just turned 21 and his father, determined to teach him everything he had brought him along on a journey to see the Fairy queen.

And coming here for the first time had been for lack of a better word, jarring.

Even entirely surrounded, almost hidden in fact by trees and every plant imaginable, the Fae have hung and embedded precious stones into every single surface they could find so that the whole city appeared to be one shiny mass of blinding light.

The Elves, although more subtle with their mushroom shaped wooden houses built into and suspended between tree branches are just as colourful, the structures covered in creeping vines and flowers of bright, almost unimaginable hues.

The dragon realm is a place of stone and mortar and hard lines.

And although they did have more colours than say the human realm of Avera, and changing landscapes that could be fascinating, nothing in the dragon realm with their ever grey skies could compare to the excessive flamboyance of the 4th realm.

And the people who called it home were just as excessive.

For the dragon king who liked order and subtly, it is safe to say that the fourth realm is not his most favorite of places.

But she looks so pleased and enamoured that he is quite nearly beginning to see the beauty in the outworldiness of the place himself.

“Gods above Midas...It is so...”

“Loud, blinding...?”

“Amazing”

Midas assumes it can for a human who is not used to seeing a sight like this, it can be quite the spectacle.

But the most attention grabbing thing about this entire place is the Fairy queen’s castle.

Sitting a little off to the right at the very top of the white mountain, glittering like a lone star against a backdrop of Sapphire blue sky.

Even the dragon king has to admit that it is quite the breathtaking structure.

So many towers it is almost impossible to count, stretch up in varying length, their gold covered tips reaching out to brush against the fluffy white clouds floating lazily over head.

He had tried to bring them as close to the castle as possible but it would appear he may have miscalculated on his account of his portal opening being so long ago.

He turns to the queen and his best friend.

“I shall have to fly us to the Castle”

Leo on his part looks so horrified at the thought of being carried with his arms wrapped around the King’s neck like some lass, that Midas almost laughs.

“If the King is open to reason...”

“I am always open to reason Leo.”

The chief Ryder smiles. “Of course you are your highness I would never dream of implying otherwise.”

Midas stares down at her blinking up at him trying her hardest not to laugh.

“Whose side are you on?”

She hooks her arm in his. “Yours dragon king. Always yours.”

It is said in jest but it makes Midas heart skip a beat anyway.

Gods he was in so much trouble.

Leo clears his throat to bring their attention back to him.

“If his majesty would agree to it, I could transform and fly us all to the castle it would be faster, not to mention more dignified.”

“You make a good point.”

Midas knows that he is not a jealous person.

Not by a long shot.

Still when the chief Ryder starts to take off his shirt, the dragon king finds himself stepping casually in front of her, arms folded.

The tiny curve of her lips tells him she knows exactly what he is doing but he stares straight ahead and over her head like he cannot see her smirking up at him.

She narrows her eyes.

“If I did not know better dragon King...”

“Well you do and it is not what you are thinking.”

“Is that so? Then you would not mind if I..”

She smirks even harder and makes a move to look behind him.

“Hera...”

He growls without even meaning to, the flare of possessiveness in his chest lending a roughness to his voice.

She laughs at his reaction and then placing both hands on his shoulders, stands on the very top of her toes to press her lips to his, moving back before he can turn it into a proper kiss. Read more free novels at Jobnib.com

“It’s only you Midas. It’ll always be only you.”

She stares at her feet when she whispers the words, her face as red as scarlet and Midas heart slams itself against his ribcage hard enough to hurt.

He reaches for her, the words on the tip of his tongue.

“Hera I...”

A flash of brilliant light and the king turns around to see Leo’s dragon form sitting on its hunches, watching them.

He will tell her later.

When the time is right.

The stone grey dragon with two horns and a narrow nostril raises itself on its four legs, lowering his head and body so that they can mount it easily.

Midas wraps his hands around her and breathes in her scent as they soar over the bright city with it’s kaleidoscope of brilliant almost blinding colours and towards the magnificent castle.

For some reason he cannot help but feel like he has just missed a chance he might not get again for a long time.

He tells himself he is being ridiculous.

Besides, she is his and Midas is not about to let her go anywhere.

Especially not now.

Now that he is beyond certain.

That the heart he thought was shattered and nonexistent is now very whole.

Whole and alive and beating only for her.

The Dragon King's Substitute Bride Chapter 96

HERA

For once I am not scared of falling.

I am barely even thinking about it.

And it is not just because I always feel safe whenever he is around but because I am too amazed to be afraid.

I lean my body as far as it would go, craning my head to look down, drinking in the sights below and never getting satisfied.

It like a city of diamonds and nature intertwined in a manner that is almost indescribably unbelievable unless one were to see it for themselves.

The waterfalls, I have counted four so far, catch the sunlight and like liquid crystal mirrors, end up casting mini archs of various colours all around the space so that it appears like there are rainbows everywhere.

I can see elves with their pointy ears and pale skin, fairies with their colourful wings and pretty glows and it is hard not to stare.

But then they are staring at us as well.

Our appearance in their realm is just as strange to them as floating houses are to me.

Perhaps even worse.

So they watch and they point and they stare.

Whispering about the large dragon with the human on its back and...is that the dragon king?!

I sigh wistfully.

“We shall come here again.”

“What?”

He leans closer so I can hear him over the sound of the rushing wind. "I said we should come here again. When our realm is no longer in the verge of extinction."

Our realm.

Ours...

Who would have thought...

I smile to myself and raise my voice so he can hear me.

"I would not have thought that somewhere this 'loud' would be your favorite place to visit."

"It is not. But it appears it might be yours. So I want to bring you here again. Properly."

I think that I when I start smiling foolishly to myself.

He is already planning our future.

A future with the dragon king.

One with an actual home to call my own.

With children, a boy and a girl that would be as beautiful as he is, although gods willing with my temper and not his and with his common sense and none of my recklessness.

Oh would get a a hold of yourself Hera.

I lean into him, my cheeks flaming even as I thank the gods that he cannot read my ridiculous thoughts.

"I believe dragon king that I would like that very much."

"Then so be it."

The castle built at the very top of the semi-flat mountain appears sweeping and imposing the closer we get to it.

For whatever it is worth, the Fae and Elves definitely were not ones to hold back.

And that much is evident just by looking at the sheer magnificence of the Fairy queen's castle.

The home of the queen of the Fae and Elves who prefers to be addressed as the Fairy queen because according to Midas, and in her own words. "The other name makes her feel like she is centuries old."

Which she actually in fact is.

I almost cannot wait to meet her.

There is an arched, stone bridge the same white color of pale birch that appears to lead from the main capital and towards the enormous golden gates that leads into the castle.

It is at the foot of this stone bridge that Leo lands, stirring up dust with his wings and flattening a few shrubs in his wake.

Midas helps me slide down and I place Leo's folded clothes which I had taken with me, at the base of his dragon's feet before turning around to stare at the castle gates.

He offers me his arm and I put mine through and together we walk towards it.

I expect us to be stopped at the castle gates. At least by well meaning guards wanting to know what in all the realms is going on and why we wish to see their queen.

But there is no guard at the gates and as we approach, the doors simply swing open of their own accord.

It would appear that when one is the custodian of magic and knowledge, they can do things that make doors open on their own.

Beyond the gates and into the courtyard of the palace.

Well kept colourful lawns and hedges.

Skies know how they managed to grow them so lush on the top of a mountain.

Crystal and marble fountains with sparkling clear water dripping from the most intricate of statues and fruit trees with singing birds lends an atmosphere of calm to the entire setting.

It is truly a sight to behold.

I note that the courtyard is filled not with people working or performing one task or the other like I am used to seeing in the courtyard of the dragon castle.

No, instead the elves and fae all around appear to be playing.

Laughter and games, some even excessively wild and loud are going on in every corner I look.

"This is...new."

I see Midas' eyes roll almost to the back of his head and I have to stifle a laugh.

The people in the courtyard, unlike those in the capital try to at least be discrete about their staring.

But I can still see them out the corner of their eyes whispering to themselves.

And it takes me a full heartbeat to realize that is not awe or wonder that is on their face.

It is fear and confusion.

The feared dragon king, the one who had promised to wipe them all out should they so much as breathe wrongly within his borders is now here.

Walking in their realm and towards their palace and their Queen.

I have a feeling that were it not for the fact that we were only three and there is now army or company of dragon ryders with us, they would have thrown themselves into a full fledge panic.

As we near the sweeping flight of marvele steps that would take us into the palace, two elven guards run up to us, dressed in green and brown armour with intricate gold detailing carved into the breast and on their helmets.

They slam their long spears into the dirt, digging it in and then with their right hand over their heart, they bow low.

Really low.

“Your Majesties”

Midas nods.

“You may rise.”

They do and I see them glance at each other as if trying to decide who has to be the one to speak.

Leo, right hand to the king, now back to his original form and dressed again in the clothes of his office steps forward making the decision for them.

“We wish to speak to the Fairy queen.”

Once more, the guards exchange quick looks, one of them even visibly swallowing.

“Of course, Chief Ryder. But may we perhaps know the uhhh... purpose of your visit so as to better inform the queen of your presence?”

“You may not.”

It is Midas who speaks now and when he steps forward, he is no longer just the man who holds me and kisses me and promises to always come for me.

He is the dragon king.

The one who fights battles without batting an eyelid and who had kept all the other realms from invading his realm and attacking his people for over a hundred and fifty years.

But now when I see the difference it is not fear that makes my heart react the way it does.

Leaping and fluttering like a bird in flight.

It is knowing that this powerful, majestic beast of a man is mine.

He stands to his full height and the elves, who in all honesty are also quite tall, appear to shrink in on themselves.

“I am not here to invade your realm so you might as well tell your silly little hearts to stop trying to deafen me with their loud racing. I have matters to discuss with your queen that are of no concern to you and you would do well to step out of my way.”

One last exchange and the guards part, one stepping on either side and allowing us to move forward.

Before we can ascend the steps, the doors swing open.

I gasp and my hands of their own accord find his arm again, my grip tightening.

This is...

I blink rapidly many times, an attempt to clear my eyes.

Yet the image in front of me remains the same.

Unable to do anything more, I simply swallow and stare.

Because standing at the very top of the steps is no one but Hermani herself.

The Dragon King's Substitute Bride Chapter 97

MIDAS

Their's is a story known throughout most of the 7 realms.

A story of family and betrayal.

For as long as the dragon King's memory is concerned, the Elves and the fae have lived together in peace.

But it had not always been that way.

Before the Fairy queen became who she is now, she was simply the daughter of the Fae king Amarion and his elven wife Demitryn.

Princess of the fourth realm along with her identical twin sister..

The elven princess Hermani.

And together the family of four served as the Royal household over the realm of Fae and Elves.

And all was good.

At least on the outside.

What the Royal family knew and every other person did not, was that Hermani had been unhappy.

Deeply unhappy and deeply jealous.

The two royal daughters were treated equally

Despite the sister who would become the Fairy Queen being the oldest by a hair's breadth and the heir to the throne.

Neither one was given preference over the other.

But somehow Hermani managed to get it into her head that was indeed what had been happening.

And so her hatred and jealousy for her sister did not begin with the throne but it had been growing growing gradually, simmering like a slow cooking stew.

Simmering and boiling until after their parents passing, only to overflow on the night of the Fairy queen's coronation.

That had been when she first began to concoct and put her scheme into motion.

She found those disloyal to the throne.

Elves who had always mumbled and grumbled with discontent about having to be ruled over by the Fae.

Her words were like k***e to the fires of tyranny burning in their feverish pitch black hearts

The Last king had been Fae and so would the new queen.

Where the elves just going to sit back and allow themselves be ruled over and over again by the fae?

Soon enough the day would come when the elves would be come nothing but slaves.

Made to bend over backwards and break their backs and fingers in the sun for their Fae masters.

Somehow Hermani and her band of rebels had conveniently forgotten that not only had her mother, the queen been an Elf, but the last two kings before King Amarion had been of Elven blood.

But overthrowing the Fairy Queen was an act akin to suicide.

The crown of the ruler of 4th realm was one that came with an amount of magical knowledge so great it was impossible for one who was not very gifted, someone like Hermani, to snatch the throne.

She needed powers of her own.

And so she turned to the shadows .

Sort for power from the nooks and crannies, journeying to the dark and most secret places of the seventh realm.

The realm of Shadow.

It was there she would meet the one who would promise her power unimaginable, who would give her and her flowers so much magic they would have more than enough.

In exchange, when the time came, she would give to him whatever it is he asked.

And so in exchange for the ability to use dark magic, she sold her soul to the one they called The Fallen.

And she and her army returned to the fourth realm covered in magical runes that writhed and danced beneath their skin, qlive and frightening yet mesmerizing and hypnotic.

But had it would turn out, promises made in the darkness are no real promises at all.

And try as she might, in the end, Hermani was not strong enough.

She and her other dark elves were defeated.

But her sister, far too ambivalent to have her executed for treason, had made her an offer.

“Renounce your alliances with the drakness and cease your use of dark magic forever and I shall show you pardon”

Hermani had spat at her feet and told her she would rather die.

So the Fairy queen had her and her followers banished from the realm of Fae and Elves.

Until they were ready to change their ways.

And that was how they had ended up in Midas’realm.

Roaming around his forests and causing havoc.

He understands leniency.

But if someone had betrayed him the way the Fairy queen’s sister has, he would not have spared them.

The Fairy Queen leads them through her castle and into her throne room and he glances absent mindedly at their crystals and diamonds and glittering surfaces.

But out of respect for his crown, she does not sit.

*Dragon King.”

“Fairy Queen.”

Her smile is just as red as the dark elven queen and just as unerving in it’s perfection. The only difference is when her lips spilt apart, there are no fangs.

“It has been too long Midas. I believe the last time I saw you, you were covered in the blood of your enemies and had the giant King’s head beneath your feet.”

“It was a message that needed to be passed.”

“Of course and we have kept well out of your realm like you asked so why are you here?”

“It is about Hermani.”

There is no change in the queen’s face but Midas notices the way her eyes twitch slightly.

“What about her?”

“She and her elves brought wolfsbane into my realm.”

“It is your fault for granting them asylum.”

Midas bristles. “Do not use that against me especially knowing the reason why my father had to do what he did.”

She laughs. “Still as prickly as ever I see.”

“Look Moria I have not come to jest or trade words with you. I have come to ask for your help. My people need the antidote to Wolfsbane and I have been told it is in your possession.”

The Fairy queen straightens the sleeves of her enormous gown, smoothens down the sides. “And why should I help you dragon king. You and I are not exactly friends now are we?”

“No but you do not want to have me as an enemy either. So name your price.”

“I want my sister.”

There is no hesitation whatsoever in her request.

Midas raises his chin.

“Your sister is responsible for the death of the son of one of my chiefs. But if you give me what I ask, rather than execute her, she will rot in a dragon cell which is more lenient than she deserves.”

Moria shakes her head.

“That is not enough. I want her returned home, returned to me.”

“But she hates you.”

“That is no concern of yours.”

Midas jaw clenches. “Your sister brought chaos and wolfsbane into my realm. If any of my Ryders should die I will kill her. And if the reason they die is because you did not give me the antidote in time, I will burn your realm to ashes around your ears and kill you as well.”

The silence that is left behind is deafening.

And then the Fairy queen laughs.

Hard and long until there are tears in her eyes.

The dragon king would have been offended but he knows she is not laughing at him.

Not really.

But like her sister, Moria responds to challenges with jesting.

Even when she knows that he could actually end her.

She smirks and adjusts the crown on her head.

“I see your bargaining skills still leave much to be desired Midas.”

“It is a promise not a bargain. Give me what I need or suffer the consequences.”

The queen is silent, thinking.

And the Hera steps forward.

The Fairy queen tilts her head in question.

“Ah so the rumors are true. Speak Human.”

He watches her rise to her full height, no longer the cowering slave girl he had first met and His heart fills and overflows with pride.

“I may be human as you say your grace. But I am also queen of the human realm and I will be addressed as so”

The Fairy queen to her credit inclines her head, amusement on her face. “My apologies your highness.”

Hera nods. “I believe what my husband is trying to say is our interests are not mutually exclusive your grace. You want your sister, we want our kingdom to remain intact. Give us what we seek and you have my word. Your sister shall returned to you.”

Again the Fairy Queen is silent.

Thinking.

That is the main difference between her and her sister.

Moria is willing to see reason. To weigh her decisions and arrive at a fairly reasonable conclusion.

She raises her head toward her guests.

” You shall have what you seek.”

“Thank...”

Moria cuts her off. “However the antidote to wolfsbane is pure, extremely strong magic. You must prove yourselves worthy of it.”

Midas is done. His voice drops an octave lower. “I have no time for games Moria.”

He feels Hera’s hand on his. Calming and patient.

He watches her nod at the Fairy queen who is observing their engagement eagerly. “What would you have us do?”

Moria claps in excitement.

“Nothing to serious. But to prove you are worthy of welding such magic, you and your company must walk the hall of mirrors”

The Dragon King’s Substitute Bride Chapter 98

MINTH

She does not eat.

Does not sleep.

Does not leave her room.

Instead she sits in bed, her drapes drawn, her chambers shrouded in an almost oppressive sort of darkness.

Shivering and afraid, wrapped up in her covers, the King's mistress had begun chewing at her gorgeous red nails from that night and she has now bitten them so far down the quick, that they have almost begun to bleed.

But she still does not stop.

Biting and chewing and spitting out little pieces of nail and skin.

A nervous habit that she thought she had left in her past.

A disgusting habit of weakness and defeat.

One she had told herself to let go off because it was not fitting for a queen and that is who she was going to be.

Wife to the dragon king and queen of the 5th realm.

The most powerful woman in all the land.

And yet that...that b***h has brought it back.

Taken her place and forced her back to her old ways.

Reduced her to a coward who sits in her room, afraid of going out for fear of what would become of her.

She tells herself to stop but she can't.

Not after failing so spectacularly.

Spectacularly and foolishly.

She had been in too much of a hurry.

But by the gods it had felt good...no beyond good.

It been exhilarating.

Pushing the "queen" out that door, hearing her breathless gasps of fear and seeing her hand flail and grasp helplessly at the air had felt Minth with such a rush that she had felt drunk, dizzy even.

Everything in her had wanted to peak over the ledge and feast on the rewards of her efforts but she had thought she heard footsteps and afraid of blowing her cover and had instead run back to her room.

She had no doubts that her plan had succeeded and she had gone to sleep content.

The managled body of the one who had dared to cross her, flesh and blood splattered against rock and stone filling her dreams and making her smile in her sleep.

It would be the last time Minth would smile in the coming days.

For she had awoken, not to the cries of alarm or panic she had expected.

But to the sight of the King and queen in the courtyard below, about to ride out to gods know where.

She had staggered back from the window, a sharp stinging pain in the region of her chest.

She screamed as she smashed everything in her room.

Pulling at her hair, clawing at her own skin.

Everything had gone wrong.

No doubt that b***h would have told Midas everything that happened.

Minth knows she did not see her face, she had pushed her from behind and had drawn back into the shadows before the human could see her.

But she has no doubt that the human bastard would call her name.

Accuse her without proof.

For that is what she herself would have done if she had an opportunity to get rid of her greatest opponent.

And no doubt, once they returned, the king would send the guards after her and they would kick down her door and drag her kicking and screaming to be charged to death.

For attempting to kill the queen was too grave a crime for the dungeons or the cellars.

But it is not just the fear of dying that consumes Minth.

No, it is the thought of losing.

Of being defeated by some weak, pitiful human b***h who had taken her crown and was no about to take her life.

Her maid had only come to her door once.

Knocking tentatively and upon receiving no response had continued to knock and knock, even going as far as to ask in a whisper through the door if Minth was okay.

But Minth had yelled at her, screaming at the top of her lungs for the maid to go to hades and leave her alone

Minth has no doubt in her mind that the inspid little rat only meant to glory in her defeat.

Perhaps the human had sent her to spy on Minth.

To make sure that she was utterly defeated and in shambles.

Cowering and shivering in her own sweat and fear.

“So show them that they are wrong.”

Minth freezes.

That voice...the one in her head just now...

It had not been hers.

She clutches at her head, shaking it furiously.

No...!!!

No she cannot afford to lose her mind.

“You are not losing your mind my dear.”

“Who are you?!!”

“Who I am is not important. What is important is that I am as real as you are and I can help you.”

Minth throws off the covers, searching under her bead and in the corbers of her room.

No doubt this is all an act.

Some scheme by that wretched human to drive her insane.

She tosses her clothes everywhere.

“Where are you, I demand that you show yourself to me right this instant!!”

“I am afraid I cannot do that. You see they have me locked up, somewhere in this castle. Chained and restrained like a common animal.”

“Who?”

“Your king...and your queen...”

Minth nearly spits. “She is no queen of mine!”

“Then we are kindred spirits. Find me dear Minth and I shall grant you all that you desire.”

“How do I know that this is not some sort of trap. A scheme to get me into trouble?”

“You don’t. But I am your only hope at getting the crown you so rightly deserve. What more do have to lose?”

Nothing.... Absolutely Nothing.

And it is that realization that has Minth running to the door.

She passes by her mirror and nearly recoils at the sight.

Look what that b***h has done to her.

She will make her pay.

By the gods...

She will make them all pay.

She drags her comb furiously through her matted hair, and attempts to pinch color into her cheeks before going out to find her maid.

The girl is busy laughing and jesting in the kitchen with the other maids and the sight sends rage boiling through Minth because she knows, just knows that they are laughing at her.

They should just wait.

Minth was going to make them eat their tongue.

The maids all freeze the minute they notice her presence, the hypocrites.

“It has been brought to my attention that there is someth... someone locked up in the castle?”

The maids glance at each other.

It is obvious that they have instructions not to speak about it but they are also too terrified of Minth to remain quiet.

It is her maid who speaks up eventually.

“Yes your Ladyship. A prisoner was moved into the east wing of the castle. But the King had given express instructions that no one is to go near her until his return.”

“What makes you think I intend to stop as low as cavorting with some ordinary criminal.

“But she is no ordinary criminal your grace. In fact...I hear that she possess demons within her. Dark magic that would not doubt...”

“I believe that is enough Anith!”

The chief steward who has just stepped into the room and who is not afraid of Minth is the one who says this. His voice resounding against the walls of the kitchen.

He turns to Minth, not even bothering to incline his head in respect. “If I may ask, why does her Ladyship concern herself so with the King’s prisoner?”

“My thoughts are none of your business. But if you must know, I was merely curious and wished to separate truth from fiction.”

“Well in that case, you shall have to wait for the return of the King and queen and ask them yourself.”

Mibth glares at them man.

Shoving him with her shoulder as she stalks past.

“Minth...”

She stops, turning left and turning right and seeing nothing.

But the voice is there, a cold, dark presence in her head.

“Minth...I can help you find me Minth. Come to me and all that you desire...”

“Will be mine.”

“Exactly.”

The Dragon King’s Substitute Bride Chapter 99

MIDAS

He is doing this only because of her.

If she were not here he would have...

She touches his hand and leans in the whisper as they walk behind the Fairy Queen and her guards through some dark corridor that seems to distort and through back their reflections.

“You know you do not have to look like we are being led to the noose”

“For all we know, we are. I do not understand why you are giving in to her whims. I could have gotten it out of her without all this shenigans”

Yes it would have put a strain on an already fraught relationship between the two realms.

But was not the end result what mattered the most?

Apparently the woman by his side thought otherwise.

She slides her arm through his and leans into him.

“You catch more flies with honey than a mace your grace.”

He frowns. Her and her human adages.

“Well the Fairy Queen is not a fly and I am not the slightest of bits interested in catching her.”

She laughs. “It means you can get more out of people if you are simply nice to us.”

He scoffs at her choice of the word ‘us’

The chief Ryder, always conscious of potential threats leans in from behind.

“I hate to act as Hades’ advocate but how well do you trust this Fairy queen?”

Midas does not trust anyone so the answer to that would be “not at all” but he does not expect the Fairy queen to attempt anything untoward.

“We are here.”

The Fairy queen Moria turns around with a flourish, arms outstretched, her voluminous sleeves dangerously close to brushing against the flaming torches lined against the walls.

“What is the hall of Mirrors?”

Moria c***s her head at Hera’s question.

“You agreed to doing something you know nothing about. You humans are either too trusting or extremely gullible.”

He feels her bristle besides him in response but is amazed at the self control she displays when she says nothing in response to the backhanded comment.

Midas however has exhausted his store of generosity and is no longer in the mood to let things slide.

“That will be last time I ask you to treat my queen with respect Moria.”

The Fairy queen smirks.

“It is as I suspected. You know I could smell your aura even before you arrived at the steps of my castle. It was different, less... angry. And I must admit I was genuinely curious as to the reason why.”

Midas narrows his eyes at her wondering what she is driving at but she does not say anything more.

Instead she turns around again, her back to them and her scepter outstretched.

As she speaks, the heavy door begin to creak slowly open, a bright, almost blinding light emanating from within.

“The hall of mirrors reflects your truth. The darkest, most secret parts of your soul. Whatever it is about yourself that you are trying to hide... the forbidden desires you hold...”

She turns and looks over her shoulder as she says that last part and Midas feels Leo fidget behind him, a slight shuffle from one foot to another.

So he is not the only one beginning to think that this might be a terrible idea.

“I need to know that you are worthy of receiving magic from the 4th realm. If the mirrors deem you worthy, you shall make it successfully to the other side where I will be waiting to give you what you seek.”

“What if your “mirrors” decide we are... unworthy. How do we get out then?”

Moria grins that unerving grin of her that reminds Miads too much of Hermani.

She inches closer, her voice a conspiratorial whisper.

“Why you shall be consumed by the darkness within your soul of course. But you my dear queen of the dragon realm, have no dark secrets you would rather keep hidden do you?”

To her credit Hera raises her chin and looks Moris directly in the eye. “I do not.”

“Then you have nothing to worry about. Besides, the journey through the hall of mirrors is an individual one. You may enter together but your paths will divulge.”

Without meaning to, both their fingers tighten around each other but it is Hera who speaks up.

“You mean we will be separated?”

“I am afraid so your highness.”

But the Fairy queen with her glitters and ruffles and the almost manic glint in her eye does not sound very apologetic.

If anything, Midas is beginning to suspect that she is enjoying this and the thought annoys him beyond anything but he looks at Hera by his side.

For some reason he feels like were he too react the way the dragon blood in his veins wishes him to, he would disappoint her.

And disappointing her is the last thing Midas ever wants to do.

Damned elves and their silly games

He nods briskly. "Fine. Let us get this done and over with."

Moria claps her hands together like an excited child. "Splendid."

She steps aside. "Now in you go and I shall be waiting for you in the other side...if you make it."

The three visitors step closer towards the door.

"Well it would appear both your desires to have my head are probably going to consume you in there"

Hera laughs and Midas rolls his eyes but his lips stretch into a tiny smile nonetheless.

Trust Leo to say something like that in a situation like this.

He smirks at his chief Ryder

"I for one have never hidden it."

"Me neither" Hera adds, shrugging.

Leo crosses his hand over his chest, a faux wounded look in his eyes.

"You wound me your highnesses but I shall bear you no grudges. I believe I shall see you both on the other side."

And with that the Chief Ryder walks in first.

To make sure that it is not some sort of trap.

Midas turns to her. "Still think Fairy queens should be caught with honey?"

She smirks. "Between us both, let's use a mace next time."

Midas grins and kisses the top of her head.

"I shall see you on the other side."

"Indeed you shall dragon King."

And together they both step into the light.

He feels it the moment he loses her.

Fingers no longer touching and her absence immediately creates a void somewhere in his chest.

For a long minute, the dragon king stares out into the glare of white light.

Eyes wide open yet seeing nothing.

He blinks and squints and glances behind him.

The door through which he came has disappeared and for all his senses he seems to be standing in a sea of white nothingness.

“Dragon king, I do not think this is a good idea.”

His dragon had been unusually withdrawn the entire time and hearing him speak up now is surprising.

“Why, Er’gan? Are you perhaps worried the secrets you have been keeping from me will get us stuck here?”

The dragon is quiet for a long moment.

Too long a moment.

Midas’ hands form into fists.

The only evidence of the worry he feels.

“What happened Er’gan. Tell me now and it will no longer be a secret that could get us trapped here.”

But it is too late.

Midas’and Er’gan path is already beginning to take shape around them.

And now they are left with no choice but to walk it.

Suddenly the floor beneath his boots is hard packed soil.

Rich and dark.

Exactly like the one at the bottom of dragon’s mount.

As a matter of fact if he did not know where he truly is, he could believe that he has somehow been transported back home.

The walls are hard rock and he can smell the damp and mold that line the various passages under the dragon's mount.

The passage is dark, one lone torch burning off in the distance.

With no particular choice left, Midas makes his way carefully towards it.

He lifts it from its hold and continues onward, the somewhat brighter than normal orangey glow lighting his way.

But soon he notices that there seems to be another light.

One that moves in time with him.

A single golden flicker coming closer with every step he takes

He lifts his torch higher.

The light ahead moves up too.

He moves his hand again.

To the side and then down and the light does the same.

It takes him a full moment to realize what it for what it really is.

A reflection.

And as he draws closer, he finds the source.

A large, towering floor to ceiling mirror stands some distance away.

A part of the rock and stone around it and yet separate.

Midas approaches it cautiously and lifts his torch higher, better to see with.

But when he does, it is not his reflection that stares back at him.

He almost takes a step back, his brows furrowed.

"Hera?"

But even as he says her name, he knows it is not her.

The hair, the alive fieriness of it, that is what had confused him.

Because it is hers.

But the face...

“Er’gan...do you know who this is?”

No answer.

“Er’gan...”

“I do.”

“Then who?”

The silence in-between the words sets Midas’ teeth on edge.

But it is the words that follow that actually make the hair on the back of neck stand on end.

“Who is it Er’gan?”

The dragon sighs, hard and deep within Midas.

“My darkest Secret.”

The Dragon King’s Substitute Bride Chapter 100

Er’gan

The thing It is beginning to realize about secrets is that they feed on darkness.

One could keep it hidden for as long as they wished.

But that would only make them grow.

Grow and fester until they became a sore.

Painful and difficult and too heavy to keep.

It had told itself that too much time had passed.

That there was no longer any need to dig up old matters and drag them to the present.

It had even managed to convince itself that by hiding it’s past, It was doing the world some sort of irredeemable favour they did not even know they needed.

But a secret is a wound.

And like a wound, it does not start to heal until the words are spoken out loud and it is brought into the light.

It would appear that the time had come for Er'gan's wound, to be brought into the light.

It had begun an infinitely long time ago.

A time before even the humans had first walked the realm of Averia.

Yet to the first dragon, the one they called Er'gan, It would always feel like it had been only yesterday.

It mattered not how hard the dragon had tried to forget.

How hard It tried to hide it.

Now, watching through the dragon king's eyes, it is confronted with the very past it had thought dead and buried.

And the pain washes over it all over again.

Grief so deep and raw it causes the dragon king to clutch at his chest and nearly double over.

Feeling the dragon's pain has his own.

It knows that the king recognizes the pain for what it is because thanks to the dragon inside of him, he has felt a fraction of the same before.

"She was your tether wasn't she."

"She was...She was my tether and I killed her."

It feels the shock in the way the dragon king's heads slams against the bones of his chest.

The king is silent.

But it does not need him to say anything, It knows what he is thinking.

Hurting your own tether is not just akin to hurting yourself.

Tethers are a dragon's gift from the gods.

A reason to live.

Something other than themselves worth breathing for.

And to kill your own Tether...

It was the highest of sacrileges.

“Five thousand years ago, my creation...the manner in which I came to be was one that was purely accidental.

No, not accidental...a joke. I was made in jest. “

These are matters that It has not thought about in a while and recalling them is more... difficult than It had imagined it would be.

But it had no choice.

If It does not say them, the mirror would deem It and the dragon king whose body It inhabits unworthy to pass and the darkness of It's past would consume them both.

So It pushes past the ache of the wound and resumes It's tale.

“After my creation, the god who made me decided he had no more use for me. His jest was done, his point proven and so I was abandoned. Left to wander the realm of the gods for three thousand years.”

As Er'gan speaks into the mind of the dragon king, It can see the mirror change, the images beginning to form.

And It watches.

Watches a younger version of Itself wander and roam.

Apart from everything, less than everything.

Until the day It was found

“His name was...is Azarath. And he was the god of magic. The one responsible for controlling and delivering the gifts of magic to all created creatures.”

Er'gan remembers Azarath the way one remembers the wind.

Good and bad intermingling until all that is left is confusion.

In those days, dark magic did not yet exist.

Not truly.

But Azarath was a curious god.

And the powers he possessed, they made him even curiouser.

So when he found Er'gan, he took him in.

Not because he felt compassion on the ancient being forced to roam the realm of the gods as an outcast but because he saw a creature with which to test the limits of his powers.

And so he began to give gifts to Er'gan.

Began to use the creature to test what he could and could not do.

And Er'gan grew strong and powerful.

So much so that Azarath decided he wanted more.

He wanted an army of this powerful creatures who could fly and breathe fire.

And he wanted them all for himself.

But by now, Er'gan vast power and abilities had gotten the attention of the other gods and when they saw it's potential, they decided to create a race of people specifically fitted to it's abilities.

So they took Er'gan's blood and Er'gan's bone and Er'gan's scales and from it they made the dragonkin.

And to the dragonkin and Er'gan's descendants they gave the fifth realm.

But to Azarath, he who believed that he would be given control of the realm, after all it was his gift that had brought the dragon's to their attention, they gave nothing.

"That is when it all began to go wrong is it not."

"Yes dragon king. It is."

Azarath had been livid.

"He was beyond convinced that the fifth realm was his right, the fruit of his loins and thus his to rule and control and do with as he pleased."

But the gods were not prepared to give control of any of their creatures to just one god.

Azarath as the patron god of magic already had so many who held him in high reverence.

It was more than enough.

But Azarath would have none of it.

If the gods thoughts they could take away from him what he deserved, then would become the strongest of them all and rule over creators and creations alike.

"So he began to seek for ways to surpass them."

His magic, the gifts he had, they began to grow dark.

He turned to arts that were forgotten, ways that were forbidden and paths that were uncharted.

And he grew.

He grew so strong that even the other gods began to fear him.

“But it was not until he began to wreak havoc throughout the seven realms, running amok, doing whatsoever he pleased, it wasn’t until then that they decided that something had to be done.”

The images in the mirror move in time It’s thoughts and words.

The events appearing as they happened.

“A meeting of the gods was called and as the first dragon and the one who had spent the most time with him and had in a way begun Azarath’s path of destruction, I was summoned. And that...”

The image before dragon and dragon king changes, wavering and shimmering, like looking under a puddle of water.

“Was where you met her.”

The woman with hair the color of fire and skin so olive and alive, it looked beyond real.

Her eyes spark and shine at them like she can see them.

And her smile, because that is how It chooses to remember her, is like the brightness of a thousand suns.

Warm and bright in the damp darkness of the cave.

The Oracle of Daphne.

It was she who had found It.

She would had first reached out to the dragon who all It’s life had lived apart from everything.

“It had been she who opened my eyes to true living. She who had taught me to be alive. My first friend and for a creature who had spent the past thousands of years of simply drifting, I knew I had to protect her with my life.”

But Azarath had gotten to her first.

The events after that are a blur even in the dragon’s memory.

Azarath began to use his magic to turn other gods and creatures to his side.

Lures of power, promises of wealth.

“And somehow she was among those who succumb to the sweetness of his words. Azarath corrupted her magic, turned her to the dark.”

By then, every god, every creature in all the realms knew that he had to be stopped.

And the battle that followed would be the greatest battle of the 7 realms.

A battle that had come at a steep price from all of those involved.

Lives were lost, their essence corrupted and sucked away by Azarath's magic.

It had been especially hard for Er'gan.

To fight against the god who had saved It and given It the powers that had made It worth anything.

And the dragon had almost been taken, Its essence nearly corrupted.

But It had fought back.

Hard and long and unrelenting.

However with the power of the future on his side, Azarath had become almost unstoppable.

The gods decided there was only one choice left.

To defeat him, they had to take away his greatest advantage.

"I tried to stop them. to convince them that she could be brought back, made to once more see the light again."

But they would not listen to It.

And Er'gan had been given a choice.

Good or evil.

Order or chaos

Its happiness or the happiness of the countless others who would come after him.

It had been a choice that had caused It so much pain, that It was nearly driven to extinction.

"The existence of the seven realms was hanging in the balance and I alone could stop it. I did not believe I could do it, perhaps that is why she did not see it coming."

"So you killed her."

"I had to. Defeating Azarath after her death was... easier."

But for the dragon it had been near catastrophic

The pain of losing her had been so excruciating it had nearly killed It.

The Fates had taken pity on it and rather than letting It die, had put the dragon to sleep.

Letting it hibernate and drift.

Alone and Apart

Until the time he had awoken again many years later, his soul bound to that of the dragon king.

“So now you know my secret.”

“You did what you had to.”

“I know dragon king but it does not make it any easier to say...or remember.”

But it definitely made the burden much easier to bear.

It had done the right thing.

It may have almost cost It Its life.

And the other half of his soul.

But in the end, it had saved a thousand more and that was what mattered the most.

The minute it thinks this, The mirror before them swings inwards.

The hall of mirrors had found them worthy.

And together, dragon king and dragon step through the doorway out of the caves and back into the light.

“Er’gan”

“Yes dragon king.”

“This god of whom you speak. It is Azarath the fallen is it not...the very same one the dark elves worship?”

“Indeed. Killing him proved to be near impossible so he was cast down from the seventh realm and locked up in an abandoned realm.”

The realm of chaos and shadows.

The realm where the past lives and thrives, festering into shadows of memories and regrets.

The dragon king stops suddenly, and It can feel the dread creeping up his heart, stealing its way into his bones

“When we went to retrieve her memories, the path on which Hera was set on...”

“Yes. The path of lost memories passes through the realm of chaos.”

“And the eyes that saw her?”

“...They were his.”

“By all of Hades Er’gan why didn’t you say anything?!”

“I was uncertain...”

“Lies...you were afraid.”

The dragon is silent.

Not because It is lying because Er’gan does not lie.

But because the dragon king is right.

However it was not the fear of Azarath that had sealed It’s tongue.

It was fear that Hera, the dragon king’s Tether and Er’gan’s second chance might have been the reincarnation of the one he lost.

The one who had betrayed them all when she gave herself over to the darkness.

It had kept silent because as dangerous as it was, it had needed to know and walking the path of lost memories had been the only way.

Now it knows.

Knows that she had been gifted to the Fates at birth.

And that they in turn had gifted unto her the powers they had taken after Daphne’s death.

Hiding the powers in a vessel and a realm into which Azarath would never think to look.

They had made a human the new Oracle.

It’s greatest fear had been realized.

And yet the dragon King’s anger at It’s silence is understandable.

So it says nothing to defend itself.

Says nothing as the dragon king paces and fumes.

“You let me take her there, said nothing to warn me and now that he has seen her, found her, he will seek to corrupt her again. To use her for his own gain. In fact for all we know...”

The king's voice drops to barely a whisper.

Hurt and pain and fear clouding his tone.

He seems unable to bring himself to say the words out loud so Er'gan finishes it for him.

She had stepped off the part and had drifted, lost among the shadows for far too long.

For all they knew.

“He may have already done so.”