

Book 2 Dragon King's Forbidden Love Chapter 36 - Tips

LARA

We were staring at each other with our mouths open, trying to stay afloat as it seemed that the river was bottomless beneath us. That wasn't how I remembered it at all.

"I am sorry," he mumbled, "I tried really hard not to call for you... But it's kind of hard to restrict my thoughts. Especially after seeing you today..."

"That's all right," I turned away, trying to hide my red cheeks. I knew very well that he wasn't the only one to blame for this... encounter.

I started swimming to the shore in the cave I saw Demir for the first time but stopped before I reached it. What was my plan really? I had no clothes on and none was waiting for me there. I couldn't possibly walk out of the water.

My feet felt the rocky surface and I stood up, thinking of what to do next. I already knew how to summon him but still had no idea how to get out.

"Now that I think about it," his voice appeared next to my ear, "I thought of you n.aked. But I didn't think of this place."

Damn it. The Dragon King was not stupid and figured everything out already.

"Well, it was hard not to think of you after our conversation for me too," I muttered, and his chuckle let me know that he heard me well.

"There is nothing embarrassing in that, you know?" his warm hands touched my shoulders and I flinched at the sensation that made tingles erupt through my body, turning to face him. And there he was... Demir felt the ground under his feet too and stood up, towering over me and letting me see his broad chest, perfectly sculptured, with drops of water rolling down his smooth bronze skin. The moonlight was kissing his wet hair and I thanked the Goddess of Light for not making it brighter. He was the most enticing man that I ever met and for a second there, I even thought that if he kissed me now, I wouldn't mind. He said it himself – dreams didn't count. And when he leaned lower and I felt his hot breath on my cheeks, I closed my eyes, trembling... anticipating...

Cold water splashed into my face, bringing me back to my senses and I looked at him in shock. I was appalled but he had this childish smile on his face that made it hard for me to stay angry at him, so I made a movement with my hand to splatter him as well.

“You wicked little Angel!” he smirked, “How dare you splash the Emperor?”

I squealed, trying to get as far away from him as possible but a huge wave still covered me and I had to retreat under water. It was dark in there and I created a few small fireballs to be able to see at least something. And then weaved a thin layer of light around my torso to cover myself at least a bit. The next moment Demir appeared out of nowhere, grabbing me gently by the waist and pulling both of us to the surface, laughing. I took a deep breath of air and clenched onto him. It felt as if there was nothing underneath us and I didn't realize at once that my naked body was pressed tightly against his. Only some light and my golden locks were separating us.

So close... This time he didn't restrain himself and slammed his lips into mine as soon as I looked at him, while I entwined my hands around his neck, forgetting that the real world beyond that dream existed. I enjoyed it and didn't feel guilty about any of it at all. If anything, it felt right...

I broke the kiss, taking deep gulps of air, and caught eyes filled with dark magic watching me.

“Will you marry me now?” he suddenly asked and I snorted while brushing his cheek.

“No.”

I didn't see his expression as I woke up in my bed. I had to cover my face with a pillow to muffle the sounds that were emerging from me. I didn't know what that was – the happiness of frustration. Or maybe both? But I had to admit... At least to myself, that I liked that man.

“I want to go for a walk”, I told my maids all of a sudden when it became clear that I wouldn't have any visitors for breakfast.

“As you wish, my lady,” Lisa curtsied, “You can go anywhere you like but at least one of us would have to follow you.”

“Just like that?” I looked at the maid dumbfoundedly, “Lisa, I was sitting in this room for a week!”

“You..”, the girl scratches the back of her head, “..never asked! I thought you were aware. We were ordered to treat you as an esteemed guest...”

I was exploring the palace for a few good hours before I reached the entrance to the gardens. Remembering our last flight with Smoke, I wanted to ask the maids to take me to him when I saw Demir. He was standing, surrounded by a group of people. His hair was a bit messy and brushed to the side and he was wearing a grey jacket with silver detailing, black pants, and shiny knee-high boots. He looked dashing and I paused for a moment to think of what to say to him. There were so many things that we needed to discuss.

That’s when I noticed a brunette in a dark emerald dress, curling her finger around the breast pocket of his jacket and slipping something inside. She smiled at him and he smiled back. It did not escape me that her hand was still on him. And to me, it seemed like forever.

The woman was beautiful. Tall and elegant. She had just the right amount of jewelry on and everything looked tasteful. I didn’t like the way she gazed at him, the way she touched him. I didn’t like her.

“Camelia Watford,” a familiar voice behind my back informed me and I turned to see the gerdian princess. She looked as perfect as ever in her golden dress black embroidery and onyx incarnated bodice. Today your fiery hair was up and a small tiara was decorating her head.

“Your Highness,” I curtsied along with my maids, “How nice...to see you.”

“Likewise”, Primrose lied and stepped closer, “Camellia is his lover for many years. You can even call her a favourite.”

My heart skipped a bit at your words and she looked at me with pity.

“Unfortunately, she is already married,” she chuckled, “Otherwise, she would be a perfect match for my brother.”

“Why are you telling me all that?” I asked her calmly.

“I found out more things about you,” she sighed, “And I think you deserved another truth.”

At this moment, my eyes met Demir's and I felt the blush returning to my cheeks. I expected him to smirk the way he always did. But he smiled. It was a genuine smile that could melt any ice. He was happy to see me. Really happy.

"Lara, you seem like a nice girl but the two of you... it's impossible," the princess continued.

She wanted to say something else and I wanted to listen. However, Demir appeared out of nowhere and interrupted us.

"My two favourite ladies", he bowed to us while we curtsied.

"You are in a good mood," his sister noted.

"And I would be really grateful if you don't ruin it," he said to her and looked at me.

"How could I?" she said politely and started walking in a different direction, "I'll leave the two of you alone. Just remember what we've been discussing."

"Fine," he agreed quickly and took my hand, pulling me away from the archway we were standing in.

"What," I snorted when we were alone already, "Your fans aren't going with us?"

"Are you jealous?" he raised his brow and I could tell that he was enjoying it.

"Of course not!" I rolled my eyes and felt that I wasn't completely honest even with myself.

"In that case," he smirked, "I am a free man and can flirt with anyone I like. Don't you think it's fair?"

No, I didn't think that it was fair. But I couldn't exactly admit that out loud either.

"If only someone agreed to marry me," he sighed and squeezed my hand tighter.

"That girl looked more than willing," I sneered at him, "Who knows, maybe that's a proposal poking out of your chest pocket."

“Oh, that?” he got the note out and looking at me, threw it away without even checking what was inside.

I bit my lip to hold back the excitement, and a little laugh escaped him.

“I have a surprise for you, Lara,” he said, pulling me behind him.

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DEMIR

If I didn't know any better, I'd say that Lara was jealous right now. When I caught her gaze for the first time I could tell she hated seeing me next to Camelia and other ladies. And I loved seeing her like that. At least in that way, I could be sure that she felt something for me.

After the dream from last night, all I could think of was her. It was extremely hard not to go to her room and claim her on the spot when I woke up. So I kept myself busy. Luckily, the emperor's job had no end, and I managed to find loads of papers and tasks to deal with. Anything to keep me away from her. Anything to keep me from thinking about her. Anything not to go crazy from the range of emotions she made me feel.

Well, clearly it didn't work that well because I was on my way to see her when I bumped into Camelia and her usual attire. The brunnete used to be my lover a couple of years ago. She managed to keep my attention for a decade and stay in the shadows, just the way I preferred it. So, I gave her a title and married her off to a duke. Which gave her an even higher title. And that was supposed to be it, only that it turned out that I was mistaken about her. She truly believed that we were going to last more than that. And now I had a Duchess on my hands that kept bothering me whenever we saw each other.

However, today I was thankful for that. Because it was Camelia who brought that jealousy fire into my soulmate's eyes.

I wasn't going to push it too far, though. Lara seemed very happy when I threw away the little note. And I loved to see her that way.

I was leading her by hand and she didn't try to take it away. It was an amazing feeling to be able to walk like that together. I needed that closeness with her. And I really hoped that she was going to like the surprise I prepared for her.

We stopped and I got the silk scarf out of my pocket. Laura raised her brow at me questioningly and a chuckle escapes me.

“Don’t worry,” I said, “It’s absolutely innocent. It wouldn’t be a surprise if you see everything at once, right?”

“Fine,” she sighed but there was a vague smile on her lips before she turned her back to me. I stepped closer to her, using this rare moment to inhale more of her wonderful scent of sea breeze and jasmine that was still intoxicating me every time. In the best of ways.

Carefully, I placed the scarf over her eyes and tied it at the back, briefly touching her shoulders while fixing her hair and thanking all the gods since she was wearing an off-shoulder dress today in a delicate shade of lilac. She trembled under my touch and I held back a growl that was willing to leave my body. The dragon was roaming inside.

Then I took her hand again and started guiding her to the doors.

I led her to the very centre of the grand room and signaled to the servants to leave us alone. When the last of them disappeared, I leaned towards her face so that my lips were almost touching hers. And I knew that she felt my breath on them as her cheeks turned into a lovely shade of pink, bringing all kinds of inappropriate thoughts into my head.

“Are you ready?” I asked her and she shuddered, biting her lower lip. This time a growl escaped me and the blush crept to the tips of her ears as she nodded.

With one swift move, I removed the improvised blindfold and she started blinking, trying to adjust to the light.

And then she gasped at what she saw and started twirling around to have a better look. Her eyes sparkled and that’s when I knew that I chose the right surprise for her.

“Brighta, the Goddess of Light!” she exclaimed and I snorted, “What is this magical place?!”

“This is my personal library,” I told her, “Only members of the Royal Family can use it. And now you can do it too.”

“Unbelievable!” she was still admiring and I stepped away, giving her time and space to explore.

This was always my favourite place in the palace. Endless rows of bookshelves with tall arched windows filling the hall with light all day long. The stone floor was actually the map of the kingdom and the ceiling was painted with the stories of my parents’ love. This library was my father’s present for my mother and they both were spending hours here together. I was still a child when I was coming here looking for them and finding them sitting together on the windowsill or on one of the sofas, reading or talking...

And chaos knows I never brought a woman here before. Even when I thought that I was in love, I never let anyone else here... It never felt right. Yet when Lara and I were talking about books back at Akyria in front of that fire, all I did was imagine her here. With me.

And now when she was brushing her delicate fingers over the old tomes, she felt like she belonged here.

“Oh, Goddess!” she exclaimed and got one book out, “I always wanted to read this one!”

“Which one?” I came up to her and she turned to me with excitement in her eyes.

“Ardenia’s Flame!” she produced the book and this was so not what I expected. “Ardenia’s Flame” was an ancient book by one of the greatest poets of the early noetic period, Sentar Roen. However, it was later banned in pretty much every country as people became more prudish everywhere. There was a time when it was a prohibited read even in the Gerdian Empire. And we were always of very open views... Long story short, Ardenia was a nun who turned out to be a daughter of a noble. And when her father decided to take her back home and marry her off to a man of his choice, she discovered a whole new life full of... pleasures. She even discovered those pleasures with multiple men. And later, she discovered that pleasure can come from pain as well... Everything was described in every single detail and Roen was not trying to choose words carefully when he was depicting the events. That was something I didn’t expect Lara to choose in a million years.

Then again...

“Why do you look at me like that?” she asked, biting her lip again. She had no idea what the book was about. Oh, this was too good!

“This,” I cleared my throat, “This book is not something I’d think you would be interested in.”

“Why not?” she gazed at me with her innocent blue eyes, “Ardenia was one of Brighta’s disciples, wasn’t she? A warrior maiden and one of the first female Warriors of Light!”

I just couldn’t help myself.

“Uhm, yeah,” I nodded, “That’s it. I am sorry I underestimated you. You are going to love this one.”

“Thank you very much,” she bowed her head formally and moved to the window, “I am going to start this very moment! I can read here, right?”

“Yes,” I smiled, “You can do whatever you want. Unless you can’t tolerate my company, of course. I spend a lot of my time here.”

I picked the first book that I touched, without even looking at it, and followed her. She was getting cozy on one end of a huge windowsill that had pillows for extra comfort, and I sat on the other end, secretly watching her and pretending to read myself.

“And who recommended you this book?” I asked.

“Gideon,” for a second she got sad and I regretted that I asked her, “I saw it once in his office and asked about it. But he said that I wasn’t allowed to read it. It was for Warriors’ of Light only. And I wasn’t one.”

“And it was the exact same book?” I just wanted to make sure.

“Of course,” she snorted, “I have an extremely good memory! I remember the title and the author, and even the cover is exactly the same!”

“Well, here you can read it freely and discover all the secrets of Warriors of Light!” I said, trying to hold back a laugh really hard, “Enjoy.”

It was less than ten minutes when her face started turning red. I waited, watching her in secret. And every time she gazed at me, I was back at my book. With the most serious face I could master.

But after half an hour, she closed the book with a clap. Even her ears were flashing and she looked at me with fury.

“You knew it, right?!” she practically growled at me and I burst out laughing.

“We gerdians don’t judge!” I winked at her, “Although I have to admit that Warriors of Light surprise me more and more with every passing day!”

“Despicable!” she threw the book at me and I barely managed to dodge because I was still choking with laughter.

“Hey, what did I do?” I demanded.

“You did this on purpose!” she looked furious, “To watch me make a fool of myself.”

“And what exactly makes you think that?” I asked.

“Your book is upside down!” she pointed out and I saw a spark of light on the tip of her index finger.

“Lara, just remember that attacking the Emperor inside of the Palace is a serious offense,” I snorted and immediately got hit by a small charge of her Light. It still hurt me and I pretended to be angry.

“Well, now you leave me no choice!” I stood up and made sure that she saw my eyes filling with dark flames.

She squeaked and ran to hide between the shelves. And I chased her. I let her believe for a while that I didn’t know exactly where she was hiding every time. Just until I had her exactly where I wanted her.

I appeared behind her when she was already panting, and grabbed her by her waist, lifting her up and spinning a few times with her in my arms, while she screamed and laughed, “Let me go!”

“All right,” I chuckled and fell onto the soft rug in front of the fireplace with her landing on top of me.

This was the closest we’ve ever been and her weight felt so comfortable on top of me, our eyes on each other and so many emotions in them. And then her lips appeared too close and touched mine suddenly as a wing of a butterfly touches one’s skin...

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LARA

I didn't know why I did that. My lips touched his just for a second but that was all the permission he needed to roll me over and cover my mouth with a hot and greedy kiss. It felt like he was waiting for this moment for a long time and although I clearly could push him away, I didn't. I started it and I didn't want it to end. What was wrong with me?

Or was it even wrong when it felt so good?

I didn't notice how my hands laced around his neck and how my fingers entwined in his hair, making him growl softly as he deepened the kiss. I lost myself and so did he... Yet none of us wanted to be found.

"Mine," I heard him mutter while he was tearing away for just a second and that made me open my eyes wide.

I hope he didn't take it as me asking him to touch me? He couldn't possibly think that it meant more than just a kiss...

"Demir," I put my hand on his chest to stop him when he was about to kiss me again.

"What's wrong?" he asked with worry in his eyes while holding my face in his palms and caressing it with his thumbs. Tingles erupted from his touch and I was about to give in to the feeling again... yet the sensible part of me wanted to make some things clear.

"It's not... I am not..." I mumbled, trying to gather inner strength and feeling embarrassed beyond belief, "You know?"

"I know," he smiled sadly and quickly sank down to steal one last kiss, then exhaled heavily and rolled off me, falling right next to me on the soft fur rug. "I know," he repeated, but this time it felt like it was more for him than for me.

"I'm," I cleared my throat as my voice didn't sound right, "I am sorry..."

He looked at me quickly and dark flames flashed in his eyes but died down quickly as he blinked a few times.

“You have nothing to apologize for,” he said as he rolled to a side and leaned on his hand, “I understand...”

“You do?” I lifted my brow and looked at him again. He couldn’t possibly know what I was going through right now.

“I think so,” he nodded, “It’s all very new to you and you don’t know what to do with those feelings and emotions. And I don’t help much as I don’t have much control... But I... It’s hard for me too, Lara.”

“You have plenty of experience,” I wanted to snort but it came out more as a whimper. I probably looked pathetic.

“Is that what you think?” he chuckled and I felt a slight pain somewhere in my chest when I realized something...

“How old are you?” I asked him all of a sudden and his smile faded.

“Age is just a number, Lara,” he coughed and I sneered.

“Oh, Goddess of Light, you are pretty old, right?”

“What matters the most is that I am still healthy, strong, immensely good looking...”

“And modest,” I continued for him, “I had a grandfather who was 98 when he died. Are you older than that?”

His lips clenched until they turned white from all the pressure and I knew that I was right.

“Oh, Brighta!” I blurted, hiding my face, “You so are!”

“It’s different for gerdians and dragons!” he protested and I burst out laughing.

“No, really,” I asked through tears, “How old are you exactly?”

“How old are you?!” he tried to revert the situation but I had nothing to hide in this regard.

“Nineteen,” I say firmly and look at him with a challenge in my eyes, “And now – spill it!”

“So, I am a bit older than you,” he rolls his eyes and stretches the words, clearly trying to think of something, “We knew that already! Does it make such a great difference? What’s important is that we get each other and...”

“I’ve read that gerdian live a couple of hundreds of years,” I interrupted his awkward speech, “Are you about two hundred?”

“Well,” for the first time ever I notice some kind of blush on the emperor’s face and it made me giggle.

“Three hundred?” my mouth opened in shock and now he looked properly terrified.

“Four hundred?” I couldn’t believe I said the words.

“Just slightly above that number,” he confessed and we both looked at each other in shock.

“Unbelievable,” I whispered, “You could have been my great, great, great, great...”

“Lara, please!” he stopped me, looking completely broken, “It’s different for us. We have longer lives, yes. But that comes at a price. Reproduction for gerdians and dragons is complicated...”

“I bet!” I nodded, “Is everything even working after so many years?”

I realized how wrong that sounded when it was too late and dark fire appeared in his eyes again.

“Don’t make me prove to you what’s working,” he growled and I bit my lip.

How many little idiots like me did he bring to his magnificent castle? How many of them did he bring to this library? How many did he kiss? I bet there were hundreds! And I was just one of them. A speck of dust in his life. I would be gone and another silly girl will be lying under him on this carpet, feeling so special in his arms.

I sat up and he did the same.

“Lara?” he tried to touch me but I flinched away.

“You know,” I said trying not to look at him very hard, “I am a bit tired. I think I’d better return to my room and have some rest there.”

I stood up and started walking away fast when dark flames appeared before me right when I almost reached the exit.

“I think I know you well enough by now to see when you came up with something ridiculous in that brain of yours,” he said calmly, “Tell me what’s bothering you. It’s not just my age is it?”

I replied nothing to that. I wasn’t admitting that I got jealous for the second time today! And this time of women I didn’t even see...

“Lara, I bet you know at least some people who are about your deceased grandfather’s age?”

“Yes,” I admitted quietly.

“And are all of them people with extreme wisdom who can teach you how to live your life properly and not be mistaken in one bit, who saw and did everything they ever wanted and that was worth trying?”

“No,” I wasn’t sure where he was going with it.

“That’s because age is just a number,” he repeated himself, “Only the body of regular humans gets old but the soul inside has no age. Some are wise by the age of 40, for some all life is not enough no matter how long they live. Our life span is longer, the body stays strong until the very end and we die only when the dark magic inside of us is drained.”

“But it’s the whole experience that you had!” I burst out, “How can it be compared with mine?!”

“It can’t and it shouldn’t,” he smiled, “You are only starting to live and I would like to accompany you on that journey. Lara, for most of my life I was either learning how to be an Emperor or working as the Emperor. I still have plenty to experience too.”

“Not the same,” I sighed, feeling like a little whining child and hating myself for it, “You already had your first everything with someone else and... I bet there were plenty of girls... I just...”

He cupped my face, not letting me finish, and looked into my eyes.

“Everything I have with you is the first time for me,” he said in the most serious tone, “I’ve never had a soulmate before, and believe me, everything I have with you is beyond special to me...”

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LARA

The words sounded in my mind yet I was not sure if he was serious about what he was telling me.

“What do you mean when you say soulmate?” I asked, trying not to tremble in his arms, but was failing miserably.

“Lara,” he was clearly trying to choose words and I felt like I was going to die. He was about to tell me that he chose the wrong term and all my hopes would be crushed. The ones I didn’t know I had but now it was all I was thinking about. The seconds he was silent seemed like years to me.

His thumb brushed over my lip and tingles erupted again. I loved and hated it in equal measures. Because nothing felt so good yet nothing made me so weak as those tingles.

“I am of mixed race,” he started explaining and I so wasn’t sure where he was going with it.

“I know,” I said, “Your father was a gerdian and your mother was an akyrian, right?”

“On the part of my mother, yes,” he smiled and pointed to the ceiling where a beautiful painting was telling a story of a man and a woman who were clearly madly in love. The woman’s long red hair reminded me of the gerdian princess. And the man... he looked a lot like Demir.

Wait! I looked at him again and he chuckled slightly, “Yes, Lara. These are my parents. Emperor Derrien Darmerion Derwood and Empress Miradora Derwood, the first rulers of the New Gerdian Era.”

“And that’s your mother’s dragon? Or your father’s?” I asked pointing at the image of the red-haired beauty flying on a black dragon.

“That’s... actually, that is my father, Lara,” he said and I wanted to laugh at first. Only that he looked too serious for that to be a joke.

“Wh-what do you mean?” I looked at him and saw dark flames dancing in his pupils again.

“Wait a minute,” I stepped back from him. Flames! He had flames! While maids in the castle and some other servant were only appearing in front of me in dark smoke. It was also written in old books that I read back at the White Archipelago that gerdians had black magic that could do a lot of things. But it mostly looked like black thick smoke. Yet I never saw Demir use anything like it!

“My father was a dragon shifter,” Demir confessed when our eyes met and before I could say or ask anything, he added, “And so am I.”

“No way!” I gasped. Yet it made so much sense! Brighta, the Goddess of Light, he was... “Smoke!” I shouted out loudly and looked at the Emperor of the Gerdian Empire in shock, “You are Smoke!”

He cleared his throat at that and then looked at me with a smile, “That’s really not how people call me.”

Oh, Goddess! I bumped into him! I treated him and spent the night in the cave with him! That’s how he appeared at that river and watched me bathe... He was the one to help me out back then. And that was why he was so interested of me from the very beginning! It was all him! Demir, Smoke, the Emperor... always the same person!

“But why?” I look at him in frustration. It was extremely hard to comprehend everything that was going on.

“Dragons are special creatures, Lara,” he came closer and took my hand into his, leading me back to the windowsill, “We are very strong. Especially the ones mixed with gerdian blood. They call us the Dark Dragons. We breathe dark fire and dark magic is under our control. In many senses, we are the strongest species in the world...”

He stopped talking and looked at me as if he was hesitating to tell me more.

“Don’t stop now,” I whispered, clenching my fists on the fabric of my dress as I sat down, and he nodded in agreement taking the place in front of me.

“But there is a weakness as well,” he smiled dryly and looked at the weakness, “Reproduction is extremely hard. It is next to impossible to have a child and only a couple where both of them have dark magic can become real parents.”

I felt a pang in my heart. I didn't have dark magic... There was only Light inside of me. I always knew that. That was the only thing I was always sure of...

“That's why there aren't too many dragons around. Although in the last couple of hundreds of years, we managed to increase our population a lot. But all that is thanks to soulmates.”

“Soulmates?” I looked at him again.

“Yes, Lara,” he smiled, “Soulmates.”

He carefully touched my hand and I let him. Somehow, I needed his closeness now.

“A soulmate is the one thing that is most sacred for any dragon,” he said softly, “It's the one person that is the other half of you. This is someone who you already love even though you don't know it before you met them. This is the one you are destined to spend your life with. You can be an emperor of the biggest empire, but without this person, you will never be complete... Or happy. With a soulmate, you can have an unlimited number of children. The two soulmates always will be compatible with each other.”

I swallowed. He wasn't saying anything else and I desperately needed to hear this...

“And?” I braced myself to ask, “What does it have to do with me?”

A vague smile touched his lips.

“My soulmate is you, Lara,” he said, “You are the one for me. One and only.”

I didn't know what to respond to a confession like that. I only knew that I needed to hear this. But what to do with all this, what to think – it was another matter. I knew that I liked him already. But I wasn't sure that he was the one for me. How would you even know that? And what if he was just playing with

me? The thought of a possibility like that hurt me and suddenly I wanted to leave him and stay alone for a while.

“I know that’s a lot for one day,” he sighed and took his hand away. I didn’t like the feeling of emptiness it left, “I also know that non-dragons need more time to feel the bond that connects us. So, I am willing to give you as much time as you need.”

“And what if I decide that I don’t want any of this?” I asked since he brought this up and notice the look of hurt in his eyes, “Will you let it go?”

“You wouldn’t want this,” he looked away, he clearly didn’t like my question.

“You don’t know that,” I tried to be reasonable, “What if?”

He crossed his hands on his chest and balled his fists, clenching them so hard that his knuckles turned white.

“I’d never do anything to deliberately hurt you,” he informed me, “So, I will let you go if you will be unhappy with me. It’ll break my heart but your happiness comes first.”

I bit my lip and stretched my hand to touch him again. I sensed that he needed this kind of closeness and when his cheek closed relaxed in my hand, it felt so right...

“You are right,” I sighed, “That’s a lot and I need to think about everything more...Will you let me?”

“Anything you want,” he whispered and turned his face quickly so that his warm lips kiss my palm, sending a wave of heat down my body. His eyes looked at me and the dark fire was going wild in them...

I felt like I needed to escape this room. Fast. Yet I didn’t want to.

“Demir,” I cleared my throat, “Tell me, how did you get wounded so badly when we first met? You were in your dragon form and had someone else’s talon in you.”

“Oh, that,” he leaned back to the stone wall of the window behind him, exhaling heavily and breaking our contact, “I had a fight with the red dragons...”

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LARA

“Red dragons?” that was something new again and I was afraid if I am able to comprehend everything in one go. But he was talking. And I wanted to know everything. Brighta, the Goddess of Light, I needed to know everything!

“Who are they?” I asked, “Are there any others?”

“There are plenty,” he chuckled, “Some groups are bigger, some groups are smaller... Dragons also differ in shapes, sizes, colours, strength... Dark dragons like me are the strongest, of course.”

He c****d his head, and I stifled a laugh. It was interesting if all dragons had the same size of ego or was that the privilege of the dark ones?

“Of course,” I nodded understandingly.

“If you’ll be laughing, I will not be telling you anything,” he smirked, and I bit my lip apologetically. His eyes stayed on that for too long and I looked away, blushing.

“So,” he cleared his throat, “Red dragons...”

“Yes, red dragons,” I wanted him to keep talking and stop making me feel so... I didn’t even know what...

“Back before my father became the Emperor,” he said, “The dragons left the human world. There were many reasons for that and I am not going to dwell on what’s not important anymore. But it was my father, who found them again and talked some of them to come back with him and help him with his claim for the Gerdian throne. He promised them protection and freedom. And after they won, that was exactly what he gave them. It was very good for the dragons. They started finding their soulmates again, our population increased. Most dragons lived happily under my father’s rule. We had some basic laws about not hurting humans for no reason, hiding our identities while traveling

for common protection, and so on. It was working great. But as it always happens, not everyone was happy.”

“Let me guess,” I sigh heavily, “The red dragons?”

“Yes,” Demir smiled sadly and looked outside the window we were sitting at, “The reds... Among dragons, the Golden Dragons were always the strongest. They were descendants of dragon god Darmerion. But there were always just a few of them. And their biggest supporters, and also, spouses, were usually the red ones. They are creatures of pure fire. And that says a lot. They are strong and deadly, but also hot-headed, temperamental, uncontrollable... They used to be in positions of power at the old Dragon Kingdom. But under my Father’s rule, everything changed. My father was the first dark dragon. But he wasn’t the last. When he brought dragons here, many dragonesses found their soulmates in gerdian males. Their families produced my kind and dark dragons became bigger in number. As I have already told you, we turned out to be stronger and the red dragons started to lose their position and fame... They didn’t like it and they were very loud about that. First a strike here and there, then they didn’t arrive at an important battle... My parents tried to reason with them but all they wanted was power. So, as soon as my father descended the throne and passed me the crown, they struck where it hurt the most and betrayed us. They tried to cease the Empire and k!ll me. Their leader Xander, wanted to make my sister Primrose his wife and return everything to the way it was.”

“That’s horrible,” I tried to swallow the lump that formed in my throat, “Did Prim love him?”

“Chaos, no,” Demir snorted, “She hates Xander’s guts, even though he is obsessed with her for years. He is cruel, manipulative, scheming, and absolutely unstable.”

“So, what happened exactly?” I tried to return us to the main point of discussion.

“Long story short, it was my first war and I won,” the man in front of me chuckled, “But it was never over. I had my moment of weakness and let them live... I shouldn’t have done it, but back then I was too young and too naïve to understand the consequences of them being alive. I spared them and now they constantly terrorize the Empire, trying to k!ll me from time to time.”

“And that’s what happened when we met?” I asked, feeling that it became harder for me to breathe. I didn’t like what he was telling me. I didn’t like the knowledge that someone wants him dead even now.

“Yes,” he sighed, “They threatened the family of one of my warriors and when they attacked me, he hit me in the back. It was his talon that you got out of me. Thanks for that, by the way.”

“You are welcome,” I smiled, “You helped me too, you know.”

“I know,” he brushed my cheek all of a sudden, and I didn’t want to push him away. However, another realization came to my mind.

“Demir,” I looked straight at him and furrowed my brows, “Those men that attacked me back at the city. Were they red dragons as well?”

“Yes,” he growled and dark flames started their wild dance in his eyes, “They were watching us and I left you in the shop to deal with them. Unfortunately, you didn’t stay there, did you?”

He gave me a reproachful look and I gave him an innocent smile.

“How could I have known?!” I giggled but then soon got serious again, “And that man with the scar... It seemed like the two of you knew each other.”

“Sean Sarn,” Demir’s lips twitched a bit when he said those words, “He was my best friend back in the days of our youth. It was he who tried to kill me right after my coronation. It was I who left him those scars on his face. I showed mercy to them because of him. Yet as you can see, he wasn’t grateful. If anything, he is Xander Rust’s right hand until this day.”

“What a horrible man,” I exclaimed, and a sad smile appeared on his face.

“It’s more complicated than that, Lara, but I don’t want to talk about him too much at the moment. Maybe another time I’ll tell you more...”

“I would really like that,” I put my hand on his and he rubbed my fingers with his thumb.

Back in my room that evening, I couldn’t find a place for myself. It was too much. Too much information, too many expectations... Too overwhelming. But also slightly exciting...

The most gorgeous man I've ever met told me that I was his soulmate. He was so sure of it... But how could I be sure?

I liked him a lot. Of that, I was sure. If anything, I liked him too much. I was letting him do things to me that I couldn't even imagine before. And I enjoyed them... But was I ready to marry him and be with him the way he wanted me to? Would that be the right decision for me? I never imagined my life anywhere else except for the White Archipelago... And Gideon. What about him? I am sure that it was all nonsense about our marriage, and he has a perfect way out. But would he ever approve of Demir? One thing for sure – I knew that we needed to talk...

Unexpectedly, dark flames appeared on my bed and I saw a black box with a silver ribbon on that. Without any kind of hesitation, I opened it and gasped at the contents...