

Book 2 Dragon King's Forbidden Love Chapter 56 - Tips

DEMIR

It was such a long day already and I still had to listen to a few more reports until I was done. Usually, Ryker was helping me with those things but unfortunately, he would be out of the game for a few more days.

Yet something just was not sitting right with me. Something was wrong...

My mind kept coming back to tears in Lara's eyes and my dragon was unsettled inside of me. He felt something too.

I had to ask one of my ministers to speed up with his speech and dismissed everyone as soon as he was done, claiming that we all needed rest now after the latest events. When in fact we only needed to work more.

Primrose looked grim at the Council meeting. As far as my guard informed me, she did not go to see Ryker again. Silly girl. The look in her eyes yesterday when he called her name while being unconscious, already gave her away.

However, I knew why she was doing it and couldn't blame her. None of us wanted our prophecies to come true...

Remembering the prophecy, I shoved the pile of the papers I had in front of me inside of the desk and summoned dark fire so that it transported me to Lara's room. I was surprised to find it dark and empty. Clicking my fingers and lighting all the candles, I looked around one more time – Lara was not there.

I transported myself to the library but she was not there as well. Back to her room, I went to the balcony to have a better look at the garden. Also empty, just a few ladies walking peacefully there. But not her... She was nowhere near and it bothered me. Closing my eyes, I tried to find her with my senses... But my senses only proved what I was already suspecting – Lara was not in the palace.

It was a nightmare! How was it possible?! Just this morning we were here and closer than ever...

Then my memory helpfully brought up the gift I gave her and I went to her wardrobe room on wobbly legs. The wings were gone but I found two letters

on her dressing table. One was for her brother. And the other one was for me...

I walked out of the room with two envelopes and sat on the bed that still smelled like her to read what she had to say to me. But I already knew that I was not going to like it.

Dear Demir,

It will be so hard for you to understand me. But, please, know that what I do, I do because you are important to me.

I know about your prophecy and I know that you can't be with a woman that has a hair colour like mine. I could of course change the colour and pretend but you and I both know that this is not how magic works. You can never lie to this greater power or it will only crush upon your head twice as hard.

I wish I could say that all that doesn't matter but unfortunately, latest events and all my previous life as an outcast of the White Archipelago prove otherwise. I would hate it if something was to happen to you because of me. Or to anyone else. Enough is enough.

I am so sorry to leave like that. But something tells me that if I told you all this in the face, you'd never let me go.

But at the end of the day, it's for the best. Because I need you to live and be happy. I want you to have a future. Even if it's not with me.

Please, don't look for me, Demir. I'll be fine. That I can promise to you.

However, I have one last thing to ask from you. Could you please help me deliver the other letter to my brother at the White Archipelago? It would mean a lot to me.

Remember what's important, Demir – your family, your empire, your people. Take care of them and of yourself.

I'll never forget you. Every night when I'll see the moon in the sky I will be thinking of you. Forever.

Love,

Lara.

I wanted to crumple that piece of paper but it was too precious to destroy. She ran away and left me alone. And she even dared to tell me to forget about her!

Oh, Lara, you are too naïve for your own good!

Because even if I have to turn the whole world upside down, I'll find you!

LARA

It took me a few days to get to the border of the Gerdian Empire this time since Akyria was technically farther from the capital than the White Archipelago. I was taking breaks in small towns next to forests, landing in the woods and hiding my wings at the tops of bushy trees I could find. Then I was pretending to be a regular traveler and usually was finding a bed and breakfast with an available room to spend a night in and hot food to fill my hungry stomach.

In the first town I stopped I sold one of the rings I had and bought a map and some other necessities for the road.

But today I wasn't lucky, as the only bed and breakfast in the town I found myself in had nothing available and the night was already approaching fast. I ended up in the nearest tavern and picked the most secure place in the corner of the room. After ordering my food, I gave a golden coin to the maid who served me and started studying the map in hopes of finding some village or town nearby where I could get before dawn.

Just then a huge dirty looking hairy man sat on a chair opposite of mine with a grin that definitely missed a few teeth.

"What a little dove like yourself is doing all alone at a place like this?" he asked me in a voice that was probably meant to be husky but seemed simply croaked instead.

Damn, so much for trying to look like a boy. I read about a trick like that in a book a long time ago but it just didn't seem to work! And instead, I was approached a lot unless I was putting an illusion on my face. But that was consuming a lot of my energy, so I tried to avoid it and just tried to stay invisible while it was possible. However, today was not a lucky day for me.

"Excuse me," I muttered, "I am waiting here for my husband."

“A husband?!” he cackled, “Who are you lying to, sweetie?! No one would let an honest woman to walk into a place like this alone! Which only tells me exactly what kind of girl you are! So, drop the act! I have money and want to have some fun tonight!”

“The last time I checked this was a tavern, not a brothel!” I rolled my eyes. He was trouble and I knew I’d have to deal with him. Shame I didn’t get to have my food first. If I use magic now, I would not be able to stay. And judging by the size of him, simply beating him up would be too hard for me.

“Stop playing with me, wench!” he stood up and wanted to grab my hair when a strong hand caught his literal inches away from mine. The cracking of bones and the ugly block screamed from the pain.

“I thought my wife told you that she was waiting for me!” said the last person I expected to see...

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LARA

My lips parted as the crying guy was crawling away and I stayed alone with my ‘husband’. He looked at me with a smirk and took off his cloak, throwing it on one of the empty seats at my table, while landing right next to me.

“Darling wife,” Sean Sarn smiled, “Don’t act too surprised, or other people are not going to buy it.”

He looked too comfortable in my presence and all I was thinking about was whether I should attack him first and run. Or whether I should eat first, listen to what he had to say, and run.

“Don’t be too scared,” he said all of a sudden, “If I wanted to hurt you in any way, I’d do it in one of the previous days of your little adventures.”

Crap. So, he had been following me for a while. That couldn’t be good.

“Why didn’t you?” I raised my brow at him and he smirked.

“That would be hypocritical of me to do since you are simply following the advice I gave you,” he gave a wide grin to the girl who brought my food and I

was surprised that she actually came with two of each dish. Meaning that he already changed my order a while ago.

“Enjoy your stay at the Golden Duck!” the server muttered and disappeared.

Great. Now it wasn't safe to eat it. Who knew what he could do to the food. And I was starving.

“What's wrong?” he looked at me and then nodded understandingly, taking one of the forks and eating a bite from each plate, then moving them to me, “No poison, I swear.”

My tummy gave a loud rumble and I hated this little moment of weakness with all my guts. Fine, food first. A surprise attack and a quick escape later. Hopefully, I could make it to my wings.

Although, he was a dragon, and all that was unlikely.

“So, it was you at the ball after all,” I stated as I had a spoonful of the stew, “You killed a lot of people, do you know that?”

“I am at war, Lara,” he sighed, “Not that I have a choice.”

“A sneaky attack on unsuspecting people doesn't seem like a fair fight,” I insisted coldly.

“You know very well that it was intended only for that one person,” Sean did not seem bothered with my accusations.

“Your ex-best friend,” I snorted, “I remember. But it was unreasonable to think that no one else will suffer as a result of an explosion like that.”

“Members of his Council are the reason we are where we are,” Sean replied, eating as if we were discussing the weather. To my shame, I did the same thing. If I run now it may be days until I could show myself in any town. I'd need to go as far from here as possible.

“And there I thought that it was personal!” I shot a glance at him and he took a gulp of his drink.

“Now it is,” the man said putting his glass down, “I know you think you know the story but in the long run, all you know is just one side.”

I rolled my eyes. Of course, he'd say something like that.

"Let me guess," Sean continued, "He told you a sad story about friendship and betrayal? Right?"

"Is that not true?" I looked at him, unimpressed.

"It is," the red dragon shook his shoulders, "But who betrayed who first – that would be the right question."

"Demir is not like that," I tried to turn away, but his palm suddenly landed on mine, making me flinch. He squeezed my fingers and I felt heat coming from him. I did not like it at all.

"He is an emperor above everything, Lara," Sean told me, looking straight into my eyes, "Even now he is there, ruling over his empire and not looking for you, his soulmate."

I did everything in my power not to flinch again or not to give any kind of reaction to him, because I was sure that he was fishing for it. There was no other way to confirm something like that and if I as much as mentioned that it was true, he'd pack me up and take me to the red dragons' lair this very moment.

"You are tougher than you look, Lara," Sean chuckled, "Demir was blessed by the gods even in that sense. Dragons don't find their soulmates that often..."

"Soulmates, what is it?" I asked simply and he gave me another smile.

"Don't play dumb with me," he sent another piece of meat into his mouth, "There will be no other reason for him to start a war for a woman. Trust me, he has plenty of those in his life already."

I clenched my lips at his remark and somehow Camelia came to mind. Was he now in her arms, was she consoling him this very moment the way she used to? I took a sip of my drink and it seemed bitter.

"There will be no war," I said to my unexpected companion, "Don't overthink it."

“Haven’t you heard?” he looked at me suddenly serious, “There is already a war. The White Archipelago is going to attack the Gerdian Empire any moment now.”

I swallowed. That could not be happening. I sent a letter to Gideon stating that I wasn’t even there! Not to mention that it would be stupid for our people to attack the gerdians, we wouldn’t stand a chance.

“The leader of the White Archipelago will never allow this!” I tried to calm myself down.

“That would be the old leader,” Sarn chuckled darkly, “But unfortunately he was killed a few days ago by the new one. I believe his name is... Gideon Artes.”

The words echoed in my mind like thunder on a quiet day. This could not be true! Gideon would never...

It was hard for me to breathe and I tried to get out of the table but felt too dizzy all of a sudden.

“Careful,” Sean’s arms wrapped around me and I looked at him in shock. Of course, it was a trap and I was stupid to stay here in the first place.

There were many emotions in his eyes and I tried to summon light to attack him, but he squeezed my hand so hard that all I felt was pain.

“Not here,” he whispered, “Relax!”

He lifted me in his arms and to my surprise went upstairs while all other people in the tavern paid us no attention.

“What do you want from me?” I hissed, feeling how all my senses were leaving me one by one.

“Trust me, Lara, I am not as bad and scary as you might think!” he laughed as he opened one of the doors with his foot, “You and I are just going to get to know each other better. But we’ll do all the talking tomorrow...”

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I had a pounding pain in my head when I woke up and felt the rough sheets against my cheek. Remembering the previous events, I jumped up on the bed and looked at myself before anything.

Fully dressed. Oh, thank you Brighta, the Goddess of Light! Thank you!

“Had enough rest?” Sean Sarn chuckled and I noticed him sitting at a small table, not too far from me. He was drinking something hot from a big mug and writing in a leather notebook. He shot a glance at me and moved another mug in my direction. “Have this, it’ll help with the headache,” he said in a friendly manner.

“I’d be mad to take anything from the likes of you!” I snorted, trying to stand up and still feeling dizzy. I knew I was already unarmed but I still could use my skills and magic to fight him if I had to.

“It was necessary,” he shrugged, “You were killing yourself with all that flying and no proper rest. You needed those two days to...”

“Two days?!” I stared at him in horror. Was I out for two whole days?!

“Sorry,” he shook his shoulders, “I don’t think there was another way to stop you. Did you even have a plan or were you just flying away as far as possible? That money you have with you will only last so long...”

My hand stretched to my thigh, where I had my purse hidden but the pocket was now empty and I glared at the red dragon in front of me.

“So, what is your plan exactly?!” I decided not to kick around the bush and just asked him bluntly, “What do you want from me? Why did you keep me here for two days?!”

“To hide you, of course,” he smirked, “Demir was roaming these lands and he would have found you if not for me.”

My heart skipped a beat. He was looking for me.

And then realization sunk in – he did not find me...

But that was all right, of course. I did not want him to find me. That was the whole point of escaping...

“Don’t look so sad,” Sean reminded me of his presence, “Trust me, you are doing the right thing here...”

“Trust you?!” I jumped off the bed and started to pull on my boots, “I saw you three times in my life, and on the first time, you attacked me! On the second, you used me to plant an exploding artifact and kill people. And on the third time, you poisoned me and held me captive for two days! I’d be an idiot to trust you! Gods know what you were doing to me while I...”

I couldn’t even finish the sentence as I felt a lump in my throat. What if he did something to me while I was out... The thought alone made me sick. I saw an opened door nearby which seemed to be a bathroom and ran into it, emptying myself into the sink. It wasn’t much but I still felt better once everything was out.

Opening the tap with fresh water, I washed my face and finally straightened, seeing Sean right behind me in the mirror reflection. His scars were somehow brighter when he looked at me with remorse.

“I didn’t do anything to you, Lara,” he said after a pause and it even sounded sincere, “I don’t want to hurt you. It’s not what I do... Even though you have a different impression of me.”

“You bet it’s different,” I muttered, “Give me back my things!”

“Everything is in your bag,” he lifted up his hands in a defence motion, “I didn’t take anything and I’d even give you more money so that you could...”

“No thanks!” I interrupted him, “I don’t want anything from you!”

“Even so,” he agreed patiently, “Let me at least explain myself.”

“You have five minutes!” I groaned, checking my belongings. Surprisingly, everything was there. But I still couldn’t shake off the feeling that it was some kind of trap.

“He would have found you, Lara,” Sean came closer and I stared at him, narrowing my eyes so that he knew that I was not afraid of him, “He could feel you and he was very close. If I didn’t help you, you would be back at that palace and going down with him. You did a smart choice, leaving him and I just wanted to keep you safe.”

“How noble of you!” I rolled my eyes, putting on my cross-body bag.

“I drugged you and you have every right to be furious with me,” the man continued.

“How kind it is of you to admit that!”

“I did it only because I knew you wouldn’t trust me enough to drink the potion yourself and without it he would have felt your presence. But since you were out, he didn’t feel anything when he was flying above. Your soul did not respond to his call and now he is gone from here. He will not be looking for you again in these lands,” Sean finished and looked at me expectantly.

“You do realize that there is no way I am going to thank you!” I chuckled, “Especially since I am sure you were following your own agenda.”

“Yes, I did,” he nodded simply, “And I am not embarrassed about it! Demir always has everything too easy in his life and for the first time I had a real chance to let him feel what other people around him feel. Now he knows how it is not to get something. Maybe it’ll help him to be a better emperor in the end...”

“Aww, how sweet! All you try to do is to make him a better emperor!” I opened the door, “Bye, Sean!”

He grabbed my hand and turned me to look at him, slamming that door shut.

“You don’t understand,” he said and I noticed how his eyes and scars fill with liquid fire. I already read back at the castle that red dragons were creatures of pure fire. And as a result, they were impulsive and hot-headed. I probably should have simply agreed quietly to everything and left unnoticed. But nope, someone pulled my tongue and made me do all those snarky remarks.

“Let go off me!” I warned him and pressed my hand against his hot chest.

“What do you even find in him?!” he gritted through his teeth, “A girl like you... with him! He does not deserve it!”

“And he doesn’t have me,” I said calmly, preparing the light if I was going to need it, “You won. We broke up. Congratulations.”

“You know,” he suddenly brushed his palm over my cheek, making me flinch, “I see now what they all are so crazy about. Your brother who is not really your brother... Demir...”

I swallowed.

“You may think that I am an awful person,” he continued, “But in all honesty, I was supposed to take you back to my camp and bring you to my Commander. Xander Rust is waiting for you for quite some time. And he has big plans for Demir’s soulmate.”

My lips part in shock as a part of me was still hoping that nobody else knew about me and Demir being connected in such a way. There were too many ways to use this information!

My scare did not escape him, and a vague smile appeared on his scarred face, “But as you can see, I did not go through with it...”

“Why?” I managed to ask him, and his glance lingered somewhere around my lips.

“Because I am not that cruel. Because I actually like you. A lot. Because maybe when all this is over, we could meet again and...”, he stopped but his eyes were telling me more than his words. “Never mind,” he came back from his daze and stepped away, “I am not your enemy, Lara. I just wanted to help, and I did the best way I could. Now you are safe and free. And you can go wherever you want to go.”

“Thanks,” I mumbled and prepared to leave again when I heard his heavy sigh.

“I have your wings, by the way,” he confessed lazily, and I was about to hit him with a wall of light when he added, “I’ll give them back to you. I swear. Just have something to eat first. I can give you a magical oath if you like that nothing will be drugged this time. There’s no need for that anymore.”

“It’s not like you are leaving me a choice,” I clenched my fists and this time he opened the door for me and led me downstairs.

The tavern was empty at this morning hour and the maid quickly brought us our food and Sean tasted everything again. Yet I still had no desire to touch

anything this time. I'd eat somewhere else later when I escape this...company.

"So, what's your plan?" he asked, stuffing his plate with a bit of everything and making me salivate at all the delicious smells.

"To go as far as possible from both the Empire and the White Archipelago," I told him what he already figured out.

"You need a place to hide," Sean looked me in the eye, "I can help."

"No, thank you," I snorted, crossing my hands on my chest.

"I just know someone who can hide you well," he insisted, while breaking fresh bread, "My mother was from Akyria. That's actually how I and Demir became friends. Because our mothers were friends too. And now thanks to that connection, I have a distant aunt in this country. She can help you hide and even give you work for the first few months. I would leave you there and you will not see me if that's what you are worried about."

I stayed silent. That was a bit tempting. To have a place to stay and some kind of a goal... I didn't think anything through when I left Demir. And this little break could help me to gather my thoughts.

"All right," I took a cup of coffee and sniffed it, checking it for any drugs, "Tell me more."

"Lara," Sean looked straight into my eyes, "Have you ever heard of the Dark Selection?"

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DEMIR

For the second day, Prim was sending me signals that were hard to ignore. Yet this time I felt that I was so close to finding her! It was like Lara's scent was in the air. But no matter how many circles I did above that small akyrian town on the border, I couldn't feel more of her no matter how hard I tried.

If she was hiding, she did it well and used protective barriers that I didn't know she could create.

Or someone created them for her... I didn't want to think of it, but it was also possible.

I returned to the gerdian palace late at night and went straight to my office to find my sister already waiting for me there. She looked much better than the last time I saw her and that meant that Ryker was probably fully recovered by now

"Finally, brother!" She stood up when I entered and didn't even frown when I walked past her.

"So, what's all this about?" I sat at my desk and looked at her expectantly, "I was busy, you know."

"I know," she admitted, "I even know what you were busy with."

"And I know that Lara needed someone to push her to leave," I said bluntly and Prim didn't even flinch. I knew she had something to do with it! And her being this calm just proves me right.

"What do you want me to say, Demir?" She sighed, taking a seat in front of me, "tell me what did you do," I looked her in the eye, "Tell me what did you say to her that made her leave me like that!"

"What makes you think..."

"Prim!" I hit my fist on the table. There was no time for all those games.

"I was angry the last time I saw her, all right?" She shifted in her seat, "I like her. I honestly do... but you can't deny the truth.. It will never work between you two and for the sake of the kingdom..."

"Who are you to decide that, princess?!" I growled, "You have no right.."

"No, Demir, you are the one who has no right for weakness like that! I am sorry but since she appeared in your life – everything changed! Disaster after the disaster started happening... You know I hate our prophecies but I already tried to defy mine. And look what happened..."

"And what – you think that If Lara is out, my prophecy will disappear?" I chuckled, "Don't be naïve! It has to happen one way or another! You trying to postpone it will not fix anything!"

“I didn’t try to postpone it. I just told her the truth and she came to her own conclusions. If anything, I only like her more now. She truly loves you, brother..”

“Thanks a lot for your blessing, Prim,” I rolled my eyes, “I don’t know what I’d do without your help! For all that we know you might have triggered the prophecy yourself when you chased her away! You have no idea how it feels when your soulmate rejects you and leaves! My dragon is in pain every living second! And so am I! How many dragons do you know who survived losing their mate?! It’s... unbearable...”

“But she is alive, Demir,” Primrose straightened her dress, “Besides, I know two dragons who went through worse and survived. And you have things you need to be doing instead of looking for a girl who made her choice! You are an emperor, remember?!”

She raised her brow and looked at me with a challenge in her eyes. My sister knew how to be cold when it was needed, there was no mercy in her stare.

And however much I hated to admit it, she was right. There was a whole empire that needed my attention. I couldn’t just fly away and look for my beloved as I pleased. It was reckless...

Yet I couldn’t just forget of her either. It didn’t work like that. I would never be able to forget Lara...

“If something was wrong with her, you would feel it,” Prim read my mind, “Do you feel anything like that?”

“No,” I stood up and walked to the window, turning my back to my sister. I hated to admit it but I didn’t feel that Lara was in danger. A soulmate would feel it. And I didn’t.

“You know what that means,” Primrose sighed again. She didn’t need to finish that sentence. We both knew what all this meant.

Lara was fine without me.

She moved on.

“Look, Demir,” I heard Prim’s skirts whispering as she came closer, “She is still young. She spent her life locked at the White Archipelago and saw

nothing. To make her an empress now would be just cruel... She needs to see things first and..."

"Did it ever occur to you that maybe I could have shown her those things?" I snapped.

"No," she shook her head, "Because you can't. You have work to do. We still have the reds after us. And now Lara's brother dispatched his people to our border. As you ordered, we are not touching them. But this cannot be good. It is possible that the prophecy was triggered already and now..."

"I get it," I interrupted her, "I'll send Ryker and the first squad to deal with them. Hopefully, peacefully."

"You see," the princess exhaled heavily, "If it wasn't someone related to Lara, you would destroy them for such an act of disrespect. But because of her..."

"What do you want me to do, Prim?!" I groaned.

"I was thinking about how to help you, brother," she said and put her hand onto my shoulder, "Lara is the soulmate of your dragon. But you are also a gerdian. I think there is a way out for you..."

"A way out of what?" I looked at her in disbelief.

"Of your bond," she clenched her lips, "Demir, I read a lot about it lately and did some research from the occurrences for the past few years. You can override the soulmate bond with your gerdian blood. If you mark a suitable woman and marry her according to gerdian laws then you'll be able to move on too. Just as Lara did. You both will be free... And it will be for the best."

"You must be kidding me!" I snorted, "And where would I find a perfect girl like that?"

"I know that you don't like any of the court ladies, brother," Primrose continued, and I knew that she had already thought everything through, "And the next place to look for a girl who will be able to become your empress and bear your children, is the Dark Selection..."

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LARA

I couldn't believe that I was actually doing it – horseback riding with Sean Sarn to the Dark Selection castle. And I've heard a lot about the horrible tradition of the Dark Selection, where girls with special abilities were chosen as bride candidates for the gerdians. Basically, the girls are sent to a special castle where gerdian bachelors chosen by the emperor arrive...

The emperor... Here I was thinking about him again... When I promised myself not to.

But yes, he would be the one choosing men to appear at the Dark Selection. The ones who didn't find wives among gerdians girls and dragons of the Empire.

Nevertheless, Sean offered me something that I couldn't actually refuse in my position. And it was safety and a job.

"You must be crazy if you think that I'll take part in that nonsense!" I splashed my hands when he first mentioned the Dark Selection, "I just escaped the Gerdian Empire, I am not going to look for ways to return there! I plan to stay in Akyria! Or maybe go further..."

"I am not offering you to take part in the Dark Selection," he chuckled, "It's not as easy as you might think! Those girls are carefully selected among many and you would never qualify with all that light of yours..."

"What exactly are you offering then?" I crossed my hands on my chest.

"I offer you a safe place to stay and work to earn money for whatever you want to do next."

"No, thank you!" I snorted and left, grabbing my things. And I thought that we were done but he caught up with me on the street.

"Look," he carefully grabbed my arm, "If I wanted to hurt you in any way, I would already do it. I had two days to do whatever..."

He stopped talking but I got the idea and looked at him again, sighing.

"How noble of you to not do anything to me while I was unconscious for two days after you drugged me," I smirked and he nodded, admitting defeat.

“There is nothing noble about me,” he scratched the back of his neck, “Not anymore. But I fight for what I believe in. That is all. Having said that, it is my duty to capture you know and deliver you to Xander Rust. And trust me, he would find many ways to use you and ruin you and Demir...”

A chill went down my spine when he mentioned that.

“But I am not going to do that,” he lifted his hands up, “I am not even going to mention that I saw you to him.”

“And why is that?” I raised my brow.

“Because I am not a monster like him,” Sean said and looked me in the eye, “He is what the red dragons need now. But we will win sooner or later. There is no need to hurt more people than needed in the process.”

I did not comment on that. I didn’t want them to win and did not believe in their cause whatever it may be. The Gerdian Empire seemed happy and peaceful. Nothing needed fixing there.

“I still cannot trust you,” I shook my shoulders, “I am sorry.”

“And what if I give you a magical oath that I mean you no harm?” the man offered, and I just kept walking.

“Will you give me an oath that you mean no harm for Demir?” I asked.

“Of course not,” he let out an honest laugh, “Such vow would never be accepted as it would be a lie. My relationship with Demir is long dead and all I want is my revenge. But I don’t want you in this...”

“Because you are such a nice and innocent person?” I scoffed.

“No, because you are,” Sean stood in front of me blocking my way, “Because your home is not your home anymore. Because you have nowhere else to go. And because... I know exactly what you feel.”

For the first time, I looked at him differently. After all, it was exactly how I felt.

“How so?” I asked simply.

“My mother was from Akyria,” Sarn started explaining, “Her sister was in the Dark Selection and a friend of Demir’s mother. Unfortunately, she was killed in

the process by the traitors from her own kingdom. Poisoned by Sideria and convinced to kill herself. Fawn Ritton was her name. My mother, Rebecca Ritton, was just a child then. And then there was a war and unfortunately, her parents and older brothers were killed. Just like that she was left an orphan and was starving. But, luckily, Empress Miradora never forgot her dead friends and found her. Learning her story, she took her in. And by the time she turned 18 in two years, she met my father, one of the oldest red dragons. He recognized her as his soulmate and they got married. They stayed at the court though as mother was one of the empress' ladies-in waiting. And when I was born, I became a friend of Demir's. He was a bit older but we got along well. We grew up almost as brothers. Him, Ryker, and me. And I thought that this was where I belonged. Yet unfortunately, I was wrong. I wasn't as noble and with age, it was clear that we weren't equals. I wasn't a gerdian and I wasn't a dark dragon either. And only those do well in the Gerdian Empire. I wanted to fit in desperately but it never worked whatever I did. I tried to pretend that I was one of them for too long... and in the process, I almost lost myself, Lara..."

I said nothing. But it sounded familiar.

"Look, Demir wasn't cruel to me or anything," the man continued, "At least at first, but he let me know my place. Several times. And I saw injustice for other red dragons as well. We were not respected, we had no place of our own. But we knew that we deserved it. So, when Xander started The Red Rebellion, we were all ready. And I chose the side of my people. I chose my future. And I will never apologize for that. And neither should you."

For the first time, I noticed that his eyes were amber in colour when he almost pierced me with his gaze.

"You chose you and it was the right decision," he continued, "I gave you that advice myself."

Little did he know that I didn't choose myself. I chose Demir. And his safety.

"I found out a lot about you after we first met, I still have eyes in the palace," Sean confessed, "And your story... You deserve a second chance. And I want to give it to you, Lara."

I bit my lip nervously and his eyes lingered on it for a few seconds, making me stop doing it.

“Still,” I wanted to retort.

“Listen,” he interrupted, “You have golden hair and we all know what it means, right? It would be better for me to leave you with Demir and just wait until his end comes. I am a dragon and I have all the time in the world. But I don’t need to use a girl for my victory... What’s between the two of us is just between us. What I am offering you is a safe place to stay. My distant cousin is working at the Dark Selection and, trust me, this is the best place to hide in the whole wide world. It’s protected and no one will look for you there. Who would care for a little maid in the castle premises?”

I had to admit, it did not sound too bad. No one paid attention to maids...

“And the best part,” he smirked, “The Dark Selection only takes a couple of months per year. But the rest of it the personnel gets to live in the castle and slowly prepare for next year. All while being safe under the barrier and paid decent money. It’s up to you, Lara. But think of this offer. I doubt you will get a better one in the nearest future.”

That was probably true. I couldn’t do too many jobs. My best opportunity would be to become a traveling mage and do little tasks for money. But it was dangerous since I was a female, and I was alone. To live in a castle and work there honestly although incognito was definitely my best option.

“And what do you get out of all this?” I asked.

“I get to do something nice for a change,” he smiled but that smile turned into a grin, “All while making sure that Demir doesn’t get what he wants the most for once.”

“I need to think about it,” I said, “Stay in the tavern. I’ll find you before midnight if I decide to go through with it.”

He nodded and I left. But when I did not find my wings, I knew that I had no choice anymore. Even though it was probably Sean who took them in the first place.

I checked where the Selection castle was on my map to make sure that we were moving in the right direction. And I also asked some locals about when the next one starts and it was confirmed that Sean did not lie to me about that.

So, here we were...

His cousin turned out to be an older lady. That shocked me. But she was a gerdian and he was a dragon. And even though gerdians lived very long, longer than regular people, dragons aged much slower.

I didn't know how much he told her but it looked like not much. And she took me for one of his girlfriends that he suddenly decided to take care of.

"Remember that visitors are not allowed here often, Sean," lady Fiona raised her brow at the red dragon, "And you can't be here when gerdians arrive. It's Akyria, of course, but you will hardly be welcome."

"I'll keep that in mind, Fiona," he smirked, "Just keep an eye on Kara if that's all right with you."

Yes, he introduced me as Kara.

"Of course," she rolled her eyes, not too impressed.

Sean left after we said our awkward goodbyes and I was taken on a small tour over the castle. It was too much information to remember at once, but Fiona didn't seem to care.

In the end, she brought me to a small room and opened the door, handing me the key.

"And this is your new home, Kara," she pushed me inside.