

Book 2 Dragon King's Forbidden Love Chapter 61 - Tips

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LARA

The room was small and very simple. One window, one small wardrobe, and one bed. That was about it. Everything was old and wooden but of good quality. But the most important thing was that all this was mine and I was to live here alone.

On the bed, I found a set of fresh bedding that I was probably supposed to do myself for the first time in my life. And also I noticed two sets of similar uniforms. Simple dark grey dresses with white collars. Nothing special but that was probably implied that it was for me. Since I was now a maid... Me. Lady Artes of the White Archipelago... The soulmate of the Emperor of the Gerdian Empire.

A little laugh escaped me as I touched the soft fabric. It was expensive and pleasant to the touch. The Dark Selection was considered a big event, and everything here was supposed to be luxurious and worthy of the dark lords that were about to attend it.

Another pleasant surprise was that there was a small separate bathroom with everything necessary. Now I knew very well that it was a luxury after days of traveling and sleeping at local bed-and-breakfasts. And it was the first time I did after I made sure the door was locked – stripped naked and poured a whole bath full of warm water. There was just one bar of soap, but it smelled really nice and I didn't have anything else, so I used it to clean my skin and my hair. All while soaking myself. Almost like I used to do in the past. Almost...

But this was for the best. I couldn't return to Demir since I didn't want to risk his life anymore. I couldn't return to the White Archipelago since Gideon was there and I couldn't imagine marrying him... I loved him, but not the way he wanted. He would always be my brother, and this was exactly what I wrote in my letter to him. The letter apparently did not help much.

I closed my eyes, thinking about everything. I couldn't believe that he was capable of killing one of our own... And yet according to Sean Sarn, Keatar,

our leader, who served the Goddess of Light for many years, was dead. It was shocking beyond belief.

What happened to Fabian? Surely he did not take it well? And what about his sister Bria? What is my friend doing now after she lost her father because of my family? I probably would never be able to find that out...

After the bath, I combed my hair. I still did not get used to how short it was now, curls reaching the top of my shoulders. But I had no regrets. All my life decisions were questionable but this one was the right one. My hair somehow always seemed to get me in trouble, and I was tired of it.

The hardest part of the evening was dealing with the sheets, duvet cover, and pillowcase. Who knew that doing your bed was so tricky. When I watched my maids doing it in the past, it seemed like it was easy. Those girls were dealing with my bedding effortlessly in less than a minute. It took me at least half an hour. But when I was done, it felt like a little victory.

I changed into the nightgown that I had taken with me from the gerdian palace. It was one of the very few things that I brought with me and it still smelled of Demir... I didn't risk putting it on previously, but tonight was the night...

I sat on the windowsill before getting in bed and looked at the bright moon. It was the same moon that I watched together with Demir back at his empire... And now it was shining for me alone, reminding me of the past...

"Lara?" he looked like he couldn't believe that I was standing in front of him. We were in his office and he probably fell asleep there again.

"You really shouldn't work this much, you know," I said nonchalantly, even though my heart was beating fast. I didn't have any dreams about him since I left as I was exhausted most of the nights and the previous two I was completely out thanks to Sean. But now I was relatively rested and here we were...

"Where are you?!" he jumped to his feet and was next to me in no time, "Tell me, Lara! I'll come and take you! I was looking everywhere for you!"

“Did you read my letter?” I asked him dryly even though all I wanted was to wrap my hands around him and feel the heat of his body again. But I distanced myself and noticed sparks of dark magic dancing wildly in his eyes. He was not happy...

“Is that all you want to say to me now, Lara?!” he snapped, “Of course I read your stupid letter! I’ve read it so many times I lost count!”

“Happy that this is how you feel about it,” I turned away but his hands caught me and he pressed me against his chest.

“What are you doing, Lara?! Why?” he whispered and it sounded...desperate and painful, “You wanted to save me? You are killing me!”

I choked on my own breath. All this was killing me too. Day by day a little part of me was dying without him... Yet I knew that this was the only way I could help him.

“Just leave me, Demir,” I said through tears, “Live your life and I’ll live mine! I am fine and I am safe. I am well taken care of and...”

He turned me forcefully, almost hurting me, and looked me in the eyes.

“Who?” he asked grimly, “Who is taking care of you, Lara?!”

I swallowed as this was not what I expected...

“No one,” I answered, “I can take care of myself, you know. I was doing it just fine for the past few days and...”

“There is no way no one helped you during those last few days,” the gerdian emperor gritted his teeth, “Someone hidden you under a barrier and I couldn’t find you, Lara.”

“You... you were really looking for me?”

“Of course I was!” his eyes were full of cold magical light now, “And don’t you think even for a second that I will ever stop! I will find you, Lara! And when I do, I’ll never let you escape again! Because in those last days there was one thing that I learned for sure! And that’s the fact that I cannot live without you! I need you to live, to breathe, to exist...”

My lips parted and he covered them with his in a greedy possessive kiss, holding the back of my head, pressing me tighter against himself... I couldn't break it however much I tried but, in the end, I just stopped trying...

It was just a dream... It wasn't real... I could...let myself enjoy him just for one moment.

But then he broke the kiss himself and looked me over from head to toes. He played with my hair for a few seconds and then leaned lower so that he was looking directly into my eyes while holding my chin in his palm.

"Tell me where you are, Lara," he said and I felt an order in his tone. And when I just shook my head, he only smirked. "Good," he let go of me, "Turn it into a chasing game. It'll only make it more fun. And our reunion will only feel more intense."

I bit my lip at how sure of himself he sounded. I liked it too much for my own good.

"Goodbye, Demir!" I prepared to throw myself out of this reality whatever it took, "Please, just live your life!"

That last request did not sound too convincing and he only chuckled.

"Tell the one who is hiding you that I'll come for him," the dark dragon looked at me menacingly, "And... wait for me. It will not take me long to figure out where you are, Lara."

A knock on the door made me jump on my bed and I noticed that it was morning already.

"Hurry up!" I heard a familiar voice...

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I woke up and almost fell off the cold windowsill. I couldn't believe I spend the whole night on it. But my body could. It was stiff and I practically crawled to open the door.

Lady Fiona was behind it and her gaze traveled over me in my beautiful silk nightgown with handmade lace. I quickly grabbed the thick cotton throw to cover myself as she walked in.

“So, Kara,” she walked inside without asking permission, “I now remembered that my... cousin did not mention how the two of you met.”

Of course, he didn't. And there were good reasons for that.

“We...”, I mumbled, trying to figure out what to say. “We used to work at the castle together. I mean at the palace in the capital of The Gerdian empire. I was a maid there.”

“Hmm,” lady Fiona looked me up and down again, “Let's make one thing clear at once, Kara. I absolutely do not tolerate liars. Even a maid from the palace would not be able to afford a nightgown like this. I may be old now but lady Solveig's boutique opened when I was young and I would recognize her work everywhere.”

Stupid guardian fashion! I knew it would get me in trouble!

“Oh, this?” I pointed at the delicate lace, “It was a present of my previous lady, nothing more.”

“Even so,” Fiona kept staring at me, “Sean was a noble back then. I doubt he even knew any maid's name. How did the two of you get so close? Did you sleep with him?”

My cheeks went red when I heard the words.

“Of course not!” I muttered faster than I realized that it was probably the best explanation. But it was too late for that. “The thing is,” I was hectically looking for some kind of idea that would make sense, “My love is dead. I mean ... the love of my life is dead. He was a... red dragon... and when they started the rebellion...”

“Are you out of your mind, child?!” She closed my mouth with your palm and hissed at me, “Never mention it ever again. At least not out loud. But I get it, Sean is responsible for your beloved's death and now he feels guilty.”

I opened my mouth to protest but then closed it. That was actually better than whatever I could come up with. So, I just nodded, biting my lip.

“You poor thing,” lady Fiona’s face became softer for a second but then she became strict again, “However, do not think that you’ll get any type of special treatment here.”

“Of course, not!” I agreed quickly.

“It’s an honour to get a job here already,” the woman continued while I was studying her beautiful face. She had noble straight features and looked like she was in her fifties. Yet she had a ridiculously thin waist and straight back, there were a few small wrinkles on her face but they didn’t ruin her beauty. The most prominent feature, however, was fiery red hair. Just like Sean’s. And only one strand of white gave away her real age. Which I had no idea about but it was probably way more than fifty. She was wearing a long black dress with silver embroidery today and looked elegant and graceful.

“I understand, my lady,” I curtsied before her and noticed a vague smile on her lips.

“You indeed worked at the palace,” she commented as I stood up, “That makes you a very lucky girl, Kara.”

“W-why?” I asked hesitantly.

“Because originally I planned to make you clean the rooms,” she informed me, “But it just so happens that this year’s candidates started arriving already and one of them is not happy with her current personal maid. It’s hard for village girls to satisfy the needs of noble ladies.”

She sighed and came closer to me, “They probably wouldn’t want someone as pretty as you close at a competition like that...”

My lips parted. Was that how everybody looked at it? A competition? I thought that they wouldn’t be happy to be looked at as objects to take back home. But apparently, it was just me...

“However, we are lucky that your hair is cut so short!” the woman smirked, “So, no one would see a threat in you.”

“Good...to know,” I mumbled.

“And you remember that you are just a maid!” she suddenly became very cross with me, “No tricks! The gerdians are here for the brides that could give them heirs! Not the maids!”

“I’ll keep that in mind at all times,” I nodded truthfully, “I am not interested in anyone except for the man who is already in my heart. I assure you.”

“Good,” the woman smiled again, “I like your attitude, Lara. Dress up and go to the servants’ dining room. I assigned a maid to help you on the first day. And slightly later I’ll take you to the lady you’ll be serving.”

“Thank you, lady Fiona,” I curtsied again.

“Don’t mention it again,” she dismissed me, “Maybe for once that cousin of mine actually made me a favour. I need this Dark Selection to be perfect!”

The door closed behind her and I hurried to put on my uniform. Luckily, the dress was exactly my size, and felt comfortable enough to do chores.

I went downstairs and met some of the maids who were going to work here as well. They greeted me dryly when a girl grabbed my arm.

“You must be Kara,” she smiled, “You can’t sit here. These are the cleaning maids. And you are one of the elite ones. Come.”

I was shocked that even maids had a hierarchy. I never thought of that when I was noble.

However, at the table we came to, I was greeted with a lot more enthusiasm.

“I am Aubrey,” one of the girls introduced herself, “And who are you?”

“Kara”, I gave a weak wave to everyone and they started calling their names. There was no chance to remember them all, of course. But I’ll get to that later.

“Welcome to the lucky table, Kara,” the girl who brought me said, “My name is Ramina. But you can call me Rami.”

“Do you already know who you’ll be serving to?” a giggly redhead next to me asked.

“No,” I replied honestly, “They didn’t tell me yet.”

“Who else,” Aubrey sighed heavily, “You all know that as of now only one of the ladies doesn’t have a personal maid anymore.”

“True,” another girl next to her looked at me in pity. And that’s how I knew that I probably wasn’t as lucky as I thought...

“Who is this lady?” I tried to sound confident while poking my porridge with a spoon.

“Gianna Vensal,” Ramina rolled her eyes, “The lady of the South.”

“Is she nice?” I looked at the rest of the maids hopefully and they all burst out laughing...

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It would be a lie to say that I wasn’t scared to knock on the door of the Lady of the South after the things I found out about her from the other maids. Gianna Vensal was considered the beauty of her lands. Even though there were numerous other beautiful maidens in the South, her family was the most prominent and she was even considered as a bride for the crown prince for the Akyrian Crown Prince. All that was before she received the dark mark – a sign that appeared on the chest when a girl was chosen by the dark lords of The Gerdian Empire as one of the candidates for the Dark Selection. Only women who could accept dark magic into their bodies received those. And it was considered a sign of great luck. Since, apparently, marriage to a gerdian lord seemed everybody’s dream here.

As far as I managed to find out from Ramina, this was considered competition for higher titles and sometimes the contestants were ready to harm each other to succeed. It was cutthroat.

And Gianna did not come here to lose. She was a winner and very demanding to everyone who surrounded her. The first maid who worked with her, ran away from the castle in tears. The second was humiliated in front of everyone for her lack of skills and... thrown out of the castle.

So, I didn’t hold my breath to stay there for long. And when I heard imperious, “Come in!”, I knew I had to follow the order.

“My lady,” I entered quietly and saw a girl with long silky dark hair in an armchair, pretending to read a book. She did not look at me even once and I still curtsied before her and stayed down, knowing that she’d have to be the one to dismiss me.

Minute after minute, we stayed like this. She turned page after page in the book she was not reading. Because it was upside down. I knew that she was looking at me and did not dare to lift up my eyes.

Back at the White Archipelago, I always tried to treat my maids nicely. But my friend Bria... had a different character. She loved to test her servants since she considered it was a big honour for them to serve her.

“Raise!” Gianna commanded and I did as I was told. I knew what a lady like her would expect from a maid and I intended to give her just that. Because Sean Sarn was right about one thing, I would be safe here. Hidden and never found. Due to some events in the past, the castle was under the protective barrier and no one would be able to sense me from the outside. Not even Demir.

The southerner was looking at me with interest now and threw away her book, standing up. She walked around me in circles, frowning slightly. But then she touched my hair and I flinched.

“What is your name?” she asked.

“Kara,” I answered softly.

“What happened to your hair, Kara,” she smirked. I could tell that she actually liked the fact that it was this short.

“It’s more comfortable for my work this way, my lady,” I lied, “And work comes first.”

“Does it?” the lady raised her perfectly trimmed dark brow at me, “Don’t you want to get married and have a family of your own? You are so young!”

“No, my lady,” I shook my head, “The family I come from wasn’t a happy one and I don’t want to repeat that. I found happiness in what I do and this is it for me.”

“Clever girl,” she smirked, rubbing her lips with her index finger and clearly contemplating something, “So, Kara. The thing is that we are at war here. And this war I need to win.”

She looked at me expectantly.

“I am at your service, my lady,” I nodded.

“If I win and stay happy with your work, I am going to ask my future husband to take you with us. Just imagine! You could be a maid at the Gerdian Empire!”

It was hard to hold back the laugh that tried to escape me. Little did Gianna knew that I just refused to be the Empress of the Empire. And she was offering me to be her maid as if it was the best offer in the world.

But I just smiled and said, “Thank you, my lady. I’ll do my best.”

“Of that, I’ll make sure personally,” she sneered, “Let’s not waste any time, Kara! Tonight we have the Introduction Dinner and I need to look my best. I already have the perfect dress and accessorize, so you don’t have to work too much with that. But I do need you to do my hair and makeup. Do you think you can handle an event this important?”

“Yes, my lady,” I smiled brightly. Luckily, back at the White Archipelago Bria and I was doing each other’s hair all the time. So, I could handle that more or less easily. It was worse with the makeup as I never used too much of it. But then again, Gianna was a true beauty and didn’t need much paint on her face. I was sure I could do it.

She was watching my every move, clearly still not trusting me. But with each intricate braid, her expression was becoming more and more relaxed. And when I was done with her hair, she approved it with a simple nod. But I bet it was worth a lot in her case. I just added some paint to her lips and curled her eyelashes. Then put some blush on her cheeks and this was about it.

“Is that it?” she crossed her hands on her chest, “Do you think this kind of look is enough to meet with the gerdians?!”

“With your natural beauty, my lady, nothing more is required,” I tried to smile confidently, “If I use more paint, I’d only be covering it and not enhancing.”

Gianna looked at her reflection in the mirror again and smirked. Flattery was working perfectly on her.

“Good,” she stood up, “Now, help me with the dress! We are late for the dinner as it is!”

“We, my lady?” I chuckled lightly as I helped her inside of a huge green dress that looked magnificent but was probably more suitable for a ball.

“This dress has a train,” she rolled her eyes, “I need someone to take care of it at all times.”

“I see, my lady,” I started panicking. What if one of the gerdians would be able to recognize me? At the one and only official event I was wearing a mask, of course, but other than that I was walking in the palace gardens and passages freely... But what would happen if one of the potential grooms recognizes me?

This was the only thing I was thinking about the whole time we walked to the Dining Hall. Many other pretty girls were there with their dark marks on display on their chests. Some of them were friendly with each other, some were eyeing the competition and making plans... Gianna just ignored everyone and walked inside. She took her place at the central table and ordered me to stay with her as I had to help her when it would be time to go on the stage in the center and introduce herself. Some of the other maids were there as well, helping their ladies with one thing or another.

I noticed Ramina on the other side of the room and she showed me a big thumb up. Probably for still being here.

However, all that I was worried about, was the fact that soon the gerdians would arrive. And here I was, standing alone in the very center.

But just then as if by magic, the lights were dimmed in such a way that all the girls' tables were succumbed by darkness. In the meantime, the higher part of the dining room was still well lit.

Clouds of dark smoke started to appear at the tables as the gerdians took their places without even introducing themselves first. Girls gasped and some even screamed with excitement at seeing them and I was just checking their faces. Luckily, now they couldn't see us as all the light was on them. And as far as I understood, next, the light will be on the stage. All that planning would make sure that I stay incognito here.

But at the moment I saw dark flames appearing at one of the front tables...

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There he was... The man that haunted my dreams and my mind, the man whom I couldn't throw out of my heart, the man who promised to find me and make me his... And now he was standing in the centre of the gerdian area while the men bowed to him. He said something to them and they all laughed and took their places, Demir included.

And I didn't know what to think about all that. I was only happy that I still was standing in the dark next to Giana.

Demir looked around the room and furrowed his brows. For a second there I was sure that he would illuminate the room and get me that very second. Yet nothing was happening. One of the gerdian lords next to him started talking to him and the emperor replied something, making both of them chuckle.

"Who is that?!" a girl next to Giana gasped, "He is so incredibly handsome! And others seem to look at him and respect him!"

"He must have a high position!" another one whispered.

I clenched my fists, wishing I could go away. I always knew that women loved Demir. I had no illusions that he would stay alone for long after I left. But seeing all the girls here drooling over him did not make me feel any better.

Lady Fiona stepped on the stage and everyone got quiet. She curtsied to the lords and the ladies, then rose her chin high, "Dear guests! Welcome to the annual Dark Selection! This is a unique event that goes on for centuries and benefits both our nations! Many families were created here! Many dynasties were built! And I hope that this year would not be an exception! We will start with Introducing each other officially for the first time. I will be calling names of the lords and the ladies in turns and you will step on this stage and tell us about yourself! Let the Dark Selection begin!"

Everyone applauded and a chill went down my spine. The damn stage was not that far from us. If anything, it was too close!

"Selena Vanhover!" lady Fiona called the first name and a girl with long ginger hair went up very quickly. Yet still gracefully.

“Dear Lords and Ladies,” she beamed on the stage, making a perfect curtsy, “My name is Selena Vanhover and I am a daughter of Count Vanhover of the Akyrian Kingdom. I am an elemental mage and my prime element is Fire.”

To prove her words, she stretched her arm and created a fireball that then turned into myriads of butterflies that surrounded her and landed on her dress, without burning it. It was a good trick as she immediately got a round of applause from the lords. And slowly after that from the ladies as well.

“Show-off!” Giana groaned next to me, while Selena continued talking about her. In the end, she clapped her hands and all the butterflies disappeared and she went down the stairs gracefully.

Next was one of the gerdian lords. He seemed younger than the rest and very eager to talk about himself. He didn’t do any tricks but almost received a standing ovation from the ladies. It was embarrassing, really. The way they jumped every time a gerdian was simply reaching the stage. Had they no self-respect?! I didn’t notice men reacting this way when ladies were introducing themselves.

For a second there, I almost forgot what I was doing here.

But then I heard something familiar, “Rien Frey...wood.”

I knew that it was him even before he went up that stage. Rien was the name of his father and the one he used when he wanted to stay unnoticed.

Demir was closer and closer and when we got literally a few feet apart, I kneeled to the ground quickly. Luckily, only Gianna noticed and hissed at me, “What are you doing, Kara?!”

“I... am making sure your dress is fine,” I lied through my teeth, “It will probably be your turn soon and I want to be certain you are not going to trip on that long train...”

“Good thinking,” the Lady of the South smirked but didn’t say anything else, her eyes were already on Demir.

“Dear ladies,” he showed them his pearly whites and I felt the need to throw something at him, “I stand before you with a broken heart.”

My fists clenched when a wave of gasps erupted through the crowd.

“We can help you with that!” some girl shouted and giggles followed.

“Oh,” the gerdian smirked, “I am really counting on that! You see, I thought I met a... soulmate but she left me alone.”

Another wave of sighs all over the room.

“She broke my heart but I feel that it’s the time to fix that and find the one who is truly meant for me! I am ready to do anything for that girl! And really hope that she is sitting in this very room right now.”

Bastard! I looked at all the happy faces of the ladies who were sitting at the moment. Each of them hoped that he was talking about her. Meanwhile here I was – crawling on the ground, lost on Gianna’s skirts.

I felt hurt that he was talking about his broken heart, which happened just days ago. And yet here he was – looking for my replacement so easily, mocking our story, bathing in the attention of other women.

He prepared to go off the stage, when he added as if he just remembered, “Oh, and I am a Duke of the Gerdian Empire.”

“A duke!” a blonde at Gianna’s table almost lost her consciousness from all the excitement.

That. Bastard.

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DEMIR

I was angry with Prim and simply wanted to get her off my back. I planned to visit Akyria anyway since I lost Lara’s trace somewhere close to the border. Appearing at the Dark Selection was simply to make my sister believe that I am listening to her while doing what I actually needed to do. Ryker was dealing successfully with the Warriors of Light at the border and Primrose assured me that she could handle palace affairs in my absence.

Well, since both of them were so kind, it would be rude not to follow their advice and go look for my bride. And it wasn't my fault that we meant different things by saying that.

However, who could have thought that I'd be so lucky!

I felt her presence the moment I entered the castle's barrier. I was almost late for the event so had no opportunity to check everyone at once. The part of the room where the ladies were sitting was in the dark and I didn't want to scare her off.

"My emperor", I was recognized and greeted immediately, "It's such an honour.."

"No need," I smiled lightly trying not to give away my excitement, "I am incognito here. And now I need you all to laugh as if I said something extremely funny."

They all burst out laughing as if we were good old friends and I turned to one of my battle commanders, who was rewarded this year with an opportunity to go to the Selection, "Flarrel, I need you to make sure that no one is leaving this castle. Block the barriers and order your squadron to come here immediately for safety reasons.

"Of course, your majesty, " he didn't even bow but tried to hide in the crowd discretely and then disappeared to follow my orders. Clever guy. I'd have to give him more rewards later. And now that I knew that my little angel was not going anywhere anymore, I could relax and enjoy the show.

I sat at one place and even chuckled when someone tried to speak to me or c***k a joke. Anything to look natural. But the more I sat there, the more girls were coming up to that central stage, the angrier I got inside. Was Lara really here? Was she trying to find herself a gerdian husband? Why would she reject me but then actually come here?!

But the more I thought the more I realized that she couldn't be a contestant. For that, she would need a dark mark and that was a specially monitored process. Girls were chosen for it years before their Dark Selection was about to happen. Girls, who could accept dark magic, and Lara was made out of Light. She was Light.

No, Lara was not a contestant. Yet she managed to get inside. I would find out how, of course. But at the moment I knew everything I needed to know. We were in the same room and she wouldn't be able to run again. Even by air. Even if a gerdian was helping her, they wouldn't be able to transport anymore.

That helped me feel at ease. And by the time the name that I gave to the coordinator of the event was called, I formed a speech that wasn't aimed for her ears only. I was thanking all the gods and the chaos itself in my mind for my parents changing the rules back in their time. Before only the girls were introducing themselves as only the men were actually choosing a pair for themselves. Now the males had to do the same since the ladies had a say as well. They had to like or at least want to marry a person that would choose them. So, the gerdians had to put in some effort as well. And it was working for me perfectly now.

I gave the performance of my life and the ladies seemed impressed. In all honesty, I hoped that she would jump on that stage and claim me as hers. That would be what I'd do if she stood up here, offering herself as a bride to anyone else. Yet she stayed silent and I got angry. Was she really letting me go? Didn't she care at all?

"Oh, and I am a Duke of the Gerdian Empire," I added just to add oil to fire and heard a wave of gasps from the female contestants.

Nothing.

I hoped no one noticed how hard I clenched my fists and sitting there only made my mood worse. Not that I let it show.

So, Lara decided to play a game with me. Well, I loved games. I was going to give her the best game of her life.

The gerdians had to leave first. It was the tradition. And I was tempted to break it now. I was tempted to illuminate the room properly and look into her eyes.

Then again, that could potentially ruin everything. So, exhaling heavily through my nostrils, I summoned the dark fire and transported myself to the designated room. Checking it quickly, I created a barrier that would only let me and her inside. No one else. Pacing around the room, I tried to call myself down.

It did not help of course, as there she was, right next to me. But I couldn't go there and claim her... I couldn't do anything!

The desk felt my anger first when I slammed it over the wall. One of the few chairs in the room followed it. I felt a small prick of guilt, knowing that this room was considered a museum of sorts since this was where my father lived during his one and only Dark Selection, the one that changed everything.

Breaking a few more things helped me to feel better. And I started to think rationally again. Everything was better than it was yesterday. We were close again. Not close close, but close enough for me to know that she was safe. Close enough for me to make her realize what she really wanted.

And with those thoughts in my mind, I closed my eyes that night...

She was sitting at a windowsill that I descried at once and calmed down that we still were in the same castle. I was not mistaken and that made me smile.

Lara looked at me and clenched her lips, turning away immediately.

My angel was clearly pissed at me and I was enjoying it.

She cared...

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LARA

I knew I was dreaming when I heard him in the room. After today I didn't even want to look at him and yet I took one little peek. He had a smug face and that annoyed me even more!

He clearly had a nice evening watching all the ladies who could replace me with ease and what did he want now?! Why was he even here?!

Was I his entertainment while he didn't choose someone new?! He clearly moved on!

“Nice room!” he said, and I flinched. It didn’t even occur to me that I could give myself away. I nervously looked around, thanking the goddess of Light for the darkness of the nighttime. It would be hard to notice anything particular now. And, luckily, my maid’s uniform was hidden in the wardrobe.

“Thanks,” I replied to him, avoiding his gaze. The sooner he’d leave me alone, the better. “I love this place,” I added just out of spite.

“I am sure,” he chuckled, “It cannot be compared to the chambers I provided for you back at the Gerdian Palace. It also makes your room at the White Archipelago pale in comparison.”

“Sometimes less is more, Demir,” I snapped and jumped to my feet, “Do you want something?”

“I want a few things,” he smirked, and I felt my cheeks flushed, realizing that I wasn’t wearing anything except a flimsy nightgown. Then again, it was a dream. And he already saw me wearing nothing, so it was too late for modesty. But I crossed my hands on my chest just in case, which only widened his obnoxious grin.

“What are you doing here?”

“Checking in on you,” he stepped closer and I stayed where I was, “How was your day, Lara?”

“Terrible!” I did not lie about that. But I decided not to mention that it was actually his fault.

“What happened?” I could swear I saw a vague smile on his lips that he tried to hide, “Maybe I can help?”

“You are the last person that can help me!” I lied again and narrowed my eyes at him, “And how was your day? Anything particularly interesting happened to you today?”

“Let me think,” he walked past me to the window and sat on it, rubbing his chin, “Interesting... Interesting... Well, I had a very interesting Council meeting today. Then I had an audience with Prim... She says hi by the way.”

"I doubt it," I rolled my eyes. The princess was probably extremely happy that I was far away now and it was unlikely that Demir was sharing our secret dates with her. "Anything else?" I furrowed my brows.

"Oh, I joined the Dark Selection," he muttered, "But do not concern yourself with that. It's nothing."

"It's nothing?!" the words escaped me before I could take them under control and, "Really, Demir?!"

He leaned over the window wall and looked me up and down.

"You don't seem too calm, Lara," he stated plainly, "For a person who wished me happiness even if it's not with you that is."

He looked out of the window and I was happy that in that dream there were just dark clouds outside and nothing else. Otherwise, he'd get where I was.

"And for a person who promised to love me forever you moved on extremely fast," I couldn't help myself saying. It hurt.

"I never said that I did," he smiled sadly, looking at me, "But I am an emperor, Lara. I need to build a family, I need to have an heir..."

His words stabbed me like a sharp dagger through my heart. An heir... He was going to have an heir with one of those girls... He wanted to create a family with one of them. A family without me...

"And if you refuse to be with me, I need to at least look at other options," he finished, and I bit my lip to hold back a sob. I wasn't going to humiliate myself by crying in front of him.

So, that was what I was for him – a better option! Well, it was extremely good to know that!

"You look sad, Lara," he noticed and that only made me more furious inside. It was almost as if he was mocking me. "Are you sure you are all right? You know, I could come for you any time and pick you up..."

“No, thank you!” I shook my head, “I wouldn’t want to tear you away from all your... options. You should do what’s best for you. And I can take care of myself!”

He clenched his lips, and I could tell that this was not what he expected from me. For a second there I was gloating inside that I managed to hurt him too. At least a little bit. But the next moment, he moved fast, and I was pinned against a wall, with him breathing straight into my face.

“Are you sure that you are even doing this by yourself, Lara?” The guardian emperor looked me straight into the eyes and I noticed sparks of dark magic dancing there wildly.

“What exactly do you mean by that?” I asked him but it only made him angrier. Did he really think that I wouldn’t last a few days in the world without him? How lowly did you think of me? Was I just a helpless child in his eyes? The memory of Sean surfaced and I bit my lip again. This time making him furious.

“Are you taking me for an idiot Lara?” he gritted through his teeth.

“No,” I said simply, “but what about you? How helpless do you think I am?”

He clearly wanted to say something but instead, he just let me go and went to the door. As if there was something behind it in our shared dream.

“So if I get it correctly,” he looked at me again, “absolutely no one was helping you and you’re fine with me finding a new bride?”

“And you bright?” I gave out a chuckle, “if my memory doesn’t fail me, you never had one before. I, for sure, was not your bride. I was simply a guest in your palace. And even with that, I had no choice.”

“Well,” he said coldly, “You have a choice now, don’t you? Is all this really what you want?”

I looked at him and wanted to honestly deny it. This wasn’t at all what my heart desired.

But the thing that I wanted more than anything in this world, was for him to stay alive and safe... In the long run, nothing changed. My hair was still golden and the prophecy was hanging above our heads. I did not want to be

the end of him. I did not want for him to have an end. He could live for many more centuries and it was not my place to take this from him.

“Yes, Demir,” I raised my chin high to lie into his face again, “That’s what I want.”

“Fine, my beautiful soulmate,” he came close and grabbed the back of my head, pulling me in for a possessive and painful k!ss which lasted for so long that for a minute there I thought that we could stay like this forever.

A little illusion that gave me hope...

But it was torn to pieces just moments later as he broke the k!ss and whispered into my l!ps, “Than this is exactly what you are going to get!”

I woke up from sobbing on the same windowsill and needed some time to come to my senses.

I washed my face and brush my short hair, put on my uniform, and skipping breakfast went straight to lady Gianna’s room. All I needed was to be distracted in some way. And I was sure that the lady of the north would definitely come up with something. I wasn’t wrong.

“ there you are!” she looked angry with me even though I was one hour early, “I was looking everywhere for you! We have a lot of work to do today. I received an invitation for a date with the duke!”

My heart skipped a bit. He was already sending out invitations to the ladies that he liked.

“Congratulations my lady,” I said politely, “it is very well deserved.”

“Even though I think so too,” Gianna rolled her eyes, “sadly I have to admit that the same kind of invitation was sent to every lady participating this year... I think he wants to get to know us better before he makes his decision.”

That piece of a gerdian!

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LARA

I didn't even notice at first that I clenched my fists so hard that nails dug into my flesh, hurting me.

"What are you waiting for?!" Gianna looked at me, clearly annoyed, "We have a lot of work to do, Kara!"

"Of course, my lady," I hurried inside. Work now, feelings later.

Dozens of dresses were thrown around the room. The lady of the South wasn't in a good mood today.

"Did you decide on your outfit, my lady?" I asked her while kneeling and gathering her lavish dresses. The southerners of Akyrian kingdom loved shiny and sparkly things. Their fashion was bolder and brighter.

"No, that's impossible!" the girl fell into one of the chairs, "Nothing I have will suit gerdian tastes! All this is wrong!"

"I've heard from the other maids that they love daring women," I told her, remembering the one and only gerdian ball that I attended, "And their princess Primrose wears all kinds of colours and shades, preferring things with golden elements."

Gianna looked at me with a suddenly interested gaze, "What else do they say?"

"Erm," I stumbled, "Not much. We are just maids..."

"What about hair?" the lady asked me.

"They like hair up," I bit my lip, "With jewels in it. But it's for official events, my lady. I am not sure if a date is..."

"Yeah-yeah," she waved her hand at me, signaling to stop talking, and rubbed her forehead, "I can work with that!"

She started pacing around the room, while I gathered her gowns.

“Find me a blue and gold dress. Not the puffy one,” she commanded and I started my choice, “It should be fine for first personal introduction in the garden...”

“In the garden?” I repeated her words.

“Yes,” she smiled, “He ordered to put up a tent in the castle’s garden and will be meeting the ladies inside.”

I had to close my eyes and breathe out through my nostrils to calm myself down. Now he was even creating a more intimate atmosphere for them. And meeting everyone in one day. The damn gerdian emperor was in a hurry, wasn’t he? In a hurry to find my replacement...

“What are you waiting for?!” Gianna scolded me, “Hurry up! Hair first!”

She already made a small sketch of what she wanted on her head. And again I was thankful to my friend Bria for plenty of experience. This was a complicated hairdo with many braids that only a professional could create.

However, I almost choked when I came to Gianna and noticed that she had many other sketches prepared. Not with hairdos. With the contestants of the Dark Selection! There were the lords and the ladies... And the small pieces of paper were arranged in groups.

“You were busy my lady,” I suppressed a laugh willing to escape me. The lady of the South was tactical, wasn’t she?

“Oh, this?” she acknowledged me lazily, “I like to visualize things! It helps me think.”

I started brushing her hair and she started to explain her system to me. As if I cared.

“And this group of ladies is the most dangerous,” she got into too much detail explaining to me why she considered the poor girls a threat. I nodded here and there and sometimes was adding a simple yes to make keep her happy.

“Melody Raen is the most dangerous of them all!” Gianna assured me, “Even the Duke was fascinated by her. He looked at her intensely!”

This got me interested without me even realizing but when I saw a sketch of lady Melody, I calmed myself down.

“She is the last you should be worried about,” I snorted and caught Gianna’s gaze on me.

“Why us that?” she raised her brow, “Melody is a beauty with shiny blonde hair, she is considered one of the most beautiful women of the kingdom. After me, of course.”

“Of course,” I echoed, “But the problem is...her hair may be considered golden.”

“So?” Gianna looked at me dumbfounded.

Yes, so what? Where was I going with it? I couldn’t reveal the prophecy and that Demir was actually the emperor of the Gerdian Empire. Nice way to set yourself up, Lara!

“Gerdians don’t like that hair colour too much,” I muttered, “It’s... considered bad luck in their lands.”

“I see,” the lady of the South smirked and placed the sketch of lady Melody into another pile, “You prove to be very useful, Kara.”

“I do my best,” I smiled politely at her and went on with my work.

“But now I think that maybe it will not be the best idea to take you to the Gerdian Empire with me,” she pointed at my hair and I clenched my lips. Thank you all the gods for that.

“Probably not,” I tried not to show my excitement. One less problem for me.

“But do not worry,” she said, “If everything ends well here, I will find a way to reward you.”

Something told me that she would forget about me the instant a gerdian proposed to her. But I didn’t need her attention. I needed this Dark Selection to be over soon. And also, I needed money. Now I wasn’t so sure anymore that it was such a great idea to stay in a castle that was full of gerdians even if it was just for a couple of months per year.

“Just the most usual way of thanking a maid would be great, my lady,” I dared to look the southerner in the eye and she smirked at me, knowing far too well that I was talking about coins.

Good. It would be easier with her if she believed that we would be on the same side.

“I always like to reward talented people,” Gianna chuckled, “And talented maids are the rarest of them all. You will be rewarded for every success of mine. So, work hard, Kara.”

“With pleasure, my lady” I was attaching one of the braids to its place.

In a few hours, we were done and even I had to admit that Gianna Vensal looked wonderful today. She had an elegant dress on and an intricate hairdo. Any man would admire her looks today...

A lump formed in my throat when I remembered that all this was intended for one man only... Demir... But I suppressed my broken heart and started cleaning up the room.

“What are you doing?!” the lady wondered, “You need to get yourself in order.”

“That’s fine, my lady,” I forced a smile, not willing to look at her anymore. I didn’t need more of those hurtful thoughts inside my head. “I’ll clean up the room and then come back here when you are back from your date.”

“No,” she snorted, “You are going with me!”

I started to think of excuses that I could use not to and it was as if she read my mind.

“Did I forget to mention?” she fluttered her long eyelashes that were too long to be natural, “The Duke ordered us to arrive with our maids.”

Uh-oh.

“Wh-why?” I mumbled and she rolled her eyes.

“How would I know?! It’s a strange request, but on the other hand, maybe it’s some kind of a gerdian tradition,” Gianna didn’t sound so sure and I had a bad feeling about it, “Never mind. Just go and change to look clean and

presentable. Your curtsies are perfect and there will be no need for you to speak. We'll be fine."

She looked me up and down again and frowned, "Maybe cover your hair..."

"Yes, my lady," I curtsied and left her.

This was bad. This was really bad and I knew that!

As long as I knew Demir, he was never interested in my maids... Could it be that he was here not to actually look for a bride?!

Anyway, there was no way I could go inside that damn tent!

I wished all the luck to Gianna, even though not sincerely, considering who her date was with... But I wasn't going to risk myself being discovered! It couldn't happen!

I was close to my room when someone dragged me by my elbow into a dark passage and I saw someone I didn't expect here at all...

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LARA

"You?!" I hissed at Sean Sarn when he pulled me closer but that only made him slam me against the wall and close my mouth with his large palm. All while pressing his body into mine, restricting my movement.

"Shhh," he put his index fingers to his lips, all while looking from behind a wall to see if the hall we were at was still empty.

However, when he made sure that it was, he still did not move away. Our eyes met just for a second and I felt like it was time to do something about it, hitting him hard with my knee, and surprisingly, I hit something that was hard.

"Eww!" I yelled at him, "What do you think you are doing?!"

He was still bending and groaning when he put his hand inside his chest pocket and produced some kind of necklace on a golden chain.

"I brought you this," he muttered, standing up, "Gods, Lara, where did you learn to hit like that?!"

"Don't test me next time," I warned him, "And I don't need jewellery, thank you."

"That's an artifact!" he finally managed to stand straight and got my interest.

"An artifact?" I took it from his hands and had a closer look. It was an oval-shaped gold pendant with a medium-sized ruby. Carvings on the sides were clearly runes and I could feel its energy. "What is it for?" I asked.

"It's to hide your aura," the red dragon replied, coming closer again, "I think you are already aware that Demir is here. I am shocked that he still didn't drag you back to his palace. He should have felt you by now."

"I guess he was too busy looking for a bride," I snorted, pretending that it didn't hurt even though my heart was already bleeding, "It would probably be better for me to just escape again..."

"Probably," he agreed, "Even with this, if he sees you, he'd recognize you..."

"I know," I sighed, "Then again, it may not matter to him anymore. He clearly moved on."

"Demir never moves on this quickly," Sean chuckled and I looked at him in shock, "However, he always had plenty of women. And he does need an heir. What he is doing here now is as much work for him as everything else. He should have done it years ago."

I did my best not to show any of my emotions to him.

This was just work...

It was probably supposed to make me feel better. Well, it didn't. That meant that he would choose someone even if he didn't fall for her... He would take that woman to his palace, give her the room I used to live in... He would make love to her and have a family with her...

I knew I needed to look at the bigger picture. This was exactly what I wanted. For him to live happily because it couldn't be with me...

But I for sure did not want to be the witness of that happiness. I did not want to see him choosing another woman and forgetting all about me... This was too much.

“I need to leave this place,” I told Sean and he nodded understandingly.

“I don’t have a castle in Akyria, but I have one in...”, he started saying when I interjected.

“No need. I need to find my own place. Now I know for sure that I need to be as far as possible from the Gerdian Empire and anything and anyone who might be connected to it in any way. If you want to help – help me to run away today.”

“Today?” he looked at me in shock.

“Yes,” I nodded firmly, “This very moment Demir has dates with the contenders for his heart. Maids are supposed to be present there as well. And as you may understand, I cannot go there with the lady I am serving.”

“That... probably wouldn’t be the best of ideas...” he agreed.

“Who knows why he ordered maids to be there,” I continued, “My lady will go one of the last ones. And before she enters without a maid at her side, it’s best for me to run away and hide. With that necklace, it will be easier.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Sean agreed, “Go, change and get ready and I’ll get you out. I will go with you until you leave the Akyrian Kingdom and cover you with a barrier if any dragons follow us. The Gerdian Empire has a treaty with Akyria and they can fly here freely. But Demir would never go to the next kingdom – Nestar, they do not have any agreement and if a dragon appears in the sky, it may cause a war.”

“Then this is where I am going,” I said, “And thank you for offering to escort me but I think I’d better manage on my own.”

“Lara, I...” he wanted to say something else when we heard footsteps nearby and looked around.

“Oh, don’t stop on my account!” lady Fiona looked cross, “After all, you’ve just been discussing all your treacherous plans right here in the maids’ hall!”

We both looked to the ground like two mischievous children who were caught red-handed.

“I think you failed to mention some things when you asked me to hide this girl here, Sean! Just what did you get me into?!” the lady hissed, but before we even managed to say something, she pointed to my door, “Inside her room! Now!”

As soon as we all entered, she clicked her fingers and I felt a barrier forming around us. So, lady Fiona was a mage too.

“Thanks,” Sean said, “I was planning to do that myself and...”

“Oh, shut up!” Fiona stomped her foot and for the first time ever I saw her showing those kinds of emotions, “I demand you telling me everything now!”

“No time for that,” the red dragon tried to calm her down, “I just need to take La... Kara out of here. We will not bother you again. And the next time we see each other, I’ll tell you everything.”

“Oh, you think you are so clever, aren’t you?” the lady let out a laugh, “You thought everything through and all... Right?”

None of us said anything. But I felt that something was really off here...

“The Duke, who is not even a real duke, but the god damn emperor of the Gerdian Empire, placed his own barrier over the whole damn castle, Sean!” she shouted, “No one can get out now! No one can get in! We are all stuck here until he finds what he is looking for!”

And with that, she looked at me with fury in her eyes.

“I guess it’s her!” she pointed her finger at me, “Who the hell are you?!”

“She is the woman I love!” Sean suddenly said and I choked on that.

NOW this was a mess!

“What?” Fiona massaged her temples, it all was too much for her and when she stumbled, I caught her and helped her to sit on my bed.

“You know my story with the emperor,” Sean continued in the meantime while I was throwing daggers at him with my eyes, “If he gets my woman, he gets

me. That's why it was so important for me to hide her. I knew that with you she would be safe. But I guess I was wrong..."

"Oh, Sean!" the woman closed her eyes, "You shouldn't have started this rebellion in the first place! And now this..."

"Fiona," he knelt before her, "Help us! Only you can."

"I will lose everything because of you!" a few tears rolled down her cheeks, "You destroyed me!"

I felt a prick of guilt. I didn't think that Demir would do anything to her. But I could understand the stress she was under.

"It's... going to be all right," the words came out of my mouth even though I didn't believe in them.

Lady Fiona took a deep breath and stood up, straightening her dress.

"It will be, but not thanks to you too!" she scoffed, "I already handled today's fiasco. Lady Gianna will not go to her date alone, another girl will be with her, covering for you. And that girl will do all the special events with her. I had to tell you that you got sick and can't serve her. Luckily, the lady of the South hates sick people. But she was not pleased. So, from now on keep away from her. Keep away from everyone! Just sit here until this is over!"

I nodded quietly. There wasn't anything else to say.

"And I'll stay with her!" Sean offered, "Until the barrier is gone and..."

My eyes widened at his words. This room was too small for us and the Dark Selection could go on for months!

"No way in chaos!" lady Fiona gritted through her teeth, "I'll find another hole for you! You are not to see each other! If one of you gets discovered then at least another has a chance!"

"But..." Sean wanted to say something but I stepped in before he had a chance.

"I agree!" I said, "Sorry for the inconvenience, lady Fiona. I'll be gone as soon as there is a chance..."

“Oh, dear,” Fiona sighed, “I hope there will be a chance like that. Otherwise, we are all doomed.”

“Fine,” the red dragon agreed, “Put the necklace on, Lara.”

“Lara? Was anything you told me true, Sean?!” lady Fiona scolded him.

“The less you know the better,” Sarn chuckled, only making his cousin angrier.

And I put the chain with the pendant over my head. The second it was done, a loud roar emerged from somewhere outside, making walls shutter...

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DEMIR

I was throwing away girl after girl from my tent, waiting to see the only one I truly wanted to see, checking her presence all the time to calm myself down. She must have been a maid. I considered Dining Hall servants as well but this was before I found out they lived in groups of three or four in their rooms. Lara had a separate room, which could only mean that she was a maid here. Or someone from the elite workers of the Dark Selection. But the latter was unlikely.

I took a break after yet another disappointment and concentrated on her aura again. It was soft and warm, and so familiar, almost like a sea breeze... and most importantly, it was close. Yet in less than a minute, the connection broke and I stopped sensing her. That was familiar as well. This was how I lost her last time! Someone was covering her! Hiding her from me!

A roar emerged from within me that I couldn't, or better say did not want to, suppress. I mind-linked the captain of the guards that I brought here just yesterday to ask him if anyone was able to go through the barrier. In all honesty, I would have felt if someone did. But I still needed confirmation from the one watching from the sky.

And as soon as he confirmed that no one left or even tried to, I relaxed. Portals wouldn't work here anymore.

She didn't escape.

But my dragon was still unsettled inside. However much I tried to calm us both down, one thing was clear – Lara knew that I was here and still did not want to face me. That stubborn girl!

Maybe I didn't think it through... She obviously cared judging by our last conversation. Tried to hide it but still cared.

However, not enough to fight for me.

If I saw her choosing between plenty of handsome men, I'd rip each of their throats first and then claim her on the spot. And yet she was prepared to watch me court other ladies.

This was killing me... But on the other hand, it was exciting too. Little did Lara knew that she was calling to all my primal instincts. It felt like a hunt and she felt like my prey. The one who would not be able to get away from me!

I threw myself back in my chair and closed my eyes. Maybe it was time to admit that I wouldn't be able to play a nice guy with her... Who was I kidding that I'd let her go if that would be her choice when it was hurting me physically and most importantly, I was aware that she wasn't happy either.

I really wanted to be this nobleman, the perfect dragon and the fair emperor my parents taught me to be. But I was too damn in love with her and too damn selfish for that.

I'd have to take her back even if she wouldn't want it. A few months, a year and she would get used to everything... Would that make me a bad person? Probably. Did I care? Not anymore. All I knew was that it had to be done. And hopefully – soon. She was my treasure, and I needed her close. I needed her to live...and to breathe...

It was pretty clear that I probably wouldn't see her among the ladies and the maids today. My girl was too clever for that. But I still had to finish what I started even though it was useless.

So, I waved my hand and the next couple of girls entered. This one looked like a southerner with her dark hair and brown eyes, wearing a blue and gold dress that was accentuating all the right places. But what attracted my attention was her hair. I never followed fashion but even I wasn't oblivious to some details. The girl had the type of braid in her hair that even I knew the name of. It was Primrose braid, named after my sister. Because one of her

maids came up with it and Prim was wearing it in her hair all the time. It was different from everything else thus making it recognizable for me. And I visited Akyria enough times to know that it was not popular here. This gerdian trend still did not reach them.

It could be nothing, of course. But it also could be something...

"Lady Gianna Vensal, your Grace," the girl curtsied before me and I took a better look at her. There was nothing special about her even though she was beautiful. But every girl here was beautiful, yet none of them managed to stand out for me.

"Raise, lady Vensal," I waved my hand and she looked at me with a charming smile on her face, "Take a seat, please."

Behind her stood a maid, slightly chubby and with black as soot hair. Not Lara.

I sighed and stood up while servants were pouring the lady a drink which she accepted with trembling fingers.

"Tell me about yourself, lady Gianna," I said to her lazily. I wasn't going to listen anyway.

She started talking and I had a better look at her, just confirming that apart from the braid, there was nothing special or particularly interesting about her.

"Your hair is very beautiful," I interrupted her and she blushed immediately.

"Why thank you, my lord," she beamed at me and I came closer, brushing my palm over the back of her head.

"Who did this for you?" I pointed at the damn braid and she suddenly looked puzzled.

"M-my maid, my lord," she replied and I turned to the other girl, who was already far too pale.

"Wonderful work," I praised her, "Where did you learn this style?"

It was a simple question but the maid was mumbling something under her breath. "Speak louder!" I demanded, giving her a glare, and the maid fell onto her knees.

“Forgive me sir!” she begged, “It was not me!”

I turned to the lady and now she was the one looking pale.

Making people feel insignificant in my presence was my gift. And today I was using it to the fullest.

“Interesting,” I smiled, which only made the lady in front of me cringe, “I thought that I was clear that you were to arrive with your personal maid from the Dark Selection...”

She did not say anything and came closer to her, leaning down and breathing in her scent. Surprisingly, I felt notes of Jasmine and sea breeze in it which only made me more confident that I was on the right track.

“Look,” I pretended to pick something up from her shoulder, “I see a short golden hair on you, lady...”

“Gianna,” she reminded me weakly, “It’s not...”

“What I think?” I chuckled, finishing for her. I knew that I needed to scare her more to get to the bottom of everything and it seemed that I was close. Faint signs but the scent... I’d recognize Lara’s scent everywhere. And this girl smelled like her. It was barely noticeable, but it was there.

“You know one thing that gerdians loathe more than anything?” I asked her and watched her trembling.

N-no,” she replied weakly and I leaned over to her ear whispering so that the other girl could hear as well.

“Liars,” I smirked and felt Gianna flinch at that, “And unless you want to find out what we do with liars, you should tell me what this golden hair is doing on you. I am giving you just one chance to clear this...misunderstanding. Miss it – and you and your family will be done. There will be no place for you in this world.”

“It’s not what you think!” the girl repeated herself, “It probably belongs to my real maid. Kara!”

“Kara,” my lips stretched in a grin. This was too good to be true. “And why didn’t you bring her here today? The order was simple and direct.”

“My apologies, Your Grace,” she mumbled, “I was told that she wasn’t coming at the very last minute. Something happened to her and she suddenly became sick.”

“I see,” I stepped away and felt with my back how she exhaled loudly, “Well, I am not a monster. I can forgive one simple mistake. Just make sure that it doesn’t happen again. I want this maid, Kara, to be present everywhere where you are present. Take care of that.”

“Of course,” the girl jumped to her feet even though I didn’t let her do it yet. But I decided that I scared her enough. For one day.

“Remember that your future depends on your further actions,” I gave her one last warning.

“I will never forget your kindness, my lord,” she curtsied and hurried to the exit. It was funny how all of them were eager to see me and how the same girls later were doing everything to leave the tent as soon as possible.

She was almost out when I stopped her, “Lady Gianna! Who told you that your maid was unwell? Who disobeyed my order?”

For a second there she was contemplating... But then the deal with her conscience was achieved and she replied honestly, “Lady Fiona. She is...”

“That would be all,” I dismissed her and stayed alone in the tent.

I knew very well who lady Fiona was. Sean Sarn’s cousin.

That explained a lot. And that would be my next stop.

Book 2 Dragon King's Forbidden Love Chapter 70 - Tips

LARA

I felt uneasy just sitting in my room and doing nothing. The sensation of soon approaching doom was not leaving me. Something was off and I knew it. I could sense it with my skin.

I jumped when I heard a knock on my door. No one was supposed to come here this early. Lady Fiona said that she would bring me food after midnight to avoid being seen. Yet it was her voice behind the door.

"It's me," she hissed, "Open up."

I obeyed, of course, I brought enough trouble to that woman already to disrespect her now.

She came in with her usual elegance and sighed, "I tried, my dear, I really tried. But I am afraid you still have to go and serve lady Gianna."

My lips parted in surprise. That wasn't our plan at all.

"What happened?" I asked her bluntly, "I thought we..."

"Right now downstairs she makes a whole ugly scene," Fiona shuddered, "Shouting and screaming that we are hiding her maid!"

"But you were supposed to tell her that I was gone..."

"Well, someone told her that the castle was under a barrier and no one can leave. So she is not buying anything that we came up with."

"I see," I bit my lip almost to the point of bleeding.

"At the moment she will attract more attention to you shouting about a maid with short golden hair who disappeared," the woman exhaled loudly, "Than if you go there and give her what she wants. Gerdians do not visit girl's rooms at this point of the Dark Selection. Not before the first ball."

My cheeks got slightly red as I understood what she was hinting at.

Well, it looked like I had no choice, so I fixed my uniform and tied my hair at the back into a short ponytail.

When I was close to lady Gianna's room, I heard loud noises and sounds of things breaking. I guessed that lady Fiona did not lie to me about my unstable mistress.

I knocked and the sounds stopped. The door opened before my face and I saw the lady of the South breathing heavily and with disheveled hair.

"You!" she almost shouted and pulled me in by my hand roughly, "You! Traitor! What do you think you were doing?!"

She pushed me so hard and unexpectedly that I landed on the floor with a thump. My first instinct was to jump on my feet and kick her back, after all, that was what I was trained to do for years.

But, of course, I didn't do it. I had a role to play, so I just clenched my fists and tried to stand up.

"And what the hell is this?" Gianna bent over and grasped the ruby pendant on my neck, making me gasp. I tucked that safely under my uniform but it probably fell out when I was on the ground. And now she was pulling it so hard that the chain hurt my neck.

"It's mine," I tried to stay calm.

"Where would a maid get something like this?!" Gianna demanded, "I doubt that your yearly wages will be enough to pay for that..."

I opened my mouth to say something about it being a family heirloom treasured for generations. But the lady of the South smirked and distorted her pretty face. She already had an answer for me.

"Oh, I know where you got it!" she chuckled and let it go, "Only gerdians here possess such treasures and may throw them around like it's nothing. My cunning little maid was servicing a gerdian while I was waiting there alone like an idiot!"

My lips parted in shock at her words.

"Of course, not," I started to explain myself.

"Enough!" Gianna raised her hand, "Lucky you that I respect clever people. But betray me again and no gerdian will help you! Sleep with whoever you want while you are off work, but when I require you here – this is where you need to be! Got it?"

"Yes," I sighed. Arguing with her would be useless anyway. She was one of those people who always had their own opinion and thought that it was the only one correct.

I just needed to go through all this – avoid Demir, forget Demir, work as a maid while stay hidden, avoid Sean Sarn who got me into all of this and then escape at the first opportunity again. Easy, right? Right...

“Enough of all that,” she suddenly changed her attitude, “Come, take care of my hair. I want something simple yet elegant for dinner.”

For about an hour she was telling me how her date with the “duke” went. She didn’t care that I did not want to hear about it, so she went on, and on, and on... She told me how perfectly gallant he was with her and how he couldn’t take his eyes off her... How he was the man of her dreams – handsome, powerful, rich... How he seemed to inhale the air around her while bending almost to touch her face...

And I may have pulled her hair too harshly a few good times to help me through all this. It was torture. Pure and inevitable. And I created all this myself. What an idiot I was to agree to go with Sean Sarn in the first place! Maybe all this was his plan all along... After all, not to bring Demir’s demise, I knew I needed to be as far from him as possible.

I made this decision and I needed to stand by it. It was for the best. For the best, for the best, for the best.... I kept repeating it as a mantra, trying to calm down my nerves. Maybe if I said it several times, I would believe in it myself.

“And now bring me the red dress,” Gianna commanded, “It’s already on the bed.”

“Yes, my lady,” I was playing my part of an obedient little maid and went to the bedroom, finding there the most gorgeous red dress. However, it was huge and with a long train. Definitely fit for a ball at the royal palace. Yet a bit too much for a simple dinner with other ladies.

However, who was I to judge?!

I helped Gianna to get in and did all the laces at her back. Then she chose jewellery and I helped her with that too, feeling happy that I’d be able to leave as soon as she did.

Yet life had other plans for me.

“What are you waiting for?” the lady of the South turned and looked at me expectantly.

And when I did not get the hint, she rolled her eyes, “The train of the dress! You’d have to hold it while I walk.”

“Y-you want me to go to the dinner with you?” I gulped.

“Oh, I don’t want to,” she chuckled, “I just don’t have a choice! Pick it up! We are almost late!”

All the way to the dining hall I was going through my options. There was no way, I could walk inside. That was exactly where all the gerdians would be at this hour.

“My lady,” I mumbled when we were almost at the entrance, “Don’t you think that this dress is a bit too much for the occasion? You could save this beauty for the next ball. You would look wonderful in it and…”

“It’s not that I need a maid’s opinion,” Gianna scoffed, “Not to mention that I have to wear this dress today.”

“Have to?” I asked dumbfoundedly. What did she mean by that?

“Yes,” for some reason she decided to reply to me with a smirk on her lips, “The duke sent it to me with a note that I have to wear it today! How could I refuse such a simple request from such a wonderful and generous man?!”

I clenched the fabric in my hands, wishing to tear it to pieces. He even sent her a present! Already!

And it was at that moment when Gianna rapidly walked in, dragging me behind her into the huge Dining Hall.

It was too late!