

Book 2 Dragon King's Forbidden Love Chapter 71 - Tips

LARA

My new plan was to ignore everything that was going on around me and pretend that I wasn't even there. It was a good plan. But unfortunately, it failed in less than a minute as I lifted up my eyes and met the heavy gaze of the gerdian emperor.

For a few seconds we were just looking at each other and there was so much in his gaze, that was full of sparks of dark magic. He looked at me hungrily, as if he didn't see me for years... when in fact just about a week passed.

And I wanted to take my eyes off him, but it was as if they were glued to his handsome face.

A smirk formed on his lips and he raised his glass at me. I didn't know how to react to that. I suddenly felt so small and unworthy among all those beautiful girls in their lavish dresses. I was still holding Gianna's train and for the first time realized how ugly and shabby my maid's uniform was in comparison.

"Look, the duke raises his glass at our table!" one of the girls whispered and they all did the same at once, shooting their best smiles at him. I did not like any of it. But just stood there like an idiot with another girl's dress in my hands.

"Dream on," Gianna snorted, "He is only looking in my direction!"

I wanted to put the train down but the Beauty of the South hissed at me, "Stay where you are! If I have to move in any way, make sure I don't have any obstacles! And follow me at all times."

"Yes, my lady," I nodded quietly, clenching the fabric in my hands.

"Don't you think it's a bit cruel to make your maid stand like this the whole evening?" one of the ladies, a blonde with clear blue eyes said, looking at Gianna, "No one else's maids are here..."

"If you're going to envy me, do it quietly, Iris," the southerner scoffed, "My maid is so loyal that she doesn't want to leave me even for a moment. Right, Kara?"

I nodded again. I wasn't going to make a scene.

“Is that why lady Fiona was running around looking for her replacement just hours ago?” A brunette on the other side of the table chuckled.

I wished she didn’t remind Gianna of this, because she immediately threw a death stare at me. She’d hardly let me forget about it now. And probably would even make me pay.

I looked at Demir again, suddenly I needed to see his gaze again. But he did not look at me. He was talking to someone next to him and even chuckling from time to time.

The dinner went on and on and I just stood there. He didn’t look at me once.

But this was good.

It was great.

Amazing.

Just what I wanted.

It was perfect.

Then why did it hurt so much?

“Ladies,” I heard his voice and it pierced straight through my soul. I raised my eyes at him again, but again he paid me no attention, even though that we were standing now just a couple of feet apart.

I clenched my fists harder. I just needed to survive this dinner and then I could go back to hiding in my room. Sooner or later this Dark Selection would be over and I would be free from all this pain.

The girls started greeting him cheerfully, only one of them stayed reserved – the same blonde that denounced Gianna earlier, Iris. I was starting to like her.

“Lady Gianna,” Demir smiled gallantly, “I see that my present suits you. It makes me very happy.”

The excitement of the other contenders faded.

“It was such a beautiful gift,” the Beauty of the South giggled, clearly happy with how she managed to stun everyone, “I couldn’t wait to put it on.”

“Good,” he smirked, “I was worried that it will be problematic for you to move in it. But red is definitely your colour...”

“No worries, my lord,” Gianna smiled caressing the fabric on her thighs and making all the other ladies roll their eyes, “This dress is worth all the sacrifice.”

“I see that your original maid is back,” Demir said, not even sparing me a glance. He was making his point loud and clear.

“Yes,” Gianna nodded, “Luckily she was found just in time to help me with the dress. I’d hate for this beautiful fabric to sweep the floor. It’s precious to me...”

“Don’t worry, the Gerdian Empire has loads of precious things. You will get used to them over time,” Demir chuckled, touching the back of her seat.

It was as he was promising her all those gerdian treasures and she giggled, and giggled, and giggled... Annoying the hell out of me.

After all, she was the Lady of the South, hadn’t she seen a dress in her lifetime?!

And him... That...gerdian! I was performing the ultimate sacrifice here for him, rejecting the love of my life to save him! Yes! I was saving him! And he...he... He did it on purpose! He wanted to hurt me on purpose! And it was... Ugrh!!!

Sparks of light shone on the tips of my fingers and within seconds the fabric that I was holding inflamed. It was a strange fire and it mesmerized me. So white and pure... Incredible!

Never have I ever created anything like it. I didn’t even know that it was possible... The white fire was something new.

Someone screamed in the background but I ignored it with my hands in the white flames. Pure light! The most amazing thing about it was that it did not hurt me. It felt warm but that was about it...

“Careful!” someone shook me vigorously and I looked up, seeing Demir’s worried face. For a second there I even forgot about everything. But the reality sunk in as I heard Gianna shouting loudly, “Somebody help me! Duke Freywood! Please!”

I closed my eyes and summoned the light back to me. The flames disappeared but it was too late. The gardian's hands left me as he grabbed a jug with water from the table and splashed it all over the lady of the South. And somehow most of the water landed in her face and hair and not the train of her dress where it was actually needed.

"M-my...I-lord," she mumbled, "Th-thank you for saving me... I..."

Boy, she did not look happy but Demir already turned his back to her and took my hands into his, examining them carefully even though there was clearly nothing wrong.

"You are welcome," he muttered to Gianna, "Ladies, help lady Vensal to get to her room. I need to take the maid to the healer to treat her burns."

"But...", The Beauty of the South seemed startled by this decision. However, quickly realized that she couldn't do anything about it.

"Of course, duke," Iris stood up in her pretty pale pink dress and moved towards her we.t rival, "We will make sure that our dear Gianna is well taken care of. Take your time."

I looked at the blonde and she gave me a little smile. The next thing I caught, however, was the furious gaze of the lady of the South. She would never forgive me that. She'd make me pay...

But the dark flames surrounded me, tickling my skin, k!ssing it... This time the transportation took longer than usual. And while we travelled, swallowed by the dark fire, I only felt Demir's hands caressing me, his body pressed tightly against mine... So familiar, so desirable... and so close. I could feel his scent, I could sense his warmth, I heard how fast his heart was beating...

Everything stopped spinning and the dark flames died down. But we were still holding each other. I didn't even know how that happened that my hands were wrapped around his neck and my face tucked somewhere in his c.hest. I didn't want to let go...

"Tell me that you are done playing," I felt a k!ss on the top of my hand and Demir's fingers entangling into my hair. He inhaled loudly my scent and his grasp on me tightened to the point that it was hard to breathe...

“Tell me that this is over and I can take you home, Lara”, he said, making my heart clench from pain...

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His words helped me to sober up from all the excitement. I knew that it was time to let him go but I still hesitated.

And he was holding me so tightly that I wasn't sure that it was even possible to distance myself from him anymore.

“Nothing changed, Demir,” I said somewhere in the area of his chest, all the sounds muffled. But he understood me because I felt his whole body stiffen at once.

“Indeed,” he agreed with me to my surprise, “I still love you more than anything in this world and you still feel the same towards me. And this will never change, Lara. Because you and I are soul mates created for each other.”

“There's still this awful prophecy hanging above our heads, I still have golden hair and I still don't want to lose you because of this,” I told him looking into his eyes and enjoying those last seconds of our closeness, “It is true that I love you. A part of me will always love you, Demir. Nothing is able to change that. Whatever happens, every time I close my eyes at night, I will be thinking about you. But this is exactly why I'm doing what I'm doing. I don't want to take any chances, I don't want to risk your life. If something happens to you because of me – that's when I will not be able to live. So, please, move on from this. Let me be...”

“Move on?” he growled sarcastically, “How do you imagine that, my love?!”

“I don't know!” I answered honestly, “Somehow. I am trying and...”

“You are trying to move on?” he snorted and looked at me with his piercing gaze and then he asked on verge of breaking, “Who is helping you, Lara?”

It was the moment to tell him the truth. But I just couldn't bring myself to hurting him more.

“It doesn’t matter, Demir,” I sighed, “At this point in time you and I are strangers to each other...”

“Strangers...”, he repeated dryly after me and released his grasp.

And even though this was exactly what I wanted, I suddenly felt cold and empty inside. As if I lost a very important part of myself...

“As you wish,” he said and dark flames surrounded him, taking him away from me.

I fell onto my knees with tears rolling down my cheeks and only now realized that we were in my room this whole time. He figured everything out. It was naïve of me to think that I could hide from him... Although I wished that it was possible. Then we wouldn’t have to hurt each other more.

I cried myself to sleep that night and didn’t see any dreams. He probably did not want to see me anyway. And it was understandable. More than that – it was good.

The only thing was – it hurt like the chaos itself.

In the morning, I had breakfast with other maids and went to lady Gianna’s room with a heavy heart. Nothing good was waiting for me there.

Yet to my surprise, the lady of the South opened the door with the widest grin on her face.

“Come in!” she pulled me inside by my hand.

“About yesterday, my lady,” I wanted to get straight to the point and clear everything out.

“Oh, who cares!” she splashed her hands on me, “I would have punished you severely if I could but lady Fiona made it very clear that such things are prohibited and could lead to exclusion. And lucky for you, your negligence turned out great for me.”

“Negligence?” I wasn’t sure what she meant.

“You didn’t notice that candle or lamp that caused the fire,” she looked at me as if I was stupid, “What else would you call it?”

"You are right, my lady," I quickly agreed with her. It was better than trying to explain to her my light. Especially considering that I couldn't really explain it.

"I am really sorry for the trouble I caused," I said.

"As I already told you, everything turned out great!" she waved her hand in the direction of her bedroom and I saw several black boxes on the bed, "Look! Those presents from the Duke!"

Oh, I knew that. I recognized the boxes from Lady Solveig's shop at once.

And again I felt my heart aching. So, he probably was giving gowns by Solveig to every girl...

Not that it was important anymore.

"He sent a note that these are the replacements for the one that got destroyed yesterday," Gianna pressed one of the dresses to her heart, "This is the latest gerdian fashion! And he also wrote that he fixed your hands for me. Isn't he sweet?"

"Yes," I mumbled.

"Yes, what?" Gianna suddenly stopped and threw an expectant gaze at me.

"Yes, my lade," I curtsied before her and she smirked.

"You know," she came closer, "I'd still find a way to punish you. But the Duke asked for your forgiveness. I can't possibly refuse that. So, consider yourself lucky."

"Thank you, my lady," I curtsied again and her tone changed quickly. The whole time that I was busy with her hair and makeup she was chatting about Demir. Or Rien, as she called him. The duke this, the duke that... She went on and on about how gorgeous he was and how generous, and how he only had his eyes on her... And I clenched the hairbrush tighter and tighter. It was unbearable to listen to that after what happened yesterday.

Finally, she was ready for a stroll in the garden before lunch. And I sighed that I would be able to have a little break from her when she announced that she wanted me to accompany her.

Declining her wasn't an option, of course, so off we went to the main garden. It was spacious and beautiful, with green arcs and fountains and ponds... Some of the other girls were there too but Gianna didn't even bother to greet them. In her head, she was already the duchess and all of them were below her.

"Oh, Kara, you are so funny!" the lady of the South said all of a sudden and I opened my mouth in shock when she even slid her hand under my elbow as if we were good old friends.

But in a second everything became clear when I saw a dark figure right in front of us.

"Morning, lady Gianna," Demir bowed to her lightly and I tried to remove my hand out of her grasp.

"Duke Freywood!" the southerner curtsied way too deeply, clearly demonstrating her generous cleavage. I followed her example. After all, I was just a maid now. And just as any other maid, I was ignored by both of them.

"What a pleasure it is to see you, Duke!" the girl giggled, fluttering her long eyelashes at him. She was playing with the lacy fan in her hands and smiling at the gerdian. She was flirting. And he was smiling politely, accepting her advances.

And it irked me.

Gianna was thanking him for all the wonderful gifts and then she stumbled just for a second and her fan fell to the ground. Right to Demir's feet.

Seriously?! This is the lowest of the low trick that nobody even uses anymore!

Something inside of me clicked and I threw myself to that fan, picking it up before Demir even had a chance. No way I was watching him kneel before Gianna and be her knight in shining armour!

But one thing I did not take into consideration, as I tripped and almost fell myself... at the same time the pendant on my neck popping up from under my uniform.

"Here's your fan, my lady," I handed Gianna her accessory and got another furious stare. But she quickly took herself under control.

"It's so sweet of you, my dear. You can go now and have some rest," the lady of the South gave me her fakest smile.

I was about to thank her when Demir grabbed the pendant, making me turn to him.

"How interesting," he looked stern, "Lady Vensal, you are very generous with your servants."

"Oh, this?" Gianna giggled and threw me a death stare, "I am afraid that's not me. Kara here has already found a lover who gives her gifts this expensive. You know those maids!"

My cheeks flushed and I looked at Demir, noticing sparks of dark magic in his irises. The dragon king was pissed.

"It's... not like that," I tried to explain myself but to no avail. He was only looking at the ruby.

"Kara," Gianna interrupted, "Didn't I tell you to go? You are dismissed!"

Demir unclenched his fingers and I decided that running away was probably the best option for me. I curtsied awkwardly and run faster to the castle. Enough adventures for one day.

But of course, life had other plans for me.

I opened the door to my room and gasped seeing Sean Sarn inside, sitting on my bed with a book in his hand.

"What is going on? What are you doing here?" I demanded.

"Waiting for you," he smiled friendly, "I brought you some books from the library. I bet you die of boredom here."

"Oh, I wish!" I rolled my eyes and sat on the windowsill to avoid being too close.

"Lara," Sean looked at me with a concerned face, "Did something happen?"

"Demir happened," I leaned over the cold stone wall next to me, finding at least some kind of support in it.

“He...saw you?” the red dragon looked worried.

“Of course he saw me,” I closed my eyes, “He found me on the first day.”

“But he didn’t take you back...”

“Maybe he is not interested anymore,” I sighed and closed my eyes. I really did not want to discuss this. Not with him. Not with anyone.

I felt something warm touching my cheek and flinched, looking at Sean in shock.

And at this exact moment, flames of dark magic appeared right in the middle of the room and the emperor of The Gerdian Empire walked out of it, looking furious...

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I looked with wide eyes at both men. At Demir, whose irises were now full of dark magic, and at Sean, who did not hurry to take his hand away from me.

I flinched away and he clenched his lips, turning slowly to face the gerdian emperor.

“So, this is who has been helping you all this time,” Demir spat. He didn’t move or do anything, but his aura became darker somehow, making the air in the room suffocating.

“Well, someone had to,” Sean smirked. He felt surprisingly at ease in front of his ex-friend, “She was all alone in this big new world, you know.”

“And you just happened to meet her?” the gerdian emperor scoffed, “What a nice and absolutely believable coincidence!”

“Oh, it wasn’t a coincidence!” Sarn was gloating, “Lara listened to my advice to run as far from you as possible! And I felt obliged to help her along the way. I am taking responsibility for her!”

I closed my eyes and exhaled heavily. This was the end...

“Who the chaos are you to take responsibility for my soulmate?!” Demir roared so loud that the walls around us shook.

“Soulmate?” Sean repeated after him and looked at me in disbelief. I never told him this and was not planning on sharing the whole truth.

“Yes, Lara is mine, and if you think that you can meddle into this...” Demir continued.

“Oh, please!” The red dragon interjected, “Don’t you see that I am doing you a favour here?!”

“A favour?! To me?! You?!” The eyes of the gerdian were glowing at this point, letting us all know that he was on the verge of breaking.

“We may be not friends anymore but I do not wish for your death,” Sean said dryly, “You know very well that you two will never be able to be together. Your prophecy... it’s simply impossible.”

“That none of your business,” Demir growled, “A traitor like yourself shouldn’t worry about such a thing. Besides, when did you manage to give my woman such “great” advice?! When you tried to abduct her the first time you met her or when you killed all those people in my palace, some of whom also were your friends once?!”

“The latter,” Sarn replied in a calm tone, “But does it matter really if I am right?! She needs to be as far from you as possible to stay safe!”

“She is only safe with me!” the emperor raised his voice and unwillingly Sean lowered his head, even though I saw that he was struggling with it. His scars started to fill with fire...

“Stop it! Both of you!” I stood up between the two of them, “Don’t you think you are forgetting something?!”

Sparks of hatred were not dying down between the two of them and none of them even spared me a glance.

“Really?!” I hissed at them, “Is anyone even going to consider what I want? What is my decision?!”

“I am not sure you are that great at decision-making anymore!” Demir finally looked at me and his words cut through my soul. There was so much pain in his gaze, and anger, reproach, anxiety, and desperation. He was hurting and I could see that.

“They are still my decisions,” I almost whispered, “I make them. Not you.”

“Listen to her,” Sean smirked and I wanted to slap him. He helped me a lot in the past, but he for sure was not helping now. He had his own agenda and it was clear as day.

Demir moved me behind him and I decided not to struggle this time.

“You have one hour to leave this place, Sean,” he gritted through his teeth, “The barrier will let you out. But just one hour. If you are not done by then, I’d finish what I started years ago. Go scheme somewhere else and thank Lara for the present of your life today. If she owed you anything, she just repaid it. So, forget about your games! And forget about her! The next time I see you, I will not be so generous anymore!”

Sarn clenched his lips. It seemed that he wanted to say something at first, but he changed his mind in the process. He took his jacket, that was lying on my bed, and turned to me before leaving.

“Check out the books I brought you, Lara,” he smiled even though the dragon next to me growled again, “I thought that you might like them...”

I had an urge to thank him at first but then decided to do it with just a simple nod. And said nothing when he left the room.

We stood in silence for a while, Demir with his back to me. And all my heart wanted was to throw myself at him, to give him my heart and share my warmth... But I knew I’d better not to.

He turned so abruptly that I was caught by surprise.

“How long?” he asked.

“How long what?”

“How long are you going to torture me, Lara?” he took a step in my direction but I stepped away.

“You are torturing yourself, Demir,” I sighed, “It doesn’t have to be like that. If you could just forget about me...”

He chuckled darkly. Not healthy...

“You think it’s that easy? Have you forgotten me already? Is that why my enemy was here? Did you even care that he is the last person I want to see you with?!” his questions were like slaps into my face.

“Nothing happened between us,” I said quietly, “I wouldn’t even call him a friend. But he helped me to get here, that’s true.”

“Does he know that you are not friends?” Demir scoffed, “He brings you presents and walks into your room like he owns it.”

“That’s on him, not me...”

“Lara, I cannot do this anymore,” suddenly he grabbed me by my waist and pulled me closer, “Don’t you see that we can’t escape destiny?! Even my enemies tried to hide you but ended up sending you exactly where I would find you again. You and I... it’s meant to be.”

“Unless it’s not...”

“I don’t care about that,” he breathed into my ear while pressing me hard against himself, “I’d better die happy with you by my side than live a miserable life without you. However long that is, it will never be worth it. I... can’t... without you...”

I let myself one last moment of weakness and stroked his hair with my fingers while tears formed in my eyes.

“And for me, it’s the other way around,” I said and felt him shudder at my words, “Don’t you see that I want you to live? It’s hard for you now but as far

as I know, dragons live for a very long time. Sooner or later, I will become just a faded memory to you. Someone that you knew, someone that you loved... You will forget. And you will still be alive. Your Empire will still be strong. And I will die happy knowing that I didn't destroy you. That's what I want, Demir. That's my decision."

"And it's a terrible one!" he distanced himself from me, "However, your desire to get rid of me is admirable! So admirable that I am starting to consider letting you be..."

I said nothing, even though my heart ached.

He understood that silence in his own way and dark flames surrounded him, taking him far away from me.

Lady Fiona confirmed that Sean was gone now. For good.

And so was Demir. "The Duke" stopped appearing during dinners and The Dark Selection events to the disappointment of other ladies.

I got what I wanted. He left me alone. Only that it didn't help in any way. With every passing day, I felt worse and worse.

Each night I was sitting on my windowsill and watching the moon, trying not to fall asleep and not to call him in my dreams. But even when I failed, he never came.

I guess this time the emperor of the Gerdian Empire was truly done with me. And in the end, I started to cry myself to sleep.

A couple of weeks passed and I felt worse every day. Ramina and lady Fiona were worried for me and started making sure that I eat something because I was skipping meals. And only lady Gianna was fine with everything. She loved having a broken maid and often commented on how ugly I looked with my dark circles and hollow cheeks.

She was often giving me ridiculous tasks. That was probably her revenge. But to be honest I loved it that she kept me busy. At least in this way, I was thinking less about...him.

Gianna was the one who got most upset with the absence of the Duke. She really did count on him taking her as his wife. However, she wasn't waiting for his return and made other plans with other gerdians at the Dark Selection.

Today she tried to desperately fit into one of the dresses that Demir sent her previously as she was getting ready for the Portal ball. It was an important event where gerdians and the girls were entering the portal of truth. If two of them truly wanted to see each other, if their hearts longed each other – they would meet at the other end of it. And if not – they will not... It was a good test to know what two persons really want and after that test proposals usually happened.

And Gianna had a problem. Even though she found two other admirers – one a count and another a baron, she was hardly sincere with any of them. That could only mean that she would fail that test with both men. And who knew what would happen after that...

So, of course, her mood was sour. And of course, she was letting all her frustrations on me.

"You are not trying hard enough!" she scolded me when I couldn't close the gap at the back of her dress.

Honestly, Demir had a peculiar sense of humour. The first dress fit her perfectly and most of the new ones could be hardly done on her.

"If I pull it more it is going to rip on you!" I told her honestly and she turned with an angry face and slapped me on the spot.

My cheek was burning when she threw the dress into me, "Do whatever you want but fix it until the ball!"

I gathered the gown that would need a miracle to fit her figure and left.

Walking down the corridors of the castle, I clenched the fabric in my hands, feeling angry. I couldn't wait until this Dark Selection would be done and all the ladies leave to their new gerdian homes, leaving the castle empty.

Although there was a big chance that Gianna would not be chosen and then she'd return next year! In that case, I would not be able to stay... Goddess of Light, how that woman annoyed me!

The light sparked on my fingers again and the dress was covered in white flames in no time.

“No!” I bit my lip as I tried to put it down. I tried to summon Light back to me, but it didn’t work at once. So, by the time I was done, so was the dress...

“To chaos with it!” I threw the now-rag garment away and ran to the garden. It was late night already and no one would be there at this hour.

Tears were rolling down my cheeks and I knew I needed a place to let out my frustration and anger.

With a scream, I let out the Light that gathered in me for days and was burning me from the inside. I raised my hands to the air and released so much of it that it formed into bolts of lightning, white and beautiful. And it was something completely new. But I kept going at it, making the night sky bright.

When I was exhausted, I fell to my knees breathing heavily. My chest still hurt but overall, I felt better.

That was right until the moment I heard a familiar voice behind my back, “Well, this was...unusual.”

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I froze, trying to catch my breath and realizing that I got caught red-handed. After a few moments, I brought myself to turn back and saw lady Iris standing next to a tree in an elegant white dress. Her blonde curls were falling freely to her waist and her skin seemed glowing in the darkness. She smiled at me and I didn’t know how to react to this. She definitely saw my magic right now and she definitely was clever enough to know that no maid in the castle should possess power like that. Not to mention how rare light magic was. Mostly, only people of the White Archipelago had it with some rare exceptions like me.

“L-lady Iris,” I mumbled, standing up, “Do you need help of any kind? I’d be happy to...”

I really hoped that we could just pretend that she saw nothing. It was probably stupid but the hope was always dying last.

"It's all right," the girl chuckled, "Your secret is safe with me. Kara, right?"

"Yes, my lady," I still didn't know how to react to everything that was going on.

"Be at ease, Kara," Iris came closer and looked me up and down, "I already had a feeling that you are not just a regular maid. And I don't plan on using this information in any way. So, no worries."

"Th-thank you... my lady," I mumbled, playing with the fabric of my dress.

"Just call me Iris," she touched my hand, "At least when we are alone and it doesn't look odd."

"All right... Iris," I nodded. She seemed to mean well but I still was a bit wary of her. Trust didn't come easily anymore.

"Light magic, huh?" the lady smiled, "Rather unusual for these lands. You are far from home, Kara."

"I am," I agreed, "But it's a long story..."

"Maybe one day you will tell me," Iris chuckled, "At the moment I scare you more than help you, right?"

"No, it's fine. I am just startled a bit," I tried to explain my stiff behaviour, "I did not expect to see anyone here at this hour."

"And I couldn't sleep," she sighed, "This Dark Selection is... a bit too much for me. I probably shouldn't have accepted the dark mark."

I looked at her chest where the black gerdian sign was. This mark was appearing only on the skin of the chosen girls, the ones who could accept dark magic into their bodies and give birth to future generations of gerdians. Only those girls could take part in the Dark Selection. I also heard that this was how gerdians marked their wives. One day Demir would mark someone just like that... And that someone wouldn't be me...

"You look sad," Iris noticed, bringing me back to reality.

"It's nothing, really," I tried to reassure her, "I am just really tired. Lady Gianna is..."

“A lot,” she finished for me and giggled lightly, “Yes, you were not lucky to get her as your master. But soon this all will be over...”

“Yeah,” I tried to force a smile and decided to finish this awkward conversation, “I need to go, lady Iris. Thank you for your kindness.”

“Don’t mention it, Kara,” the blonde picked up her dress, preparing to leave too, “I’ll be seeing you around in the castle.”

“Of course,” I nodded and turned around, only wishing to escape as fast as possible. But when I was already far enough, I heard her voice again.

“Kara,” she called me and I looked back at her. She was standing with her index finger rubbing her chin, “Did you ever hear of seraphim?”

“Uhm, no,” I answered honestly, “Not really. Why?”

“It’s nothing,” Iris shook her head, “Just read about them if you ever have time. Might be interesting for you. Just trust me on this.”

“Will do,” I shrugged and kept walking. I almost ran through the corridors and passages of the castle and soon reached my room and locked the door.

I did not want to think about what happened. It was too much on top of everything I already had on my plate. So, I just took a quick bath and after drying my hair, got one of the books that Sean Sarn gave me and got into my windowsill with a blanket. This was how I tried to calm myself down every night.

I tried to concentrate on reading even though I was exhausted... The last weeks were hard... I looked at the moon from time to time and wondered if he was looking at it too this very moment. I wondered if he still remembered me... If he still longed for me the way I longed for him...

I didn’t notice how I fell asleep and for a moment there it seemed that he was in my room and caressed my cheek. But when I opened my eyes in the hope to see him again, he was not there... It was just a dream. A simple one. Not even a special one...

In the morning my cheek was swollen from yesterday’s slap and I still had to tell lady Gianna that her dress was ruined. Bracing myself, I stood before her door when I heard noises inside.

“Please!” Gianna wined, “Don’t do this!”

Not thinking twice, I entered without permission. I was expecting anything – a gerdian lower, a burglar, a murderer even... But what I saw was just lady Fiona with Gianna at her feet on the floor. Just what was that?

“Ah, good,” Fiona smiled, “And there is walking proof of your aggression!”

I stumbled. Were they talking about me? Why?

“Did you complain about me?!” The lady of the South threw an angry gaze at me.

“No,” I shook my head honestly. I had no idea that was an option.

“She didn’t have to!” Lady Fiona stepped between us two, “The handprint on her cheek was proof enough against you.”

“What if another maid hit her?!” Gianna seemed angry, “And you are blaming me for something that I didn’t do!”

“Unfortunately for you this time there are witnesses of your misbehaving!” Fiona said coldly, “One of the ladies, Iris, saw you mistreating your maid more than once! She filed an official complaint against you and judging by your previous record here, we decided to let you go.”

“No, please!” The southerner started begging again, “You can’t do that! It’s not supposed to be like that!”

“You’ve been warned after what happened to your previous maid. But it did not help. You have no one to blame but yourself!” The coordinator of the Dark Selection was staying strong, “Unless...”

“Unless what?” Gianna grabbed that last chance, “ Unless your maid decides that we should keep you and give you one last chance. Everything is up to Kara now.”

They both looked at me – one expectantly and the other with hope in her eyes.

I did not like Gianna. I did not. But over the past weeks I found out one thing about her – the Dark Selection was all she had. She couldn’t possibly return to

her homeland without a gerdian husband. It would be too humiliating and she'd hardly be able to deal with this kind of humiliation.

And for the first time, I felt sorry for her. She was a hostage of her situation. And although she wasn't a good person, she probably wasn't the worst one in the world either. I did not want to ruin her life. I felt already bad enough for all the troubles I caused to others.

"Please, Kara, please!" She fell lower on the floor and I... I felt sorry for her.

She was always so arrogant, she always behaved as if she was above everyone else. And now she was ready to beg a mere maid for help. All to become a wife of a man she didn't even love. She wasn't even sure whose wife she may become... She was... pathetic and I only felt pity towards her.

"I would like it for lady Gianna to stay at the Dark Selection," I said firmly and for a second there lady Fiona seemed surprised.

"Is that your final decision, Kara?" She asked.

"Yes," I nodded.

"Very well," the strict lady looked at the southerner, "It seems that the luck is still on your side. But remember that if I see at least one new scratch on your maid, I am not even going to ask her where that came from! From now on your most important task here is to make sure that nothing happens to her. Do you understand me?"

"Yes," Gianna nodded quietly, "Thank you for the second chance."

"That's your third one," lady Fiona corrected her, "And also the last one. See you at the next event."

She started walking towards the door, where I stood, and nodded at me right before she was out. It was a little gesture but it gave me a lot of confidence.

So when the door was closed behind her, I walked calmly to Gianna and helped her up. She looked at me through her long lashes and opened her mouth to say something but closed it fast. I smirked and shrugged my shoulders – I knew far too well that she didn't have it in her to simply thank someone. But it did not bother me at all.

“Let’s go,” I told her, “We need to fix your makeup. Most of it is gone from all the crying.”

“Yes,” she agreed quickly and then remembered, “Where is my dress for The Ball of Portals?”

“Oh, it was ruined,” I confessed easily. Now that I knew she couldn’t do anything to me, I felt so much better about it, so I added, “You’d better choose something else. Fast.”

She clenched her fists and there was so much rage in her eyes. But I only raised my chin higher and looked her in the eye. Judging by her facial expression, she had an inner fight going on. But when a forced smile spread over her face, I knew I just had my little victory.

“That’s fine,” she squeezed out of herself, “I have many dresses.”

“That’s fine,” she squeezed out of herself, “I have many dresses.”

“Great,” I smiled at her, “Then I’ll help you choose one as soon as we are done with your face and hair.”

The atmosphere in the room was awkward and Gianna started talking about random subjects. I nodded to her from time to time to show that I was listening even though I wasn’t. There wasn’t anything new there. She was discussing her next gerdian targets. Also known as potential husbands.

She was rating them and creating new lists of pros and cons. And I held back a laugh when she assured me that at the Ball of Portals they will all see her on the other side. That was unlikely, but I decided not to tell her that.

“Shame the Duke is not here anymore,” she sighed, “What a man!”

“Indeed,” I kept braiding her hair even though she just stabbed my heart with another mention of Demir.

“I wonder why he is gone from here,” Gianna continued in the meantime, “That’s probably because of that war at the gerdian border...”

“A war?” I looked at her in shock. I wasn’t aware that there were any wars.

“Yes, they say that some bird people tried to attack them!” the lady of the South rolled her eyes, “Idiots! I don’t know what made them do it!”

But I knew...

A pain in my heart wasn't dying down even when I left her that day.

Was Demir fighting Gideon this very moment? Why would Gideon attack the Empire?! I sent him a letter before I left where I explained everything! He shouldn't have done it!

Or... maybe he simply did not believe me?

In my room, I wrote a new message for my brother, begging him to stop and letting him know that I wasn't even in the Gerdian Empire anymore. I explained my decision with precise details in the hope of his understanding. Maybe not at once, but over time... Gideon will understand...

There was no other way to send this message to my brother other than with the help of magic. I knew there were special spells for that. It wasn't like there was a special delivery service that could take a letter from Akyria to the White Archipelago. So, there was no choice, and I went to the castle's library in search of books that could help me.

The library wasn't too big and I bit my lip remembering the one that Demir had back at his palace. The shelves here were mostly filled with romance books. That was probably what they expected the ladies at the Dark Selection to read.

But I started digging deeper and after a while found a few basic magic books. In one of them, there was an easy spell to pass a letter. I also found a track-destroying spell just in case, so that Gideon couldn't find me easily. I didn't want him to start another war with Akyria. And I still wasn't ready to meet him after everything that became known to me lately.

I was about to leave when I remembered Iris' words from last night. Seraphim. She told me to read about it whatever it was. So I started looking but to no avail. There were no books on it in the library to my disappointment. I was even more intrigued now...

The days went by slowly. Sometimes it seemed to me that the time here was frozen. Events between the girls and the gerdians were happening almost every evening and. Couples were forming. Not for everyone though. Gianna still was struggling, playing with two men at the same time. Some other girls

did not manage to attract anyone. And some distanced themselves from their admirers. One of those to my surprise was Iris.

The day of the Portal Ball arrived and I prepared Gianna the best I could. I was going to leave to my room and have some rest when lady Fiona approached me all of a sudden.

“Lara, dear,” she addressed me by my real name to my surprise, “I have something to ask you. I am down some regular servants due to flu. Would you be so kind as to work at the Ball tonight? Nothing hard – I just need someone at the wine table filling all those goblets. Do you think you can do this for me?”

“Of course,” I smiled. I owed this woman a lot and this was a little favour.

“Great,” she said, “I already send a dress to your room. Change into it, please.”

“A dress?” I looked at her in shock.

“Yes,” she nodded, “It’s a ball and everyone has to look nice. Even servants. Don’t worry, it’s modest and pretty. Nothing special but not this ugly uniform.”

“All right then,” I agreed, “I’d be happy to help.”

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LARA

In my room, I found a small bag of coins together with the dress for me which lady Fiona sent, as well a note saying that this was my first payment for all my work. Not being able to help myself, I got all the coins out and counted them. It wasn’t much but the satisfaction I had inside of me was real. This was the first time I earned something. Not given, not gifted... I earned those coins and I was proud of myself for it.

The dress was simple yet beautiful. Deep blue velvet with silver embroidery at the edges hugged my body perfectly. Long sleeves, however, implied that it wasn’t a ball dress. It was not lavish but elegant enough for me to not stand

out among the Dark Selection crowd. I put my hair into a small bun and let a few curls loose to frame my face. Festive enough for a ball. But not too much since I wasn't going to be a guest there.

Before leaving, I decided to write that letter I planned for Gideon. I needed him to know that I was fine and not in the Gerdian Empire anymore. So, if the war he was about to start was about me then he had to stop and go home. I begged for him to reconsider his actions.

When I was done, I opened the note with the two spells which I found earlier at the library and created a thread of light. My fingers were itching to use magic the old-fashioned way and I started to weave the patterns needed for the spells. I never particularly enjoyed sewing but using light thread was so different! A smile formed on my face, it was like a little part of me was back. And I missed it. Everything was ready in no time and I added a few lines so that Gideon couldn't track my location. I was not ready to meet him just yet.

The letter was gone, and I sighed, thinking of how I lost both – the love of my life and my brother at the same time. My eyes became teary but I shook it off. It wasn't the time for weakness. Luckily, I had a task for today.

I entered the hall together with other servants and was amazed when I saw a real-life portal. It was tall and standing in the very centre of the huge room. However, at the moment it was deactivated and people were walking freely through the huge arch.

There were a few other maids who were working today. Their task was different – from taking away empty dirty goblets, to making sure the tables with snacks were full. Ramina was here too. She was the messenger girl today. If something went wrong, she had to inform lady Fiona immediately. And that meant that she simply had to walk around and try to stay unnoticed by the guests. But she was coming to me from time to time, pretending that she was checking my table and in the meantime, we cracked some jokes. She was funny and that was exactly what I needed today.

I filled the first goblets and prepared the next jug at the same time pretending to be a piece of furniture. We were not allowed to talk to the guests unless they addressed us directly.

The ladies started to arrive first, each of them beautiful and looking like a rare gem. It did not escape me that a lot of them were wearing gerdian dresses already. Which meant they received gifts from their admirers. It was a good sign. For them.

I saw lady Iris, wearing a silver gown that suited her looks perfectly. She noticed me and gave me a light wave. To which I had to curtsy, of course. Waving to a guest would be considered rude for a maid.

Lady Gianna appeared as one of the last ones and behaved as if she was already a queen, no less. She held her head high and greeted other ladies with a graceful nod as if there was a heavy crown on her head.

Soon the gerdian lords started to arrive. One after another clouds of dark smoke appeared revealing their figures in fancy dark suits and after the desired effect was achieved, they started mingling with the girls. I saw one couple, where a young-looking guy with dark hair, sat on one knee and offered his lady – a pretty girl with red curls – a bracelet. My heart skipped a beat when she threw herself at him and he spun her and then pulled in for a passionate kiss. That was love. I bit my lip as painful memories surfaced in my mind again. Painful but also sweet at the same time. I knew how love felt...

Suddenly I felt as if someone called my name and looked in a completely different direction. Where I saw him... Demir was standing at the other side of the hall and not taking his eyes off me. He was so handsome in his black suit with silver detailing that fit his tall and muscular figure just perfectly. People were walking in front of us, covering our vision from time to time but we just kept staring at each other. And although I knew that it would be best for me to turn away, I couldn't do it... I forgot about everything at that moment because I honestly thought that I'd never see him again. Yet here he was...

His eyes were full of dark magic and I even thought for a second, that he would come up to me. But the magic died down and he turned away, breaking my heart... Not that I did not deserve it...

From my dark corner, I watched his every move greedily. In the meantime, Demir walked to a group of ladies and formally invited Iris for a dance! She politely accepted and they started swirling around the dancefloor. She suited him perfectly in her silver dress and I bit my lip again in hope that the pain which I inflicted on myself would bring me back to reality, helping me cope with the situation at the same time. I needed to save my face at least. I did not

want to see it! I did not want to see any of it! However, my eyes seemed glued to the perfect couple.

“That harlot!” I heard a familiar voice right next to me and saw a very pissed lady Gianna, gobbling a whole cup of wine and placing it back on the table with a thud. “More!” she commanded and stopped, noticing me for the first time during the evening, “Kara? What are you doing here?!”

“Just helping,” I explained briefly, filling her goblet, “The castle is a bit understaffed thanks to the protective barrier, so I am on duty today, my lady.”

“Good,” she nodded, “At least one face I am glad to see here!”

Seriously? Out of all the people here, she was glad to see me, her insignificant maid?

“Can you believe this?” she continued and pointed at Demir and Iris, “He didn’t even look at me once!”

“It’s early night still,” I reminded her, thinking that for some reason it wouldn’t be so painful to see her dancing with Demir. Although, who was I kidding?! “And you have plenty of other... options,” I added.

“It’s early night still,” I reminded her, thinking that for some reason it wouldn’t be so painful to see her dancing with Demir. Although, who was I kidding?! “And you have plenty of other... options,” I added.

“But none of them is the Duke!” Gianna stomped her feet and a couple not far from us threw shocked gazes at her.

“All bachelors here are noble, aren’t they?” I tried to speak calmly even though I didn’t like what I was seeing just as much as her. Demir was smiling at Iris. And she giggled at something he said. But the worst thing was that it all looked so natural... As if they really belonged together.

“And yet none of them is a duke,” the southerner sighed, repeating herself. The dance was almost over and she hurried in Demir’s direction. However, he did not stop even for a second and continued dancing with Iris, making the musicians adjust to their pace and other couples joining them rapidly.

I liked it less and less by the minute...

And the worst thing about was not even that he seemed into Iris. No, it wasn't that! The worst thing was that the lady that he chose was a blonde!

The realization hit me so hard that my mouth parted in shock and it was at that moment when our eyes met again and a little smirk formed on his lips.

"What are you doing?!" someone shouted next to me and I noticed that the goblet that I tried to fill was already full and the wine was spilling all over the table in front of me.

Some lady screamed as splashes got into her pale pink dress, destroying it, and she looked as if she was about to kill me. Oh, chaos!

"My apologies!" I mumbled and saw Ramina running in my direction.

"Go get a towel or something," she hurried me as she tried to deal with all the mess that I created. I guess I wasn't a great maid after all.

But one thing I was happy about was the opportunity to escape and not see any more of this. Because in all honesty, I had no idea how much more of it all I could take.

All of a sudden, the lights were dimmed as I started walking and I heard lady Fiona's voice, "Lords and Ladies! The time has come for you to enter the Portal of Truth and discover if the one you long to see wishes for the same thing! Inside this portal, one cannot lie about what he or she desires. And you will know if your chosen couple reciprocates the feelings. As only the desires of the heart matter in that reality!"

Someone activated the portal and it started glowing. I stopped, mesmerized by it as it was an incredible sight. People started entering and I really wanted to see what would happen next. Would they be walking out of it holding hands or not? And what would Demir do? Who did he want to see inside out of all the Dark Selection ladies?

I saw Iris step inside and came to my senses. Whatever happened, I did not need to see this, I did not even need to know. So I gathered my skirt and started walking to the exit that was close to one side of the portal. However, I did not make it far as someone grabbed my elbow and pulled me harshly right inside the portal...

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LARA

Everything was blurry for a few seconds as I didn't even know what was actually happening around me. But then I saw light and walked out on a balcony of all places. The beautiful view of The Gerdian Empire was spread before me, the view so familiar that tears formed in my eyes. It was my room in the palace... I turned around in hopes that Demir would be here too. But I was alone, and it made my heart clench painfully. Even though I knew that it was for the best that we didn't meet here. But the tiny voice in my head was whispering, "He moved on...He already forgot..."

I walked around my old room, reminiscing about the good old days. Who knew that this would be how I'd remember the time I spent in the empire. And then I decided to take one last tour around the palace. After all, I had no opportunity to say goodbye to this place... I opened the door and walked out but instead of the usual hall, I found myself at Demir's library.

Strange... Although now that I was thinking about it, it wasn't the real palace... Just the space inside the magical portal that was showing me what I wanted to see. And those were my most favourite rooms, the ones where I made my best memories with the man I loved. Those places were carved in my soul.

I walked through the shelves, brushing the book covers by the tips of my fingers... Just like I used to do here when I was choosing a book to read. But then I felt something and looked at the shelf. I didn't get it at once, but when sparks of dark magic gleamed in the darkness, I saw that someone was watching me from the other side of the shelf. I started walking and the eyes followed... It couldn't be! It couldn't!

The damn shelf was so long, and I simply lost my patience and started to run. He seemed to speed up too and in no time the shelves were over and we were able to face each other.

"Demir!" I gasped, panting. Not from all the running, more from the shock.

"I knew I would find you here, Angel!" he smiled and pulled me into his embrace, covering my lips with his, not even bothering to ask me if he could or was allowed to. My fingers dug into his shoulders, clenching the thick fabric of his jacket as I tried to push him away at first but ended up pulling him closer. His hand grabbed the back of my head roughly, ruining the bun I did earlier, to keep me in place and I gave in to my weakness. I didn't know for

how long we were continuing the madness but in the end, we had to break the kiss to breathe.

But when he wanted to claim my lips again, I covered his with my palm.

“No, Demir, no, no, no!” I wanted to cry, “Stop doing this! You know my decision! You know why I do this! Could you just... let me do this for you? Please!”

He let go of me way too easily and turned away, clasping his hands behind his back. And my whole body tensed.

“Lara,” he sighed heavily, “I decided to... respect your decision.”

My heart skipped a beat, and I didn’t know if the cause was happiness or pain. He was letting me go. For real... for good. But it didn’t feel good at all.

However, when he turned with a smirk on his face, I felt that something was off here.

“Thank you,” I mumbled and took a step back, not sure what to expect from the guardian emperor.

“You are welcome,” he nodded and the expression on his face was hard to read, “I probably also have to tell you that I am planning to get married very soon.”

It felt like myriads of needles were poked through my heart but I decided to hold my emotions back. I would have my whole life to cry about this later.

“That was to be expected,” I said as calmly as I could and then heard myself asking, “Did you...did you already choose your bride?”

“Oh, yes,” he smiled and there was something wrong with that smile but I still couldn’t say what, “I decided to go with Lady Iris Raen. You probably saw me dancing with her right now.”

“What?” I couldn’t get it if he was joking or if he meant what he just said, “You are not serious, are you?”

“Oh, I am deadly serious,” that smirk of his appeared on his lips again, “In fact, I was thinking about it for a while.”

“You can’t marry Iris!” I interrupted him, almost screaming and he looked at me with interest.

“Why not Lara? Elaborate on that, please.”

“She is...she is,” I realised how stupid this was going to sound but he left me no choice, “Her hair is the same colour as mine!”

He looked me in the eye and grinned, “You think I didn’t notice? That’s exactly why I am going to marry her.”

“Demir! This is not a joke!” I snapped at him.

“No, it’s not,” he shook his shoulders lazily, “It’s my life, Lara! And in my life, I am going to make my own choices. Just like you make in yours. It just so turns out that I like blondes.”

I thought I heard my teeth screech but he simply continued, “I used to avoid them thanks to that stupid prophecy and the promise I gave to my parents. But you know, Lara, I honoured that promise for hundreds of years. I think I am about done. There is one thing that dragons hate more than anything. Do you know what that is?”

He looked at me expectantly and I was sure I knew the answer.

He looked at me expectantly and I was sure I knew the answer.

“Not getting what they want!” he announced and I rolled my eyes. It was all a game for him.

“So, you only want blondes now even if they are going to kill you?” I snorted, crossing my arms on my chest.

“Well, I want only one blonde and I am sure that she would never hurt me intentionally,” he smiled sadly but then let out an overexaggerated sigh, “But since she is no available... I decided to go with the closest thing as a replacement.”

“How romantic! Don’t forget to mention that to her!” I scoffed, “Also, I am SO flattered by the fact that I am this easily replaceable!”

“Not this easily,” Demir chuckled, “Iris would hardly be enough! That’s why I decided to start up a harem.”

“A what?!” I was almost speechless at his impudence.

“A harem, it’s when a man has many women to satisfy his...”

“I know what a harem is!” I practically yelled at him, “What the chaos, Demir?! You are not serious, are you?!”

“I am very serious. I checked history books and a long time ago gerdian emperors used to have harems. So, now I am planning to bring back that tradition and take every girl with blonde hair I could only find and turn them into concubines! This is going to be so fun!”

I closed my eyes and exhaled through my nostrils. He was playing with me and I was falling for it.

“Very well!” I smiled at him and went as far away from him as was possible, “Good luck with that!”

He caught up with me in no time and created a dark flame on his palm, making me stop and look at him in shock.

“What are you doing?” I gr0aned.

“I think that you are not taking me seriously right now,” he looked at me with a challenge.

Well, I wasn’t. But I did not like the gleam of mischief in his eyes.

“I, Demir, give you an oath and summon Magic as my witness,” he started, and I turned pale.

“No!” I shouted but he continued.

“...that if you don’t agree to marry me here and now, and be my wife in body and soul, I would marry another woman with golden hair and collect myself a harem with more golden-haired girls! As many of them as I can only find! I will not love any of them but I will do it ANYWAY!”

The flame got bigger, signaling that the oath was accepted and I stared at him in dull shock.

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LARA

“What did you just do?!” I screamed at him in horror, hands digging into my hair, while he just stood there smiling and leaning over the bookshelf like nothing happened, “Take that back!”

“If I could...”, he sighed and then smirked again, “I still wouldn’t do it.”

“Demir!” I grasped his shoulders, “This is suicide! What are you doing?! It’s crazy!”

He suddenly got serious and placed his warm palm on my cheek, “Lara, can we stop playing this game? Can we stop being miserable and lonely? I am tired... I miss you so much...”

He pulled me into a hug, and I tuck my face into his chest, feeling defeated... but also relieved. I didn’t even know what to think yet, but tears started rolling down my cheeks and I felt his hands closing around me.

“It’s over, Angel,” he muttered while placing soft kisses over the top of my head, “We can be together now. It’s over...”

“But the prophecy,” I mumbled. However much relieved I was, the thought alone that I may lose him for real was making me shudder.

“I don’t care about it,” he whispered, pressing me tighter.

Of course, he didn’t. I wish I could say the same...

“But what if you will die because of it? What if some great disaster will happen or...”, I tried to explain to him but to no avail.

“Shh,” he raised my chin so that I could look at him and wiped my tears away with his thumb, “Lara, disasters happen even without prophecies. Wars happen for no good reasons. And we will all die one day. I lived a long life as it is. But I refuse to spend the rest of it without you. I need you like air. For the first time, I am this close to happiness, and I mean real happiness. I am not ready to let it go. I don’t want to be done with this... not for nothing, not for anything!”

He bent lower, slowly this time, and I felt his soft lips on mine, not being able to ignore the urge to respond to his kiss. There was no point to resist now, I

lost and he won. And he was going to claim his prize. It was clear by the way his grasp on me was becoming stronger, the hands were now roaming my body and it somehow became much hotter in the room which wasn't even real.

"This is blackmail!" I muttered in between kisses, still not willing to give up.

"Uh-huh," he agreed eagerly, lifting me up in his hands and walking out of the room.

"This is dishonest!" I threw it at him.

"Absolutely!" he nodded while pushing the door with his foot.

"Reckless!" I kept on going, "Insolent!"

"Yeah, yeah," he chuckled, "Time, Lara, time! Either you agree to become my wife or the magic will start killing me slowly... Or maybe you'd like me to marry one of those blondes after all?"

"In your dreams!" I snapped and he let out a laugh, "I'll have to keep my eye on you! You are absolutely unbearable! And... irresponsible!"

I didn't even notice how he brought me to his chambers in the palace and when he stopped next to the bed and placed me back to my feet, looked angrily at his smug face.

"Is that a yes?" he smiled and sparks of dark magic started dancing in his eyes, anticipating my answer.

"Just so that you know," I raised my chin high, "This is the worst proposal in the world!"

"Are you kidding me?" he grinned, "This is going to be the story that will make us stars of every ball or gathering of any kind! And our grandchildren are going to love it!"

I rolled my eyes but now even I had a hard time holding back a silly smile.

"I'll repeat my question," he got serious again, holding me by my waist, "Is that a yes? Lady Lara Artess, do you agree to become my wife and spend our whole life together? Prophecy or no prophecy?"

“Yes,” I said and wrapped my hands around his neck.

“Finally!” Demir growled and crashed his lips into mine. We kissed just a few minutes ago but he was so greedy again as if it had been months. “I missed you so much,” he muttered, grasping the hair at the back of my head and tugging it slightly to give himself better access to my neck, which he immediately covered with wet kisses. His free hand already started dealing with the ties at the back of my dress masterfully.

“I missed you too,” I confessed while battling with the belts of his jacket. It had far too many of those to my taste.

He was done first, and I felt his palm slid under the fabric of my dress and help peel it off me gently inch by inch, creating tingles along the way. My gown fell to my feet and for a second there he froze, watching me, taking me in. He traced the lines of my body with his fingers, admiration in his eyes. And I felt heat rushing to my cheeks, regretting once again my hasty decision to cut my hair. There was nothing to cover myself with anymore. I wanted to hide at least some part of me but he caught my hand and brought it to his lips, kissing it gently.

“You are so beautiful, Lara,” he said with the most serious face, “No need to hide. Not from me. Please, never hide from me again.”

I knew he wasn't talking about me being naked and I stepped closer, taking his face into my hands.

“I think it's too late for that,” I smiled, “This time I am staying no matter what...”

“Chaos,” he swore under his breath, cupping my buttock with one hand and bringing me closer with another, “I sure damn hope so, Lara. I can't do it all over again...”

“You wouldn't have to,” I dealt with the last belt and helped him out of his jacket. The shirt that was underneath he took off himself in one swift move and then got rid of his knee-high boots as well. He lifted me up and then gently placed me onto the bed, pulling down the remains of my underwear and throwing it away.

Demir towered over me and I felt his hardness through his pants. My hands stretched to help and let it out, but he leaned lower and started planting wet gentle pecks all over me, making me arch my back from all the sensations. I

could swear I heard him chuckle, but I did not care anymore. Especially when he knelt next to the bed and pulled me to the very edge by my thighs, securing them on both sides of his shoulders.

“Demir!” I whimpered, biting my lip as I felt his fingers stroking my sensitive spot and his tongue flickering over and over my petals. My first release came fast under his masterful guidance, wild and uncontrollable, making my whole body tremble in his hands. A growl emerged from him as he stood up again and started unbuckling his pants. Breathless, I waited for him and he did not disappoint, spreading my legs and positioning himself in between.

He nudged at my opening and smiled at me right before thrusting himself into me and making me give out a loud moan. And then again, and again, and again. Slowly but deeply.

“Mine,” he groaned as he entered me to the hilt and bent lower to kiss my breasts, neck, cheeks, lips, anything he could find... He stilled unexpectedly before any of us was able to reach the climax and I saw that he was struggling to do it. Then why did he?

“What is wrong, Demir?” I asked him, panting, desperate to continue.

“I want to... need to... mark you,” his breathing came out torn and hectic, “Love you... so much, Lara.”

I didn't know what he meant exactly but I saw the need and desire in his eyes. And I trusted him enough to agree without knowing all the details. So, I just nodded and whispered, “Do it, Demir. Do what you have to. I love you too.”

Relief on his face told me that he still doubted me before this moment. But there was so much warmth in his gaze that I knew – there was no doubting this man. If I could ever trust anyone – that would be him.

He placed his hand on my chest, where the heart was, and looked me straight into the eyes. The purple rings around his blue irises started glowing with dark magic and I felt a burning sensation on my skin under his palm. It's at that moment that he started pounding into me with precise strength as if he has lost the last bit of control. I locked my legs at his back, succumbing to primal desires.

This time the release exploded my body into myriads of tiny pieces. I forgot about anything and everything. But in that sweet chaos I only knew one thing,

we now belonged to each other forever. Two soulmates, two halves of the same whole, connected forever with an unbreakable bond. And the glowing that came from the place on my chest where he touched me, let me know that I wasn't imagining things.

Demir roared on top of me, threw his head back and magic started flowing from him to me, bringing all kinds of amazing sensations. Thrust, another – and he stilled inside of me...

"Mine," he smiled, still panting and brushing his palm over my cheek.

"Mine," I replied and did the same to him...

Book 2 Dragon King's Forbidden Love Chapter 78 - Tips

LARA

I was lying in his arms and not quite believing in what had just happened between us. On the one hand, it was such a mess with the prophecy... But on the other, I was so happy... and he was happy too.

"I know what you are thinking about and you need to stop," he told me, brushing his fingers over the skin on my shoulder and sending waves of tingles all over me.

"You know me so well, huh?" I chuckled, lifting myself up to have a better look at him.

"I do," he smirked, "But now I also can feel you better."

"What?" my lips parted in surprise and he traced them with his thumb, going down my neck slowly and all the way to the mark he gave me that was shining with the purple light of his dark magic. It looked like an ancient rune but when I examined it closer, I saw that it was actually a dragon with spread wings and a scaly tail. Beautiful and so Demir.

"This connected us forever," Demir told me and touched the mark, almost making me lose my mind. It was still sensitive and could easily send me over the edge again. Noticing my reaction, my soulmate smiled understandingly.

"Will I feel you the way you feel me?" I wondered, thinking that I would actually really love that.

“Yes,” he nodded and nipped my chest with his lips gently, “Over time you will learn to control it. What I feel, you will feel too. You will sense me.”

“I like it,” I admitted, blushing slightly at all the attention he was giving to my chest area again. We were here for longer than necessary already.

The thought suddenly hit me.

“Goddess of Light, Demir! The portal! The ball! We need to go!” I tried to stand up, but he pinned me back to the bed, laughing.

“No, we don’t,” he announced, “I am not planning to get out of here for days!”

“What? Are you crazy?!” I looked at him with wide eyes, trying to understand if he was joking.

“That’s the Portal of Truth, Lara,” he chuckled, “However long we spend here, we’ll walk out back in our world within seconds. No one will even notice.”

“Really?” I gasped, suddenly feeling how the bottom of my belly clenched with desire again.

“Really,” he smirked and crashed my lips with his, making me forget about everything and dissolve in this wonderful sensation.

It was long before we were finally able to stop. After being apart for so long, nothing was enough. However, portal or no portal, but our bodies became tired after hours of loving each other in every way imaginable.

“So, what’s next?” I asked him as we were sitting on the balcony and watching the magical sunset that Demir created for us. It wasn’t real, but it was still perfect.

“We will live our life together,” he shrugged his shoulders as if it was the most natural thing, “Get married, get you crowned, have kids... plenty of those, please.”

“But what about...you know what,” I didn’t even want to say the word.

“We are not going to speak of it, we are not going to wait for it,” he replied without hesitation, “It has no power over us.”

“But if it happens...,” I turn to face him.

“Lara,” he wanted to stop me but I shook my head.

“No, listen to me,” I begged him, “If it happens, we’ll share your destiny together. As one.”

“Lara...”

“We’ll share everything!” I said firmly, “The good and the bad. And from this day forward I’ll stand with you. Not by your side, not behind you... with you. Holding hands and being one whole that you insist that we are. That’s my only condition.”

“All right then,” he smiled proudly, “But I have a condition too.”

“What is it?” I furrowed my brows, expecting anything from this man.

He stretched his palm to me and two bracelets appeared on it out of the dark flames.

“You will let me put one of these on you,” Demir chuckled, “And you will put the other one on me.”

“Engagement bracelets”, I bit my lip, “So, you were serious about marrying Iris then?”

I couldn’t help but feel a prick of jealousy inside.

“No, my love,” He pulled me closer and took my wrist, “This one was only meant for you. No one else.”

“Still,” I couldn’t help but sulk, “You made that oath... What would you do if I rejected you?”

“I had to believe in you making the right choice,” he let out a laugh, “It was scary as chaos itself as you are not known for best decision making...”

“Hey!” I felt slightly offended, “I was doing it for you! To protect you!”

“I know,” he caressed my cheek, “But from now on let’s make all our decision together.”

"I agree," I lay comfortably in his arms and watched him place the bracelet on my wrist. It looked like it belonged there.

"Lara Artes, now you are my one and only, the love of my life and my future wife," Demir announced with pride in his voice, and I looked at the shiny metal with carvings in ancient gerdian language.

I took the second bracelet and put it on his wrist, saying, "Demir Darmerion Derwood, now you are mine and mine only. My soulmate and my future husband, the only man I will ever love..."

He let out a growl of approval and I sneered at him, "So, forget about harems! You are not having any!"

"Deal!" he pulled me on top of himself and locked his arms around me as we both laughed. "You make me so happy, Angel," he chuckled.

"That's only because you make me happy first..." I replied.

~*~

We spent about an hour doing the ties of my dress. It turned out that although Demir was very skillful in undoing them, actually tying them was out of his field of expertise.

It was time to go back and looking at the mirror, I fixed my hair for one-hundredth time. The shiny mark was on display and as soon as we would walk out of the portal, everyone would know...

"Are you nervous?" my now fiancé asked me, hugging me by my waist from the back and enjoying the sight of our reflection.

"Very," I told him honestly. We agreed not to have secrets from each other anymore and I didn't want to hide from him even the smallest of things.

"I'll hold your hand," Demir whispered in my ear and kissed my temple, "Whatever happens, wherever we find ourselves in life, I will always hold your hand. Never forget about it."

It made me feel so much better and I smiled at him, feeling warmth in my heart.

It was time to go...

We opened the door and saw the portal. It looked exactly like the one back at the Dark Selection castle.

He took my hand, and we stepped into it together...

~ * ~

Gasps filled the room as my eyes were trying to adjust to the light.

“What the chaos?!” someone screamed, and I recognized the voice as Gianna’s.

“But it’s a maid!” someone whispered.

“With the duke!” another lady was in shock too.

Demir and I looked at each other and smiled mischievously. I bet that would be the talk of the empire for a while!

All the gerdians in the room stayed quiet politely and some of them seemed to restrain their ladies. Of course, they probably already guessed that their emperor was up to something and none of them wanted to risk their life and wealth by silly comments of their partners.

“Let’s go from here!” my dragon told me and I just nodded, grinning.

However, we only managed to make a few steps when Gianna came in front of us. And I would probably admire her bravery if she wasn’t looking at me as if she was about to slaughter me in very many brutal ways. If anything, she looked scary!

“Kara!” she raised her chin and narrowed her eyes, “How should I understand this?!”

“Lady Gianna, my name is not...”, I started talking, but Demir interjected.

“How dare you?!” his voice echoed like thunder in a suddenly quiet ballroom.

“Your Grace,” the lady of the South tried to be respectful with him, “I do apologize but I need to have a few words with my personal...”

“Don’t. Finish. That. Sentence.”

Demir's eyes filled with dark magic and even I flinched at the way he looked right now, squeezing his palm tighter to send him a signal to calm down.

"But..." Gianna still didn't get how much trouble she was in.

"Silence!" this time it was a voice of a dragon, not human, "Show respect to my future wife and Empress of the Gerdian Empire!"

A wave of bows and curtsies went through the room and all of them stayed as low as they could. No one wanted to test the emperor. And only Gianna still stood there, not quite grasping the situation. She was probably in too much shock and I even felt sorry for her. But then she looked at me with eyes full of hatred again and I forgot about all that.

"Wh-what do you mean future wife and empress?" she asked not so sure of herself anymore, "Kara is just a lowly maid! When did she..."

I noticed dark flames on the tips of Demir's fingers and grasped his free hand too, looking at him with a plea in my eyes. That wasn't how I wanted to start our life together. His features softened as if he had read my mind and I smiled at him, realizing that this was our new bond working.

"Forget the name Kara," Demir told the girl coldly, "This is lady Larissa Artes of the White Archipelago, my soulmate and future wife. And as soon as that happens, she will become the Empress of the Gerdian Empire as well. Bow when you speak to her! Say thank you that Lara has a kind heart, otherwise I wouldn't forgive you your insolence! But you'd better not to cross our path again!"

"B-but that means that you..." the southerner opened her mouth in shock at the realization, and only then she finally lowered herself for a curtsy. She was trembling and I decided not to add anything to her misery. As far as I already knew, the Dark Selection crowd wasn't a forgiving one. It would be highly unlikely that any of her suitors would now be proposing to her when they saw the Emperor disliking her this much. As far as this event went, Gianna Vensal was done.

Demir led me to the exit and I noticed lady Fiona. I hurried to her and helped her up, even though my help wasn't required. The woman was in great shape.

"Lady Lara," she smiled at me and I couldn't help but notice that she wasn't in too much of a shock at the fact that I wasn't in love with her cousin. And when

she smiled at Demir, I knew that she was the one helping him, and me being in the ballroom wasn't a coincidence at all.

But I had no hard feelings towards her, of course. Everything happened the way it was supposed to be.

"Lady Fiona," I took the artifact necklace that Sean gave me previously out of my pocket and placed it into her hands. I took it with me for safety but I did not need it anymore and it would be wrong to keep it. She understood me without words and I heard a soft unhappy growl behind my back. "Will you pass it to the original owner?", I looked at her and raised my brow. And she nodded quietly.

"It would be my honour, my lady," she answered politely.

Demir took my hand into his and headed to the exit once again. And there, almost at the door, I noticed Iris, who smiled at me gently, looking genuinely happy. But my dragon pulled me away too fast to say anything to her.

Back in my tiny room, I wrote one more note and attached it to the bag of coins that I earned. I wanted to send it to Ramina, who was always kind to me here. Not wasting time, I packed my bag and used the same spell to send the money to my friend, that I used to send a letter to Gideon. After all, she needed them more.

Demir watched me with a smile on his face and hands crossed on his chest.

"Your magic," he said all of a sudden, "Is it me, or does it look a bit different? The light seems.. brighter."

"Oh, you have no idea the things that have been happening to me lately!" I chuckled, coming closer to him and wrapping my hands around his neck, "But it's a very long story."

"Can't wait to hear this one!" he chuckled as dark flames surrounded us, transporting us straight to the gerdian palace.

We appeared on the balcony in Demir's private chambers, kissing madly. I dropped my bag to the floor and we both were ready to repeat everything we did back at the Portal of Truth.

Yet someone cleared their throat right next to us, “You know, brother. This is so not what I meant when I sent you to the Dark Selection for a bride!”

Book 2 Dragon King's Forbidden Love Chapter 79 - Tips

LARA

We tore off each other and looked at the gerdian princess who was standing just a few feet away from us with a few leather-bound volumes in her hands. I wanted to take my hands off Demir but he held me in place and his sister sighed looking at us.

“I guess no one can change their destiny,” she smiled sadly, “Even the dragon king.”

“Lara is the part of my destiny that I am not willing to change,” her brother chuckled, “We love each other, Prim. We are soulmates. She bears my mark and we are engaged.”

He lifted our hands to demonstrate our bracelets, making Primrose’s eyebrows shoot up.

“You two are sure fast!” she laughed nervously and put the books she was holding to a nearby desk. Then exhaled heavily one last time and smiled at us, “Well, I tried! Welcome to the family, Lara.”

With that, she came closer and gave the startled me a big and warm hug, to which I didn’t know how to react. Our last conversation was still circling in my mind. But she seemed genuine, and I embraced her warmth. After all, I could understand the desire to protect her brother. I had one too once...

“What are you doing here, Prim?” Demir asked her after we were done and she pointed at the books, “I brought you these. They may help you with.. you know what.”

“You can speak freely in front of Lara, Prim,” my soulmate took my hand.

“Fine,” the princess snorted, “These have all the information we have on the nation that inhabits The White Archipelago. And it may help us in the upcoming war with them. Considering...”

She got quiet and I felt something off.

“Considering what?” I asked.

“Considering that our Emperor does not want to fight them at full force and save as many of them as possible.”

Suddenly, it got really quiet in the room.

“How bad is it?” I asked them both.

“Your brother is persistent,” was all that the princess told me, “He wouldn’t give up... He is ready to risk all your people just to get you back.”

“And this is what strange about it,” I heard myself saying, “This is not like him. Gideon is...pragmatic. He never takes unnecessary risks, he calculates things, he plans.”

“What makes you think he doesn’t do that now?” Demir smiled sadly, “I can already tell that he is not stupid. They take the fight to the cliffs as soon as dragons arrive. Warriors of light can maneuverer better between rocks, they can go lower than dragons...They use every advantage that they have. He is a very good leader. I have to give him that.”

“Still. The people of the White Archipelago never go to wars to other lands. We just live our life, serve our goddess and protect the Citadel of Light. This is our main aim in life, to keep the Light,” I tried to explain to them and both siblings looked at me with concern on their faces.

“Sometimes,” Demir came to his desk and sat on top of it, taking one of the books that Prim brought into his hands, “There are personal reasons for wars, Lara. It is possible that your brother just really wants you back.”

“He wouldn’t risk our people just for me,” I tried to reason and caught his eye.

“I don’t know, my love,” he had a vague smile on his lips, “Sometimes I think that I could risk everything for you...”

“And that’s a very thing to hear from your emperor!” Prim rolled her eyes, “Anyway, I see that you are both tired enough for today and we can discuss everything tomorrow. Lara, I will find you after breakfast. We have a lot to do.”

“Really?” I looked at her in surprise, not having even a remote idea what she and I had to do together after me being absent for so many days.

“Really!” she snorted, “That royal gerdian wedding is not going to plan itself! There are too many things to consider! And we’ll have to start with fabrics for your dresses and...”

“Dresses?” I looked at her in horror, “As in plural?”

“Of course,” she looked at me as if I was saying some kind of nonsense, “You need one for the morning blessing ceremony, one for the main wedding ceremony, one for the reception ball, and then probably one more for the evening. Not to mention your engagement and official announcement. And what you will be wearing on your wedding night...”

“All right!” Demir jumped off the table, “I think we are done for tonight. And I really don’t want my blood sister to have anything to do with what my wife will be wearing on our wedding night. So, thank you very much, Prim, for all your help, but right now it’s time to go.”

“Of course,” she scoffed, “I need to contact all designers, gardeners, chefs...”

“Off you go, sis!” he pointed her at the door and she just smirked at us and picked up her dress.

“See you tomorrow!” the princess waved her goodbye, “Don’t stay up too late. Too much work to do from now on!”

She left leaving a floral scent behind her and I came closer to my now fiancé. It was still strange to call him that but I enjoyed every moment of it.

He opened his arms for me and I pressed myself against his hard chest in a warm embrace.

“You are sad now,” he stated, not asked.

“This gerdian mark thing will be really annoying with you always knowing how I feel, right?” I chuckled, “How am I ever going to pretend in front of you now?”

“You don’t,” he brushed his fingers through my hair, “We are supposed to always be honest with each other, remember?”

“Yeah,” I sighed, “I want to speak to him, Demir. I want to speak with my brother.”

“I am not sure that’s such a great idea, Lara.”

“I know him. I think I can talk him out of it. Just imagine if we can avoid this unnecessary war!”

“I have to admit,” he pulled me even closer, “That sounds good. But... I am starting to think that maybe your brother is just not in his right mind...”

“Maybe,” I agreed, “That’s also a possibility because all this is so not like him. But it’s only more reason for me to talk to him. I would know. And if that’s the case... there are rules. A mad person can’t be the leader of the White Archipelago.”

“Now we are talking,” my gerdian smirked, “But just for the record, I still don’t like it.”

“Thank you,” I stood on the tips of my toes and reached his nose to give it a light kiss.

However, the next second, he lifted me in his hands and moved in the direction of the bed.

“I think we had enough of everything for one day, Lara,” he smiled at me and I noticed the sparks of dark magic dancing wildly in his eyes, “Time to celebrate your coming back home!”

Home... A smile formed on my lips. The Gerdian Empire was my home now... Wherever this man was – was my home. And it made me truly happy, letting me forget all the troubles. At least for now...

Book 2 Dragon King's Forbidden Love Chapter 80 - Tips

LARA

“Lara! I know you are there!” Prim shouted while I was hiding between the shelves in the library. The last few weeks were exhausting as it turned out that the princess was not joking about all the wedding preparations. There was so much to be done! And apparently, I had to be a part of it all.

It seemed that it was all that we were doing for the past few days and yet nothing was ready yet. So, somewhere along the way I just decided to let Prim deal with everything. However, she wasn't particularly happy about that. And now we played this game every day where I was hiding and she was searching.

Unfortunately for me, Prim was a golden dragon, and, of course, she could feel my scent from afar. So, hiding wasn't working out for me too well.

The red-haired princess was walking between the tall bookshelves lazily. She already knew exactly where I was and was just giving me time to adjust to the idea of more wedding planning.

"So," she chanted, "Today's agenda is to check the sketches of your dresses that lady Solveig brought and created personally for you. Then we work on the speech for your first official introduction. And the menu needs to be adjusted for every guest. Not to mention that there is a sitting chart to take care of for all three receptions that we are going to have. Then your wedding vows..."

Oh, Goddess of Light! Even the wedding vows had to be planned under her guidance. I knew that Prim meant well but this was getting too much too soon. Her perfectionism was killing me.

She was already near and I clenched the book I had in my arms, knowing that I had literally seconds left before she would find me. Just then two strong hands wrapped around my waist scaring the life out of me and I turned to look at Demir appearing out of dark flames. He pressed his index finger to his lips and gave me a mischievous smirk. And I leaned back into his chest and closed my eyes, letting him transport me out of here.

He took us to his chambers that would soon become ours and we both burst out laughing. We laughed until our bellies hurt and it was the best feeling.

"What a naughty emperor you are!" I scolded him in a sarcastic tone and turned to give him a kiss of gratitude.

"I couldn't possibly let you stay there and suffer, could I?" he snorted, brushing a curl behind my ear. My hair became longer but still only reached my shoulders thanks to being so wavy. But I was starting to kind of liking it this way. It was definitely more practical.

“My knight in shining armour!” I stood on the tips of my toes and gently pecked his lips. But of course, it did not end there and his palms started sliding up and down my body, only pulling me closer. Our breath got ragged, and I hated that I had to put a stop to it.

“You do know that your sister is going to find me no matter what?!”

“Luckily Prim can’t transport so it will take her a while to get here,” my dragon chuckled.

“Still not enough for us to have proper fun,” I shot my eyebrow up and sparks of dark magic appeared in his eyes.

“Angel, are you talking me out of it or trying to entice me more?” he smirked, tracing my lips with his thumb and then lifted me up and placed me on the top of his desk.

He was tempting me, teasing me, and I really wanted to give in to this guilty pleasure when someone knocked on the door.

“No,” I whined desperately, pouting my lips. But Demir only smiled apologetically. Apparently, he wasn’t that much of a rebel. And when duty called...

“Sorry, my love,” he shook his shoulders, “It’s Ryker and he only bothers me like this when there is something urgent.”

“Of course,” I sighed and let go of him, but stayed where I was, grabbing the nearest book. It was one of those that Prim brought to Demir on the day that I returned to the Gerdian Empire. I saw him reading it a few times. “The Ancient History of The White Archipelago” was pressed on the cover and painted gold but pieces of the paint were coming off from time. The book looked old and was clearly falling apart. I flipped through the pages and a few of them fell out.

“Damn it!” I swore under my breath and picked them up while Demir was still talking to his right hand about something. I looked for numbers, trying to figure out how to put the pages back, but there weren’t any. I stuck the first two randomly but paused on the third. It was a drawing and a very unusual one at that. It was of a maiden with wings. But what was odd about it, she didn’t just have two of those. She had all six of them!

However, even that was not what startled me the most. The thing that made my lips part in shock was what was written underneath: Lady of the Seraphim.

A memory of lady Iris suggesting for me to read about those creatures helpfully surfaced in my mind. So, that was what she talked about! How peculiar!

“Lara,” Demir distracted me, and I looked at him questioningly, still grasping the drawing.

“Did something happen?” His face looked strained and he got me worried there quickly.

“It’s a new message from your brother,” he leaned on the desk right next to me, “And he insists on another meeting with you. He says that he knows you are in the Empire. And to be honest I am not sure if he thinks you never left or actually knows that you have returned.”

“You think he has informants here?” I bit my lip, fidgeting the piece of paper in my hands.

“He wouldn’t be the only one,” Demir groaned, “The palace seems to be full of rats and I’ll need to do the cleaning soon.”

“That bad?” I clenched my lips and tried to give him a supportive smile.

“I now think that the explosion that Sean caused wasn’t meant to kill me, after all. It was a long shot. But the new members of the Council are giving me a hard time. And they are suspiciously on the same page lately...”

“I see,” I placed my palm over his and squeezed it lightly, feeling helpless. He was dealing with so much and I didn’t help with anything. In fact, I was even making things worse. Just like the prophecy that we did not speak about anymore foretold. I was dragging Demir down and it was time to put an end to it. “Demir,” I looked him in the eye, “I want to speak to my brother.”

“No,” he cut me off at once, not even considering such a possibility.

“Demir!” I knitted my eyebrows, “This war... None of us needs it! Gideon just doesn’t understand. I am sure we still can find common ground and deal with everything peacefully. The people of the White Archipelago do not take part in wars. Especially the useless ones.”

“Your brother will fight for you until the day he dies,” Demir said looking nowhere in particular, “I saw it in his eyes the last time we met. He is not giving up.”

“And yet I still want to talk to him. Just give me a chance. I want to try.”

He looked at me for a few seconds that seemed like forever and held his testing gaze.

“You want me to become your empress,” I decided to persuade him more, “Isn’t it my direct responsibility to try and avoid that war? What if I manage to put the conflict down?”

His lips twitched just for a second but enough for me to notice. That was the moment when I knew I won.

“Fine,” he confirmed my suspicions, “But I still don’t like it and I insist on measures of extra security.”

“Anything you like!” I wrapped my hands around his neck and gave him a kiss, “I really don’t mind.”

And he wanted to say something else but at this moment the loud knock on his door disrupted our sweet time together.

“This was not funny, you two!” Primrose yelled from the other side and then pushed the door without permission. She was wearing a beautiful emerald, green dress today and somehow looked even more beautiful than usual. Not that it was possible.

“Sister,” Demir grinned at her, “You look dazzling. Any particular reason why?”

Blush hit Prim’s cheeks and now I knew that something was shady here. Not to mention that it took her too long to get to her brother’s chambers.

“No,” she squeaked in an unusual for her voice.

“Oh, so you didn’t meet Ryker on your way here?” the dark dragon chuckled, embarrassing his sister even more, “What a shame! He just left!”

Yet she raised her chin high, as a true royalty and ignored his little comment.

“Lara, I know you have too much on your plate, but you know that we have to get back to planning. Very little time left. And everything should be perfect!”

“I know,” I jumped off the table and smiled at her. After all, she was doing all this for us and for her country. The least that I could do was to try and help her. Not to mention that Prim was a perfect example of what a gerdian queen should be. Finding a better role model was simply impossible and I needed to learn fast.

I wanted to return the page in my hands to the book when an idea struck my head.

“Demir, can I take this book?” I pointed at the leather-bound volume.

“Of course,” my fiancé looked slightly startled.

“Great!” I chirped, “Thank you! I guess I’ll see you in the evening!”

“Of course,” he placed a soft kiss on my forehead when his eyes were telling me that he wanted more.

But Primrose already took me by my hand and dragged me to her chambers, where lady Solveig was waiting for us with dress sketches – one better than the other. And while they were discussing fabrics and further embellishments, I started reading the book. A lot of what was written there were the things that I already knew from the history lessons at the White Archipelago.

But after a while, I came to see the chapter that grasped my attention in less than a second...