

Book 2 Dragon King's Forbidden Love Chapter 81 - Tips

LARA

The title was plain and simple. Just one word but everything inside of me jumped with excitement.

Seraphim.

The language that was used in the book was very old and sometimes it was hard to understand the meaning of what was written. And yet I managed to grasp the most important parts. Or so I thought.

Seraphim were celestial beings, the purest and the most powerful ones that the Goddess of Light ever created. They were the guardians sent to protect the people and share their light with them. They were said to have six wings of pure light, golden hair as the rays of sunshine, and eyes as blue as the sky that they came from. Each of them possessed unimaginable force. But there were just a few of them since creating each one took a considerable amount of the Goddesses' power. She only created them when they were needed in the world and when one of them was dying, she was mourning her loss for centuries.

The legend had it, that it was her tears over one of her beloved seraph's death that fell into the sea and formed the White Archipelago. And then, after a gruesome war, one of the remaining seraphim went to live a life of solitude on the islands and built the Tower of Light there as a means of contacting his beloved Goddess when it was needed. Because once a seraph was descending to the ground, they became bound to it and couldn't come back to the Goddess Brighta again.

The seraph of the White Archipelago wanted to live alone, but when after yet another bloody war, people from neighbouring kingdoms started to swim to his shore, he accepted them. But he made it a condition that they will all be purified in the Tower of Light. The ones who agreed to be purified stayed. They were stepping into the light inside of the tower that came from the Goddess herself and when they were walking out, their hair was glowing silver and their eyes were changed to golden. A sign of being blessed by Brighta. That's how the first people of the White Archipelago came to be. While that seraph, whose name was Arinor, became their first-ever leader. Together, they built a new nation, that was pure in heart and peaceful. They were seeking no war and served the Goddess of Light diligently. They were always

ready to help others and devoted themselves to making the dark world brighter. People could always seek refuge in their lands.

I rolled my eyes. A lot had changed since ancient times.

Other people found out about the magical islands and as always, greed overwhelmed them. They wanted this power for themselves and prepared for a new war.

The Goddess of Light and other seraphim made a promise to protect the White Archipelago as long as its inhabitants were remaining pure in soul. The Light Source in the tower grew stronger and that light was shared among the people, giving them abilities similar to those that seraphim possessed. That's how the first Warriors of Light came to be – the fighters for justice, truth, and purity of souls.

I closed the book and looked at Prim and lady Solveig. They were still discussing my dress and not even looking at me.

I stood up and went to a huge window to get some fresh air. Goddess knows I needed it. Because the story of the White Archipelago that I knew was very different from what I just read. Seraphim were never even mentioned there.

According to what was taught to children now, the islands always were there and the people on the islands were so good that once the Goddess of Light decided to make them the chosen ones and bless them with her power. And that's how the first Warriors of Light came to be. Interesting... What was the truth? And was any of these two versions the truth? After all, they were just legends. And legends are almost the same as fairytales.

I checked the author of the book and was surprised to find out that it was signed by Pheonor Tizar. He was one of the most famous leaders that the Citadel of Light ever had. The books that children read at school were based on his teachings. He was one of the first to write down history. It was his scrolls that our scholars were studying. And I was holding an original of his book!

It felt strange. And why was the information so different then? Here he was writing about seraphim yet they were never mentioned at the White Archipelago! I hadn't heard of them even in actual fairytales! How so? The first time I heard about the great celestial beings was from lady Iris! A random girl at the Dark Selection.

The more I was thinking about it, the more absurd everything in my life seemed! How did Iris hear of them but I didn't? Were there more books on them? After all, I was in the Gerdian Empire, the lands of dark magic, and they had a book that clearly belonged somewhere else. What if there were more of those? And why did Iris tell me to read about seraphim? She witnessed my magical outburst and told me to read about them... Golden hair, blue eyes... Did she think that I was one of them?! Just like that?

I remembered the power that emerged from me that day. White flashes of lightning that were shining in the dark sky... Biting my lip, I opened the book again and found the page with the drawing. Lady of Seraphim... It was a simple sketched in black ink, so it was impossible to say what colour her eyes and hair were. But what I saw for sure – were bolts of lightning coming out of her hands.

“Thank you, lady Solveig!” Primrose stood up and shook the designer's hands, “Everything is perfect and I can't wait to see the final results!”

“It's an honour for me!” the older woman's face stretched in a wide smile as she curtsied elegantly before the princess and then before me. I waved at her awkwardly and she turned and went to the exit.

“Prim,” I hurried to my future sister-in-law, “Could we possibly have a break?”

“Nice try but not really!” she smirked, “We need to write your vows still!”

“Does it have to be today?”

“Yes, Lara! We are already late with the schedule as it is! And there is also the speech for your first introductions! Are you even taking all this seriously?!” the princess scolded me when a sudden idea struck me.

“You are right!” I sighed, “Those are important. I am sorry. But I will make it up to you!”

“I wonder how,” Primrose chuckled.

“Let's go to the library – I will do my own personal research and find the best words and phrases to use in those speeches! Relevant and beautiful! And while I go through history books in search of previous speeches and the jewels of gerdian classics for best love confessions, you can sit and work on the menus. That would help you, right?”

“Right,” she agreed hesitantly. But then, after thinking about it some more, smiled. “That’s probably a good idea. Let’s do this!”

I sighed with relief. Now I could look for more information while still staying on her good side.

However, there was no end to my disappointment as even after hours and hours in the library, I found just two mentions of the celestial beings. And both were useless to me. Just what was going on with those seraphim?!

I returned to my chambers late at night and fell to my bed, feeling exhausted and disappointed. Dark flames appeared right next to me and two strong hands pulled me into a warm embrace...

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“Tell me,” was all he said as he lay down with me and pulled me onto his chest. I sighed and told him everything that I managed to learn, including why I got interested in seraphim in the first place.

“What do you think?” I asked him after I was done, while afraid to even look him in the eye. Was I silly to be worried about all that?

“I think that all of that is very...interesting, Lara,” he answered, playing with my hair, “Do you think you are one of them?”

There. He said it out loud. The one thing that I was afraid to even think about. Yet still had to consider.

“I don’t know. Could I be?”

Demir was silent for a while but then replied nonchalantly, “Who knows. I would not rule out such a possibility. Your magic was always very special. Stronger than what your people have. And combined with the story of your just being found and adopted... it’s even more suspicious.”

“Back at the White Archipelago, my magic was never stronger than what others had,” I threw my shoes off, “They didn’t let me become a Warrior of Light because I wasn’t one of them and wasn’t special enough in any way to take up the place.”

“Are the places limited?” Demir looked at me with curiosity on his face.

“Yes,” I mumbled fidgeting with the buttons of his high collar shirt, “Only the best of the best get a place since the Goddess doesn’t bless everyone and...”

“So, the Goddess of Light is declining people who want to serve her with all their hearts? Just because...” he was looking at me expectantly and I did not know the answer. I knew why the goddess did not bless me – I was a foreigner after all. But why didn’t she bless others willing?

I remembered my training. Everyone was allowed to participate in that as long as they could handle it. And in the end, the names of the chosen ones were called.

I remembered how happy my friend Bria was. And how upset was my maid’s son, Calder. He was one of the best of our year but unfortunately, the Goddess did not choose him...

A bad feeling rose inside of me. We all thought that it was because his thoughts and aspirations probably were not pure. This was the only reason that a native of the White Archipelago would not be honoured by the Goddess. But she approved Bria... I loved my best friend but even I had to admit that sometimes her nature... didn’t seem that pure. She knew how to be selfish, and sometimes she was jealous of other girls that we knew... was she really a better choice than Calder?

“Demir,” I stopped only when I realise that I practically took his shirt off already and he looked at me, puzzled.

“What are you thinking about?” He asked.

“My brother,” the words came out before I realised what I just said and my fiancé’s eyes filled with dark magic.

“That’s... good to know,” he gritted through his teeth.

“We,” I scolded him, “Not like that! I think that I really need to meet and speak to him. I have too many questions and desperately need answers.

“It is already arranged,” the gerdian confessed, relieving himself of the remains of the shirt, “The same place, sunrise in two days.”

“Really!?” I smiled as the news made me very happy.

“Of course,” he nodded, finally getting his hands on me, “But I am telling you this at once – he is not invited to our wedding.”

“I don’t think he would be willing to attend even if he was!” I scoffed, feeling his fingers slowly start relieving me of my dress.

“Of course he would like to attend,” Demir gave me an eye roll, “To destroy the whole thing. And this is why he is not welcome.”

“Fine!” I agreed, thinking that he was probably right. Deep inside I really hoped that one day we all would be able to live happily ever after together. But that probably wouldn’t happen any time soon. And I wasn’t ready to risk my future with the love of my life. Not even for Gideon.

Demir towered over me and looked me in the eyes, “You know I love you more than anything in the world, right?”

“I know!” I smiled and wrapped my arms around his neck, pulling him closer...

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We arrived at the top of the mountain on the agreed day. The sun was kissing the sharp peaks around us, making everything seem golden. I saw a small dot in the sky that was getting bigger and bigger. And soon I was able to hear the flapping of his wings. Gideon was alone. But what struck me the most was not that. His wings were not shining anymore. They reminded simple mechanical ones that he was creating for me, the feathers looked dull... He landed in front of Demir and I, looking tense. Our eyes met and for a second I felt sad, realizing how much had changed. Just a few months ago, I would run into his arms and give him the tightest of hugs. But right now, I did not feel the urge even to get close and adjusted the silk scarf on my neck that was covering my mark.

Demir squeezed my hand tight in his as a sign of reassurance and I looked at him with a smile on my lips. Even now he knew what I was feeling, and I loved the connection that we shared.

“Lara,” Gideon called my name and I felt slightly guilty for this momentary distraction. I faced my brother and gave him a weak smile as well.

“Hello, Deon,” I greeted him and saw the relief on his face. I knew he would like that.

Demir let go of my hand as he knew that I wanted to speak with my brother in private. It was unlikely that he was going to answer my questions in front of the gerdian and I was desperate for some answers!

I stepped closer without fear. I knew I could protect myself, the energy of light was circling through my veins and I felt it getting stronger every day. Not to mention that my dragon could transport me with his dark flames as long as he saw me. But also...also I hoped that my brother would not try to hurt me or take me away.

“Your hair,” he clenched his fists as I came closer, and he understood that there was no long intricate braid anywhere on my head. I had a small simple bun instead with a few curly strands down my neck. He wanted to touch me and even stretched his hand but I flinched and he stopped.

“I cut it,” I gave him a weak smile.

“Why?” was all he asked.

“Felt that it was time for a change”, shrugging my shoulders I went past him and gestured for him to follow me.

“It’s not only your hair that changed,” Gideon admitted darkly.

“No, it’s not only that.” There was no point to deny or pretend. The Lara that he knew was gone and although I myself was not sure yet who or what I was, I knew that I wasn’t that meek girl that he used to take care of and shield from the world.

“I knew that you were still in the Empire,” he said all of a sudden.

“I only returned recently. There were some things for me and Demir to figure out first...”

“Like what?” the wings behind Gideon’s back folded.

“It doesn’t matter anymore.” I knew that the fewer details I gave him the better. “It’s done and we are getting married.”

“So, the rumour is true,” my brother’s golden eyes became sad, “You agreed to marry him... Why, Lara?!”

“Because I love him.” My honest reply probably sounded cold, and I noticed how Gideon’s lips twitched at that.

“Are you sure you are not confusing love with something else?” he asked that not looking at me.

“I am, Gideon, I had time to think while I was out of the Empire.”

“And you are sure that this is what you want?”

“I am.”

The silence between us felt heavy.

“You know you are never going to marry him by the laws of Brighta, right?” his voice was cold and for the first time ever I felt fire-raising from within me.

“I am aware,” I turned to face him, clenching my fists, “And maybe now you can finally explain why you and father did what you did?! How could you?!”

“It seemed right at the time,” Gideon shrugged the question off, making me angrier.

“That’s not what I am counting to hear today!” I raised my chin, “There must have been a reason! Father always had a reason!”

“There was no other way for you to stay with us,” Deon took my hand in his and I wanted to take it away, but he pressed it tightly in his grasp, “We did it for you. I did it for you... I do everything for you, Lara. You are the only one I care about.”

“That’s bad, considering that you are the new leader of the Citadel of Light, brother,” I shook my head, “Is the war also for me? Because I don’t see how...”

“Everything is for you!” he snapped and pulled me harshly by my hand, making the silk scarf slip off my neck, exposing the shining dragon mark on my chest...

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His lips parted and clenched a few times while the eyes that were glued to my mark got darker. I tried to avoid that, knowing that his reaction would not be good. Of course, Gideon already knew what that mark meant. He wasn't clueless at all.

“When did that happen?” he asked darkly and I swallowed, trembling slightly. I looked at the mark that was gleaming with Demir's dark magic, wanting to cover it up again with the scarf. But when I was about to do it, I realized something important. That was my choice and I had nothing to be embarrassed of. We did it out of love. And we were going to get married. In the temple of the Goddess of Light or not – that did not matter. What mattered was that I chose Demir and everything that came with him. No one could prohibit me from loving him, no one could do anything about it. That man was mine and I was his. And I'd rather die than try to hide that ever again.

I took off the scarf and threw it away, the wind catching it and playing with the light silk.

“Not so long ago,” I replied honestly, “This is...”

“I know what this is,” my brother said through his teeth, “Do you have any idea how insulting it is for the Goddess?”

That was a jab at me, and I didn't miss it.

“Is it though?” I raised my brow and Gideon looked at me in shock.

“Of course, it is! You betrayed everything we believe in!”

“No, I didn't,” I clenched my fists, “You did. And Father did. When you tricked me into saying those words at the temple! I was just a little girl back then; I had no idea what was going on! There is no way the Goddess would approve of a marriage that starts with a lie!”

“A lie?!” Deon looked really hurt and I almost felt guilty. Almost... “Was it a lie that you loved me on that day? Was it a lie that I love you?”

“No,” I shook my head, “But it wasn’t that kind of love. You know it well.”

“It was for me,” he looked me in the eye, and I saw the pain that was coming from his heart.

“But for me, it wasn’t,” I sighed. All I wanted was for him to understand and accept. “I will always love you, Gideon. With all my heart. But only as my brother. The feeling that I have for you... they are not the same as what I have for Demir. And I am sorry if you feel differently. Goddess knows, I had no idea and never wanted it to be like that! I only wish you the best and want you to be happy. But it wouldn’t be with me as your wife. That’s impossible.”

The silence between us was heavy. But at the moment I was happy that at the very least we were not arguing.

“I want you to be happy too, Lara,” he said after a while and I let out a breath I didn’t know I was holding, “I am sure we can find common grounds again. Come home and we’ll find a way out.”

“The thing is,” I turned and looked at Demir, smiling at the man that I was so much in love with, “I don’t think that my home is at the White Archipelago anymore.”

“Don’t say that...”

“But it’s the truth.” Very carefully I took my brother’s hand into mine, “A lot has changed. I still don’t know so much about myself... But I know one thing – my home is with Demir.”

“Are you really... sure about that?”

“I am, brother,” I tried to smile, and his eyes softened a bit, even though I still had this lingering feeling inside of me that something was wrong between us, “This is probably the only thing that I am sure of.”

“All right,” he exhaled heavily and pulled me for a hug. The mark on my chest pulsated painfully, letting me know that my guardian was jealous. “If that’s the life you choose, I am going to support you.”

“Really?” I smiled happily.

“Really,” Deon brushed his palm over my cheek, “When is the wedding?”

“Soon,” I looked down awkwardly, I already promised my fiancé that Gideon would not be invited. And now I didn’t know how to tell him.

“I see,” it was as if he read my mind, “I am not a welcomed guest at this event, right?”

“What about the war?” I looked at him with reproach, “Why did you even start it?”

“Because I would do anything for you.” The reply made me sad. Deep inside I still hoped that I wasn’t the reason for all of that... And yet I was.

“It was wrong,” I furrowed my brows, “You are lucky that the gerdians and their dragons did not want to k!ll our people. It was very generous of them considering that you were the ones provoking them.”

“Is that what he is telling you?” Gideon snorted, “They were k!lling us just fine!”

I flinched at his words. But he didn’t shatter my confidence in Demir. Deep inside I knew that the gerdian did not lie to me. And, unfortunately, I couldn’t tell the same anymore about my brother. It was even strange to call him my brother now... Too many things happened, too many things changed...

“Deon, I have a question for you, and I want you to tell me the truth. Do you think you can do that?”

“Anything for you,” he smiled and wanted to touch me again, but stopped when his hand was in the middle of its way when he noticed me flinch. For us that was progress.

“What do you know about my real parents?” I looked him straight into the eye and he held my gaze.

“The same thing that you know,” Gideon did not hesitate, and I was slightly disappointed. I really hoped that he could tell me at least something. “Why are you suddenly interested in that as well, Lara? You stopped asking those questions a long time ago.”

“I became curious again,” I let out a chuckle, “A lot of things turned out to be not what I thought they were.”

“I am sorry you feel this way,” his wings twitched a bit, “And I wish I could help.”

“Maybe you still can,” I bit my lip, not knowing if what I was about to do was the right thing, “Tell me, brother, what do you know about seraphim?”

This time his facial expression changed and it did not escape me. He took it under control very fast but it was too late.

“What about them?” he cleared his throat.

“So, you’ve heard about them,” I raised my brow, “What do you know?”

“I know that those are all fairytales,” he shrugged his shoulders, “None of those are true.”

“All fairytales come from somewhere,” I said it more to myself but noticed how his whole body tensed. He definitely knew something. But he was not going to tell me. And that was already an answer that I needed.

“Lara, would that be possible to see you again before your wedding?” Gideon was clearly trying to change the subject, “I don’t want to lose you. Even if we meet like that – it’s enough.”

“Is it?” Inside of me rage was growing. He was not honest with me again.

“It’s something,” he gave me a sad smile.

“I will think about it,” I said and turned away, walking firmly to the only man that I could trust. I heard the sound of the wings opening but dark flames already brought me into a warm embrace and I tucked my head into Demir’s chest.

“Take me away from here,” I whispered, and he obeyed.

“Did he make you sad?” the gerdian lifted my chin, when we were back at the palace, and looked me in the eye.

“I’ll be fine,” I answered honestly, “I hoped that he would tell me everything. But he chose not to.”

“I am sorry, Lara.” He pressed me to his chest firmly and kissed the top of my head, “We’ll find answers in another way. That I promise you.”

And I knew that he wasn’t lying...

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“Just don’t forget the words!” Prim was adjusting the headpiece in my hair for the one-hundredth time, “The first impression is always the most important!”

“I know, I know,” I chanted. If she thought that she was helping – she wasn’t. She only got me more stressed than I already was.

Today was the day. Even though rumours about the emperor’s bride had already spread all over The Gerdian Empire, I still had to be officially introduced. And this was it. Demir would be announcing to the whole nation that he chose me, a practically no one, as his future wife and empress. And although chances were slim, I was still hoping that people would be able to accept me. I needed to be accepted somewhere.

I was wearing a pale grey dress made of thin transparent fabric which was embroidered with silver thread all over it, creating an intricate pattern that was shining in the sunlight. The lines were sewn with pearls and silver beads to add extra shimmer to this masterpiece. The firm corset and long sleeves with flares were giving me support and a slightly regal look, while at the same time low cut and bare shoulders made me seem delicate. There were diamond pins in floral shapes in my hair, while I had no other jewellery on, except for a few diamonds that Prim glued to my skin here and there over my chest and collarbones. They were, however, only there to attract more attention to Demir’s. Everything I wore today was made to set the mark off tonight and make a point that the choice was the emperor made was permanent.

“Gods were kind to me to give me such a beautiful soulmate,” Demir walked into the room, wearing a dark suit with matching silver patterns that somehow managed to look masculine on him. He wrapped his hands around my neck as everyone else stepped away and trailed his fingers over the line of my neck, kissing it gently and sending pleasant shivers all over me. He then looked at both our reflections in the mirror and I smiled at him.

“Aren’t we a perfect match?” he chuckled.

“We sure are...”

“Are you ready, my love?” He took my hand and I nodded in agreement. Dark flames surrounded us, and I hear a cheerful roaring of the crowd before we even appeared on the main balcony of the house.

There were so many people around us, filling a huge square and everything that was visible beyond us. I plastered a reserved smile over my face but to my surprise, everyone seemed so happy. They shouted Demir’s name mostly but generally seemed very happy to see me too.

And I thought that this would never end. Yet as soon as their emperor stepped forward and raised his hand, everyone got quiet.

“People of the Gerdian Empire!” he started in his imperious tone that made my toes curl, “Today I have the most important announcement of my life for you! As you all know, I looked for a long time for my queen. But the gods blessed me and I have finally found her! The one who will stand with me and rule with me until the day I die! The future mother of my heirs and your future empress! Meet Lady Lara Artes of the White Archipelago!”

Loud cheering emerged and I couldn’t believe that everything was going so well. Demir turned to me, smiling, and stretched his hand. Now it was my time to talk and for the first time, I was thankful to Prim for making me memorize what I should say. Otherwise, I’d mumble something silly for sure. I turned quickly to look at the princess, who stood slightly behind us and she gave me a reassuring smile, mouthing, “You can do this.”

I raised my chin and waved at the crowds, making them go wild. So that Demir had to lift up his hand again.

“It is a great honour to be chosen for such an important role,” I started my speech proudly and went through every aspect that we prepared beforehand, making all the necessary promises along the way. But somewhere in the middle, I heard a commotion behind my back. Ryker came closer to us and whispered something to Demir. My heart clenched because there was no way he would do that if nothing important happened. And it could mean only one thing – something was wrong!

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I did not let it affect me and finished the speech exactly the way I was supposed to. Whatever was happening, I knew far too well that all eyes were on me and I couldn't fail Demir and his trust.

"I hope that together we'll be able to bring peace and prosperity to this wonderful empire!" I said one of the last sentences as my voice echoed through the square that exploded again as soon as I was done. Demir stepped closer and took my hand into his, lifting both of them up to demonstrate our matching engagement bracelets.

Not surprisingly, that was when people really went wild. I looked at him with worry in my eyes but he only smiled confidently.

However, in just a few seconds dark flames surrounded us and we stepped out into the emperor's office. Not the private one in Demir's chambers, the one he used for official matters. Which only confirmed my suspicions.

"What happened?" I asked him at once, not wasting any time. Whatever it was, it was serious enough for us to be here and not at the banquet that Prim planned carefully.

"There was another attack at the border," the gerdian replied dryly and at that moment his sister arrived in Ryker's flames.

"Red dragons?" I asked, secretly hoping for an affirmative answer, but Demir shook his head, looking at me with a concerned expression on his face. I felt weak in the legs. If it weren't red dragons... then it was Gideon and his Warriors of Light. But why?! Why would he do that?!

"How bad is it?" Primrose came closer to us and gave me a reassuring hug, making me flinch as I did not expect it. If anything, they all were supposed to be mad at me. Yet no one said a word.

"That's the biggest attack they tried so far," Ryker got an artifact out of his hand and put it on the desk in front of us. A big map appeared before our eyes and he pointed at the mountains close to the White Archipelago. "They attacked here, here, and here," he pointed his finger, and red dots formed on the shown locations.

"Casualties?" A little line formed between Prim's eyebrows.

“Pretty much everyone who lived there,” Ryker replied dryly and my heart skipped a beat.

“What does it mean – everyone?” I heard myself saying.

“Three border towns are gone,” the gerdian replied and I felt dizzy.

“Impossible!” I muttered, “The Warriors of Light don’t kill innocent people...”

“Apparently some things changed since you were gone,” Prim crossed her hands on her chest, “That brother of yours...”

“Enough,” Demir stopped her and then turned to me, “Lara, we will have to cancel our engagement banquet. I hope you understand...”

“Of course,” I nodded, “There is no question about it – we are not having a party when people are killed like that.” He smiled sadly and touched my chin with so much love in his eyes that I almost forgot what kind of situation we were in.

“I need to go,” he said and leaned his forehead over mine, “To deal with it.”

“Let me go with you,” I begged, “I can talk to Gideon again, persuade him...”

“No.” Demir distanced himself from me. “Something tells me that this is exactly what he wants, Lara. This is about you one way or another.”

There. He said it out loud and the silence in the room became heavy as I clenched my lips. There was nothing to reply to that. He was right. And everyone else was thinking that too.

“I don’t mean that it’s your fault,” Demir hurried to fix his statement but I raised my hand for him to stop.

“It’s all right,” I tried to smile at him, “It is what it is. There is no point pretending that I have nothing to do with it.”

“Lara,” he stepped closer again and pulled me into a hug. His warmth coated me, but I knew that I couldn’t enjoy it for too long. Not now.

“Go,” I said, pushing him away slightly, “They need you more now.”

Dark flames rose again, making Demir and Ryker disappear and leaving me alone with the princess. Prim, however, did not look worried at all.

“Don’t worry,” she came closer, “They are going to deal with it fast.”

Yeah... Because people from the White Archipelago are easy to kill for the gerdians. And especially for the dragons. That wasn’t something to be happy about either.

“I don’t know what Gideon was thinking,” I sighed, “What he does... it goes against everything we believe in.”

“As far as I understand, he loves you very much. And love makes us do crazy things,” Primrose came to the window and looked out of it to see the crowds dispersing slowly. The show was over after all.

“In other words, it’s my fault?” I chuckled darkly. I for sure felt like it was.

“No,” the girl next to me answered easily and looked me in the eye, “You can’t be responsible for other people’s actions, Lara. I hate when they do that. She was wearing a dress too revealing, she behaved provocatively, she walked alone at night and that’s why that happened to her! All that is bull sh*t that men give us!”

I looked at the gerdian princess in shock. It was the first time when I heard her swearing. And she gave me a confident smirk, similar to that of Demir’s.

“Don’t be so surprised! If you are anything, then you are a victim here! Always the one that everybody wants, always the one to blame for other people’s desires. However, it’s wrong! Your brother chose to do what he is doing, his people chose to follow him and not object! All that has nothing to do with you in the long run. Because in the end, all that is about a man who didn’t get what he wanted and couldn’t deal with it.”

My lips parted as I didn’t even know what to reply to that. Luckily, Prim didn’t need me to as she kept going, “So, back to your question – is that your fault? Definitely not!”

A smile almost formed on my face but then I remembered something...

“You are speaking from experience, right?” I sighed and noticed a small tear running down her cheek, which she quickly wiped away, pretending that it never happened.

“Xander Rust,” she chuckled nervously, “The leader of the red dragons. He wanted to marry me and after I refused, he killed the man I loved. And then when they betrayed us, he started spreading rumours that it all happened because of his broken heart. He blamed either me or Demir. Me, for being cruel when I rejected his love. He even stooped so low as to claim that I was his soulmate. And Demir – for breaking two lovers apart.”

“The two versions contradict each other,” I leaned over the desk. My shoes were killing me.

“That’s the thing with rumours, Lara,” Primrose snorted, “People don’t even care if they are logical! They spread them anyway.”

“I can only imagine what they say about me now,” I played nervously with the hem of my dress.

“It doesn’t matter,” the princess smiled at me, “Whatever it is – it’ll pass when they see you standing by Demir. Or with him, ruling together over the Empire that really needed an empress!”

“I wouldn’t go that far!” I let out a little laugh.

“Who knows,” she shrugged her shoulders, “Maybe you should. Demir is... tired of being an emperor. He has been doing it for a while now, giving it his best. He helped this Empire become better, he helped different races live together in peace... well, more or less. But over the years that drained him. He was doing it alone for so long. And you... you are like a breath of fresh air for him, Lara. You have eyes full of light and this desire to live, desire to make everything around you better. He needed this. He needed you.”

“Funny you should say that,” I sneered, “All those years he had you by his side. And you were performing the empress’ duties just perfectly.”

“Oh, stop it!” she rolled her eyes, blushing but by the look in her eyes, I could tell that she accepted my compliment.

“In fact,” I continued, “You were so perfect that now I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to fill in your shoes!”

“You’ll do just fine,” she smirked and went to a little table in the far corner with elegant marble chess on top of it, “Care for a game while we wait? We need to take our brains off all that negative energy!”

~ * ~

“Checkmate!” Prim announced again and I groaned, “New game?”

“Please, no!” I begged her, “I used to think I was good at chess and now my ego needs time to adjust to the new reality.”

“Don’t be too hard on yourself,” the princess scoffed.

“Too hard? I was playing chess almost every day of my life and now I see that it was all for nothing!” I relaxed my back in my chair, running a hand through my face.

“So?” the princess scoffed, “I played most of my life too. Only that’s a couple of hundred years when you barely reached your first decade. Trust me, you have nothing to be embarrassed about!”

Right when I wanted to answer something snarky, dark flames appeared right before us, and Demir walked out of them with Ryker. It did not escape me that my guardian already changed his clothes. But that was probably to be expected as his previous outfit wouldn’t be comfortable for any kind of fighting. And the most important thing was that he was back and he was all right.

I threw myself in his arms and he embraced me with warmth, kissing the top of my head and pressing me tight against himself.

“Is it over?” I looked at him and he hesitated before answering.

“I sure hope so,” he smiled, “It is over for now.”

“Is my brother...”, I was too afraid to form the words. Whatever happened, Gideon still had a place in my heart.

From the corner of my eye, I noticed Primrose greeting Ryker awkwardly. She obviously wanted to go for a hug too but stopped herself and stretched her hand to him instead. Which he took into his large palm and kissed gently, making the beautiful princess blush. And when it was time to let go, he didn’t.

They didn't say anything, though their eyes clearly were speaking to each other. While Demir and I pretended not to notice.

"Tell me everything," I asked my gerdian but noticed how his eyes shifted away from me. I didn't like it. That wasn't how Demir usually was and deep inside I knew that something was off.

"Maybe later," he caressed my cheek, smiling, "I am a bit tired now and still need to do a few things."

"If you want, I would deal with the prisoners myself," Ryker said and Demir threw a furious gaze at him.

"Prisoners?" my heart sunk at the realization.

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LARA

They all looked at me in silence and I knew that it wasn't even my place to ask. Everything was as clear as day. Yet I couldn't leave it like that either.

"Is my brother one of the prisoners?" the words came out dry, my voice croaked. And the pity in everybody's eyes only made it worse.

"Yes, Lara," Demir replied. We agreed not to lie to each other after all.

"Is he...wounded?" was my second question.

"Yes," my fiancé stepped closer and stretched his hand to me to cup my chin, "I am sorry, Lara. It was... really bad there."

"How bad?" I felt cold sweat trickling down my spine.

"Really bad," this time Ryker took his turn to speak, and I noticed that he was covered in splatters of blood. Prim got out a white silk handkerchief and started to carefully wipe his face to his big surprise. In the meantime, my eyes traveled to Demir. His clothes were dirty too but I did not find traces of other people's blood on him or any kind of wounds. He looked at me with guilt in his eyes and my heart sunk.

“They...” Ryker started speaking as soon as the princess was done, “It was as if they wanted to die. They were throwing themselves at us, even when we had to turn into dragon forms. We had to take prisoners simply to make sure they stay alive. And to end all this...”

“Nonsense,” I finished for him, “All this... It doesn’t sound right. Our people don’t do that!”

“They didn’t look like people anymore, Lara,” Demir sighed, “Their eyes... something was wrong with them.”

“I need to see them!” I clenched my fists. It felt like it wasn’t happening to me. Never had I ever thought that I would listen to such stories about Warriors of Light.

“No,” Demir said firmly and I looked at him in shock.

“What do you mean, no?” I furrowed my brows. I thought we were past all this already.

“Trust me, Lara, you don’t need to see this,” he stood firmly, avoiding my gaze.

“Demir!” I gasped, “You can’t be serious! They are my people! Gideon is my brother! However bad things are, I have a right to at least see them!”

“No, Lara!” he sighed heavily and held his ground, “Something smells bad there and none of them is getting even a glimpse of you. Because something tells me that this is exactly what they want!”

“Why would they...”, I started but then bit my tongue under the emperor’s heavy glare. We agreed not to share our theories about seraphim for now and I was sure that he didn’t share those with Ryker or Prim.

But it could be that.

“I need to deal with a few more things tonight,” Demir told me and I nodded, “I’ll take you to your room. Wait for me there. All right?”

“Of course,” I smiled sadly. The last thing I wanted was to be in his way after what he had to do today.

Dark flames surrounded me and I found myself in my chambers. Lisa and Sandra were already there, their faces pale.

“We are so sorry, my lady,” they both curtsied quickly.

“What a shame that your Introduction banquet was canceled,” Sandra didn’t look sorry at all. As always.

“It’s fine,” I replied coldly, “Just help me change into something more comfortable.”

They got to work. While Lisa was undoing the many tiny buttons on my back, Sandra brought a few dresses for me to choose from. I approved the first one as I didn’t even care that much anymore.

My thoughts were elsewhere.

There was no denial that Gideon loved me. I spent too many years with him to doubt that. But for him, I was never his sibling. Now that I thought about it, while I kept referring to him as my brother, he never called me sister. He always used my name or nicknames, detesting calling me his sister from early on. I just never thought much of it. It didn’t matter... He treasured me and kept me away from everyone. And I used to think that it was for my protection since he was always telling me that people of the White Archipelago would never accept me. But what if there was a different reason for all that?

After our recent conversation, I had this lingering feeling inside of me that he wasn’t truthful.

“You stopped asking those questions a long time ago,” he told me with regret in his voice.

And seraphim... When I mentioned them, I could swear he knew something. More than he was willing to share back then.

Question after question were popping in my head and I just knew that I wouldn’t be able to sleep tonight.

It was late at night and I tried to distract myself with a book, which seemed useless at this point. Demir still didn't come and the things that I was imagining were making it worse.

And no matter how hard I tried to deny it, I still kept thinking about Gideon too. You can't throw away someone from your heart in an instant. I didn't know him the way I thought I did, but I still loved him. And the thought of him alone in that prison was making me suffer too.

I stood up and put a shawl on as it was chilly tonight. Not wasting time, I got into my wardrobe room and took one of the diamond brooches that I owned.

"Sandra!" I called the girl and she appeared out of the dark smoke.

"My lady," she bowed lazily, only making me smirk. She was perfect for what I needed. I liked Lisa more, but she was the perfect maid, the one who would always follow the rules. And I was about to break some.

That's where Sandra came in. She did not care as long as it benefited her.

"I want to award you for all your hard work," I smiled and showed her the shining jewellery piece in my fingers. Her eyes started sparkling more than the diamonds and I chuckled lightly.

"That will be very generous, my lady!" now she was doing a deep curtsy with more enthusiasm than ever.

"True," I took the trinket away and the girl in front of me almost lost her balance, "But maybe you can do something else for me and earn it?"

For a few seconds, she stared at me, clearly thinking about her next move. Luckily, she made her decision fast and bowed to me, "Anything for my future empress!"

"That's the spirit," I crossed my hands on my chest, "Tell me, Sandra, do you know where the palace dungeons are? Where do they keep the new prisoners?"

She looked at me from under her brows and I already thought that she would back down. Yet she just nodded, "I can show."

"Wonderful!" I exhaled loudly, "Lead the way then!"

I prepared for a walk when she came closer and touched my shoulder, surrounding us with the black smoke.

A few moments – and we stepped out in the dark room with a long narrow stone staircase.

“The guards are standing at both entrances,” Sandra informed me, “So, you will need to come back here when you are done. I’ll take you back.”

She looked eagerly at the pocket where I had a brooch and I handed it to her. And then got out a sapphire ring as well. The girl’s eyes got wider and I grinned at her, “Wait for me and I’ll give you that as well.”

Now the obstinate maid was ready to eat from my hand as she nodded vigorously, “I will not fail you, my lady!”

Of course, she wouldn’t! No one was this crazy.

She showed me where to go and in no time I was in a long corridor with numerous cages. Most of them were empty, but in some of them, I noticed familiar features. The white and silver uniform that was now dirty, the wings that were broken and bloodied... But most importantly, the burn marks everywhere. They didn’t even resemble the warriors of Light anymore and I felt a lump forming in my throat.

And then I saw him... A bloody mess with feathers scattered around the floor of his cell. His golden eyes opened as soon as I came close.

“Hello, Lara,” Gideon smiled weakly...

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LARA

I stood there, silent. He looked terrible, half of his face was burnt and so was one of his wings. He couldn’t take them away now and there looked like simple wings made of flesh and blood. Not a sight of light anywhere in the feathers that usually were shining brightly.

“What happened?” I asked, touching the metal bars and not taking my eyes off my brother.

“You dragon happened!” he spat, “He is a monster!”

“That’s not what I am interested in, Gideon!” I sighed and even though it was painful for him, he tried to sit up, looking at me in shock. Yes, this wasn’t how we usually talked to each other. But I was tired. I felt sorry for him, it pained me to see him this way, but also I knew that he did it to himself! Moreover, I knew that he did it to others as well.

“He ruins you!” my stepbrother narrowed his eyes at me, “Look how different you are already!”

“I beg to differ. If anything, I am changing for the best here!” I retorted calmly, “Please, don’t play games with me anymore. I am so tired of all this. Why did you do it, Gideon? Why did you attack those villages?”

For a few minutes he was just looking at me and I thought that yet again, I wouldn’t receive any answers from him. But he leaned over the wall next to him and tried to stand up, slowly coming closer to me. His wings were now dragging behind him and leaving a bloody trail. I cringed at the sight.

His fingers reached the bars, almost touching my fingers. And I notice that even those few steps made him pant.

“Why do you think I did it?” he looked at me with his golden eyes and I felt all the regret in the world.

“I told you my choice, why didn’t you listen?” I felt tears forming in my eyes, “How did it even help? There was no way that Warriors of Light were enough to take a huge empire down!”

“I don’t need to take the whole empire down,” he chuckled sadly, “Just one dragon who is in my way most of the time.”

“And then what?!” I stepped away right before he managed to touch me. Disappointment grew on his face.

“I hoped that you will give me a chance,” a vague smile appeared on his face, “We never had it in the first place...”

“What are you even talking about, we lived together for years?!”

“Not like that... Not like we should have... Not like I wanted,” he looked away, “It’s probably strange for you to hear because I did everything wrong. Father warned me about that, but...”

He stopped talking and looked away.

“What did Father warn you about?” I couldn’t help but ask.

“Not to let you think of me as your brother,” Gideon’s gaze met mine at last and I felt like someone stabbed me with a knife.

“W-why?”

“Because from the day he found out what you are, he knew that the only way for us to keep you safe would be for me to marry you,” he tried to smile, but it seemed too painful in his state and I noticed a small trickle of blood near his lip, “And I never minded that, since his plans were in lines with my feelings...”

Now it was my turn to look away. I wanted to go as far as possible and even made a step in the direction of the exit. But then I realised that I couldn’t run from this. I came here for this exact conversation. For the first time ever, Gideon was ready to talk honestly to me and it would be stupid to waste such an opportunity.

So, instead of running, I came closer. Still not enough for him to reach me, but enough for us to have this conversation in private.

“Tell me everything!” I said dryly, too exhausted to demand or to beg. And the warrior of light in front of me just nodded. “You said that father found out what I am. What do you mean?”

“I thought you already figured that out,” he leaned over the metal bars, trying to hold himself in place, “When you asked me about seraphim... I thought you already knew.”

I ignored that and he continued, “When Father found you, we thought at first that you were just a regular child. You were lying in the shore, wearing next to

nothing, only your long hair covering your frail body... golden hair.” His eyes lingered over me and I brushed my fingers over my short wavy locks. “You know what our laws were telling. He was supposed to kill you then and there. He was the protector of our lands. Yet he couldn’t do it. He said that he looked into your eyes and his heart melted. You were so small, so innocent... He wrapped you in his cloak and got you home, thinking of what to do with you next. But when Mother saw you, she insisted that we had to keep you as our own. She always wanted a daughter but couldn’t have one.”

I smiled. Memories of Lydia Artes almost faded from my mind, but I still remembered her voice and her warmth towards me. She was the closest thing I ever had to a mother.

“Then one day, Keatar came. He just replaced his father as our leader and wanted to prove himself to his people. He found out about you and wanted to fulfill our laws. The White Archipelago never accepted strangers. Foreigners were considered a danger.”

“But I was just a child!” words left my mouth before I realized that.

“That’s what my father said to him,” Gideon chuckled sadly, “But Keatar insisted that there should be no exceptions. He was afraid that people would come looking for you... and what they may reveal. We wanted to stay unnoticed.”

I liked this less and less.

“Then Adrian Artes came up with the last idea he could and said that they need to check you for the light present in your body. Do you remember what happened there?”

“Not really,” I answered honestly, hugging myself.

“Then, I have a bigger story to tell you...”, he groaned and fell to his knees, which made me run to him and try to help him up. “It’s fine, Lara,” he stopped me, “Just let me speak... You see, for decades the White Archipelago was dying. The Citadel of Light...its core crystal that is said to be a gift from the Goddess herself, the one that gives the Warriors of Light power... it’s weak now. It was weak for too long. But when they brought you to it, it reacted. You touched it and so much light emerged that it started working properly again. But this wasn’t all that happened when your little fingers came in contact with

it. Your appearance changed, your aura sparkled... there was no denying that you were something else.”

“A seraph,” I finished for him and he nodded.

“We didn’t know for sure at first, they were supposed to be those mythical creatures... But with time, both Keatar and Father found enough information to come to the same conclusion. And then they burned it...”

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LARA

I tried to keep my breathing steady even though my heart tried to jump out of my chest. He was confirming all my suspicions. But unfortunately, I wasn’t too happy about that.

“Why did they do it?” I asked quietly, “Why did they burn all the information about seraphim after they realized that I was one of them?”

He turned to look at me, every move seemed painful for him. But his lips still managed to curl into a soft smile.

“You managed to fill the crystal with Light, but the effect turned out to be temporary. After a few months, it started to get weaker again and we brought you back and repeated everything. Then again and again. And soon it became clear – whoever had you, had the power,” his words sounded like a slap in the face and I clenched my lips, not to give away how hurt I was to hear that. All my life was a joke! I was just a pawn in the hands of the rulers of the White Archipelago.

“So, that’s what it all was? You all just wanted power... and I was a means of achieving it.”

“Not all of us,” Gideon sighed heavily, and I sat down on the floor opposite of him so that it was easier for him to see me, “I did what I had to for your protection. I didn’t want Fabian and his father to get you.”

“Is that why...” I couldn’t even finish the sentence. But he got what I wanted to ask. Is that why you wanted to marry me?

"I swore to protect you whatever it cost me," he stretched his hand in my direction so that our fingers touched. I wanted to take my hand away, but his words moved me and I stayed in place. "This was always my only reason for existence," my stepbrother continued, "To keep you safe. From everyone. Even when you left me, I had to make sure that no one can hurt you. That's why I killed Keatar. He wanted to get you back and e*****e you, marry you to Fabian and make you live at the Citadel of Light, without ever leaving it again."

"But what was the point of marrying me to Fabian if all he wanted was to use me for charging the artifact inside the Citadel?" I furrowed my brows, feeling how a bad headache started bothering me slowly. So much had happened lately. I couldn't take anything else... And then I caught Gideon's eyes on me. That was how he always looked at me when I didn't know something, but he did.

"For your kids, Lara," he stated calmly, his head still leaning over the stone wall as my heart clenched.

Of course... I was just temporary for the islands. However long I lived, one day or another I would be dead... And then what? They would still need power and energy... And the best way to get them would be through my children! To use them in exact same way! To take their light, to make them produce more seraphim to this world, to marry them so that their spouses could rule...

Disgusting! The ugly feeling was spreading in my chest. Disappointment, anger, resentment...

I wanted to stand up, but Gideon intertwines his fingers with mine already and he held me in place. His eyes begged me to stay.

"Is that why I wasn't accepted into Warriors of Light? And even the Sisters of Light did not want me?!" I chuckled on the verge of crying and he pursed his lips.

"Yes," the reply sounded grim, "Keatar made sure that no one accepted you. Not the orders, not the people... It was his plan from the very beginning. But father intercepted it..."

"With that engagement," I touched the cold bars with my forehead and closed my eyes. The coolness of metal helped me to keep my thoughts in line, "So..."

“He understood Keatar’s plans early on,” I noticed crystals of sweat on Gideon’s face, he was really in a bad state and his burns looked bad as well, “And when Keatar started rejecting marriage proposals for Fabian, we knew we were in trouble. One night he came to our house to talk. You were under our protection and Artes family was always influential. He couldn’t get to you in any other way, so he decided to try and test other options. He offered a marriage...”

“For me and Fabian?” I rolled my eyes, tired.

“No, for me and Bria,” he smirked, “That’s when father had this idea for the first time. The only reason why they were ready to unite me and Bria so early was because they were afraid that father will marry you to me. We share no blood. So, any temple would approve it. When we were discussing it later with Father and he laughed about all that, I told him that I want to do it.”

I looked him in the eye, and he held my stare. Everything was so reasonable... too reasonable.

“It wasn’t for your protection only,” his voice was getting stronger now, “I would be a liar if I said that. When they came with Fabian, everything became so real for me. I realised that they might actually take you away from me one day. And for the first time, I felt the anger and the ugliness inside of my soul. That was the day when I found out that I would never be able to be happy for you if you are not with me. That was the day when I realized that I love you not as my sibling. That was the day when I knew once and for all, that I would do anything for you to be safe and for us to be together. This was the day when I made the most important decision in my life... Everything I did after that day was for that.”

His confession startled me as he said all that calmly looking into my eyes, not a muscle flinched on his face. Only his fingers grasped mine tighter.

“It doesn’t make any of this right,” I sighed and stretched my hand to touch him but stopped before reaching his skin, “Your wounds look bad. I will call a healer. Let me go.”

“No,” he begged, “Please! Stay with me. I need this more than a healer...”

“I can’t stay for long anyway. Demir will get angry...”

He pulled my hand harsh so that my face almost bumped into the bars and I noticed a strange spark in his eyes.

“Lara, don’t you see? He is using you too!” my brother started whispering desperately, “You can’t stay with him! You shouldn’t!”

“He is the only one who has no real use of me, Gideon,” I tried to distance myself, but he kept holding me forcefully. To the point that my hand went numb and I was starting to consider using my magic. However, I still hoped that he would come to his senses and release me without it. The Warrior of Light and the leader of the White Archipelago didn’t look like he could take another blow.

“He will taint you,” he said, looking at my mark again, “He already did! Who knows what his magic will do with you!”

“It doesn’t do anything,” I tried to reassure him, “We...complement each other. I need him and he needs me. This is how it was supposed to be.”

His eyes somehow got darker when he heard my words, and I didn’t like it. I tried to get my hand back, but he was holding me so tight now that I was sure that there would be bruises tomorrow.

“Lara, think about this. It’s not only about you but about our people too...”

“I understand. And I will help where I can but my personal life is off-limits. I already made my choice.” With that, I demonstrated to him the engagement bracelet that Demir put on me and Gideon almost choked on the air.

“We can still take it off...”

“The thing is that I don’t want to,” I said loud and clear, “I love Demir and I am we are going to spend the rest of our life together! Accept this already!”

“How can I?!” he pulled me closer, “You never even gave us a chance!”

“That’s because I can’t! I am sorry, Deon. I love you very much. But not in a way that you want me to. This would never work. You need to forget...”

“Forget?!” he snapped and I noticed something shiny in his other hand. The panic struck me when I realised that it was a feather... A feather from a wing of a Warrior of Light. Once falling out, they turn into the sharpest steel.

I tried to get my hand back for the one-hundredth time but felt his fingers digging deeper into my flesh.

"I am sorry, Lara," he muttered, "This is not how I wanted to do it. But you left me with no other option!"

He used the gleaming feather to cut my flesh in one swift move, even before I managed to summon Light, and to my horror, he dug his face into it and started drinking...

"What are you doing?!" I screamed and sent a pulsar the way that made a hole in the bars and threw him off me.

Crap! That was bad!

I squeezed the hurt hand and saw Sandra running in my direction, while two guards ran from another. But in the next second, a huge wave of light went into them and knocked them off their feet. I wanted to scream, but Gideon's hand covered my mouth, muffling any sounds coming out of it.

"Tsh," his lips touched my ear, "I'm so sorry, Lara. Just a little bit left... Hold on, please."

I hit him with my elbow. Hard. And he released me just for a second. But it was already too late, as three pulsars that he sent into other sells, broke their doors, melting the dark gerdian magic.

Other warriors of like looked weak, but all of them hurried our way, as Gideon fixed my body position, holding me in a way that didn't allow me to move or summon light. A girl that I went to school with grabbed my hand, twisting it painfully and making me scream. At the same time, others were dealing with the guards and Sandra, who attempted to run in the dark smoke but was hit with someone's light right when she tried to escape.

"Careful!" my stepbrother growled at the girl, "No one is hurting her! Just do what we have to!"

And with that, he stretched my bleeding hand to the rest of the warriors of light... They hesitated just for a few seconds. The people I grew up with... The ones with whom I trained for years! But then Fabian stepped forward first and leaned to my wound, licking the dripping blood off. He wanted to do it again, but Gideon pushed him back.

“Just a drop and just once!” he warned his friend. Although I wasn’t even sure anymore if they were still friends... Fabian stepped back, looking displeased. But he said nothing and that could only mean that he acknowledged Deon as his leader after all.

Bria was next, I didn’t even recognize her at first. She grasped my hand, nails digging painfully into my flesh, squeezing it and making me bleed more. She looked into my eyes just before she took a sip and all I saw there was raw hatred. One after another they came, sometimes two at once as they were in a hurry, and tears started rolling down my cheeks, while Gideon was still holding me whispering something to me. My whole body started to feel dizzy. The ones who were already free were releasing the others and they all were coming to me. It felt as if it would never end...

“Just a little bit more,” the stepbrother kissed my temple, just like he always did when I was hurt in our childhood, “Soon they will come and it will be over.”

“Wh-who will come?” I mumbled on the verge of losing my consciousness.

“The red dragons!” Fabian replied grimly, looking around. They already hid the guards and Sandra in one of the cells. All their wounds were healed, not even a single scar left...

The red dragons! They were working together! Panic got the best of me but at least it helped me to sober up from all the blood loss. This was all a plan! And I stupidly fell for it! Gideon knew that I would come to talk! They let it all happen to themselves! And I played the part they needed me to play just perfectly. But the worst thing was that they had the backing of the red dragons! That was why they were so bold in their attacks on the Empire. Alone the White Archipelago had no chance. But together... especially if they got me...

I felt furious and tried to summon light again to the tips of my fingers, even though I knew that my light energy flows were blocked. However, Gideon pressed on my wound and sharp pain prevented me from properly concentrating, taking my last chance of freedom away and making me cry out loudly in pain.

But then the worst thing that could happen occurred – dark flames appeared right in front of our group and Demir stepped out of them in a torn shirt and a few scratches on his face, looking angry and ready to kill. Just what was happening here?!

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LARA

He looked as if someone already attacked him, eyes madly searching for something and when he saw me, his gaze trailing down to my now bloody dress, he only got angrier from the looks of it.

“Demir! Run!” I shouted and he clenched his fists, lips twitching and his eyes flashing with dark magic.

“Please!” he snorted, “My soulmate can’t be thinking that I will run from a fight with the lowlives who only know how to scheme and cover themselves by wounded girls!”

He took a step closer, and Fabian pressed a sword that he took from one of the guards to my neck, “Come closer and she is dead!”

Demir stopped and that was when I got really scared. There were so many of them and he was alone. If he wouldn’t fight back, then they could even kill him!

“They will not touch me!” I said firmly, “They need me more than anything! That’s what all this is about in the first place!”

Gideon shook me to make me shut up, but it was already too late, as Demir summoned his dark magic. The smirk on his face just let us all know that the Warriors of Light were in big trouble. Bria and some guy I didn’t know ran to attack him first and he knocked them both off their feet as if it was nothing special. He took another step, and this time Fabian threw himself at him, trying to get him with the sword and his Light energy attack at the same time. Demir dodged so quickly that the enemy didn’t even have the time to blink.

I tried to struggle in Gideon’s arms, but unfortunately, I was still bleeding and getting weaker and weaker. Even staying on my feet was a challenge at this point.

Demir spared no one, even though they were attacking him by Light energy that seemed to hurt him effectively. Slowly but steadily, he was getting closer to me.

“Enough!” Deon shouted loudly and I felt cold metal touch my neck once again. I was hanging in his grip by now, the last bits of strength leaving me. And even after everything I still couldn’t believe that the man I thought to be my brother was threatening to kll me.

“You wouldn’t do it,” Demir gritted through his teeth.

“I will if I have to!” I hear the cold reply, “I love her too much to let her end up in your arms. Besides, without her, we would all die anyway. And I’d prefer for us to be together in the afterlife than leave her with the likes of you!”

“The likes of me?!” the eyes of the emperor filled with dark magic again, “Together in the afterlife?! You and her are definitely going to be in different places!”

He took a step in our direction and the blade pressed harder into my flesh, probably even drawing more of my bl00d. My vision became blurry but I still noticed some movement behind my soulmate’s back.

“Demir!” I half-whispered in a croaked voice, looking behind him and he followed my gaze, clearing the view for me as well.

I noticed two men and a girl with fiery hair. It took me a few moments to realize what was before my eyes, but one of the men was holding Primrose with a dagger at her throat. Just the way Gideon was holding me. Sean Sarn stepped forward, wearing a uniform of a royal guard.

“It’s over, Demir,” he said, gesturing for the other man to come closer, “Right this very moment the red dragons and rebel gerdians are attacking the palace from two sides. Our allies on the inside will help them as well. There is no need to turn all this into bl00dshed. I think we all know that you already lost. You lost the moment you didn’t chase the golden-haired girl away and let everybody know about your weakness.”

“Don’t do it!” Prim growled and I noticed two bulky bracelets on her hands. They probably used them to block her magic. The man holding her pulled her hair, making her gr0an from pain, and now it was Demir making an angry roaring sound.

“Are you really going to do it? You and Prim grew up together, Sean!” he reminded his ex-friend and the latter sighed heavily.

“That’s why I am not the one holding the dagger,” Sarn said coldly while his eyes locked with mine, “I am the one negotiating. Xander doesn’t want to take any chances. If you don’t obey, your sister and soulmate will be dead. It will cause you such strong physical pain that you will not be able to fight anyway. So, just give up. That’s the only thing you can do now.”

“No!” Prim and I shouted in unison, watching Demir clench his fists. I tried to summon Light again but I was too weak, my head dizzy and breathing ragged. He turned to look at me and I shook my head from side to side to try and stop him from the biggest mistake.

“If I do what you want,” he said calmly, way too calmly, “Will you make sure that they are both alive and treated well?”

“They will be alive, and I will do my best about the rest,” Sean replied dryly.

“No,” I whispered, throwing my head back, desperately trying to stay awake.

My eyes were closing and opening and the last thing I saw was Demir, kneeling with his hands up in the air. Fabian and two other warriors of light ran up to him and pointed their weapons at him. Sean passed them the bracelets just like the ones that Prim was wearing and they put them on.

I finally fell down, Gideon catching me into his arms and throwing away the dagger that he was threatening to kill me with. He was clenching me closer to his body, calling my name and trying to make me look at him. But in my last moments of consciousness, all I did was trying to turn my head in a way so that I could see Demir...

The last thing I saw was three of the Warriors of Light sending Light pulsars at the love of my life at the same time. I tried to scream but this was when my body gave up finally and the darkness consumed me...

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LARA

I woke up with a pounding headache and not quite realizing where I was. Just then memories of kneeling Demir and light pulsars flying straight into him

made me jump on the bed. To my surprise, I was in my chambers in the gerdian palace. I quickly looked around, checking my surroundings carefully, and let out a sigh of relief.

It was either all a dream or Demir won. Of course, he did! There couldn't be any other explanation. He must have destroyed them all after I fell unconscious. He was...well, Demir. And that said it all.

I fell back to the bed, closing my face with my hands and trying to calm down when I heard a clicking noise. I abruptly opened my eyes in disbelief and my heart sunk. There they were... two metal bracelets, one on each of my wrists. Exactly like the ones Prim had on her when she was held hostage.

I concentrated and tried to summon light. It did not respond. And then I tried Air, my strongest element. It wasn't working either.

I felt a sharp pain in my chest that was making it hard for me to breathe. Demir wouldn't do something like this to me. And that meant...

Dark smoke appeared right in front of me and I saw Lisa. She looked at me coldly and curtsied politely.

"May I help you with anything, my lady?" she asked dryly, avoiding even to look at me.

"Lisa!" I crawled off the bed, noticing for the first time that my dress was changed and my hand was properly bandaged, "What happened?! Demir! Where is Demir?!"

"The former emperor is in the dungeons awaiting his execution," the girl clenched her lips and I looked at her in horror.

Former emperor... execution... I felt my head dizzy again and was about to fall when she caught me. But as she did, she didn't care for my recent wound, pressing on it hard and making me hiss from the sudden pain.

"Please, my lady, take care of yourself," she said emotionlessly and I met her angry gaze. It was the first time the always smiling Lisa looked at me like that.

"Thanks," I mumbled, finding my balance again and pressing my hurt hand to my chest to ease the pain.

“Don’t thank me. I just don’t want any more unnecessary deaths because of you!” she spat at me and I forgot how to breathe...

“Wh-who?” I looked at her in horror, it felt as if the ground left from under my feet.

“Sandra!” Lisa narrowed her eyes, “And many others! Half the palace guards died! Nobles! Servants! All because of you and your so-called Warriors of Light! And after something like this, you call us the dark ones?! What a joke!”

Tears were forming in my eyes and I swallowed a huge lump in my throat. The worst thing that could happen – happened!

“I guess the prophecy was true after all! You brought the end to the emperor!” the maid looked at me as if she would kill me this very moment only if she could.

“How dare you!” a familiar voice made me jump and we both turned in the direction of the balcony to witness Gideon landing there safely. His wings were shining brighter than ever, his injuries were gone and overall, he looked better than I ever remembered. He was wearing a white and silver tunic with grey pants and high boots with silver armour. The lighter version, not the battle one. This one was worn for official events and parades. Like a victory parade...

“Insolent dark wench!” he gritted through his teeth, “We only left you alive because the princess said that Lara liked you...”

Lisa’s lips twitched but she did not say anything. And she didn’t even flinch when his hand went to the hilt of his sword.

“Stop it!” I crossed his path and covered Lisa, “What do you think you are doing?!”

“I thought from the very beginning that keeping her here was a bad idea! And now I see that I was right!” Gideon stepped closer but seeing that I did not move, took his hand off his weapon.

“You are not touching her!” I said firmly but he looked behind my back.

“Apologize to the lady immediately!” he ordered.

“My apologies!” Lisa muttered half-heartedly, only making him angrier. But I quickly turned to her.

“Accepted!” I nodded and waved, “And now go, please. I need to speak to my... stepbrother.”

I didn't need to say it twice as the cloud of dark smoke surrounded her and she left me with that monster without a shade of regret. It pained me that she hated me now. But unfortunately, this was the least of my problems.

“How is your hand?” Gideon came closer and tried to touch me but I recoiled from him, making his smile fade.

What did he think it was going to be? A sweet family reunion?!

“Stepbrother,” he tasted the word on his tongue and I looked at him not understanding where he was going with this. He looked at me understandingly and explained, “Just now... You called me your stepbrother. I guess I will have to take it as an improvement. At least you don't consider us siblings anymore and...”

“And you think that's an improvement?!” I snorted, “You truly are delusional!”

“Lara,” he sighed heavily as if he was really tired all of a sudden, “I understand. Don't think that I don't...”

“Really?!” I almost chuckled, “You betrayed my trust multiple times! You hurt the people that I love! You tricked me and used me! You cut me and drank my blood! And to top it off, you even offered a sip to everyone else that I knew!”

He clenched his lips, looking away.

“If there was any other way...”

“Any other way to do what?!” I screamed, “To kill innocent people and to conquer an empire that you don't even need?!”

“To get you back!” he snapped and looked at me, disappointment and fury fighting in his eyes.

“Well, too bad then,” I crossed my hands on my chest, “Because after what you did, you definitely don't have me! Not even as a sister! I will never call you my brother ever again! And no, Gideon, that's not a good thing! Trust me!”

“You only say that now,” he rubbed the bridge of his nose, “Over time, you will get over it. We will fix everything and...”

“Where is Demir?!” I interjected. I simply had no patience to listen to him anymore.

“Forget about him,” the reply was as cold as ice. But inside of me, a storm was rising. “The sooner you forget...”

“I want to see him!” I demanded.

“Over my dead body,” Deon gritted through his teeth, “He is as good as dead anyway. His execution is in a few days. Xander wants to make it an event...”

“Your new best friend?” I rolled my eyes and his lips twitched, proving to me that he himself did not like that idea.

“It’s a partnership,” he announced, and for the first time during our conversation, a bitter laugh escaped me.

“Well, congratulations on your victory!” I turned away and he dared to come closer.

“Lara...”

“Just stop,” I suppressed a sob that desperately wanted to leave my chest, “What do you want from me? How are you planning to use me now?”

“Use you?” his hands landed on my shoulders and I tried to shake them off, but he only grasped me tighter, “Lara, you will be treated as a goddess back at home!”

“Will that be before or after you all drink my blood without my consent?!” I managed to get out from him and noticed the disappointment on his perfect face.

“It was just one time because we didn’t have a choice,” he tried to explain, “Without it...”

“You wouldn’t be able to sacrifice all those people!” I scoffed.

“It’s on the red dragons. My people were just protecting you and themselves.”

His wings dissipated, leaving only tiny specs of light behind. And for the first time, I felt disappointed as I realized that he was planning to stay with me. Because he was the last person I wanted to see right now.

“I told you already. The White Archipelago is dying. We need you there!” Gideon didn’t risk coming closer again and just sat on the nearby chair, throwing his head back.

“I would never let the Citadel of Light die! I am not a monster!” I snorted, “You could have explained everything to me and I would have tried to help you! We could arrange everything only if you...”

“Only if I didn’t love you the way I do,” he chuckled darkly, “Yes, Lara. I am greedy. It’s bad but it’s true! And I would never risk a dark dragon tainting what’s so precious to me! I needed that dragon and his family out of our lives and now it’s done! Blame me all you want but...”

“F-family?” I turned to face him again, cold sweat trickling down my spine, “Gideon, what happened to princess Primrose?!”

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LARA

He pursed his lips and now I wanted to slap him. But I needed the information more.

“What. Happened. To. Prim?!” I demanded, clenching my fists. My wounded hand was still hurting but I did not care.

“She is fine if that’s what you worried about. Alive and well. Treated like a queen,” he replied way too fast.

“And why is that?!” I narrowed my eyes since I knew he wasn’t telling me something important. It all felt like a trick again and now I knew better...

“Because she is going to be the next gerdian empress, Lara,” he sighed, giving up, “Xander Rust, the leader of the red dragons, is in love with her. He is to be announced the new emperor and the princess will become his wife on the same day. This will also help him to keep his throne and legalize his claim since most gerdians love their royal family. And now they will have it. Their children will be heirs...”

“Oh, good!” I smiled like an idiot he obviously thought that I was, and he looked at me strangely for the first time, “How well did you two plan everything! Just perfect! And everyone is happy, right?!”

His gaze shifted away but I continued, “Except for Demir who is going to be killed! And Primrose who is his sister and HATES Xander! And me! But who cares about us, right?! As long as you two get what you want!”

Gideon appeared next to me in no time, grasping my shoulders and shaking me vigorously. His glare told me that he was ready to do everything to make me shut up.

“You will be happy!” he almost shouted in my face, “Once we leave this place! Once you forget...”

“Forget?!” I interrupted his not impressive speech, rolling my eyes, “Do you really think that it is a possibility here?! I will NEVER forget how happy I WAS! HERE! WITH HIM!”

A slap stung my cheek and I covered it with my palm, tasting blood in my mouth. I threw an angry gaze at him but saw that he was horrified with his own actions as well. At least there was a bit of sanity in him.

“Lara, I...”

“Just leave me! I don’t want anything to do with you anymore!” tears rolled down my cheeks and I wiped them off my face quickly, because crying in front of him wasn’t an option. Not anymore.

“It’s fine,” he pulled me into an embrace from which I tried to get out desperately, but he was much taller and bigger than I was, so he made me stay in place as he whispered into my ear, “Everything will get back to normal. I’ll take you back home and over time you will find a way to forgive me. I’ll keep you safe, I’ll take care of you, I will give you whatever it is that you need, I’ll find a way! That’s a promise, Lara. I’ll make you happy!”

“You will only make me happy if you if you let Demir and me go,” I pronounced every word calmly and distinctively, “In any other case I will be hating you forever because you destroyed my life and killed my one and only soulmate. And THAT’S a promise, Gideon!”

“Soulmate?” he did not look happy at all, “This bond between the two of you will be gone the moment he dies! The mark will be gone and you will be free! You will see that I am right about it!”

“Is that what you’ve been telling yourself all the time?!” I snorted, not being able to deal with all that anymore, “Gideon, it’s called a soulmate for a reason! Even if you cut this mark out of my flesh, I will still love him! I will never forget him! He is a part of me as much as I am a part of him! If you hurt him, you will only be hurting me in the process.”

“Well, you seem fine now,” he smirked and looked at me with a challenge in his eyes. And I knew at once what he meant. They were torturing him and I didn’t feel it...

I returned him the slap with my wounded hand and felt how the stitches broke on the wound that he made. The blood soaked through my bandages quickly and I hissed from the pain.

Gideon came to me, his cheek slightly red and swollen from my blow, and took my hand, looking at it with worry in his eyes. The anger was gone.

“I don’t understand,” he muttered, “Why don’t you heal?!”

“Maybe because you are torturing my soulmate?!” I pulled my arm out harshly. I was ready to feel any kind of pain just to avoid him touching me.

“Nonsense!” he spat, “It doesn’t work like that!”

“What would you know about it?! It’s not like you have someone like that!” I scoffed and he stepped away. His lips twitched and he clenched his fists as he went for the balcony.

“Tonight is the Victory Feast,” he said without turning to look at me, “You and I are going together.”

“I think I’ll pass!” I scoffed, lowering myself into a chair as my head felt dizzy again.

“Not if you want to see your friend, the gerdian princess,” he stood on the rails and smirked at me as his wings spread behind his back, “Be ready in three hours.”

I took the nearest thing that I found that turned out to be a vase and threw it at him, however, it broke when it reached his feathers, they shined and seemed to be as strong as the best steel. He jumped down and in a second, I saw him taking up height as he flew somewhere far.

Dark smoked appeared right before I and Lisa stepped out. I prepared to a wave of hatred again but noticed that this time she had a bowl of water and a basket with medical supplies in her hands.

“I am fine,” I lied but she looked at me the way strict parents look at silly children.

“If you are not ready by the time he specified, people will be punished,” she explained coldly, “I need to patch you up, wash you, and dress you. Lives depend on it whether you like it or not.”

Just what was going on here?! What were they doing?

She worked in silence, redoing my broken stitches and changing the bandages.

“I think a dress with long sleeves will be appropriate tonight,” the maid stated plainly, “He ordered to throw away everything dark that you had, so now you are only left with the white dresses.”

“Not my biggest problem at the moment,” I muttered and she pressed on my arm painfully, making me screech slightly.

“Compared to others you don’t have troubles at all,” she stated bluntly and got up, “Time for a bath, my lady.”

I sighed and followed her, the nice and sunny girl in Lisa was gone. Probably as naïve and trusting one was gone in me...

She was braiding my hair when I finally decided to ask her what was bothering me all this time.

“How is Prim? Where is she?”

Lisa sighed and contemplated for a while whether to reply to me or not. But the good person in her won.

“She is in her old room. Locked and with the same bracelets that you are wearing now. Angry.”

“Xander Rust, did he...”, I swallowed a lump in my throat, “hurt her in any way?”

“I don’t think so,” she shook her head, “The princess is feisty. And he was busy now usurping the throne and fighting the small battles that occur here and there in the empire.”

“Good,” I mumbled, slightly relieved when the door behind us opened and Gideon walked into the wardrobe room we were at. He held a box in his hands and a dashing smile on his face. Yet Lisa and I greeted him with cold expressions.

“Lara, you look so beautiful!” he came closer, “So nice to see you in our colours again...”

“It’s not like I had a choice, right?!” I huffed, looking away.

“Anyway, I brought you a present,” he put the box in front of me, watching me expectantly. In the past, when he was bringing me anything, I clapped my hands like a child and jumped with joy. He was the only one who was giving me presents. But now I knew why. And didn’t want anything from him anymore.

“I don’t need it,” my reply sounded cold and firm.

“You don’t even know what that is!” he tried to reason with me.

“Regardless of what it is, I am not interested!”

Without saying anything else, he opened the box and I saw a huge and expensive diamond necklace in it. Clusters of big precious stones were arranged in flowers and leaves. If I were to put it on, it would probably cover my whole neck and chest, creating a beautiful effect. But I was not going to.

“What do you think now?” he smiled and took it in his hands as if to demonstrate it better.

“I think that you don’t know me at all, stepbrother,” I said dryly as Lisa put the last pin into my hair. Our eyes met just for a second and he dropped the jewellery back carelessly.

“Is this how you are going to play it?” he asked with a challenge.

“No,” I lifted my chin up high, “I am not planning to plan at all!”

“Are you so sure?!” he sneered, distorting his perfect angelic face and in just under a second he was next to Lisa, grabbing her by her neck and lifting her up in the air. She tried to scratch him but it was obviously not working and her legs were just twitching helplessly in the air.

“What are you doing?!” I screamed in horror, “Let her go!”

“Not until you learn how to behave!” he smirked coldly, “I am ready to forgive you a lot as it is. But you’ll have to behave, Lara!”

I froze for just a second and he squeezed her throat tighter, making her gurgle.

“Fine! Fine!” I yelled and grabbed the necklace, putting it on, “I get it!”

He dropped Lisa to the floor and I wanted to check on her when he caught me, “What do good girls say when they get presents.”

Our gazes locked and I gritted through my teeth, “Thank you, stepbrother.”

He didn’t look happy still but he forced a smile anyway, “Well, it’s a start. Just remember, Lara, that I still know you better than anyone. I know what you care about and how you will behave. That’s what helped us to win this war.”

He took the necklace and walked around me to help me put it on. The cold metal and stones seemed like a stranglehold, not letting me breathe properly. But from the corner of my eye, I saw Lisa getting back on her feet and her thankful gaze. And I felt a little bit better after that.

“Now,” Gideon offered me his hand, “Would you be so kind as to let me escort you to our victory celebrations.”

Without saying anything I put my hand in his and he led me out with a smug smile on his face. I never noticed that Deon could be so cruel... I wondered how many other things I didn’t notice about him before...

He brought me to the main hall, used for bigger events. This was where we once had the masquerade ball and this was where my and Demir's engagement was supposed to be celebrated. I noticed that the flowers and ornaments prepared for it were still there, now used for a completely different occasion.

The huge doors opened before us and my lips parted in shock...