

The Selection: Bride Of The Dark Dragon Chapter 36 - Tips

MIRA

The kiss is long and overwhelming. For a second there I try to push him away, but then something inside of me decides not to... As if he just read my mind, he squeezes me even tighter in his arms. When he lets go of me, because, let's be honest, we both need to breathe, I almost fall to the floor. Why the heavens do I feel so dizzy every time?

He looks at my shuddering frame and touches his own lips in frustration while I step away. However, in just a second, he moves firmly in my direction and by the look in his eyes, I know exactly what he is thinking.

"Please, help Fawn!", I say the first thing that comes to my mind stretching my hands before me.

He stops and sparks of dark magic start to dance madly in his eyes.

"Is that why you responded to my kiss just now?", his voice is lower than usual and it makes me shrug, "To ask me for something?"

"Of course not!", I say, appalled, and don't even notice when he sweeps me off my feet and starts walking to the bedroom.

"Then prove it!" he smirks and throws me onto the bed.

"Excuse me!", I gasp and start crawling away from him, "I don't have to prove anything! And definitely not in a way that you are implying!"

"Uh-huh", he nods sarcastically while he is on top of me already and I feel his hand sliding up my leg, lifting up my silky dress and creating more sensations than I want to feel right now. This is so strange... I breathe faster and somehow it feels that I need more air...

"Please, stop!", I whisper, but he is already too busy kissing my neck as his hand brushes my thigh. Oh, Gods!

"Mira", he breathes into my ear and bites my earlobe, "Somehow I feel that you don't really want me to stop..."

“I-I do”, I squeak when I feel him touching the ties of my underwear...

“It’s very provocative, Mira,” he chuckles into my breast, “Who do you wear these for?”

“I wear these because someone destroyed all the other undergarments that I had!”, I retort, breathing heavily, “And something tells me that it was you!”

“Yeah, it was me”, Derrien’s hand suddenly leaves my thighs and I feel him trying to undo my dress’s fastening at my back.

“Admitting so easily?”

“I’ve promised not to lie, haven’t I?”, he smirks, “fvck, why is this so complicated?”

“Derrien,” I say, but he doesn’t react, still struggling with the buttons.

“To chaos with this dress”, his eyes shine so brightly with magic that it doesn’t promise me anything good. I remember far too well how he turns clothes to ashes in seconds!

“Wait”, I put my hand on his cheek and brush it softly, he looks at me in surprise and the magic is gone, “Aren’t you forgetting something?”

“What?”, he asks, almost in a daze.

“That we have work to do. Isn’t it time for us to go on that trip to Silver Mountains Chain, isn’t it?”, I ask bluntly and quickly and for a second there he just stares at me. Then he closes his eyes and puts his head on my shoulder sighing heavily.

“Did anyone ever told you, Mira, that you are a mood-killer?”, he groans.

“Actually, yes”, I admit, “Once at the Academy there was supposed to be a...”

His lips cover mine quickly and greedily, taking my breath away literally and metaphorically. When he pulls away and sits up, I don’t know what to say.

“It’s going to be a very interesting trip, Mira. Be ready in one hour. We meet at the back door,” he says and flames of dark magic consume him. I lift myself up to make sure I am alone in my room and then fall back to the bed. Just what am I doing?! Have I fallen for him? Why would I let him do so much to

me? Am I crazy? And just what did he mean by saying that the trip is going to be interesting?

The trip. This is the most important! Yes, that's what I should be thinking about and nothing else! I am helping to find Bella's murderer!

I stand up and run to the wardrobe, finding the warmest clothes and shoes. The Silver Mountain Chain is covered with snow, I'd better be prepared. I pick a dark green dress with golden embroidery and a hood attached to it – one of my own. Then I remember that Derrien gifted me a cloak trimmed with fur and take that as well. I also pack another dress and some necessities with me – just in case – and put on my favourite dark leather combat boots. Just because they are comfortable and gods know how much walking we'll have to do there.

A knock on the door disturbs my train of thought. I have told the girls that I will be on a date with Derrien, so none of them should come for a visit.

"Hello, Mira", Tristan smiles softly with corners of his lips, "May we speak? Please?"

"Uhm... I am a bit in a hurry," I say, surprised. He is the last person I expected to see.

"It's not a long conversation", he sighs, "I wouldn't take much of your time..."

"Alright, come in", I nod.

"Mira, I think you are forgetting about the barrier in your room," he says, confused.

"Oh, no, it's fine. It allows people that I want to see inside in. Come in", I confess. Tristan carefully touches the barrier and immediately takes it away as if in pain. I notice burns on his fingers.

"Oh, gods!", I scream and run out to him to the hallway.

"Either that thing is broken or you don't really want to see me inside," he smiles sadly and puts his hand down. I notice that the engagement bracelet is still on it. But choose not to comment at this time.

"I swear to gods, just yesterday my friends walked in freely here", I say quietly.

“It’s alright, Mira, I guess lord Derwood doesn’t want any men inside your chambers,” he says and does not look me in the eye, “I should have done the same when I had the chance...”

I look up at him in surprise, “What do you mean, Tristan?”

“I should have married you last year...”, he says with bitterness in his voice, “Then you wouldn’t be here. You would be safe and in my castle... But I... I thought you were too young... And you were so happy to be at the Academy so that I wanted to give you another year... I thought that you would always be there, you’ve been by my side for so long... I was sure it would never end...”

I feel a prick of pain in my chest. He has never spoken to me like that... I never knew what was on his mind...

“Mira, when I found out that you received the Dark mark...”, he continues, “It was the worst day of my life. The King gave me the list of names and told me to be strong... for the Kingdom... Only I didn’t care about the Kingdom or anything else at that moment. I wanted to go to the Academy and take you away! Marry you, at last, hide you in my castle from anyone! But the King... He ordered me not to. I already knew for a while before that I would be supervising the Dark Selection... And my task is to keep our countries away from war... I can’t take you back, Mira... It would be treason...”

“I understand”, I say quietly, “Ragnard family are considered the right hand of King Bendor of Akyria. Duty before everything is your family motto... I... I understand... We weren’t a real couple anyway, I didn’t even know you were serious about marrying me in the first place, so no hard feelings...”

I don’t get to finish my sentence as Tristan pulls me by my waist and kisses me for the first time ever... I gasp in shock and his tongue enters my mouth greedily and madly. It’s like he is crazy and out of control. And the Tristan I know is always in control... I try to push him away, but he just grabs my arms and pulls me even closer...

“You are going to die for this, Sapphire Knight!”, Derrien’s voice sounds like thunder...

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I manage to break the kiss and step away quickly, meeting Tristan's frustrated gaze. But the next moment dark smoke surrounds him and concentrating on his neck lifts him up in the air. Smoke? Since when Derrien's magic looks like that?

"Derrien, please", I run-up to the gerdian, "This was completely coincidental... he..."

"Coincidental?", the dark lord grits through his teeth, not even bothering to look at me, "He confesses to you and then forces a kiss on you and you say it's a coincidence?!"

"Gods, Derrien, it doesn't matter! Please, don't kill him!", I beg, standing in front of him, pressing my arms into his chest.

"You care about him?!", he says in disbelief, his eyes full of dark magic. A chill goes down my spine. I've never seen him like this!

"I know him for most of my life! He is a friend of the family! And... and he is important in the Kingdom! If you kill him, that would be bad... and probably even for you!"

"Oh, so now it's me that you care about?!", he chuckles bitterly, clearly not impressed.

"I don't want anyone else to die here! Is that so much to ask!", I shout and hit him on his chest with my fists. Two desperate kicks bring the magic down and Tristan falls to the ground. I look back at him quickly and see how red he is. But he is alive.

"Did you just raise your hand at me?", Derrien growls, "For HIM?!"

Oh, gods... That's bad. Bad, bad, bad... He is stepping towards me, backing me into a wall.

"It's not like that," I squeak, "Let's just go inside and talk... Please..."

"Mira...", I hear Tristan's hoarse voice and see him trying to crawl in my direction, "Don't hurt her!"

Oh, he did not just say that! Damn it!

Dark flames appear at the tips of Derrien's fingers and these are not the harmless type that he uses to transport us... These are deadly... I feel the aura of death from the gerdian for the first time and it's so suffocating.

"Please, don't!", I beg, but he is not looking at me. And as if to make the matters worse, Tristan stands up and raises his head. He is not called the Sapphire Knight of the Kingdom for nothing. Honour is in his blood and he is ready to accept his death with it.

For a few seconds, they look at each other and Derrien starts moving his hand, but I stand on my toes quickly and slide my hands to his neck and chin, turning his face to me and shout, "Rien, stop!"

The flames are gone. And I feel one of his hands on my waist, pulling me closer and then letting me go.

"Go get your bag, Mira!", he says in a voice that is lower than usual but when he sees me hesitating, adds, "You just saved this dog's life. Go. You have ten seconds."

"Oh, gods! Thank you!", I smile at him and bit my lip, "Everything is ready! I will be back in five!"

I run quickly to my chambers and pick up the small brown leather bag that I have prepared for our journey. I close the door with magic and I am right in front of Derrien as soon as I promised. The two men are still staring at each other. And I silently pray that Tristan would keep his mouth shut right now.

"I am ready!", I say to break the ice. Well, I know that's not possible. But anything that distracts Derrien from murderous thoughts is great right now.

"Good", he looks at me and his eyes soften a bit.

"You can't take a participant of the Dark Selection out of the castle premises," Tristan says all of a sudden, his eyes are on my bag and they are full of pain... I realize quickly what he is thinking right now... Nothing good probably...

"You are not the one to talk right now about the rules!", Derrien smirks at him and pulls me into his arms by my waist once again, "All participants of the Dark Selection are considered the property of gerdian lords. You aren't even

allowed to look at them, let alone touch them! I should have killed you right now and I only didn't do it not to ruin lady Mira's mood right before our date!"

He stresses out the last words and looks at me. I say nothing. Of course, he wouldn't be explaining to Tristan of all the people where we are going and why... And neither can I... So Tristan will think what he will think...It doesn't matter really... We aren't engaged anymore and I am one of the participants. If I don't run, sooner or later I will have to really be with one of the lords... And Derrien...

"When will you be back?", Tristan's voice is cold and emotionless, "I need to know as the supervisor of the Selection."

"On Monday if everything goes good," Derwood chuckles and now I want to hit him. We are only going for a day, for gods' sake! That's what he told me before. But he cruelly wants to cause as much pain to my ex-fiancé as possible.

"You can't...", the knight starts speaking.

"I can do whatever the hell I want, boy!", Derrien growls, "I am an archduke of the Gerdian Empire and a general of our army! If today I want to take all the girls, neither my emperor nor your king would even say a word to me about it! And if I accidentally kill you, they will both close their eyes! Because no one except for you is stupid enough to make me their own enemy! Forget about Mira! She is off your limits! If you can't handle it, resign from your duty here and go back to your court and look for a new fiancée to lick your wounds! Because the next time I see you speak or touch her, I would turn you to ashes! That's a promise, Sapphire Knight!"

With that, flames of dark magic start slowly consuming us. Much slower than usual. Derrien is making a point here.

Tristan takes a step in our direction, hand on his sword. But I mouth, "Don't you dare!". And he stops. I smile apologetically and that's when we disappear completely.

The transportation takes us to the back entrance of the castle. We appear to be standing on the small staircase outside of the building. But Derrien does not let go of me. Instead, he grasps my chin into his fingers and lifts it up so that I look at him.

“The same goes for you, Mira!”, he says in a warning tone, “If I see you speak to him then I...”

“You won’t”, I interrupt him and see a satisfied expression on his face. Playful even.

“Clever little mage”, he praises me and brushes over my lower lip, “He is in the past, Mira. Forget about him.”

“Look,” I sigh, “What you heard right now was our longest conversation. We’ve been engaged for years, but there isn’t much to remember. And it’s not like he confessed love to me right now..”

“It was a lot like confessing love to you...”, the gerdian smirks.

“And yet it wasn’t. You don’t know Tristan! He probably is just pissed that something did not go the way he planned,” I shake my shoulders, “That was also our first proper kiss...”

“And the last”, Derrien ads rashly, looking at me with sparks of dark magic dancing madly in his eyes.

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I look at him for a second and want to smile for some reason, but control myself and just give him a polite nod, “And the last.”

“Now – to the carriage!”, he commands and I know that he is still a bit mad. At me mostly even though none of it is my fault! But it’s way better than what has been happening a few minutes ago.

And that’s when I see our means of transport to the Silver Mountain Chain and gasp. Four huge griffins are harnessed to our carriage. I’ve never even seen them in life, just on pages of my academy books. They are very rare... Half body of a lion, another half – eagle. And wings, humongous in size!

“W-why griffins?”, I look at Derrien.

“Because they can fly,” he answers as if he is already bored, “Otherwise we’d be getting to those mountains of yours for days!”

“Of course”, I feel so stupid.

“Come, Mira”, he takes the bag out of my hands even though it’s not big at all and pulls me to the carriage by his free hand.

It’s luxurious and comfortable inside. Plush purple seats, a few cushions, a table with a set for tea and snacks under a protective magic shield. I take my seat and Derrien sits opposite of me, dropping his coat and my bag next to him. I take off my cape as well, as it is very warm inside, and look out of the window. I don’t want to miss it. I have never flown in my life!

A second – and griffins start to move. They take up speed and jump off to the sky, flapping their wings until we are high enough. Incredible! The enormous castle looks smaller and smaller. The trees look like miniatures from my brother’s collection back at home. The scenery changes so fast. And then I see them... the clouds!

“Oh, gods...”, I whisper, not able to look away. They are like white smoke just hanging there... So beautiful and fluffy. We go through them easily and soon we are above them and I can’t quite believe it! Yet one strange thing, somehow I feel water aura and not the air one that I expected... Strange.

“What are you thinking about?”, Derrien interrupts my thoughts and I see that he looks at me as if he was amused.

“Hum”, I bite my lip, “I am thinking about how wonderful it is to fly. This is my first time...”

“Oh, really?” he chuckles, “You don’t say.”

“That must be pretty normal to you”, I roll my eyes and look back at the window.

“More than you might think”, he answers.

“I wonder why I feel so much water energy here, though. Shouldn’t it be almost zero up in the air itself?”, I turn to my companion again and see him smiling with the corner of his lips.

“Clouds are actually made out of water, Mira,” he says and my mind is overwhelmed.

“What? But how...”, I stop talking not to look like an i***t, “The rain comes from dark clouds... That makes sense. But what about the white ones?”

“Still tiny droplets of water and ice, but not too much,” he says, “You actually got that pretty fast.”

“I never read anything about clouds...”

“You have bigger problems at the Akyrian Kingdom, I guess...”, he reasons, “You are trying to survive and concentrate on magic, ignoring anything else around you..”

“And you?”

“We don’t need to survive. We just exist and have plenty of time to learn, discover, invent...”, he boasts and I want him to eat it. I feel a bit hurt by the way he speaks of my homeland!

“But you are trying to survive too, lord Derwood”, I say and the way I address him does not go unnoticed as he sits up immediately.

“What do you mean exactly, lady Miradora?”, he retorts and my cheeks flush with anger.

“I mean that something went wrong and now you can’t give birth to enough women, so you have to force them to come from other countries. Otherwise, it would be hard to keep up with procreation,” I cross my hands on my chest and sneakily notice how appalled he is by my words.

“We don’t have to force women,” he says, clearly offended by my words, “Usually they are happy to...”

“How would you even know that? I bet you have never even asked anyone if they really wanted to be a part of the Selection!”, I snort.

“There was no need. They behaved like they wanted to.”

“To survive!”

“You know, Mira, a lot of girls would kill to get to your place!”, he snaps.

“You know, Derrien, a lot of girls would feel the same way I feel! I am lucky I wasn’t in love with Tristan! Otherwise, that would have been a heart-breaking kind of situation! But no one would care! Because no one here cares about us! It’s all about you and it’s never about us! No one asks us what we want! We are just property! And we are reminded of that constantly! I wasn’t born a slave, I was born free – the same way as you! Imagine how would you feel in a similar situation!”

“If I met you, I would be fine!”, he grumbles and turns away to stare at the opposite window. And I feel a prick of conscience. He may be so sweet sometimes! “Although I probably would be chosen by someone more important.”

Alright, that feeling is gone. He is what he is – inhuman, selfish son of a harpy!

“And I would probably choose someone younger,” I smirk and see the flashes of dark magic from his eyes reflect in the window glass in front of him. There you go!

We say nothing for the next hour and all my excitement about the flying is gone. It’s actually pretty boring up here. We are too high to see anything remotely interesting. I don’t even notice how I drift off to sleep.

I enter a room that I’ve never seen before in my life... High ceilings and luxurious furniture, a desk in front of the window, curtains are closed as it is dark already. It’s a personal cabinet of sorts, with bookshelves taking space on most of the walls. Flames dance in the fireplace and I see Derrien standing next to it with his back to me... I want to walk away, but the me in the dream walks towards him and wraps her hands around his neck and waist from the back.

“You’ve been a naughty little mage”, he says in a lower than usual voice...

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“You’ve been a naughty little mage”, he says in a lower than usual voice...

“Uh-huh”, I say while my fingers travel to the buttons of his shirt, undoing them as if they’ve done it hundreds of times before, “So, soooo bad!”

The shirt falls to the floor and I see the n.aked, muscly, well-sculpted back of the gerdian lord for the first time. Well, the real me. The one in the dream is pretty comfortable with the sight. What grasps my attention is a tattoo on his left shoulder blade – it's a black dragon curling into a circle with only its wings protruding beyond the shape, big and powerful wings. Beautiful but also scary for some reason... Is it my sick imagination? Derrien definitely does not look like a tattoo kind of man. Mostly mercenaries and lower-ranked warriors that come from commoner background have those...

Meanwhile, the me in the dream starts seductively k!ssing the lord's back and I feel his muscles flex under my arms and his breathing becoming heavy.

"Is it all just a game to you?" he asks me firmly.

"Oh, I'm sorry", I mutter sarcastically, "You are not in the mood... I'd better leave then!"

I turn on my bare feet and take a few steps towards the exit, but he catches me by my hand and pulls me back into a deep and possessive k!ss. I feel dizzy, even though it's just a dream again. But it feels exactly the same way as when he k!ssed me in reality. Am I going crazy?

"You are not going anywhere!", he smirks and lifts me into his hands. He walks around the sofa that stands in front of the fireplace and enters a room behind it, which is to absolutely no surprise of mine is the bedroom. Oh, gods!

Derrien throws me onto the massive four-post bed with tulle curtains as if I weigh nothing, then clicks his fingers and dozens of candles light up in the dark room, giving us some light. He walks slowly around the bed, not taking his eyes off me, and unbuckles his pants. I want to close my eyes and turn away, but the me in the dream has no such desires... He steps into the area that is covered from my eyes by an undone tulle curtain and I can only see the shape of him. I gulp realizing that he is now n.aked and coming to me. I have never... I've never been with anyone like this...

His hand emerges from the darkness, as he stands on the side of the room where there are no candles at all, and brushes over my face and lower l!p, making me breathe deeper... It then slides lower, to my c.hest and he cups one of them gently, and then the other... making my n!pples harden under his touch. He then pays attention to the only two ties that hold the thin silk olive nightgown on my body and unties them in turns. Then he hooks the cold fabric with his fingers and helps it slide down to my very walst, leaving my b.reasts

open to his gaze. A moan escapes me... And not the me in the dream, in the real me... but she repeats it simultaneously. Gods, this is too intense for me! Feels too real!

His hand then travels to the lower parts of my nightgown and brushing his hand over my calves and then thighs, he lifts it up to my waist as well.

“Naughty little mage does not wear any underwear,” he chuckles as his fingers brush over my center and I gasp at the impulses it sends all over me. I close my eyes and arch my back as the sensations overwhelm me.

“Derrien!”, his name escapes my lips.

“You know how to call me, Mira,” he whispers into my ear and I feel the mattress next to me dip with his weight. He kisses me again, with so much desire and passion...

“Rien!”, I moan in his arms and he leaves a trail of kisses from my neck to my belly and then lower... What is he...

Oh, gods! ...

Gods!

GODS!

“Gods!”, I scream and wake up as my body pulses with waves of pleasure coming from my core. Wave, after wave, after wave!

I breathe heavily and flap my lashes trying to adjust to the light.

“Shhh, Mira, it alright”, strong hands, soothing voice... I don’t realize what is going on at first, but I know now that it was just a dream. I am back in the carriage, back in Derrien’s arms... Wait, where am I?

His hand emerges from the darkness, as he stands on the side of the room where there are no candles at all, and brushes over my face and lower lip, making me breathe deeper... It then slides lower, to my chest and he cups one of them gently, and then the other... making my nipples harden under his touch. He then pays attention to the only two ties that hold the thin silk olive nightgown on my body and unties them in turns. Then he hooks the cold fabric with his fingers and helps it slide down to my very waist, leaving my breasts

open to his gaze. A moan escapes me... And not the me in the dream, in the real me... but she repeats it simultaneously. Gods, this is too intense for me! Feels too real!

I try to stand up, but he holds me in place. I am stuck lying in his arms, one of which brushes my cheeks in circular motions. I look at him and swallow... His brown with red tint eyes now look much redder. And sparks of dark magic dance so wildly...

"Wh-what are you doing?", I ask hesitantly. He looks like he can devour me any moment now.

"You had an interesting dream, Mira", he smirks and I blush. He can't possibly know, can he? "Maybe you would like to tell me what you saw?"

"Just a regular nightmare," I like, the dream still makes my body shudder, but not in a bad way, "I am alright. You can let go of me."

"A nightmare?", he looks displeased at my words, "Hm. Mira, to forget a nightmare, you need to replace it with some kind of good memories!"

And before I can say anything, he covers my lips with his in a greedy kiss. I must be too shaken by what I just saw and experience, or maybe I have simply got mad, but I respond... Hesitantly... but it's all the invitation he needs. I feel the heat between us. Gods, it's so unbearably hot inside this carriage!

A moan escapes me when his tongue touches my neck... Just like in the dream...

And that's when we both feel the strange shaking of our transportation and the sounds of wheels on the ground... There's no denying that we have just landed.

He stops the kisses and just leaves his face, buried into my neck, swearing under his heavy breath...

"Derrien," I call his name carefully, "We arrived..."

He lifts up and carefully places me on a seat next to him and I exhale loudly. Probably too loudly to his taste, as he grasps me by my chin and makes me look into his shining with dark magic eyes once again, "This is not over, Mira!"

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We walk out of the carriage and I put my cape on. It's incredibly cold here! But something is wrong, though and I feel it at once.

"Derrien", I call for my companion and he looks at me raising his brow, "I don't think this is the place that I have shown to you on the map..."

He gets an artifact out of his pocket that looks like a little box and opens it. I see some purple light of dark magic coming out of it and come closer to look. There are a map and two beaming dots in it. And my guess is one of the dots in the box, and the other is our destination point.

"You are right", he says firmly, "We are at least 10 miles away from where you advised us to land."

"Why haven't the griffins taken us there?", I ask.

"That's what I am going to find out now", he says and creates a ball of dark fire, throwing it in front of us with force. It flies far, but soon it meets an invisible obstacle and dissolves in it.

"Oh my!", I change my vision to a magical one and come closer, "It's a barrier! More like a dome even. It completely covers this part of the mountain! I've never seen a barrier this huge!"

"You are adorable," he chuckles sarcastically. Of course. For him, it's probably nothing. His kind is superior to ours. I couldn't break his barrier in my room for the life of me.

We both come close to the very edge and I look at the pattern that created this magnificent shield. Intricate. Not simple at all. Placed with one of the best magicians of the Kingdom. However, I notice another strange thing.

"What is it?", Derrien asks as if he reads my mind.

"Wait a second", I say and stretch my hand. Surprisingly, it goes straight through the barrier without any trouble. "Strange," I look back at the gerdian, "Shouldn't this prevent us from entering?"

“Hmm”, the dark lord repeats after me and his hand also goes through the shield without any problems, “This may mean only one thing, little mage. This thing is here not to prevent us from entering. It’s for something else!”

“I wish I knew what it is exactly, but the pattern used doesn’t say much to me. Maybe if I ever got graduating from the Academy...”, I sign, but he takes my hand in his and just walks inside the barrier pulling me in as well.

“Only one way to find out!”, he says firmly, “Don’t get lost!”

“My bag!, I squeak trying to keep up with him.

“It’s just some 10 miles to the goal and we’ll be back in no time as I will use my transportation skills to get us back”, he says.

“Why didn’t you use it in the first place?”, I ask since he is the first to mention the subject that’s been bothering me since he announced the whole trip thing.

“It could only be used to the places I know well. I can’t transport us to an unknown mountain, the landing might be too dangerous. I’ll survive for sure, but...”

He stops talking, but I know now that the reason he is not using his usual flames is because I am with him. He didn’t want me to get hurt. And that’s sweet. He also thinks that I am a weakling. That prick!

I giggle quietly to myself and he turns to look at me but says nothing. However, flashes of dark magic in his eyes tell me more than he wishes to share.

We walk in silence for some time. The road is tricky as we are going uphill. Derrien checks his artifact from time to time to check that we are on the correct route. The road is tricky as we are going uphill. I almost fall own once, but luckily, he gives me a hand in time and helps to get up, giving me support. However, when I try to take my hand back, he doesn’t let me.

“I can walk by myself, you know?”, I say to him.

“I know”, he smirks, “But it’s just faster this way.”

I don’t see how it’s faster, considering that he slowed down significantly. And now it just looks like we are on a leisure stroll here. But oh, well. Who am I to

contradict the decisions of the gerdian lord? It feels nice to be out of the Dark Selection castle. For the first time in all those days, I can breathe!

I take a deep breath of fresh air, close my eyes, and smile as this feels nice. When I open my eyes, I feel Derrien's gaze on me. But it's a bit embarrassing to look back. I must have looked like an i***t.

"Why did you decide to become a battlemage?", he suddenly asks.

"Why are you interested in that all of a sudden?", I can't help myself saying.

"Well, we don't have women fighting in our country. And although I've seen one or two female battlemages in my life, none of them looked like you," he answers honestly.

"And how do I look?", I snort.

"Beautiful, elegant, delicate, alive... You should be..."

"Sitting at home with embroidery in my hands and giving birth to dozens of redhead babies?", I roll my eyes, "It may be surprising to you, but I find that boring. I want more. I mean, some of that doesn't sound bad. Not the embroidery part, though. But I wanted to do more with my life. I wanted to be someone, do something great, protect my country from..."

"Us?", the gerdian chuckles and I blush. Because yes, from them.

"You never know from where a danger may occur", I bite my lip and look at him slightly guilty, which makes the corner of his lips twitch in something slightly resembling a smile.

"Clever girl", he chuckles.

"Uh-huh," I nod, "And how about you?"

"What about me?", he turns away not to face me anymore.

"Well, you said to Dargen once that you are an archduke and a general of your army. How did that happen?"

"It's a long story", he tries to blow me off.

“Well, Derrien Derwood, then you are so lucky that we have this much free time right now!”, I smirk and he looks up to the sky as if to ask why gods send this kind of punishment to him.

“Are you sure you are ready for something like that, Miradora Freyn?”, he mimics me and I giggle at that.

“Pretty sure! Shoot!”, I look at him smiling with all my pearly whites and begging eyes.

“Alright, suit yourself,” he signs as if he is annoyed, but his hand tightens on mine, “My mother was the sister of the Emperor. He loved her very much, but she was forced to marry a duke from our empire by their father, the former Emperor. The one who started the war with your Kingdom. It was a political marriage and she wasn’t happy. And one day she fell in love with someone else. We still don’t know who that was, although I have a few theories. He left. Or maybe died. However, there was a result of their affair – me. As you can probably understand, my mother’s husband wasn’t too happy about it, so he started to abuse her. Years passed, I grew stronger, and then one day, when I found him hitting my mother again, I killed him.”

I flinch at that and look at the dark lord next to me, his grip on me is tight as ever.

“Good,” I say and feel him shudder just for a fraction of a second.

However, he avoids my gaze and continues as if nothing happened, “By then, my uncle was already the emperor, so he pardoned me and gave me my step-father’s title. I became a duke and a member of the Royal League. It’s a kind of a council for the emperor, a group of advisers of sorts... So, we were in a breach of war and one of our best generals at that moment presented his grand battle plan that would probably cause us to lose a lot of people. I pointed out his flaws very politely and..”

“You?”, I snort, “Politely?”

“Yes, me, very politely. Just the way I always am,” he retorts with a smirk, “He, surprisingly, wasn’t too happy and challenged me to a duel.”

“Really? The nephew of the Emperor?”, I raise my brow.

“Alright, he called me a bastard and I challenged him to a duel,” the lord admits and I hold a laugh, “And then...”

“Let me guess, you killed him?”, I roll my eyes.

“You grasp everything surprisingly fast”, he grins at me, “But yes, I killed him. And then presented a better plan for my very angry uncle. The plan succeeded and I got another title. And then I won the war. There were no more titles to give and I was already the richest duke in the Empire, so my uncle made up a new title for me – archduke.”

“Which war was it?”, I ask and he looks at me for the first time.

“The rebellion of your Kingdom”, he answers calmly, but everything inside me turns upside down. I know very well what rebellion that was. The one after losing which we started to give 25 girls instead of 20 for the Dark Selection. Not to mention lands lost. And lives. We have lost many lives. Way too many. And all because of him? I am supposed to be furious, but somehow I am not. He did his duty... And that story of his mother... And being a bastard child... It probably wasn't the luxurious hassle-free life that I imagined. I don't remember those years as I was just a child back then...

“Gods, Derrien, how old are you?”, I suddenly ask and he looks surprised, “I was a baby back when that was happening!”

“Does it matter?”, he chuckles and stops, taking a lock of hair out of my face.

“No,” I admit, blushing, “But I am just curious...”

“Let me just say that I was 19 back then,” he raises his brow at me and waits for my reaction.

“Then it makes you thirty...”

But I don't get to finish, because I sense them! They are close and they are here to kill...