

The Selection: Bride Of The Dark Dragon Chapter 51 - Tips

DERRIEN

What am I even doing here? This is so not like me to waste time like this. Pointlessly.

But somehow every time she smiles I feel that the delay was worth it.

Mira... My dragon reacts to her every time she is near. She can calm him down or make him furious with a flick of her finger. And I still have no idea why.

I want her with me at all times. She is intoxicating in the best sense of the word.

I send the stupid boat to the lake and watch it for some time before raising my eyes and seeing Mira. Her red hair sparkling among all those lights. She is like a rare precious jewel... Captivating. Mine.

"Look, your boat is on the way to that one with a flower. And I think it belongs to that hottie down there!", I hear some guys laugh next to me. Some boat is on the way to Mira's and I don't even notice how I burn it to ashes. No one is touching what's mine.

I then make sure that my boat sticks to hers and look at her reaction. She is biting her lip, obviously trying not to laugh. One of the young men next to me swears loudly and girls at the other bank giggle hearing that.

She gestures me to meet her back at the bridge where we parted and disappears into the crowd. I don't see her for just mere seconds, but the dragon inside becomes restless. Something is wrong!

I transport myself to her, not caring in the world if someone sees me. The crowd at the lake is huge, but soon I see her walking out, one hand in her pocket, looking frustrated. Something happened and I know it.

"Mira!", I grab her by her hand and pull her into my arms, checking if she was hurt. She has several other scents on her, which is not surprising considering how many people must have touched her in that swarm. Her aura is fine and she looks at me as if she was frightened.

“Rien”, she smiles at me and my dragon calms down. That beast is really dependent on her now...

“Are you alright?” I ask just in case and she nods, “Then we need to go back, Mira. I am afraid the date is over.”

“It’s getting late anyway”, she agrees and relaxes in my embrace, a warm feeling spreads over my heart. I love it when she does it.

Dark flames surround us and I bring her into her chambers. She looks at me with her clear green eyes and the need to take her here and now, to possess her once again, grows inside me.

“Rien”, she whispers and the sound of my nickname on her lips drives me crazy. I grasp her head, tugging onto her silky hair, slamming my lips into hers, and tasting her once again. Perfection...

A call comes through my mind and I shake it off. Damn it! Not now!

Only one person in the world would dare to make a mental call to me. And that’s my uncle – the Emperor. And even he would only use it in case of emergencies. fvck!

I break our kiss and she looks questioningly at me. Damn it. There is nothing more I want now than to take her to bed and stay with her until morning... But the duty weighs on me.

“Mira”, I say, surprised at how croaked my voice is, “I am so sorry but I have just been called urgently. I need to go..”

“Really?”, she looks disappointed and it makes me smile when she pouts her lips. I kiss her once again almost not being able to end it...

“Little mage, I would make it up to you when I come back. I promise,” I whisper to her, making her blush.

“I’ll be waiting,” she doesn’t look at me when she says it, she is still so not used to all this. And I like it.

“Do not take it off”, I slide my hand to the pendant I gave her, “As long as you are wearing it, everyone knows you are mine, Mira.”

“It will be on me at all times,” she nods, blushing more and before I do something stupid, I give her a quick kiss on the forehead and transport myself to the palace...

MIRA

He left and the room suddenly feels so empty. Sometimes the effect this man has on me scares me...

However, I don't think long before I slide my hand into my pocket and get the thing that Derreck gave me out. It's a silver ring, an emblem of his house – a lion is on it. But I know exactly what it really is. A communicator. An expensive artifact that helps the members of their family to always be able to connect to each other.

Not thinking long, I check that Derrien's barrier is still in my room. And since he himself is gone, it would be the best time to talk to my friends.

I put the ring on and come to the mirror. Swiping my hand across the surface, I send the signal and wait. Just a few seconds later I see Dereck's worried face.

“Mira!”, he breathes out my name and smiles.

“Hi”, I wave at him and notice that he is completely alone.

“I knew that was you!”, he exclaims happily, “How are you? Do they hurt you? Are you safe?”

“I am fine, thanks”, I smile, “How in heavens have you recognized me?”

“I have been your partners for years, Di”, the guy chuckles, “I sensed you first and then, when I was holding you, you tucked your hair behind your ear... You always do that sort of thing...”

“Seriously? Is that it?”, I am shocked, “I would have never recognized you like that!”

“This is not something to be proud of”, he snorts, “I had a hunch after that and went to observe you. And after watching you for a while I had no doubts that it's you...”

I stop smiling, realizing that he has seen everything... Everything Derrien and I were doing...

“Don’t worry, Mira,” he says dryly, “I understand. You have to survive there. They forced you into all of this and...”

“It’s not like that,” I sign, “Everything is way more complicated...”

“It doesn’t matter”, Dereck interrupts me, “I have not been wasting my time here. I have a plan, Mira. This time it’s a good one. We will get you out of there.”

“Oh, Der, please don’t”, I sit down in a chair next to the mirror and rub my forehead, “This is way too risky. The more I find out about gerdians the more I realize that this is it for me. And also... Um, I don’t know how to say it... It’s not that terrible... It’s...”

“Mira!”, he seems not happy to hear what I am saying, “Please, trust me. You will never be safe there. Girls that go there are as good as dead!”

I shrug at the words.

“Der, do you know something?”, I ask him and see him tense.

“I know that I am getting you out of there!” he looks like he has already decided everything, “I just need you to hang out and stay safe for a few more days. But I also need you to be ready for us.”

“Please, cancel everything”, I spring back to my feet, “If you try anything stupid...”

A knock on my door interrupts our conversation.

“I need to go, Di”, Dereck smiles softly, “I have a lot of work. It was really nice to see you.”

And with that, the image of him disappears in my mirror.

Another knock and I realize that someone is behind my door.

Slowly, I gather myself and walk to the living room to see who it is.

But as soon as I open it, I gasp. This is the last person I expected to see...

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MIRA

“Lady Freyn”, the gerdian smiles politely and I shiver at that. But what happens next is beyond me, as lord Ryden Dargen easily steps into my room through Derrien’s barrier, making me back up.

“H-how did you?”, I almost stutter at the unexpected.

“Got in?”, he smirks, “You see, lady Miradora, “Derwood’s barriers cannot be broken by anyone, but he is a loyal subject of his Majesty the Emperor. A long time ago he swore that his barrier would always obey the Emperor and his heirs...”

“But what...”, I start talking and stop at once, realizing where he is going with this.

“Got it already?”, he looks around, clearly happy with himself, “Yes, lady Mira, just a few hours ago the Emperor made me his official heir and the Crown Prince of our Gerdian Empire.”

“Oh, gods”, I whisper to myself and meet his expectant gaze.

“Aren’t you forgetting something?”, he raises his brow.

“I apologize, your highness,” I sit down in the deepest curtsy I can master and bow my head, not raising until I am allowed. That’s the etiquette in both – the Kingdom and the Empire.

He circles around me, like a shark around its prey. Taking in what he sees and enjoying the moment. And I pray. Pray for Derrien to come back, pray for a miracle to save me...

When his cold fingers touch my chin, lifting it up to have a look at my face, I flinch.

“Look at me”, he commands and I follow, “Raise, lady Mira.”

“Thank you, your Highness”, I mumble quietly and hear him chuckle at that.

“You are scared of me”, he says calmly, “And that’s understandable. I was impatient with you and I do apologize for that.”

“Uhm, thank you, your Highness,” I repeat the only phrase I am now allowed to say.

He comes closer to me and brushes his palm over my cheek, making me shiver.

“It’s not a secret that I wanted you from the moment I saw you”, he says, taking a lock of my hair in his fingers and playing with it, “But I was impatient. I should have handled everything differently. And from now on – I will.”

I gulp. Please, tell me he is not saying what I think he is saying.

“I will become an Emperor soon, Mira”, he continues, “And I need an Empress. Beautiful, smart, strong, someone who can handle herself at all times...”

“I am sure any lady at the Selection would be happy to...”, I start...

“Someone who I am attracted to, Mira”, he interrupts my pathetic attempt, “And I am attracted to you. I want you to become mine. In every sense of the word, Mira. But I also want you to come willingly.”

At those words, I breathe out. This is good if he means it. But does he really?

“I see the question in your eyes”, he chuckles, “Sit down, Mira. I want to talk to you first.”

He leads me to the sofa by hand and waits for me to sit before he lands in an armchair opposite of me, clearly relaxed and feeling as comfortable as ever.

“I know very well everything that happened to you in the last few days”, he sighs, “Derwood made you help with the investigation, risked your life, and...”

“That was an accident”, I add quickly, “And I wanted to help myself since it was my roommate that was killed...”

He looks at me understandingly and smiles as if he knows something that I don’t know.

“Of course he would make you think that it was your own desire,” he sighs.

“What do you mean?”, I tense in my seat.

“How well do you think you know my cousin lord Derwood?”, he asks with a raised brow.

“I don’t know”, I shrug my shoulders, “A bit. We have met just a few weeks ago... But out of all lords here at the Selection, I probably know him the best...”

“Answer worthy of a future Empress,” he smirks, “Very political. But I want the two of us to be honest now. So, I’ll start. Because I know for sure that you have absolutely no idea who he is. What he is. You see, Mira, I am pretty sure he hadn’t told you that he is not a part of the Selection.”

“What do you mean?”, I tense even more.

“I mean, Mira, that he isn’t here to find a wife. The only reason he came here was to investigate the murders and see everything go smoothly here. This is his main and only purpose. As soon as he is done, he’ll leave and never even remember your name.”

I feel like something heavy has just hit me on the head. I am dizzy. It can’t be happening... He couldn’t...

“I am sorry I have to tell you that, I wouldn’t even bother telling if it was anyone else... But since it you and I have decided that you are the one I want...”, Dargen continues. He doesn’t show it, but I think he enjoys it.

“Derwood is a military man to his bones, Mira. All he knows is his duty and it’s the only thing that interests him. He needed a cover here to bury the suspicions of those who are committing all those crimes here. And you were perfect since you are one of the brides, and you have human magic he is so peculiar about. You also know things he doesn’t know about humans and he needed that knowledge now. So this is it. As soon as he finds the murderer, he leaves this place and never comes back. Another lord will take his place as soon as he is done here. And this is cruel to you, Mira. Since he is using you so bluntly.”

I don’t flinch at any of his words, I hold my head high and my back straight. This is my protective reaction to any kind of trouble that life brings me.

“I see”, I say calmly and the man in front of me smirks.

“Mira,” he stands up and walks closer, sitting on a handle of the sofa right next to me and placing his hands on my bare shoulders, “I realize how unpleasant all this must be to hear, but I want to be honest with you. After I scared you this one time, I wanted to fix things between us, but there was no opportunity before I got the title of the Crown Prince officially. And everything would be different now. I am very serious about you.”

“Your Highness, we’ve seen each other just a few times, how...”

“Shhh,” he puts a finger on my lips and then brushes it softly, making them part and not taking his eyes off, “I always know what I want, Mira. And now I want you. It has been decided. I tried other girls here, but my mind kept coming back to you...”

“But Fewn...”, I remember about what Brenden told Derrien and me back in the mountains about the two of them being happy together.

“She is the sweet girl,” he smiles softly, “She attracted me because I thought she had the similar scent to yours... And what the disappointment it was when I found out that you just lent her your perfume and dresses...”

I gulp. I did send some stuff to Fewn and Desiree since I had way too much in my closet and they needed those things more than I did anyway.

“And how does it make you different from Lord Derwood?”, I dare to ask, not caring anymore for anything. I got way too much information right now.

“I haven’t planned anything”, he shrugs his shoulders carelessly, “What happened happened. I was looking for a wife. It’s just that Fewn and that other girl are not right for me.”

That other girl... He speaks of Alexandre and doesn’t even remember her name. For a second I even feel sorry for the poor girl, remembering how proud she was to wear bruises on her body after their night together.

“Mira, you would have to marry one of us anyway,” Dergen says and stands up, preparing to leave, “Why not become the Empress then? I can give you anything you want – power, treasures, position, love... Anything!”

He gets the small jewellery box out of his pocket and places it on my knees. Still frustrated with everything, I look up at him questioningly.

“Open it”, he chuckles and I obey quietly. Inside the box, there is a ring. Very similar to the first one he gave me. A huge black diamond and black gold. Stunning, but very...gorgeous. I look up at him again.

“I know it’s too much now,” he says, “But I want you to have it. When you are ready, put it on and I’ll know that you accept my offer. And we’ll go from there.”

He starts walking towards the door and I stand up to see him off. At the exit, he suddenly turns and takes my hand into his, kissing it gently.

“By the way, Mire”, he smirks again, “Have you seen any...strange dreams lately?”

I gasp at the words.

“I see”, he shakes his head disapprovingly, “He hasn’t even disdained that...”

“But how?”, is all I can say.

“Did you ever exchange blood with him?”, Ryden asks, raising his brow.

“Not that I know of,” I hug my shoulders. All this is so uncomfortable.

“Well, if you did – that would explain it”, he says, “Even a small drop is enough. And then he would be able to connect to your mind when you drift off to sleep...”

“He,” I chuckle bitterly, “That explains a lot. Thank you, Lord Dergen. I have a lot to think about now.”

“My pleasure, sweet lady”, he kisses my fingers again and leaves with a smug face. He can’t even hide how much satisfaction this conversation has brought him.

But not to me... For me... It broke my heart...

“But Fawn...”, I remember about what Brandan told Derrien and me back in the mountains about the two of them being happy together.

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MIRA

I pace around the room with Dargen’s ring in my hands, thinking about everything and not finding a place for myself. It’s late at night but what he told me made a deep cut in my heart... Is this even possible? Surely it’s just a trick of his... There is no love lost between the cousins and he probably just wants to cut a wedge between us.

At last, I give up and just make a bubbly bath for myself. Soaking in it, I reflect on everything... It just can’t be the truth. Derrien... What we have is real. No one can lie like that. He said that I am his... so many times!

And yet he never said that I would become his wife. Not once. He said that he’d take me to his castle. But it’s not a proposal... And that time he said that I shouldn’t think of other men “while” I am his... While...

He also never told me he loves me. And neither did I. But I thought that we have time for all that... We were together... I gave myself to him... He asked me, almost begged me... And he..he saved my life. While I saved his. It should mean something. And our date... He was so sweet, he didn’t have to do it. He...he...

I don’t even realize how tears start rolling down my face. And it just takes me seconds to start sobbing. It hurts. It hurts so much!

Just the possibility of him using me in this way, of him not caring about me and my feelings... It's killing me. And I... I fell in love with him. I only realize that now... How painful!

I gather all my willpower to get out of the bath and dry my body with a luxuriously soft towel, looking at myself in the mirror. For the first time, I really look at myself. Could he...not like me?

I mean, I've been always told that I am beautiful but I never cared about that. Took it for granted. Could he really not like me?

Or maybe it's even worse and he likes my body, but that's it. I do annoy him a lot. What if he hates my personality? What if he hates... me?

On weak legs, I walk out of the bathroom. I hope to see him in the room, waiting for me. But the room is still empty. I sigh and dry my hair with fire magic, put on the silky nightgown, and fall into the bed. Dargen's ring is on my bedside table and I open one of the drawers and simply throw it in there. I can't look at it right now.

I wave to put the lights down and close my eyes.

It's not the truth. It's just can't be. And with these thoughts darkness consumes me...

In the morning I am still alone. He hasn't come back to me.

With a heavy heart, I dress up in one of the most beautiful day dresses that I've been given. Just when did I become so self-conscious?

A knock on the door makes me jump and I almost run to open it.

"Don't look so disappointed!", Morgan snorts at me, "You must have had an amazing weekend since you look so tired!"

"Morning", I force a smile, "Yes, everything has been great... And how about you?"

"Ah," she sighs, "Don't start me on that! Everything was so great before Brandon just disappeared in the middle of a date!"

“Well, I heard he had a task to perform from someone above him”, I say and almost bite my lip. What if Brandon is here only for work as well... Derrien and he look like they are a team after all...

Morgan drags me to the breakfast, chatting about her date and that Xia managed to have three in a meanwhile with three different lords! And although I am not hungry at all, I follow her. Any distraction is good at this point. Until I can see and speak to Derrien myself!

We come closer to the dining hall when I hear a buzzing of a crowd. So many people are at the main door. Something is definitely not right. Girls are crying, waiters are pale... Two girls are waving their fans at lady Cecilia, who looks like she has just seen a ghost.

“What is going on?”, Morgan stops one of the girls, Clara, but she looks at us and bursts into tears.

Without hesitating, I push through the crowd and enter the dining hall, gasping at the sight. On the huge chandelier right in the centre of the hall above the stage, we were introducing ourselves on, hangs a body of a girl. Nausea strikes me as I recognize my own dress. The one I wore to my engagement to Tristan. The one I gifted to Fawn...

“Gods...”, I whisper and almost fall to the ground when two strong hands catch me. I turn to see who that is and meet Tristan’s tense gaze.

“It’s alright, Mira, everything is going to be alright,” he says calmly into my ear.

“Not for Fawn!”, a tear rolls down my cheek.

“Come here!”, he pulls me into his warm embrace and I dig my fingers into his arms in an attempt not to cry in front of everyone. That probably hurts, but he doesn’t even flinch.

Dark smoke starts appearing here and there, transporting the gerdian lords to ask. I feel the warmth of dark flames right next to me.

“What the chaos!”, Derrien growls and pulls me out of Tristan’s arms. I look at him through my teary eyes and he brushes his fingers over my face, wiping away tears and nodding understandingly. “Bran,” he calls for his friend, who is comforting Morgan not far from us, “Clear the room and seal it. I’ll take Mira to her room and come back.”

“No,” I protest and push him away, “Not again!”

“Mira”, he looks tired and a bit annoyed.

“I am not going, I need to check the scene as well as you do!”, I insist. I don’t care about what is going on between the two of us at the moment. I just want to know what happened to Fawn.

“I’ll tell you everything when I am done here”, Derrien promises, but I am not impressed.

“You may not even know what to look at!”, I retort and breathe out air heavily, calming my nerves, “I am going to be fine. I just want to help.”

“Who needs your help?”, Isidore’s voice is squealing loudly, “The gerdian lords are here for gods’ sake!”

I don’t even say anything to her, just look at Derrien and, sighing, he nods in agreement with me.

“Alright, stay here with me. Everyone else, except Brandon – OUT!”

People leave the room and dark smoke takes the gerdians away. Morgan is the last one to leave, looking at me puzzled before closing the doors...

I look up at Fawn hanging on the rope attached to the chandelier...

I am sorry, my friend, I wasn’t here to protect you...

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MIRA

“Are you sure you can do that?”, Derrien’s hand is sliding across my back in a soothing motion.

“Yes”, I shrug at his touch and he looks surprised, “We need to do this now before you dirty the space with your dark magic.”

That was harsh. And now even Brandon Seville looks surprised at my words. I shouldn’t let my personal feeling get in the way. I was taught better than that. I

change to my magical vision and look carefully around the room. I scan every inch of the room but find no traces of any spells, no shards this time... nothing. Fawn is hanging above a table, on the table lies a chair... She probably put it on top to get the rope to the chandelier and then kicked it. I check her aura and see nothing peculiar. It's fading, almost gone. That means that she died hours ago, probably around midnight.

I go back to my normal vision and meet the expectant gazes of the gerdians in the room, shaking my head to let them know that I found nothing.

"I haven't noticed anything unusual as well", Brandon sighs, "Can I put her down now?"

"Yes, please", I nod, shiver goes down my spine at the thought. But, again, I need to be strong.

Dark smoke surrounds Fawn's body and she is carefully put down on the table. Brandon starts carefully examining her body while I notice how pale my friend is. That must have been a horrible death...

"There are no traces of any fight on her", Seville concludes, "She didn't struggle. It looks like she did it herself and she did it willingly."

"Only she was not the kind of person to do something like that!", I interrupt his trail of thought, "Fawn would never..."

"You didn't know her for that long", Derrien places his hands on my shoulders and I shake them off.

"I knew her enough to know that she wouldn't end her life! And even if she did – she wouldn't do it like that! Not in the dining hall for everyone to see! Fawn was a timid person, she was not a drama queen!"

"I hate to say it, but she was with Dargen. What if he was too brutal for her to tolerate...", Brandon suggests.

"There are no traces though", Rien points out.

Dark smoke appears not far from us and lord Dargen quickly comes closer.

"What the chaos, Derwood?!", he grits through his teeth, "Why haven't you called for me?"

“Your highness”, Derrien and Brandon do quick bows, and I curtsy.

“Raise, Mira,” Ryden smiles softly as if we are not standing in front of a corpse of one of his favourites, “Drop the formalities when you are with me. I allow it.”

I notice how Derrien flinches at his words but stays silent.

“Thank you, your Highness”, I say and raise.

“What a pity”, Dargen sighs artificially looking at Fawn, “She was a sweet girl. Have you found anything?”

“Nothing suspicious, your Highness”, Brandon reports, “For now it looks like a suicide. Has anything...happened maybe between the two of you?”

“I ended things with her yesterday”, Ryden says calmly, “She was a nice girl, but not fit to become an empress. I have someone else in mind for that role...”

At these words Derrien slowly steps in front of me, covering me from Dargen’s sight. And I hear the Crown Prince chuckle at that.

“Well, that sounds like a reason to end her life...”, lord Seville says slowly, probably grasping the situation.

“Oh, please!”, I step forward, “Fawn wasn’t power-greedy! And you were together for what? Like two days? No offense, your Highness, but that is not enough of a reason to end one’s life! Not like this! None of this is Fawn! She wouldn’t...”

“Oh, Mira”, Dargen smiles, “You are not like any other girl in here. You wouldn’t understand how weak others are. How much is at stake for a commoner like Fawn... She was so close to having everything and yet...”

“For a commoner like Fawn it would be a win even to marry a simple knight”, I retort.

“Enough, Mira”, Derrien turns to me, covering me from the prince again, “It’s all too much for you. You need to go and rest...”

“I need a drop of her blood and a lock of her hair”, I say firmly, “I need to check those myself.”

“Alright”, Rien nods to his friend and Brandon gets out a dagger. At the same time, a tiny box and a small glass bottle appear out of nowhere.

“Mira,” Derrien takes me by my shoulders, “Please, take what you need and go to your room. Wait for me and I will come as soon as I am free. Stay there and do not go anywhere.”

I nod, avoiding his gaze. And he doesn’t say anything else.

As soon as I get what I need, I curtsy abruptly and walk away, without saying anything. Tristan, whom I didn’t even notice, opens the doors for me.

“Be careful, Mira,” he whispers before I walk out. I hide the box and the bottle in the pocket of my dress.

Morgan is waiting for me in the hall and we both fall into each other’s arms as soon as we see each other.

“I can’t believe this!”, she sobs, “It can’t be happening!”

“And yet it did,” I sigh, “Morgan, from now on keep and stay quiet. Bad things are happening here!”

“What do you mean?”, she distances herself from me, looking puzzled, “Hasn’t she killed herself? Everybody talks about it! Isidore...”

“Isidore should shut up too”, I snap and then rub my forehead, feeling tired, “Morgan, we are not safe here. None of us are.”

“Gods, Mira, what are you...”, she starts talking and gasps, “Mira, you mean that Bella didn’t just get expelled from here and left?”

“Someone killed her”, I whisper, “We’d better not talk about it here and now, though. Come later to my room and we’ll discuss everything.”

“Alright”, my friend nods, “Lady Cecilia is waiting for all of us to gather in the class. ”

“Unbelievable”, I roll my eyes but follow my friend. On the other hand, I don’t want to sit in my room alone and wait for Derrien anyway.

The class is buzzing, I hear sobs here and there and only Isidore sits and looks annoyed. Even her minions Alexandra and Ariadna have wet eyes.

We walk to our seats and I shiver when I pass Fawn's desk. Xia and Desirae look shaken as well and we give each other quick h.ugs.

"I can't believe she did this", Xia whispers.

"That's because she probably didn't", I say and see that Desirae agrees with me fully.

"That's what I was telling everybody", the commoner girl nods at me.

"I hope the gerdians would find out the truth fast", Xia adds quietly, "What were you doing there, though?"

"They let me scan the room for human magic", I whisper so that others do not hear us, "But there was nothing."

Lady Cecilia walks into the room and we all stand up to greet her. She looks older today somehow. All this probably wasn't easy on her as well.

"Ladies, I gathered you now," she starts with her high voice, "To discuss the upcoming talent show!"

I am speechless...

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MIRA

Gasps fill the room and for once I know I am not the only one disgusted with the system here.

Lady Cecilia, however, raises her chin high and continues, "I understand that these are challenging times for ALL of us. But we must go on with our lives. Now more than ever."

"How do you imagine that after what we all just saw?!", I hear one of the girls saying, "Fawn was one of us!"

"It's tragic what happened to that poor soul," lady Cecilia admits, "But that doesn't mean..."

“Do you know what happened exactly?”, another girl asks.

“We only know that she took her own life”, the older woman sighs, “You see, she got rejected the night before by the new Crown Prince and, understandingly, got depressed about that...”

My blood boils. How dare she say all that when we haven't even found out the truth yet?!

“The Crown Prince?”, I recognize Isidore's voice. Now she is interested!

“Yes, ladies”, Cecilia smiles weakly, “That's another news. Duke Ryden Dargen has just been appointed the Crown Prince of the Empire. He doesn't have a favourite at the Selection anymore, so the stakes are higher than usual! Just imagine – one of you could become a Crown Princess and the future empress!”

Another wave of gasps. Excited this time. And I roll my eyes. It hasn't even been a minute since they all were shaken with Fawn's death!

I look at my friends, Morgan and Desirae shake their heads disapprovingly while Xia crossed her arms on her chest, clearly unhappy as well. I am glad that at least the three of them are grieving in their own ways. At least a little bit.

“So,” lady Cecilia clasps her hands to draw attention, “We have to postpone the talent show obviously, but it's only one day, ladies. Use this to practice more and surely...”

“Just one day?”, I raise my brow and the room goes silent, “Is that how much our life is worth to you?”

“Every life is priceless, lady Freyn”, our mentor says, “But we need to take care of the ones that are still here! Time is pressing and the talent show is an important part of the Selection. What happens next to each of you depends on it. So, who wants to be first to demonstrate what you have prepared?”

She then asks one of the girls to go to the center of the class and to show off that damn talent of hers. I sit and watch this for some time. Until I realize that I just cannot do this anymore.

Without asking for permission, I stand up and walk to the door.

“Miradora! What do you think you are doing?”, lady Cecilia looks appalled.

“Leaving”, I shrug my shoulders.

“You haven’t even shown us what you are going to do at the talent show!”, she says sounding desperate.

“I’ll explode something,” I roll my eyes, “The gerdians would be thrilled!”

And with that – I leave.

I am in the middle of a long corridor when dark flames surround me and transport me to my chambers.

“Where have you been?!” Derrien pulls me into his strong arms and I feel a soft k!ss on the tip of my head. Gods, tell me that what Dargen has told me is a lie. Tell me this man really cares about me.

I don’t even notice how I start crying, burying my face in his chest. And he just holds me, patting my back and placing small k!sses on my hair from time to time.

“Mira,” he sighs when I finally distance myself from him, “If I knew you were this upset, I would have come sooner...”

“But work comes first, doesn’t it?” I ask calmly and he looks at me, puzzled.

“Not always”, he doesn’t give any reaction to my words which only makes me angrier.

“Speaking of which”, I say calmly, “Are you here to investigate the murders?”

“Yes, but you already know that,” he takes a step in my direction but I step back.

“No, Derrien, you don’t understand my question,” I shake my head, trying to focus, “Are you here ONLY to investigate the murders?”

He is silent and that’s how I know it’s true...

“You aren’t here to look for a wife, are you?”, a tear rolls down my cheek and I wipe it away quickly, “You aren’t a part of the Selection!”

“No, Mira, I am not”, he presses his lips firmly, “But does it really change anything?”

“It changes everything!” I snap at him, “You lied to me! You tricked me into thinking...”

“You said that you never wanted to marry,” he says and my heart breaks into million tiny pieces. Shattered, completely shattered. “I thought that this is what you want...”

“To be used?! To be lied to?!”, I almost scream.

“I never lied to you,” his words cut through my soul and I walk to the window, “It just never came to discussing any of that...”

“Oh, gods, help me”, I whisper and turn back to face him, “And what about the dreams?”

He looks surprised once more, “What is that what you really want to ask, little mage?”

“Don’t call me that!” I yell, closing my eyes, “Have you been sending all those dreams to my mind?! Have you?!”

“That’s not something I can always control,” he admits.

“And yet sometimes you can?”, I need to get to the bottom of this, “How does it work? Did you exchange blood with me?! When?! I certainly don’t remember it!”

“In the very beginning,” he says way too calmly, “We kissed and I bit you. And you bit me back. And even a drop is enough for the bonding.”

“The bonding?”, I sit helplessly in the armchair and Derrien comes closer, kneeling in front of me.

“That’s how we call it,” he informs me, “Our genetics works in a way that may help us connect to other minds if we wish to and if a signal is strong enough. With you it was easy. Sometimes you even saw more than I wanted you to see...”

Easy... That was easy for him...

“You are despicable”, I feel tears in my eyes again.

“Mira,” he smiles softly, “If you changed your mind and want to become my wife, I can...”

A slap echoes through the room and he turns back to look at me with a red cheek and eyes full of dark magic.

“Don’t you dare finish this sentence!”, I yell and jump to my feet, “I don’t want your pity proposal! And I don’t want to ever see or hear from you again! You...you...” I can’t find the right words... But I don’t need words to make my point – I tear the pendant he gave me off my neck and throw it to his feet.

“Mira!” he grabs me by my hand, pulling me closer, “Stop this now! You know you are mine already!”

“Your toy, maybe!” I retort and turn my face away, “But this is over! Get out! Get out of here! I hate you!”

“Mira!”, he growls and shakes me in his hands.

“I think the lady was clear about her desires! Step. Away.”