

## The Selection: Bride Of The Dark Dragon Chapter 61 - Tips

MIRA

I blink. Then look at him and blink again. Then again and again. I can't quite believe what he is asking of me.

"So, excuse me if I get it wrong", I start after clearing my throat, "You want me to get into the rooms of all the girls at the Selection and check their jewellery boxes in search for the artifacts that Aspen created? Exactly how on heavens do you imagine me do that? Considering that most of them hate my guts!"

"Well, I always found you pretty...", he pauses and I blush at the words, "Inventive."

That son of a harpy!

"That's eleven rooms, lord Derwood," I flop into one of the armchairs near me and notice how not happy he is with me calling him by his last name.

"It's easier for you than it is for me," he insists, taking a seat opposite of me.

"Debatable," I snort, "You can order them to let you in and then do whatever you want inside."

"And give time to the murderer to hide what we are looking for?" he smirks, "If another participant of the Selection is desperate enough to ask for a jewellery piece that would be much less suspicious, don't you think?"

"I think you are asking too much of me", I straighten my posture, "If anything, you are asking me to do your dirty work. And I don't see any reason to help."

"Weren't you interested in finding out who killed your friends?" he raises his brow and I try not to give away the fact that this little habit of his makes my heart beat a tiny bit faster.

"Of course," I smile, "And I helped where I could. Also, I believe in your abilities. After all, you proved to me that you are ready to do ANYTHING for your job."

You can cut the tension in the room with a knife before he sighs heavily and closes his eyes.

“Mira, it wasn’t like that...”

“Oh, please, don’t start that! I am not interested to hear any explanations of yours,” I turn away.

“Alright, forgive me. What do you want then?” he asks.

“A favour,” I turn back quickly and smiling, knowing pretty well that I got them.

“What kind of favour?” he looks at me sensing that I have something unspeakable on my mind.

“Empty jewellery boxes”, I grin at him, “I want you to make the gerdians who take part in the Selection send me empty jewellery boxes!”

“You are not dome with that idea?” he looks shocked.

“Oh, no!” I put my hand on my heart, “After everything I have seen here I am dreaming of marrying a gerdian whom I know nothing about probably just to be used for breeding purposes and never truly to be cared of. Not to mention to leave my family, friends, my life, my real dreams, and purposes. All just to live in an unfamiliar foreign Empire where I would probably be looked at as a second class citizen for the rest of my life! And who knows if my future husband would be a sadist or a man-wh0re, or both... Now, who wouldn’t dream of all that?!”

I look at him with a challenge in my eyes and he looks at me without saying a word. We sit like that for some time, just staring at each other. And, luckily, I played this non-blinking game with my brother Colton way too many times to lose in such a crucial moment.

“Alright, Mira,” he says after a while, “I’ll get you the boxes that you want. All but one, though.”

“I know,” I breathe out loudly, “I would take care of the Crown Prince on my own. For all we know he may lose interest in me any day now anyway.”

“That’s unlikely,” Derrien says way too fast and our gazes meet again, making my cheeks red for absolutely no reason. That’s not a compliment to you, Mira,

don't be a fool. He probably just knows his cousin all too well. That's what it's about.

"There is also one more condition," I say quickly to change the subject.

"Oh, really?" he chuckles and my heart skips a bit, reminding me of the times I believed that man was infatuated with me...

"Yes," I say firmly, "I may need to bribe a few girls to get what we need..."

"You can promise them anything," he replies smiling softly, "I'll take care of it. Anything reasonable that is."

"Good," I stand up, "Then it's a deal."

"Not yet," he smirks, "I will have one condition as well."

"I don't think you are in the position for that here", I snort in his face.

"I have to insist," he steps closer and gets a well too familiar necklace from out of the inner pocket of his jacket, "You will have to wear this."

"No," I reply at once, getting angry.

"Mira..."

"I said no!", I interrupt him, "I can't believe you are even offering me that! I would never wear this thing again!"

"It's for your safety!" he growls and the sound is scary, to be honest. I look at him in surprise and see his eyes full of his dark magic. "Mira," he rubs his forehead, "I charmed that necklace. So that I would be able to know at all times if you are alright or no."

"In what way?" now it's my turn to raise the brow.

"Your heartbeat," he says after a momentary hesitation, "It lets me feel your heartbeat... And by that, I can recognize your emotions. It's a dragon thing... I would know if you are worried or scared..."

"Was it always like that?" is all I ask.

"Yes," he confesses.

“Why?”

“Because, Mira, believe it or not, but I care about you,” he sighs, “So, will you wear it?”

“On...Only for the task,” I squeak, taking the locket with trembling fingers, “After we are done, I am giving this thing back to you.”

“I would really like it if you could keep it...” he says.

“I am afraid I can’t,” I turn away and put on the jewellery piece onto my neck as quickly as I can, then turning back to face him with the fakest smile from one ear to another, “So, when do we start?”

“Tonight”, he says while his eyes look sad... very sad...

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MIRA

I am knocking on Xia’s door, all ready for my first ever task. Who knew that it would happen here at the Dark Selection of all the places. I imagined this moment many times and never... NEVER in mind have I thought that my first task would be going to random girls’ rooms and begging them for jewellery.

But still. It’s a task. And as a female battle mage, I guess, I could have been asked for worse things. Oh, well...

“Mira!”, Xia is startled when she sees me, “I did not expect you! Did anything happened?”

“Uhm, well”, I sigh, “You know how the Crown Prince ordered me to dance completely ruining everything I have planned for the Talent Show?”

“Oh, Mira,” she snorts, “Everybody knows that! It is quite the talk of the day!”

“Well, that wasn’t the end of it,” I roll my eyes, “There is an outfit to wear as well... And none of my jewellery matches it... So, I thought, maybe I’ll ask around and someone will have something appropriate...”

“Gods, Mira, I have to teach you everything!” the southerner giggles and pulls me into her room, “You need to ask the prince for an audience and then flap your lashes and mention that no jewellery is good enough for the dress he has chosen for you! Silly girl!”

“I don’t really want to ask him anything,” I shake my shoulders, feeling the cold metal of Derrien’s locket on my skin. To avoid questions, I placed it under my dress this time.

“He is a prince for God’s sake! He can afford a few jewellery pieces!” Xia laughs, “Don’t be shy!”

“Maybe that’s how she attracted him in the first place,” Xia’s roommate walks out of the bathroom, wearing a robe, “Not everyone is throwing themselves at the men and asking for their attention and gifts. My name is Erica, by the way.”

“Nice to meet you”, I smile, “Mira.”

“You can have a look in my jewellery box,” she points a finger to her bedside table, on top of which I see a medium-sized wooden box, “I don’t have much with me, but if anything is suitable, you can borrow it for the Talent Show.”

“Thanks!” I light up and hurry to open the box, looking through everything that is there. Sadly admitting that there are no artifacts made by Aspen. At least not the ones that I am looking for. “If I can do anything for you,” I start the traditional polite reply when she interrupts me the same second.

“Actually there is something!” Erica blurts out, “Ask lord Derwood to dance with me!”

“What?’ I almost drop the box to the floor. I did not expect that!

“Gods,” Xia pushes her roommate away and sits next to me on her bed, offering me her own box, “And you call me calculating, Erica? Here you go, Mira. Take a peek in mine. Absolutely free of charge!”

“Uhm, thanks”, I open Xia’s box and very quickly realize that what I am looking for is not there as well.

“And what’s wrong with that?” Erica crosses her hands on her chest, “She has the Crown Prince now! And lord Derwood is the number two desirable

bachelor now! He is available and she is the only one who can speak to him at the ball. That's a little favour. A good deed. Why not help fellow brides?"

I close Xia's box and hand it to her, "You don't know what you ask for. Good night, ladies..."

In the next room everything goes a little bit better, girls show me their jewels and only imply that if I want to take something, I may owe them a favour. But since I don't take anything, I just leave their room.

But the surprise awaits in the third room.

"We know what you want", a blonde with a beautiful name Callista says. I always liked that name. Well, not anymore. "If you want to look at our jewellery, promise to ask Derwood for a dance with us both."

"What, all at once?" I raise my brow, "I don't think he is a fan of threesomes..."

"Bye then", she starts closing the door to my face and I give up.

"Alright!" I put my foot in the door gap, "But I can't promise you that he'll agree or that he'll be nice. He is...complicated."

"That's a deal", Callista grins and lets me in. She and her roommate Bianca show me everything they've got and make sure that they don't have the artifacts – I leave.

Strangely enough, the situation repeats again and again. All the girls are asking me for that same "favour" – a dance or an introduction to Derrien. The next event we'll have after the talent show – is a Ball of Portals. I guess, someone is going to be busy on that day.

I feel angry agreeing again and again to that same thing. I do not want anywhere near him. Then, on the other hand, I am pretty sure he would hate it all. And so be it.

I miss two rooms that are occupied with the commoner girls. It would be strange if I ask them for jewellery. I'll have to think of something else for them...However, Derrien and I have come to a conclusion before that it's a very slim chance that it may be a commoner. Aspen's artifacts are crazy expensive...

And that leaves Isidore's and Alexandra's room.

"Come with me!" I hear Isidore's pitchy voice even before I reach her door, "Look no more! No one here has a better fine jewellery collection than I!"

I turn and see her with Alexandra and Ariadna. I just left Ariadna's chambers minutes ago and she already ran to her "master" to tell everything.

"Are you seriously offering me your help?" I snort, "Are you alright? Sure that you are not sick?"

"It will not be free," the blonde smirks, "The same deal as for everyone else. Just a bit sweeter! Because you can keep whatever you choose! I wouldn't want to wear anything after you anyway. So, what do you think?"

I think I want to spit into her face. But I was brought up better than that.

"I wouldn't want to keep your jewellery," I raise my chin, "Just dispose of it later. That's if you have anything worthy anyway."

"Follow me!" Isidore gestures to her door, smiling as if she has just won the lottery and not got insulted by one of her most hated enemies.

Unlike everyone else, Isidore leads me to a chest, not just a box. Opening the lid, I see dozens of compartments. She did not lie. She has quite the collection here. Enough to buy a few luxurious houses in the capital.

I have to almost kneel to have a look at everything. Everything is so shiny and blinking that I am afraid that it would hurt my eyesight. And pride. Isidore was right, my collection is not nearly as good or expensive as hers.

Sadly, there are no artifacts. But then I notice a little piece of ribbon on the very bottom. I look at both girls and they are talking excitedly about their turns at the ball, Alexandra holding her own box in her hands. Using the moment they don't look at me, I pull the ribbon and open the lowest compartment in the chest. And immediately recognize a necklace. It is definitely from the same set with the brooch that was attached to the carriage we used to get to the Silver Chain mountains! The brooch was the tracker and this necklace, according to Aspen, is used to see the location of the brooch. So, that means that Isidore was the girl who bought the artifacts. The pieces of the puzzle fit together. She is blonde, just as Aspen described, she is filthy rich, which means she can afford high prices and on the night of Bella's murder they had

a fight. Or at least I think they did. I don't know what she couldn't share with Fawn, though... But I can find out later. Right now I need to get back to Derrien.

I close the compartment before anyone sees me and quickly stand up.

"Well, nothing here would match the outfit," I fake-sigh and meet Isidore's arrogant gaze.

"Are you kidding me?" she steps forward, "There are pieces with every precious gem in the world! Any colour!"

"Well, it's more about the style for me," I shake my shoulders.

"The deal is still on!" she snorts, "An introduction and a dance!"

"Sure", I nod, "But no promises on his behaviour. Just saying."

"Check mine!" Alexandra pushes her box into my hands and I open it and look inside briefly. Nothing as expected.

"Also not what I am looking for, but thanks!" I smile, "It's time for me to go."

I hurry to the exit, when Isidore's cold voice catches up with me, "Not so fast!"

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I turn, trying to look as careless as is only humanly possible, and ask, "What now?"

Isidore's gaze is piercing through me, her hands are on her sides and I hear a light tapping of her feet, "I need to check if you have stolen anything before you go!"

"Pardon me, what again?" my jaw may have dropped to the floor. Is this really what she is thinking about now?



“You coming to different rooms and begging for jewellery but not taking anything is way too suspicious!” she smirks, “I bet there will be loads of lost jewels tomorrow! Freyn family is not that rich, right?”

“Right,” I smile and tilt my head slightly to my right, “It’s not the money we are famous for, simple merchants weren’t our ancestors. The best and most noble honourable warriors created our family line. Freyn’s honour is unsullied. You can search me if you like.”

She takes a step forward and I grin at her, “Of course, then you would have to forget about that introduction and dance...”

“You...” , Isidore turns pale and Alexandra comes closer to her, whispering in her ear something. I can swear I hear “Crown Prince” and “Favourite” among her words.

“Let’s not quarrel, ladies,” Alexandra giggles as if she hasn’t witnessed the ugliest scene right before her eyes just now, “I am sure we could all be friends. We have nothing to share and all of us are from noble families. Right, Icy?”

“Of course,” Isidore grits through her teeth, “I will count on you keeping your word, lady Freyn.”

“Of course, lady Vierne”, I smile, “Would you like to count your jewellery before I leave?”

“There is no need,” she snorts and turns away. And off I go.

I run out of her room straight into strong muscular hands, lift up my hands, and see familiar brown eyes with red tint and sparks of dark magic dancing in them.

“All is fine,” he squeezes me tight into his body, and flames of dark magic transport us away. I open my eyes and realize that it is not my room, though. It’s his!

I step away quickly, but he pulls me back by my hand and takes my chin into his hand, turning my face left and right as if he is looking for something.

“What happened there?” he asks after a while, “Your heart was beating like crazy. I thought...”

“I found one of the artifacts,” I say, trying to release myself from his grasp, “Isidore Vierne has the necklace that is paired to the tracking brooch.”

“Did she threaten you? Did she try to hurt you?”, magic starts a wild dance in his eyes.

“No,” I admit, “I don’t think she realized I saw that. It was in a hidden compartment at the very bottom of her very huge chest filled with all kinds of jewellery.”

“Was the hairpin also there? The one with rubies?”

“Definitely not,” I shake my head, “Unless there is another hidden compartment somewhere else...”

He lets go of me finally and I walk towards the window, feeling his gaze on me at all times.

“Mira, is something wrong?” he asks after a pause.

“I don’t know... Do you think she did it? She is the murderer?”

“We’ll know for sure later today, Mira” he says softly, coming closer and I feel his hands on my shoulders. But this time I don’t want to push him away. It’s comforting. And I need this little piece of comfort now. “I’ll search her room and then we’ll question her...”

I shrug at the words. I can only imagine how the gerdian question their prisoners... That’s something I would never want to know.

“Don’t worry,” he turns me to face him and brushes his palm over my cheek, “You did a great job, Mira. Chances were small, but we found the clue we needed so much. I’ll take care of the rest and let you know the results as soon as possible. And you should return to your room and rest.”

“Yes, I’d better go,” I agree before I relax too much in his presence again. I cannot let that happen. Nothing changed.

“I can take you,” he suggests stepping closer again.

“No need,” I wave for him to stop, “My room is literally a few steps away from yours. I can walk.”

“Mira..”

“Just let me know if she confesses and if you discover anything else,” I say before quickly leaving his room.

I make just a few steps and realize that I am in trouble. His Highness the Crown Prince of Gerdian Empire is leaning on my door with his back, his hands crossed at his chest.

“How very... interesting,” he says, smirking, “My soon-to-be bride walks out of another man’s chambers late in the evening. Lady Miradora, I have to say I am disappointed.”

“Your Highness,” I curtsy quickly and stay in the very uncomfortable position as I need to wait for him to let me rise. And he does not. He walks closer and makes a circle around me.

“Tell me, Mira, is the Crown Prince not good enough for you?” he asks carelessly, but I feel that there is no right answer to this question.

“Your highness, I am honoured to even be considered for the position of...”

“Shut up,” he snaps and in the next moment, he raises me by my throat, lifting me way too high. So that I have to stand on the tips of my toes. “If you are so honoured, then what the fvck is this thing on your neck?!” he grits through his teeth and the next moment tears Derrien’s locket off my neck and lets go of his grip.

I rub my neck, there would definitely be a bruise tomorrow.

“Your highness,” I cough, “It’s not what it looks like.”

“It’d better not be what it looks like!” he growls.

“I gave it to her for protection!” Derrien voice cuts through the air and we both turn to look at him.

“Protection? You are no one to her to protect her!” Dargen steps forward, fuming.

“I am the head of the Gerdian Guard here and it is my duty to make sure everyone is safe. Especially you and your favourite lady. Considering that the last one has been killed.”

“She doesn’t need protection from you, she has me now!” Ryden smirks, “She is mine to have and mine to protect!”

“And yet you can’t be here all the time because of your new duties, Ry”, Derrien talks to him, not even sparing me a glance, “You appear only at late evenings and at the events now. You physically cannot be here to protect her all the time. And I can. For you.”

His words are not surprising and yet it feels like he put a knife in my heart all over again. Gods, I hate him. I didn’t just a few moments ago. But I do now. And I want him to suffer for all the pain he caused.

I open the door of my room and go inside firmly.

“Where do you think you are going?!” Dargen storms after me and Derrien follows him, while I quickly run to my bedroom and open the first drawer of my bedside table.

“Your highness,” I show him the ring he gave me, and both men freeze, looking at me, “You gave me this and you also gave me the time to think. You gave me the freedom and respected me. And I appreciate it. I’ve made my decision.”

Not saying anything else, I put the ring onto my finger and see Derrien’s eyes shine with dark magic brighter than ever...

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MIRA

I want to cry. I want to cry when I look at him and I want to cry even more when Dargen comes with a smug face and kisses my hand. But most of all I want to cry when I look into those eyes.

He shouldn’t look at me like this if he doesn’t care. Why does he look like this? As if... as if he is in pain. This ring changes nothing. He is not a part of the Selection, and even if he was – Dargen has the right to choose first, not him. And we all know that this politeness of his is just an act. He will take what he wants. So why... why is there so much magic in his eyes? Why doesn’t he take his eyes off me...

“Leave us, Derwood”, the prince says and I am suddenly terrified. Oh, gods! What have I just done?! “My lady and I want to spend the evening together. In the privacy of her chambers...”

No, no, no, no, no....

“Actually, your Highness,” Derrien says, “There is some news on the murder case. I think you should really take a look at this yourself. The emperor wants to be informed of everything as soon as possible.”

Dargen is silent and I just pray for him to take the bait and leave.

“Well, I can, of course, deal with everything myself and report to the emperor of all the hard work if you wish to enjoy your leisure time instead,” Derrien adds nonchalantly, probably implying that this is the last chance for Ryden to take credit for the investigation process.

“No, that’s more important now,” Ryden kisses my hand quickly again, “My lady, I am afraid I am going to see you at the talent show tomorrow. Duty calls. I hope for your understanding.”

“I understand, my lord,” I curtsy, trying to not sound all too eager for him to leave.

“I’ll be waiting for your dance at the show,” he smirks and I gulp. I am a terrible performer and not the greatest dancer in the world for sure. Not to mention that I have been far too busy trying to find out who the murderer is. When he sees me, he would be pissed. And it’s going to be the end of me for sure.

And yet... That’s not what I worry about the most now.

“May I give it back to the lady?”, Derrien picks up the locket from the floor, “Purely for safety purposes.”

“Alright,” Dargen nods and then turns to me, “Wear it under clothes. I don’t want anyone else to see it. Only my ring should be seen.”

“Yes, your Highness,” I curtsy again and hear the sounds of flames and feel the spread of dark smoke in the room. They both disappear, leaving me alone.

I fall to the sofa, feeling tired. So tired... I haven't felt this way even after the hardest of training. Everything is such a mess now. I can't forget the sparks of magic in his eyes... They are haunting me...

My gaze falls on the locket that Derrien put on one of the little tables. He didn't even give it to me. In front of him, I chose the prince. He would never even touch me anymore. He is a loyal subject and from this day forward everything is over between us.

It feels more inevitable now than ever before. Remembering him just hurts me physically.

Calm yourself down, Mira. It's better this way...

A knock on my door brings me back to reality and I drag myself to open it. There isn't even a minute of peace and quiet in this castle!

Lady Cecilia is literally the last person I want to see! Well, after Dargen that is. But she is a firm second.

"Lady Freyn," she enters without asking for permission, "I am just coming to talk to you and see your preparation for the talent show."

Oh, gods... I have absolutely nothing prepared.

"Oh," I sigh, "I am actually still thinking of the details of my performance..."

"You must be joking! The show is tomorrow! Everyone else is ready!" her voice sounds too pitchy, "Do you know how high expectations for you are? The Crown Prince himself is waiting for your performance!"

"Yes, I know very well! He has just been here to remind me," I rub my forehead, "I cannot do that now. Anything but listening to her constant nagging. "I am sorry, I am still a bit shaken by Fawn's death and..."

"Oh, who cares!", lady Cecilia snaps, "One more, one less! It's not about you, girls! It's about them! Everything here is about them! They are important, not you! And the sooner you get this into this pretty head of yours – the better!"

I am speechless. Probably for the first time in my life. Everybody knows this, but nobody says it out loud so bluntly and disrespectfully.

"I see your point, lady Cecilia," I force myself to say after a while, when I come back to my senses, "I'll make sure to create a performance that no one ever would forget. That's a promise."

"I really hope so!" she snorts in my face, "You've been lucky here. More than any other girl. Ever. And you take everything for granted. Some girls would kill for what you have!"

Some girls already do, lady Cecilia...

"I hope you will think about everything I have just said, lady Miradora!", she measures me with an arrogant gaze and then just leaves.

Honestly, what was all that about?

Not thinking twice, I run back to my bedside table and take off Dargen's ring, throwing it inside! I don't want to see it. But then I notice something else... With trembling fingers I get out Dereck's ring and put it on, coming to the mirror and swiping my hand across the surface.

This time he appears pretty quickly as if he has been waiting. I notice Nort at his side as well.

"Di!", Nort yells first and I put a finger to my mouth to signal to him that he should speak quieter.

"Mira!", Dereck smiles broadly, "We knew you would come to your senses!"

"I am glad to see you guys!" I try to hold the tears and force a smile, but fail miserably.

"Hey, princess, has anything happened?" Rick appears behind those two with a concerned face, "You don't look yourself!"

"I'm fine", I lie.

"Did anyone...hurt you?" Dereck asks, hesitation in his voice.

"No," I splash my hands, "Nothing like that. It's just generally horrible in here. And I am the Crown Prince's favourite now. Officially... So, you may need to think if you still want to..."

“Don’t finish that sentence if you don’t want to offend us!” our leader interrupts me, “We are your friends, Mira! We would die for you if the need arises!”

“But preferably not,” Rick snorts, “I am sure we can find a way to avoid that!”

“I already did,” Dereck pushes him away.

“You did?”, I look at my friend, surprised, “Is it even possible? To get me out?”

“Yes, Mira,” he smiles, “I found someone in the castle who can help us. I can’t give you any details, though. It was our agreement. But if you want to escape, then just say so and...”

“I do,” I say abruptly and swallow, “I want to go home.”

“About that,” Dereck scratches his neck, “You need to understand that coming to your family house would be very unlikely. If anything – we would have to hide you at least for a few years until you are too old to participate in another Selection...”

“I see. Well, it makes sense...”, I nod. It does make sense. The gerdians might look for me, considering Dargen took a liking to me... If I escape, that would be the greatest insult to the Empire.

“Also,” our team leader continues, “We would have to stage that you were kidnapped. Or killed. Or kidnapped and killed in the process...”

“I agree to everything,” I sit down in a chair next to the mirror, “If I am honest, I don’t care about anything as long as I am out.”

“That bad, huh?” Nort tries to smile reassuringly but fails miserably.

“I can manage,” I lie, “But I can’t stay here. All this... is not for me.”

“Then it’s a done deal,” Dereck says firmly, “You just survive there a few more days and our people would get you out of the castle. Then we will be there to help and protect you.”

“Thanks, guys,” I small tear rolls down my cheek, and I wipe it away quickly. I am not going to humiliate myself by crying in front of them.



“That’s all for now, Mira,” Dereck clenches his lips at the sight, “Hide the ring and wait. It’s best if we don’t talk this way anymore. So only connect if there is some kind of emergency.”

“Alright,” I nod and swipe my hand. The image of my friends disappears and I relax my back into the soft chair.

It’s better this way. I need to get out and to forget about everything.

The next day goes by quickly. No one visits me and I don’t go anywhere. Everything is ready for the evening and I know exactly what I am going to do. This is going to be the talent show of their lives!

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I am walking in my costume back and forth behind the stage. Well, it’s not a costume really, just one of the gerdian dresses Derrien gave me once he still liked me – a beautiful silvery silk one with a train and a cape attached to it, yet it goes so low that most of my back is still bare. I did my make up in silver tones as well to match everything and to create the cold look I am going for.

I am watching Xia nail it on the stage and she gets the most applause up to the hour. Gerdians are not the most appreciative spectators, to say the least. If they don’t like something, they are not going to waste their time pretending to.

A few girls left the stage with tears in their eyes.

Morgan is next and her herbology experiments are also received well. The best part of it was when she called one of the spectators to join her and Brandon volunteered, offering her his support. She then asked him to pick three ingredients and then promised to add three herself for a potion. When they both did, she mixed it all up and then poured it into a cocktail glass, adding an olive inside, and offered it to him as a drink. He took it all in one gulp, including the olive, and said to her that the taste was weird, but he is glad he is still alive. The audience burst out laughing as while he was saying it his hair turned into a nice shade of light green.

Honestly, I have to give it to him, he is one of the few people here who know that there is a murderer between us. And he is still ready to drink whatever she offers... He must be really into her. Interesting, does he know that what he drunk was absolutely harmless to his hair and cheeky Morgan must have hidden the real potion for the colour change into that damn olive.

Note to myself, do not quarrel with Morgan. And do not eat or drink anything she offers. Just in case.

“It’s your turn, lady Freyn!” Cecilia gestures to me to start climbing the ladder. My appearance today must be grand. Lady Cecilia was clapping her hands when she heard of it and praised me for finally listening to her advice. Poor naïve lady Cecilia... You have no idea...

The stage goes dark... I take my seat on a swing shaped like a silver crescent and a sad melody of my choice starts to play from the crystal I charmed earlier today. I light up the crescent and, slowly, it is gradually lowered to the side of the stage. I summon the air element for a light breeze and it makes my dress and hair flutter delicately. A picture of perfection, just what they want us to be.

I wave my hand and send ice crystals to the air. They shine like little stars and as soon as I make another wave – it starts snowing lightly over the heads of my spectators.

I can’t see any faces, as their seats are in the dark and all the light is on me. But see how silhouettes look up at the sudden snow.

I stretch my hand and summon the little ice crystals back to me. They begin to whirl in a dance of a blizzard, multiplying in numbers any second now until I have enough. They soon turn into the figures of two girls with long hair. They hold hands and perform a beautiful dance. I hear applause, but it’s not too loud. Poor naïve gerdians, they don’t even know that I haven’t started yet.

The figures disintegrate into thousands of little grains of ice and then form again into the shape of just one girl. She curtsies gracefully. “Belladonna Grosvenor,” Bella’s voice sounds from the crystal just as I charmed it to, “Daughter of a Count... When I was 16 my older brother and I dressed like commoners and escaped to our town’s summer fair. We walked freely the whole day...”

Bella falls apart and next the snow forms a completely different picture. A girl in a chair, her eyes open, but she does not move. Another girl in a nightgown walks up to her “Bella! Bella! Bellaaaaa!” my voice shrieks.

Disintegration again. Next figure – a girl in a beautiful dress with her hair up. “This is my first ball, ladies, I am so excited! I never had an opportunity like that before...”, Fawn’s voice is as sweet as I remember. “I just wish to marry one of them and create a happy family...”

Next – the girl drinks something from a cup. I suppose that’s how Sideria got into her body. And then another one whispers in her ear. And the figure of Fawn hangs herself on an ice rope. The crowd before me starts buzzing and I hear loud gasps from behind the stage. Taking a quick glance I see that one of the girls fainted and lady Cecilia is trying to bring her back to her senses.

And that’s when the last accord starts. “One more, one less! It’s not about you, girls! It’s about them! Everything here is about them! They are important, not you!” Cecilia’s voice breaks across the concert hall, creating even more havoc.

I look back at my spectators. I want to see their reactions.

But all I see is two eyes full of dark magic watching me... Derrien. He is here. Standing in the very centre right at the main door between the rows of seats. And he is watching me. But his magic does not scare me anymore. If anything, right now I see it as a sign of support.

I wave my hand again and thousands of tiniest pieces of ice fly to the seats in front of me, landing on those smug gerdian faces.

I easily jump off the moon, even though I am in heels and it’s pretty high. But I have no time to lose. There wouldn’t be a way out for me through lady Cecilia, so I’d better try and escape now.

I jump off the stage and run through the passage between the seats. When I am next to Derrien, his eyes stop shining. He is leaning over the door with his hands crossed on his chest and a smirk on his face.

“Well, that was stupid,” he says to me.

“But totally worth it!” I retort, “Do you mind?”

“Run, little mage, run,” he snorts letting me through and even holding the door for me. And when I am outside, I start walking away when I hear his single applause...