

The Selection: Bride Of The Dark Dragon Chapter 66 - Tips

MIRA

Going to my chambers now would be a terrible mistake. As this would be the first place Dargen would look for me after the show is done. And he would be pissed for sure.

I know I would have to meet him sooner and later and gods only know if I would be able to survive then... So, at the very least, I want to postpone whatever is waiting for me.

An idea strikes me suddenly and I hurry to the hidden staircase I once discovered. Guards use it sometimes. So, if my guess is right, somewhere down there would be their quarters and below them – the dungeons.

Luckily, mostly everyone is still at the Talent Show. I am lucky I got to perform right in the middle of it. I am also lucky that some of the girls are doing very long performances. Bless them. The spectators, I mean. There were about four or five more or less interesting numbers at all of them had already finished by now.

I wander around unknown floors for just a few minutes until I am at the very bottom of the castle. There are two guards at the metal gate. Luckily, humans. Not gerdians.

I raise my chin as if it is a perfectly normal place for me to be and march in their direction. They both look at me, startled, to say the least.

“I am here to see Isidore Vierne!” I say with a confident voice.

“Lady Freyn,” they both bow before me, “We are terribly sorry, but no one is allowed to see her.”

“Well, I was allowed to,” I lie without blinking, “By the Crown Prince!”

And to prove my words, I raise my hand, demonstrating the huge black diamond ring Dargen gave me. The two men look at each other for a second and then step aside, letting me through.

“Where is she?” I ask before entering.

“In the only occupied cell,” one of them replies, “You wouldn’t miss it.”

I enter a long and gloomy corridor. Cell after cell is dark and empty and only at the very end, I see a glimpse of light inside. A dull ball of magical light hangs on the ceiling and Isidore is sitting on the floor, hugging her own knees. I notice that her dress is dirty and torn in a few places. I also see a few bruises and small cuts on her. It doesn’t escape my eyes that she is shaking like a leaf in the wind.

“Hello,” I say quietly and she shrugs at my voice, sullenly looking at who came to visit her. But as soon as she sees me she jumps to her feet and in seconds her hands with broken nails are trying to reach me. Luckily, my reaction is too good to be caught that easily and I step away in time. She angrily waves her hands in the air, still trying to reach me, although we both understand perfectly well that she will not succeed.

“It’s you! You! You b***h!” she shouts with a croaked voice. I can tell that she’s been screaming a lot lately, “You did this to me! You set me up!”

I just wait for her to calm down and when she said every single insult that she knew, and I have to say that the stableboys back at my home have nothing on the noble lady Vierne, she finally falls to her feet, hugging the bars and starts sobbing.

I sit next to her and sigh heavily, “Are you done?”

“I hate you!”, she spits but I block it away with a simple shield.

“I know, it’s not new”, I say.

“You put that thing into my chest! I know you did it! You!” she says somehow desperately, “That’s why you’ve been going into everyone’s rooms. And because the Crown Prince chose you, no one is listening to me.”

“No,” I say calmly, “I was helping them to investigate, that’s why I was in all those rooms. I was searching for the artifacts and I found one in your room. That’s it.”

“Lies,” she exhales heavily, “All lies! You did it! You set me up!”

Tears are streaming down her face and a part of me believes it’s not her. Too obvious, too easy. If she was the murderer, she would play nice and lay low.

She wouldn't quarrel with her victims, she wouldn't be so obnoxious... as if she has already won. She is not that stupid, even though she is definitely not the smartest either.

"Isidore," I say carefully, "Who else had access to your chest?"

"No one," she replies bitterly, biting her lips and trying to swallow another sob.

"Well, are you sure? Can you think about it some more? If anyone..."

"Of course I am sure!" she snaps, "It was locked with a two steps magic lock! I was the only one who could open it! You need to know the password and be me to open it! I am not an idiot to keep this much jewellery without protection!"

Hm, interesting. So, no one could put it in there except for herself.

"Was anything else in that secret compartment?" I ask and meet her furious gaze.

"Only my mother's wedding ring! I took it out right before you came!" she says, "I wouldn't let the likes of you touch something this precious!"

"So, you unlocked the chest before I came? Did you lock it after that?"

"Of course not!" she rolls her eyes, "I was in the room the whole time! Why would I?"

"I see..."

"You know what," she suddenly smiles a very wicked smile and I strengthen my shield just in case, "At least I am happy that you would be the one marrying this monster!"

"You need to be more specific," I snort and stand up, "There are a lot of monsters in that castle!"

"The Crown Prince!" she spits the words, "I wanted him so much! But I guess I am lucky to at least receive an easy death at his hands. YOU would have to live with him for a lifetime! And trust me, you filthy w***e, you would not enjoy that!"

She starts laughing. Not normally, hysterically. I would even call that cackling.

“Isidore,” I call her, “If you are truly innocent I would prove that. That’s a promise.”

She stops laughing and looks at me for a few seconds, startled. Then wipes away tears, just smudging more dirt over her face with that motion. “Who would trust you?!” she throws at me bitterly, “You are the source of all my problems!”

“Well, she is your best chance for survival as well!” Derrien appears behind my back out of nowhere, making me jump.

“Lord Derwood! It’s her! I told you! That’s her! Please! You have to believe me!” she stands up as well and tries to reach him desperately. She is relying on him too much, so that means that he definitely had nothing to do with her tortures. This little discovery suddenly brings some peace to my heart. So, he IS different. A part of me needed to know that. Even though it’s too late.

“It’s not her,” he says looking at Isidore, “She was working with me on this case the whole time. I also know for sure where she has been during both murders. It’s not her. She is not the one who set you up. If anyone did at all, of course.”

“Someone did!” she starts crying again, “I didn’t do it! I didn’t like them, yes, but it’s not enough to kill them!”

“Why did you confess then?” he says coldly and I flinch. Did she confess? Why on heavens?

“I couldn’t handle it anymore,” she sobs, “There was too much pain... I just couldn’t...”

She cries, holding the bars of her cell and I step closer, putting my hand on one of hers. She shrugs but accepts it.

“Please, Mira,” she says with eyes full of tears, “If you really mean well...help me. Help me, please!”

“I promise,” I nod to her and give her a sympathetic smile.

“It’s time to go, lady Freyn”, Derrien says and the fact that he addresses me officially is not lost on me.

I start walking to the exit and after a few steps feel his hands on my waist, "Don't be stupid. That's how you get caught!"

Flames of dark magic surround us and it's another long transportation. During which he may or may not have pressed me harder into his body. And I may or may not have thrown my head back onto his chest just to feel his closeness...

But when I opened my eyes, I found myself in his chambers once again.

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We stay like this for longer than it is appropriate. He is holding me around my waist and I am too afraid to move away. Because if I do – it will all be over. And I need this closeness now, even if it's just for a few seconds.

Soon enough, he takes his hands off me and I suddenly feel much colder and much more empty. I turn to look at him but only see his back as he is looking out of the window.

He doesn't say anything and I simply come closer and stand next to him, trying to see what he is looking at. But the night is dark and, however much I try, I see nothing in the darkness.

"Do you believe she is guilty?" I ask finally, "Isidore Vierne?"

"Do you?" he still doesn't look at me.

"I don't know. If our conversation down there was all fake then she should be acknowledged as the best actress of the century."

"You are very easily convinced, little mage."

"Am I, though? I mean, that necklace is the only artifact we found in her chest, right?"

"Yes."

“So, where is the rest? And where is the worst one out of them all – the ruby hairpin which is actually a magical amplifier? One can make a lot of damage with that thing!” I insist.

“One can make a lot of damage even without it,” he interjects, “Enjoying your new ring, Mira?”

For a second there I don’t even know what to answer, but then the anger rises inside of me, “It wasn’t a choice and you know it!”

“It looked like a hell of a choice when you put it on in front of me!” he snorts, almost bitterly.

“You know what, He would make me wear it sooner or later anyway! So, no, it wasn’t a choice!” I roll my eyes, “Not telling me that you are NOT a part of the Selection and making me fall for you and use me WAS a choice!”

His lips part and he looks at me, startled, “You fell for me?”

I trip on my own words... Did I just admit that out loud to him?

“Just forget about it!” I turn to the door and start walking away when he suddenly appears before me in the dark flames, eyes full of those beautiful sparks. He still has sparks for me...

“Mira,” he says in a hoarse voice, “I need to know. I need to know it more than anything!”

“And what would it change?” I almost yell at him and feel a tear falling down my cheek, “I still have this damn mark! I am one of the brides! And you are not a part of the Dark Selection! And even if you were, if Dargen wants me then...”

“Do you want him?” he suddenly asks.

“Of course not!” I feel so insulted by his words.

“Then what do you want? Do you want to become the Empress? Is that why you are wearing that demon’s ring?!”

I slap him before I even realize it. Again. And right now there is so much magic in his eyes that I feel that I am going to say hello to his dragon any time now. But I don’t care anymore!

“How dare you!” I shout at him and hit him again, this time on his chest, and then again and again, “How dare you say those disgusting things?! How dare you insinuate something like this? How dare you trick me?! How dare you... you...”

I don't get to finish as his lips cover mine in the most possessive kiss he has ever given me. He is holding me in place tight, tugging on my hair from the back with one hand, and pressing me into his firm chest with another. I don't even notice how my hands slide around his shoulders and neck. This is madness! Pure madness!

“I need to hear you say it, Mira!” he growls at me in between kisses.

“Dream on!” I try to avoid his lips, but I have to admit that I am not trying too hard.

“Stubborn,” he mumbles, piercing my mouth with his tongue, “Stupid!”

“Say it to yourself,” I bit him on his lip and feel a metallic taste. I gasp, realizing what I have just done. The smirk that appeared on his face doesn't promise me anything good.

“Silly mage did it again”, he chuckles and I slip out of his grasp and run away a few good steps. If I remember it right, we need to exchange blood for him to be able to send me those dreams. I haven't seen them for the last few days and I guess the effect wore off.

“Derrien Derwood, don't you come closer!” I warn him stretching my hands before me.

“Or you'll do what exactly? Bite me again?” he is clearly enjoying that chase. I pick up my dress and run deeper into his room, jumping over a chair and try to use it as a barrier between us. He moves slowly, like a lazy lion who knows he already trapped the gazelle. We stand like this for a while, before he jerks in my direction and I run for my life. Only to bump into his rock-hard chest again as he appears before me out of flames of dark magic.

He traps me in his hands.

“My little mage loves to bite”, he smirks breathing into my lips, “So do I...”

The kiss is long and gentle. I know how it would end, but I don't mind the pain when he bites the inner side of my lip. It's almost sweet if he is the one who does it! He licks this place again and I gasp, but I suspect that he only makes sure that our blood mixes properly this time.

"Would you finally tell me what I need to know?" he is leaving a trail of hot and wet kisses down my neck.

"Is there a point to? Nothing changed!", I exhale loudly, almost moaning in his arms.

"You answer me and I'll decide if there is a point!" he insists almost at my bosom.

"You tell me there is a point and I'll think about answering!" I try to push him away, but he subdues my resistance quickly, pinning my hands at both sides of me.

"You know, Mira, you would give me your answer!" he smirks wickedly, "At the portal ball this weekend."

"Don't be so sure!" I snort, secretly wondering if he is going to continue.

"Oh, you are a terrible student after all," he chuckles, "You absolutely don't know, do you?"

"Don't know what?" I raise my brow.

"The main point of the portal ball," he tries to explain, but seeing my blank face starts laughing, "You seriously don't know why it is called the Ball of Portals in the first place?"

"I've been preoccupied to pay attention to any of that!" I roll my eyes once again, "Enlighten me, lord Derwood."

"Oh, I would!" he leans lower to me, breathing into my lips and looking into my eyes, "At the very end of the Ball of Portals, ladies and lords enter two specially created for the occasion portals. Inside, they would meet each other, if that's what their heart desires. They would only see each other if this is what they both want. So..."

“So?” I bite my lips, trying to hold back a smile. Is he telling me that we would see each other there? Does it mean that he wants to?

“We’ll see,” he whispers, almost covering my lips with his when we hear a loud knock on the door.

“Derwood! Open immediately! I know she is there!” the Crown Prince’s voice sounds like thunder on a calm day...

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Derrien lets go of me quickly and walks to the door, unlocking it with a wave of his hand on the way. Disappointment spreads all over my heart. What has all this been for just now if he is just going to give me away so easily? Am I still just a toy for him to play with when the prince is not there? I truly want to cry, but I would not let myself to humiliate myself in that way. Not in front of those two.

Dargen marches into the room furiously and looks at me as if he is going to kill me here and now. Oh, gods! This is the end.

“What the chaos is my favourite doing in your room, Derwood?” he spits at his cousin but moves forward to me without waiting for a reply, grabbing me by my arm and pulling me out of the room.

“She is working for the Emperor!” Derrien voice makes both me and Dargen freeze. What did he just say?

“I beg your pardon?” the Crown Prince’s mouth opens in surprise but Derrien gets some kind of paper out of the pocket of his coat and hands it to the prince. Ryden lets go of me and I rub the hand in the place where he’s been holding me. He reads the paper carefully and whatever he sees there does not make him happy. At all. I look up at Derrien and he winks at me. That cheeky...gardian. He could have told me but he didn’t on purpose.

“Since when is she helping with the investigation?” Dargen throws the paper back to Derrien and he carefully folds it and hides it back in his inner pocket.

“Since she arrived,” he answers calmly, “She was the roommate of the second murdered girl. You’ve been there.”

“And what does it have to do with anything?” Ryden rolls his eyes.

“Nothing, but after I escorted her to the room to gather her things, she discovered a clue. And even studied it later, doing better discoveries than our mages. She proved to be a specialist in human magic hence I made sure she takes part. And I was not mistaken. She helped us to find out the truth about artifacts and she was the one searching for the girls’ rooms.”

“You made my future empress go through other women’s belongings? Are you serious?” Dargen grits through his teeth.

“She is not an empress yet, the two of you are not even engaged. Besides, as you can see, the Emperor gave permission for her to work and she is at my disposal any time I need her.”

“Is that why you’ve been spending so much time together?” the Crown Prince is looking at me suddenly and here I am... Completely lost and have no idea how to reply. Obviously, saying yes would be the right answer. But what would Derrien say if I hurt him again? However, taking a quick glance at him I see him nodding in agreement.

“Yes, your Highness,” I say carefully and the prince’s face lightens up.

“Good then, let’s go then,” he grabs me by my hand and starts pulling me behind him again.

“What in the words she is working now don’t you understand, your Highness?” Derrien appears before us in his dark flames.

“You are not expecting my almost fiancée to work for you at night, do you?” Dargen growls.

“I actually do,” Rien smirks, “If we want to be done by the Ball of Portals.”

“Isn’t it solved?” Ryden chuckles, “That girl down in the dungeons confessed rather easily.”

“You mean while you were torturing her? I am afraid, your Highness, it is not enough to prove that she is guilty. Some details... do not match here. And lady Freyn’s help would be really greatly appreciated.”

Dargen does not let me go and doesn’t say anything. I can tell he doesn’t like any of this.

“Should I mention the Emperor’s order you’ve just read?” Derwood raises a brow.

“Of course not!” the prince says finally and releases me, “But I want you to be done by the Portal Ball.”

“I intend to,” Derrien bows respectfully.

“Mira,” Ryden turns to me and takes my hand again, this time just for a kiss. But he turns my wrist up and kisses it with passion. This is beyond intimate in both our worlds! “I am proud of you, my princess. Can’t wait for all this to be over and for us to finally have time to...”

A fireball flies across the prince’s head and he is lucky he was leaning at the time.

“What the chaos, Derwood?!” he shouts.

“There was a fly,” the other gerdian clearly lies, “Hate those creatures.”

For a second the two of them just stare at each other as if they are playing a game who is going to break first. But when Rien’s eyes flash with dark magic just for a second, Dargen turns away.

“Get to work then,” he throws back at his cousin, “Mira, I’ll see you soon...”

“Your Highness”, I curtsy.

As soon as the door closes I exhale loudly and raise, “And why exactly you didn’t tell me before that you have Emperor’s order about me working for you?”

“Because I wasn’t sure it would be needed. Believe it or not, but I can be offended too,” he snorts.

“Oh, I believe that someone with an ego as huge as yours could be offended easily!” I roll my eyes, “No surprises there!”

“You staying here tonight,” he suddenly declares, orders even.

“No, I am not!” I shake my head, “I don’t think it’s...”

“Appropriate?” he chuckles, “We’ve done things far more inappropriate than simply sleeping in the same room!”

Oh, so he means that I just sleep in here... Nothing else... Can’t say whether I am relieved or disappointed.

“Why can’t I sleep in my own room?” the question slips off my tongue before I manage to bite it.

“Because as soon as you are there alone, you would have a visitor who would want to do inappropriate things to you,” he answers nonchalantly.

Gods, he is right, isn’t he? I hate it when he is right.

“Alright!” I give up, “But I am not sleeping in the same bed with you.”

“That’s quite alright,” he smiles and a pillow flows to my face, “Sleep on the sofa then.”

What? Is he serious?

“You sleep on the sofa!” I throw the pillow back at him but he slices it to pieces with magic. Hundreds and hundreds of white feathers are flying around us as if it was snowing. With feathers.

“Look at what YOU have done!” we both say in unison and... start laughing.

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I can’t believe this heartless monster has made me sleep on the sofa after all. I had my suspicions for a while that chivalry is long dead in the mighty Gerdian Empire. Well, it just about confirms it! Unbelievable!

I turn and sigh loudly in hope that he would hear and offer me to change places. But all I hear is a sound resembling a snort and.. nothing else.

Turning from one side to another several times, I simply give up. This man has no heart! I close my eyes and, after a while, the darkness consumes me...

I wake up in the middle of the night and look around, slowly realizing that I am not in my chambers, but on a sofa in Derrien's instead. He is so close and yet so far at the same time. Carefully, I stand up and tiptoe to the bedroom. He is sleeping at the side of his humongous bed. Naked. His lower part is covered with a sheet, but judging by the outlines – he is not wearing anything...

I swallow and want to walk away when suddenly he grabs me by my hand and pulls me almost on top of him.

“What are you doing?” I gasp when I feel his second hand on my thigh.

“What are you doing coming to me in the middle of the night looking like this?” he says in a hoarse voice.

“Like what?” I look down and see that I am not wearing anything but one of his very own charcoal shirts. I forgot about this little fact completely.

He pulls me closer and then just rolls me so that I am underneath him. I immediately feel how his knee spreads my legs a little and then I feel... what a lady should not name.

“See what you do to me?” he chuckles, slowly unbuttoning the shirt on me, “Coming here, smelling divine... wearing next to nothing...having my scent all over you...”

“I was just passing through!” I lie, “The bathroom is just next to...”

His lips cover mine is one quick but very greedy kiss. “Liar!” he whispers.

“Brute!” I mumble when he is done with the last button and exposes my full body to his gaze.

“Far from it!” he smirks and grasps one of my breasts and then another, then leans lower and fondles them in turns with his tongue.

“Oh, gods!” I moan and bite my own hand to try and muffle the sounds that I make, arching my back at the same time. He wraps his hands around me, caressing me gently, and making me forget about everything. But it’s when I feel him tear off my panties is when I really lose it... He enters me in one swift move and clamps both my hands with his, intertwining our fingers.

“Open your eyes, Mira, and look at me”, he commands and I obey him. And only when our eyes meet he starts to move, first slowly and gently but clearly taking up the pace.

“Rien!” I almost scream when I am at my peak, gasping hard for air.

My whole body pulsing with wave after wave of pleasure when I realize that I am completely alone in the sofa. What the chaos is this?!

From my modest bed, still breathing heavily I hear Derrien swearing and going to the bathroom. A few seconds and I hear the sound of a shower on. I bet it’s a cold one.

He is out after a while, a bluish tint to him.

“How’s the water?” I snort, leaning on a doorway.

“Icy cold,” he replies, just a towel wrapped around his hips and I am trying really hard not to look down there.

“How dare you send those disgusting dreams to me again?” I ask the question that I came here to ask.

“Disgusting?” he chuckles and moves towards me, “Haven’t you noticed now that something was a bit off?”

“N-no,” I mumble, but now that he mentions it... it did feel a bit different than previous times. It felt more realistic for sure. Usually, it’s as if I am watching a performance from afar, not being able to control anything. But this time... this time I was in full control of my body in that dream. I could choose what I was doing... Oh, gods!

My face turns red and I hear him chuckle again at that, leaning down to face me, “I was just planning to tease you, little mage. You chose to enjoy it and from then on I couldn’t stop. But it was the two of us. Together. More than

that, I heard you just now screaming my name in ecstasy and I can smell that I am not wrong.”

I don't find what to answer to that and he gives me a smile of victory.

“And now, little mage,” he says moving away from me, “If you don't want that dream to become the reality, you'd better get to that bed and cover yourself with some sheets. A dragon has just about this much patience!”

“T-t-to the bed?” I look at him surprised.

“Yes, Mira, to the bed”, he simply nods, “After what has just happened I don't think you need to be this shy about sleeping in my bed.”

“B-but...”, I mutter and he takes my chin into his hand and makes me look at him.

“Dream on,” he snorts, “I am not touching you before the Ball of Portals. Unless you ask for it yourself, of course.”

Here he makes a significant yet awkward pause and I feel that my cheeks simply radiate heat.

“I beg your pardon, and after the Ball of Portals you ARE planning to... touch me?” I bite my lip even just asking that.

“This would depend on how it goes,” he answers seriously and then lifts me in his arms and marches to the bed, throwing me to the very center of it. I grasp some sheets to cover myself as I see his eyes flash with dark magic but see him not joining me and turning away instead. He is going to the wardrobe room.

“Um,” I mumble, “What are you doing?”

“Going to fly,” he informs me, “Seems like this is the only joy I can get here tonight...”

I feel a slight pang in my heart hearing this. And somehow I feel disappointed. But when I think about it, nothing has changed for us. This peace is only temporary. If I don't get out of the Selection, I would end up with Dargen. And I cannot allow it. Derrien doesn't give me any promises, so sleeping with him now would be simply stupid... The realization of all this kind of kills it for me.

We are not together and I don't know why he is relying so much on this Portal Ball. But I am willing to wait. If there is just a little chance for us... I'll wait.

"Mira," he brings me back to reality by brushing my cheek and I see that he is already fully dressed and ready to leave, "I am going to leave this for you."

"The Emperor's order?", I wriggle my brows.

"Yes, I am going away until the Ball and would not be back. Dargen will be with me and I'll make sure he doesn't bother you as well," he says carefully, "But I want you to sleep only in my chambers. Here is my personal barrier and no one would be able to enter this room except for me and you. So, at night, stay here. Even Dargen won't risk entering here by force. In case he comes back first. For everyone – you are working with me and the Emperor. You can disclose this fact if the need arises, however, it would be best if you keep a low profile."

"I see," I take a look at the paper to hide away the fact that I want to really cry now. I don't want to stay here alone without him.

"And wear the pendant I gave you at all times," I feel how his lips touch the tip of my head and fingers brush through my hair, "That's how I will know that you are safe and fine."

"All right", I give him a fake smile even though I secretly want to die. He stands up from the bed and walks to the nearby window, then turns and gives me one last look full of desire and dark magic. Flames surround him and he disappears before I can say that I want him to stay! That I want him the same way he wants me... if not more...

"I am going to miss you", I sigh and fall back to the soft pillow of my guardian's bed.

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The first lesson of the day is held in the main ballroom. As usual, I am the last one to enter and other girls are already standing in a straight line just as beautiful little soldiers that they are. In pretty dresses that is.

I can't help but notice that some of them are wearing gerdian dresses today. And some – even jewellery. Or both. I guess the talent show was more successful than I thought. However, the overall mood is not great and you can feel it. I think my performance had the desired effect and those pretty dolls have finally started thinking about what is really going on here.

I pass Xia, Morgan, and Desirae and they are all in new outfits in the latest gerdian fashion. The three of them are beaming, talking to each other, but when they see me the effect fades.

“I didn't think you would be able to attend today if I am honest,” Desirae whispers, “Did Crown Prince...”

“The Crown Prince had to leave early yesterday,” I grin at her, “Unfortunately, we didn't get to have a proper conversation. Or any conversation for that matter.”

“Yeah, unfortunately,” Morgan snorts, “Miradora Freyn, I've never seen a girl more lucky than you!”

“Or more crazy!” Xia chimes in, “That little trick of yours yesterday would cost a life to anyone else! Yet, here you are! How on heavens do you even do that?”

“I guess the gods are looking over me!” I smile. For a second there I want to tell them about the Emperor's Order, but then decide against it. I am not sure if we are that good of friends in the first place.

And also, Derrien asked me to keep it to myself if it is possible. He probably has his reasons to ask that of me. And I do not want to fail him. Not anymore. I wonder where he is... Is he thinking of me the way I keep thinking about him?

Lady Cecilia marches into the hall, clearly ready to kill. And when her eyes stop on me, I gulp.

“Lady Miradora Freyn!” her voice is so loud, I can almost say that she is shouting, “Five steps to the front!”

What is this? Army?

I sigh and follow her command without creating a fuss. That was to be expected!

“Turn so that everyone could see you!” she hisses and, when I obey again, starts talking, “Look at this lady! The one, who thinks she is too good for the Crown Prince of Gerdian Empire himself! The one, who disobeyed the rules numerous times and now would have to pay the consequences!”

She makes a significant pause and I start wondering myself where she is going with this. She is looking at me triumphantly and I am starting to get worried here. What else can they do to us? Punish physically? Torment mentally? For a second there I remember Isidore back at the dungeon, dirty, bloody, and shaking... But then one of Cecilia’s helpers brings in three wooden boxes in her hands and the room fills with whispers.

“Those are for you!” lady Cecilia takes the boxes from the girl who brought them and shoves them into my hands. “Not one, not two...but THREE!!! EMPTY! JEWELLERY! BOXES!”

She looks at me as if she just announced to me that I am terminally ill at the very least. I look at the boxes and check them just to make sure that they are empty.

“Just three?” I ask, not being able to hide the disappointment and hear Morgan snorting loudly, while the hall fills with surprised gasps.

“Is that not enough of an embarrassment for you?!” if lady Cecilia had a knife she would stab me right now.

“Not really,” I say honestly, “I thought that there would be many more by now...”

“You!” our curator turns red, “You are the worst student I had in years! The good thing now is that at least the Crown Prince will see how useless you are as a Crown Princess and would definitely pick someone else... So, girls, grab your chance while you are at it!”

Oh, I am going to cry. I wish all the gods could hear her words and make them true!

“Actually,” Tristan appears out of the grand doorway, and everyone curtsies before him, “The Crown Prince has just sent lady Miradora numerous gifts. I

doubt that his intentions have changed. The servants have just delivered them to her door and I had to place a guard there as well as the chambers are still protected by the prince's barrier."

"Maybe he has sent them before the talent show?" one of the girls squeaks in hope.

"Not really," Tristan shakes his shoulders and only now I notice that he is holding a similar box to the three I have already got in his hands, only bigger, "He also ordered to give lady Mira this."

"It's another empty jewellery box!" I hear whisper after whisper.

Tristan comes to me and tries to hand me the box, however, my hands are already busy.

"I'll help," Morgan comes forward and takes the first three from me, winking at me at the same time.

"Thanks" I mutter and open the box in Tristan's hands with hope in my heart for it to be empty as well.

"Don't get your hopes up," he whispers sadly, "This thing is heavy!"

Damn it!

But when the lid is off, I gasp. Inside, on a red velvet cushion lies a small crown forged of black gold. Oh, this is bad! Bad, bad, bad!

I take the crown out and for the first time, the whole room goes quiet. Why on heavens would he give me a crown after everything?! He looked properly furious yesterday! Why...

"There is also a letter," my ex-fiancé adds, "Under the cushion."

I look closer and notice the edge of an envelope. Opening it up I see a very short letter: "Nice try, my princess. Life with you would never be boring and I can't wait to start educating you on our rules. His Highness The Crown Prince of Gerdian Empire Ryden Dargen."

Ugh.

For a second, my eyes meet with Tristan's and he gives me a sympathetic look.

"Do I have to wear it?" I ask him pitifully.

"I am afraid so," he clenches his lips, "That's the crown that is given to the person with the best performance at the talent show. You have to wear it at least today. Here, let me help you."

He takes out a crown and throws the box to one of the helpers. I lower myself a bit and he places the damn thing onto my head. When I raise, our eyes meet again and I notice that his are filled with sadness and pain.

"Does it suit me?" I snort nervously.

"Nothing would ever suit you," he whispers.