

The Selection: Bride Of The Dark Dragon Chapter 71 - Tips

MIRA

When everything calms down and lady Cecilia comes to her senses, we continue with our lesson. It's dancing again, of course. Sometimes it seems to me that there would be nothing else in the Gerdian Empire for the girls other than attending balls and being pretty accessories for their husbands.

"Today would be a little different, ladies," Cecilia smiles and one after another gerdians appear in the ballroom out of dark smoke, "The gerdian lords themselves would be teaching you and checking what you have learned so far! It would also be a brilliant opportunity for you to get to know each other better!"

The gerdians start inviting other girls to dance and taking their position on the dancefloor, waiting for the rest. And, of course, everybody avoids me like the plague. Which is good, really. I just wish they got those empty boxes with them...

Suddenly, I notice one young gerdian walking in my direction. Brave. Very brave. I have to give it to him.

However, Tristan does not let him reach me, "I apologize, my lord. The Crown Prince has ordered that no other Selection participants touch lady Mira in any way. So, I would have to dance with her myself as her guardian."

"Of course," the young man nods and disappears in black smoke. And so do others who didn't get a bride to dance with. There are more of them than us here. So, not everyone gets to take part in the activity.

Tristan bows before me and offers me his hand, which I accept gladly. I'd better spend the next few hours with him than with any of them.

"Did Dargen really say that?" I ask him quietly.

"Not really," Tristan smirks, "But they are not going to ask him about that. I am sure."

"My or my!" I giggle, "Tristan Ragnard being rebellious! Now I've seen everything!"

Music starts and he presses me harder by my waist against his body, making me gasp. This is actually how the dance is supposed to be. Gerdian dances are more... candid. But I only danced with Tristan our Akyrian modest ones and never saw him from this perspective.

"You haven't seen much of me," he says into my ear, lips almost touching my earlobe, "It was my mistake, really..."

"We don't have to talk about it", I try to smile, although this feels awkward. I remember how he kissed me the last time he was like this and my cheeks immediately flush.

"This is all I think about it now," he confesses, "So many mistakes on my part... I had everything but I never realized it..."

"Oh, come on!" I gently pinch his shoulder, "I am sure your mother wasn't wasting any time and already found you a new brilliant bride."

"She did," he nods and I snort, "Three actually. Perfect families, perfect ladies, very eager... I have declined all of them."

It's time to twirl while holding his hand and I roll my eyes, "Well, that was stupid! Your mother is very good at picking brides. I should know – she picked me personally!"

"My father picked you", he smiles looking at me.

"Really? I mean, I know I've been a candidate because of our father's friendship, but..."

"My mother never wanted you to be my fiancée in the first place. But father offered and I agreed at once, Mira," he says avoiding my gaze, "And since I rejected so many before you, she had to agree."

"So, in other words, you wanted to anger your mother?" I say, biting my lip.

"No, Mira, I simply only wanted you. Always," he says and finally looks into my eyes, making me part my lips in surprise.

"Tristan, why are you saying all that now? It's... it... it doesn't change anything anymore. You know that and I know that... Besides, we never were a normal couple and...", oh, gods, it's really hard to say it out loud so I close my eyes

and just blurt it out, “Besides, you had plenty of other girls while we were engaged and I know it for sure because I saw you.”

His whole body shrugs and he almost trips yet manages to not show any emotions on his face as we continue dancing.

“Mira,” he coughs, “I don’t know how to say it to a lady...”

“Speak freely,” I snort, “I think we are way past the point of no return here.”

“W-well,” he continues, starting to sweat, “When we got engaged you were 15... And I was 22. We had a few good years before we could even consider announcing our wedding date and I didn’t want to scare you with... Uhm... average male’s needs.”

Oh, gods! This is getting beyond awkward.

“For me, you were too precious to... you know...”, he looks like he is suffocating, “And I already had...Uhm.. women before our engagement... so...”

“Gods, Tristan,” I close my eyes again, feeling how my cheeks radiate heat, “There is really no need to explain thus far. I get it!”

“I just want you to know that there was nothing serious. I was also very discreet. And from the moment our engagement would become active... there wouldn’t be anyone else but you.”

I gulp at his words. Is this dance ever going to end? What is it with gerdians and their long explicit dances? I turn and the next move for a man to brush their hand softly over his partner’s back – all the way from top to bottom. As ill-luck would have it, I am wearing another dress with a bareback. Tristan’s fingers slide over my skin definitely longer than needed, and when I turn back to face him, I notice his blue eyes became a shade darker.

“Mira”, he presses me against his torso again and leads us across the hall in slow steps, “Is that why you...”

“What?” I raise my brow at him questioningly.

“Is that why you seem to hate me so much?”, he sighs.

"I... I don't hate you," I admit, "It's just... For a 15-year-old girl to see her fiancé kissing someone else kind of kills the romance. I never thought that you are planning to go through with the whole engagement thing. And I planned my life accordingly."

"I see," his fingers start to press a bit harder into my flesh, "Mira, it's all my fault. All of it. I've been so stupid and I lost you as a result. But what if... in a perfect world... where we would have another chance. Would you have agreed to be with me for real this time?"

"In a perfect world, where there is no Selection and gerdians, I don't see why not," I chuckle as politely as I can and the dance comes to its end.

"My lady," Tristan carefully kisses my hand, smiling, "You have made me the happiest man in the Akyrian Kingdom."

He walks away to give some orders to the servants and I just stay there, startled. Tristan's humour was always a bit difficult to decipher.

"You know," Xia appears out of nowhere, "If we weren't a part of the Selection, I'd say that this one is a keeper. For you that is. The way he looks at you..."

"Please, don't finish this sentence," I stop her and notice that Brandon Seville, who was Morgan's partner the whole time looks at me suspiciously. Gods, tell me he is not going to turn it into something more than it really was – a completely awkward dance of two exes...

When it's time for a new type of dance, Tristan comes back to me with his usual serious and noble face. Not a trace of emotion anywhere.

"Missed me?" he jokes as we start to move again.

"Terribly!" I retort, "Tristan, can I ask you about something?"

"Of course, Mira, anything," he agrees without thinking.

"Help me to see Isidore Vierne today..."

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MIRA

The dungeon smells worse this time around. For a second there I am even worried if Isidore is already dead and rotting in her cell. But as soon as Tristan and I reach it, I notice her in the same corner she was sitting last time I came.

She lifts up her head when she hears our steps and jumps to her feet as soon as she sees me.

“I’ll just talk to her myself,” I smile innocently at Tristan, “Can you wait for me here?”

“Of course”, he nods, “But be careful, Mira. She is dangerous.”

“Uhm, all right,” I promise and walk towards the blonde prisoner. Her dress is properly dirty now and her hair looks dull. There is not a trace of the beautiful and noble Isidore Vierne. She looks older than she really is and my heart stings for her if she is truly innocent. She was always mean to me, but no one deserves what she has got.

“A new day and a new man,” she chuckles loudly. Although I’d better say cackles.

“Hello to you too, Isidore,” I roll my eyes, “I have brought you some food.”

I demonstrate to get a small bag full of meat buns I have stolen from the kitchen and see her swallow at the sight. But then she turns away.

“No, thank you,” she says in a broken voice and I realize that she is probably still thinking that it’s me that set her up and now imagining that I came to finish the job and poison her.

“Are you sure?” I ask and get one out, “Well, more for myself then.”

I take a big bite and start chewing loudly. She turns slowly and watches me eat. By the look in her eyes, I am sure now that she is starving. I get another bun and take a bite of that as well, demonstrating that they are all safe.

She grabs the bag without saying another word and then snatches the two buns I’ve already started out of my hands and gobbles them almost at once.

Gods, really? She is so thin one would think she would starve herself to look this way. But I guess no. It’s been three days since she is here and she already looks so broken.

I take a quick glance at Tristan who is keeping his eyes on me at all times.

“How are you?” I whisper, “I’d be honest, you look like chaos itself...”

“Thanks,” she mutters sarcastically while rolling her eyes, “I am not fed and have to pee in a bucket that stands right to where I sleep. On top of that every moment now that monster of a Crown Prince can come and beat me up and torture me again. Nice crown, by the way. I can imagine dozens of way he would be able to hurt you with it. Trust me, Mira, you are not going to enjoy any.”

“I know,” I chuckle quietly, “But stay calm, the prince is not coming back until the Ball of Portal this weekend. So, get some sleep if you can. I’ll try to bring more food tomorrow if I can.”

“Can you bring water?” she suddenly asks a bit too desperate and I feel like an idiot that I haven’t thought of that.

“Yes, of course,” I nod and suddenly I am stricken with an idea, “Actually, I can do something for you right now. It’s raining outside.”

“So?” Isidore looks at me dumbfoundedly with a stuffed mouth and I close my eyes, summoning the water element through the little window next to her cell. Fine drops look like little diamonds when they fly in and surround the girl, joining together.

“Rainwater,” I smile, “Will it do for today? I purified it on the way.”

“Oh, gods, yes!” the girl swallow the food and opens her mouth and I carefully help her to drink. Sometimes the water splashes over her face, but she doesn’t seem to mind. “More, please,” she says and I get her more water to clean herself. She washes her face and hands and I smile understandingly. Shame I cannot do more for her now.

“Feeling better?” I ask when we are done and she is back at the food.

“Definitely,” she groans enjoying one of the buns, “They only brought me some strange smelling water that makes me sick and stale bread. Prince’s orders.”

Dargen sure is cruel. Like he didn’t torture her enough. One day it could be me...

“Isidore,” I whisper, making sure that Tristan doesn’t hear us from where he is standing, “I need something from you.”

“I can’t do anything for you from here,” she shrugs her shoulders.

“I need a few strands of your hair,” I say honestly and she stops chewing looking at me in surprise.

“Why on heavens would you need that?” she asks, hesitation in her voice.

“I want to see if anyone used any potions on you,” I admit, “You know, to set you up.”

“Who would do something like that?” she rolls her eyes.

“Someone who already killed Bella and Fawn?” I sigh, “I’ve been thinking about your situation. It is strange. And if no one could get into your chest except for you, what if it has been you? But you don’t remember it.”

“Do you think that possible?” she asks with hope in her eyes.

“I don’t know, that’s why I want to check your hair. If something was used on you – at least a trace of it would still be there,” I whisper.

“All right”, she sighs heavily, “I guess it can’t be any worse for me anyway, considering I confessed in the crimes I did not commit.”

“Everything is going to be fine,” I say a bit louder and stretch my hand to her head. From afar it should look like I am just patting her, but in reality, I tear a few strands off and wrap them around my fingers.

“Thank you for visiting,” Isidore smiles understandingly, “I would never forget what you are doing for me.”

Tristan escorts me to my room in silence, but at the door suddenly turns me by my shoulders to face me.

“Mira, what do you think you are doing meddling into the investigation?” he hisses, “If the Crown Prince finds out...”

“What are you talking about?” I look into his eyes firmly.

“You didn’t just visit that girl! I am not blind. You are not even friends! So, what were you doing there right now?” he sounds concerned, scared even, “Don’t you understand what kind of place this is? Girls are dying every day! Gerdians are doing whatever the hell they want! And you... you have no right here and no one to protect you. Especially not from the prince.”

“Tristan, thank you for your concern but I am not doing anything dangerous. I don’t believe that Isidore is guilty even if I don’t like her much. I simply brought her food and helped her a bit. That’s all.”

His fingers are pressing harder into my shoulders, “Gods, Mira, I hope this is true...”

After my ex-fiancé leaves, I go to my chambers and notice a pile of gifts from Dargen. Ugh. What does a girl have to do to get dumped by him? I am seriously run out of ideas!

I don’t even look at what’s in there, just walk to the chest I am keeping my equipment in. Getting out everything like the last time – when I was testing Fawn’s hair and blood, I get to work. And they say for a reason that work is the best way to forget all your troubles as I finish late at night, exhausted.

I tiptoe quietly to Derrien’s room next to mine and get inside. I am planning to sleep here every night until he is gone, just as he asked me.

After a quick shower, I go through his shirts and choose one to wear tonight. I could have taken one of my nightgowns, but I didn’t want to. I wanted to wear something with his minty scent on.

Getting into bed, I pull the sheets to cover myself and darkness consumes me within seconds...

I feel a hand brushing over my cheek and lips... Derrien is taking his time, playing, and watching me react to his touch.

“I missed you,” I say, not wanting him to stop.

“I thought you are never going to sleep tonight,” he chuckles, “You like to keep me waiting, don’t you?”

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DERRIEN

The meeting of the Empire's Prime Council is never-ending. Issue after issue, all urgent and all-important. And on every decision, I and Dargen clash like our lives depend on it. Sometimes I think he doesn't even care what he or I suggest – just wants to be on opposite sides and prove me wrong. Which rarely happens and only infuriates him more. Once he gets to the throne it would be chaos...

And once the murders at the Dark Selection are mentioned, all hell breaks loose. That stupid cousin of mine insists on us closing the investigation and dismissing everyone involved in it since HE found out the murderer already and even has her confession. Luckily, our uncle is not that stupid and not convinced at all. But he lets us fight for hours proving our points. So when I win it doesn't even feel like victory anymore.

But at least she is safe from him. He wouldn't be able to touch her as long as the investigation proceeds.

All I want now is to sooner come to my chambers in the main palace and close my eyes, trying to reach her. But when I do she is not there. That girl.

One would think that she would sit quietly in my room and wait for me, sleeping peacefully in my bed. But apparently she has better things to do at the Selection! Unbelievable!

I try to reach her again and again but she is not there. It's so late at night that I start to get worried. Transporting to the castle now would anger the Emperor so it's not an option. But the thought that something could have happened to her while I am away just make my blood boil. And my dragon is restless as well.

Then I remember about the simplest method of checking on her – the pendant I gave her. I get my own, its twin, and rub the stone in the middle. Immediately it gives me the rhythm of her heart. Calm and soothing. She is fine.

It's funny that just knowing that somewhere out there her tiny heart is beating makes me happy and calm. And helps my dragon to go back to sleep and stop burning me from the inside.

I wonder why is she having this kind of effect on me...

I can finally feel her asleep and can enter her mind, imagining her sleeping peacefully on my own bed. Her fiery hair all over my pillows and her full chest going up and down. I sit next to her and brush my fingers over her milky skin. Somehow it feels that gods created her just for me... Although it is probably stupid.

"I missed you," she smiles and it warms up my heart. However, I am not admitting it to this mischievous girl.

"I thought you are never going to sleep tonight," I chuckle instead, "You like to keep me waiting, don't you?"

"Funny you should say that," her fingers slide over my abs, "Considering I am the one left at the Selection castle and waiting for your return!"

"Do you wait?" I can't help asking, even though I shouldn't give her this much power over me.

"Of course, Rien," she looks away and blushes and all I want now is to r****h her even if it's just in a dream. I lean down to her and touch her lips gently with mine. She tastes so sweet. Always. And when her arms slide around my neck, I lose myself, not being able to stop. I kiss her face, neck and prepare to go lower when she almost moans, "Rien, I think that was Alexandra! The murderer, I mean."

What the actual...chaos?! Here I am, trying to undress and take her and she brings up the murders in the heat of the moment?! Only Mira Freyn can do something like that. I sigh and mutter a few swearings into her neck. And then sit up.

"Why do you think that?" I ask, still disappointed.

"I took Isidore's hair today and checked it for potions," she confesses.

"You shouldn't go to the dungeons alone, Mira!" I reproach her.

"I wasn't alone!" she interjects and immediately bites her lip.

The dragon is up and he is furious inside me, fire burning so much I feel like it could escape me any moment now!

“And may I just ask who you’ve been with?” I growl, pinning her hands at both sides of her head. Her green eyes look scared and I feel a prick of conscience doing this to her. But I cannot help it. The beast inside me cannot tolerate knowing she’s been with someone else.

“W-well,” she mumbles and I know that I wouldn’t like the answer, “It was Tristan... but...”

I slam my lips in to hers, I hate hearing his name escape them. Not him. I know for sure she hates Dargen. But that human. HE is dangerous. He is always there when I am not, looking at her like a love-sick puppy. Always ready, always eager to please her... Hate the guy! And the worst thing is that they have history. She never loved him but what if she suddenly realizes that she did? Or that it was a mistake and she didn’t see the real him before and now she...

“Rien!” she moans, her hands are around me and it brings me right back to her, “Rien, I want to tell you what I have found!”

“Of course, Mira,” I exhale into her mouth and take her into my hands, getting cozy on the bed, “Tell me everything.”

“I have found something in Isidore’s hair! A trace of...”

“Let me guess,” I chuckle, “Sideria?”

“You knew?” she gasps and looks at me with those big eyes of hers.

“No, but since you found something – that must be it!” I say, rubbing her cute little nose.

“Oh,” she giggles and leans back on my chest. What would I give for really being with her now and not just in our dreams? “So, I’ve been thinking,” she says, “Isidore said that she was the only one who could access her chest. And yet the artifact was there. I believe her for some reason. And now I think that someone made her open her chest and then they made her forget about it!”

“That actually makes sense,” I agree with her and not tell her that I’ve been thinking about it myself.

“So, who could do that? What if they did that when they found out that I am going from a room to a room asking to have a look at everyone’s jewellery? At first, I thought that it would be stupid to set her up. It would have been easier to just hide the artifacts. I would have never seen them. Our attempt there was a long shot. We both know that. But the murderer must have realized that we are after her. Hence, giving us another suspect to waste our time with could have been a move to win some time for herself! Maybe even escape!”

“You know that with your dark marks escaping is not an option,” I say.

“Who knows,” she humphs, “Anyway, maybe the murderer just wanted time to cover their tracks. The more days pass by the harder it is to prove anything!”

“True.”

“Again, since I discovered Sideria in Isidore’s hair it became clear that someone was telling her what to do. And what if that has been going on regularly?”

“What do you mean, Mira?”

“I mean... the trace in her was significant. Not like in Fawn’s hair at all. She took Sideria more than ones.”

“All right,” I sit up. That is actually an interesting piece of information.

“And at the Selection only two people could be this close to Isidore. Her two minions – Alexandra and Ariadna. But Ariadna lives in a different room. Alexandra, however, is Isidore’s roommate! She definitely knew about the chest and its magical locks. She could have ordered Isidore to open it for her and hidden the artifact inside to set her up. And to be honest, now I am thinking, that Isidore in the dungeons and Isidore that I knew before are like two different people. What if she’s been controlled when Alexandra needed it from the very beginning.”

“Well, it’s a good theory, Mira,” I admit, “But we have no proof.”

“I know,” she sighs sadly and I turn her to face me.

“Don’t be upset, little mage. You’ve done well as always. I am so proud of you.”

Her face lights up at my words.

“Thanks,” she blushes and I kiss her forehead gently.

“And now, Mira, I am going to give you an order. And you are going to do what I tell you,” I say calmly and she turns with her lips parted in surprise.

“Derrien Derwood! How dare you give me orders!” she snorts.

“I just do,” I chuckle, “But I am serious, Mira. I need you to stay in my room until I come back! Do not go to those stupid lessons, do not go to dinners, do not go to meet with your friends. Tell everyone that you are sick. I’ll write to lady Cecilia and to that Sapphire Knight to let them know. I will send you food and drink as well. Do not consume anything that doesn’t come out of my dark flames. Got it?”

“Gods, do you think that I am going to be next?” she cracks me within seconds, “Because I’ve been going to all those rooms?”

“I don’t think that anybody would dare touch as much as one strand of your hair,” I say, “You are both mine and Dargen’s favourite. If something happens to you... Well, it’s just... It’s just better to be safe than sorry.”

“I see,” she blushes.

“Do you promise to do as I say?” I ask her and she avoids my gaze.

“I’ll try...” she clearly lies.

“Mira!”, I growl and throw her next to me, landing on top of her, “I have my ways to make you, do you know?”

“Oh, I am so scared!” she says sarcastically, holding down a laugh. That girl! She drives me crazy...

“Mira, promise me,” I say, looking seriously into her eyes and she stops smiling.

“All right,” she agrees, “But when will you be back?”

“I’ll return for the Ball of Portals, Mira. And I will see you there...”

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MIRA

The days most definitely last longer while he is away. And I can't say that I like it. What I do like is that I am actually locked in his chambers now with an access to my own next door. But, somehow, most of my things are already here. The things I care about – like my daggers, books, lab equipment, and such. Hope Derrien wouldn't mind... Oh, who am I lying to? I hope he would approve and be happy about it. He still hasn't made any promises to me and technically I am not even with him... And yet... And yet what we have seems to be so special. I've never felt the way I feel when I am with him. And now, after these days in seclusion, I realize that I don't want this feeling to end. Ever. Hopefully, he feels the same...

While alone, I found comfort in exploring his room and things. I feel like a naughty child who got into mother's jewellery box. And although I realize that this is just a temporary accommodation for him, I do learn a few things about him in this way. For example, he reads fascinating books. And he is very neat and well-organized. All his papers, feathers, ink, etc are in perfect order. Also, this minty scent of his is just his, as the bottles of cologne, I found smell differently. I don't think he uses them too often. Which is good. I love how he smells.

I got the book with the rules of the Dark Selection to read and now know everything that is going to happen during the Portal Ball. This is actually one of the most important events here. One cannot cheat when he or she comes through the portal. It would only take you to the person your heart desires to see. If that person feels the same. This is the best way to find out what everybody is really feeling. Although, for the girls, it doesn't change much. They are still not the ones to choose. But for the gerdians it's important while making their decision as they can still change their minds any time. Surprise, surprise... Gods, I hate this system!

I know I want to see Derrien. There is no one else I want to see at the other end. But what would happen next? What would Dargen do to me when he spends time alone in the empty space when I do not arrive to see him on the other side of the portal. Would he demote me as his favourite? Hopefully yes. And, also, it would be just amazing if he doesn't k!ll me in the process.

On the other hand, he should realize that there is no way in chaos I would want to see him in the portal. So, what is his plan here for me exactly?

I read the book, sitting on the windowsill when a huge black box arrives in dark flames. All these days Derrien has been sending me food, drinks, and also little gifts with notes here and there, making me smile every time. I wish I could send things or at least a letter to him, but that's a bit more complicated with human magic. And you also need to know the exact coordinates and all... Which I don't. So, I just write to him without the possibility to send it. Maybe I'll show it to him, maybe I will not... A lot will depend on how the ball goes as he is not the only one who needs answers.

I get off the window and walk to the box, taking the lid off and smiling in surprise. Inside is the most beautiful dress in pale lilac. Its fabric looks as if woven from flower petals, small graceful butterflies of a darker shade adorn the corsage and the hem of the dress. It's stunning! And it is more to my taste than any other dress he gave me. Somehow I have a good feeling about it.

Xia and Morgan tried to visit me a few times but left with nothing since I couldn't open the door of my own room while hiding in Derrien's. The worst thing was Tristan. After a few days he got fed up and promised to break the door and bare consequences later. Not that he would be able to enter the room in any way. But... but I simply felt sorry for him as he probably thought that O already died. I stepped out of Derrien's room to explain things to him. But seeing me in my dressing gown walking out of the archduke's room... he didn't say a word to me other than, "I apologize, my lady" and left. He never came back. Although it's definitely for the best. I cannot give anything to him anymore...

On the day of the ball, I am excited from the early morning. I spend most of the day getting ready and pampering myself. I want to look my best. For him.

I lift my fiery red hair to the top, holding it with hairpins with the same lilac butterflies as on my dress, letting a few curls fall down my shoulders and back playfully. That's when I notice that these are not just simple decorative butterflies. They are charged and shining with dark magic, making them flutter their wings beautifully. Gods, did Derrien play with my dress and cast illusion on it? I chuckle at the thought that if he doesn't want to be a gerdian general anymore, he could easily make it as a dress-maker! But, of course, I would hold that thought and never let it slip off my tongue. Ever.

I am ready early in the evening and just want to run downstairs to the ballroom and wait for Derrien there. And yet, I've been given clear instructions to stay in the room until he tells me to come out.

So, here I am, looking out of the window and waiting... and dying with anticipation. I imagine how I would enter the hall where everybody already gathered and all eyes would be on me. And in the middle of it, all would be Rien, looking only at me with eyes full of...

"Mira," his fingers are still covered with dark flames when they lay on my naked shoulders, but his fire never burns me.

"Rien!" I turn to face him, smiling, and meet his gaze. And there is so much in it. Happiness, desire, relief, excitement, even a bit of pain, and... hopefully, love.

"You look beautiful, my little mage," he whispers in my ear gently touching it with his lips and making me blush even though it's completely not new.

"You are back!" I can't hide my enthusiasm.

"And not going anywhere anymore," he chuckles, "Even if you would want me to. But first, would you let me escort you to the Ball of Portals, my lady?"

"It would be my pleasure," I curtsy and bite my lip, trying not to grin like a fool.

I am so happy...

We walk in together as many couples do. And everybody does watch us. Men in shock, girls ready to kill.

We pass my friends and Desirae looks disappointed, while Xia is smiling and Morgan winks at me, holding a glass of wine. I have mixed emotions about this encounter.

Suddenly, I see Callista, Xia's roommate, coming through to Derrien and me.

"Lady Mira!" she smiles showing all her pearly whites, "I've been waiting for you! And there you are!"

"You've been waiting for me?" I probably look very surprised.

“Of course, do you remember what we’ve been talking about the last time? When you were looking for some jewellery for your performance at the talent show?”

She wriggles her brows and I suddenly remember. Shoot. I kind of sold Derrien for a dance with her... Uh-oh...

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MIRA

Derrien looks at me questioningly and I feel so guilty in the heat of the moment. How could I have forgotten?!

“Lady Callista,” I smile, “Would you forgive us for just a moment?”

“Of course!” she giggles, not taking her eyes off my gerdian, “I’ll be right here! Waiting!”

“Great!” I squeak and pull Derrien away for a quick private chat.

“What was all that about?” he raises his brow at me.

“Well,” my voice is too pitchy all of a sudden, “You see... Remember how you asked me to take one for the team and go into all those rooms to pretend I am looking for some jewellery?”

“Yes,” he says darkly, feeling that something is coming.

“Well, now it is YOUR time to take one for the team! You see, I kind of promised that you would dance with that girl as she wouldn’t let me see her box otherwise.”

“Mira,” his fingers press harder into my flesh, “This is not for you to promise.”

“Well, Derrien, it is too late for that now. Because I already did and she is already here to collect. So, off you go!”

I bite my lip and he leans lower and whispers to my ear, “This is so not over, little mage! Wait for me right here! If you make just one step to your right or

left, I'll consider it as an attempt to run away! If you jump on the spot – I'll consider that as an attempt to fly away. Got it?"

"Yes," I straighten my back as if I am in the army, "Consider me frozen!"

"Oh, I'll warm you up alright when I am back!" he grits through her teeth and walks away to Callista, inviting her for a dance right away.

Little does he know that Callista is not the only one I sold him to. When he comes back to me, I see his eye twitch nervously when he notices a queue of women behind me.

"Miradora Freyn!" he snaps at me, "What do you think you are doing?!"

"I am so sorry!" I whisper and softly touch his hand, "They all wanted the same deal, otherwise I wouldn't be able to enter any rooms!"

"You couldn't sell Dargen?" sparks of magic dance in his eyes.

"Nobody wanted him! He is psychotic and everybody knows it! They all wanted you and I can understand them completely!" I say and see a small smile in the corner of his lips which he suppresses immediately.

"Still not over," he mutters to me and walks to the next girl, offering her his hand. They both pass me and I see how the blonde smiles at him delicately and looks away just as if she was shy. Which she is not! I acknowledge that she is gorgeous – just a picture of noble perfection: elegant, beautiful, moving gracefully. I notice how Derrien says something and she giggles and blushes. And when they are done dancing, he bows and kisses her hand.

Damn it! I don't like what I am seeing. He doesn't even make another step when a brunette curtsies before him. He throws an angry glance at me and leads her to the dance floor, smiling at her the whole time. That piece of a ...gerdian never smiles! And of all the times he chooses now?!

"What the chaos is all that about?" Brandon and Morgan come up to me, her hand trapped in his.

"I sold him," I sigh and my friend gives out a laugh.

"Gods, Mira, why would you do that?" she snorts.

"Well, it was a necessary sacrifice back in the day," I admit bitterly.

“And a very stupid decision,” Seville interjects, “You know, send him to all those beautiful girls right before you have to cross the arc and enter the portal. What if now it’s not you that he would be thinking about when the time comes. Maybe he would understand that it’s not worth to be so obsessed with just one girl.”

“Interesting point of view, my dear lord!” Morgan says sarcastically, “And good to know. Maybe I shouldn’t obsess with just one gerdian as well?”

“Morgie!” he suddenly changes in the face, “That’s not...”

“You might be right, Morgan”, I decide to add some salt to his wound, “Gerdian men are so handsome! Why waste your time on just one?!”

“True!” Xia comes in, chuckling with a gerdian following her and not taking his eyes off her. She is wearing a beautiful red dress with a deep cut at the front and long sleeves. While Morgan is in dark green with open back and hands. Now both men look a bit pale. I guess my friends found gerdians who truly care about them.

I turn to see Derrien dance with another girl and gulp. I hope I found one like that too.

Suddenly music stops and the herald announces: “His Royal Highness The Crown Prince of Gerdian Empire Ryden Dargen!”

The royalty marches into the room and all men bow to him, while women curtsy. However, he ignores everyone and doesn’t dismiss them, coming straight to me, raising me by my chin.

“Lady Miradora,” he smirks, “You look beyond beautiful tonight. Thank you for your effort.”

He still doesn’t give a signal for people to stand up and, judging by his look, that’s on purpose.

“Good evening, Your Highness,” I say calmly and look at him.

“Would you be so kind as to honour me with the next dance?” he glares, offering me his hand and I look around.

"I am afraid, your Highness, musicians would have trouble playing from this kind of position," I gesture at the people around us. It's about time to let them raise.

"Of course," Dargen chuckles and waves his hand, allowing everyone to stand straight again. A wave of quiet moans from the girls erupts around the hall. But in a few seconds, music starts and the prince brings me to the center of the dancefloor. We pass Derrien and yet another girl and I can swear I hear a growl of some sort.

We start moving in circles first and only after we've made ten steps everyone else is allowed to join in. I see Rien and the girl, I think her name is Scarlett, from time to time. Everything moves so fast.

"Did you missed me?" Ryden smirks, pulling me closer.

"Everyone missed you," I avoid giving him clear answers.

"Are you ready for tonight?" he asks, piercing me with his dark eyes. Gods, I hope he is talking about the arc and the portal. And not about anything gross.

The large arc made of pure black gold is standing in the middle of the ballroom. One gets the feeling that there are thousands of dark tree branches intertwining and ascending into the sky. A true masterpiece. It is not working, but soon it would be charged with dark magic and the challenge would begin.

"So, Mira, are you?" the prince sounds impatient.

"Pardon me, Your Highness?" I almost jump on the spot, "I am afraid the music is too loud and it's hard to hear you."

"I asked if you are ready? I hope you do understand what I expect from this evening?" he raises his brow and adds, "To see you at the other end of the portal."

"Well, let's see if your heart leads you to me," I smile nervously trying to put an idea in his head that if (or I'd better say when) we don't meet, it could actually be his fault and not mine.

“Don’t play with me, Mira,” he squeezes my hand so hard I know there’s going to be a trace later, “I know who I want to see! And if you are not there... let’s just say I will have to teach you to love me in a different way.”

“I understand,” is all I say as I try not to look at him anymore. Gods, that’s scary. How is this evening going to end?

I feel that someone is watching me and, unfortunately, it’s not Derrien this time. It’s Tristan and he looks concerned, probably guessing what is going on.

Suddenly, I notice a small flame on the Crown Prince’s shoulder. It gets bigger and bigger and I gasp, “Your Highness, you are on fire!”

“Of course I am,” he smirks proudly not even realizing that I meant that literally.