

The Selection: Bride Of The Dark Dragon Chapter 111 - Tips

MIRA

“Don’t look at me like that!” Derrien says, getting what I am implying from the very first second.

“But, Rien, please!” I beg him just like a child would, “What else could we do?”

“Walk!” he groans, crossing his hands on his chest.

“That would take us a week at least! And this is all we’ve got according to Brandon!” I retort. He knows that I am right.

“Mira!” he hisses and grabs me by my arm, flames of dark magic surround us and we appear at a further distance from our friends.

“What?” I look at him in surprise. What is the problem here exactly?

“This is not how our first time should be,” he says after hesitating and pulls on the collar of his shirt as if it’s choking him.

“We already had our first time and...Oh!” I bite my lip. By our first time – does he mean the first time I ride him in his dragon form. My ears turn red as my mind drifts of remembering how many times I have already been riding him in his human form though...

“Naughty little mage,” he clicks his tongue and smirks.

“Honestly Rien, sometimes it feels like you can read my mind!” I roll my eyes at him, “But back to the subject. It’s going to be just a quick lift to our friends and...”

“Mira, I’ll do it,” he interrupts us, “But first I want to fly alone with you. Even if it’s just for a few minutes.”

“But we don’t have the time...”

“Take it or leave it,” he cuts me off. “I can still take you to a safe place, then go kill Dargen and uncle and usurp the throne, you know. And we will not be needing this little trip to Dragonland.”

“Agnegard,” I correct him even though I know that he does it on purpose, “And you know why we need that trip! It’s not only about the Gerdian Empire! It’s also about the Akyrian Kingdom and the emerging war! We need a bigger force to stop it! And only dragons can give us that!”

“It doesn’t mean that they will,” he says calmly, “There is also a pretty big chance that we wouldn’t find them... They may have died years ago... After all, no one has seen one since the times of my father’s last appearance...”

“But we have to at least try,” I insist, “If we don’t... it will never be over! And if we fail... you can always go back to the usurping the throne plan. It will not solve the war with Akyria problem, but we’ll go from there.”

“Just give me those few minutes,” he brushes his palm over my cheek and I welcome the embrace, closing my eyes in delight.

“Just five minutes,” I raise my brow.

“Thirty.”

“Five.”

“Twenty.”

“Five.”

“Fifteen.”

“Five!”

“Mira!” he growls and I chuckle at that.

“Alright, fifteen it is!” I agree and he smiles.

He steps away from me a few good feet and flames of dark magic appear around his body, first they form wings that close around him but as soon as they open, I see a dragon and not a man. The whole shifting process takes him just seconds. And now a beast is staring at me with eyes filled with dark magic. All black with occasional dark purple scales, a thing of beauty, yet terrifying at the same time. He lowers his head and I come closer to touch him. He doesn’t scare me at all. I put my cheek to his nose and rub his scales with my hands a bit. A soft satisfied growl echoes around us.

He lies on the ground and offers me his folded wing as the first step to get onto him. And as soon as my feet are on it, he lifts me all the way up. I grab two spikes on his back and place my right foot on a third one, climbing him quickly. From the corner of my eye, I see all our friends watching us quietly at the side.

I carefully sit between two huge spikes surprised by how comfortable it actually is! Another two spikes will make great handles, so I will be able to hold onto them.

“Ready?”, Rien’s voice in my mind makes me jump.

“How on heavens do you do that?!” I exclaim.

“I didn’t know if I could before now,” he chuckles, “But sometimes I was able to hear snippets of your thoughts. And in my dragon form, I can hear more, my little mage. I don’t know how or why...”

“I think I do,” I smile, remembering what Aaron Brookland was writing about dragons’ soulmates, “But it’s a conversation for later. You have fourteen minutes, Rien.”

He takes to the sky so fast that I only manage to grasp the spikes harder, all my thoughts are left on the ground. He didn’t take it slow, did he?!

He flaps his wings from time to time, gaining altitude. But as soon as we are level with the clouds, he begins to simply float in the air, enjoying our joint flight. It’s so cold in here that I have to activate my fire element to make it dissolve in my blood and make me warm again. But as soon as I am done with that, I start to enjoy it as well. This is my second flight. Third, if we count the time I jumped off a cliff when the Invisibles tried to assassinate me. But this time is different. I truly experience the magic of it in peace. I can see the ground below us, the spikes of the cliffs, the mountain river... but everything is so small! And it’s so quiet here! So peaceful!

“That’s why I love to fly,” Rien says.

“I can understand that now,” I smile, rubbing the biggest spike on his back.

“Mira, don’t do that!”, he mutters.

“Why?”, I ask without any ulterior motive.

“The effect is similar to that of rubbing a genital,” he confesses and I hold back a laugh.

“Oh, my! Is that why you don’t want our friends to...”

“No, Mira,” he says grumpily, “ Only your touch has this kind of effect on me for some reason.”

“I am sorry,” I mumble, “So, just to make sure, I shouldn’t rub it like that?”

I carefully slide both my hands up and down the spike. “Or like that?”, I hug it with my chest and arms tightly and give it another rub.

“Hold just like that!” he growls and speeds up, turns around his axis a few times fast, making me scream. I grab this damn spike with all I’ve got too afraid to let it go. His chuckle in my mind drives me crazy, yet I am still not brave enough to release the spike.

When we are back on the ground, Brandon and Morgan say their good-byes and leave in dark smoke. Rien stays in his dragon form the whole time and when Dereck, Rick, Nort, and Isidore come closer, he lowers himself.

“Tell me he is not going to do this flipping thing when we are on him!” Isidore begs when I help her up right behind me.

“Just don’t rub anything,” I chuckle and the dragon under me snorts breathing a cloud of black smoke.

“Oh, gods!” Isidore starts trembling but Dereck lands right behind her and she pulls on a brave face.

“Don’t worry,” he says, “At least if you fall off accidentally it’s going to be a very quick death. Most people are gone even before their bodies reach the ground!”

“Der!” I turn to face him in anger but see that Isidore is fuming at his words as well and completely forgotten about her fears. My friend winks at me and I am starting to feel that he doesn’t hate Isidore so much after all...

“Mira, if we die on this quest,” Rick says lazily, “You’ll be responsible for all my widows and bastard babies!”

“No one is that rich!” I chuckle and Rien starts off to the sky again.

Another flight that I enjoy. Even though Dereck and I have to keep our friends warm by sending fire element impulses to them from time to time. The rest of it is good. And even Isidore starts to enjoy it once she stops screaming.

In just a few hours we reach our destination – the Crescent Cliff. It’s easy to recognize it because the top of it looks like, well, a crescent. And also it is the highest one of them all. The peak of it is well beyond the clouds. And if Aaron Brookland was right then the entrance to Agnegard will be here somewhere.

“I see something that looks like a cave close to the top,” Rien tells me.

“Can you land there?” I ask.

“I think so,” he sighs, “It looks like there is just enough space for one dragon.”

My heart starts racing when Derrien carefully lands on the not-so-big piece of rock. We all slide down in turns. Rick helping Isidore, while Dereck turns away rolling his eyes.

And I look at just one thing. Above the cave, there is a sign set in stone – a flame in a circle. The sign of Agnegard. Exactly like the one in Aaron Brookland’s journal.

We are here!

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MIRA

“So, it’s great that we are here,” Dereck says, “But what is next?”

“Wow, and someone like you really almost graduated from the Academy of Magic?” Isidore rolls her eyes, “We come for the Dragonland and there is their sign on the cave entrance? What do we do? What do we DO? Enter, of course!”

“Guys! Please!” I try to stop their nagging, rubbing my forehead. |

“What does the journal say?” Nort asks me.

“Aaron Brookland doesn’t elaborate on the tests much,” I admit, “He just says that there are several and they are all very hard. Only the worthy and pure of heart can enter the Agnegard. So, be ready for anything.”

“Stay close to me at all times,” Derrien tells me as he grabs my hand.

“The same goes for you,” I smirk at my own dragon, “We should go first.”

We step into the cave and start walking inside. The cave inside is much bigger than I anticipated and we mostly move downwards. There are no signs of Agnegard anymore and no other signs or patterns as well. There are also no signs that someone was here before us in a while. It’s dark, so each of us creates a fireball to lighten up the way. Everyone but Isidore, so I just push Dereck to share his with her to hear him gruntle about that. This is the only fun we have here after all.

On our third hour, it’s getting a bit annoying that nothing is happening. And on our fourth, I am utterly disappointed. Derrien is quiet and when I look at him, I notice that his face is tenser than usual.

“What’s wrong?” I ask.

“The more we go down here, the more I feel like the trap has already close behind us,” he says and I cannot agree with him more. This is exactly how it feels. But we keep walking and nothing happens.

“You could have made a bigger fireball!” Isidore complains, not even looking at Dereck, “This is at least a size smaller than everybody else’s.”

“I am not measuring fireballs here,” Dereck gr0ans, “Maybe I didn’t want to see your face too clearly. If I don’t see it, I can almost pretend that you are not here!”

“Good point,” she chuckles and trips him with her leg at the same time. The captain of our team falls down, knocking me off my feet as well. Luckily Derrien catches me on the way with my date with the stone-hard floor, bending down. And this is when a huge fire wave emerges above both our heads.

“Fire traps!” Rien shouts and pulls me back. That was close!

Rien sends a fireball over the tunnel before us and it activates several fire waves from different places on the walls. I summon water magic and although we have to wait a few good minutes for the water to arrive where we are, it is totally worth it. I send it in a huge wave down the floor and it activates several other deadly traps.

"I'll go first," Rien says with a serious face and I know not to stop him when he is this determined. Out of all of us, he has the best chance anyways.

I nod calmly even though my heart sinks when I think about him going there. But I know that I need to keep calm and watch. Watch and memorize. Because I have to be next.

Rien walks calmly as if it is a walk somewhere in a park! Sometimes he has to dodge fireballs here and there and once he even bends. But he makes the whole ordeal look so easy and effortless to pass.

When he is on the other side, where it is safe to take a breath. He tests the area with his magic a few times as well and waves me to start.

All right, Mira! You can do this! This is exactly what you have been training for.

I almost start when hear Isidore's voice, "And why exactly can't he just transport us to the other side with his gerdian magic?"

"i***t!" Dereck covers his eyes with his hand, "This is a test! We have to pass it, not avoid it! But you are actually welcome to just stay here. It's not like you are much help anyway!"

"You know what, I'll show you!" Isidore starts marching towards the traps, when I catch her, "Mira, let me go! I can do this!"

"I am sure you can," I reply, "But first watch me, Rick and Nort. Memorize what we do and later do the same. You'll have your turn."

"Very well," she almost grits through her teeth, throwing a quick glance at Dereck.

"Don't let him get into your head," I chuckle, "This is his secret weapon. You let him in and you are dead."

She looks at me in surprise, then smiles as if I said something incredibly wise. Gods, I hope it wasn't a mistake bringing her here after all.

I start walking. By no means this is as easy for me as it was for Rien! I have to run, jump, dodge and even somersault at times. By the time I am in Rien's arms, I am all sweaty and dirty. But he kisses me as if it is all nothing.

"I really don't like all this," he mumbles into my lips.

"Concentrate," I say, "If something goes wrong, you will have to get them out."

He nods and we watch Rick and Nort struggle the same ways as I did, but managing to get to us safely. The next one is Isidore and we are all not at ease with it. She is the least trained one here.

She steps forward and I notice that Dereck does the same. She looks surprised at first, but he pushes her to the front.

"Don't waste time!" he yells and for the first time, she doesn't retort, just following his orders, "Lower! Jump! Jump again! Down! Run!"

They come to us falling down on the ground together, with her cloak a bit on fire and her hair all messy. But the smile on her face is enough to ignore all that.

"I did it!" she looks at me as if I have given her the best gift possible and I chuckle at that, giving her my hand and helping her up.

"You sure did! And you did well," I smile and meet my eyes with Dereck's, which tell me that she is not going to last long like this...

"Let's not waste time," Rien suggests, "Soon it will be getting dark outside."

We walk and walk, but there is nothing else here. Just the endless tunnel of this cave. To be honest, the cliff was already supposed to be done by now and yet here we are, still walking. Which makes me think that we may be underground now. Since we don't walk downwards anymore, we walk straight.

After another few hours, we just have to call it a day and start preparing for a break. We agree that someone should stay up at all times. Isidore decides to take the first turn and Nort decides to join her. Her face seems to be relieved at his companionship, while Dereck just snorts and walks away.

Rick and I summon the Earth element and try to create something resembling beds made out of leaves. It does not work perfectly, but it is definitely more comfortable than sleeping on a rock. Then I go a bit further and make ours look like a tent, covered on top and sides as well.

“What a wife I have,” Rien smiles watching me, “Jack of all trades!”

“Forgive me, my lord,” I smirk at him, “But you have no wife! Just a fiancée! ”

I shake my bracelet before his eyes and he scoops me in his hands, throwing me inside our improvised tent. Soft leaves hug my body nicely. He crawls on top of me, his eyes full of lust and after just one kiss I have to stop him, putting my hand on his lips.

“Rien, we are not alone here,” I remind him, and sparks of dark magic in his pupils die down, his body falling tiredly next to mine and a heavy sigh emerges.

“Cruel woman!” he snorts.

“Actually,” I say, getting out Aaron Brookland’s journal, “There is something I wanted to show you here.”

“What is it?” he pulls my upper body onto his chest and creates a ball of magical light to help me see things better.

“He writes many interesting things,” I say, opening the old pages, “But there is something here that caught my attention. He writes that dragons have soulmates... Real soulmates, Rien!”

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DERRIEN

“There is something I wanted to show you here,” she says not even realizing that I am in hell here not being able to do things to her that I really want to do. Her scent is intoxicating, as I pull her upper body on my chest. I need her close, as close as possible. My dragon is agitated and only with her next to us, he calms down.

I am so tempted to play with her, even with all those people around us, hearing us. I don't mind. Let them all hear that she is mine. Especially Dereck. She doesn't get it, but I see how he looks at her. The only reason I didn't throw out this other girl from the quest is that she took his attention off Mira.

"Real soulmates, Rien!" she says excitedly and I feel guilty that I didn't listen before. It seems important to her.

"Elaborate on that," I say, kissing the top of her head and itching to do something else. It's been too long!

"Look, here!" she opens a page and starts reading, "What amazes me the most about these beasts is that they are beasts only on the outside of one of their forms. But on the inside I find them to be the most caring creatures. Each dragon finds only one person in their whole life whom he or she will truly love. They call them soulmates. Once the dragon's heart makes its choice, if it can even be called a choice, then he or she will be loyal to this person forever. They will not need anyone else, moreover, they wouldn't be able to be with someone else even if they try."

Shit. That sounds utterly familiar. So familiar that I start to listen carefully to her every word.

"Only this person can make the dragon happy and only with this person can the dragon have offspring. Until they do, the desire to claim the soulmates can drive the dragon crazy. They are very possessive creatures."

"Mira," I stop her, not knowing what to say.

"I know," she smiles the way only she can and continues, "What's interesting is that if the other person is not a dragon, they gradually start to feel the same, fully reciprocating their feelings. And I know it first hand, as I myself became a soulmate of a dragoness. A thing of beauty, I noticed her at first sight. But with time my feelings developed into true madness. You cannot compare the bond we share with anything else."

"Your ancestor was a soulmate of a dragon!" I exclaim, still not quite believing what I have just heard, "And so are you!"

"You think... this is what we are?" she looks at me with a question in her beautiful green eyes. And I feel a little bit offended by the question. Doesn't she know still? After everything?

"I know we are," I cup her chin and turn her to slam my lips into hers and to taste her divine scent yet again. Big mistake. Now I want her even more than before.

"Rien," she stops me, breathing somewhere into my neck, "If we are soulmates... then this is bad!"

What? Why would she say that? What's so bad about being mine in body and soul?

"You don't want to be my soulmate?" words slip off my tongue and I already regret it. I don't want her to answer. What if she doesn't? It will break me beyond repair.

"Silly dragon," she brushes her hand over my cheek and smiles softly, "Don't you already know how much I love you? It's not what I mean. Aaron Brookland... he writes that if the dragon loses his or her soulmate, he or she would go crazy with grief. Only a small percentage survives..."

"So?" I look at her questioningly, I don't see a problem here. I found out quite some time ago that without her life wouldn't be possible.

"So?" she looks offended, "Dragons live longer than people, Rien! Much longer! If I die, I don't want you to..."

I cover her lips with mine. I don't even want her to finish this sentence. She may want many things, but this is something I just cannot give to her! I know that we come as a pair, her and I. And without her, I would cease to exist.

"It doesn't matter, little mage," I whisper to her, "It's still better than to live the longest life possible without knowing you, without feeling what I feel for you. This is what made my life worth living. Before you, it was just an existence."

"Rien," her eyes fill with tears and I kiss every single one falling down away. My girl wouldn't cry because of me.

"Silly," I chuckle, "You forget that I am just half a dragon. I probably wouldn't live that long anyway. And also, gerdians live for a long time too. And most importantly, when I share my dark magic with you, I also share my life energy. Chances are that you will live just as long as I do."

This time this little minx jumps at me herself, her warm soft lips biting me lightly. She doesn't even know what she has just started as I roll her so that now she is under me and unbutton her shirt a bit to have more access to her neck and chest, and to my beautiful mark just above her delicate breast. I give a trail of wet kisses all over her and prepare to undress her further when I hear Dereck's voice.

"Just stop it already! You are not alone here!"

My lovely fiancée turns red in seconds and pushes me off her. Gods, I hate this guy!

His turn is next together with Rick. I hear them change the previous pair exchanging a few jokes with Isidore about how terrible they both look. Mira is sleeping snuggly in my arms and the rhythm of her heartbeat makes me calm and happy. Content even.

But something needs to be done first. I carefully put her down and leave our little nest that she created, covering her with my cloak.

The two guys are sitting at the little fire, Dereck tense and Rick half asleep.

"Leave," I address the latter and he looks at me with hostility, "I am going to change you."

"I don't need to...", he starts his bravado, but his friend puts a hand on his shoulder.

"Go, Rick," Dereck says, "Use the extra sleep time you get now well. And we have...a lot to talk about."

After the other guy leaves, I take his place at the fire and we just sit like this for a while.

"You know it's never going to happen for you and her, right?" I look at him, waiting for a reaction. But he gives me none.

"I have known it for a while," he chuckles bitterly, "While Tristan was blowing his chances with Mira, giving her time to grow up, I have not been wasting mine. I tried. And failed and tried again. She never even got it."

He stops talking, it is obviously hard for him to confess. And to me of all the people.

“Every time I tried something romantic for her, she laughed hard. Like it was a funny joke...,” he says, looking at the fire, “You know when she hurt me the most? Long before you came into the picture. I was going to confess one day... and she hugged me and said that she was so happy to have found me. That with me she felt exactly the same as with her brother Colton. That night I knew that she doesn’t have those kinds of feelings for me. And probably never will. When she received the Dark Mark, I wanted to help her to get to her fiancé. I thought that they were in love. But she told me that they never were and I thought that I might hide her in my castle, that maybe... maybe she will see me differently if I rescue her... And when that didn’t happen, when you took her away... I was beating myself every day. Until once I saw the two of you in the capital. You were wearing illusions and I wouldn’t have recognized you in a million years. But her... I would recognize her even within millions of illusions. Even when she denied it, I knew it was her... I followed you and that’s when I saw your little date. I made myself believe that you are forcing her, I managed to give her my communication ring. And she didn’t call... I was going crazy, waiting every day... And then finally that happened! She connected to me and she cried that day, asking to get her out. I should have been terrified but in reality, I was so happy inside to hear that. I was back to my plan, I had my chance again. Not long before that sh!thead Tristan also contacted me and offered his help to get her out. I met with him and we made a plan. I had no idea that not a word of truth gets out of his fvcking*g mouth! When he brought her out unconscious, he explained that the gerdians blurred her mind, compelled her into believing she loves one of you... And I bought it simply because I wanted to... But then, on the road, she woke up. She wanted to get back to you. She wanted this so much that she even fought with the three of us! That only made me believe in Tristan’s lies more. But then you came in the shape of a dragon and I hid us under a shield of illusion. I managed to trick you. But then... then I saw how she looks at you in the sky. And then I knew...I knew that it’s all over. I will never have her. No one else except for you will...”

“And that’s why you helped me when we met in the Akyrian Palace?”, I ask him, remembering how he recognized me but only helped me to get to the ball, instead of giving me up.

“Yes,” he nods, smiling sadly, “For her... Everything is for her...”

“If anyone in the whole world can understand you, it would be me,” I sigh and he looks at me in shock, “I lost her way too many times to know exactly what it means and how it feels. But she is mine now, Dereck. And she always will be.”

“You think I don’t know that?” he almost growls.

“I think you are stuck,” I say, “And you need to move on. There is no future for you and Mira but as friends. But there is a future for you and someone else. You just risk missing it while looking in the wrong direction.”

The boy looks at the sleeping Isidore and I smirk at that. He is almost there.

“Go sleep now,” I say to him, “I’ll watch alone over all of you.”

“Are you sure?” he asks, eager to follow my advice.

“I’ve been imprisoned for weeks! I already had enough sleep for a lifetime,” I snort and the boy leaves me alone.

I really want to get back with Mira and have her close to me, but her safety is more important. And I wouldn’t trust it to anyone else.

This trip is important.

But in two days, when we run out of food completely, I change my mind...

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MIRA

It’s been two days since the moment when we run out of food completely, walking on an empty stomach up to now wasn’t much of a challenge. But soon it will be. And there are no signs of anything edible within this damn cave! I am starting to feel like everything was a big mistake and I just brought my friends into a deadly trap for no good reason at all.

At least water is not a problem for us. Most of us can summon the water element so we get as much as we need even in this kind of circumstances.

“Let’s talk,” Dereck throws his bag to the grounds and sits next to it. The rest of us slowly follow his example, looking at each other secretly and making sure that we are all still alright.

“So,” Der sighs, “We cannot go on like this. This tunnel is never-ending and our resources are very limited. Some of us wouldn’t be able to walk soon.”

He throws a significant gaze at Isidore, clearly implying that she is the weak link in our chain. The beautiful blonde, who still looks amazing against all odds just gives out a loud snort.

“Oh, please!” she rolls her eyes, “I am a lady of house Vierne! I can go without barely any food for at least a week! And dance at a ball in high heels at the same time! This is not even a challenge for me yet! But if you are ready to give up, just tell us!”

And she gives him a very fake smile, full of confidence and superiority. House Vierne made a big mistake when they didn’t let her attend any academy of magic! She is a natural battlemage!

“Listen,” Dereck snaps at her, “Your bravado is very tiring! We all know that you are here out of pity and are of absolutely no help, so if you could at least be quiet during serious conversations – THAT would be the best help you could provide!”

My jaw drops to the floor to hear Dereck say such rude things and Isidore just stands up and walks away.

“As you wish!” she throws an angry gaze at my friend before leaving with her head held high.

We all look at Dereck with reproach in our eyes and he just rolls his.

“It’s true and you know it!” he mutters, “So what do we do next?”

“Continue,” Nort says, “It’s too late to come back anyway...”

“Rien can transport whoever wants to leave,” I say quickly, we already discussed it with him before, “But that may potentially ruin our test.”

“If it’s a test,” Derrien adds, “For now we’ve only seen the fire traps and they could have been set up here thousands of years ago. It means nothing.”

“It means something!” I look at him in disbelief, “Besides, we’ve seen another Agnegard sign recently! We are close to the next test!”

“But if you want to leave,” Rien interjects, “We will understand.”

“No,” Rick says firmly, “If even Isidore is ready to stay, then so are we! Besides, if you are ready to transport us anytime, we’d better leave it to later than go away now.”

“Agreed,” says Nort and I notice that Dereck is looking in the direction where Isidore disappeared.

Her loud scream makes us all spring to our feet and run as fast as we can to the sounds.

But to our surprise, we find her in no danger, intact and even jumping from joy.

“Look what I just found!” she waves her hands, her fingers pointing up and we all lift our heads... to see something ...oddly looking.

“What is it?” Dereck sounds more worried than annoyed.

“Can’t you see?” she babbles, “Mushrooms! Paletonets!”

But when we all still look questioningly at her, she adds, “They are e-di-ble!”

I look carefully and notice little clusters of something purple on the upper walls of the cave.

“Are you sure?” I look closer, but do not recognize the type, “I haven’t seen these before. And the name paletonets doesn’t tell me anything.”

“It’s because they are rare!” Isidore shines, “A delicacy even. We have them on our land sometimes, they grow on rocky surfaces and ta-da!”

I can’t help but smile and throwing a quick glance at Dereck, he smiles too.

“Ok, and what do we do with them?” Nort asks, “It’s good that they are edible but there isn’t much... Not even sure that it’s going to be enough for all of us...”

“Well, it’s better than nothing!” Isidore defends her find, “We can grill them on fire!”

Our team quickly arranges everything and in less than half another the mushrooms are all ready for the first taster. The problem is – no one volunteers.

“Seriously?”, Isidore looks at us, clearly disappointed, “Fine, I’ll it first and...”

She doesn’t get to finish the sentence as Dereck grabs his portion and sends it to his mouth, chewing quickly and swallowing.

“Seems fine,” he reports and I want to start eating mine, but Derrien catches my hand and pulls me closer to himself.

“Give it a few minutes,” he chuckles, “If he survives then you can try.”

“Rien!” I hiss at him, embarrassed, but he holds me in place for as long as he needs. Then, after a while, when others started eating as well, he lets me have my portion and swallows his in one large gulp.

It’s getting late again and we do our usual sleeping arrangements. I snuggle in my fiancé’s arms and surprisingly he is fast asleep, his hot breathing on my forehead. I could lie next to him forever...

I close my eyes for what seems like a few seconds, but the next moment someone forcefully grabs me and gets me out of our improvised tent. And when I see who it is I want to scream, but for some reason, I am not able to.

“Missed me?”, Dargen’s smirk is terrifying as he j.erks me in his direction. I look around in panic, but Rien is nowhere to be seen. Dereck, Rick, and Nort are on their knees with gerdian soldiers holding knives at their throats. I almost forget how to breathe at the sight.

A loud piercing scream makes me shrug and I turn to see Isidore in some gerdian’s hands. He is laughing and trying to grope her, while she is kicking and screaming.

Dargen laughs right into my ear, l!cking it at the same time and I want to throw up at the sensation. But what worries me more is that I still see no sign of Rien.

“Don’t look,” the Crown Prince of Gerdian Empire says, “I had to take him out first.”

“What did you do?” I grit through my teeth and he bursts out laughing again, “What do you think I did? Killed him of course.”

“No!” I shout at him, finding my voice, “Not possible! You couldn’t!”

“Of course I could!” he snorts, “He was much weaker than usual. It was a perfect opportunity! And I don’t miss perfect opportunities!”

“I don’t believe you!” I try to hit him, but he blocks me. He is a gerdian after all and our strengths are not equal.

“Then I’ll just have to show you!” he grabs me by my hair and pulls me further into the tunnel of the cave. I struggle, trying to stall for some time. He doesn’t have Rien! Rien will come to save me! He always does!

But what I see next, I do not expect. On the dirty floor, a few feet away lies Derrien... My Derrien! My Rien! His face is all white, and dark, almost black, blood forms a pool around him. He doesn’t move and his eyes look... glassy. Just like Bella’s when I found her body.

“Rien!” I call for him, but he doesn’t respond. No! It can’t be! It is not possible!

Dargen pushes me in his direction and I fall to my knees, blood quickly soaks into my pants. Rien’s blood! I try to shake him, but he doesn’t react. Tears are strolling down my face and a loud sob escapes me.

“Rien, please,” I take his face into my hands but there is no reaction. And also – he is icy-cold! “No, please, Rien! Look at me! Stand up!”

My loud sobs fill the space and I don’t know for how long they let me cry, my whole body shaking. But when Dargen has enough, he pulls me back by my hair, throwing me at the feet of my four friends. The boys look badly bitten and Isidore is all in tears as well, trembling like a leaf in the wind.

Ryden walks in a circle around me, watching my every move and enjoying the process of tormenting us.

“Just kill me already!” I grit through my teeth and he gives out a chuckle again.

“Mira, Mira, Mira,” he cups my chin and makes me look at him, smirking, “Don’t you know that I have better plans for you?”

“You must be kidding!” I say, “You still want me to be your queen?!”

The expression on his face changes, “Oh, no. That carriage is already gone, Miradora. You failed me way too many times to trust you with this position! Although who knows! Maybe one day... if you are a good enough girl for me...”

He brushes his thumb over my lips, making them part, and chuckles.

“But for now you can only become my slave,” he announces and my blood boils, “My official concubine that is. I will need you to please me and...”

“No,” I say firmly, looking him straight into his eyes, “Not happening. You can kill me, but I would never...”

“Who says anything about killing you?” the prince sneers, “When I have so many of your friends to play with first? Who should I start with? Is it the captain of your little team? Or maybe that useless but incredibly pretty girl? She for sure would make a great toy for me. Again. And maybe even more this time...”

I look at him with horror in my heart. I should have guessed that there will not be an easy way out! I look at the guys and Isidore and notice how tense their faces are. No wonder! Such a situation...

“So, Mira,” Dargen squats next to me and takes away a lock of hair from my face, tucking it behind my ear, “What is it going to be?”

“Please!” I look at him and he starts to laugh, but there is no emotion in it. It is dark and empty.

“You have five seconds to decide!” he says firmly, looking at me as if he is amused with everything that is going on, “You or them. Become my slave and save them, or they all die today in tortures. Five!”

Oh, gods! Only the thought of this makes me sick!

“Four!”

Death is so much better than the destiny of Dargen’s plaything.

“Three!”

But my friends! I lost Rien, I can't lose them too! More tears are rolling down my face and another sob escapes me.

“Two!”

I need to at least give them a chance...

“One!”

“I agree!” I almost scream, closing my eyes.

“The test passed!” a cold voice announces and I open my eyes in shock.

The Selection: Bride Of The Dark Dragon Chapter 115 - Tips

MIRA

I gasp for air, trying to get up but two strong hands catch me and hold me in place. Turning my head left and right, my vision is still blurry. But I see the familiar figure next to me and tears start rolling down my cheeks.

“Mira!” Rien brushes his palm over my forehead, taking away wet hair off my face, “It's fine, Mira, whatever you saw – it wasn't real!”

“Oh, thank gods!” I wrap my hands around his neck and pull him in, to feel his scent, to hear his heart beating. I need it! I need it so much right now! “It was just a dream!” I exhale heavily.

“Actually,” he breathes somewhere into my collarbone, “It was the next test. And since you are up, I guess you passed it. Well done, little mage.”

“What do you mean since you are up?” his words help me sober up quickly, although acute nausea makes it hard to move.

He hesitates before answering, “At the moment it's just you and me.”

I start to crawl out of our tent and see that all our friends are still unconscious. Isidore trembling in her dream, while Dereck asleep in a sitting position by the wall – he was on duty. Nort seems to sleep peacefully. But Rick... Well, I am

not sure what he is doing, but he lies on his stomach on the ground and it looks like he is trying to swim. Trying really hard. I think I know what his dream might be, considering he can't swim for life!

My nausea reminds me of itself with strong urges and I crawl a few feet away to empty my stomach. Bye-bye, magic mushrooms.

Rien is carefully holding my hair and pats my back. Unbelievable! I never wanted for him to see me like this! But on the other hand, I take it one million times if needed. Just for that dream to stay a dream.

He hands me a flask with water and I wash my face and teeth, then drink the rest in just a few gulps. This is much better now.

"What did you see?" the gerdians asks me when he pulls me back into his arms and brings me closer to my friends. We just sit there and wait for them to wake up.

"I don't want to talk about it," I bury my face in his chest and feel a soft kiss on the tip of my head.

"Mira," he sighs, "Whatever it was..."

"You were dead!" I sniffle with my nose, holding back tears, "It was horrible..."

"It wasn't real," he tries to soothe me, but that's when we hear coughing sounds and turn in their direction. Dereck and Rick woke up almost simultaneously and now look as if someone has dragged them directly out of a grave.

"Are you fine?" I shout at them, not being able to control my voice, and after a while, they notice Rien and me.

"Gods," Rick trembles first, "That was horrible!"

"What did you see?" I can't help but ask.

"I had to marry!" he shrugs, "For the sake of the Kingdom!"

I give out a loud snort. Everybody knows that Rick opposes marriage as a concept. He declined multiple brides offered by his parents and tries to avoid responsibility where possible at all costs.

“Who was the lucky bride?” I chuckle, leaning my head on Derrien’s chest.

“You!” he shrugs again. Rien tenses up a bit, but I burst out laughing.

“Did you try to swim away from the marriage?” I snort and now even Rien starts laughing, his body almost convulsing. From the corner of my eye, I notice that Dereck is not having any fun and avoids my gaze at all times. “What did you see, Der?” I ask my friend and he immediately stands up and walks towards still sleeping Isidore.

“I prefer not to say,” he honestly admits and I respect his decision. I also have no desire to share the details of my test. Remembering Dargen just makes me want to throw up again.

It’s only Nort and Isidore left. After about an hour, I check them both and they seem fine. Nort is sleeping peacefully and snoring, while Isidore looks not happy at all. Dereck stays at her side at all times and I can’t help but smile, watching the scene. However, I am worried about what will happen if one of them doesn’t pass the test.

A loud gasp – and Isidore is in Dereck’s arms. He helps her to come to her senses and I don’t hear a single nasty remark. Glancing at Derrien quickly, I receive an approving smile from him.

That leaves just Nort. We sit at his side in turns, watching him sleep peacefully and just hope that he will wake up any moment now. After several hours, we decide that it’s time to try and wake him ourselves. However, we quickly come to the conclusion that it’s easier said than done.

“I think I know what his test might have been,” Rick says sadly. Dereck and I know as well. There is only one thing that was his weakness – money. Or the lack of it if speaking precisely. He is the only commoner among us and he is the only one supporting his family. We tried to help as much as we could, but until he graduated from the Academy and gets a well-paid job there isn’t much that we can do except for just lending him money here and there, giving him gifts on occasions, and so on. So, if his test was finding money that could save his family from poverty...

“Can’t blame him,” Dereck says, “But what now? I don’t think he is going to wake up...”

“We can’t leave him here!” Isidore joins in.

“We are not going to!” Dereck snaps at her again and I sigh, everything was going so well before this moment. Nort clearly failed the test and the whole thing left us with a bitter taste.

“I’ll transport him to Brandon,” Rien says, “And we’ll continue our journey.”

“I don’t know if it’s a good idea,” I confess quietly, “What if you leave the grounds and this will count as failing the test?”

“I am not going to leave the grounds,” my gerdian smirks, “However it will take a lot of strength out of me, so for the next few hours I will not be at my strongest and protecting you...”

“I can manage myself, thank you very much!” I roll my eyes and then look at my sleeping friend as well, “It’s good that you are sending him to Brandon. Morgan is there and she is a herbalist. I am sure she’ll find a way to detoxify him and wake him up.”

Rien touches Nort’s shoulder and flames of dark magic surround him. One second – and he is gone.

“I hope nobody was sitting on that sofa,” Rien mutters, “I can only transport people to exact locations I remember or with precise coordinates.”

For a second I imagine Morgan and Brandon sitting on their sofa and enjoying a quiet evening together when unconscious Nort falls on their heads. Quite the way to remind of ourselves.

We keep walking in silence. No one is in the mood to talk anymore. I look at Rien from time to time. He said that he’ll be weaker but somehow I don’t see any difference with his usual self. Impressive.

I look up and see another emblem of Agnegard, signifying that the next test is near. I have a bad feeling about this one and when we walk through a tight passage where we hardly fit in and walk into a huge open space, I gulp. This part of the cave is huge. So much so that it takes one’s breath away.

We are standing on a dais and look down at a huge and complicated maze below us. I don’t even see where it ends.

“Seriously?!” Rick whistles and I look at Rien, “Those dragons are better to be worth it!”

“It’s important not to lose each other here”, I say before the entrance to the maze, “Who knows what’s inside!”

“It would probably be best if we use this!” Dereck gets a long piece of rope out of his bag and we all tie it around our waists.

Rien goes first, then me, then Rick and Isidore, and Dereck completes our chain. The guys and I got out our daggers just in case, Isidore grabbed a stick she found, and only Rien leads us without any weapons, confident as always.

I can’t help but admire this man again and again. During our entire journey, he never gave in to panic. He should be the one worried the most, as we are looking for his people now. Possibly even his family. But the only thing he seems to be bothered about is my safety. The thought warms my heart.

The walls of the maze are made out of stone and covered with vegetation, we have to step carefully not to trip on vines.

We don’t talk, all of us on high alert, looking around at all times.

When suddenly one of the walls moves abruptly and changes its position, cutting off Dereck and Isidore from the rest of our group.

“What the chaos!” Rick yells, holding the broken end of the rope in his hands.

“Guys?” I shout, “Do you hear us?”

“Yes!” Isidore yells, “ We are fine!”

“But Dirty dragon tricks”, Dereck almost swears, “I guess they want us to deal with it separately! See you at the exit!”

We look at each other tensely and cut the rope off without saying a word. In this kind of circumstances, it may do more harm than good. Walking carefully and watching every move, we check on our lost friends when we can. However, they seem further away from us every time.

Another wall changes and Rick is lost as well. Damn it!

“Stay as close to me as possible!” Rien grits through his teeth, I see that his eyes are full of dark magic.

“Are you all right?” I squeeze his hand that I am holding tighter.

“This is annoying,” he says, continuing our path, “It’d better be worth it. I don’t know for how much I can hold on without shifting in rage!”

“Everything will be...”, I start reassuring my fiancé when I notice that one of the vines is moving and wraps around my leg swiftly, pulling me with all its might and lifting me up in the air, “Rien!”

“Mira!” his terrified face is the last thing that I see...

I am thrown away quite far from him but, to my surprise, nothing else happens. No one attacks me and the walls are not moving anymore. I guess their aim is to simply separate us from one another.

“Rien, I am fine!” I shout.

“Damn it!” Dereck swears somewhere on the right, “You too?”

“Yeah,” I exhale loudly, “Maybe that’s why Aaron Brookland was the only one to get into Agnegard...”

“I really hope that it’s not the case!” Isidore yells, “Otherwise it would be the most disappointing trip of the century!”

“Rien?” I call for my gerdian, suddenly realizing that he hasn’t said a word to me yet, “Rien!!!”

“I am fine,” he shouts, “But I need you to do something for me. All of you!”

“Anything!” I agree at once.

“Create fireballs and show me where you are, lift them as high above your heads as you can! Higher than the walls,” his voice sounds as if he is on the verge of something.

“All right!” I do as he asks and create quite a big fireball and make him levitate above me. Soon I notice two others as well. Dereck is still with Isidore.

“Do you see?” Rick shouts.

“Yeah!” Rien sounds strange, “Stay where you are until I come for you!”

And with that, the ground starts shaking and I see a huge figure grow right in front of me, spreading its majestic wings. He has shifted into a dragon!

He gives out a roar and then flaps just one of his wings and demolishes at least half of the maze. Then he spreads another wing in my direction and I jump onto it, getting his idea at once. I climb onto him just like a few days prior, still amazed at the power and beauty this beast radiates. He does the same for my friends and in no time we are all sitting on the back of the dark dragon.

He opens his mouth and lets out a huge wave of dark fire, walking slowly to the exit and destroying everything on our way.

We stop at the very wide but not high white marble staircase that leads to two grand doors mounted into the rock. Sliding down with the help of Rien’s wings again, we wait for him to shift and start walking up the stairs.

When the door opens and strong light hits our tired eyes.