

The Selection: Bride Of The Dark Dragon Chapter 86 - Tips

MIRA

Tristan is not a newcomer when it comes to newspaper covers. The Sapphire Knight of the Akyrian Kingdom appeared on a lot of them. It was always either his victories or achievements though. Even when we got engaged I was never there! Just my name was briefly mentioned and then there were loads of words about what a loss it is to the girls of the kingdom and how incredible he is, and how lucky I am.

But right now I am looking at a huge portrait of myself in his arms. It was clearly created by a master. And a glossier paper was used for today's issue.

I am wearing a pale blue dress and he is in his festive sapphire armour, giving me a proper princess carry while my red hair is flowing with the wind. We are looking at each other and tears are rolling down my eyes...

What the chaos is this?! Who did this and why?!

"The Sapphire Knight and His Rescued Beloved Announce Wedding Date", I read the title and my jaw drops to the floor... I open the article about us and I am lost for words. It tells a story that I have never heard of but, apparently, been a part of without even knowing. Tristan and I were madly in love since our childhood and were supposed to get married. But this year the evil gerdians chose me as one of the brides for the Dark Selection and we had no choice but to separate as our country comes first before everything. The King had to send Tristan as a supervisor as he had his doubts about the treaty and the reasons for the Selection. And while supervising Tristan uncovered a conspiracy against the Akyrian Kingdom! Gerdians were preparing to attack us and meanwhile were having fun killing off the girls at the Selection. I was chosen by the evil Crown Prince, who was going to make me his bride and lead the war the day after our wedding. But Tristan to the rescue! After the gerdians had a killing spree at the latest ball, Tristan kidnapped me and sent me home. He himself, however, returned to the castle and blew it up together with the Crown Prince and other gerdians. Prior to that, of course, he saved a couple of other girls that managed to survive. And they all gave statements about what a hero he is. While doing all that, Tristan managed to take a gerdians prisoner and deliver him to the King. And the King's Archmage found out that we can be as powerful as the gerdians themselves. King Bendor was

so happy that he awarded Tristan with a new title – and here I choke – he made him the Crown Prince of the Kingdom! As the king himself wasn't blessed with a son. Moreover, he restored our engagement because – and I quote – “true love always wins”! And now Tristan and I are going to lead the country to the war as symbols of everything worth fighting for. And the whole country is cheering for us.

I put the paper down and for about half an hour just staring in front of me. What the chaos is all this?! Who wrote that? There is not a word of truth and... Gods, what is it with my luck and crown princes... I just got rid of one and here we go again!

“Morning!” Tristan strolls in with a huge bouquet of flowers and both maids start whispering and giggling, looking at the two of us. The flowers land in my hands and the knight gets the newspaper out. I give him a questioning look and he shrugs his shoulders.

“Did my fiancée take her medicine already?” he asks one of the maids and she blushes.

“No, your Highness,” she curtsies, “It's on the lady's tray.”

He finds a tiny glass with some kind of potion in it and hands it to me.

“No need,” I protest but he only brings it closer to my lips.

“This will help you to gather strength and recover quickly, Mira. Open your mouth,” he smiles and the maids sigh in adoration. While I roll my eyes and yet drink it.

“Good,” he brushes his fingers over my lips, wiping a few drops of the liquid and not taking his eyes off me, “Leave us!”

“Of course, your Highness!” both maids curtsy and hurry to leave the room.

I look at my newly found fiancé and exhale heavily, “Congratulations, Your Highness!”

“Have you read all of it?” he nods at the newspaper.

“Yes,” I say simply.

“And?” he raises his brow.

“Very entertaining piece of news!” I look at him, “Shame there’s not a word of truth!”

He throws the paper out and sits right next to me on the bed, “You know how news is made... Mira, but not all of it is a lie.”

“Enlighten me, Tristan,” I force a smile.

“You already know everything”, he sighs, “We are at war whether we want it or not. And we can be free of gerdians. And also... our people need you!”

“Oh, don’t go there, please!” I snap.

“We are already there, Mira! You are a battlemage of the Akyrian Kingdom! It’s your duty to fight wars for the Kingdom – no matter who the enemy is! You know it and I know it!”

I say nothing. Because this is where he is right. It IS my duty to fight if there is a war. Battlemages give an owe when they join the Battle Magic Department at the Academy. We have to fight if there is a need even if we haven’t graduated yet.

“Mira,” Tristan takes my face into his hands, “The Selection is gone. And so is everything that happened there. You and I are back home and we have a second chance! And this is the moment where I need you the most. Our people need you! You are not only a battlemage now! You are also a symbol for all our people! A symbol of freedom, a symbol of the bright future! They want to believe in you and me! It helps them!”

“It does, doesn’t it?” I sigh. He is right. People need me and I have to help them!

“And that gerdian,” my fiancé continues, “He is in the past. You and I are the future!”

For a second there I feel that he might be right. But then I remember Derrien’s eyes with sparks of dark magic dancing in them... And I am not so sure of anything anymore...

“I don’t know,” I turn to look at the window and Tristan takes my hand into his and kisses it.

“Mira, how about we go and visit your father?” he asks, “I think you are ready now. You will enjoy a little family reunion. Your brother Colton is also here.”

“Is he?”

“Yes, he is preparing for the war too,” the Sapphire Knight informs me, “He needs you now more than ever. We all need you. The whole Kingdom. And me..”

He is right. They all need me...

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MIRA

“Flicker!” Colton spins me into a hug, “Gods, I’ve missed you! You got thinner!”

“You don’t look too good yourself,” I reciprocate my brother’s embrace, “How is dad?”

He lets go of me and his smile fades, “He is better, Mira. But it’s been so bad before. I think he’ll be very happy to see you. And Tristan too. He started to get better when he found out that Tristan saved you and you are back together. Let’s go.”

He leads me to a spacious room, similar to the one I am staying in and when we enter the bedroom, I see my father lying on a bed. His eyes light up when he notices me.

“Mira! Child!” he stretches his hands to me and I run into my father’s arms, tears in my eyes.

“Count Freyn,” Tristan greets him behind my back.

“Your Highness!” Dad tries to lift himself up but I push him back.

“Please, don’t move! You are still not well!” I say and look back at Tristan.

“There is no need for formalities,” he smiles, “In my mind, we are already family and I want you to just call me by my name as always!”

“You’ve always been the most considerate boy,” Dad smiles weakly and my heart sinks. He looks so weak! My father! The great warrior! One of the strongest men I’ve ever seen!

“Daddy!” tears roll down my face now, “It’s all my fault!”

“Of course not, my dear,” he wipes the tears away and I feel Tristan’s hands on my shoulders.

“Mira, everything is going to be all right,” the Sapphire Knight says, “The best healers are treating your father and they say now that his life is not in danger anymore. And none of this is your fault. It’s the gerdians! They’ve started it and they caused all those troubles for us!”

“Yeah,” I nod, feeling a bit dizzy. I look at my dad and he looks concerned.

“And how are you feeling now?” he asks and I force a smile.

“I feel great, daddy. Never better!” I chuckle.

“We are preparing for our wedding,” Tristan squeezes my shoulders tighter, “The healers promise that by then you would already be able to stand on your feet and join us! Mira and I so happy...”

“I see,” my father starts coughing, “Is that so, Mira? Are you happy?”

I hesitate before answering but when I see how anxious he looks I smile and lean back on Tristan, saying, “Of course! Why wouldn’t I be? I am home!”

“Good, very good,” Dad smiles.

“Maybe it’s enough for today,” Colton says after a while, “You have seen each other and now your hearts can rest. But so should you. Both of you!”

“Of course,” I plant a kiss on my father’s cheek and stand up. Tristan offers me his hand and I accept it and, after waving good-bye, we both leave.

Tristan takes me to the main palace garden for lunch, where a table for us is already prepared. I don’t even notice how he is holding me by my hand, our fingers intertwined until we reach the place. I see some other nobles walking

leisurely around as if we are not preparing for the war of our lifetime. And all eyes are on us. If our eyes meet, ladies immediately curtsy, and men bow in respect. And this feels so odd... I was never treated like that.

“Don’t mind them,” Tristan smiles holding my chair, “They all want to see their future king and queen.”

He leans down all the way to my face with a clear desire to kiss me in front of everybody but at the last moment I turn away, “I am sorry... I don’t think I am ready to...”

“No, I am sorry,” he kisses the top of my head instead, “By the way, you are looking pale again. I think it’s about time for you to drink the elixir that the healer has provided for you. It would bring back your strength in no time.”

The maid brings a small glass on a tray and Tristan hands it to me, watching me until I take it all in one gulp.

“That’s better,” he sits in front, giving me one of his perfect smiles, “Soon you will regain your strength and become happy again. With me by your side. We’ll be happy here in Akyria, Mira. Together with our families and our people. Gerdians wouldn’t hurt you anymore. None of them would be able to reach you again. As I am sure, you don’t want that anymore. You want to stay here and be with me. Right?”

“Uhm,” I think about it but suddenly feel a bit dizzy and rub my forehead, “I guess so...”

“Good, Mira,” Tristan smiles again, “Because we are in love, you and I. We always were. And now we can finally be happy together.”

“Uh-huh,” I try to cut a piece of meat in front of me while my fiancé states the obvious.

“So, do you think you would be ready for tonight’s ball?” he says casually.

“There is a ball tonight?” I look at him in surprise as this is the first time I hear it.

“Yes, we called it the Last Day of the Previous Era,” Tristan eats his food quickly, he was probably too busy to eat normally in the last few days.

“That’s one stupid name if you ask me,” I snort and he chuckles at that.

“You may be right!” he says and one of his hands covers mine, “I missed this so much!”

“I bet you did,” I wink at him and he suddenly gets serious.

“Mira, if I don’t k!ss you right now I am going to die...”

“Erm.. Well, we wouldn’t want that, would we?” I say, hesitating, “You are a future king after all...”

He takes a gulp of his wine, stands up quickly from his place and is right next to me in mere seconds, lifting me up and pulling me closer to him by both his hands. His lips cover mine greedily as his fingers tug on my hair lightly. His tongue explores my mouth and it’s getting hard for me to breathe in his arms. But somehow I only feel dizzy...

Until a certain burning sensation appears in the area on my chest. It hurts so much that I give out a scream and touch the place that hurts, noticing the mark that gerdians gave me. What evil creatures! Now they are even torturing me from a distance.

“What’s wrong?” Tristan exclaims, still holding me by my waist and I distance myself from him a bit, I feel like I need space for some reason.

“It’s the mark, it hurts!” I say and he tells the guards to bring more medicine for me.

Meanwhile, I have this strange feeling and turn around, seeing a man at a distance. He is looking at me intensely. But I do not know why... I don’t think that I have ever met him. But his eyes... there is something familiar in them...

“Mira,” Tristan hands me another glass with medicine, “Drink this. It will take away the pain.”

I take the tiny glass and carefully drink the elixir that my fiancé offered to me. The pain is gone already but it helps me feel better. Although the dizziness does not go away.

I turn again to take another look at the man who caught my attention but he is not there anymore. Did I even see him? And why am I so interested

considering I don't know him. Those eyes... they clearly have made an impression...

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MIRA

The maids brought me the most beautiful dress. Cream silk with blue embroidery – Tristan's colours. And as a special present from my fiancé – a set of jewellery to match the dress. A crown, a necklace and a brooch – all with finest sapphires, shaped like butterflies. A true jewellery masterpiece.

"Ah, what a beauty!" one of the maids sighs as she attaches the crown to my hair with a special pin, "You are going to be the star of the evening, my lady! The most beautiful one!"

"Of course she will be the star! She is the future Queen!" the other giggles, "I am so honoured to be a part of this moment!"

"Me too!" the first one joins her as she attaches a light but ridiculously long cape to my shoulders.

"And me!" Tristan's voice makes the three of us flinch and the maids immediately curtsy as deep as they can and stay this way until he waves them to raise.

"You are early," I say, standing up from the dressing table and notice the look in his eyes. Intense and... greedy.

"Heavens, Mira, I wish we could skip that ball tonight!" he says, walking straight to me and wrapping his hands around my waist.

"Oh, gods!" I hear one of the maids whisper.

"Leave!" he says firmly to the two of them and they obey him without any hesitation.

"Have a good night, your Highnesses!" one of them mutters before closing the door.

“What a beautiful queen I have,” Tristan brushes the palm of his hand over my cheek, “Mira, I am truly happy tonight.”

He lowers himself to kiss me, but I place my finger on his mouth, “The maids were making me this pretty for three hours. I wouldn’t want to repeat that if that’s possible, so keep your hands to yourself, sir Ragnard!”

He doesn’t look pleased at first but ends up smiling anyway.

“You are right,” he sighs heavily, “I shouldn’t be selfish and must let other people see such beauty at least once in their life. After all, you are going to be with me forever. Right, Mira?”

“Forever,” I nod and he seems satisfied with my answer.

He leads me into the main ballroom of our whole Kingdom – The Golden Hall. This place is as luxurious as it gets. White marble floors with golden patterns and walls and columns simply covered with gold vines, all going up to the ceiling that was painted as the heaven skies with a legendary painter several centuries ago.

When guards open the doors before us, all the guests have already gathered and a wave of low bows and curtsies follows. Tristan leads me confidently, his head up high. We only stop before the throne, where King Bendor is sitting and watching us with a smile.

“Tristan! Miradora! Finally!” he greets us and we do what etiquette requires of us, “Raise! Raise! Take your places beside me!”

I look at him in shock. Does he really invite me to stand right at his side? Me? Is he serious?

As we take our places, King Bendor raises his hand and the noise of chatting around us dies down.

“Dear guests! You all know that these are challenging times for our beloved Akyria! But even during those times, we do have something to celebrate!” the King starts his speech, “Our Sapphire Knight, my beloved nephew Tristan Ragnard, has been the one to discover the betrayal of the Gerdian Empire! He risked his life to stop them and won time for us! But what is also important, he managed to rescue his own beloved from the dirty gerdians’ hands! Lady Miradora Freyn here was chosen by the disgusting Crown Prince of the

Empire and was facing a terrible future as his captive! But, luckily, her knight in Sapphire Armour came just in time! The hero that he is, he went through all the obstacles and brought his bride home! Now, I named Tristan my one and only heir! He will lead our army to the war but before that, he expressed the desire to marry the love of his life! I am not the one to stand in the way of true love, so I bless the two of them and their wedding will take place within next month! It wouldn't be the grand wedding they deserve due to the times we live in. But it would be a beautiful wedding none the less! Only the closes and the most important would be invited. But after the war is done, we will celebrate once again and name Tristan our King! I will gladly pass my crown to the Hero!"

"Long live the King!" someone starts shouting and other phrases emerge as well, "Glory to the Crown Prince! Let the future Queen be blessed!"

Huh... I did not expect that... The crowd is all blurry before my eyes as I look at them. Until I stop at one face... a face with beautiful eyes and tiny sparks of purple light dance in them... So familiar...

"Bring the bracelets!" the King commands and I flinch. Bracelets? Nobody told me anything about bracelets!

"Don't worry about anything, Mira," Tristan pulls me closer by my waist, "We are already engaged. It's just a formality. And a pretty bracelet would be a great addition to your whole outfit."

"Probably," I say, thinking that it must be a sapphire bracelet if he says so. And sapphires just never were my favourite stones. Gods, I would have to wear this thing forever.

A footboy appears with a cushion in his hands, trembling slightly. The boy is way too young for the task. He stops in front of us and Tristan smiles broadly, looking at me first and then at everyone else. All eyes are on us.

He lifts up the fabric, covering the cushion and...

"What the chaos?!" he roars, "Who did this?!"

Huh. I've never seen Tristan so angry! Ever! But, looking at the cushion, I finally get why. On it lie two bracelets. Or what is left of them I should say. They look like they've been melted... Ugly pieces of burnt metal... A very

strange sight! Tiny bumps in that mass must be the stones that were decorating the bracelets before... Well, not anymore.

For some reason, I want to laugh. And bite my lip hard not too.

“Find out who did this!” the King commands and guards start running back and forth.

“I would kill him!” Tristan mutters and his words just catch my attention.

“Who?” I ask, not stopping to gaze at him in surprise.

“Doesn’t matter,” he shrugs and steps forward, taking my hand and pulling me next to him, “Well, lords and ladies! An unpleasant incident happened to our bracelets! But Mira and I do not need any trinkets to prove our love! We have already proven everything there was to prove! Mira is mine and I am hers! And the wedding will take place as soon as possible! Probably even sooner than a month! Nothing will stop us on the way to our happiness!”

And as soon as he is done, he turns me to face him and slams his lips into mine. He is kissing me madly and deeper than it is appropriate considering how many people are watching. He presses my body into his and doesn’t stop even when we clearly should! Sharp pain in my chest brings tears to my eyes but he doesn’t stop even then, only squeezing me tighter. My scream is muffled by the kiss and probably sounds like a moan.

Gods, how embarrassing that is!

After he is done and all the guests applaud us for gods know what – Tristan leads me in the middle of the dance floor and we perform the first Larian of the night. It’s one of my favourite dances but the mark on my chest is still hurting and Tristan seems like he is somewhere else with his thoughts.

“Mira, I need to leave you for just a few minutes,” he says when he kisses my hand, thanking me for the dance.

“Of course,” I nod, “Take your time...”

I escape to the table with desserts and walk along trying to choose what to treat myself with. My hand almost reaches one of the tin tarts, when I hear a familiar voice, “You should be careful with what you eat!”

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MIRA

He was smiling at me and looking dashing in his dark green coat, embroidered with gold, his family emblem on his chest.

“Oh, my!” I smile back, “Marquis Ashterton!”

“In the flesh!” he bows to me and kisses my hand, “Enjoying the evening, your future Highness!”

“Oh, please!” I roll my eyes, “Too much attention to my taste! I don’t even know how I agreed to all this!”

And now that I think of it, I really don’t... I don’t remember agreeing to this. I just somehow know that I did... Strange.

I look at Dereck and notice his face change.

“Would you be so kind as to gift me the pleasure of your next dance?” he offers me his hand.

“That would be interesting,” I snort, “It’s funny that we never dance before.”

“Let’s fix that!”, my friend leads me back to the dancefloor and as the music starts, we start to move.

“How is the Academy?” I ask nonchalantly.

“Not the same without you,” is all he replies.

“Well, that’s because I am irreplaceable!” I giggle, “The last time I saw you...”

And I choke on that, realizing I don’t remember when I saw him or any of my friends last.

“Is everything all right?” he asks, looking concerned and... worried?

“Yes, I just... I don’t think I remember the last time I saw you. So much has happened lately...and...”

"I see," he grits through his teeth, "Well, Mira, as I have already told you, be careful with what you eat. Or drink."

"Are you implying something?" I raise my brows.

"Well, you are a clever mage, Mira, you'll figure it out," he says, looking away. And then suddenly he throws me to the side and I gasp with shock as this is not how this dance is going. But someone catches me and turns me the way the next move is supposed to be. At the same time, tiny lights start cascading from the ceiling as if they were fireflies. Guests applaud and I realize that it's probably just a part of the celebration.

"Forgive me my rudeness, my lady," the man who is now my dancing partner says and I look at him in shock, recognizing the man from the garden. He was also the one staring at me right before the bracelets... Could it be a coincidence?

"That's quite all right," I say awkwardly as he leads me around the room in the dance.

"Killian," he introduces himself, "Killian Krauten."

"Nice to meet you, lord Krauten," I smile weakly, feeling that something is off.

"Mira!" he almost growls and my eyes widen in shock when his face suddenly changes. It's similar but much more... beautiful. Straight manly lines and captivating eyes. Those eyes have been on my mind for a while now. And when I see sparks of magic in them, my heart starts beating faster! I know this! This happened before! It's... It's...

"Who are you?" I exhale heavily and his face contorts with pain. He looks so tired, exhausted even.

"What have they done to you?!" he mutters, pressing me closer to his own body. And this feels familiar too.

"I know you," I whisper, "But I don't know how..."

"You are mine, Mira," he smiles sadly, "Whatever they did – you know this..."

My lips part in surprise and he covers them with his. Sparks go through all my body as he wraps his hands around me and I dig my nails in his shoulder making him moan in... pain? Was that painful?

He breaks the kiss and I see that it's hard for him to breathe. To be honest he doesn't look too good. Something is wrong. I notice a strange feeling on my chest, it's a bit wet and cold. And when I look at it I notice a bloodstain.

"Oh, gods!" I almost scream, "You are hurt!"

"Doesn't matter!" he interrupts me, "Mira, I'll be back for you! Soon! Until then I need you to protect yourself and make your final choice!"

"What choice? What is...?", he slams his lips into mine once again, biting my lip harshly. What the... Something cold slips into my hand and he steps away.

"Here he is!" I hear Tristan roar and see him running inside the ballroom, "Seize him! Kill him!"

Guards rush inside, loads of them, and the man I just danced with charges for the other exit. I notice a small trail of blood behind him.

"You are not getting away!" Rick, who I didn't even know was here all this time, shouts loudly and runs after him before everyone else. Explosion and all the guests start screaming and running away in panic.

"Protect the crown princess!" Dereck commands next to me, creating a fireball in one of his hands and taking me with his other. I feel like he got whatever I was holding in his hand right before Tristan reaches me.

"Mira!" my fiancé is here, "Oh, gods, Mira! What did this monster do? You are all in blood! Did he tell you anything? If he did – it's all lies, Mira! It's..."

"Oh, Tristan!" I fall into his arms, trying to squeeze a tear or two out of myself, "He said that he knows me! But I don't know him! Who was that?"

"It's all right, my love," he plants a kiss on the top of my head, taking my hands in his as if he is checking for something, "He is a traitor! I think he wanted to kidnap you to threaten me! But it's all right now, you are safe. You did so well!"

“Luckily Dereck protected me from him,” I look into Tristan’s eyes, “If he wasn’t here on time then I don’t know what could happen... I.. I was so careless!”

“Thank you, Marquis,” Tristan nods to Dereck, “You have been very helpful tonight.”

“I am so lucky to have such a good and loyal friend!” I sob and now throw myself into Dereck’s hand, he pats my back reassuringly and slips the cold metal thing back into my hand, while I quickly shove it into my... well, cleavage. Noticing that Dereck turns as red as a tomato but it’s time to throw myself back to Tristan now.

I have no idea what is going on. But I am sure that something is! Someone is lying to me and someone is using my trust! And I need to find out who that is!

Rick comes to us and bows deeply, “I have to apologize, You Highness! Whoever that was, he managed to escape...”

Tristan takes me back to my room, holding my hand at all times.

“What are you thinking about, Mira?” he asks when we enter, even though etiquette says that he needs to stay at the door.

“Uhm,” I sigh, “I am thinking about what a terrible battle mage I am!”

“Wh-why?” he looks surprised.

“Well, because I got scared and startled when everything happened today. I didn’t fight him off although I should have... I... I am so embarrassed for myself, Tristan! I don’t know how to look in the mirror anymore!”

“You silly girl!” he pulls me into a h.ug, “You don’t need to think of things like that anymore! Just stay safe and stay with me...”

“You don’t understand,” I sigh, “I feel so sad now...”

“I see,” he breathes in the scent of my hair, “Can I help?”

“Actually,” I push him away a bit a smile like a child who sees a candy, “Yes! I think I need to get back to training! Can I do that?”

“Of course,” chuckles, “I would...”

“Great!” I interject, “Please, tell Dereck that I could start tomorrow!”

“Dereck?” he looks at me, startled.

“Yes, he is my battle partner. He knows everything I need to work on! And he told me he has a lot of free time now, so...”

“I am not sure that it’s such a good idea,” Tristan is definitely looking for a way out.

“Why? Do you think Rick would be jealous of him? I think they are well over that!” I smile.

“You mean that they...”, he almost smiles but controls himself.

“Oh, you didn’t know?” I cover my lips, “Please, keep it a secret. Their families would never agree to this kind of... let’s call it friendship.”

“All right then,” Tristan kisses the tip of my nose, “Everything for you!”

“Thank you,” I smile and move away, “Gods, I am exhausted!”

“Well,” he sighs, clearly disappointed, “I will get back to work then. And you stay here and relax. I will see you the first thing in the morning!”

“Great!” I smile and wave him good-bye.

“Oh,” he suddenly remembers, “It’s time to take your medicine, Mira!”

Chaos!

“All right, I’ll take it after I have a bath!”

“What kind of fiancé would I be if I didn’t make sure that you take good care of your health!” he comes to the table where a bottle with “elixir” stands and pours it into a bigger glass this time which doesn’t escape my eyes, “There you go!”

“Thank you,” I take it without any hesitation and drink all of it in a few gulps, “It tastes disgusting, though! But it’s so sweet that you care for me this much.”

“Then kiss me,” he says firmly, although his lips are trembling in anticipation.

“I don’t see why not!” I smile and come closer to him. I don’t need to do anything else, as he grabs me into his hands and kisses me with passion, taking his time and enjoying the moment.

And then I fall...

“Mira!” he looks so worried, I think this time he is truly concerned.

“Oh, I am so dizzy!” I complain, “Your kiss hit me off my feet, sir Sapphire Knight! Impressive!”

He smiles, reassured with all my actions tonight. We say our goodbyes and he leaves. But before maids are called to help me undress, I hurry to the bathroom and put two fingers into my mouth – the elixir leaves my body and so does everything else I managed to eat before the ball...

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MIRA

That’s not a nice feeling when you suspect your fiancé of drugging you. And you don’t even know why exactly would he do something like that.

Tristan sits right next to me during breakfast in the garden and my hand is in his as we are both done with our meals and now we are just spending some “quality time” together as the first couple of the kingdom. Noble lords and ladies are walking at a distance but no one comes too close to the guards protecting us.

I look at Tristan and I can tell that he is in love. Either that or he is the best actor in the whole damn world. But I doubt that.

“What are you thinking about?” he asks as he brings my hand to his lips and kisses it gently.

“How do you know I’ve been thinking about anything?” I ask him and he smiles.

“You always wrinkle your nose when you do”, he admits and I giggle a bit.

“I never thought you know me so well!”

“Luckily, we will have our whole lives now to get to know each other,” another kiss, this time on my wrist. Which is intimate, too intimate to do it in the public.

“Naughty Crown Prince!” I giggle and snatch my hand away from him, “Don’t forget where we are! This kind of thing is done when…”

“I don’t think I can wait any longer, Mira,” he leans closer and whispers into my ear, “I’ve waited for you for so long!”

“I know,” I try to master a shy smile, “But I want everything to be perfect. As traditions teach us. You know?”

“I do,” he puts his forehead on my shoulder, secretly planting a kiss there as well. Oh, gods! This is getting complicated! And all I know is just that something is off. My family is so happy about our union, my mother is up in the sky with all the wedding preparations. She has almost everything ready and even Tristan’s mother seems happy, although I don’t think she likes me too much. They both strolled into my room in the morning with fabrics and magazines and seamstresses… And only Tristan could rescue me from them by taking me out to have breakfast together.

“You are thinking about something again,” he says, his breath is on my neck, “What is it?”

“Our wedding,” I say and don’t even lie this time.

“Oh,” a playful smile appears on his lips, “Of course! Mira, I just want you to know that you can do whatever you want with it. There are absolutely no limitations for you – any colours, any flowers, any decorations. Whatever makes you happy – I’ll take care of it!”

“I don’t think our mothers would let me get involved too much though”, I snort, “It seems like it’s their perfect wedding and not ours!”

“Do you want me to talk to them?” he asks, his nose brushing over my earlobe.

“Uhm, no! I don’t want to anger them and, besides, after everything they deserve a treat. Plus they both have impeccable tastes so I think we are safe there,” I try to distance myself, but he catches me into his arms and lifts me up from my seat, placing me on his lap, “Tristan! Stop it! Everyone is watching us!”

“Mira,” he sighs somewhere into my chest, “I am sorry, it’s just hard to keep my hands off you. I love you so much!”

He is looking at me, expectation in his eyes. And something inside me urges me to say the same thing. But that’s exactly what is bothering me. I know one thing for sure – I am not in love with Tristan. I don’t reciprocate his feelings, so why the hell do I want to say that I do?

“Your Highness! Lady Freyn!” an unknown guard bows to both of us in turns, “Marquis Ashterton has arrived!”

“Oh, great!” I jump off Tristan’s knees as fast as I only can but he immediately stands up and pulls me closer to him by my waist, “Lead him to us!”

“I still don’t know if I should have allowed you to train again”, my fiancé whispers into my ear.

“Oh, actually, that reminds me,” I turn to him, “How about you meet all my friends? We are getting married so soon but you still don’t know anyone except for Dereck and Rick. We need to fix that, don’t you think?”

“If you say so,” he smiles, “Invite whoever you want and tell me the date and time. I’d be happy to meet them all.”

“Great!” I giggle like an idiot but Tristan seems satisfied with that, “I’ll make the list and send invitations. I would also like to invite the same people to the wedding if that’s all right with you.”

Of course,“ he brushes his hand over my cheek and even distinctive coughing behind our backs doesn’t make him take it away. “Lord Ashterton,” Tristan acknowledges Dereck and I turn to see him in his battle outfit with our training swords.

“Your Highness!” he bows, “Lady Freyn.”

“Oh, please, just call me Mira as always! Don’t be boring!” I snort and catch my fiancé’s disapproving gaze, “We are friends, aren’t we?”

"If you say so, my lady," Dereck bows again like the good little soldier that he is.

"Drop the formalities, Ashterton," Tristan says leniently, "If you are my wife's friend then you are mine too."

"Thank you, your Highness," Dereck bows slightly again, "It would be my honour."

"Mira is still not feeling fully recovered so be easy on her," Tristan says firmly, "I don't want her to get hurt."

"Of course," my friend nods.

"Which reminds me," my fiancé waves his hand and a maid brings me a glass with familiar medicine.

"Oh, thanks!" I giggle again and drink it as fast as I can. From the corner of my eye, I see Dereck's concerned look. And Tristan's satisfied one.

"Then I guess I'll see you later," he smirks and kisses me on a cheek, before leaving.

"Mira," my friend comes closer but I signal him to stop.

"My room. Now. Follow me quickly and distract my maids!"

After I emptied my stomach once again and changed into my battle outfit, we leave for the secluded part of the garden.

"So, what was all that about?" Dereck asks.

"You tell me," I look directly into his eyes, "You are the one who knows more than me!"

"Mira, what happened to you after we brought you here? They didn't let us see you!" he looks troubled.

"Wait a minute, you brought me here? Not Tristan?"

“No, he handled everything at the Selection castle and gave you to us unconscious. He told us that gerdians were hurting you and this was the only way to save you!” Dereck looks guilty and that’s how I know that this is not the whole story yet.

“Continue,” I say calmly while pretending to check my sword. Guards are watching us from a distance.

“Well,” my friend hesitates and I give him a death glare, “In the middle of the road you woke up. You were asking us to take you back to the Selection castle. You said... You said you were in love with a gerdian.”

“Huh,” I sit on a verge of a stone, “Not possible...”

“Exactly!” Dereck exclaims, “That’s exactly what Rick, Nort, and I thought. And Tristan said that they charmed you, that they were giving you dark potions and drugging you, making you do what they wanted. You didn’t want to come home with us and we even had a fight. I had to give you Somnium Nox. But then something happened...”

“What?” I look at him intensely.

“A dragon came to look for you,” he sighs heavily, “He was huge and looking for something and I didn’t understand it at once. But when it was almost over and we were well hidden, I notice how you look at him before falling asleep. And he... the sounds that he was making. He was hurting...” Dereck looks upset telling me all that, but he doesn’t stop, “I decided to take you home still. I was sure that this is a safe place for you. Especially since we knew that a war has started with the Empire. I thought that you would make your own decision when you wake up. But when you did... They didn’t let me see you. And then all those articles started to spread about how you are in love with Tristan and how he saved you. It smelled...rotten.”

“Unbelievable,” is all I say.

“But then I came to the palace on the day of your engagement ball and I was attacked on my way. By a gerdian. He said that it’s all my fault. And on his neck, I saw a pendant. Your pendant. I threw it away when I realized that the dragon was looking for you. It threw him off his course as he almost found us. As he later explained to me, he could track you with the help of the pendant and your mark. But your mark was fresh and a bit weak, so the pendant was his best bet. And I blew it for the two of you.”

“Were you the one who hurt him?” I ask.

“No, I don’t know what happened there. He said that the king knows his disguise, so we didn’t have much time. I agreed to help you two to meet, he said he needs at least a minute alone with you.”

“For what?”

“To remind you,” Dereck smiles weakly and we both stay silent. After a while, he looks at me and asks, “Did you? Did you remember anything?”

“I don’t know,” I shrug my shoulders, “I don’t know if I remembered anything in particular. But I felt something... I know him. And I know that he would never hurt me...”

“I am so sorry, Mira,” my friend exhales heavily.

“That’s all right,” I say and slam my knee against his stomach, watching him fall to the ground and groan with pain and smirk, “I forgive you now. And you are going to do more to really earn it!”