

Epilogue

The Last Day of the White Moon Festival.

The streets of the Capital were crowded with people from all over the country, as they all gathered to the festival to celebrate. For the Dragon Empire, the White Moon Festival was one of the biggest celebrations of the year, the one that was held to take their freedom and happiness to the streets. Every citizen in the Country waited for that day to throw off their status, and have fun among the common citizen. Those who weren't as carefree found tactics to pretend to be, just for a day.

Warriors without their shiny armors, Officials walking like common folks in the streets, women showing off their beauty and even children of any household running down the streets laughing. If one had any trouble, they were to forget it that night, for freedom was everything in the Dragon Empire.

It wasn't an old tradition. The Dragon Empire was one that had risen from the ashes of the past and turned each defeat into a lesson. Not so long ago, slavery and poverty had filled those streets. Now, what once was a cold and frightening slave market had been replaced by a joyful large market. A larger one where anyone could buy flowers, potions, fresh products, and wonders from further east. The children running between the stalls had no idea the clatter of chains once filled this place instead of laughter.

The years had passed, and life had gone on. A new Empress had taken the golden throne, bringing a new Era and a lot of changes with her. Those who hadn't complied had regretted it, and those who did follow her lead had found themselves in a lucky sight.

The young girl wandered in the streets, hopping from one stall to another, checking their merchandise, and buying some snacks to eat on her way. After a couple of streets, she had two chicken skewers in her hand, and one little bag full of jujubes.

She kept walking and humming, her long ponytail of brown curls swinging behind her. The bystanders sometimes stared at her, confused by her strange attire and appearance. She had honey skin, and big emerald eyes, and a slender but toned body. Her clothes were a bit strange. She had a mix of purple and green fabrics, with simple embroideries, and her only jewelry was the little anklet that tinkled at each of her steps. Not only was her outfit very strange and completely oblivious of the usual rankings, that girl even daringly wore the Imperial purple!

People were totally confused. Was she supposed to be treated like an Imperial Family member? She was going around barefoot! She only had one piece of jewelry and some wildflowers in her hair... That girl was truly too strange.

“She’s there! Catch her!”

As soon as she heard that, the girl ran and hid under one of the stalls, right after turning a corner. However, to her surprise, she wasn’t the one the children were chasing after. Another girl, about her age, ran past her, looking panicked. The young girl with honey skin grabbed her and pulled her into her little hiding spot.

“Who are...”

“Hush!”

The girl, dressed in brown, frowned but nodded. They both stayed hidden, listening to the little crowd running past them, confused. The children yelled and began spreading in the nearby streets.

“I think they are gone...”

“Who are you? And why did you hide too?” Asked the dark-haired girl, frowning.

“My name is Kiera. I thought I was the one being chased after! I ran from home. And you?”

“I’m Lorey, and... they think I stole something...”

“Did you?”

“Of course not!”

The girl with the food chuckled and handed her one of her chicken skewers.

“Here. You look hungry.”

“Oh... Thanks...”

The two girls chuckled and ate their chicken, hiding there for a while. That little snack was indeed enough to start a friendship, at least if one had an empty stomach. They whispered to talk but were smiling too.

“Are they your siblings?” Asked Kiera.

“No... I mean, sort off. They are other children working in the same house as me...”

“Oh. For me, it’s always my siblings who are chasing me around.”

“Do you have a lot of siblings?” Asked Lorey, curious.

“So many! I have three sisters and three brothers. And my mom is pregnant again!”

“Wow...”

“I know right? My dad is crazy about our mom. Our house is so crowded with everyone! That’s why I ran, it’s funnier to play here!”

Lorey nodded. Most families with a lot of children had to live together in tiny houses, it could easily feel cramped. Kiera probably had to share everything with her siblings, too...

“So? What do you want to do?” Asked Kiera, raising her thin eyebrows.

Lorey was about to say anything, but just then, her stomach growled loudly. Kiera laughed.

“Let’s buy more food!”

“I don’t have any money...” Sighed Lorey.

“It’s fine, I have plenty!”

“...Are you sure?”

Kiera nodded, and grabbed her hand to take her out of their little hiding place. For a long while, both girls went from stall to stall, buying the food they found yummy, and running or hiding again when the other kids chased them. At some point though, Kiera pulled her to another hiding, frowning.

“So annoying! Are you sure you didn’t steal anything? They are really persistent.”

“I really didn’t! They just like to pick on me the most...”

Kiera sighed.

“Well, they are not going to stop so easily, then. Come on, let’s just go where they won’t find us!”

Lorey thought her newfound friend was full of surprises. Kiera grabbed her hand, and the two girls quickly left the market, getting into the hot streets of the Capital. It was full summer, and the heat was scorching unless one found some shadow to hide from the sunlight. Kiera seemed fine, though. Despite her paler skin, the young girl was barely sweating a bit, while Lorey was thirsty in minutes.

Moreover, she was taking the direction to the Palace, making her frown.

“Where are you going?”

“To a place, we can have fun!”

Lorey didn’t dare ask, but Kiera was indeed headed straight to the Palace. The strange girl was indeed full of surprises, but Lorey was intrigued to see what else she had in store. They entered the Palace just like that. It was a first for Lorey. She knew they had decided to open the doors to the Palace a few years ago, so anyone could come and go as they wanted, but Kiera was headed deeper inside the Palace, to the area restricted to the Imperial Family.

At some point, she couldn’t take it anymore and grabbed her sleeve.

“Kiera, we shouldn’t be here. We will get scolded by the guards...”

“Don’t worry, my aunty is working here, they won’t care!”

Was her aunt one of the servants here? Or one of those new scholars, perhaps? Now that the new system was allowing women to take the higher education test, more and more ladies were entering the Palace as new scholars, with the Empress’ support...

Kiera suddenly smiled wide and grabbed her hand to pull her.

“Here! Let’s play in the Lake!”

Under Lorey’s shocked eyes, Kiera ran to jump into the water. In seconds, the young girls were completely soaked and laughing. She looked a bit crazy, playing by herself in the middle of that lake, but Lorey was terribly tempted to join her.

“Come on!” Kiera encouraged her.

Lorey took a look around, but no one was there to stop them. After a hesitation, she ran to get into the lake too. It was probably the craziest thing she had done in her life, to simply jump into a lake in the middle of the Imperial Palace to play! Kiera was

ecstatic with her friend joining her, and the two girls played for a while in the water. Although, Kiera was going further into the water.

“Don’t go too far, Kiera,” said Lorey. “You’ll drown.”

“I know how to swim!” Said her friend.

Once again, Lorey was surprised. It was so rare to know how to swim! There were few places to swim in the Capital anyway, but she knew most of the children living in Cities near the river learned how to swim... Did that mean Kiera wasn’t from the Capital? She looked like she perfectly knew it, though.

Lorey was about to ask, when something touched her ankle, making her yelp. She looked down into the water and saw something shiny swim away in a swift movement.

“What is it?” Asked Kiera, who was a few steps away.

“Something touched my leg, like a big fish...”

Kiera’s face lightened up immediately, and she started looking around in the water, a malicious smile on her lips.

“Something like a fish, huh... Which color was it?”

“I don’t know... perhaps grey...”

“Ha... Gotcha!”

She suddenly dived, making Lorey panic a bit. Where had she gone to! For a while, her friend had completely disappeared from the surface, and despite her fear, Lorey took a few steps forward to try and see her.

“...Who are you?”

Lorey froze and turned around, embarrassed to death.

A tall and beautiful man in a blue robe was looking at her. Lorey gasped. He had the outfit of scholars, but he was wearing a lot of jewelry, and his long hair wasn’t very orderly for someone working there... He had his arms crossed and was looking at her, a bit surprised but not angry.

“I... I am sorry, I...”

Before she could think of a proper excuse, Kiera suddenly emerged, a bit further away from where she had dived. Not only that, but her friend was obviously playing with some large creature. Lorey's jaw dropped. That wasn't a fish, but a dragon! A proper, grey-scaled dragon! The beautiful creature was wrapping its body around the girl's playing around with her and trying to escape her grip. Kiera was laughing so loudly and so focused on catching it that she didn't realize who else was there.

"So it's you, Kiera," sighed the man.

"Oh, hi uncle!"

"You little stray cat, did you ditch your brothers again to come to play here?"

"Yup!"

To Lorey's surprise, Kiera's uncle smiled, looking a bit proud.

"What about your grandma?"

"They are all at the Diamond Palace at the moment because mom is about to have another baby, it's boring..."

"So that's why you came all the way here to play. Your brother is going to scold you."

Kiera answered with a wry smile.

"He can't scold me if he can't find me!"

Her uncle laughed.

"True. But if I were you, I'd at least greet her Highness, or she'll kick you out once your brother comes here."

Kiera nodded, and just with that, her uncle left. Lorey had a lot of questions, but Kiera was still playing with the young dragon, and she didn't dare ask any. After a while though, her friend noticed her confusion.

"Oh, sorry. Come on, Kiki!"

The grey dragon turned its head towards her friend, and finally, ended her little fight with Kiera. Kiki swam swiftly into the water, and Lorey couldn't help but feel a bit scared as she saw the long, snake-like body come towards her. Kiki was as big as her thigh, and probably twice her arm's length too. However, the dragon gently swam

around her, until Lorey relaxed a little. She extended her hand, and Kiki swam past her fingers to get caressed.

“It’s so smooth...” She couldn’t help but whisper.

“Right? My Kiki is so pretty!”

“You’re... part of the imperial family?” Lorey finally asked.

“Yep. I only come here to play, though! My aunt is the one doing all the hard work. My dad says he’s retired now!”

“I know! And so, your mom is the Lady of the Mountain?”

Kara was the one surprised, for once.

“You even know about my mom?”

“Of course! I want to be a healer, just like her! I like to go to the market to see the new medicines they bring! I’m learning to read so I can read all of her medicinal guides, too!”

Kiera pouted.

“You sound just like my big sister, she’s always obsessed with books! But it’s fine if you want to do it! Me, I want to be a warrior like my dad!”

Lorey chuckled.

“You mean a soldier! There are no more wars now, the Eastern Empire is an ally and your father defeated the Northern Barbarians...”

“I’ll do what I’ll do!” Protested Kiera. “I want to see the world with Kiki, beat the bandits in the mountains or whoever is stirring some trouble...”

“You can come with me, then! I’ll tour the isolated villages to heal them!”

The two girls kept talking about their plans, excited and playing around in the water with the young dragon with them. They didn’t realize a woman was watching them, her shoulder against one of the pillars. She had a little smile on and was drinking a glass of wine. A woman that looked like her was standing a few steps behind, watching them too.

“Those kids... Do you think they like to come here annoy me, or is it that their parents are worried I'll be lonely and bored otherwise?”

“It's nice to see them grow up,” whispered the other lady. “They look happy... Aren't we going to say hi?”

“You can go if you want. I probably need to go back to work before Evin throws a fit.”

“That's because you always start working last minute...”

“I need my alcohol to get the work done, and he just won't let me drink. When are those two coming back, anyway? My stock is going to go empty!”

“Lady Missandra said she was working on a new alcohol for the summer, she should come by soon.”

“If only those two would stop flirting around and get married right here. We have an empty Palace and all they think about is their ridiculous little shop downtown!”

Her half-sister chuckled behind her.

“Aren't you the one who emptied it in the first place...”

“I got rid of the useless ones, not them! ...As if I was going to keep feeding all those annoying mouths! Nah, we are better off without all those leeches. Come on, Mera, let's find another bottle before he comes back.”

“You'll get really drunk so early anyway, aren't you?”

The Empress laughed it off, and the two of them went to find the kitchens, ignoring the poor Counselor who would complain later on.

It was just another long, long day of the sun going down in the Dragon Empire. Two girls playing in a lake under the sun, with a dragon, laughter, and lots of promises to come.

A brighter future to come..