

Extra 1

Lover's Day was perhaps one of the oldest celebrations in the Dragon Empire.

The Legend that was told over and over had seen many changes over the years, from the lovers being two humans or two dragons, whether they survived the tale or not. No one could tell which part of the Empire was really implied either, or how old that tale actually was. It wasn't of any significance, and each year, many poets were happy to reinvent the tale to fit the modern era. The one thing that did not change however, was the part of the male lover gifting a river of flowers to his lady, to conquer her love. This was the main point of the story, the one that had been embellished year after year to make all the ladies swoon to the idea of a man gifting them a flower on that one, special day.

There perhaps wasn't a real river, but the flowers couldn't be misinterpreted. As such, this tale gave a reason, every year, for hundreds of shop or stall owners to suddenly add flowers to the products sold: Lover's Day was the one day of the year that every woman in the Kingdom would receive flowers, and as such, all men were expected to gift flowers. It could be to a woman they still courted, one they hoped to marry during the year, or one they had been with for decades. The best sellers did not hesitate to find hundreds of reasons for any man to buy flowers on that day, promising a lifetime of love, success with their partner, or even more entertainment in their chambers. Even the past Emperors had been subjected to this ancient tradition, despite the headache of gifting hundreds of flowers to hundreds of concubines while creating little to no jealousy between them...

Thankfully, times had changed, and there would be much less trouble for the ruler of the Dragon Empire this year, for the Emperor was now an Empress. For once, the owner of the golden throne didn't have to worry about sending flowers to anyone, but instead, she would most likely have to receive an endless trail of those.

Far from the issues of the Imperial Palace, in the North, a little village was also celebrating the custom. The usually quiet village was filled with stalls and customers on that day. No one seemed bothered by the cold, as all were flocking to the streets to enjoy the joys and delicacies of the little festival that was happening for Lover's Day. Of course, the inventive merchants of the Dragon Empire had found ways to dedicate this Lover's Day to more than flowers; food, charms and dozens of other items were put forward in the name of love. Still, flowers were the prime product of the event, and the stalls filled with them were, allegedly, the most popular ones.

As such, the florist lady at the end of a street was happily finishing to get paid by her tenth customer of the day, a man walking away with three bouquets, when the next one already approached, or more accurately ran to her.

"Father! This one!"

Perched on his toes, the young boy enthusiastically pointed at a large bunch of pink flowers, arranged in a heart shape in front of the stall. The old lady smiled at him.

"Oh, this young man has good tastes! Who is this for? A lovely young lady in your heart?"

Arriving behind him, another boy, whose striking physical resemblance to the first obviously made him the older brother, politely nodded and smiled at the merchant lady.

"We are looking for presents for our mother, Madam."

"Oh, what a polite young man! Your mommy must be so proud of her boys!"

The two boys had dark-brown hair, and a curious honey skin the old lady had never seen before. From their clothes, she could tell they were from a middle or upper class family. The cold winds of winter were already there in the North Village, and the Onyx Castle had its first layer of snow settled on its roofs, still visible from afar. The two boys both wore coats made from snow leopard fur, a very rare item for the creature was too dangerous to hunt. Even more intriguing, the older one had gorgeous, mysterious green eyes. The old woman smiled a bit more, as there was little doubt as to their real identity.

"Father!" Called the younger one again, visibly impatient. "This one!"

"Darsan, your manners," protested his older brother.

Darsan, obviously more stubborn, ignored him and kept jumping up and down on his feet, his hands on the front of the stall. Despite wearing a large dark cloak over his head, their father couldn't be missed; his silhouette stood taller than anyone in the flow of customers filling the streets for the Lovers' Day. Many turned heads and quickly stepped away from his path, as he exalted an aura of danger.

"Good Morning, my Lord," said the old woman, slightly bowing to the man as he approached.

As she raised her eyes, she finally saw him, his black eyes under the cloak. Any other child would have been very intimidated by this tall and large figure, but Darsan and his brother weren't. Plus, loved in the man's arms, a third child was hidden under the large cloak. The little girl was absolutely lovely. She had long brown curls, the same striking green eyes as her older brother, and skin one shade lighter than that of her brother's. She was holding on to her father's clothes, herself wearing a very pretty green dress with a little cape of the same fur as her siblings. As her eyes met with the old lady, the woman smiled, and the young girl blushed before hiding her face in her dad's shoulder.

"Darsan, Kassian. Have you picked one?" Asked their father with his deep voice.

"This one, Father, this one!" Shouted Darsan, who kept jumping around.

Kassian, however, approached his father, his eyes on his little sister.

"Cessi, do you want to choose one too? For mom?"

The little girl perked up again at her brother's voice. Her eyes met with her dad's, and he gently let her down. She was just a bit smaller than Darsan, but she had seemed smaller than that in her father's arms. Kassian gently took her hand, but she was the shiest of the trio, almost hiding behind him despite her green eyes curiously looking at all the flowers displayed.

"Which ones do you want, Cessilia?" Asked her Father.

The little green eyes were scrutinizing each batch of flowers, visibly very determined to make the right choice. No one else was coming to bother the little family on the stall that should have been full at this time. The impressive figure of their father was enough to convince anyone to make a cautious detour around them.

"Father, this one!" Insisted Darsan.

"Darsan."

His father's voice resonated like a whip in the air, and the boy immediately sealed his lips. Kassian, too, had sent a little glare his brother's way, but Cessilia visibly didn't mind. Instead, her finger pointed at a large set of white flowers.

"Oh, white Lilies! That's a very good choice for your mommy, my darling, isn't it?"

Cessilia blushed again, but turned her eyes towards her Father, full of hope.

"...Pick some for yourself too," he said.

Her green eyes grew larger, and immediately went back on the stall. One could guess her excitement as she bit her lower lip, her eyes going all over the stall again. Meanwhile, the War God gave some money to the old lady. The weight in her hand was obviously way too much than anything the children would pick already, but the old woman simply smiled. Instead, she took the flowers Darsan had picked, some of the white lilies, and some branches full of green leaves to start arranging a bouquet.

"How about you, young man?" She asked Kassian with a wink.

Kassian glanced at the bouquet, and pointed at some little pink flowers. The old lady smiled, and added some of those to the bouquet. She stepped to the side to trim the branches, letting the three children bicker about which one Cessilia would choose.

"Thank you for your patronage, my Lord," she said softly to the War God. "I have been in this village for my whole life, and never have I ever seen our lands so prosperous, thanks to you and my Lady..."

The War God didn't answer. There was no need, and the old woman, smiling softly while continuing to prepare that bouquet, didn't expect him to.

"Father, Cessilia chose hers!"

The children came back, and Cessilia showed her choice, some big purple flowers. Kassian, too, showed a bunch of pink and white flowers.

"We picked some for baby Kiera too," said Cessilia.

"Our sister is too tiny! She won't care about the flowers!" Protested Darsan with a frown.

"It doesn't matter," said Kassian. "We should still pick some for her too."

"Can we take some for the aunties...?" Asked Cessilia.

"Take all the flowers you want, my darling," said the old woman.

The Lord of the land had already given her more than enough to buy the full stand anyway, so the more the children took, the sooner she would go home. However, it was easy to see how well raised those three were. They remained polite and carefully picked the prettiest flowers for the aunties they were talking about. For a while, this old merchant lady was happy to serve her young customers, arranging several little

bouquets of flowers for them, the prettiest one being of course, for their mother. A few minutes later, Cessilia was carrying her mother's bouquet and her own, while her brothers had to carry all the others. Even the War God had one in his hands, the one dedicated to their baby sister.

The woman watched all of them as they left her stall after a quick goodbye. The older brother was gently talking to his little sister, who walked as close to her father as she could, visibly a bit shy in the crowd. Meanwhile, the other boy, energetic again, was running from one stall to another, pointing at things. This image of a family almost like any other lit up a warm feeling in that old lady's heart. For sure, this Empire had bright days coming up...

The four of them quietly left the main street, after Darsan had convinced their father to buy some heart-shaped pastries filled with some sweet apple paste. The road leading to the Onyx Castle had a thin layer of snow on it, but was completely empty. The children happily raced together to the Castle, playing in the wide, empty area between the castle's grounds and the village. As soon as they caught sight of the gates, a large, dark creature popped up its head.

"Krai!" Exclaimed the little girl, excited.

The black dragon jumped from over the gates, and the three children ran to the majestic creature. The Dragon was so large, one of his paws was as big as the children. Still, it laid in the snow, waiting for them with its nostrils exuding thick clouds of steam, its tail waving the snow around. Cessilia ran until she hit the huge snout with a big laughter, and Darsan, coming right after her, began climbing on top of the Dragon.

"You're going to damage the flowers, Darsan!" Yelled Kassian with a frown.

Hearing her older brother's sentence, Cessilia patted Krai's snout, but walked back to take her dad's hand, and they walked inside the Castle's ground together. The large Dragon followed too, Darsan still playing on its back.

"Darsan!" Suddenly yelled a feminine voice. "I am not mending those clothes again, you little rascal! You've been warned!"

The woman who had just stepped out of the building was glaring at the large black dragon and the kid playing on its back, but her eyes softened as she went down on the trio.

"Auntie Nebbie!" Exclaimed Cessilia. "Look!"

"Oh, you got flowers, honey? They are so pretty!"

"Those are for you," said Kassian, giving her a bouquet of purple and orange flowers.

Nebora took it, surprised, and smiled, brushing his hair gentle.

"Oh, thank you Kassian, they are really pretty. Did you pick them for me?"

"I picked too!" Proudly announced Cessilia.

"Of course you did sweetie, you are the prettiest flower of all!"

"Where is she?" Asked Kairen.

"She just went into the gardens, my Lord," nodded Nebora with a smile. "I think she can barely get rest with all the little ones..."

"Darsan, come give the flowers!" Called Kassian.

The boy finally got down, but the bouquets were already a bit damaged. Still, he proudly gave them to his Auntie Nebora.

"This was for auntie Prunie, and this one for auntie Marian..."

"You guys bought this much? Looks like we don't need husbands after all..."

"Prunie can marry me!" Exclaimed Darsan proudly.

"You're a little too young for her young man, but I will tell her," chuckled Nebora. "Now you all go and see your mother and give her those pretty flowers..."

She walked away carrying those for her colleagues, a smile on her lips. As soon as she disappeared back inside the building, the three children ran across the place. Darsan leading, they opened the Castle's doors and crossed the main hall to get to the other side, where their mother's gardens were.

This was the most beautiful area of the Castle. Despite the weather conditions, long, green trails of ivy were freely growing on the walls, and the floor was covered with fresh grass, free of any snow. The main reason was that the roof had been torn down, and made of several layers of sturdy glass. Hence, the whole room felt half-open, but was still much warmer than the outside, as the sun gently shone over it.

In those conditions, flowers were freely blooming all over, and the most organized area had plants, in little squares of soil, growing neatly into gorgeous green plants. In the middle of this improbable field, several little dragons were running around, following one woman and a little girl. As soon as the three siblings arrived, the dragons stopped their running around and turned their heads.

"Kian!" Kassian called first. Immediately, the bigger of the four dragons ran over, his long silver body shining.

After him, the three smaller dragons came too. One ran to Darsan, and the two began wrestling in the grass. The third dragon, with a long, snake-like body of a purple shade, gently came at Cessilia's feet following her steps. The last one, by far the smallest, was sniffing the children and their father curiously, before it suddenly flapped its tiny wings to climb on Kairen's shoulder. With its dark-grey body and small eyes, it looked like a statue on the War God's shoulder.

"Mommy!" Exclaimed Cessilia, running to her mother first.

The woman turned around, with a bright smile. The little girl that was hanging on to her dress suddenly let go, and ran past Cessilia in the opposite direction, to grab Kassian's cape.

"Hi, Kiera," he said, carrying her. "Have you been a good girl with mommy?"

Meanwhile, Cessilia reached her mom at the same time as her Father did. Cassandra smiled, and crouched down to hug her daughter.

"Hello, my princess..." She said, giving a kiss on the brown curls. "Have you been good for your dad?"

"We got flowers for you, mommy..."

She shyly showed the bouquet, almost too big for her, and immediately, her mother smiled even more.

"Oh, they are so pretty! Thank you, my loves..."

"We have some for Kiera too!" Exclaimed Kassian, giving the smallest bouquet to his baby sister. "And even for the aunties!"

Cassandra smiled and stood back up, carrying Cessilia in her arms. Her husband approached, and they exchanged a long kiss. None of their children, visibly used to it,

looked bothered. Cessilia played with some of her mom's brown curls that were hanging out of her bun.

"I wondered where you had gone off to, so early," smiled Cassandra. "You took the children to the Festival?"

"I hoped you'd catch some sleep..."

"Thank you."

They kissed again, and this time, all the little dragons, except for Darsan's ran back to Cassandra's feet, loudly making growls and cute squealing noises.

"Mh... Did you happen to bring food too?"

Kairen frowned at the unruly little creatures, and they all stepped back, immediately calming down. With a sigh, he then took out the half-empty pack of apple buns, and Cassandra quickly grabbed one.

"Thank you! I love apple turn-overs... Kiera, come and get one too honey, otherwise they will eat it before you..."

Kiera, aided by Kassian, came back to her mom and grabbed one of the little pastries, happily eating it despite all the baby dragons begging for food.

"You guys should go hunt if you're so hungry," sighed Cassandra. "They have been stuck to me all morning long already..."

Just as she said that, a growl, much louder, resonated in the Castle. All four baby dragons perked up, and quickly ran out of the room, towards the noise.

"Finally," Cassandra sighed.

"Mom, I'm going hunting with the Dragons too!" Shouted Darsan, running out of the room before his parents could stop him.

"Isn't it too soon for him to go hunting...?" She asked, a bit worried while letting Cessilia down.

"He'll be fine," shrugged Kairen, hugging his wife.

Cassandra chuckled in his arms, and held him back for a long while.

"Mommy, can we go and see the dragon egg?" Asked Cessilia, pulling on her skirt.

"Of course, baby, let's go see it."

"I hope it's another little sister," whispered Kassian, making his mom chuckle.

"We can't predict, Kassian, you know that right?" Smiled Cassandra.

"But you said grandma was right every time! Can we go ask her?"

"We should get her some flowers, then. She'll be happy to see you... Let's go to the Diamond Palace when Darsan and the dragons come back. And then, we can all dine at the Imperial Palace tonight, your aunts will be happy to see you. Your baby cousin should be born soon, too."

"A baby!" Exclaimed Kiera, excited.

The children ran to see the egg a bit further inside the garden, leaving their parents finally alone. Cassandra sighed, and leaned her head on her husband's shoulder, while he wrapped his hands around her small but growing belly.

"You guys didn't pick flowers for your mother or for the Empress..." she whispered with a smile.

"They both get dozens every year anyway..." grumbled her husband.

"Still, they are your family... Let's go and visit them, today. Your mother must be lonely..."

"I'm lonely too. I want more time alone with you..."

Cassandra chuckled, and turned around to put a quick kiss on his lips.

"Then we can leave the children to play with Shareen and your mother in the Palace for the evening, and find somewhere to hide together... I'm sure we can find a place the little ones won't follow. We should enjoy it before Missandra's baby is born, I promised to help her afterwards."

The War God nodded, although he also sighed lightly. Cassandra smiled, and leaned against him, hugging her husband a bit more before the children would come to interrupt them again. The truth was, they were both very happy with their family growing bigger and bigger...

Cassandra was just satisfied to have them all here, growing in peace and filling, once again the Dragon Empire with some of those magnificent creatures. She didn't need more flowers, or any special attention. She had all the love she wanted right here, with her family...