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Isla Marenwick

The geranium pot



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Аннотация

He’s a soldier on leave. A dragon accustomed to war. But even he needs a break.

She’s the embodiment of a peaceful life. A florist who never expected a big, imposing dragon to walk into her tiny flower shop.

Can they find a way to be together?

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Chapter 1. A Dragon's Respite

The war had dragged on for so long that even dragons were growing tired of it.

Gryf knew that better than most.

Once, the fire inside him would flare to life on its own the moment he spread his wings. Now it barely smoldered, keeping the piercing cold at bay for only a few precious minutes at a time. Six months at the Edge of Frost left their mark on a person. Up there, a single breath from an ice troll was enough to freeze the blood in your veins.

When his commander, the old dragon Ognecheshui, finally sent him on a ten-day leave, Gryf merely nodded.

The map was still blurring before his eyes, and even his golden dragon pupils struggled to keep their focus on the right point.

"Pick anywhere you like," Ognecheshui grumbled. "Just, by my old head, make sure it's at least three flights from the outpost. And don't let me see your face until your wings stop creaking."

At the moment, Gryf hardly had a human face to speak of.

He was in his true dragon form: forty feet from snout to tail-tip, copper scales dulled by frost, heavy wings, and an ache in every joint.

Gryf spread his wings with a quiet crackle, pushed off the ground, and rose into the cold northern sky.

He headed south — to somewhere the air wasn't thick with

smoke, blood, and frost.

On the map, he had found a tiny town with the cozy name of Flower Alley.

A backwater.

Exactly what he needed.

Beyond the town, Gryf descended into a quiet grove.

The transformation began almost immediately, familiar and practiced down to the smallest detail. Magic swept through his body in a warm wave. His bones shifted. His wings vanished. His scales gave way to human skin.

A few moments later, a tall, broad-shouldered man stood in the clearing.

The coppery tint of his skin remained. His short, dark chestnut hair looked perfectly ordinary, while the golden gleam in his eyes was barely noticeable.

A traveling cloak did little to conceal his powerful build. In one pocket were a purse filled with silver and a summoning crystal — the only thing he carried that still reminded him of the army.

He reached the town in less than an hour.

Flower Alley was exactly what its name promised.

The air smelled of damp earth, fresh greenery, and flowers. There were so many scents that they blended together into one thick, sweet fragrance.

There were no stone towers here, only low houses beneath tiled roofs.

No weapons shops — just flower stalls, pots of seedlings, and sacks of soil.

People talked leisurely as they chose plants and argued about the weather.

No one flinched at sudden sounds.

No one studied strangers, waiting for a blow to come from behind.

Only then did Gryf realize just how exhausted he was from living on constant alert.

The tension didn't disappear all at once, but little by little, his shoulders began to relax.

Chapter 2. The Sky Geranium

On the second day of his leave, Gryf made a firm decision to do absolutely nothing.

He went outside, bought a warm cinnamon bun from a smiling old woman, and settled onto the low parapet beside the fountain. He simply wanted to watch how people lived when they didn't have to fight for their lives.

Children raced around the square, laughing. Vendors called out to customers over one another. Bees buzzed above the flowerbeds.

For a while, Gryf almost managed to believe that this was what the whole world was made of.

Then a flowerpot fell on his head.

He had been prepared for anything: an enemy projectile, a chunk of falling rock, even a surprise attack.

But not an ordinary clay pot filled with a lush, fiery-red geranium.

It didn't hurt, but it landed with impressive force. Soil showered down over Gryf's shoulders and slipped beneath his collar. The flower itself got caught in his thick hair, its petals dangling directly in front of his nose.

Gryf blinked.

Everything inside him demanded that he roar, transform, and burn half the town to the ground.

But he was on leave.

And, after all, it was only a flowerpot.

"Oh-oh-oh-oh!"

A high-pitched, frightened squeak came from above.

With truly dragon-like self-control, Gryf removed what remained of the pot from his head. Soil spilled into his lap.

Only then did he look up.

A frightened young woman was staring down at him from a small wooden balcony on the second floor, directly above a bright sign that read *Liza's*.

She had enormous brown eyes, chestnut hair tousled by the wind, and cheeks bright red with embarrassment.

"I'm so sorry! I'm a thousand times sorry! I turned it the wrong way, and it slipped! Are you alive? Oh gods, you're covered in dirt!"

Gryf silently stood and dusted himself off. A cloud of soil rose around him.

He picked up the broken pot and the geranium, its roots exposed.

"Alive," he said at last.

Gryf hadn't made much small talk in a very long time, so his voice came out rough and hoarse.

"But it seems your soldier has been wounded."

The girl he had already mentally dubbed *the culprit* disappeared from the balcony.

A moment later, she burst out through the door of the shop.

She was short and dressed in a simple green dress, its hem stained with dirt. She hurried over to Gryf, wringing her hands.

"Oh, my poor Georgina! And poor you! Please, let me…"

She reached out to brush the dirt from his shoulder, but Gryf instinctively stepped back.

In his world, there were only two kinds of touch: healing and combat.

The girl froze, even more embarrassed than before, but quickly pulled herself together.

"I'm Liza. This is my shop. I'll clean everything up, I promise! And I'll pay for the damage. Maybe you need a doctor?"

"No doctor," Gryf replied, studying the flower.

Geraniums were hardy. Resilient.

He had no doubt this one would survive.

"But you do need a new pot."

"Of course!"

Liza nodded so enthusiastically that her hair fell across her face again.

"Please, come inside. I'll bring you some water so you can wash up. And I'll give you a flower, too — any one you want!"

She looked so genuinely remorseful that the corner of Gryf's mouth twitched.

All of this was laughably insignificant compared with war.

And yet…

There was something strangely human about it.

"All right," he said.

“Let’s go to your shop.”

Chapter 3. The Reluctant Gardener

The shop called *Liza's* turned out to be a real jungle in miniature.

The air was thick with the scents of roses, damp earth, and fragrant herbs. Buckets of flowers crowded the walls, hanging planters dangled from the ceiling, and shelves were lined with neat rows of seeds, bulbs, and gardening tools.

For all that, the shop had the particular kind of disorder found only in places where something is constantly being grown, moved, and invented.

While Gryf washed the dirt off in the tiny sink in the back room, Liza darted between the shelves, muttering under her breath.

"New pot for Georgina, soil, drainage… And I still need the order for the Bronzovs' wedding ready by tonight. And those monstrous oleander tubs still haven't been delivered…"

She emerged from behind a shelf carrying two clay pots and looked at Gryf again.

He had already managed to wash most of the dirt off himself.

"You're not from around here, are you?" Liza asked cautiously.

"I'm on leave," Gryf replied shortly.

"On leave?"

Liza's face immediately brightened. Then guilt and desperate

hope flickered in her eyes.

"Then… would you like to earn a little extra money? Help me with the tubs? They're terribly heavy, and the deliveryman threw his back out today. And you're so strong…"

Her gaze drifted over his arms.

"I'll pay you double. And I'll give you lunch!"

Gryf had already opened his mouth to refuse.

He had come to this town to rest, not to haul other people's flower tubs around.

But Liza was looking at him as though the fate of the entire flower business depended on his answer.

Chaos reigned all around them, while his bag contained enough silver to fund a year of carefree living.

For some reason, he found himself saying:

"All right. Show me what needs carrying."

The oleanders turned out to be two enormous tubs that reached almost to his chest.

They were filled with densely packed, damp soil, and lush bushes covered in pink flowers spilled over the top.

"They need to be taken across the square, to the bride's house," Liza explained. "Five minutes if you don't rush."

Gryf walked around one of the tubs, estimating its weight.

For an ordinary human, it would have been impossible to lift.

He crouched down, wrapped his arms around the wooden sides, and, with a breath, raised it.

The soil inside gave a dull, heavy slosh.

“Careful! The roots!” Liza squealed.

“I’m carrying it. I’m not shaking it,” Gryf muttered through clenched teeth as he squeezed toward the door.

The tub was awkward. Its edge pressed against his chest and blocked his view.

At the very first uneven patch of cobblestones, he stumbled, and the heavy container swayed dangerously.

“Left! Left!” came Liza’s voice from behind him. “There’s a puddle! Don’t step in it, you’ll slip!”

Gryf, a man who had once planned assaults on troll fortifications, felt the muscles in his cheeks twitch as he fought back laughter.

He carefully walked around the puddle.

“Now straight ahead, past the fountain, then right! The house with the blue shutters!”

Smiling, pedestrians stepped aside to make room for the powerful stranger carrying an enormous flowering plant across the square.

Children ran after him, giggling.

Gryf caught himself thinking that this was probably the most ridiculous “combat mission” of his entire life.

Once the first tub reached the bride’s house and Gryf had received a flood of enthusiastic thanks, he and Liza went back for the second one.

This time, she walked beside him, but she still didn’t stop giving him instructions.

"You know, you're very strong," she said thoughtfully. "And patient. Most of the townspeople would have already yelled at me for the pot falling on their head. And you're actually helping me."

"I'm hard to surprise," Gryf answered honestly as he carried the second tub.

"A flower falling from the sky is far from the worst thing that can come down from above."

Liza glanced at him curiously but didn't ask any questions.

When the work was finished, she kept her promise and set out lunch behind the shop, in a small inner courtyard.

Cheese, bread, honey, and a pitcher of cold lemonade appeared on the table.

"So, leave-taker," Liza asked cheerfully as she poured the drinks, "how do you like our Flower Alley?"

"Peaceful," Gryf replied, taking a bite of bread.

He was silent for a moment, then added:

"And it smells…"

"It smells like life," Liza said with a smile. "I think that's the best scent in the world."

Gryf looked at her.

At her lively, expressive hands. At the light that appeared in her eyes whenever she talked about flowers.

Before him was an entirely different world: fragile, bright, defenseless.

A world like this was supposed to be protected by people like him.

And yet there was usually no place in it for men like him.

Chapter 4. The Language of Petals

The next morning, Gryf found himself standing in front of Liza's shop again.

He couldn't have explained why — not even to himself.

He had no plans for the day, that much was true. But perhaps there was another reason.

The silence of his room at the *Sleeping Lily* had suddenly become too noticeable, almost unbearable, after a warm day spent in pleasant company.

Liza met him right at the entrance.

Something dark was smeared across her palms.

"Oh, it's you! Just in time!" she said happily, as though she had been waiting for him all morning.

"Will you help me with a wedding bouquet? I'm having a complete disaster with the ribbons."

She didn't even ask whether he agreed.

She simply assumed he would.

And, to his own surprise, Gryf didn't argue.

Inside, the shop was in complete working disarray.

White roses, blue delphiniums, sprigs of myrtle, and delicate maidenhair fern covered the large worktable.

"The bride wants something 'light and eternal,'" Liza explained as she deftly gathered the stems into a single arrangement.

"The rose means love, the delphinium means lightness and flight, and myrtle means the bonds of marriage."

She touched a finger to a cluster of tiny blue flowers.

"And this little one is forget-me-not. So the groom, silly man, remembers the day he got married."

Gryf silently watched as the chaotic armful of stems transformed beneath her hands into a beautiful bouquet.

"Do you make up the meanings yourself?" he finally asked.

"No!"

Liza indignantly tossed her head back.

"It's the language of flowers. Every flower, every shade has its own meaning. Look."

She picked up a rose.

"A red one means passion and burning love. Yellow means jealousy and betrayal. White means purity and innocence."

Then Liza brought a sprig covered in pale purple blossoms close to his face.

"And sage means wisdom, health, and long life. It's given to people you want to protect."

Gryf leaned closer and inhaled.

The scent was spicy, with a slight bitterness.

It smelled like the medicinal brews in field hospitals.

"And this?"

He pointed toward a pot on the windowsill containing a small, fuzzy-leaved plant.

"Touch-me-not. Some people call it the shy plant," Liza said

with a laugh.

"Its leaves fold up when you touch them. It means caution, shyness, and the need for protection."

Sounds like me, Gryf thought.

The idea was so absurd that he nearly grimaced.

"And that geranium? The one that fell on me?"

"The red geranium?"

Liza smiled.

"Courage, determination, protection of the home. They say it keeps evil spirits and ill-intentioned people away."

Gryf snorted.

A brave little flower protecting a home had attacked a dragon who protected people for a living.

The irony was almost too obvious.

"Are you laughing?" Liza asked in surprise.

"That's wonderful! Flowers can tell an entire story without saying a single word."

She quickly gathered a sprig of lavender, a stalk of wheat, and a tiny daisy.

"Lavender means peace. Wheat means prosperity. And the daisy means innocence."

She held the little arrangement up.

"So together they say: 'I wish you a peaceful, prosperous, and bright life.' See?"

Gryf did.

An entire universe fit inside petals and stems — a universe

without tactics, sieges, or ice.

A language spoken by the soul.

And he, a man who had been through fire and water, had never known that language before.

"Teach me," he said before he could change his mind.

Liza looked at him in surprise.

Then she smiled warmly.

"Of course. We'll start with the basics. This is a rose, and this is a thistle…"

She kept talking without pause, while Gryf listened attentively, occasionally allowing himself to admire the most beautiful flower in the room.

Chapter 5. A Shadow on the Horizon

The week passed quickly.

Almost every morning, Gryf came to Liza's shop. He helped with the flowers, listened to her stories, and learned things he had never known how to do before.

How to cut stems at an angle.

How to tell one kind of tulip from another.

How to arrange a bouquet so that nothing in it clashed with anything else.

Liza talked about orchids and peonies, and Gryf caught himself looking forward to those conversations.

He thought about the war less and less.

That morning, he was unloading a cart of peat when he noticed a rider on the main street.

The man rode calmly, without urging his horse.

But Gryf recognized a soldier from a distance — from his straight back, from the way he scanned his surroundings without letting his gaze linger on any one thing.

A staff officer.

One of Ognecheshui's men.

Gryf set the sack down.

The rider spotted him and turned toward the shop.

The young sergeant looked exhausted. The wind had chapped his face, and dark circles showed beneath his eyes.

Even without the uniform, Gryf would have known where that weariness came from.

"Sergeant," Gryf said, setting aside the shovel.

"Sir."

The sergeant saluted.

His gaze lingered for a moment on the flowers, then shifted to Liza standing in the doorway.

"Captain Ognecheshui sends his regards. He hopes you're getting some good rest. The situation along the borders is tense. There are no new orders yet. But the captain says to be ready. The crystal could flare at any moment."

Gryf straightened.

His shoulders instinctively fell into position. His hands settled calmly at his sides.

"Understood. Report that I'm aware of the situation. And that I'm waiting."

"Yes, sir. Take care of yourself."

The sergeant saluted again, turned his horse, and rode away.

Bees hummed over the flowerbed.

Somewhere around the corner, a cart creaked.

"You're a soldier," Liza said.

Gryf turned toward her.

"Yes."

Liza studied him carefully, as though she were seeing him for the first time.

That morning, he had been sorting ribbons for her bouquets.

Now he stood motionless in front of the shop, waiting for an order that had not yet come.

"Could the war come here?" she asked.

"The sergeant said you needed to be ready."

"The war is already here," Gryf replied. "It's just far away from this place right now. In towns like this, people don't always hear about it. But it never truly goes away."

He paused.

"Sometimes there's only a lull."

"And your lull is over?"

"Looks like it."

Liza lowered her eyes to the roses.

She picked one up and began removing the lower leaves, then caught her finger on a thorn.

A bead of blood appeared on her skin.

Gryf instinctively took a step toward her, but stopped.

Liza wiped her finger on her apron and set the rose aside.

"So you'll leave," she said quietly.

"When they call me."

She nodded.

For several seconds, neither of them spoke.

Then Liza picked up another stem and went back to work, moving more slowly now.

Gryf lifted the sack of peat.

The scent of flowers that had lingered in the air only moments before was now mixed, for him, with memories of smoke and

damp ash.

Chapter 6. A Nighttime Conversation by the Fountain

Sleep wouldn't come.

Gryf lay on his back, staring at the ceiling where moonlight spilled across it. He turned onto his side, then onto the other, and finally couldn't take it anymore. He sat up.

In the silence, the creak of floorboards in the hallway sounded unnaturally loud.

Waiting for bad news was wearing him down.

Gryf threw on his cloak and went outside.

The town was asleep. Streetlamps illuminated the empty cobblestones.

At the fountain — the very one where the flowerpot had once landed on his head — Gryf sat down on the parapet and rubbed a hand over his face.

Light footsteps sounded behind him.

Liza emerged from the darkness, a lantern in one hand and a small watering can in the other.

"Oh!"

She stopped.

"You can't sleep either?"

"Couldn't sleep."

"I went to check on the rose garden by the town hall. It was

hot during the day, so I decided to make sure the flowers were all right."

Liza sat on the edge of the parapet, leaving about a hand's breadth between them.

"And you're still waiting?"

Gryf hesitated, but then answered anyway.

"Waiting."

The lantern swayed beside her knee.

Liza's voice turned serious.

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