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Lauren Coyne
Western Michigan University

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Pollination

By Lauren Coyne

Pollination

You do not love Ran. Not the way that stories say. In poetry that men and women croon at the capitol during Founding Festivals, or in songs so syrupy-sweet and dripping with embellishments that even Ran refuses to dance to the tunes. Songs where humans like her and dragons like you forsake their families and deny their pasts just for a single night together, or charge their suitors with impossible tasks in order to prove their love, or uproot entire gardens just to find that single, perfect rose. Worst of all are those tales of Mallea's founding, which tell of the star-crossed love between the newly ascended goddess of plants and god of animals. Of how the new goddess created that precious flower, and the new god helped her Pollinate it, and her humanity mixed with his dragon to create a hybrid: the first dragonskin who became the new country's first king. Of how it was only possible due to the great love the deities had for one another.

You do not love Ran that way.

But you do feel... *something* for her. You know Ran's moods—when you can get away with scuffing up her hardwood floors because you just can't stand confining your claws within shoes for one second more, and when it would be better to just suck it up a bit longer unless you want to bear the disgrace of your claws falling to her shears. When she will be delighted by the smell of petrichor and drag you out to dance upon the dewy garden grass, or when it will make her so sick for home that the only way to cure her is to warm a basin of sand with your fire and bury her feet within it while you wrap her in a cotton cloak and hold her until the tears stop.

You know Ran's secrets—that she feigned a sprained ankle so she could

get out of dancing in front of that egotistical ambassador from the neighboring country without causing him insult and potentially starting a war. That she cannot, for the life of her, get the perfect ratio of seasonings for roasting poultry despite growing the best basil and garlic in the land. That she laced her village elder's cup with tasteless poison before she finally left her desert homeland and settled in Mallea for good, and that she still, even so many years later, can't decide which motive mattered to her more; was it sheer pragmatism, the need for the villagers to gain new perspective and fresh ideas since she refused to join her predecessors in an early grave? Or was it the burning need for justice and revenge on the elder who refused to open her mind to new solutions for the village's survival back when the situation was less dire and more resources were available?

You know Ran's routines—that she spends the first day of the week is for washing and mending the costumes and shoes she wore out dancing for the two days before, so that she can spend the second day walking through the marketplace to break them in while searching out good deals on new materials, or on wholesale shoes if the mending was unsuccessful. That she won't actually buy anything until the third day of the week, after she's gotten a good idea of the prices and seen what the merchants have to offer, so she can buy supplies or fill in gaps in the marketplace by selling her own seedlings, spices, and prized cuttings. That she alternates her day of rest between the fourth and fifth day based on your own indulging of the current king's missions and plans, so she can, as she claims, “be prepared for any nonsense or animal carcasses you drag in here, because I don't care how full of iron and nutrients it is, Den, I am not going to eat that thing raw!”

This is why yesterday, the fourth day of this week, you brought her a fresh-killed goose. You even plucked it for her, and drained it of blood—which you did *not* do by drinking it straight, because that is not and never has been a thing that dragons do, thank you very much *Ran*. You left the feathers in the offering basket, patterned in its riot of colors, and the goose in the plain one slightly hidden behind the bush, so she would know it was from you. This gave her the time she needed to pull up a double harvest of garlic and onions, to decide whether basil or sage would complement it better, and to weigh whether lemons or oranges would be more in demand on the morrow. Then this morning she brought it all to market to try and convince someone else to dress and cook the goose for her, claiming that of course she could do it herself, but that it was just so time consuming when she still had so much to do in the marketplace that it simply made more sense to offer someone else wanting a poultry dinner the use of her extra, high-quality ingredients if they agreed to cook her bird along with theirs. In the meantime, you entered the smaller, more personal garden behind her home, intending to pull in the sun-dried laundry, sort it, and set the table to her standards so that you could eat while the goose was still warm and the fat sizzling—the flavor of the seasoning a fair compromise for not getting to eat the goose raw and feel the slowing vibrations of its dying heart against your teeth.

But as you surveyed the garden, looking for where she put the new clothesline after the old one finally broke, you couldn't help but glance back into the far corner where you'd helped her set up the memorial—the small shrine for all those lost in the course of Mallea's founding set in the midst of a small patch of the flowers that made that founding possible—and all your plans rapidly

changed when you saw one of the flowers glowing.

“You better not have used my good tablecloth,” Ran states the moment she closes the door. Like the dancer she is, she removes her colorful, cotton cloak with a twirl and flourish before hanging it on the hook beside your fur-trimmed one. Wordlessly you take her empty bags to fold and put in their proper places by the back door while she moves to place the plain basket, the mouth-watering scent of the cooked goose emanating from within, onto the side table in the kitchen where she usually has you carve the meat you bring her. When you join her after putting her things away, it’s to the sight of her rummaging through her cutlery drawers and huffing in annoyance. She spies you from the corner of her eyes as you sit down at the other small table in the room, the one designated for eating, and turns to give you a fierce glare.

“If you were going to come in here uninvited, Den, the least you could’ve done was get things prepared for dinner!”

“I brought you the main course,” you say pointedly, gesturing toward the goose.

“Yes, and left *me* to get it cooked! And *don’t*,” she turns on a heel to point a menacing finger at you, “tell me that we could have just eaten it raw, because you *know* that’s not an option for me.”

You lift your hands in surrender and her glare softens a bit as she turns back around to continue her search. “The knives are by the sink,” you remind her for the thousandth time, and she grunts out her thanks as she closes her current drawer and saunters toward where you directed. But the clinking and clanking of the cutlery resumes for only a moment before she stills, and a deadly silence

permeates the air. Slowly her gaze shifts to the side and her slim hand reaches for the trowel you put in the sink. She draws it closer and studies the muddy tip, the coating of dirt still clinging to the handle. Then she places it back down with a calmness that belies the anger you knew would grow within her when she finally noticed the tool, burning hotter than even your own fire.

“Den,” she demands. “Did you take a plant from my garden?”

“Yes,” is your simple answer, and she all but explodes in rage.

“How *dare* you!” she shrieks, stalking toward you. “You know what that place means to me! What those *plants* mean to me! I give you permission to enter those sacred grounds, and *this* is how you repay me? By *uprooting* something from my garden?”

You meet her angry gaze steadily and answer with calmness, “Take a look at just what plant it is.”

Her eyes quickly flick over, desperate to find any scrap of rationality to your actions. And by the way she does a double-take and stares at the plant you removed from the garden, you know that they, too, must have caught the glow you did earlier.

“Oh,” she says in honest shock, taking in the sight of the glowing flower sitting there so innocently in its new pot. Then, “...Oh,” she says again, as its species finally registers, along with what it means for it to glow the way it is.

Slowly one hand reaches out to cup the smooth petals, while the other weakly gropes around for the table’s second chair. When Ran finally finds it she sinks down, near boneless.

There is debate, you know, over the proper name for the flower. Some call

it a “peace-flower,” for the role it played in the country’s founding. Others say that’s just a happy coincidence of pronunciation, and it is properly a “piece-flower,” after the common belief that everyone and everything is only a small piece of a greater being, and that one day, when there is nothing else to learn, that being will pull all those pieces together and reform itself again. Foreigners typically call them “glass flowers,” due to how translucent the petals are before Pollination, and that process is also why you’ve heard it jokingly referred to as “Mallean Baby’s Breath.” But you’ve never cared that much what it is called; not when you first heard the debates over the name, and even less now, as you watch Ran fuss over the one you placed on her table.

You aren’t entirely sure what she’s looking for as she flattens out the softly glowing petals with delicate fingers and gently lifts leaves to view their undersides, but the familiar motions stir something inside you. The care she takes with this flower, all the while knowing the potential it holds... but you quickly quash the feeling down. It only makes sense for her to worry over the plant, in a way that has nothing to do with its current status. Though she conceded your right to remove it from her garden, as you did help her Pollinate it, you both know that it was only with great reluctance, and that she won’t feel comfortable until she ensures its general wellbeing.

“It seems all right,” Ran finally concludes, wiping her hands on her skirt before sitting down again and folding them in front of her on the table. “But it would have been better if you’d just left it in the garden to show me after we’d eaten. I know I’ve told you before about the dangers of replanting.”

You briefly dip your head, acknowledging the point. It *is* a good one. You

still don't know all that much about plant care, but she has lectured you many a time and made it abundantly clear that even if you have a good reason to move a plant, the process still stresses them. And it isn't like this specific flower would have been in any danger for the duration of a meal. For one thing, it was growing in Ran's private garden. No one is allowed in there save you and her. The people of the town consider it to be something akin to those temples that other deities have in bigger cities—though you suspect they don't realize Ran is so much more than a mere priestess taking care of the garden as a way of paying homage to the plant goddess—so not even the lowest thieves would dare enter without permission. As for any opportunistic animals, it only took one incident of you putting the fear of, well, *yourself* in them before they decided it was in their best interests to stay away. But that aside, you are still fairly certain that this particular flower would have been safe either way.

The result of the first Pollination was a flower whose once-clear and glassy petals changed to glowing swirls of white and crimson, blending together at times into the pale pink tones of a newborn's delicate skin. The dragons who saw it grinned, their blood-stained teeth gleaming with pleasure at the shade, sure that the colors signified that the soul of their future monarch would be that of a fierce warrior who could rend and tear and make their kingdom's enemies bleed even though they would have the dull, white teeth of a human. The humans shed tears of hopeful relief, sure that, rather than blood, the red shades of the flower meant that their future monarch would be gentle and kind, and would use fire like a dragon's to light the kingdom's hearths. Humans and dragons both love to hoard their beautiful things, and both groups wanted to touch it, and pluck its leaves and

petals to keep for their own, selfishly basking in its glory. And while that would have perhaps been an even more apt and ironic lesson, the ultimate proof that humans and dragons were equally selfish and shortsighted and always had been, it also would have been an impermanent one, as each side would have blamed the other and continued the fighting and killing until only the deities who created and helped Pollinate the ruined plant were left alive amidst the carnage. This is why that flower did not leave the goddess' grasp until the Clutch-Mother was prepared for her human mate to feed it to her.

But no one would think to hoard *this* flower, or to even give it a second glance. Where its sibling was striking, the colors adorning its petals in beautiful contrast where they did not blend into a balanced shade, *this* one's color speaks of chaos incarnate. Too many hues to name, all mixing and melding together in a way reminiscent to your last visit to the dyer's hut, when Ran conscripted you to help pull her cart piled with saffron and indigo to the market, and the two of you watched the dye-master's youngest son, a dragonskin like his mother, mix all the different dye barrels together. Rather than the beautiful rainbow he'd hoped to create, the result instead was a disgusting, muddy, greenish-brown color so dark it was almost black. The boy's mother scolded him for rendering the dye unusable, but Ran had quickly turned back to the cart so she could hide a surreptitious smile, pleased that the child had the desire and, more importantly, the *opportunity* to experiment at all. Her hand lightly brushed yours as you handed her one of the bundles of plants from the cart, and, once she was finally composed, she turned back around and offered a slight discount if the dye-master bought the lot.

The two of you spent that evening in her more private garden, reminiscing

in front of the memorial and its flowers. Remembering how long you've known each other, and the journey it took to go from hating each other, to toleration bordering on friendship, to what you have now. The good and bad, the hardships and the triumphs. The way she laughed at your expression the first time you forced yourself to wear a pair of shoes, and how you laughed at hers the first time she tasted a lemon, before she realized they weren't meant to be eaten whole. The tears she shed when she realized that she'd outlived anyone who could have known her from her old village, and the tears you shed yourself when it finally sunk in just how awful your own people had been, and how badly you'd ravaged the country whose remnants struggled together to form Mallea.

Looking back on that night now, you can't help but wonder if that was the moment when this flower's Pollination began.

But you quickly banish these thoughts from your mind and offer Ran a shrug. "What's done is done."

Ran studies you, taking in your impassive expression, before she rolls her eyes and sighs. "So, what do you propose we do now, Den?"

When you tilt your head a silent query, she huffs and rolls her eyes again. "It's obvious you want to do something with it, otherwise you would have left it alone. As I said earlier, I've already told you about the dangers of replanting. Not only do you know better than to mess around with that sort of thing, you've also never shown any real interest in gardening before."

You glance at the glowing petals once more, before offering, "But this isn't exactly an ordinary flower, now, is it?"

"That's a poor excuse, and you know it."

You say nothing.

Ran stares at your expression again, then looks to the flower. Her gaze drops to her folded hands before she says, slowly, as if testing out the words, “We could just... do nothing. Leave it be in the pot. Pollination doesn’t fade unless the flower dies, after all, and it’s not like it can’t survive there just as well as outside, not with me looking after it.”

“But you’ve said it yourself that sometimes even the most perfect replanting can go awry,” you quickly point out. “Just because it looks okay now doesn’t mean it will stay that way.”

You hear the tap of dull, human fingernails on wood and wince internally, knowing that you’ve given something away. You glance at Ran’s slim, drumming fingers and then back up to see the smirk growing on her face.

“Then who did you have in mind to eat it, and carry the child?”

You swallow roughly, looking to where your own hands have folded themselves in your lap. “I... perhaps... the crown princess? Or her wife? It would be good, I think, for this child to grow up with their kin.”

Ran’s smirk doesn’t fade, but her eyes do widen a bit in surprise, before they soften and look back at the flower.

Neither of you like to talk about it much, the fact that part of why you both hate those stories of the deities’ star-crossed love is because of just *how* false they are. Back then, when the two of you finally realized that you were more than mere human and dragon, you had barely moved from hatred to mere toleration. The only opinion you shared was that the madness had to stop. The warring between human and dragons on this continent was so bad and the casualties on both sides

so high that the former kingdoms had collapsed, and neither of you wanted it to spread or claim what family you had left. And if you had to do so by utilizing your new rank as deities and hatching a crazy plan, then so be it. A child who held claim to both species, was raised by both species, could act as a bridge and rallying point to draw everyone together and keep a peace. And even though that peace would likely be tenuous before the child grew up and could stand on their own, no one would risk angering a deity by harming their offspring—even if said offspring wasn't actually raised by them. So Ran created the flower and you helped her Pollinate it, and then the two of you handed it off to the chosen parents who would bear the resulting child into the world and raise it as their own, despite it not being related to them by blood.

That royal line remains unbroken to this day, and as long as it does so you will be the however many greats-grandfather to the ruler and their heirs. Since the child who is born from this flower—if, indeed, a child is born at all—will be the blood sibling of that first king, they, too, would share kinship with the royal line, however distant they may be this many generations apart and no matter who consumes the petals.

“Also,” you finally continue, “The princess already has a dragonskin child, and a flower-born one, at that. And even though Mallea is well-established and at peace, it is always good to have another heir, especially one who could remind the people of their heritage. Not to mention—”

“—That a placement like that would allow us to be able to see the child on a regular basis, and to watch them grow up?” Ran cuts you off, though not unkindly, her voice soft and knowing. “That would be nice,” she agrees.

Your eyes flick back to hers—or, at least, they try to. The action is made rather difficult by the fact that she’s still steadfastly looking at the flower. But from what little you can glimpse, you can tell that behind her eyes she’s replaying the memory you did, earlier, of that dragonskin child attempting to create a rainbow, and the evening that followed. “But, if that’s the case, then why bother with the middleman?” she asks, a slight tremble to her voice.

You give a start. “Ran?”

She takes a fortifying breath and looks straight into your eyes. “The world is different now, Den. *We’re* different. That first time, what let us Pollinate that flower was our shared resolve to keep our peoples safe, and ensure a better future for everyone. Nothing more. But this time... this time I think what let us Pollinate it was... well, *us*. Don’t you agree?”

She waits for you to think about it, and then, finally, “I don’t feel for you the way the stories about us always say,” you warn her, your voice trembling and your heart beating hard in your chest.

“I don’t either,” she admits, a wry smile on her lips.

You hold her gaze a few moments longer, wondering if your baby will share those eyes, before you release a breath and tell her “Then... I think you’re right.”

Ran stays silent, but her smile widens as she breaks your gaze and lifts one hand to steady the flower in its pot. Her other hand she holds out to you, demanding, and you take it in one of your own without hesitation. She studies the flower, her eyes quickly flicking this way and that, before she finds what she’s looking for and they settle. Only then does she drop your hand and meet your

gaze once more.

“Cut it here,” she orders, gently brushing the green stem at a point right above the highest visible node beneath the glowing blossom.

You shift your gaze to the indicated spot. Your other hand moves to join hers where she holds the pot, ensuring more stability while you perform this delicate task. The newly-freed one, with only the barest unsheathing of your claws, pinches the stem between your thumb and forefinger in the indicated spot, cutting off the blossom from the stem. A line of warmth runs down to your palm from the pooling sap between your fingers, and you swear you can feel a gentle energy, the shared promise it holds for you and the woman whose hand you still hold.

“Den.”

You shift your gaze away from the glowing petals and look into Ran’s eyes—wide, soft, and hopeful, like your own—as you dutifully place the newly-cut flower on her outstretched tongue. She pulls it within her mouth and chews the petals once, twice, and swallows. Her eyes close and she gives a soft gasp as the energy the flower contained disperses and resettles in the proper place, making her shiver. A bit of sap leaks to the corner of her mouth, and you watch as it slowly loses its glow. Her fingers come up to wipe it off, and then they trail down until her hand rests over the place where her child now grows. Her other hand remains warm in yours, despite having moved them away from the pot, as the two of you sit, watching where she idly rubs her belly, almost as if you could already see externally the changes happening within. You would be content to stay like this until such things became a reality, if not for a sudden gurgling sound

breaking the contented silence.

You look up at Ran's face and your brow quirks in amusement with her sudden blush at the audible sign of her hunger, and you quickly miss the warmth when her hand finally pulls away from yours.

"Well don't just sit there," she says. "We would have already finished eating by now if you weren't so impatient, and now the goose is probably stone-cold! Make yourself useful for once and go heat it back up while I set the table."

"Of course." You grin at her as you stand up, acquiescing to her demands. "It is good I brought you a goose this time. They are full of proteins, fats, and oils—all good things needed for a healthy gestation."

Ran startles a bit, blushing again, and then gets an odd look on her face. Her eyes widen at some internal realization, and then narrow at you in a glare. "If one of my cravings turns out to be raw flesh, you're getting a punch in the face."

You throw back your head and bark out a laugh. "I look forward to it!"

You still do not love Ran. Not the ways the stories say, or the poets croon. But only because what you do feel for her, and what you know is already growing for your child, is so much better.