**Le Santons et Oriana**

Snow had fallen on the southern plain. The house that Marion had named Falling Water for its Earth equivalent was in the midst of a winter scene that would make the designers of Christmas cards weep. The evergreen trees were frosted over. The pond below the waterfall was iced over except for one deep part where some water was still flowing even though much of the waterfall was now thick white ribbons of ice. Where the house jutted over the water icicles hung from beneath it.

The house itself was invitingly warm. Marion stepped into the glass lift that brought her to the middle floor accompanied by her chauffeur who carried packages for her before retreating to the servant’s quarters and leaving his mistress with his sister-in-law.

“I’ve got smoked salmon and strawberries and cream for lunch,” she announced as Oriana came to greet her with a warmth that both of them were only just becoming used to. “And Christmas Presents… or Winter Solstice presents if you prefer.”

“The dinner tonight is for Winter Solstice,” Oriana admitted. “But it DOES coincide with your Christmas, I suppose.”

“Kristoph and I visited a Christmas Fayre on Earth yesterday. We bought lots of nice things. There’s a huge cheese, here, too. You can serve it to your guests, later.”

Oriana carefully smelt the wheel of smoked Gruyere and confirmed that it would be an excellent addition to the cheese board for the dinner she had planned in every detail. A maid arrived without any obvious summoning and took away the cheese to the kitchen where, in contrast to the calm, quiet drawing room a lot of activity was going on to prepare for the dinner party in the evening.

Another maid, equally quietly brought plates of dressed salad and added the smoked salmon. The two pregnant women sat and enjoyed a lunch that was rich in essential omega-3 fatty acids EPA and DHA, important for brain and eye development in the growing baby and a natural source of vitamin D.

Of course, neither really cared about that. They just liked smoked salmon.

Afterwards, Marion lost no time in presenting her other surprise packages.

“This IS a Christmas present, technically,” she explained about a large box wrapped in gold paper and a ribbon that had been left, tantalisingly, on the side table during lunch. “But I thought you might like it all the same.”

Oriana carefully unwrapped the paper and ribbon and lifted the lid. She looked curiously at the set of ornaments carefully nestled inside.

“It is a Crèche Provençale,” Marion explained. “I bought one last year for our house, and I enjoyed selecting more figures and little houses for it this time. I thought you might enjoy having one for your drawing room, even though you don’t know anything about Christmas.”

This was a ‘deluxe’ starter package with thirty pieces hand carved from hard wood and painted with durable lacquer paints. Oriana picked up one of the Three Wise Men carrying their intricately crafted gifts and studied it carefully, admiring the fie detail of his crown and the gift of Myrrh in an elaborate box.

“My brother tried to explain the tradition to me. I was wondering what it was that excited you so much. The idea was puzzling. A king born in a lowly place to parents of humble birth. I really didn’t understand that, at all. It… just wouldn’t happen on Gallifrey.”

“It doesn’t happen very often on Earth,” Marion admitted, fully understanding Oriana’s confusion about something she had taken for granted all her life. “In fact I don’t think it has happened at all except for this one very special time.”

She picked out the stable from the box and set it on one of the fine wooden cabinets Oriana had furnished her drawing room with. She put the Holy Family in place, and Oriana set the Wise Men in a neat line. They added animals to the stable and the shepherds who visited first.

“Technically the Wise Men shouldn’t be added until Epiphany,” Marion pointed out. “But as there isn’t such a date in the Gallifreyan calendar they may as well take their place.”

“But why all the other figures?” Oriana asked. “Kristoph showed me the texts from the sacred books of the Earth religion. There was no mention of all these characters involved in the birth.”

“It’s the special tradition from Provence,” Marion explained. Of course, it was difficult enough to explain about the different races and cultures of Earth to anyone from Gallifrey. Explaining about a unique sub-culture from the south-east of France was even harder, but Oriana tried to understand it. When it got really complicated, Marion just pictured a map of the country in her head, then a selection of the food and wine and other special Provençale customs.

“As for these figures – the people of the region have long believed that everyone ought to be able to pay their respects to the Child. They have figures representing all the people of the village, all the tradesmen like the baker and fishmonger, important people like the mayor or the lord of the manor. Sometimes they have pieces made to represent members of their own families, that become heirlooms for generations to come.”

“That’s a charming idea.” Oriana agreed. “It’s still a little puzzling, though. I’ve never thought of the Caretaker classes as being made up of different kinds of people with different jobs.”

“You’ve been raised not to see them at all except as servants scurrying in and out of the room. But look, here is la couturière with her scissors and thread. You meet those all the time.”

Oriana took the little dressmaker figure and placed it in the scene. She reached for another. This one puzzled her greatly. It also had very tiny knives and scissors in his coat pockets, but was carrying a curious little contraption.

“I don’t think we DO see those on Gallifrey,” Marion explained. “They aren’t really common on Earth by my time, but in the past Le rémouleur was very important. He sharpened knives and scissors.”

“I have never had cause to use scissors, or knives, except to eat my food, but I think Gallifreyan steel stays sharp without needing such attention.”

That was one of those stark differences between Marion’s upbringing and Oriana’. Marion had prepared food in the kitchen using knives. Oriana had never done so. The kitchen was a mystery to her. Nor had she ever done needlework, even for a genteel pastime. Before she became a client of the Gallifreyan couturiers, Marion had often made dresses for herself and still, on quiet winter afternoons, enjoyed a little embroidery or cross stitch.

The boulanger with his long sticks of French bread didn’t need explanation. Oriana did understand that the bread she ate in her fine dining room was made by an artisan. She placed him in the scene next to le poissonnier, a fishmonger, not, as she had first thought, a poisoner, and la poissonnière, also not connected to subtle forms of murder, but the fishwife. This, Marion assured her, was a separate profession in Earth tradition and worthy of representation in the Crèche.

“This one should mean something to you,” Marion told her. “This is l'herboriste. They can be male or female, of course. This one is female.”

“Oh… like mama,” Oriana guessed by the bunch of herbs in the apron pocket of the little figure and the mortar and pestle in her hands. “A herbalist… or apothecary.”

“On this tradition, just a herbalist,” Marion conceded. “Here is Le apothicaire. He has a mortar and pestle, too, but he IS a man. A bit of chauvinism going on, there. But he deserves his place in the scene, too.”

“What is this one?” Oriana asked. She held up a little man in white shirt and grey trousers and a red cap on his head. He had no articles denoting his trade at all and held his arms up in excitement. Marion thought he looked like a football fan whose team had just scored, but she knew the true story well enough.

“He is le Ravi. The word means ‘delighted’ or ‘ecstatic’. The cruel name for him is ‘village idiot’, but it is kinder to call him simple-minded, or even clear-minded. Of all the characters he sees the birth of the baby as a wonderful miracle and celebrates it with his laughter and his raised hands. He understands the joy of it perfectly and fully even though everyone else thinks he is too stupid to understand anything.”

Oriana didn’t quite understand. Even Gallifreyan Caretakers tended to be intelligent. They didn’t really have village idiots. Nor could she quite get her head around somebody whose mind was so clear of ordinary concerns and complications that he can see what is the most important thing to happen on his world.

Marion placed le Ravi carefully beside the Holy Family themselves. His simplicity earned him that place according to Provençale tradition.

Oriana was enjoying assembling the Crèche and hearing the little stories that went with many of the figures.

Then she reached for one of the last figures and her mood changed. This was one of the noblemen in a fine renaissance costume. Oriana stroked her finger over the folds of his gown, hardly able to believe it was painted wood and not real silk.

She held the figure much longer than she needed to and sighed deeply. Marion realised it was nothing to do with the figure itself. She had simply been holding it when the spell of the Crèche suddenly broke and she felt the cold reality of her life come upon her.

“Sometimes, on Earth, people do get unhappy at Christmas,” Marion said. “The effort to be cheerful just gets too much.”

“It’s not that,” Oriana admitted. “It’s….”

She clung to the figure of the French nobleman tightly, as if it was a kind of talisman for her. “It’s….”

“Tonight’s dinner party?” Marion guessed.

“Am I rushing it? Is it too soon to try to be a hostess… after all that has happened? After the disgrace, the humiliation, after… becoming a deserted wife and then a widow….”

“It… well, it hasn’t been very long since the death of your husband,” Marion admitted. “But this isn’t a ball or party, just a formal dinner with a few friends and relations. It is perfectly appropriate. Besides, all of your guests are people who bear you no ill will. There will be no criticism or gossip.”

“I feel so nervous. I shouldn’t. I have hosted so many parties. I was… renowned for my good taste, and for the quality of my guests.”

“Lily D’Alba is coming tonight. There is nobody of higher quality or regard. She is enough to ensure anyone not invited will be jealous.”

“Lily never accepted an invitation from me, before. She… disliked Seveg. I used to think she was being snobbish because the Lessage name was not as great as hers… but I realise, now, she had good reason to want to distance herself from my home.”

“Lily is the least snobbish lady I have ever met,” Marion said. “She doesn’t often attend dinners in the Capitol. It might just have been that.”

“You’re too generous. I wish I had seen the truth much sooner. I was married to a fool, a wastrel, and a criminal.”

“And tonight you have a new start. This is your first dinner in your lovely new house. Everyone will go home talking about how wonderful it all was.”

“I used to have no fear about such things. I KNEW people would like my parties. I knew I was popular, I knew I was liked. Now… I’m not sure of that, at all. I don’t know how many real friends I even have.”

“You… have me.”

“So I do,” Oriana admitted. “Though I don’t know why. You’ve been so nice to me, yet I have always been beastly to you.”

“That’s the other thing about Christmas. It’s about forgiveness and making amends. Goodwill to all men it says in the Bible. I think they meant to women, too. And… perhaps they even meant men and women on other planets.”

Oriana thought about that for a moment and nodded. She managed a smile.

“That seems a good sentiment. Even if I don’t quite understand Christmas fully, I like that part of it.”

Marion would have commented further, but the butler announced that Lord de Lœngbǽrrow was here. Kristoph cane into the drawing room with a ribboned box.

“I missed lunch, I’m afraid, but I thought I should come as soon as possible.” He looked at the Crèche and nodded approvingly. “I brought some figures to add to it.”

 “You did?” Oriana was surprised. So was Marion. He opened the box and took out one figure, first.

“L'astronome,” he said, placing the little man with a starchart and telescope next to l'herboriste. No explanation was needed. Then there was a little veiled nun and a couple with a little boy. Two ladies in elegant satin gowns with lace parasols were added. They were matrons of Arles, the chief city of Provence, with its own unique fashions and traditions.

“Our family,” Oriana said with a slightly choked voice. “But what about you, brother?”

“This is Kristoph,” Marion said, taking the last figure from the big box. “Le Chevalier – the mounted knight who stands in protection of all of us.”

“Of course,” Oriana agreed. “Yes.”

“Merry Christmas, my dears,” Kristoph said, holding his wife and sister close and kissing both on the cheeks. “Happy Solstice. Maybe both.”