**Queens, Wives and Sisters**

The orange sun of Lukas IV was setting over the glittering central city. Beyond its spires and domes famous throughout the Scarlett systems, a golden desert turned multiple shades of orange-brown to the north and an ocean was already burnt umber to the south.

“The sunset here is just like on Gallifrey,” Oriana commented as she looked at the glorious view. “I often watched it set over the Red Desert when I lived in the city. And… yes, I must admit the Southern Plain sunsets are lovely, too. I have had dinner guests congratulating me on the perfect position of my house to enjoy it. I suppose I can hardly take credit for that, though.” She looked at Marion and laughed. “I would have done in the past, wouldn’t I? No wonder you found me so unbearable.”

“This is a very beautiful sunset,” Marion agreed, forbearing to comment on Oriana’s self-deprecation. “I think it is because this city is so clean. No pollution in the sky, spoiling the colour. Still, you should see the sunsets on Earth. Even in Liverpool they can be spectacular, the evening light spreading across the Mersey.”

Oriana had only recently learnt what words like ‘Liverpool’ and ‘Mersey’ meant to her sister-in-law. The syllables still felt strange and alien to her.

“I never thought of seeing sunsets or anything else on any other planet before,” Oriana admitted. “I wouldn’t have come on this trip, but… I suppose I was a little bored. Winter on the southern plain is so dull. There are only so many parties even I can hold when nobody wants to cross the snowdrifts to get to my house.”

“Yes, it is, a bit dull,” Marion agreed. “That’s why I decided to come on this trip even though I’d mostly rather stay at home and rest. The baby makes my back ache so much. Funnily enough, it was when I said that… about the back ache… that Kristoph decided you should come, too.”

“So that we could have back ache together?” Oriana remarked dryly. “Trust a man to think that was a kindness.”

“I think he meant we should both enjoy the break from routine and be company for each other.”

“I think he might have had another motive,” Oriana suggested with a knowing smile. Then she turned as the door to the dresssing room opened. Kristoph came in with indulgent smiles for them both as well as corsages for their evening dresses. They were large and vividly coloured according to Lukasan tradition and had their own heady perfume.

“Dare I ask if you’re ready?” he asked. “Two women dressing together… I knew it might be a dangerous thing to intervene.”

“Enough of your cheek, brother,” Oriana answered. “We’re both ready.”

Kristoph pinned the flowers on their dresses. Both were maternity style, of course. Marion was in deep maroon, Oriana in purple, colours of Lukasan aristocracy. Both had silver pins shaped as the silvertrees of the House of Lœngbærrow. Having newly come back into the family, that meant a lot to Oriana.

“You’re both beautiful,” he told them. “Come along. The State Banquet awaits.”

He, of course, was dressed in the formal clothes of the Gallifreyan Diplomatic Service. The heavily embroidered velvet robes and the high collar made him look taller and broader than ever. The two women, wife and sister, were proud to walk at his side as they made their way through the diplomatic wing of the Lukasan Royal Palace.

At a wide, sweeping staircase he held both of their arms carefully and walked slowly. The guests gathering below in the grand foyer had plenty of time to look and admire the Gallifreyan representative and his elegant ladies as they descended. Oriana was thrilled by the attention. Marion had learnt to deal with those many eyes upon her, but she was glad when they got to the ground floor. Without worrying about a dangerous fall, she was able to gather her thoughts for the next difficult part of the evening – the formal introduction to the King of Lukas and his Queens.

She had been introduced to all kinds of royalty since she had been married to Kristoph. The only surprising thing this time was that King Ansonia was only a king, not a Koënige or Voivode or Archimandrite or some other bewildering title with a whole collection of puzzling rites and rituals attached to his position.

A simple curtsy was all that was required for a king. She had done it many times before.

But never before during pregnancy. She wasn’t sure if she would physically manage it.

Oriana had expressed the same reservation. This was her first royal presentation. She was not used to the diplomatic life at all. Her social circle had included the most powerful families on Gallifrey, but like so many of her race, she had rarely travelled offworld and knew few people whose titles were significantly higher than her own.

“Neither of you HAVE to perform a full curtsy,” Kristoph told them as they took their places in the receiving line. “Lukasan culture holds motherhood in high regard. You will be required to merely bob respectfully. If you do it in unison I’ll be proud of you both.”

“We’ll do our best,” Marion promised with a soft laugh. Oriana laughed, too. It relieved their worry and they both smiled proudly as they walked with Kristoph, admired by onlookers as they finally approached the throne.

The King was a handsome man whose robes added poise and dignity to an already noble demeanour. Beside him on the dais three women sat, all three wearing crowns and fine gowns. Their titles were Queen One, Queen Two and Queen Three. They may have had names of their own, but the order in which they were married to the King identified them.

Queen Two was very clearly pregnant and smiled in sisterly understanding as Marion and Oriana made their simple bobs of obeisance. The king himself smiled at them both, too and congratulated Kristoph.

Kristoph bowed very correctly, even wearing the stiff high collar. He had centuries of experience in such things. Then he stepped back with his two ladies and they joined the rest of the VIP visitors passing through a grand arched doorway into the State Dining Room where they awaited the arrival of the Royal Family.

“You see,” Oriana said as she and Marion were directed to seats next to those left empty for the Lukasan Queens. “THAT is why Kristoph wanted us both here with him. The king was impressed by a man with two pregnant wives.”

“Two…” Marion laughed. “Oh, did they really think….”

But, of course, polygamy was quite usual on this world. The assumption was bound to be made.

“The thought never occurred to me,” Kristoph protested, though neither woman quite believed him. “But I’m proud of both of you, so it doesn’t matter.”

The King and his Queens arrived last and took their places. There was a great deal of ceremony in the form of loyal toasts before the banquet started. This proved another minefield for Marion and Oriana. Their appetites for each different course varied. Neither liked the look of the bloated purple fish dish, but they did appreciate the delicately flavoured soup that was like the finest, crispest salad in liquid form. They toyed with the whole roasted birds in a piquant sauce, but enjoyed a savoury mousse that came after it.

The dessert courses were a little easier to cope with. Lukasan cuisine was famed for its delicately flavoured confectionaries.

Among the topics of conversation during dinner, Marion told everyone near to her about the unusual menu at the famous Danish restaurant that specialised in steak tartar garnished with ants. Her sister-in-law with her limited experience of foreign food was not the only one puzzled by that idea.

“Is that what people like to eat on your world?” asked the Second Queen of Lukas.

“No, not usually,” Marion admitted. “It’s… just a very different kind of restaurant. We went there, once. It was interesting. This fruit compote made me think of it… the edible flowers as garnish. It is just what they would do.”

“We use flowers in many of our famous recipes,” the First Queen explained. “The chefs here at the palace are experts in the use of all kinds of flowers and herbs. I have a garden of my own where I grow many exotic plants.”

“My mother would be interested in that,” Oriana said, finding her voice after being a little bewildered by the diplomatic conversation. “She is accomplished in the uses of plants. It is… something of a hobby, of course. A lady of standing does not need to do such things for an income.”

It was probably a sign of Oriana’s nervousness that she felt she had to explain why her aristocratic mother took an interest in the skills of an artisan. She retreated into silence again, eating her flower compote intently. The conversation continued around her. Marion avoided intergalactic food fashions as a subject altogether.

After the banquet there was dancing in the grand ballroom, a gilded space that would have made Versailles look shabby. Crystal chandeliers reflected in glittering mirrors all around the bejewelled dancers as an orchestra struck up the tunes to complex formal dances traditional to Lukas. Interestingly, despite the polygamous culture the dances were for couples. The men took turns to dance with each of their wives.

The pregnant ladies didn’t dance. Marion and Oriana sat with the Second Queen and drank fruit cordials brought to them by liveried footmen while watching the magnificent scene. The King still had two unencumbered queens to dance with alternatively while Kristoph was popular with many unattached ladies.

“I’m not sure that’s technically a lady,” Marion pointed out as Kristoph found himself partnering the Drigini Ambassador, one of a species so tall that his or her neck was level with the top of his high collar. The Ambassador had a bland, androgynous face and a body shrouded in gold fabric. Kristoph rose to the occasion and treated his dance partner with dignity and respect, but it had to be said that he looked happier once he changed partners and took the beautiful, elegant, and regularly sized Third Queen of Lukas onto the floor.

Marion glanced from the pair to the Second Queen, sitting demurely beside them. She was beautiful, too, the more so in her latter days of pregnancy. She was looking at the Third Queen with Kristoph and the First Queen with the King. Her expression was hard to gauge. Perhaps she was used to keeping her thoughts to herself, but even in a culture where polygamy was normal it must be impossible to avoid jealousies. How did she really feel about it all? She couldn’t imagine sharing Kristoph’s affections in that way. The little misunderstanding about her and Oriana was amusing. They both knew that a man’s love for his wife and his sister were quite different. But how did three Queens and one King work?

Oriana must have been of the same mind. She asked a question of the Second Queen that elicited an interesting response.

“We have no reason to be jealous of each other. Our good King loves us all equally. Though… being the mother of his first child I am receiving extra favour just now.”

“Quite right, too,” Oriana agreed with her. Of course, the only man favouring her at the moment was her brother, but she was coming to terms with that.

She seemed to enjoy the royal occasion, anyway. So did Marion. When it was over, Kristoph escorted his wife and sister back to their diplomatic apartments. At the door to her room, he kissed Oriana on the cheek and wished her goodnight before bringing Marion to the master bedroom. All seemed well.

But a few hours later it was a different story. Kristoph woke to find Marion groaning in pain beside him and a frantic personal maid rushing into the room to report that Oriana was screaming in agony.

He knew that she was. He could feel her distress telepathically. He was aware, too, that something else, equally terrible, was happening in the palace.

“Marion,” he said as he grasped his wife in his arms and did what he could to comfort her. “Marion, hold on, sweetheart. Please hold on.”