**All About Oriana**

Kristoph came to the garden. His expression was unreadable, but everyone looked at him with trepidation. Oriana reached out and found Marion’s hand to cling to. Aineytta stood and embraced her son. He responded in kind. His father stood, too, his instincts telling him that there was news that would chill the warm afternoon air.

“Oriana,” Kristoph said, turning from his parents to his sister. “I am sorry.”

“Sorry for what?” Marion asked him. Oriana couldn’t speak. She couldn’t even raise her eyes to look at her brother. “What has happened that was worse than it was before?”

“Much,” Kristoph answered. “Much that is worse.”

Oriana shuddered. Nobody could guess how many worst case scenarios flashed through her mind as she met her brother’s gaze.

“Segev? He… is dead?”

“No. Though it would be much easier if it were so. He has escaped from the Castellan’s custody and absconded from Gallifrey.”

Oriana looked at her brother in surprise.

“My husband did all of that? Really? How? He isn’t that clever.”

Before this she would have fiercely defended him, hiding his shortcomings from her family, friends, any criticism that reflected on her as his wife.

But he had let her down so badly this time that she couldn’t do it anymore.

“He may have had help with that,” Kristoph admitted. “Certainly, SOMEBODY at the Transduction Barrier Control must have allowed him to leave the planet. Pól Braxietel is looking into that. But… Oriana… before he escaped, he had already made a confession. He gave Pól clear, full details of his role in the Jex smuggling ring. He also named the others involved, including his own brother. He told the Castellan everything.”

“Was he tortured?” Marion asked, well aware that Pól Braxietel, a charming, refined man whom she enjoyed having as a dinner guest, had a day job presiding over what could be described as a medieval torture chamber except that most of the diabolical instruments of pain were electronic.

Oriana’s eyes asked the same question. Kristoph shook his head emphatically.

“I watched the interrogation. He was not physically harmed. They didn’t even use the mind probe. The threat of being sent to Shada was enough to break him. He ‘spilled the beans’ after that.”

Oriana didn’t know what ‘spilled the beans’ meant, but she understood one thing.

“In addition to being a criminal, it seems my husband is a coward.”

“Shada is a terrible place,” Kristoph told her. “I have seen it, in my capacity as a Magister, and it always unnerves me.”

“He has not seen it. He knows only the lurid gossip. He is a coward. Why didn’t I see that before now? I never asked him to be a soldier like you… but at least to be a man.”

“Oriana, my dear…” Her father came to her side and took her hands. “I’m afraid you don’t yet realise the worst of it… for you.”

“What is worse than having my husband revealed as a criminal and a coward?”

Her father looked at Kristoph and nodded sadly.

“He confessed. The confession was signed. In signing the confession he signed away everything he owns. Our law dictates that any personal property linked to the proceeds of crime is confiscated by the State. All of his liquid assets were immediately sequestered, including any offworld accounts. But it is clear from the documents seized in his study that he used money from his activities to pay off three mortgages held against the house.”

“Three mortgages?” Aineytta queried with a disgusted tone. They had all known that Segev was a bad businessman and a gambler, but just how bad he was with personal money was a shock to everyone.

“The point is that the house was paid for with the proceeds of crime,” Aineytta said with a sorrowful tone. “Therefore… it is also confiscated. Oriana, my dear, he has left you homeless and destitute.”

“But it isn’t her fault,” Marion protested. She was still getting her head around three mortgages on one house, but the injustice of it all jarred most with her. “How can she be punished that way?”

“It is the law,” the senior Lord de Lœngbǽrrow admitted. “It must be applied even when the innocent are affected. We can ask no favours just because the Castellan is a family friend.”

“No, not favours. But, Oriana, if you put your case to him, some of the assets may be returned to you,” Kristoph said. “The house, its contents. There have been some precedents where a wife has made a claim against the seizure.”

He didn’t say what the precedents were. Most of them concerned the widows and children of executed men. Oriana’s pride was shattered enough without that.

“If by put my case… you mean beg….”

“Not beg, no. Just make a statement. Tell him that you need your home….”

“That looks an awful lot like begging,” Marion said. “And to somebody who… as your father pointed out… is a family friend. She can’t do that. You must see that, Kristoph. Nobody can stand that much humiliation.”

“Yes, I do. I understand. But, let me at least make arrangements for the staff to be paid out of Segev’s assets. They certainly can’t be punished for his foolishness.”

“Please, do that,” Oriana said. “But I don’t want the house. I could not live in it, now. Besides, I have renounced the House of Lessage. I hardly have the right.”

Kristoph was surprised. His mother explained what had occurred before he arrived, including the formal act of forgiveness and the news that his sister was bearing a child that would, with his permission, be a De Lœngbǽrrow, not a Lessage.

“That permission is granted. But this news makes it even more imperative that you keep the house. You must have somewhere….”

“No,” she insisted. “I don’t think I could even bear to look at it. I went there as a bride, happy. I loved that the house was in the Capitol, in the heart of the social scene, not buried in the countryside. But now… he destroyed everything and then ran away. I’m nobody’s wife. I have no home there.”

“You have a home right here, daughter,” Aineytta promised. “The proper place for you at this time, where I can take care of you.”

Marion opened her mouth to say something, but Kristoph looked at her sharply. She stopped, wondering what her faux pas might have been.

“No,” Oriana said to her. She, too, seemed to have seen what was in her mind. “A husbandless woman living with her parents is acceptable. But with her brother… that is too much like charity. I cannot.”

“It is the house you were born in, my dear,” Aineytta reminded her.

“No,” Kristoph intervened. “Staying here is the best possible idea, after all. What pregnant lady wouldn’t want our mama available at all times to look after her. Let us send your driver to collect your personal maid and the clothes and hairbrushes and other female fripperies that you need. Stay here and enjoy what is left of the sunshine and fresh air of our country estate instead of the artificial air of the Capitol.”

“I can’t show my face amongst any Capitol society, anyway,” Oriana admitted. “I may as well hide myself here. But… ‘female fripperies?’ Kristoph, my brother, you have been married long enough to put a name to those things by now.”

“Criticism duly noted,” Kristoph said to his sister with a smile he had rarely had for her in recent years. “Let me go and arrange those matters. As much as it is possible to do so, please try not to worry.”

He left his sister with her family. She sighed deeply and looked around at the pleasant garden of the Dower House.

“It is true,” she said after a long silence. “What you’re all thinking. I married Segev for his fine town house as much as for love. I hated being a country dweller. Whenever we went to the capitol, to balls, theatre, I always felt that my clothes weren’t fashionable enough for the city and I didn’t fit in with the city crowd.”

“That’s nonsense,” Aineytta told her. “Your gowns were made by the same couturiers as every other woman of our status.”

“Besides,” her father added. “Did it never occur to you that those of us who live on country estates are the OLD aristocracy and the Newbloods in the city merely… what is that word you used, once, Marion? I think it came from one of your Earth books.”

“Arriviste,” Marion answered. “Though I was not referring to anyone on Gallifrey. It was somebody who was rude to Kristoph when we were in nineteenth century Nice. He dared to call us that, in a derogatory way, and Kristoph put him firmly in his place. The Newbloods ARE the Arrivistes of Gallifrey. But I would never use that term for any of my good friends like the Lundar or Dvoratre families who are Newblood.”

“Feel free to use it for the Lessages,” Oriana said bitterly. “Segev has betrayed me as much as he betrayed Gallifrey.”

“I am sorry,” her father told her. “When he came to me with the offer of Alliance I thought it a good match. None of us expected him to gamble away the fortune his father and grandfather had made. None of us expected this disgraceful development. If I had refused him….”

“I was in love with him… or at least with his house, with the idea of being part of the city set, and would probably have married him without your consent, papa,” Oriana admitted. “Then my humiliation and my plea for forgiveness would have been so much the worse.”

 She sat back and sighed. She looked at Marion with an ironic half-smile.

“Are the marriages on your world as complicated?” she asked.

“Some of them are much worse,” Marion answered. “How about a Prince who couldn’t be king because the woman he loved had been divorced from another man… Or another Prince many years later, who couldn’t marry the woman he really loved so both of them married elsewhere to please their families, and then, much later, when they were both divorced, they finally got to be together. In the higher ranks of Earth aristocracy, they have more complicated rules than any you have here. And even among ordinary people… there are problems people make for themselves. I used to know two brothers back in Liverpool who haven’t spoken for twenty years because they were lifelong blues and one married a woman whose family were reds.”

Her in-laws all looked at her curiously.

“Blues… reds?” Aineytta asked. “Do you mean like Prydonians and Arcalians with their colours?”

“It’s even sillier than that when I think of it sitting here,” Marion answered. “But to some people it is far more important than life.”

“Well,” Oriana responded. “Then these reds and blues must be more important than the Lessage family. I don’t intend to let them cause me any more unhappiness. I am Oriana de Lœngbǽrrow again from now on... and though it is humiliating to be kept at my father’s discretion and have no home or fortune of my own, and though I shall not be able to show my face in society again….”

“Oh, don’t worry about that,” Aineytta told her. “Sooner or later Minniette Oakdăĕηĕ’s fool of a husband will do something to give the gossips new meat and they’ll forget this. You’ve been a part of that circle long enough to know how it works.”

Oriana had. She had shared the cruellest gossip about others. That was why it was so shaming now. She looked at Marion and then looked away quickly, perhaps remembering that she had so often gossiped with Lady Oakdăĕηĕ and her clique.

Now she felt the sting herself.

“Water under the bridge,” Marion whispered to her. It was another expression Oriana didn’t fully understand, but she felt that she was being forgiven.

Kristoph returned to the garden and told Oriana that he had sent Marion’s driver as well as her own to help bring as much of her personal effects as she needed.

“We’ll go home after dinner by my TARDIS,” he said. “By then, perhaps the planet will have stopped spinning out of control under your feet, sister. In the days to come, there will be time to decide your long-term plans. But for now, I’ve asked mama’s cook to do tomato soup for the entrée. Apparently, it is irresistible to pregnant ladies. Think no further than that.”

“Tomato soup is excellent,” Marion confirmed.