

This is the story the people of The Empire tell.

*“It is not every day that a Crown Prince comes of marrying age, nor is it every day that a king is widowed, nor is it common for a ruler to set aside a barren wife. Rarer still, then, a year in which not one but four monarchs would find themselves in need of a wife. For it to happen when a beautiful young maid, a princess whose father had no male heir and whose health was tottering, herself came to wedding age? Ah, that’s a contrivance to shame the laziest of storytellers, but it happened. It happened in the Center Kingdom and the four eligible kings just so happened to rule the four nations it touched upon.*

*“Some would (in hindsight) see this unlikely conjunction of events as evidence of divine will, and not particularly subtle will at that. Still others say the world is wide and strange, and forever is a long time. What prodigies, coincidences and odd happenstances might emerge in the fullness of ages? Still others, of a more cynical mind, mutter that the will at work was more mundane than divine, and not particularly kind. Now, so many years later, who can say that it was sterility alone, and not greed for land, that led the King of the Sunless Plains to set aside his wife and pitch woo to Serenity, Center Princess? Who can say that some devious manipulator — perhaps the king himself! — did not engineer the mysterious circumstances behind the death of the Deerwood King’s wife? Who can unravel the exact choices that led to the unseating of a happily married Pahar king and his replacement by an unwed nephew? Indeed, only the Prince of the Western Marches is above suspicion and reproach, by virtue of having been born only one year before Serenity herself.*

*“No, it meets not to speculate on ages-gone cabals. Rather, let us turn to the matters of historical fact, which is that all four of these monarchs made proposal to the princess. The Master of the Sunless Plains wrote her fulsome verses, the ruler of the Pahar sent sumptuous gifts, the Prince of the Marches offered to meet any of his rivals in single combat, while the King of Deerhome went further and threatened to field his army and conquer any nation that defied his suit.*

*“War across five nations seemed immanent when Serenity invited the four swains to her father’s citadel. There they were feted and celebrated for a*

*week and a day, as the fair Princess gave her attentions first to one, then to another. By night she showed the Prince of the Marches the grace of her dancing, and by day her skill with hawks to the Deerwood King. She traded quips with the Sunless Master and debated philosophy in his own language with the exotic Pahar. By the end of but one day, each man was smitten by the lady herself, and not merely the thought of the lands her father possessed. A week beyond that and they were close to crazed.*


*“In that state of near madness, she invited them to a private dinner upon her terrace, overlooking the fairer side of her nation, and when they had all had a bite and a sip she made her proposal. ‘Gentle kings,’ she said, ‘The pain of choosing among you is simply too great to bear. Even the loveless and lonesome can count themselves lucky beside me, for while they have no one and therefore no one to lose, any way I choose returns a threefold loss! To scorn any one of you, let alone three . . . nay, it is too brutal, too bleak! Better that I should take holy vows, offer up my chastity to the gods, and take solace from what could have been. Better still, perhaps, to die and thereby escape the riddle I cannot solve!’*

*“With that she moved towards the terrace edge, though not so quickly that all four suitors could not interpose (and it must be said that the Deerwood King, lamed by a fall from a horse, was not quick on his feet). ‘Take not from this world its fairest flower!’ cried the Sunless King. ‘Seeing you in another’s arms would be bitter,’ said the Pahar King, ‘But not so cruel as the guilt of being any part of your death.’ ‘Is there not some way?’ asked the Western Prince plaintively. Only Deerwood was silent.*

*“The Princess lowered her eyes and said, ‘Well . . . I know that in Deerwood there is a custom of greater marriages, in which one man holds several wives. It would fill my heart to bursting if I could somehow marry all four of you, but I hesitate to even suggest such a greed of happiness . . .’”*

*“The Prince of the Marches reared up as if stung. ‘Share a bride?’ he said. ‘How could such a thing be countenanced?’ ‘Is it not an offense before heaven?’ said the King of Pahar. ‘Ah no,’ said the Sunless King. ‘At least, our gods, whom we share with the people of Center, have been known to stretch the boundaries of wedlock. Indeed, I myself have had sad occasion to step out from a fruitless bond, and in this our priests find no sin.’*





*“‘But what of the succession?’ asked Deerwood. ‘I cannot put my lands under the rule of any of these men, when my day comes to leave this life.’ ‘Surely a child and heir cannot but arise before that sad event,’ said the Princess. ‘If our offspring be too young, some sort of regency can be arranged, as has happened from time to time in all nations. Of course, my firstborn would, then, be heir to all five kingdoms.’*

*“At those words, the four kings fell silent. Each looked at the other, shrewdly contemplating Pahar’s trade, Deerhome’s fields, the great armies of the Marches and the riches hidden in the Sunless Lands. All this, they surely thought, plus the history and grandeur of the Center Kingdom, could fall to my child. My heir could rule a land greater by four times than what I now hold, a land that spans two continents...*

*“The four men thought, and then the Pahar spoke. If he did not say the thought that surely weighed upon all of them — ‘What if another man’s son takes my land?’ — he came close enough, asking ‘Yet how are we to know who has the honor of fathering this most fortunate of children?’*

*“The Princess cast her eyes modestly downward and said, ‘In truth, I had not given much thought to those matters, being unwed and innocent of matters of sensuality. I suppose that each would take an equal chance with the others, though, of course, my favors might fall more heavily to the one who was...’ She turned a delicate crimson and at that moment history chose its new course. What king, indeed, what man, could step away at that? What ruler would not stake his own kingdom on his bedroom prowess, that his child might inherit five?*

*“Thus it was that Princess Serenity married four kings, outliving them all and producing a succession of no less than seven girls, while the five nations struggled to govern in concert. By the burial of her last husband and her own crowning as Empress, she had married three more men and produced her only son, but by then it was clear that her eldest daughter would one day claim her throne. So it has been since her time, with the Empress taking those husbands who please her and giving an ever-greater kingdom to her daughters. So may it always be! All honor to the Empress!”*