

Miguel Hogan Triskan the Seventh, King of Triona, gently caressed the finely tooled and gilded leather of the book on his desk. The contents of the multi-hued paper package had been delivered two weeks ago, though its carefully restored condition was a pleasant surprise; he knew that the book *Lox The Fox's Hexisle Quests* had once belonged to his family, and vaguely remembered it as having been quite well-worn as a child.

His secretary was still trying to track down when and where it slipped out of the royal library and into the hands of an unknown female. The woman had sold it to a reputable bookseller here in the capital of Triskelle, who had been concerned enough at the hasty nature of the sale to contact him through his secretary about whether or not it should be returned. Miguel had decided that it should be, since he certainly hadn't remembered ordering its removal from the nursery's library. There was no telling how long that quest would take though, as it was probable the book had been stolen before being sold, and thus would have no record of when it vanished or who had taken it.

That bookseller, a woman named Tastra Kanithsdottir, had discovered a dedication inside the book from his great-grandfather to his grandfather, and had contacted his secretary to see if it had been passed along deliberately for resale or not. Miguel didn't know, himself. He hadn't read this book since he was about as young as his youngest son, Masten. Mast was only thirteen, but mad for the Trionan Guard. When he read fairy tales, it was mostly the ones with the dashing soldier-heroes.

His middle son Teron was somewhat bookish, but the youth's tastes ran more toward reading treatises from scientists and engineers, which meant the nineteen year old was taking his classes at the Academy of Sciences seriously. Miguel's eldest, Estevan, was more interested in military matters at the moment. A good thing, too, since the twenty-three year old was currently entrolled in the Trionan Royal Militia as a junior officer, a requirement for all Trionan kings-to-be.

Even Teron and Masten would serve some time in the Militia, eventually, since it was a requirement for all citizens to have militia training, male and female alike.. Not that Triona was a shogunate, a land ruled by its military caste; it was a proper monarchy, with a council selected by each segment of the populace who advised the king, but the king made the final decisions wherever needed.

No, Trona as a kingdom was merely being practical about its neighbors and its position as a geographical crossroads of sorts. Their neighbor to the south and east, Trigull, *was* a shogunate, though for the moment, there was peace. Thanks to his great-grandfather's decision to focus on encouraging and developing the sciences, Triona had stayed a few steps ahead of Trigull's military capabilities. War was always a possibility, but with wisdom and care, diplomacy and a constant show of vigilance and strength, it would remain an avoidable trouble.

*Which brings up this dedication, and the motives of this Mistress Kanithsdottir, to pointedly remind me of it. More than that...the name sounds familiar.* Once upon a time, when *he* had served in the Trionan Militia, there had been a summer where he had enjoyed the company of a smart, lovely young woman named Tastra. Her last name escaped him, but he thought it might be Kanithsdottir. If so...well, he hadn't been able to pursue his attraction to her back then, but it would be nice to rekindle an old friendship, if nothing else. He had gone by the name of Migo Hosson back then, a precaution so that

enemy spies hopefully wouldn't know a prince served among the ranks of the junior officers, just as his own son served now under the alias Stevan Hosson.

Of course, it was more likely that she wasn't the young Militia maiden he remembered. Both of them were entering the latter years of middle age. No doubt someone as charming and engaging as her had found a husband, raised children. Kanith was somewhat common for a woman's name, as was Tastra. So the King of Triona did not hold to the idea that this honest bookseller was the same kind, funny young lady he had known in prior days.

There was one thing, though; she had included a strip of paper with a message of the sort one often saw at Year's End, the kind one tossed into a brazier to burn so that its message would be dispersed into the world's aether. An old custom to be sure, and a bit silly in some ways in the face of modern thinking, but he knew it could be argued that the paper represented Earth, the ink Water, the fire...well, Fire obviously, and the smoke from its burning filled in the final category of Air.

These four things were tangible, the four Elements of the world; between them sat the oft-praised or –pleaded values of Light and Life, World and Weather. A man or woman with the right combination of them could augment such things, even manipulate them. Miguel himself was strong in Earth and Fire, with a touch of Air. He liked to think his affinity for Earth kept him solidly on the path as the protector, defender, and leader of his people. His Fire affinities kept his enthusiasm and passion for good governance strong...though admittedly some of it was just plain tedious.

Air...well, that was for thinking, for it was said even those blind from birth rolled their eyes up toward the Vull-rippled sky whenever they thought hard. Water, a thon-affinity which he lacked, was supposedly for the ability to blend and compromise. Strangely enough, Miguel had never felt limited in his ability to cooperate with others, despite his lack of the thon for it...which led him back to the belief that such customs as burning thoughts and wishes written on scraps of paper at Year's End were silly. Except in some ways they weren't. Not when penned with such delicate eloquence.

*“Light and Life, help us each to forget our troubles and ease our pains, that we may be free to rejoice in the many wonderful good things we already have, rather than pine for those things we cannot attain, nor regain.*

*‘World and Weather, may we always remember to return to the ideals of our childhoods, or at least strive for them more often. Remind us that each time we do try to make the world a better place, we often do succeed, even if it is only in some small but tangible way, for that is the sort of world each of us secretly longs to call home.’*

By rights, this paper should have been burned several weeks ago. Yet its author had considered her wishes important enough to delay, so that they might have a chance to be read by her king's eyes. Miguel wanted to speak with this bookshop owner, this restorer of lost childhood treasures. Alas, the schedule of a king was quickly filled and tightly maintained; today was the first day he'd had enough time free for an hour or two of conversation with her. *Morals and values...very much like the Miss Tastra I knew. I think this woman was trying to be helpful, whoever she turns out to be.*

All he had to do was wait for her to arrive in the coach he had ordered sent to her shop. The sky was sleeting, a mixture of rain and slushy snowflakes, enough perhaps to cause a delay. Still, the royal coach would be able to get there and back, given the sturdy horses and skillful coachmen serving the palace.

A quiet knock on the door of his public study preceded the equally quiet entry of a footman. Though it was now technically spring, he wore his winter uniform of felted wool with velvet trim. The study,

ornately appointed and appropriate for guests, was kept warm by a fire crackling cheerfully in the soapstone hearth. Not so the corridors between rooms, though some did have soapstone-crafted hearths backing onto them, allowing heat to radiate at certain points during the cold months of late autumn through early spring.

As a result, within the first two years of her residence, Miguel's late wife had ordered new uniforms for the servants and guards standing duty within the palace. Now everyone had three sets, heavy wool for winter, a mix of wool and linens for autumn and spring, and light but finespun linens for the heat of summer. Perhaps it was a bit of an extravagance, but the men and women who cleaned, guarded, fetched, and carried here in the sprawling stone edifice that served as his home appreciated that the extravagance was spent on them, and not on some frippery or fashion reserved solely for nobles and kings. Admittedly, Miguel himself wore the finest velvet, but then it was winter, and velvet was warm.

"Your Majesty, are you receiving visitors at this time?" the footman asked. Every inch of the young man projected an air of competence and deference. Miguel's late wife Mastella would not have tolerated anything less, of course.

Though she had been gone for the last seven years, the servants had kept up the discipline she had insisted they display. It hadn't been a love-match--few political alliances were--but Miguel had come to admire her. So had the servants, for while she had strict notions of what was right and proper, Queen Mastella had never hesitated to give praise where it was due, and had given it openly. Miguel had continued the tradition; foreign dignitaries all remarked on how well-run his palace was, and how efficient the staff.

The only visitor he was scheduled to receive was Mistress Kanithsdottir. He rose to his feet and nodded at the footman, who disappeared into the corridor for a few moments. Opening the door wide, the man returned, stepping in and to one side as he announced the visitor.

"Presenting Mistress Tastra Kanithsdottir, bookmaker, to His Royal Majesty, King Miguel Hogan Triskan the Seventh, rightful ruler of Triona."

The bundle of gray woollens that entered came a *tap tap tap* from a walking stick, and two blue-clad maidservants in her wake. They were trying their best to unobtrusively yet efficiently remove the veil-draped hat and heavy winter cloak, while she was trying to do the same. For a moment, veil and cloak and three sets of hands tangled, then with an audible sigh of impatience, the woman held herself still, one hand gripping her walking cane while the maids handled the weather-dampened layers. There had been enough heat in the halls of the palace to melt whatever snow had landed on her during the brief walk from coach to entrance, but he could still see beads of moisture on the fine linen of the veil and the felt of the cape.

For a moment, the face that was revealed shocked him with the signs of age. Her brown hair was liberally streaked with gray, and her face seamed between her brows, at the corners of her eyes, and along either side of her mouth with burgeoning wrinkles. Her hair had been swept up in a loose matron's bun, rather than confined into a maiden's braid. But the longer he stared, the more Miguel was convinced he knew this regal-looking woman. Then she dipped into a graceful curtsy, head level but eyes lowered demurely. Her movements were a little slower with age, but familiar; she had never bowed her head low to anyone.

Her old nickname escaped from his lips without conscious thought. "...Tatty?"

Caught mid-curtsy, she looked up at him. Hesitating, she straightened, cleared her throat, and asked, "I beg your pardon, Your Majesty, but...did you say something?"

Miguel moved out from around his desk. One of the maidservants took the cloak and hat off to be dried and await being needed again. The other joined the footman on either side of the door, which the footman shut to preserve the heat in the room. They would both stay, partly to guard their king, partly in case their services were needed, and partly to serve as chaperone, a visible reassurance to the visiting matron that this king wouldn't try to take advantage, unlike the rumors of what the leaders of other lands sometimes did.

It wasn't proper protocol, but he walked right up to her, picked up her free hand and clasped her chilled flesh between the warmth of his palms. "You *are* Tatty, are you not? Tastra Kanithsdottir, nicknamed Tatty? You served in General Meshansson's headquarters for the North Northeast Sector a good...thirty years ago?"

Flustered, her cheeks turning pink, she cleared her throat. "Why yes, I did. I was called that when I was young...but...how did you...?"

Her voice trailed off as he smiled at her. Blinking her hazel eyes, she peered at him, looking past the lines of worry and care creasing his own brow, the hair that had once been a darker shade of brown than her own but which was now more than half gray. She didn't *say* it out loud, though her mouth did shape the name *Migo* for a moment. Then she shook her head, clearly dismissing it as a fallacy.

Miguel nodded. "Yes," he murmured, rubbing her hand a little to chafe warmth into her cold fingers. "I *am* Migo Hosson. Or I was. It's never wise to openly announce exactly which junior officer is the Crown Prince, after all."

Her face flushed, then paled. Afraid she might faint, Miguel shifted his arm around her back. The maid hurried forward to support the bookmaker on her other side as well.

This close, he could smell the scents of ink, paper, and a hint of flowery soap rising from her skin. Her gown was a modestly cut brown thing sprigged with a printed pattern of black flowers, with semi-fashionable pleats and ruffles. It looked good on her, for all it was plebian compared to his dark green coat and trousers. He couldn't help but remember the plain, lighter brown clothes everyone had worn in the Militia; not even he had escaped the trappings of regulation attire.

But this was no Militia headquarters. This was the sumptuous public study of his ancestral home. While Tastra was settled in one of the brocade-covered chairs by the hearthfire, the footman hurried to the sideboard to pour a brandy. Miguel seated himself on the edge of a chair across from her, unable to stop the wry smile from curling up one corner of his mouth.

"My identity must come as a bit of a shock, I am sure," he murmured. The footman brought over two goblets. One went to Miguel, the other passed to the maidservant. "But once we parted that last time, I never thought I'd have a reason or a chance to see you again. I am delighted to see you now, after all these years."

Still looking a bit dazed, Tastra accepted the cut crystal goblet handed to her by the maidservant. The younger woman dipped a curtsy as she did so, murmuring, "Tea service will be brought shortly, Majesty, milady, but for now, perhaps this will steady milady's nerves."

Tastra blinked a few times, then sipped at the brandy. Her breath sucked in, sighed out, and she sipped again. Some of the color came back to her cheeks. Swallowing, she cleared her throat. "World and Weather... This is... This is quite a surprise. You're Migo..." Another sip, and she lifted her brows a little. "And you have very good brandy, too."

Miguel chuckled. He had missed those little asides. “Well, it does pay to be the king.” He let her sip a little more of the brandy, searching for something to say. As king, Miguel was accustomed to making speeches. He could converse with bureaucrats, diplomats, servants and trade envoys. But with Tatty, he had a thousand questions and no idea of where to begin. Except, perhaps, with an apology of sorts. “So...now that you know, I trust that explains why I couldn’t... Why *we* couldn’t, ah...”

“Oh, yes,” Tastra quickly agreed, nodding. “Arranged marriage in the waiting, you a head of state, and little me just a clerk in the Militia printing office. I knew you were a nobleman’s son from your fine manners and self-confidence, and figured there were reasons why it, ah, was never pursued past a friendship and a light flirtation.”

“You were never just a clerk,” Miguel demured gallantly.

“Well, I tried to be a good clerk, which is more than just a clerk, I suppose. Oh, my belated condolences on the passing of Queen Mastella. Everyone knew the king’s marriage was a political arrangement, but— heh, that was you, all this time?” Bhe chuckled slightly, overcoming her shock with a touch of bemused humor, “Well, it seemed to the populace as if the two of you got along well enough over the years.”

“We did. I came to love her in a way, as well as be a dutiful husband and liege, though it was never a grand passion...such as the kind I once held in my youth for a certain clerical genius,” he found himself admitting with a candidness that caused the footman, just within Miguel’s line of sight, to widen his eyes for a moment in shock. Kings did not normally admit their feelings out loud. He had been free to be so outrageous only in snatches as a young officer in the Militia. Seeing Tatty again, being with her, had bought back that imp of mischief he had almost forgotten about.

The footman wasn’t the only one shocked by His Majesty’s candor. Tastra choked on the next sip of her brandy, and Miguel had to relieve her of her glass so that she could spend her energy focusing on coughing to clear her lungs. He set it on a side table and patted her back while the maid escorted in a trolley bearing a tea service.

“I was told you are widowed as well. I hope your late husband was a good and kind man,” he offered once she was breathing normally again.

Tastra nodded. “Yes, he was. We fell in love—not a grand passion, but in love,” she dared to tease back, then sighed. A wistful smile turned up the corners of her mouth. With such outrageous statements, she could very well believe he was indeed the polite yet rascally sly young Migo she had known. She cleared her throat a little more. “It was a good marriage, with two smart sons out of it. One is an accountant for the Triple Triskelle merchant association, and the other is a Logistics engineer for the Militia, moving things up and down the river.”

“And you spend your days as a book mender and paper seller.” Miguel gestured for the maid to serve the tea before it could cool. “Would you like milk or sugar in your tea? Or perhaps lemon, hothouse grown?”

“Milk, please. Those pastries look sweet enough. Thank you,” Tastra added politely to the maidservant.

The other woman smiled and mixed each beverage deftly, a squeeze of lemon and a sprinkle of sugar for the king, a smooth pour milk for his guest. The trio busied themselves with the food as Migo—far too informal to be Miguel—pointed out little sandwiches he thought Tastra might like, and which were his favorite sweets, and the maid loaded little plates for each of them. Tastra in turn playfully spun a

stemless cherry—also hothouse grown—on the tip of her finger; when he attempted it, the fruit fell to the floor, which the maid silently scooped up and disposed of without a word, making both of them laugh.

The pair reminisced about the days where they had gone on picnics as two junior members of the officers' corps and done similar, silly, lighthearted things. They glossed over the pain of separation, for the younger versions of themselves had become good friends before Migo's time in the Militia had ended, forcing him to return silently to his non-military duties while she continued on in her required service for a few more years. By silent conspiracy, the footman by the door and the maid near the tray did not interrupt their laughter-punctuated chatter until the king absolutely had to get ready for dinner.

The footman did so by coughing once, then twice, lifting Miguel's attention from Tastra to the doorway at the unaccustomed noise from an otherwise impeccable display of service...and the fancy clock on the mantle over the fireplace chimed delicately, marking the hour before supper would be served. With a start, Miguel looked between the clock and the footman, then at his Tatty.

"Oh, bother," he muttered under his breath, subsiding. "I do have to go. The ambassador for the Surshan Clans is our royal guest at supper."

"...And I would be a fifth wheel on the wagonbed," Tastra stated plainly, sympathetically. "It is time I should be going anyway."

"I hate to send you away," Miguel agreed, letting the maid take his teacup and saucer. "But I am glad you understand."

She set aside her plate, dusted with crumbs from the last of the pastries, and rose. Perhaps not with the protocol one used in front of a king, but it was Migo who stood and took Tastra's cloak from the footman, to the startlement of the younger man. He allowed the maid to fuss with the veil, then held both of Tatty's hands in his.

"I would have you visit again, if that would be alright," he offered, thinking only of the thousand and ten more questions he wanted to ask her, and the thousand and ten things about himself he wanted to share. This was the first truly lighthearted, open conversation he had been free to enjoy in a very long while, and he wanted a second round. A second, a third, a forty-fifth... "Shall we make arrangements for this time next week as well?"

She blushed, but smiled. "I think my poor customers shall just have to put up with the shop being closed again. But you should check with your secretary to be absolutely sure you have the time free," she added, freeing one hand to pat his in turn. "Mister Poulsson is a dear customer of mine, and I would not have him unduly upset."

The twinkle in her hazel eyes let Miguel know she was teasing him, placing his secretary's scheduling efforts above the wants of a mere king. Chuckling, Miguel—Migo—stepped forward and hugged her, dried cape, veil and all, as he had once hugged the much younger Tatty, a spontaneous gesture of affection. It was brief, and there were far too many layers of fabric between them for any part of it to be improper, but she slipped her arms through the slits in her cape folds and embraced him back.

"Mister Poulsson is an excellent secretary. I am certain he will be able to arrange appropriate time in both our schedules," Miguel murmured, smiling at his dear, long-lost Tatty. She smiled back, curtsied with her eyes lifted to his face this time, her mouth curved in a matching smile...

And then...she was gone.

His valet took her place by entering through the back door of the public study, the one behind his desk, coming in search of the king so that Miguel could change from his afternoon velvets to his formal evening clothes. It wasn't until he passed his desk and saw the neatly rebound book of children's tales still sitting on its carefully polished surface that Miguel realized he had completely forgotten about its existence. Including the original questions he had meant to ask about why she had sent it back to the royal family.

*Ah well, he dismissed, too pleased with their reunion to bother with regret or annoyance. I suppose it's just one more reason to call her back, next week...or perhaps the week after that, should I forget to discuss it again, next time we meet.* With a smile that was a little too smirk-like for a proper kingly expression, Miguel disappeared into his private quarters to prepare for supper.