

Contemplations

A Vulland Story by Jean Johnson

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Year's End was Tastra's favorite day of the year. Some people didn't like it; they preferred the brightly hued celebrations of the Spring Festival that followed it to the somber day of remembrance, thoughtfulness, and planning that were supposed to be observed. But she loved Year's End.

Some of that love came from the build-up of sales right beforehand. Often, it seemed like everyone and their neighbor wanted a new pencil or pen-nib, or a bottle of ink to write out their wishes and regrets. And of course, the paper upon which were written those year-long wishes and regrets.

Tastra's paper was renowned throughout the city of Triskelle for its fine quality and variety of colors and sizes. So were her blank books, scroll sheets, and other tools of the trade. She also made numerous sales in brightly colored packets of paper just waiting to be folded into flowers for the Spring Festival—real flowers were never used, because most kingdoms believed it was a bad omen to damage the first flowers of spring. So she sold a lot of things in the days leading up to Year's End.

Of course, it helped that her thon, more Earth than Water, had turned out to be rather useful at turning plant matter into paper. Most of the Earth-attuned ended up being farmers or miners, coaxing their crops to grow into bountiful harvests or sensing where veins of good stone and ores might be hidden. Her sensitivities dealt best with paper products, and her customers appreciate it.

But the coins clinking into the storage drawer of the fancy, lever-operated, sales counting machine she had finally bought two years ago wasn't her only reason for liking this day. It was the way people shared little pieces of their lives on this day, even to complete strangers. They treated Tastra, shop owner, like a scrap of the same Year's End paper they bought from her, giving her their reminiscences, their confessions, their hopes and sorrows and dreams in little snippets not much longer than a finger and about twice as wide. Only without the whole throwing her in one of the various brazier fires dotting the city streets, of course.

A short, elderly, white-haired woman with a stout ironwood walking cane much like Tastra's thumped up to the counter. Placing her basket on the surface required a grunt of effort, but she smiled once the surface took the weight. "My little Jonas would have been fifty-one today. Keel'd over and died with his face in a bowl of soup, according to his wife. But he loved your purple paper, so I'm writing how much I loved my boy on a strip of purple, today."

"I remember him. He'll be missed," Tastra replied, offering a wistful smile as she counted up the papers and made change for her customer. "May he have plenty of spare sheets to write upon in the afterlife."

"How very kind of you, dearie." One wrinkled hand accepted the two copper coins in change, while the other came up to pat Tastra's hand. "Bright blessings in the new year! Light and Life bring joy to you."

"World and Weather guide your way," Tastra said, smiling again as the woman placed the papers back into her basket and headed for the door.

She didn't exactly remember who Jonas was; over the years, there had been at least a couple dozen middle-aged men who bought purple paper from her shop on a regular basis, as well as hundreds of others

selecting the other hues. But all the elderly mother wanted was for someone to speak kind words about her lost son, words which Tastra could give.

Taking her place was a heavily cloaked, middle-aged man who earned a smile and a direct greeting. “Master Kemper, it is always a pleasure to see you,” Tastra greeted him. The schoolmaster was one of her most regular customers. “Another book today? Or just more Year’s End and Spring Festival papers?”

“No books, no papers—I bought those last week,” he reminded her. “But I do need fresh chalks and these pencils. Some of my students are a bit tight-fingered, and keep breaking the sticks...and some can’t afford to replace them.”

Nodding, she reached for the ball of twine she bought from the chandler’s down the street. He hadn’t brought a basket, but she could tie up the paper packets of chalking sticks and pencils. “The King’s grandfather did a good thing when he made education a priority in Triona, but that doesn’t cure the problem of funding it fully.”

“I do what I can,” Kemper admitted. “Oh—one of them, a young lad of fourteen, Curtil. He has an excellent hand, but is a bit low on funds. I don’t suppose you could use an apprentice bookmaker?”

Tastra thought about that as she finished tying the split-and-glued pencil shafts together, with their charcoal-and-clay leading. “...Is he studious? Does he listen well and pay attention to instructions?”

“A bit better than average for boys his age, though not always one hundred percent attentive,” Master Kemper said. “Still, your shop is warm enough, he should be grateful for its comfort, and I think he’ll like the work well enough.”

“Send him over after the Spring Festival is through, and we’ll see if we can get along. I’ll be busy selling papers for flowers until then,” Tastra told him. She accepted his coins, sorting through the silver and copper discs to see if he would need change, and pushed the levers on her cash-counter. At his curious look, she explained. “I know I got this thing to do my counting for me, but I mostly let it do the counting for my ledger’s sake, not for making change.”

“Light and Life be kind to you,” Kemper praised her.

“World and Weather watch your way,” she replied.

An angry young woman and her sympathetic friend were the next customers, approaching the counter mid-conversation. “—And I’m going to *keep* writing these nasty notes and burn them all year! Maybe *then* World and Weather will catch up with him and give him his awfulness right back in his face. Preferably via lightning! I swear to the skies, if I had even an *ounce* of Air in me...!”

Both of them had purchases to make. The angry girl had a lot of expensive red paper, but a few sheets in a softer pink, and a pair of brass nibs she wanted to purchase. The sympathetic girl had shades of blue and green, and a deep indigo ink from Tastra’s most popular stock. The paper wasn’t nearly as fine as Angry Girl’s, but her smile was sweet.

“Could you please wrap mine?” she asked, glancing at the glass windowpanes Tastra cleaned every day, to make sure her printed books could be easily read by prospective customers. “It looks like it’s going to rain, and I don’t have a lid on my basket.”

Nodding, Tastra reached for the large roll of mottled, mostly brown waxed paper she kept on hand for such things. Next to her specialty papers, it was her biggest selling item, but only to other merchants in the city. She made it cheaply from re-pulped scraps of paper, some leftovers from her own stock, some of it gathered from other businesses in return for a discount on the price for the rolls.

The chandler's down the street gave her the wax she needed in exchange for free rolls of the finished stuff, and the mix of hues made it popular for packages. It was the care and pleated folds that she used when wrapping things that lured in customers from other shops just to have her wrap their purchases. She charged two coppers an arm-length when they did that, since they weren't buying her goods, but they didn't seem to mind. When it was her own things, however, she gave the paper for free.

Angry Girl huffed as she waited. "...I think I'll write a few lines about that whore he's courting now."

"Jiselle!" Sympathetic Girl gasped. She quickly looked at Tastra, who merely gave her a slight shrug. Embarrassed, the young woman hissed at her friend, "You're not supposed to say things like that! Certainly not in public. Wh...Ladies of ill-repute aren't to be discussed by ladies of fine upbringing. They certainly shouldn't be mentioned in a shop as fine as this one."

Angry Jiselle blushed brightly, and mumbled an apology to the shop owner. Tastra nodded in polite acceptance of her contrition, and watched the pair leave.

Tastra kept her wry smile to herself. Prostitution knew no class boundaries. Only education did. She was far more likely to sell paper to whores than either girl realized. Of course, most of them were highly-paid, educated mistresses and gallants, but even the ones who could barely puzzle out the letters of their own names were known to come purchase a slip of paper for Year's End from Tastra's shop. Hopes and dreams, regrets and wishes, those truly knew no boundaries.

For those who wished it, Tastra would politely write down their thoughts for them so they could take the little slips to the brazier fires for symbolic burning. She never spoke about them to others. Sometimes it was a wish for escape from a life of poverty. Sometimes it was a note of thanks for a kind client. Sometimes it was a wish to end an unexpected pregnancy. She heard them all, wrote them down, and then at the end of her own day, wrote a simple line of her own to be fed to her hearth fire in the kitchen upstairs, in the part of the shop where she lived out her widowed life.

This year, she was going to write it on a new, experimental paper. Bright yellow at the edges, faded to creamy white in the center with subtle mottling, dyed during the pulping process so that the faster it dried, the stronger the color remained. She just wasn't sure what color ink she should use for her Year's End wish, yet.

A glance at the clock ticking quietly next to the front door showed it was just about closing time. Mornings were reserved for making papers, grinding pigments for ink, and binding books. Afternoons, she opened the shop to make sales. Evenings were her quiet time, when she made herself a nice supper and relaxed upstairs. Sometimes, she missed the sounds of her two boys, fully grown and now living on their own, chasing each other, laughing, arguing, and making her late husband roll his eyes at their antics. Other times, she was just grateful for the peace and quiet, and the chance to catch up on reading the newest of the books in her stock.

An apprentice would change things. He would still need to attend school in the morning, and she'd have the shop to work in the afternoons. Teaching him would be confined to the evenings. But it might be worthwhile; she wasn't getting any younger, and both of her sons had moved on to other tasks, having been born with more heads for numbers than for words. One was an accountant for one of the major

merchanting houses here in Triskelle. The other had joined the king's service as an engineer, and was studying something to do with figuring out better ways to ship things up and down the Gull River.

Wrapping up the last package of the day, a pair of blank books and several sheets of painstakingly striped paper for an elderly gentleman, Tastra followed her customer to the door. Just as she reached for the sign in the window to turn it around, a heavily cloaked, rain-spotted female pushed her way inside, huffing and grunting under the weight of the two baskets she carried. The woman almost knocked them into a display case holding glass pens imported all the way from Bellaria, before finally getting them onto the counter.

"Can I help you?" Tastra asked, bemused. The woman's pushy manner and hoarse breathing made her wonder if she should reach for her ironwood cane. She didn't need it to walk; she kept it around to kosh would-be robbers on the head. Ironwood was just as tough and formidable as it sounded liked.

"Books...for sale," the hooded woman panted. "Need money... Bit of a hurry."

This was not entirely unusual. Sometimes a person just needed money. Printing presses had made things like leisure reading available to many people over the last couple hundred years, and books which hadn't been read before were always in demand, even if those books were a century old. It did mean paying out money rather than taking it in, but Tastra was sure she could find a buyer for just about any book out there.

Nodding politely, Tastra finished flipping the sign over and moved behind the counter. Relieved, the hooded, cloaked woman began pulling books out of her lidded baskets. It was getting rather dark outside, though. Year's End came right before the spring equinox, and between the time of year and the rainclouds, that meant they now needed to light a lamp to see by.

Pulling up the chimney on the oil lamp next to the cash-counter machine, Tastra touched her finger to the wick, flexed her calves so that her heels drummed subtly back and forth, and concentrated. She didn't have much of an affinity for Fire, but there was just enough lurking within her that she didn't need flint and steel.

Within half a minute, the wick glowed red, then puffed to light. Tastra quickly pulled her finger back before it could get burnt. Twisting the lever for the wick, she gave it plenty of material for a good, strong flame, then lowered the glass chimney and looked at the stacks of books being set on the counter.

They were all rather old, some with rather dry-sounding titles and aged leather covers. Some were very well-worn, but the worst of them excited her. "*Lox The Fox's Hexisle Quests?*" she asked with careful casualness, glancing up at the woman. The light shone on a rounded chin and full lips, the lower of which was being bitten by a pair of white front teeth. "Do you know how long it's been since I last saw a copy of this?"

"Is it...is it worth much?" the woman asked.

"Oh...a reasonable bit. The cover's very badly cracked and worn, I'm afraid," Tastra stated, carefully sighting down the spine, then opening it to a random page. "The paper's in good shape, a bit aged...a couple torn pages... It's not in the best of shape, but not the absolute worst I've seen. I could give you...four silver for it."

"Four silver?" she asked. "But...but it's a popular children's book!"

“One which was popular eighty years ago, and which will have to be rebound at my own expense before I can resell it. Let’s have a look at the other books, shall we?” Tastra stated, continuing briskly. “You did say you were in a hurry, right?”

The cloaked customer subsided, waiting patiently as Tastra checked over the books. The total she offered wasn’t a bad price. The woman haggled only a little bit, driving it up a few silvers. Tastra let her, finally settling on five gold and eighteen silver, before letting the woman out of her shop. Closing and locking the door behind her, Tastra slid the shutters into place over the glazed windows and returned to the pool of light cast by her lamp.

Some of the books, she’d be lucky to sell for the price she had just paid the cloaked woman. That one book, however. If it really was in as salvageable a condition as it seemed, she should be able to repair the torn pages, restitched the two loose quires at the front so that the nested sheets wouldn’t pull free when read, and give it a brand new leather cover. Gently turning over the pages as she checked the bindings, she thought of the dozen gold she could easily get from one of handful of clients who collected tomes like this.

A beautifully penned dedication near the very front, just after the title page but before the index listing all the stories, made her stop. She had missed it earlier because the beautifully thin pages were almost stuck together from age, and a hint of something sticky along one edge. Possibly jam from the thumb of some young reader too eager to wait until his hands were clean before reading. It wasn’t the fact that the book had a handwritten dedication that arrested her thoughts though. It was *who* the book was dedicated to that made her stop and stare.

‘To My Beloved Son, Estevan Rogen Triskan the Third,

A Prince must know the difference between fantasy and reality, if he is to one day rule wisely as a King. These stories may be made of pure fantasy, and not nearly as vital to study as geography, combat or accounting...but you are right in that they encode the ideals and morals a good king should adhere to in each word and deed. I promise to you I will read these with you, and in doing so, I will remember to adhere more closely to the ideals I, too, held at your tender age.

Your Beloved Father, Miguel Hogan Triskan the Fifth.’

It was King Miguel Hogan Tristan the Seventh who now sat on the throne of Triona. King Miguel the Fifth had last reigned sixty-three years ago. King Estevan had followed him, then King Miguel the Fourth. So this book...this heavily-loved book...technically belonged to the current King’s family.

There would be many collectors who would pay dearly for such a royal treasure in their collections. Enough money that she could *hire* someone to tend the shop, maybe even keep it open all day while she worked on the much more enjoyable tasks of creating new kinds of paper and restoring old books such as this. But...the book belonged to the king. It was *his* legacy she now held in her hands.

It was possible, she supposed, that one of the successive heirs to Miguel the Fifth had ordered such things removed from the royal library. And it wasn’t uncommon for such things to be gifted to servants, who would then be free to either treasure them as reading materials or sell them off for a little extra money. But the furtiveness and hurry of the hooded, cloaked woman made Tastra wonder if any of these books had been hers to sell.

Sighing, Tastra began the nightly ritual of unlocking the cash counter, tallying the receipts in her ledger, and carrying the coins upstairs to be put into her stout iron vault for the night. Her last trip downstairs,

she sighed, snagged extra sheets of the experimental yellow paper, and took them upstairs along with the worn book and the lamp.

Adding the oil lamp to the others on her kitchen table, she started a soup from the beans left to soak all day, added a few vegetables, then washed her hands at the basin pump and dried them. Seated at the table, she went through five different drafts before she finally had a pleasant enough letter for the king, stating that she had stumbled across a consignment of several books, including an old book of his grandfather's, and was curious to know if he wished to have it back once it was repaired.

As much as she could use the gold selling it would fetch, she knew—as his great-grandfather had known—that giving His Majesty the chance to have it back was the right thing to do. As an afterthought, she carefully transcribed the dedication to his grandfather onto a fresh sheet of paper, just in case it was the only thing he wished to keep of the time.

Setting aside letter and copy to dry, she composed her Year's End wish. This year, she changed it slightly, making it a plural wish for many, not just a singular wish for herself.

'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.'

She paused, thinking about the late king's words to his son, then added one more line.

'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 in some small but tangible way, for that is the sort of world each of us secretly longs to call home.'

The flames in the hearth stove awaited her words. She had revived them from the embers banked during the day, but Tastra couldn't quite bring herself to toss her words into them. The belief was that, by using Fire to devour the messages, all regrets and sorrows, all prides and joys would be transmuted into the afterlife, where they would hopefully tip the balance of the Great Scales waiting to weigh every person's soul in death, and thus determine their circumstances in their next life, preferably for the better.

She didn't burn them, however. Instead, she took the scrap of paper, trimmed it down with a pair of scissors, and casually tossed it between the two sheets of paper, one the letter to the current king about his grandfather's book, the other her neatly penned copy of its dedication. Folding up the sheets, she tucked them between a larger scrap of waxed paper, folding it protectively around the notes.

A blob of sealing wax, warmed by the subtle thumping of her heels as she focused her thon, sealed the lot together with the waxed side of the paper facing inward. That would allow her to write the king's name on the exterior. It would have to wait five...six days for her to deliver it to the palace. Four days to wait for the Spring Festival, since people would inevitably need more colored papers to fold into flowers. The fifth was reserved for Master Kemper's charity case to be brought by so she could judge if he would indeed make a good apprentice. Six days from now, she could deliver the note to the palace staff...unless...

It was still raining outside, and the fire would need to be banked, but it wasn't a particularly cold night. She could simply take the note up to the palace right now. And then maybe stop off at the tavern three streets up, where they made those tasty sausage-buns. They were a bit spicy, but hot and savory, and it had been a while since she listened to a minstrel perform a song or a story.

Making up her mind, she rose to take care of her meal. The beans and carrots could sit a while longer if she covered the pot. And if she didn't quite get the fire banked right, she could always restart it with a touch of her thon. And she should probably take her good cloak, the one with the fur-edged hood. Getting through the palace gates would take looking respectable enough to meet with the king's secretary, who sent round a servant to purchase some of Tastra's papers and inks every few months. He, at least, would know who she was, and that she wasn't just some random person hoping to bother their sovereign with something silly.

It wasn't silly. It was a point of family history, and a touch of honor on her part, in case those books had indeed been stolen by some unlucky servant. As it was, in her eyes, Miguel the Seventh needed to contemplate his family's history tonight. He wasn't a bad king based on what she had heard and seen, but it wouldn't hurt for him to be reminded of what his grandfather and great-grandfather had once known and contemplated at some point in their lives.

That was the whole point of Year's End, after all.