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# King Mark's Agony

by Matias Travieso-Diaz

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King Mark sat alone late at night in the throne room of Tintagel. His thoughts ran in circles: from his duty as a ruler to his anger as a husband to his disappointed love for his nephew Tristan, almost a son. Too many irreconcilable emotions, adding up to a single unbearable pain.

"I must make a decision soon, but whatever I do will affect others and hurt myself," he concluded. He remained awake, brooding.

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It all started from a dispute between King Mark and King Anguish of Ireland over Cornwall's alleged tribute to Anguish. Mark was a widower without heirs and Anguish had a maiden daughter, Iseult. The two kings had agreed to arrange a marriage between Mark and Iseult as a way to end their hostilities. Mark dispatched Tristan to Ireland to retrieve Iseult and bring her to be wedded. Something had gone wrong during the sea voyage back—some said Tristan and Iseult had mistakenly drunk a love potion and fallen in love with each other—so



that, upon arrival at Tintagel, she had been colder than a dead haddock towards her future husband.

Iseult was as beautiful as she had been described by the ambassadors. Her blonde hair shone so brightly that refined gold would be darker than night compared to it. Her complexion was so luminous and her beauty so intense that a room would be brightened by her presence. She had the soft white hands of a princess, but a resourceful mind and a sharp tongue of silk and iron that could at the same time enthrall and confound her audience.

Mark had not been surprised at first by Iseult's lack of affection, for he was more than twice her age and not well-favoured. His manners were a bit unrefined and Tintagel was more rustic than towns like Kildare and Armagh. He expected that, in time, his bride would become accustomed to her new home and would appreciate the pampering he was ready to lavish on her. However, this did not happen.

Sir Agravain, one of his barons, started making veiled allusions to the increasing familiarity between Iseult and Tristan. He declared, "Dominus, Lady Iseult's signs of affection towards your exalted person seem to be in short supply, perhaps due to her bestowing her favours too generously on her deliverer, Sir Tristan."

Mark had multiple reasons for disregarding the allegations. He did not trust Sir Agravain, a covetous man who was suspected of having designs on the throne. Also, Mark's principal goal in marrying was to father an heir to the throne. This had not happened yet, but he continued to bed Iseult in the hope she would prove fertile and bless Cornwall with a successor to Mark. With the line of succession assured, the ambitions of Sir Agravain and other courtiers would be quenched.

At a personal level, to entertain the notion that Iseult was having an illicit affair with Tristan would put his beloved nephew in deadly peril, for it would be considered an act of treason for which stern punishment would be demanded. Then, he felt the need to protect his own pride—a cuckolded husband was a figure worthy of derision and (setting his own self-esteem aside) his ability to elicit obedience from contumacious subjects such as Sir Agravain would be undermined if they lost respect for him.

The king had fresh on his mind the recent disappearance of Tristan and Iseult from court following an unaccompanied hike into the Wood of Morois. They were gone overnight and when questioned by Mark, Tristan had replied, "Dear Uncle, we strayed from the beaten path in search for wildflowers like bluebells and primroses, for my aunt was desirous of gathering spring blooms to adorn your table. Soon it got dark and we lost our way, so we had to spend the night resting our heads against the trees until the light returned and we could find our way back."

When a courtier remarked that Iseult's valuable samite and silk green dress had mercifully survived the ordeal without a rip, tear or crease, Iseult haughtily responded, "Unlike those in these parts, couturiers in Ireland are skilled in creating attire that is as durable as it is pleasing to the eye."

Everyone was left dissatisfied with the lame explanations proffered by the pair. At the end, Sir Mordred suggested a trial that the king had to allow: after everyone had retired for the night, a page would sprinkle flour on the floorboards between the royal chambers and Tristan's room, and the floors would be inspected at dawn for signs of Iseult's steps as she travelled back and forth between the two rooms.

The trial having proved the lovers' culpability—footprints visible in the white flour— Mark could no longer ignore his relatives' misbehaviour. He banished Tristan to Western Dumnonia, some distance away from Cornwall, and required Iseult to be always accompanied by an attendant who would guard and bear witness to the young queen's fidelity.

These precautions had proved insufficient. Tristan stole back into Cornwall and was spotted entering the keep through an unguarded servants' entrance. He had been intercepted and grievously stricken by a sentinel's lance and lay in his room under guard while recovering from his wounds.

That was how matters stood as Mark agonized over his next steps.

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As the tallow candles in the throne room burned low and the first glimmers of the morning light filtered through the windows, the king reached a final decision: all parties involved in this disaster deserved punishment, for nobody was without blame, and the needed measures should be taken swiftly, for the lack of action could hurt the innocent as much as it rewarded the guilty.

As the sun rose over Tintagel, King Mark proceeded to Tristan's room. His nephew rested on a layer of blankets and quilts over a sleeping pallet, his handsome face nearly as white as one of the sheets that covered his body. The boy was awake and the shadow of sorrow that was always present in his eyes became accentuated by a guilty grimace as he recognized his uncle and overlord.

"Dominus, I am so sorry . . ." he started.

King Mark pressed his lips, seeking to contain his anger. "Nephew, grant me the kindness of sparing me your excuses and lamentations. You have betrayed me time and time again and made a mockery of the love I bestowed on you. I renounce you from my family and will spare your life only out of respect for the memory of my sister. As soon as you are recovered enough to ride, you will be dispatched to Camelot to serve under the watchful eye of my liege, King Arthur. Perhaps, if he is willing, you will become a Knight of the Round Table. I do not care about your future, but know this: you will be slain on sight if you are ever found in Cornwall. You are dead to me and will be mourned as such." Without more, he turned around and left the room, never to lay eyes on his nephew again.

King Mark would not dignify Iseult with a personal visit. She was fully to blame for the tragedy that had occurred. She had betrayed her marriage vows and had brought scandal and scorn to the kingdom that had received her generously and to her husband and sovereign, whose faith she had betrayed. Mark was tempted to put her to death, but she was the daughter of a powerful king and Anguish might react violently to her execution, perhaps leading to the shedding of innocent blood both in Cornwall and Ireland. Instead, she would be confined for life to a nunnery, to atone with piety and good deeds for her sins. Again, any attempt to return from her exile would be punishable by execution.

That left only what Mark would do about himself. He was guilty of having deliberately overlooked a situation that threatened the stability of his kingdom and perhaps tarnished Cornwall's reputation in the eyes of other nations that

might covet the land's riches and may have regarded the kingdom an easy Kea plum to pick. He did not deserve to rule anymore.

He summoned his closest confidant, Sir Mordred, and announced his intent to abdicate and withdraw from the world to a life of piety and quiet contemplation. Sir Mordred was appalled.

"Sire, you are the innocent victim of the failings and betrayals of others. It would be unfair for you to punish yourself for sins you have not committed. And it would be a great disservice to your subjects to relinquish your crown abruptly and perhaps give rise to a bloody war over your succession. I strongly counsel you to desist from such plans. You are still young and vigorous. Search again for a high-born lady, in this land or across the sea, who will share your bed and give us a legitimate heir to the throne. If many years from now you find yourself without an heir, we can convene a council of the barons to choose a successor."

Mark was not totally convinced. He was not without blame. Piety demanded he do something to atone for his failings. "It would be dishonourable for me to attempt to wash my hands of this situation," he countered.

Sir Mordred had yet another suggestion. "Then go on a pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela in Galicia, to pray before the remains of Apostle Saint James the Great. You will gain absolution from your perceived sins and will return to Cornwall renewed and refreshed. You might even meet a beautiful Galician maiden along the way."

King Mark was tempted to dismiss his baron's recommendation as trivial but thought the idea had some merit. If nothing else, the travel would help cleanse his spirit and give him time to investigate future options. "Who would run Cornwall while I am away?"

Sir Mordred's smile was broad. "There are many among your loyal subjects who would faithfully share the burdens of ruling in your absence. Shall we make a list of candidates?"

King Mark shook his head resignedly. "Yes, let us do that. Better run a pilgrimage than retreat to a monastery for life."



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

## Matias Travieso-Diaz

Born in Cuba, Matias Travieso-Diaz migrated to the United States as a young man. He became an engineer and lawyer and practiced for nearly fifty years. After retirement he took up creative writing. Over two hundred and sixty of his short stories have been published or accepted for publication in anthologies, magazines, blogs, audio books and podcasts. One of his four novels, an autobiography entitled “Cuban Transplant,” and four anthologies of his stories have also been published.

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