



MYTHOPOUCH

RETELLING

MALORY: LE MORTE D'ARTHUR

COMPLETE TEXT

Chapters 1-11

A modern educational version for readers aged 15 and up

This is original Mythopouch wording. It is not Malory's fifteenth-century English and not a scholarly edition.

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CHAPTER 1: THE SWORD IN THE STONE

Uther Pendragon would not live out the winter, Merlin saw, unless he first destroyed himself. The king sat in his war tent above the Cornish coast with his fists clenched on the council board, and the name he would not stop saying was Igraine.

"She is another man's wife," said the Archbishop. "Duke Gorlois's wife, who shelters in Tintagel while her husband holds Terrabil against you."

"I know whose wife she is." Uther's face had the grey cast of fever. "I burn with it, Merlin. Make her mine, or make an end of me."

Merlin looked at him a long while. He saw past the tent, past years not yet born: a crown, a shining hall, a field of the slain. All of it hung on this sick man's longing. The price, when he named it, came out gently, because prices should.

"I can bring you to her for one night. You will wear her husband's face. But the child that is gotten that night shall be given to me, to rear as I will. Swear it, and you shall have her."

Uther swore before the words had died. Men always swore quickly, Merlin thought, when the cost lay in the future.

. . .

That night he worked the oldest craft he knew. Uther rode to Tintagel in the Duke's own likeness, and the porter opened the gates to his master without a question. Igraine received her husband gladly, for she did not know that hours before, Duke Gorlois had died at Terrabil with his host broken around him.

She was deceived, and there was no blame in her. Merlin held fast to that. But deceit is a seed like any other. It grows.

When the truth came out, Uther married Igraine within the month and was well content. Merlin said nothing of contentment. He was waiting for the price.

. . .

The child came at winter's end, a boy, red-fisted and squalling. Merlin took him from the postern before dawn, wrapped in a cloth of gold, while Igraine wept on the stair and did not follow. Uther had kept his oath. It was the one clean thing in all of it.

Merlin carried the boy to Sir Ector, a knight of good lands and a better heart, whose hall smelled of bread and woodsmoke and not of court.

"Name him Arthur. Raise him beside your own son Kay. Ask me nothing."

"Is he a king's son?" Ector asked, because he was not a fool.

"He is what Britain needs. That is riddle enough for one lifetime."

. . .

Uther sickened within two years and died without naming an heir, for none knew where his son had gone. The realm came apart like a cloak with the clasp cut, and every great lord measured the empty throne against his own shoulders.

Merlin let them quarrel for a season. Pride must spend itself before it will listen. Then he went to the Archbishop of Canterbury. "Bid every lord and baron to London at the New Year, for God will show us who should be king."

They came, grumbling. When they spilled into the churchyard after mass, there stood a stone where no stone had stood before, four-square like an altar, with a steel anvil upon it, and through the anvil a naked sword was driven into the marble to the hilt.

Letters of gold ran along the blade: WHOSO PULLETH OUT THIS SWORD IS RIGHTWISE KING BORN OF ALL ENGLAND.

The lords fell upon it like dogs on a bone. King Lot of Orkney pulled until the cords stood out in his neck. King Uriens pulled. The sword did not stir a hair's breadth for any of them.

"Then we must wait," the Archbishop said, "until God sends the man." So they held tourneys to pass the waiting, and Merlin waited too, with a patience that was not patience at all, since he knew the hour already.

. . .

It came on New Year's Day, by small means, as great things do. Sir Ector rode to the jousts with his son Kay, new-knighted, and Kay reached the field and found his sword left behind at the lodging.

"Arthur," he said to his foster-brother, a boy of fifteen who carried his shield, "ride back and fetch it."

The lodging stood locked and empty, every soul gone to the lists. Arthur, who hated to fail at any task set him, rode past the churchyard and saw the sword standing unguarded while all London shouted at the games. He thought only that a sword was a sword, and Kay needed one.

He took the hilt and drew it out as easily as a man draws breath.

Kay saw the blade and knew it, and claimed the deed for himself; the habit of command ran in him like a fault in stone. But Ector made him lay his hand upon the holy book, and the lie broke in his mouth. "It was Arthur drew it. He gave it to me."

They set the sword back and bade the boy draw it again before them all, and he did, while lords who had strained red and sweating could not move it a finger's width. Then the commons set up a cry that shook the frost from the rooftrees: We will have Arthur for our king! Small folk trust what they can see.

Ector knelt to his foster-son with tears in his beard and asked one boon, that Kay should be the king's steward all his days. Arthur granted it, weeping too, for he had lost a father in the gaining of a crown.

. . .

So Arthur was crowned. But in the north the kings who had pulled and failed stood with their jaws set, and King Lot said aloud what the rest were thinking: he would never kneel to a nameless boy, sword or no sword.

Merlin watched from the abbey door as the boy took the throne, so young, gripping the sword that had made him, and felt the whole long future lean on that slim hand. Glory and grief together, always together. It must be, he thought, and the thought gave him no comfort at all.

CHAPTER 2: KING OF BRITAIN

Eleven kings rose against him before the year turned. Arthur, crowned less than a season, sat his horse above the valley where their host lay camped, and the banners seemed numberless.

His own lords murmured of terms. King Lot of Orkney led the rebels, and had said plainly what they all believed: no beardless boy pulled from a churchyard would rule men who had worn crowns while Uther lived.

Arthur heard it and felt the fear under the murmuring like frost under grass. He was afraid too. He would not say so, and he would not wait.

"They expect a boy to hesitate," Merlin said. "Strike at dawn."

Arthur struck at dawn and led the charge himself. In the first press of spears he came on Lot's standard-bearer and drove the sword from the stone through shield and shoulder both. The Orkney banner went down; a shout ran through his men, and they went in after it. The rebels fought for their pride, and Arthur's men fought for their king, and pride tires sooner than love.

Then two kings came over the sea to his aid, Ban of Benwick and Bors of Gaul, who had loved Uther and now his son, and their fresh knights broke the rebel flank.

Lot was driven from the field, and over that hard year the rebels yielded or fell. Arthur buried his dead with his own hands, and the ground stayed under his nails for days, for he would not wash it out.

. . .

He paid for his victories the next spring, at a ford where a knight in strange arms barred his way.

They jousting, and the knight put Arthur in the dirt. He rose and fought on foot, and twice the knight's shield was there before his blade, until the sword from the stone met a blow it could not answer and snapped in his hand like rotten wood. He stood holding a hilt and six inches of blade, and understood that he was about to die.

But the strange knight lowered his point, for Merlin had cried out who Arthur was. "I will not slay a king swordless," he said. His name was Pellinore, king of the far islands, come over the sea hunting a beast no hound could run down. He said it as other men mention the weather, and Arthur, wiping the mud from his eyes, laughed, and liked the man before he could help it.

"Your sword served its purpose," Merlin told him. "It named you king. Now you need a sword for what comes after."

He brought Arthur to a lake of black water, so still the cliffs stood doubled in it, and an arm rose out of the deep, clothed in white samite, holding a sword whose brightness hurt the eye. A Lady of the Lake stood upon the shore.

"That sword is Excalibur," she said, "and you shall have it, if you will give me a gift when I ask it."

Arthur promised. He was young, and had not yet learned what it costs to promise unborn things. He rowed out and took the sword, and the hand went down without a sound.

"Which is better," Merlin asked him, "the sword or the scabbard?"

"The sword," Arthur said, for it shone.

"The scabbard is worth ten of the sword. While you wear it, you shall lose no blood, though you be wounded to the death." Arthur buckled it on and did not understand, and that too would be paid for.

. . .

In the days of the wars Lot had sent his wife to spy out the court, Morgawse of Orkney, with her young sons. She was tall and royal, and Arthur, knowing nothing of his own begetting, loved her, and she did not refuse him. It was a short season and a sweet one, for he did not know she was his mother's daughter.

Merlin told him, after she had gone home.

"She is Igraine's child by Gorlois. Your sister, in the half that matters. And she carries your child, who shall be born on May Day, and he shall destroy you and all your works."

Arthur sat very still. Somewhere below the hall a groom was singing to the horses. "Then the child must not be born," he said, and his own voice sounded like another man's.

"It is born already in what is done. You can only meet it."

. . .

In those days the knight Balin came to court, a poor man of the North with a temper like a drawn knife. A damsel came girt with a sword no man could draw unless he were clean of his deeds; the best of the court failed; Balin drew it easily, and would not give it back, though she warned it would slay the man he loved best.

Then the Lady of the Lake rode in to claim the gift Arthur owed her, and asked for Balin's head, for he had slain her brother. Balin, before the whole court, took her head instead, for she had caused his mother's death. Arthur banished him that hour. "You have shamed my hall, and no man does that twice."

Balin rode out to win back his honour, and the tale came back by degrees, in the mouths of wounded men. How he hunted the knight Garlon, who rode invisible and slew unseen, and followed him into Pellam's castle.

There, weaponless and bleeding, Balin saw a spear on the chamber wall, the very spear, the wounded men swore, that had pierced Christ's side. He took it and drove it into the king, and the stroke threw the castle down on them both.

Men called it the Dolorous Stroke ever after. Pellam lived, maimed past all healing, and his land withered with him: fields untilld, wells gone bitter, three counties wasted by one blow. Nor could he rise until the best knight in the world should come and ask the question that heals.

Riding on, Balin met a knight in unknown armour by a castle moat, and they fought and gave each other death. It was his brother Balan, whom he loved best. They knew each other only when the visors came off, and were buried in one tomb.

Arthur heard it all in silence. Kin slaying kin, each a stranger to the other. He thought of a lady gone home to Orkney, and Merlin's words lying in him like a second wound the scabbard could not stanch.

Far in the North, in his ruined castle, King Pellam lay waiting for a healing no one understood. Nearer home there was peace, and peace had its own questions.

CHAPTER 3: THE ROUND TABLE

The realm was at peace, and peace gave Arthur no rest. War had told him what to do; peace only asked what he was for. His lords filled the silence with counsel: the king must marry, and beget heirs, and make an order of knights worthy of the years he had won.

He knew already whom he would wed: Guinevere, daughter of King Leodegrance, seen once and dreamed of since, proud and golden, who looked at a man as if weighing him for a crown.

He told Merlin first, as he told him everything. He expected a blessing. He got a long silence.

“You could choose better,” Merlin said at last, “and worse. I tell you true: Guinevere is not wholesome for you. She is fair and she is a king’s daughter, and where her heart will go, no man may command. And there is one coming, the best knight the world will hold, whom she shall love, and he her.”

“Then I will trust her,” Arthur said, “and him.” His voice came out harder than he meant. The words settled into the dark room of his mind where the May-child already waited.

He sent for her anyway. A man does not escape his fate by knowing it. Leodegrance wept for joy at the match, and sent his daughter to Camelot with a dowry beyond gold: a great round table that Uther had given him long ago, with seats for a hundred and fifty knights.

Arthur was married at Pentecost, when the world is green and no man believes in winter. At the feast he set his knights around the Table, and the Table became the realm’s new heart.

For at a round table there is no head. That was the whole of it. No knight sat above another; the king sat among them as first in oath, not in pride. They swore it there, every man, and swore it again each year after: never to do outrage nor murder, to give mercy when it was asked, to fight for any lady wronged, and to take no battle in a wrongful quarrel, for love or worldly goods.

Arthur watched them swear and felt what he had not felt since the sword came out of the stone: that a thing was being made which would outlast him. If the May-child was coming to destroy him, let it come. This would remain.

One seat stood empty among the rest, and no man would take it. Merlin had letters put upon it in gold: THIS IS THE SIEGE PERILOUS.

“Only one knight shall ever sit there,” Merlin said, “the best in the world, he who shall achieve the Holy Grail. Any other who sits there dies that day.”

“Then it waits for a man not yet born,” Arthur said.

“It waits,” said Merlin, and would say no more.

. . .

In the days after the wedding, Merlin began to go from the court, following a damsel of the Lake whose name was Nimue. She was cool-eyed and courteous, and she learned from Merlin all that he would teach, and he would teach her everything. That was the trouble.

“She is afraid of you,” Arthur told him once. “She thinks you will have your will of her by craft.”

“She is wise to be afraid,” Merlin said. “I am old, and I know I go to my end, and I cannot turn from the road. I made you, Arthur. I cannot make myself.”

Arthur begged him to stay. Merlin only smiled. “You will have your queen and your Table and your wars. You will not have me. Glory and grief together, always together. It must be.”

In the summer the word came, carried by Nimue herself, who told it without tears. Traveling in Cornwall, Merlin had shown her a great stone under a cliff, where a cave ran into the rock. There she worked upon him the very enchantment he had taught her, and the stone closed over him as water closes over what is thrown into it. Alive or asleep or dead, no one knew; some said that on quiet nights travelers heard a voice talking under the ground.

Arthur rode to Cornwall and stood on that stone a whole day. Nothing answered him but the gulls and the tide working at the cliff. He came home heavier than he went.

Then in the autumn his sister Morgan le Fay, schooled in the dark arts and smiling like honey, stole away from the court in the night with Excalibur’s scabbard, which she had begged leave to handle for its beauty. Arthur pursued her through two counties. Cornered at a lake shore, she cast the scabbard into the deepest water rather than yield it, and rode from him laughing. They dragged the lake a week. The water kept what it was given, as that other lake kept his debt.

He told no one what the loss meant. Merlin had said it long ago: the scabbard is worth ten of the sword; while you wear it you shall lose no blood. Now it lay in dark water, and Merlin lay under the stone, and the Round Table sat full and bright in Camelot’s hall, with one seat empty, waiting.

The realm must stand now on the oath alone. Arthur looked down the hall at his knights, at Guinevere beside him, and wondered whether he had built a wall or a door, and what would come through it.

CHAPTER 4: LANCELOT, BEST OF KNIGHTS

Lancelot was eighteen when he left Benwick for Britain, and his father King Ban wept to see him go, and blessed him, and let him. He had been raised, men said, by the Lady of the Lake in her hall under the water, and he carried her gift in him: he had never in his life been afraid. He did not yet know what that would cost him.

He wanted one thing only, and it was not glory. It was to kneel to King Arthur and mean it. His father had crossed the sea for that king, and had told him what the oath of the Round Table was worth. But when Lancelot came to Camelot, he said nothing of whose son he was. He came in plain arms, a stranger, and asked to be tried.

They tried him. A knight of the North, Sir Turquine, had waylaid the roads for a year and held four and threescore knights in his dungeon, men of Arthur's own Table among them. Three good knights had ridden against him and joined the prisoners. Lancelot asked the quest as his proving, and the court smiled kindly at the nameless boy, and let him go.

He was gone nine days. On the tenth he came back with Turquine's shield at his saddle-bow and four and threescore freed knights riding behind him, loud as a wedding, and the court stopped smiling.

Then Arthur had him called by name, and when he heard whose son he was, he rose from his throne and kissed him on both cheeks. "Your father was my strength when I had none," he said. "Now I see where his went." He made him knight of the Round Table, and no man said the seat was given for Ban's sake. They had all seen the road.

After that it seemed the world had been waiting to be beaten. Quest after quest, joust after joust, there was no knight in Britain who could keep his saddle against Lancelot, and few who could keep their temper, for he unhorsed men gently and helped them up, which was harder to bear than blows. He spoke little. When they praised him he turned it aside onto God, or his horse, or the skill of his enemies, until men stopped offering praise and simply told one another what they had seen.

. . .

In those years came the war with Rome, and Lancelot crossed the sea with the host. It wants a book of its own and shall have a page: how the Emperor Lucius demanded tribute of Britain; how Arthur answered that he owed Rome nothing Rome had not first taken; how the king left his realm in good hands and sailed, and fought through France and over the mountains, against giants and emperors and the gathered kings of the East; and how at last, in Rome itself, the pope crowned him Emperor with his own hand. It was the summit of the world, and the men who came home believed that whatever Arthur's fellowship made would stand forever.

Lancelot remembered the crowning differently. A Christmas morning, breath white in the cold church, the smell of wax and incense, a circle of gold settling onto Arthur's brow, and with it a thought as sudden as an arrow: this is as high as it goes; everything after is down. He never knew where the thought came from. He was ashamed of it. He kept it.

. . .

Back in Britain, Arthur named him the queen's champion, for what knight was fitter to keep her honour than the knight who had never lost?

Lancelot had spoken to Guinevere perhaps a dozen times before that day, at feasts, at the rail of the lists, the way a man speaks to the sun: courteously, and without looking straight at her. Now, as champion, he knelt in the hall to take the charge, and she gave him her hand to kiss, and said, "I could not be safer, unless God sent an angel."

"Your Grace has had an angel's patience with rough knights," he said, and raised his eyes.

She was looking at him. Not weighing him, not dealing out the queen's smile she gave like alms. Only looking, the way one looks at weather coming from far off. It lasted no longer than a breath. Then she withdrew her hand and turned to Arthur, and the hall moved on around them, and nothing had happened.

Nothing had happened. Lancelot stood among the greatest fellowship the world had known, sworn to a king he loved above any man, charged before God with the honour of that king's wife, and he understood all at once why men prayed not to be led into temptation. The prayer had never made sense to him before. He had thought it meant the sin.

It meant the wishing.

CHAPTER 5: THE KITCHEN KNIGHT

At the high feast of Pentecost, when the hall was loud and the meat just coming in, a young man knelt before King Arthur and asked for three gifts. He would not say what they were. He would not say his name. He was tall and clean-limbed, with big fair hands, and Sir Kay the steward looked at those hands and laughed.

"Fine smooth hands for a beggar," Kay said. "Give him to me a year, and we shall see what he is made of."

So the first gift was asked: meat and drink for a twelvemonth, served from Kay's own kitchen. A king at his feast cannot refuse a guest's boon, and Arthur granted it, studying the tall stranger a moment longer than courtesy required. Kay named him Beaumains, Fair Hands, put him to the spits and the scouring, and the whole court laughed at the kitchen boy.

All but one. Lancelot, passing through the steam one morning, stopped to watch the boy scrub a cauldron and whistle a northern tune. "You need not love the work," he said. "Only do it like a knight. I was a stranger in plain arms once."

"I am a king's son scouring pots," said the boy, grinning through the soot. "It is good for the pots."

The year turned. Then at the next feast a damsel rode in, rain-soaked and angry, and knelt to the king. Her sister Lyonesse was besieged in her castle by the Red Knight of the Red Launds, who hanged his beaten foes from trees like fruit. She wanted Lancelot, or one of the great names.

Beaumains came out of the kitchen smelling of grease and claimed the quest as his second gift. The court laughed again. Kay laughed loudest. The damsel looked at him and flushed with fury.

"Fie on the king's courtesy," she said, "that gives a lady a kitchen knave. He smells of the dripping-pan."

"Then I will smell of something better by the end," said Beaumains, "or the Red Knight will smell of me."

His third gift he named before they rode: that Sir Lancelot follow after and make him knight, when he had earned it. Lancelot came as asked, on the third day, in a greenwood by a ford, and there he found Beaumains standing over the Black Knight of the lands, unhorsed, beaten, and spared.

Lancelot armed him and dubbed him there, and the boy gave his true name at last: Gareth of Orkney, son of King Lot, Arthur's own nephew, brother to Gawain. He had hidden it because he wished to be known by his deeds and not his blood.

Lancelot embraced him. "Your deeds have a louder voice than any name," he said, and Gareth felt the words go into him like heat into cold iron. From that day he loved Lancelot as a son loves the father he chose.

Lynette, the damsel, was slower. For days she rode ahead and would not speak to him except to mock, and when he overthrew the Green Knight at the ford she said the knight must have been sick, and when he spared him she called it kitchen mercy.

But the Green Knight's kin were a hundred and more, and Gareth fought them from noon to evensong in the rain. At the end Lynette brought him water with her own hands and did not mock him again.

At the Red Launds hung the shields of forty dead knights, and a horn to blow for battle. The Red Knight was the strongest man Gareth had ever stood against. They fought till their mail hung in ribbons and the ground was trodden to mud.

When at last Gareth had him down, the beaten man begged his life and told him why he hanged knights: his own brother had been slain by knights of Arthur's court, and he had sworn to pay it back in kind.

Gareth looked at the forty shields a long while. Then he said, "The debt ends here," and spared him, and made him swear to ride to Camelot and yield himself to Arthur's mercy.

So the siege was lifted, and when the lady Lyonesse came down from her tower she found the kitchen knight kneeling in the mud and would not let him rise until she had kissed his hands. They were married at Camelot that summer, and Gawain laughed until he wept to learn that Beaumains was his own small brother, grown.

Arthur gave Gareth a seat at the Round Table for what he had done, as he had given Lancelot, and no man said otherwise. Only Lancelot gave him something more. He said that if ever Gareth needed him, in any quarrel, he had but to send word.

"Then I will come to you bare-handed, if you call," said Gareth, meaning love by it, and Lancelot answered, "God forbid you should ever need to."

God heard, and remembered.

CHAPTER 6: TRISTRAM AND ISOUD

They brought the wounded man to her father's court in Ireland because no other healer could touch him and have him live. A poisoned spear-wound, months old and festering, from a dead knight's hand; the man himself half out of the world, harping in his fever, singing to keep the pain company.

Isoud was the princess who healed. It was the one craft she had been allowed to make her own, and she took him in.

He gave his name as Tramtrist. She knew better within the week. A knight's scars, a harper's hands, a courtier's careful lies; and the dead knight whose spear had poisoned him was Sir Marhaus, her own mother's brother, slain in a quarrel over Cornwall's tribute. The man in her care had killed her kin, and she held his life in her dressings and her herbs.

She told him, when the fever broke, that she knew.

"Then you know what I deserve," he said. He did not ask for mercy. That decided her.

"Stay and heal," she said, "and one day tell me why I did it."

His true name was Tristram, nephew of King Mark of Cornwall. When he was whole he went home, and Isoud thought that was the end of it.

It was not. Mark heard of the healer princess and sent Tristram back to Ireland to ask her hand, not for himself, but for his uncle and king. Tristram came, and knelt, and asked. His voice stayed steady the whole time. Isoud saw what the steadiness cost him. Her father saw nothing but a crown for his daughter, and it was arranged the way such things are arranged, without anyone asking her at all.

So she asked herself, and found no answer she could live on, and went.

On the voyage to Cornwall, in a cabin that smelled of pitch and salt, her maid Brangwaine unpacked a little golden flask that Isoud's mother had prepared: a drink of enchantment, for Isoud and King Mark on their wedding night, that they should love each other all their days. Brangwaine set it by and went above. The day was hot. Isoud and Tristram were thirsty. They found the flask and thought it wine.

They drank. It was fated, and she knew it the moment she tasted it: not a rapture but a recognition, like a door opening onto a room she had already lived in. The potion had not made them love. It had only made the love they were refusing impossible to refuse.

"Now there is no hiding from it," Tristram said.

"No," said Isoud. "Now we choose what to do with it, every day."

She married Mark. The potion had been meant for that night; she kept its taste instead. Tristram served his uncle as a loyal knight, and for a time loyalty and love held their strange truce. Isoud kept her honour and her station and was seen to be a good queen. What lay between her and Tristram she answered for to God, and to no one else.

Mark knew the way a jealous man knows, without knowing. He loved Tristram and hated him by turns, and his love was the worse of the two, for it made the hate ashamed and the shame cruel.

One autumn he sent Tristram to the mews for a hawk and set armed men in the garden to slay him as he passed. A dog's growling gave the ambush away. Tristram came that night to the chapel where she prayed and said, "Your husband would have had me killed like a deer."

"He is not my husband in his heart," said Isoud. "He is my jailer there."

Tristram went into exile, and exile broke him as fevers never had. Men found him in the woods of a foreign land, lean and wild, harping to the trees, not knowing his own name. Isoud sent gold, and messages, and her prayers, the only part of her still free to travel. When his wits came back he made his way, half-mended, to the one court where a wronged knight could be safe.

Arthur took him in and made him knight of the Round Table for what he had done, not whom he had fled. Isoud came once to Camelot under safe conduct to see with her own eyes that he was whole, and she sat in the great hall where no man sat above another, and the fellowship was bright as morning.

Then she saw the queen look at her champion.

It was only a look, the length of a breath. The queen turned back to her king, and nothing had happened. But Isoud had worn that look in a cabin smelling of pitch and salt, with a golden flask between two people who thought they were drinking wine. She knew what it cost to stand where

the queen stood. She saw in Lancelot's courteous stillness a man choosing, every day, what to do with a love he had not chosen.

She said nothing to anyone. That night she prayed for the queen of Britain as she prayed for herself: that the choosing would hold, and if it could not, that there would be mercy for the fallers. She had long since stopped praying for the love to go away.

She knew better.

CHAPTER 7: THE GRAIL BEGINS

The old king at Corbenic looked at Lancelot the way men look at an answer, and Lancelot liked nothing about it.

He had ridden to the Grail Castle only for a night's shelter. Instead he found King Pelles in his high chair, watching him across a hall where candles burned that no hand had lit, and a maiden bearing a vessel under white cloth among the tables. Where she walked, the air went sweet.

"The Sangreal," said Pelles softly, when she had gone. "It has waited long for you, sir knight. A knight of your own begetting shall see it openly, and achieve what no man living can."

"Then God be praised," said Lancelot, "that I have no son, nor shall."

Pelles only smiled.

That night a woman of the castle, old in enchantment, brought him spiced wine and told him the queen had come secretly and waited for him above. Lancelot drank, and climbed the dark stair, and the voice that answered him in the bed was soft and known.

He woke at dawn beside Elaine, Pelles's daughter.

He had his sword half drawn before she caught his wrist. She did not beg. She told him the truth: the prophecy laid on her father, the enchantment, and her own part, which she had not refused.

"Slay me if it helps you," she said. "But I carry your son, and he will be the best knight the world has seen, and he will heal what is wounded."

Lancelot let the sword fall back. He had been tricked past any shame a man could name, yet the shame sat on him as if he had chosen it. That was the worst of enchantment. It used your own wanting as its key.

He rode for Camelot and confessed nothing, which meant everyone knew within the month. The queen sent for him. She received him white and still, her voice gone quiet with anger.

"You thought it was me."

“Brisen’s craft is older than sin,” he said. “I swear it, on my knighthood.”

“Your knighthood.” She turned the word over like a coin she meant to refuse. “The whole court says she carries your child. You could not tell wine from me in the dark.”

There was no answer to that, because the wound under it was not the enchantment. It was that the dark had made no difference. He knelt and begged her pardon, and she gave it the way queens give things, grandly and at a price, and neither named the price.

The child was born at Corbenic and christened Galahad. Elaine sent no word and asked nothing.

It found Lancelot anyway. Sick at heart on a summer quest, he walked into the wilderness one dawn, and the wilderness took his wits. Two years he ran wild in the woods, naked as a beast; men told of a madman who fought like the end of the world, and none guessed him.

Bleeding from a thorn brake, he stumbled by chance into Corbenic, and they carried him, not knowing him, into the chamber where the covered vessel stood.

He woke whole. Pelles wept over him. Elaine stood at the door with a boy of three by the hand and said nothing at all, and her silence was kinder than any speech.

“I have been given back what I never earned,” Lancelot said, and meant his mind, and his life, and more than those.

. . .

Fifteen years passed like a slow tide, and then a gentlewoman brought a young knight to the Pentecost feast, white-shielded, unproved, with a face like Lancelot’s made clean.

They showed him the Siege Perilous, the seat that killed any man who sat it. The gold letters had changed in the night; no one had seen the hand that wrote them: THIS IS GALAHAD’S SIEGE.

The boy sat down. Nothing happened. The whole hall breathed out, and Arthur kissed him. Lancelot stood in the cheering with his son’s calm eyes on him, and felt himself weighed and found wanting by a boy who had never drawn blood.

That evening, after Gawain tried and failed, Galahad drew from a stone floating on the river the sword lettered for the best knight in the world, as easily as his own knife from its sheath.

At the feast, thunder walked through the hall and no storm followed. The covered vessel entered of itself, passed among them, filled every knight with the food he loved best, and was gone.

Gawain leaped up before the silence could settle. “We have been fed and not seen,” he said. “I vow before God I will ride tomorrow and not return until I have looked on the Grail openly, or died in the seeking.”

One by one they rose and swore it, a hundred voices and more. Arthur sat white-faced through it all. "You have slain me," he said at last. "You have slain this fellowship. It will never be whole again."

Lancelot swore with the rest. That night, alone in the chapel, he prayed to be found worthy, and a voice answered out of no mouth, gentle and final: Lancelot, thou shalt seek, and thou shalt not find, save through a veil.

He rode out at dawn among the greatest fellowship ever gathered, and knew he was riding to his judgment. The queen stood watching from the steps, and he did not look back, because looking back was the one vow he could not keep.

CHAPTER 8: THE QUEST ACHIEVED

Bors saw his brother beaten half to death and dragged towards a castle, and in the same breath he heard a maiden screaming in the wood behind him, and God gave him one horse and one body and a choice.

Lionel hung between two knights, bleeding from thorn whips; the maiden's cries came the other way, a knight hauling her off by the hair. Bors sat his horse between the two sounds and understood that this was the quest, not visions and sweet airs: which cry do you answer.

He thought: Lionel is blood. He thought: she has no one at all.

He rode for the maiden, his heart dragging the other way like an anchor. The knight yielded her at spear-point and ran; all the while Bors listened backward into the trees for sounds that had stopped.

He found Lionel three days later, escaped and changed. His brother looked at him the way a man looks at a betrayer.

"You left me to the whips," Lionel said, "for a stranger."

"She had no one," said Bors. "You are a knight of the Table."

"And you are my brother." Lionel drew his sword.

Bors would not draw. He had sworn it kneeling in wet leaves: he would not be the man who slew his kin. Lionel struck him to his knees. An old hermit ran out crying shame and threw himself between them, and Lionel cut him down, and still Bors knelt, blood in his eyes.

Then a voice came out of the sky like thunder wrapped in fire: Bors, rise and go thy way. Flame fell between the brothers. By the time the smoke cleared Bors was riding, because obedience was the only thing left that was his.

He wept most of that night. The quest had not asked him to be brave. It had asked him to choose between two duties, and to live after choosing.

. . .

He found Percivale at a hermitage by the sea, thin as a Lent candle, telling his own adventure in a flat voice, as if it had happened to someone else.

On a barren rock a lady had come to him in red silk, gold at her wrists, with a pavilion and wine, and offered him everything. "And I was sore tempted, for I was alone, and she was kind." He had crossed himself, and pavilion, lady, and all had gone up in smoke with a stink of burning.

"Then I took my sword and drove it through my own thigh," he said, "so the flesh that listened to her would remember."

Bors dressed the wound and did not call it madness. His ribs still ached from Lionel's blows; the hermit's blood was still on his hands.

Percivale had the word they were seeking, from his aunt, a holy anchoress. Far off lay a king maimed by a dolorous stroke, who could not rise until the best knight in the world came and asked him what ailed him. Men had ridden past that castle for years and never thought to ask.

Later they came upon Lancelot. Bors hardly knew him; the greatest knight in the world looked like a beggar who had once been told something he could not forget.

Over bread and salt he told of a chapel by night, its door shut against him, a light inside brighter than noon, and a voice that bade him not enter. He had pushed the door anyway. He had seen a covered vessel on a silver table, and angels, and a man in priest's vestments lifting what he could not name.

"I saw it as through a veil," Lancelot said. "Then a breath like fire struck me down, and I lay as dead four and twenty days. It was said to me plain: for my sin I might look, and no more."

Bors heard the shame under the plainness and loved him the more for it. The best knight of the age had been weighed like the rest of them.

. . .

At Corbenic the three companions were gathered into one room, and Bors watched Galahad do what all the world had failed to do.

The Grail was uncovered there. The bleeding spear stood by, and King Pellam on his litter, borne from his ruined northern castle to his brother's hall, maimed these many years, his land gone to weeds and bitter wells. Galahad took blood from the spear and anointed the king's wounds. Then he knelt before the litter, and asked: "Sir, what ails you?"

The king told his hurt aloud for the first time, and the telling and the blood together did the work. He rose off the litter, weeping and laughing, and within the year men said the wells ran sweet again in the wasted land.

Bors thought of Arthur's realm, and wondered whose question would heal it, and whether anyone there would think to ask.

. . .

A ship with no crew carried the three of them to Sarras, where the Grail was brought ashore like a king coming to his coronation. They made Galahad ruler there, for no one else would touch the honour, and for a year Bors watched his friend's son burn brighter and thinner, like a candle giving itself away.

On the year's day Galahad knelt before the uncovered Grail and prayed, then looked up at his two companions with a face Bors would carry to his grave.

"When I see the end of this," he said, "I shall ask to leave the world. Do not grieve. I have had everything."

He saw openly, with no veil, what he had ridden so far to see; and he asked, and it was granted. He died kneeling, smiling, and Bors could not weep, only kneel too, while Percivale held the body's hand as if to keep it warm.

Percivale outlived him a year and two months, in a hermit's cell outside the city. Then Bors buried him beside Galahad, and took ship alone for Britain.

Camelot's hall was quieter than he remembered. Half the shields were gone. On the seats of the Table the gold names of the dead stood lettered where living men had sat, and Arthur read them like a man reading his own indictment. When Bors knelt and told it all, the king wept openly and did not hide it.

"The best of us are spent," Arthur said, "buying a treasure that went out of the world with them."

Bors had no comfort for him. He had seen the Grail, and he had seen what it cost, and the two sights weighed exactly the same.

That night he found Lancelot in the chapel, kneeling before the queen, and she was weeping, and neither had the look of people who had been healed. Bors went softly out and left them. The quest was done. The wound that remained was the one no vessel on earth could cover.

CHAPTER 9: THE QUEEN AND THE KNIGHT

The barge came down the river to Camelot on the morning current, black-draped, with no oarsman and no sail, and in it lay a dead maid with a letter on her breast.

Guinevere watched them carry the girl up from the wharf. She was young, her hair combed loose over a green gown, her hands folded as if she slept. The letter was addressed to the king, to Lancelot, and to all the ladies of the court. Arthur had it read aloud in the hall; Guinevere stood through it with her back straight and her palms gone cold.

Elaine of Astolat, Sir Bernard's daughter. The court knew the story; half of it had happened under this roof. Lancelot had lodged at her father's house before the Winchester tournament and worn her red sleeve on his helm as disguise. She loved him past reason, followed him to Camelot, and asked openly for his love. He answered gently and finally: he could not be hers. She went home and began to die. Now she had finished.

The letter said so, in a hand that blamed no one. I died of love for Sir Lancelot, and I charge you all to pray for my soul. It asked nothing. That was the worst of it.

Guinevere found she could not hate her, and that frightened her more than hatred would have. She knew what it was to want that man and go unanswered. The girl had only done openly what the queen did in secret, by inches. Across the hall Lancelot had gone grey to the lips.

"She had the cleaner sorrow," Guinevere said, into the hush. "She gave her heart to one man and one door, and all the world may pity her. Bury her like a king's daughter. I will pay the mass-pennies myself."

Arthur touched her hand, grateful, and did not understand what she had said. Lancelot did. She watched him understand, and looked away first.

. . .

Her own name was a coin other men spent. She learned how thin it was worn at the autumn dinner.

Sir Patrise of Ireland took an apple from her fingers and, before the cups came round, fell from his bench choking, and died. The poison, it came out later, was set in the dish for Gawain by a knight with a private grudge. Later was no use to her. Sir Mador de la Porte rose and cried treason against the queen, and the law gave her fifteen days to find a champion, or burn.

Not one knight of the Table stepped forward. They had all seen her hand the fruit out. Bors begged delay and sent riders. Guinevere sat through nine days of whispers and rain on the shutters, knowing her life hung on one man, and the whole court knew which man, and why.

On the fifteenth day a knight in plain arms rode into the lists and overthrew Sir Mador in a single course. When he put up his visor it was Lancelot. The queen was cleared before God and man; he

knelt to her as if nothing else were true. The court cheered. Guinevere smiled and gave him her hand, and thought: they all saw. They have all seen for years.

. . .

She was right. Agravaine had been waiting for it said aloud, and now he said it, Mordred smiling at his shoulder: the queen and Sir Lancelot dishonored the king, and they would prove it. Arthur sat like a man being lowered into cold water.

"If you are wrong, he will kill you," the king said. "I ride hunting tomorrow and lie out the night. Take your proof, if proof there is."

That night Lancelot came to her door, as he had come a hundred times, softly, meaning to speak through the oak and go. She heard Agravaine's voice in the passage before her hand left the bar.

Traitor knight, come out.

Fourteen of them, armed. She got him inside, the door between them and the spears, and they stood listening to Agravaine cry shame through the wood.

"They will burn me and call it law," she said. "If you stay, they kill you here in your bare feet and call that law too. There is your sword." She put it in his hand. "Go through them. Living, you can still answer for me."

Isoud had seen her once, and known her, and said nothing to anyone. Guinevere understood that silence now, and the prayer inside it, at a door with fourteen swords on the far side and one man on hers: mercy for the fallers.

He looked at her the way he had looked at the chapel door on the quest, at a light he was forbidden.

"Open it," he said.

She opened it.

. . .

They judged her in her absence: guilty, and the fire. Arthur signed it with a hand that shook, because the law he had made left him no other pen. Gawain refused to attend. Gareth and Gaheris were commanded to attend and came unarmed, in mourning black, heads bare.

Guinevere remembered that afterward, when she could think at all: Gareth's face, gentle and grieved, above the piled wood. He had refused to wear steel against Lancelot, even to guard her burning. He had promised once, in a greenwood, to come to Lancelot bare-handed if ever he was called. God had heard, she thought, and remembered.

Then the shouting: Lancelot's kin through the ring of spears, Lancelot at their head, visored, his sword already wet. The fire was not yet lit. She saw Gareth step forward, to help her down or shield her, she never knew, into the path of the man he loved. The sword went through him as through any armed stranger. He fell against the wood with his brother dying beside him.

She screamed his name. Lancelot heard, and did not know, and had no time to know. He cut her cords, lifted her to a saddle, and they rode out through a city of swords.

. . .

At Joyous Gard the truth came by degrees and messengers. Gareth and Gaheris, slain in the rescue, unarmed, by Lancelot's hand, unknowing. Lancelot walked out of the hall when they told him, and she let him go alone.

The second messenger told the rest. Gawain had knelt over Gareth's body a day and a night, and risen with an oath: never to eat seated in hall nor sleep in peace until he had Lancelot's blood for his brother's. The king's grief could not bend him. No prayer could.

At the arrow-slit, with the dark coming up, she understood that the war began in that moment, and her love had lit it. She had asked Heaven to be loved wholly. Two kingdoms would burn for it now, the gentlest knight in Britain lay dead of coming bare-handed, and there was no one left at Camelot wise enough to stop what she and Lancelot had begun.

CHAPTER 10: MORDRED'S TREASON

They had to pull Gawain from his brothers' tomb to make him eat, and when he ate he stood, for he had sworn not to sit in hall until Lancelot answered for Gareth's blood.

The king sat, and looked older than his crown. Lancelot had given back the queen at the pope's command, delivered her weeping, and offered what amends a man could offer. "He did not know them," Arthur said. "They went unarmed."

"That is the charge," Gawain said. "Gareth went unarmed because he loved him, and Lancelot's sword found my brother anyway. I will have justice, uncle, or I will have his life. There is no third thing."

He saw the weariness in Arthur's face and hated it, because under his own grief, where he did not look, lay other knowledge.

Agravaine had set the trap, and Gawain had not stopped him. Gawain had sworn the Grail quest that emptied half the hall and left too few knights to hold the peace. Gareth had stood at that fire bare-headed while Gawain sulked in his chamber, refusing to watch. He could not punish the men truly at fault. The nearest one he could reach was Lancelot. So he reached.

. . .

Arthur gave way at last, as Gawain had known he would. The law demanded it, and the kinship, and only weariness stood against. Lancelot was banished to his own lands over the sea, and Arthur followed with an army to war on him there. He left Mordred, his nephew in the world's naming, smooth and courteous, who had brought the proof that began it all, as regent of England, and the queen in his keeping.

Gawain went gladly. France felt clean: siege lines, forage, the high walls of Benwick, and every morning his voice at the gate crying Lancelot's name like a curse.

Lancelot would not come out for weeks. His kin came instead, Bors and Lionel and the rest, and Gawain fought them and never fell. Then shame did what siege could not. Lancelot rode out one morning in plain arms, and Gawain knew at the first shock of spears that he was fighting the best knight in the world, and did not care.

His strength was a strange gift. It waxed with the sun, and by noon he was worth three men, and Lancelot gave ground before him across the trodden field. Gawain shouted at him to yield.

Then the sun turned, and the strength drained out of him like heat from a corpse. Lancelot, who had only endured and covered himself, stood up and beat him down into the dirt in three strokes, and set his point at Gawain's throat.

"Kill me," Gawain said, "or I will come against you again."

"Then come again," Lancelot said. "I will not slay Arthur's nephew, nor Gareth's brother." He took off his helm, and his face was wet, and Gawain hated him most for that. A month later, healed, he challenged again, and was spared again the same way, and mercy from Lancelot tasted like scorn.

. . .

The news out of England caught them in the third month. Mordred had forged letters saying King Arthur was dead of his wars. He had had himself crowned at Canterbury, and meant to marry the queen, his father's wife, to make the theft smell of law.

Guinevere had refused him to his face. Then, buying time the way she bought everything, she smiled and asked leave to go to London and make herself ready, and once inside the Tower she barred the gates, armed it, victualled it, and sent Mordred word she would die before she would be his. He had the Tower ringed now. The Bishop of Canterbury threatened him with bell, book, and candle, and Mordred did not care.

Men remembered then, in whispers, what Merlin had said long ago of a child born on May Day.

Gawain read the letter twice. Under the rage came a coldness he did not recognise at first: he had pushed Arthur across the sea and left the kingdom in the hands of the man who had opened this

grave. Merlin was long under the stone; no wise head was left. For one night he could not tell Lancelot's fault from his own. Then morning came, and he chose the simpler sin to hate.

. . .

Arthur broke the siege of Benwick and turned for home, and Mordred's host met them on the shingle at Dover. Gawain was first ashore and fought in the surf until a sword found the old dint in his helm, the place Lancelot's blade had marked in France, and opened the wound beneath it.

They carried him to Dover castle. He lived two weeks, which was long enough.

To Arthur he said what he had never said to any man: "Uncle, this war was mine. I asked it of you and would not be answered no. Had Lancelot been at your side, Mordred had never dared. Lay it on me, and give him the pardon I would not."

Then he wrote, in his own hand, to the man he had sworn to kill. His hatred had cost more than his love ever had; he died forgiving what he could not forget. Let Lancelot come and see his tomb and pray for his soul, and then ride to the king, who needed him as England had never needed anyone.

He gave the letter to a chaplain, and gripped Arthur's hand.

"If God grants a dead man one more ride," he said, "I will come to you in your sleep and warn you. Do not fight Mordred until Lancelot lands. Wait a month. Promise me you will listen, even to a ghost."

Arthur promised, weeping. Gawain died before dawn, his face turned towards the sea road Lancelot would come by.

. . .

The king marched west after Mordred's retreating host, and behind him a single rider carried the letter towards France and the coast. On the road ahead lay a plain called Salisbury, where two armies would meet. And the question no one could yet answer rode with them all: whether the best knight in the world would reach England before the last battle was fought without him.

CHAPTER 11: THE LAST BATTLE AND AVALON

The king woke him an hour before the hosts were to join.

"Bedivere. I have seen Gawain." Arthur sat on his camp bed, unarmoured, grey-faced. "He stood by me in my sleep and said: make a truce and wait a month, until Lancelot lands, or tomorrow you are slain and your realm with you. I promised him at Dover I would listen, even to a ghost."

Heralds went between the armies, and by noon there was a truce to last until Lancelot came. Neither side trusted the other. "If you see any sword drawn," Arthur told his men, "come on and spare not." Mordred, across the field, gave the same order.

They met in the open to seal it, the wine poured, Bedivere at the king's shoulder watching Mordred's courteous face. Here stood the child of May. Merlin was under his stone; no wise head was left in England.

Then a knight, stung on the heel by an adder in the winter grass, forgot everything but the pain, and drew his sword to kill it.

The blade caught the light. A small, bright thing. Both armies saw it.

Horns. Shouting. The truce folded like a tent struck by wind, and Bedivere got the king into his saddle before the lines met. After that there was no more day, only work. Hold. Turn. Strike. Hold. When the light failed, the dead lay over the plain in sheaves, and of all that host only two of Arthur's knights stood: Bedivere, and Sir Lucan bleeding out his life beside him.

The king leaned on his spear. "Alas that this day should come. Here was the fellowship, and here it lies."

Then he saw Mordred, alone among the slain, leaning on his sword.

"Give me my spear," Arthur said. "He is the cause of all this."

"Sir, let him be," Bedivere said. "The day is yours. Remember your dream."

"We remembered it an hour." Arthur took the spear. "Whether I die now or later, he shall not live to boast of this."

He set spurs, and Bedivere watched him ride, and thought of Balin and Balan, who slew each other unknowing. This was worse. These two knew their blood, and it changed nothing.

"Traitor," the king cried, "now is thy death come."

Mordred ran to meet him. The spear went through him more than a fathom, and Mordred, feeling his death, hauled himself up the shaft by main strength and struck one blow through the king's helm to the brain. Father and son fell together, and did not rise.

Lucan and Bedivere lifted the king between them. Lucan's wounds burst with the strain and he died on his feet, still holding, and then there was only Bedivere, one man to carry a king.

. . .

Bedivere got him to a chapel near the water. The king's wound bled as it never would have bled had Morgan not thrown his scabbard into a lake, long ago. "Take Excalibur," Arthur said, "and cast it into the water, and tell me what you see."

Bedivere took it. The hilt was gold, the pommel one great stone; its like would never be seen again. He hid it under a tree, went back, and said it was done.

"What did you see?"

"Sir, only wind on the water."

"That is not truly said. Go again."

He went again, and again his hand would not, and he came back with the same answer. The king looked at him a long moment. "Ah, traitor untrue. Twice you have betrayed me for the riches of a sword, and I a dying man."

He ran and took the sword and hurled it as far as he could send it. An arm clothed in white samite rose out of the lake and caught it by the hilt, and brandished it three times, and drew it under.

He told the king, and the king wept, and said, "Now bear me to the shore."

. . .

There came a barge out of the mist, draped in black, and in it many ladies in black hoods, and one was Morgan le Fay, the king's sister. They took Arthur from Bedivere's arm and laid him with his head in her lap. "Ah, dear brother," she said, "why have you tarried so long?"

"Lord," Bedivere said, "what shall become of me, now you go from me and leave me alone?"

"Comfort yourself, and do as well as you may," Arthur said. "I go into the vale of Avilion, to heal me of my grievous wound. If you never hear more of me, pray for my soul."

The barge went out into the mist, and for a while the water spoke against its side; then there was nothing to watch, and nothing to hear.

. . .

The rest he saw, or heard, from a hermit's cell near Glastonbury, where he ended his days in prayer, as the king had asked him.

Lancelot landed at Dover too late. He knelt at Gawain's tomb in the castle there, as the letter had begged him, and prayed for the soul of the man who had sworn to kill him. Then he sought the queen at Almesbury, where she had taken the veil. She would not come out to him. Through us two, she sent word, all this war was wrought. Pray for me, as I shall for you.

He came to the hermitage hollow-eyed and told it, and took the priest's gown from the old Bishop of Canterbury, and served. When word came that the queen was dead, penitent, at prayer, he carried her body to Glastonbury in his own arms and buried her beside the king. Then he sickened, and would not eat, and died within six weeks, of no sickness but grief.

Sir Ector de Maris, his brother, who had sought him seven years, came the morning after and stood over the body, and what he said Bedivere wrote down.

“Ah, Lancelot, thou wert head of all Christian knights. Thou wert the most courteous knight that ever bare shield, and the truest friend to thy lover that ever bestrode horse. Thou wert the meekest man and the gentlest that ever ate in hall among ladies, and the sternest knight to thy mortal foe that ever put spear in the rest.”

. . .

Under the chapel floor they set a stone for the king, lettered: HIC IACET ARTHURUS, REX QUONDAM REXQUE FUTURUS. Here lies Arthur, the once and future king.

Some men say he is not dead, but healed, and will come again. Bedivere never said so. He had seen the blood, and the barge, and the mist that took it. What he said, when travelers asked, was what Merlin said at the beginning: glory and grief together. It must be.

Then he would go in, and pray for his lord's soul, as he had been asked, and let the stone say the rest.

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