



# MYTHOPOUCH

## RETELLING

### MALORY: LE MORTE D'ARTHUR

#### VOL. 2 KNIGHTS AND THE GRAIL

#### Chapters 5-8

A modern educational version for readers aged 15 and up

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## 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.

## SOURCE NOTE

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