

Knots of Brass and Gold

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/3834046) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/3834046>.

Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	F/M
Fandoms:	Arthurian Mythology & Related Fandoms , Le Morte d'Arthur - Thomas Malory , Arthurian Mythology
Relationship:	Isolde the Fair/Tristan (Arthurian)
Characters:	Iseult of Ireland , Tristan (Arthurian) , Brangaine (Arthurian) , Palomides , Governail , Mark of Cornwall , Guinevere (Arthurian)
Additional Tags:	Royalty in Compromising Positions , Agony Aunts , love potions , Female Friendship , Failtastic Knights , Canon-Appropriate Violence , Character(s) of Color
Language:	English
Collections:	Rarely Written Fanfic Exchange 2015
Stats:	Published: 2015-04-27 Words: 5,850 Chapters: 1/1

Knots of Brass and Gold

by [La Reine Noire \(lareinenoire\)](#)

Summary

There are bonds of blood and bonds of magic, and then there are those even stronger than both.

Notes

The two main source-texts for this story are Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* and Gottfried von Strassburg's *Tristan*. Most of the plotline derives from Malory because it's the text I read more recently, but there are a few elements I'm pulling from Gottfried because I find them interesting. More detailed notes at the end. Many thanks to Gehayi for beta-reading!

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

There are bonds of blood and bonds of magic, and then there are those even stronger than both. Perhaps they are not the stuff of singers' tales or monks' chronicles, but they persist, silent and true, long after those others have fallen to dust.

Such was the bond between the lady they called Iseult the Fair and her handmaiden Brangaine, who came into the world before her lady and left it afterward, who held her lady's secrets close as holy writ, and who--unlike husband and lover alike--never once betrayed her.

When Brangaine was but five years of age, her mother was called to the Queen of Ireland's confinement. Brangaine assisted her in silence, fetching water and cloths, and holding the newborn princess while her mother saw to the queen. Though many might have blamed the midwife for delivery of a girl, the queen gave her a heavy bag of gold and, with a measuring look, offered Brangaine a place in the royal household.

"Such discretion for one so young," she said. "My daughter will have need of a handmaiden, if you are willing."

That last was mere courtesy--there was no question that Brangaine would accept the queen's offer, and a month or two later, she bid her family farewell, never to return.

As Princess Iseult grew, so did the legends of her beauty. To Brangaine, however, Iseult was her lady--no more, no less. If her hair shone bright as beaten gold and her eyes greener than the rolling hills, that was no matter. There were ladies aplenty who were fair without and foul within, but Iseult was both kind and bold, and--though the stories only ever glanced at it--as wise as ever her mother had been in the arts of healing and surgery.

Brangaine too learnt much at the Queen of Ireland's knee. Possets and poisons were her particular craft, and it was often a minute change from one to the other. She could read the

leaves of plants as the monks in the abbey read their prayers and she had scarce grown to womanhood when the ladies of the court began to seek her out for lotions to preserve youth or the swift secret cures to rid them of unwanted children.

Brangaine did not deal in love potions. The Queen of Ireland did, but warned both her daughter and her handmaiden of their fickleness, and only once was Brangaine tempted--not by a potion to inspire love, but one to dampen it, help it to fade into safe, distant memory.

There was a knight who had come to court when Iseult was sixteen years old, who had travelled from far beyond the lands they knew and who brought with him stories of vast deserts beneath a scorching sun and long-fallen empires older than Greece and Rome. His name was Palomides. He was a heathen, of course, and though a worthy knight, there was no question that Iseult was as far above his reach as the stars in their spheres. But he loved all the same, plying her with tales from his homeland and fighting tourney after tourney in the vain hope of her favour.

For her, he had even offered to give up his strange faith to be christened, and it was that offer that made even Iseult pause for a moment. "Would it not be my duty, Brangaine, my duty to God, to draw such a man to the light?"

"You are a king's daughter and he is a mere knight," Brangaine replied. "He knows he cannot have you, and if he would use his soul as a mere bargaining-token, what trust can you place in such a man?" It was a harsh assessment, she knew, but *her* duty lay with her lady, not with Palomides, however much she might pity him.

Later, however, she would wonder if she had been wrong. For good or ill, Palomides would have loved and treasured her lady to the end of his days, which was more than could be said for the man to whom Iseult gave her heart.

She should have known the Breton harper was trouble when he first arrived.

Indeed, she *did* know it, or at least had an inkling of it, when she found Iseult kneeling at his feet as he played. Oh, he was a handsome one, to be certain, with eyes blue as the sea and dark curls that ached for a maid's fingers. But Brangaine had seen the other scars on his hands, and the great wound in his side that Iseult had healed, and though she kept her thoughts to herself, she remembered what she had heard some months before of the queen's beloved brother cut down on the Cornish sands by a young, deadly knight.

It had been fair combat--of that, all the court had been assured--but the queen had taken her brother's death to heart and vowed vengeance on the man responsible. And that man, Brangaine was certain, was the one now making eyes at the queen's only daughter.

It was driving poor Sir Palomides mad, and perhaps for that reason it was a blessing that the king announced a tournament to give away one of his cousins, not so fair as Iseult, but nearly as wealthy. Brangaine, had she chose to wager, would have placed her money on Palomides, who struck down every challenger on the first day even as Iseult watched with her harper, giggling behind her hands as he whispered to her.

It might have been for the best if Palomides had won that tournament and the lady with it, but on the final day, Iseult sat alone and a mystery knight clad all in white struck Palomides down. Brangaine certainly didn't begrudge him victory in fair battle, but the white knight circled his fallen opponent and, in a booming voice that echoed across the field, demanded that he forsake all feats of arms for a twelvemonth and a day, and moreover, that he give up any and all pursuit of the Lady Iseult.

Beside Brangaine, her lady breathed an audible sigh of relief, even as Brangaine shot her a disapproving glare. "There is no shame in Sir Palomides' affection, my lady, even if you choose not to return it."

"But I fear me he will go further than that," was Iseult's shrugging reply. "One cannot trust a heathen's word."

A far cry, indeed, from her own pronouncements earlier that year, and contrary to Sir Palomides' behaviour--he'd scarcely allowed himself to touch Iseult at all, let alone take liberties. Brangaine had her suspicions as to who had taught Iseult to parrot such sentiments and who the white champion was who had punished Sir Palomides for reaching too high. So she decided it was time to take matters into her own hands, and made her way to the queen's chambers.

The queen, like any wise woman, had noticed her daughter's infatuation with the young harper, and her brow knit as Brangaine revealed her suspicions. "I speak not of proof, Your Grace, but I don't like that Sir Tramtrist and I mistrust his influence on the Lady Iseult."

"To humiliate so great a knight as Sir Palomides, heathen or not, was not well done," the queen agreed. She herself had spent many hours with Palomides, speaking of strange eastern remedies and theories of the stars and the earth that made Brangaine's head spin. Iseult had once listened too, but not since Sir Tramtrist and his songs had turned her head. "I will speak to him, and to Iseult. It is perhaps time that he returned to his native country, as he has so banished Sir Palomides."

It was Brangaine's task to distract Tramtrist's servant, a Breton of about her own age named Governail whose two biggest weaknesses, she soon discovered to her relief, were gossip and his stomach. The two of them settled in the garden with a freshly baked pie while Governail told stories of his young master's childhood exploits.

She had nearly convinced him to inadvertently give away the names of Tramtrist's parents when a crash and a woman's cry echoed from the chamber far above. By the time they arrived, they found Tramtrist sprawled in a wooden tub, gasping for breath, and his squire holding a sword with one telltale notch in the blade. On the floor was a piece of steel, wickedly sharp, still red with the blood of the queen's brother Sir Marholt, that Brangaine had seen many times since that knight's death in Cornwall.

"So it is true," she said aloud, meeting Tramtrist's wide eyes. "Where is the queen?"

"She tried to kill my lord!" stammered the squire. "She burst in here and nearly ran him through!"

"I think, sir, that you should make yourself scarce," advised Brangaine coldly. "Speak to the king if you must, but make haste. Sir Marholt was much loved in this kingdom, and you may rest assured that word of your deed will spread."

"Let it spread," said Tramtrist. "I slew him in fair combat on mine uncle's behalf, the king of Cornwall."

"Be that as it may, the queen will not suffer her brother's killer to linger here unavenged. For your own sake, be discreet and be quick." Without waiting for a response, she strode from the room to break the news to Iseult.

"But it was a trial by combat," protested Iseult. "Even my lady mother cannot blame him for that. For certain the king will not."

"No, but you must put him out of your mind," Brangaine told her. "Would you break the queen's heart?"

Iseult shook her head, one hand over her mouth, and Brangaine slipped her arms around her lady's shoulders. "There, my lady. It will all be well in time. He's but one man in hundreds. Thousands, even."

Iseult jerked away as if stung. "There are none like him. You're a fool to think so."

Brangaine had a hundred retorts to that, but Iseult was staring at the doorway and she turned to find Tramtrist standing there, dressed for a journey and looking for all the world like a sulky child. She supposed he was a year or two older than her lady at most. *Still a child, then, in so many ways.* Perhaps there was a chance for him yet, far away from here.

It was as though she had ceased to exist, so she retreated to the window with one of Iseult's gowns and pretended to fix a fraying sleeve. His name, he finally confessed, was Tristram--at that, Brangaine rolled her eyes--and he had not lied about his origins, save that his father was in fact the king of Lyonesse and his mother the younger sister to King Mark of Cornwall. At that, Brangaine studied him with new interest in spite of herself.

He admitted that Sir Marholt was dead at his hand, but Iseult had barely known her uncle, no matter what her mother thought. And when Sir Tristram knelt before her and swore to be her knight all the days of his life, her lovely green eyes filled with tears.

"I will make you a promise in return," she said, even as Brangaine started from her seat to stop her, "that I shall not marry these seven years but by your assent and choice."

There were worse matches, Brangaine supposed, than to marry a king's son, however unfortunate the circumstances of their meeting. More importantly, seven years was long enough for Iseult, should she be so inclined, to forget this Cornishman for good. Or so Brangaine told herself.

For nearly three years, she even believed it.

There was no word of Sir Tristram of Lyonesse in Ireland for those years--it was as though he'd never existed. The queen mourned her brother for a second time, now that she knew the identity of his killer, while the king urged patience and forbearance, reminding his wife of the rules of trial by combat.

He did so even when called to account in King Arthur's court for having struck down a knight of Sir Lancelot's kindred in similar combat, and though his queen begged him not to go--fearing treachery, as well she might--the king assured her that his cause was right and that he would surely prevail. And as all of Ireland rejoiced when his ship was sighted some few months later, Brangaine's heart sank when she saw the familiar figure standing beside him.

The queen sent for her the next day, and the two stood by her chamber window, looking out upon the gardens where Iseult sat at Tristram's knee while he sang to her.

"Is he here to marry her, Your Grace?" asked Brangaine. "If not, it is an ill thing to trifle so with a lady's heart."

"To see them, one would think he was just as smitten with her as she is with him," the queen murmured, shaking her head. "And yet the king tells me he asks for her not for himself but for his uncle the king of Cornwall."

"Mark of Cornwall?" echoed Brangaine. "Surely he jests."

The queen laughed without humour. "No, Brangaine, I fear he's serious. His word to his uncle means more than my daughter's happiness."

"She doesn't know, does she?"

"Not yet, but we will need to tell her soon. I want you to go with her, Brangaine, protect her when she's queen of Cornwall. For certain her *husband* will not. As for Sir Tristram, we have seen what comes of his oaths."

She left the window and, as Brangaine watched, retrieved a small golden flask from a casket. "I brewed this long ago just in case my daughter were to find herself betrothed to a man not of her choosing. Three drops in each of their glasses as they drink the wedding toast. No more, no less."

"I thought you mistrusted love potions, Your Grace."

"I do. But if it will bring Iseult some ease, I will do what I must." She wrapped the flask in a piece of soft silk and pressed it into Brangaine's hand. "It will be your charge to see that they drink it on their wedding night."

Brangaine nodded. "As you will, Your Grace."

What came of that, all the world knew thereafter.

For Brangaine's part, she blamed herself for leaving the flask unattended in the cabin she shared with Iseult, for becoming distracted by seasickness while her charge drew Sir Tristram into the cabin, for realising only too late what had happened. She pushed open the cabin door

to find the two sleeping lovers entwined in a pile of discarded clothing, the empty flask abandoned on the floor.

"They could marry," she told Governail, having dragged him onto the ship's deck as Tristram and Iseult slept blissfully ignorant below. "He is a king's son and she is a king's daughter. Surely they could return to Lyonesse--"

"He would never do it, Mistress Brangaine," protested Governail. "He gave his oath to King Mark."

"But he gave one to my lady too," snapped Brangaine. "A fine man for oaths, your Sir Tristram! He gives them out as Merlin dispensed prophecies, with no regard for consequences. Why is it that a man's word to another man must be taken as gospel and not his word to a lady?"

"A knight must obey his king--"

"The devil take his king! It is my lady who will pay the price if they are discovered." She gripped the ship's rail hard to regain her composure before turning back to him and speaking more softly. "Your master has a choice, Governail. If he is to be a man of honour, he will marry my lady and treat her as she deserves. And if not, God help him."

"You are too harsh, mistress," Governail told her with a shake of his head. "King Mark is no easy man to serve."

"Then he should find a better king. There are kings aplenty in the world. Surely a knight of such prowess would have a place at Arthur's table in Camelot, if nowhere else. It is pride and nothing more. I challenge you to tell me otherwise."

Governail, to his credit, bowed his head and said nothing. Brangaine sighed. "So, what do we do now, sir? My lady cannot marry King Mark."

When her companion did not respond, Brangaine stared in growing horror. "You can't possibly expect her to marry him, not now. Not after *this*," she hissed, pointing toward the closed cabin door. "If the king were to find out..."

"He won't. And if he does, your lady need only demand trial by combat and I can swear to you my master will prevail."

"So much for God's judgement," Brangaine sniffed. "And what of my lady's wishes? Do they mean nothing?"

"She agreed to it, did she not?"

It was Brangaine's turn to keep silent, recalling the expression on Iseult's face as her mother told her who she was to marry. Her fingers had tightened on Brangaine's hand until the bones shifted, but she had nodded in pained silence all the same. *As you will, Your Grace. I am obedient.* "That is one word. But this is my condition. Your master must keep away from court, away from her. No doubt that is what he wants anyway--all these young men want is to travel the countryside challenging one another for no reason whatsoever, so let him do it. But he will not place my lady in danger for his own foolish whims."

"I will see it done, Mistress Brangaine."

"See that you do, Master Governail, lest we all regret it."

The court of Cornwall, they soon discovered, was little more than a nest of snakes, and all of them bitterly jealous of their newly crowned queen. True to his promise, Governail urged Tristram to spend most of his time from court. As for Brangaine, she did her part and dosed King Mark's wine such that he could scarcely recall his wedding night, let alone that his wife was no longer a maid.

Some stories, long afterward, claimed that Brangaine herself bedded the king in Iseult's place, but it was Iseult who, horror-stricken, flatly refused her maid's offer. "I will not punish you for my own sins, Brangaine, and you must not think of it again."

The other ladies at court soon noted the queen's affection for her handmaid and, perhaps predictably, sought to drive the two apart. When that failed, they enlisted several of King Mark's pettier knights to follow Brangaine into the woods one day when she was collecting herbs.

Iseult had told her time and time again to take an escort, but escorts, Brangaine had always believed, were more hindrance than help. On this occasion, she was forced to admit she was wrong.

"My lady will hear of this," she informed the knights as they bound her hand and foot to a tree. "As she is your queen, rest assured you will pay."

"Dead women don't talk," was the terse reply as one of the knights drew his dagger. "Filthy Irish witch. You're hiding something and we mean to find it out."

Only Brangaine saw the knight in black bearing down upon her captors before he struck. One lost his head before the other could even turn, and the other had enough wit to cry for help, though it did him no good as the new arrival's sword lodged deep in his throat, his blood spattering Brangaine from head to toe.

"Mistress Brangaine," said the knight, in a voice Brangaine knew but could not place, "are you well? Did these ruffians harm you?"

"I...no, they threatened me, but you stopped them from going further," she stammered, twitching against her bonds. The knight raised his sword a third time and sliced through the ropes to set her free. "I thank you, sir. I owe you my life, and my lady--I mean, the Queen of Cornwall--will thank you heartily as well."

"Will she?" the knight asked, a kind of desperate hope in the words. Before he pulled off his helmet to reveal a face browned by the desert sun, Brangaine knew who he was.

"Why, Sir Palomides," she said, reaching up with her apron to wipe the blood from her face. "I am a lucky woman indeed that you were passing by."

"There is a nunnery hard by these woods, mistress. If you will go with me, I'll take you to safety."

For a moment she wondered why he didn't think to take her back to court, but Brangaine had no desire to explain her state or the two dead knights until she could see her lady in private. Nodding, she took Palomides' hand and vaulted onto the horse behind him. Replacing his helmet, he spurred the animal through the woods as Brangaine clung to him. She spared no further thought for the two knights left behind on the forest floor. *They would have murdered me for nothing. They have no right to my pity.*

The nuns quailed at the sight of Sir Palomides' face, but Brangaine quickly explained the situation. Before she could send one of their messengers to Iseult, however, the Saracen knight stopped her.

"I will take your message myself, mistress." Brangaine frowned up at him, and he held up his hands with a shrug. "Can you blame me, truly?"

"Even now, after all this time? Surely you must know there is no hope. She is married, sir, to the king of Cornwall."

Palomides spit on the ground. "That's for the king. Do not deny me, Mistress Brangaine. All I would do is look on her once more."

"See that you do no more than that," warned Brangaine. "You may have saved my life, sir, but my lady's honour I prize higher than all things on this earth."

For the better part of a year, Brangaine remained in the nunnery, venturing daily into the woods to replenish their meagre store of herbs in exchange for their kindness and hospitality.

Even when Iseult returned with Palomides at her side, Brangaine suggested that she remain in seclusion.

"If you see some amongst your courtiers rejoice, my lady, you will know who your enemies are. Beware them. I will abide here a while longer and help these good sisters."

Iseult threw her arms around Brangaine. "It gladdens my heart to see you well, and I will do as you bid me."

"Not forever, my lady. I will come back, but it will do you good to know your court for what it is." Her eyes measured Palomides, who did not look at her. "Be kind to him, my lady. Whatever he has done, it is for you."

"I never asked for it."

"I know that. But pity him even if you cannot care for him. He is only a man."

Iseult, she later learned, took her at her word, even when Tristram himself intervened and battled Palomides nigh unto death. On Iseult's orders, he spared the Saracen knight, and she sent him instead to King Arthur's court at Camelot with a message intended for the ears of Queen Guenevere.

Still, Brangaine stayed within the nunnery's walls as stories spilled from the court of King Mark's growing jealousy of his beautiful queen and rumours of her love for Sir Tristram, greatest and boldest of the Cornish knights. It was only when King Mark accused his wife before all the court of adultery and banished her to a lazar-house that Brangaine bid the good sisters farewell and left the nunnery veiled and wimpled to return to her lady's side.

Instead, as she rode through the woods, she came upon a fair bower and discovered the queen with Sir Tristram as bold as could be, and sighed. "I should never have left you," she murmured.

Governail found her there, his broad face breaking into a smile at the sight of her. "I thought you dead, mistress."

"I was in seclusion, sir. It seemed the best course for my lady's welfare at the time, but I see now that I was wrong."

"Not wrong, mistress." He too looked at the lovers with a shake of his head. "We were fools to think it could end in any way but this."

"And they are fools to stay here. It is too close to court, to that vile king. He may declare himself done with her, but he'll come after her all the same."

"So I told my master," said Governail sadly, "but he'll hear none of it."

"Still proud as ever?"

"Were he otherwise, he would not be as great a knight. But I confess, I wish he were, for his own good and hers."

But when Brangaine broached the subject with Iseult, the queen proved as stubborn as her knight. "I am King Mark's wife, for good or ill, Brangaine, and if he asks me to return, so I shall. His kingdom would fall to rack and ruin without my guidance--ask any of his advisors, for I alone listen to them."

Brangaine knit her brow and was about to protest when the sound of trumpets cut through the woods. "The king!"

Tristram reached for his sword even as Iseult threw her arms around him. "He'll have a dozen men with him at least."

"I can match any one of them--"

"But not *all*, you fool," she hissed. "Even Lancelot of the Lake knew better than to fight twelve men at once."

"What would you have me do?"

For what seemed like an endless moment, Iseult cradled his face in her hands, her forehead pressed to his. "Go, Tristram. Go from here and live. For if you die, you kill me with you. If you would not be a murderer, then go."

"Go where?" He seemed a lost boy for a moment, his voice cracking. "Where in all this earth could I go?"

"Brittany," said Brangaine without thinking. "Hide there for the nonce, until the fuss dies down. Then take service in Camelot. He'll be watching the queen, but he can't watch her forever. Send messages by me and by Governail, but don't write until at least six months hence."

Her eyes met Governail's and he nodded. "She's right. We must make haste, sir, before they find you here."

Still the lovers clung to one another, like honeysuckle to the hazel tree, until Brangaine tugged on Iseult's arm. "My lady, we must go. There's no profit in this."

Weeping, Iseult followed her from the bower, and she clung to Brangaine as the sound of hoofbeats and trumpets drew closer. That was how the king and his men found them, arms twined about one another, Iseult's face buried in Brangaine's shoulder.

"What will you do with your queen, Your Grace?" demanded Brangaine. "If you've sought her out for further torments, I suggest you turn back and let me take her to the holy sisters for peace and seclusion."

"She is my wife to do with as I please," snapped the king. "And it pleases me to take her back to court where she belongs."

"Only if you treat her as your queen and your lady with the respect she is owed. As you see," she added, pointing to the empty bower, "she is alone and desolate, thanks to your filthy accusations."

"Mistress Brangaine, you are too bold."

"I speak from my heart, Your Grace, and from my soul too. Do you treat her well or I will take this case to King Arthur himself in Camelot."

It was the one threat from which King Mark would back down--he had hated and feared the king in Camelot for many years now, though Arthur had done nothing to deserve it, so far as Brangaine knew, save for having all the fame and glory that Mark himself lacked.

Only she saw, as they started down the road, that Iseult glanced back the way they came until the bower faded from sight, tears standing in her beautiful eyes.

Governail held Sir Tristram to his word, or so it seemed, for there were no letters from Brittany in the six months that followed, nor thereafter.

Nearly a year passed before a letter arrived, not from Brittany but from Camelot, in the hand of Queen Guenevere herself.

It grieves me to give you these tidings, but I wished you to hear them from a woman who, above all others, understands your plight. A knight arrived in Camelot a fortnight past with news from Brittany, from the court of King Howell. The king was recently troubled by one of his earls, who made great war upon him and wounded his son nigh unto death. He would have prevailed altogether; had it not been for Sir Tristram, who took the king's part. That

much, perhaps, you have already heard, but the prize for Sir Tristram's prowess and loyalty was the king's daughter, Iseult of the White Hands, in marriage. The news I had from Sir Lancelot, who heard it from one of King Howell's knights, and Sir Lancelot has disavowed all friendship with Sir Tristram for his unfaithfulness to you, his first lady and his love. But be of good cheer, for though she shares your name, she does not share your beauty and grace, and no doubt he will regret his decision anon.

There were tales aplenty of Queen Guenevere, whose marriage to the great Arthur was as childless as Iseult's to King Mark, but whose husband held her in infinitely greater regard, no matter what bitterness had passed between them in the early days of their union. As for Sir Lancelot, greatest of the Round Table knights, his devotion to his queen knew no bounds, and he and Sir Tristram had once been fast friends.

"I wonder if she understands," Iseult whispered afterward. "Her knight has never been unfaithful to her, has he?"

"We can't know that, my lady. Lancelot's sins are his own and he does not sing them to the world as others do."

"Of what does she speak, then, when she says she knows my plight?"

"Why, of Arthur, my lady." Brangaine sat back as Iseult laid her head on her lap, and she smoothed the still-golden curls away from the queen's face. "It is an old tale from before you were born. Your mother told it to me once, of a false Guenevere who Arthur took to his bed for nigh on a year, abandoning his true queen while his lands sickened and died. I don't know the truth of it, to be sure, but that is the story."

Iseult was silent for some time as Brangaine's fingers combed through her hair. She glanced up as she asked, "But he took her back in the end?"

"Aye, he did, but only when the false queen sickened too, for her sins." Brangaine crossed herself. "A wicked trick to play on a king and queen. Your knight, I fear, succumbed to little more than temptation."

"You warned me of him long ago, Brangaine. I should have listened."

"Then listen now, my lady. You are Queen of Cornwall and the second lady of the land, with only Queen Guenevere above you. Learn from her. If Tristram begs your forgiveness, give him leave to fight in your name, but no more than that."

Letters began to fly back and forth between Tintagel and Camelot, each bearing a queen's seal and carried only by trusted messengers. The two women had never set eyes upon one another, but were nonetheless bound close as sisters in knowledge if not in blood. Soon enough, the letters no longer spoke of false loves, but of statecraft and other, more mundane things--how to sweet-talk recreant lords or help damsels wronged by travelling knights.

Even when Tristram returned--as Brangaine knew he would, for the Queen of Ireland's love potion was such as would never fade, even with the passing of years--and Iseult opened her arms to him, it mattered less, for her husband's reputation had diminished as hers grew, and Brangaine regarded her oath to the Queen of Ireland fulfilled. So long as her lady was happy in her illicit love, it mattered little what the world said of her, and indeed all the world said was that she was the queen of second greatest worship in all the land of Logrys.

Which is not to say that all was well, for as lovers do, they quarrelled and fought and scorned one another, and turned back to their wedded vows if and when it suited them--at which point Brangaine would pray for her lady, since Iseult had been wed to King Mark through no choice of her own, unlike her faithless knight. She even spared a thought or two for the lady of the white hands, long since abandoned in Brittany and, at least according to her husband, still a maid after all these years. Brangaine was sceptical, but what mattered was that Iseult believed it.

Even Palomides made his peace with Tristram, in his own way. Brangaine asked him later what brought it about and the Saracen knight sighed. "I tried to tell him that love is free--that I was at liberty to love the Queen of Cornwall as he did, though she never gave me her favour. I do no wrong in loving her, nor in fighting in her name."

"What did he say?"

"That he would fight me to the uttermost."

Brangaine snorted. "That sounds like Tristram. You are a good man and a worthy knight, sir, but you must not let your jealousy get the better of you."

"How do you do it, mistress?" asked Palomides after a moment. "You love her too--I can see it even if Tristram does not."

"Her heart is her own, Sir Palomides, as yours is. She may give it to whomever she chooses, and, however you or I may feel about it, she has chosen Tristram. It is that simple...and that complicated, all at once." She reached out and took his hands for a moment. "I pray that your heart may find peace, sir."

"As do I, though you would not understand it as prayer."

Brangaine smiled. "You underestimate me, Sir Palomides. There are as many ways to pray as there are to love."

In the end, Brangaine retired to the same nunnery where she had once sought refuge with the aid of Sir Palomides--now christened in the presence of King Arthur and Queen Guenevere themselves, and with Sir Tristram of all people as his godfather. Of the death of her lady and Sir Tristram, she would not speak, save that in her prayers, despite the disapproval of her fellow nuns, she cursed the name of King Mark of Cornwall who had murdered his nephew out of spite and jealousy.

She died long after both Cornwall and Camelot had fallen to dust and, by her request, was buried beside her lady, loyal to the last.

End Notes

As I mentioned above, my primary source for the plot of this story is Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*, which takes a rather different view of Tristram and Iseult's relationship, arguing that it began earlier when she healed his wounds from the battle with her uncle Sir Marholt and that the love potion only compounded an emotional connection that already existed. He also strengthened the relationship between Iseult and Brangaine, so I thought he'd be a good choice as a base text.

The reference to Brangaine and Iseult switching places on Iseult's wedding night appears in Gottfried von Strassburg's poem *Tristan*, and it is from that passage that the story's title comes:

"Whatever her companion did with her, whatever demands he made on her, she met them to his satisfaction with brass and with gold. I am convinced that it can rarely have happened before that such fine brass was passed as bed-money for a payment due in gold. Indeed I would wager my life on it that false coin of such nobility had never been struck since Adam's day, nor had so acceptable a counterfeit ever been laid beside a man." (Gottfried, trans. Hatto, p. 207)

Malory's Book of Sir Tristram goes on for at least 200 more pages after Tristram's marriage to Iseult of the White Hands, but it mostly concerns tournaments and quests and periodic descents into madness (as one does), so I decided to leave it alone. Tristram, Iseult, and Palomides continue their bizarre love triangle through most of this section, which I wrote about in a different fic, and it ends with Palomides and Tristram finally making peace and agreeing that both of them are capable of loving Iseult without killing one another (shockingly enough).

One of the interesting aspects of Iseult's story is that she's rarely demonized in the way that Guenevere is, partly because her husband King Mark is such a repulsive excuse for a human being, particularly in Malory's version, where all his actions are driven by intense loathing and jealousy for Tristram, including his marriage to Iseult in the first place. But I do love that Malory gives Iseult and Guenevere this constant epistolary friendship even though the two women only meet once or twice in the entirety of *Le Morte Darthur*, so I wanted to make a few nods to that here.

The story of the False Guenevere does not appear in Malory, but in the 13th century Vulgate Cycle early in the *Prose Lancelot*.

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!