

## 8. A Drop of Blood

“Tristan has saved my life once more,” the king announced to the council. “And as long as there is no heir being born to me, he will be heir to Tintagel, should something happen to me. He is my nephew and we do not have a knight at court who is as brave and loyal as him. As for the rumors at court, regarding my nephew and my wife. I have heard them, and I forbid anybody to ever make such remarks again. Those who are caught spreading lies, will be punished for treason. My wife and my nephew are innocent. And to prove my trust in them, I have Isolde care for both our injured bodies in the same chamber.”

Both Isolde and Tristan as well as the king tried their best to prove the rumors wrong. Isolde spent her days in the royal chamber that now accommodated Tristan, too. He had suffered broken ribs and a large wound to his calf that had to be sewed. The king complained of constant headaches, probably from his temple that had hit one of the rocks. Otherwise, save for a few scratches and bruises, he was not injured, it was a miracle. He was out and about faster than Tristan, who took his time resting. He longed to be alone with Isolde, even though his mind told him otherwise.

“Isolde, this is our chance to break the spell,” he whispered to her as the king was out of the room one evening. “Let us prove the king that we are not deceiving him. We must try.”

Isolde began to cry. “Just once more, I want to be alone with you. Then I will let you go.”

“Isolde, no -” Tristan said, but she cut him off.

“Please. The king has guests tonight and will be up late,” she whispered. “Just this one time.”

Tristan exhaled and kissed Isolde. “Just once.”

Outside, the maid had paid close attention. Malory had promised good payment to whomever could bring him information about Tristan and Isolde. She rushed to lord Malory to present him with these news. Malory had been poring over the books, but now he leaned back in his chair, crossed his arms behind his head and smiled to himself, exposing crooked teeth.

The maid looked at him expectantly.

“I will double your payment if you could do me a favor,” he finally said.

The king welcomed Lord Armand of Caerhays Castle, who had come with his family to present his two daughters Genna and Merwayne, hoping they would find a position at Tintagel since suitors had been few and most of the unacceptable. Officially, he had come to present the king with improvements to his tax system, though. As the evening went on, Isolde tried to find a moment to retreat to her chamber. Not only did she long for Tristan, but the Armands were unbearable. Lord Armand was a red haired pig clad in velvet, and his daughters were, well, piglets. The mother had died giving birth to the younger one.

Finally, much longer than she had anticipated, Isolde was able to let the king know she would retreat for the night. She rushed up the stairs to the royal chamber and quietly entered the room with her maid. Tristan was sleeping, or at least pretended to. Moments later, Isolde slipped between her sheets and the maid blew out the candle. On her way out, though, she spread flour on the floor, trying to make it an even layer as lord Malory had instructed her to. She closed the door and walked away with loud steps. Then came back to the door as silent as a

mouse.

“Tristan, my love, are you awake?” Isolde whispered.

“Yes,” Tristan answered.

“The maid is gone, and Armand is not going to be done talking for a long time.”

Without a word, Tristan sat up in his bed and was about to step out when a ray of moonlight fell on the floor. Tristan immediately spotted the flour.

“We are being watched again, Isolde,” he warned. She looked at him from the other bed, then to the ground.

“I miss you so much, Tristan,” she whispered, almost weeping.

An urge for mischief took a hold of Tristan, and he stood up in his bed. He bounced on the mattress a few times, then took a leap and landed on next to Isolde. With a loud giggle, the lovers embraced each other. That was all the maid needed to hear to draw her conclusion, and she hurried into the hall where the king was. Lord Malory’s men were instructed to notify him of the maid, and he had her brought to him immediately. She only gave one nod, and Malory got up from his chair.

The conversation around the table stopped, everyone looked at the lord of Launceston.

“My king, all I have been doing is for the sake of Cornwall, and for the sake of Tintagel. There is treason within this castle, and it is happening right now, in the royal chamber.”

Silence. Then Mark slammed his golden wine goblet on the table.

“And I have made it clear that whomever dares to speak of Isolde and Tristan again will be punished.”

Malory bowed deeply.

“My King Mark, this time, it is not a rumor. This time, it is a fact, and if you follow me, you may witness what we have all been suspecting.”

The king pushed himself up from the chair with both hands and glared at Malory.

“How dare you?” he shouted. “I will have you hanging from the gallows before the night is over!”

His face became as red as the wine he had been drinking. Slowly, he walked around the table, glared once more at Malory and then walked out of the hall. The wine had him confused and overly angry at Malory. He would prove him wrong. Malory and even the Armands followed the king to his chamber, keeping a safe distance.

Inside the room, Isolde and Tristan had been warned by all the noise and voices. Tristan leapt back into his own bed and both turned their backs on each other, pretending to be fast asleep. Before Mark could open the door, Malory gathered his courage and stepped in front of the king.

“Allow me,” he said, taking a torch from the holder in the wall and carefully opened the door. The orange light poured into the room, and everyone saw the fine layer of flour on the ground. It was undisturbed, no trace of a footprint was in it. To the right, Tristan was sleeping peacefully, to the left, Isolde was sleeping, too, curled up underneath a heavy down blanket.

“Give me that,” Mark yelled at Malory, and grabbed the torch from his hand. “Nobody just looks at the queen sleeping. Guards!” The guards formed a circle around lord Malory. “This man is guilty of treason, and I condemn him to death. Hang him right away.”

Malory was about to collapse, his knees were not able to carry him and two guards had to hold him up. How could this be? Did the maid betray him? His head sank to his chest and just before the guards could drag him away, he saw it. There was a tiny droplet of blood on the flour. And there, another!

“Wait!” Malory said and tried to wrestle free from the guards’ grip.

“I don’t want to hear your last words!” the king growled.

“No, there’s blood. There is blood on the flour!”

The king did not know what that meant at first, but then he took a closer look at the floor. Yes, there were droplets of blood. Both Tristan and Isolde sat up in their beds and rubbed their eyes in all innocence. But Mark did not believe any of it anymore. He tore the blanket off Tristan and there it was - the wound in his calf had opened again and was bleeding. He stared at it for a second, then went to the bed of the queen. She resisted, clutching her blanket for a few seconds, but then the king tore it away. There was blood, on her calves, too, but no wound. The king froze, overwhelmed by the reality of being betrayed by the two people that he loved most. Then he began to laugh, a shrill, insane laughter. He lowered the torch and set Isolde’s bed on fire, then the bed of Tristan. Both jumped out of their beds quick enough, but were seized by the guards. But the beds and the whole royal chamber was reduced to ashes, and it was a miracle that the rest of the castle did not burn down as well.

As morning dawned, the king sat on his throne, looking as cold and hard as the walls of Tintagel.

He did not have a moment of sleep. Instead, he had ordered the castle to awaken and all lords and knights to gather in the throne room. As he saw them kneeling before him, he began to talk with a hoarse voice.

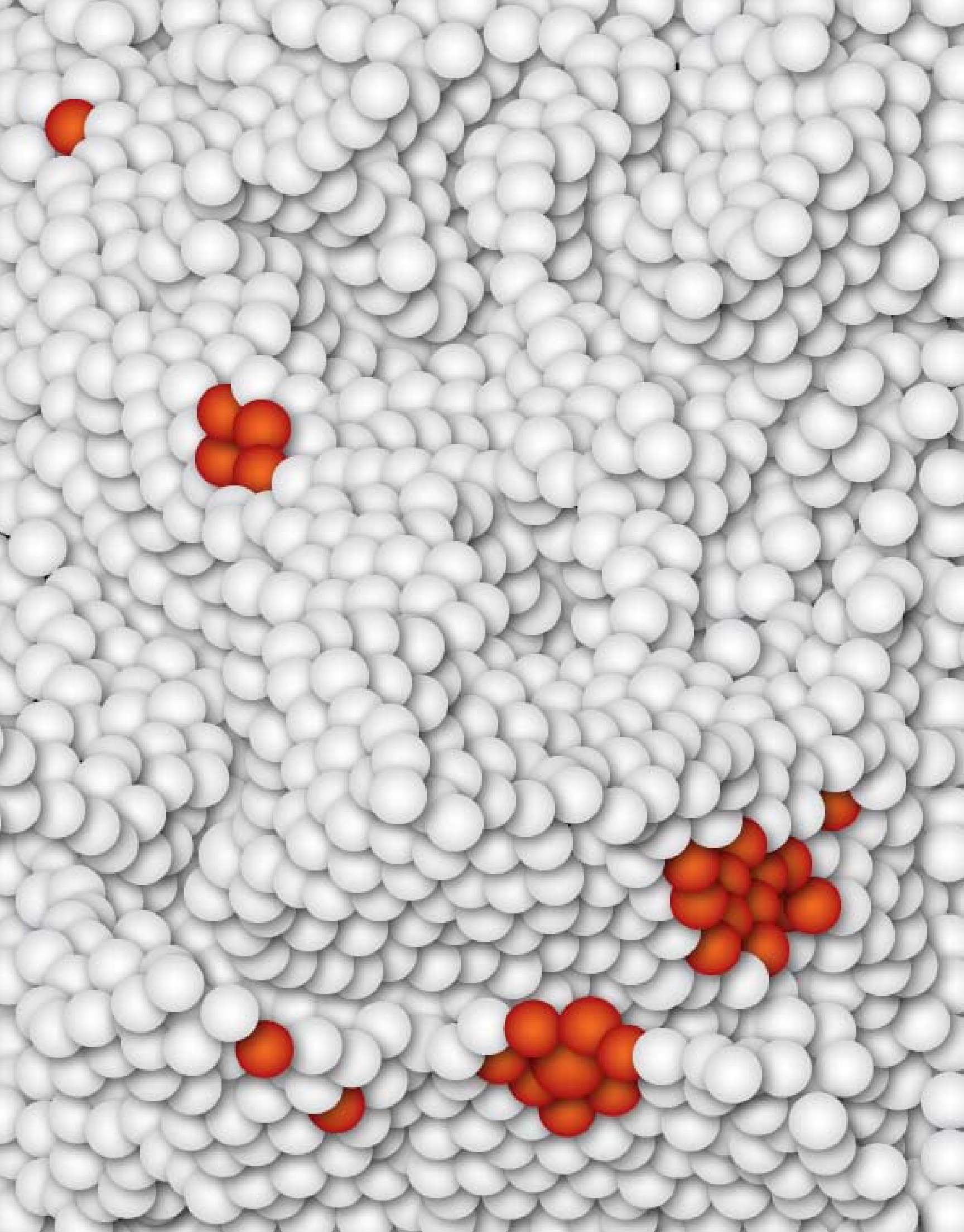
“My wife, Isolde of Ireland, and my nephew, Tristan of Lyonesse have betrayed me and Cornwall with lies and treason. I sentence Isolde to the stake, Tristan gets the noose. Set up the stake in the yard and have the gallows next to it. I want them to watch each other as they die.”

A murmur went through the throne room. Nobody had ever heard King Mark speak such cruel words, and public executions had been rare.

“Set everything up now. I want them dead before noon.”

His men rose and began the preparations. A few hours later the gaolers had brought Tristan and Isolde to the yard. Isolde fainted as she saw the stake and the gallows, but Tristan did not flinch. Deep inside, he did not feel guilt. He still loved Isolde and she was worth dying for. He did not want her to die, but Mark had left no room for negotiation. Isolde’s limp body was tied to the pole, the dry branches under her feet. Tristan was led up the scaffolding to stand on the trap door, and the hangman placed the noose around his neck and bound his feet with rope. Tristan’s eyes watched only Isolde. But when the hangman stepped down and lit a torch, ready to light the straw that would get the fire going, Tristan closed them. The priest came up to both of them, asking for final words, but Tristan declined, Isolde was not capable of talking. She struggled weakly against the ropes and wept. All was set, and the hangman looked up to the balcony, where the king was looking on, his face a white mask without expression.

King Mark was paralyzed by feelings of sadness, rage and despair. He had been a fool to think that he was the one to be with Isolde, not Tristan. The young lovers had always been as if made for each other. His dream of love had been an illusion. He was old, Isolde had been wasted on him. But why play this game? They both had



lied to him again and again, and therefore they had to die. And he would watch.

Slowly, he raised his hand and signaled the hangman to light the fire. The straw underneath the wooden blocks and branches was ablaze quickly, and Isolde shrieked from fear. The whole court held its breath. But then, sounds of a commotion broke the silence. It came from the gate, where guardsmen were shouting at each other. Then came the clanging of metal, but not from fighting, it was like wine goblets being slammed against each other, and rattling. Tristan opened his eyes again.

A woman screamed and then they all saw it: a dark crowd of lepers poured through the gates, that the guards had failed to close in time, and now were too terrified to get near to. The lepers had been blamed for several deadly outbreaks of the pox that year, and now they invaded the castle, smearing their filth everywhere. They were led by who was formerly known as knight Blackheath of Tintagel. Leprosy had eaten away half his face and he reeked of rot and illness. He was still tall and strong, thought, unlike the other deformed creatures that huddled around him with their bells and clappers. Next to Blackheath appeared his loyal squire Gorgy of the Scillies, who had accompanied his master into this gruesome exile, and God had blessed him by not bringing the disease upon him for this act of kindness.

A mass panic arose in the court, where people found themselves cornered, the lepers blocking the way out. Some tried to enter the castle but the guards locked and bolted the doors from the inside. Other people were pushed against the fire that began grew bigger by the second. People screamed for the king to send his guards as the black tidal wave of the doomed swept across the yard, until they had the stake surrounded, where Isolde whimpered from fear of the fire. The lepers rattled and laughed, enjoying their play until Blackheath raised his sword and called his followers to order.

He knelt before the king, who was still looking on without movement. The whole grotesque scene had unfolded under his eyes like a strange dream, and all he could do is look on.

The rest of the lepers knelt, too, and stayed that way when Blackheath addressed the king.

“Forgive us, my king. My people and I smelled death and came to see its source. I see a beautiful, treacherous lady put to the stake. And I have an offer for you. If that lady desires dirt and disease, lies and sin, she should be sent with us. Our men have not held a woman in years, some decades. We would enjoy the company of such a fair lady, until she withers away under our rotten hands.”

“No,” Tristan shouted, desperately trying to writhe out of the ropes that bound his hands and feet.

The king was disgusted, yet the cruel offer pleased his thirst for revenge. Isolde would have what she deserved, she would have so much of it that it would kill her. Slower, and more painful. Tristan would hang nonetheless.

Slowly, the king nodded, and with screams of victory, some of the most greedy leper men tried to climb the pile of wood to get to Isolde. Some pushed away the branches with their canes, others were less careful. Their eyes bulging out and faces distorted from perverse lust, they tried to make a way through the halfway lit wood with their bare hands. Two of the lepers' grey rags caught fire, and the men were fully ablaze within a heartbeat. They stumbled back, then ran across the yard, reaching out for help, but none was given by the terrified spectators. Isolde began to scream again. She would rather burn than be carried off by these men.

But it was too late. A few of them had successfully extinguished the flames with their soggy overcoats



and mud they had scooped up from the ground. Now Blackheath himself walked through the pathway his men had prepared, and with his sword he cut the ropes that bound Isolde and took her in his arms. Isolde fainted from sheer terror after she saw the grimacing face of Blackheath looming over her. The lepers cheered and rattled, and more chaos ensued in the courtyard. Gorgy the squire was feeling adventurous and loaded his crossbow. He once had been the most excellent bowman at Tintagel, and he wanted to remind the castle that he still was.

He took aim and let the bolt fly across the yard, piercing the rope that held the trapdoor which Tristan was standing on shut. With a jolt, the door opened under Tristan's feet and the noose tightened around his neck. The world swayed in front of him, and the last thing he saw was Blackheath, running his dark tongue over Isolde's face like a hunting dog lapping up the blood of its dead prey.

Gorgy saw him fight death to the last moment, though hardly anybody else was paying attention to the gallows. "A strong boy," he said to himself, as his peers danced past him toward the gate. "His neck's not broken, and he hasn't soiled himself yet. What a shame to waste this one."

He turned around to follow his master, but then had a second thought that was even more reckless than the first one. He loaded his crossbow again, took aim and shot at Tristan's legs that still lightly twitched. The ropes that bound them came loose and fell into the trap. Quickly, he reloaded the crossbow and took a final shot. He smiled at his success when the noose burst and Tristan disappeared through the trap door. If the boy had any luck left within this lifetime, this was the moment to use it.

Tristan had been almost unconscious during those last few moments. When his body hit the ground, he awoke to unbelievable pain, his head was pounding and he threw up the little contents of his stomach. It was dark, and there was noise outside. Then it all came back to him. The gallows, the lepers, Isolde. Isolde! He did not take time to think about how come he was freed, but he knew he had to try to save Isolde from Blackheath. He sat up, trying to defy the hammering pain in his head and the dizziness. The ropes on his hands were tight, but not impossible to untie. Desperate, he tore at them using his teeth and one of the knots loosened. While he struggled with the ropes, he spotted the small door through which the dead body would be pulled out. He kicked it open. Legs were running all around him, there was still screaming and rattling as the lepers teased the people in the court on their way out. Tristan took a deep breath and hurled himself out from the insides of the scaffolding, into the court. The hangman had drawn his Mercy, with which he sometimes executed those who took too long to die. Two lepers danced around him, daring him to soil his sword with their disease, trying to touch him. Tristan jumped in their game, and the hangman's eyes widened with surprise. Tristan took advantage of the opportunity and wrestled Mercy from the hangman, then slashed the man's throat with it. With the next two strokes, he cut down the two lepers and ran after Isolde.

Most lepers were halfway through the gate again, and Blackheath and Gorgy had mounted their horses that looked just as bad as their masters, and Blackheath had flung Isolde on the saddle in front of him. From behind, the guards had finally come to their senses and chased the remaining lepers out with torches and threats. From the balcony, the king's guards screamed their lungs out, trying to have someone arrest Tristan, but in the court, the noise was too loud. Some guards rushed into the yard to follow Tristan, but he covered himself in a the ragged coat that he had ripped from the lepers and disappeared in the crowd. Gorgy looked over his

shoulder and was able to spot Tristan by his light skin.

“That boy really is something,” he growled and loaded his crossbow. But the next second, Tristan was gone. Gorgy searched the crowd but nothing. In his anger he shot a random leper through the forehead, and his corpse was trampled deep into the muddy trail by the rest of the crowd.

King Mark leaned over the balustrade, raging with anger about Tristan’s escape.

“Get him! Get him! Get him!” he screamed again and again at his men in that yard, until his face was red and glistening with sweat.

But Tristan was smarter than them. He did not follow the lepers, but ran straight for the woods. Blackheath and Gorgy rode ahead and let their grisly entourage follow at its own pace. They would head for their field far away from the castle and the town of Tintagel, where the lepers lived in caves, earth-holes or makeshift tents. They would have to ride a part of the way through the forest, and that is where Tristan awaited them, having taken a short cut on foot.

He sat in a tree top above the trail and heard Blackheath and Gorgy approach, the sword ready in his hand. Tristan knew he had only one chance at this, it was all or nothing.