

# SYNOPSIS



## ACT I

On board Tristan's ship, Isolde, daughter of the King of Ireland, is raging at her fate and would like to have her mother's magic art of calling up a storm to wreck the ship. To free Cornwall from paying tribute to Ireland, Tristan, nephew of King Mark of Cornwall, had killed Morold, the champion of Ireland and Isolde's fiancée, in single combat. On his return to Cornwall, Tristan had persuaded his uncle to ask for the hand of Isolde, then went back and now is escorting her to King Mark's court.

Isolde is angry when she hears a song about an Irish girl mockingly sung by a sailor. She sends her attendant Brangäne to summon Tristan: he answers mildly that he must steer the ship; but Kurwenal answers roughly that Tristan is not Isolde's vassal, singing a vigorous song, taken up by the sailors and clearly audible to Isolde, celebrating Tristan's killing of Morold.

Isolde tells Brangäne how, severely wounded in the duel with Morold, Tristan, under the assumed name of Tantris, had been healed by the magical arts of Isolde. She had recognised Tristan (a piece broken out of his sword matched the fragment in Morold's head), but had spared his life. She now complains bitterly that he has repaid her by seeking her as a bride for his old uncle, an insult that no one would have dared if Morold were alive and Cornwall still owed tribute to Ireland. Brangäne reminds her of the love potion which her mother has given her, but Isolde thinks only of another potion, a poison. When Kurwenal announces their imminent arrival in Cornwall and tells her to prepare to land, she gives him a message for Tristan: he must make amends for a wrong. She orders Brangäne to pour the poison into a golden goblet.

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When Tristan arrives, Isolde claims that Morold's blood still lies between them. Tristan offers his sword for her to kill him if Morold was so dear to her, but she says King Mark would hold it against her if she killed him. Instead she offers a drink of atonement. Understanding her intention, he drinks and Isolde seizes the goblet and drinks the remainder. But Brangäne has substituted the love potion and they fall into each other's arms, oblivious of all around them, as the ship reaches land and King Mark approaches to claim his bride.

## ACT II

In the garden in King's Mark's castle in Cornwall, Isolde waits for Tristan as King Mark and his court leave on a hunt. She brushes aside Brangäne's warning of danger, particularly from Melot, answering that he is Tristan's friend and has arranged the hunt so that Tristan can meet her. Brangäne, suffering pangs of remorse for her part in the love between Tristan and Isolde, begs her to defer the meeting. Isolde says that not Brangäne, but Love itself was responsible for their love. She gives the signal by extinguishing a torch, telling Brangäne to keep watch.

Tristan arrives and the lovers embrace, praising the night as the friend of their love, as opposed to the inimical day. Night, as Tristan explains, is equivalent to death and death will not part them, but unite them forever: only in death can their love be truly fulfilled. Brangäne's warning of the approach of day goes unheeded and they are taken by surprise when Kurwenal rushes in, followed closely by King Mark, Melot and the court.

King Mark is deeply wounded by Tristan's betrayal. He recalls that when his wife died he refused to marry again for Tristan's sake, intending him as his heir, agreeing to marry again only when Tristan added his voice to the wishes of his people. Tristan had found him a peerless bride and his joy in her had made him more vulnerable than before.

Tristan replies that he is unable to offer an answer that his uncle would understand. He asks Isolde if she will follow him in death. She consents and he kisses her on the forehead, arousing the wrath of Melot, who draws his sword. Tristan draws his sword to defend himself, but lets it fall and is wounded by Melot.



### ACT III

*In Kareol, Tristan's ancestral castle in Brittany.* Tristan, his wound still unhealed, lies under a tree as a shepherd plays a mournful tune while keeping watch for a ship which is bringing Isolde. Tristan wakes, but is unsure where he is. Kurwenal tells him that he has been brought home to recover from his wound. Tristan replies that he has already been in death's kingdom and only returned to find Isolde, who still tarries in the realm of light. Kurwenal explains that Isolde has been sent for, as the only one able to heal his wound, as she had done before. In delirious excitement, Tristan thinks he sees the ship approaching. He yearns death, who has always been near him for his father had died before he was born and his mother on giving birth to him. The shepherd's tune changes to a cheerful strain - the ship has been sighted. As Kurwenal goes to the shore to meet Isolde, Tristan tears off the bandage from his wound. He is only able to murmur Isolde's name, before dying at her feet. As she reproaches him for dying before her, another ship is sighted. Kurwenal tries to bar the gate as King Mark and Melot arrive with Brangäne. Kurwenal kills Melot and is killed by Mark's men, falling at his master's feet. The king grieves to find this carnage. He had been told of the potion by Brangäne and had not only forgiven Tristan and Isolde but had come to unite them. Isolde, oblivious of her surroundings, is transfigured as she joins Tristan in death.