

III



❧ GUINEVERE ❧

The High King's bride was brought to him in the spring of the year that followed his victories; she was the prize of peace and the promise of fair weather after storm. Even the heavens smiled upon her, the storytellers said. On the day of her arrival, the sky was a cloudless blue. Sunshine burnished the golden stone of the walls of Camelot and sparkled on the broad river that curled around the castle's foot.

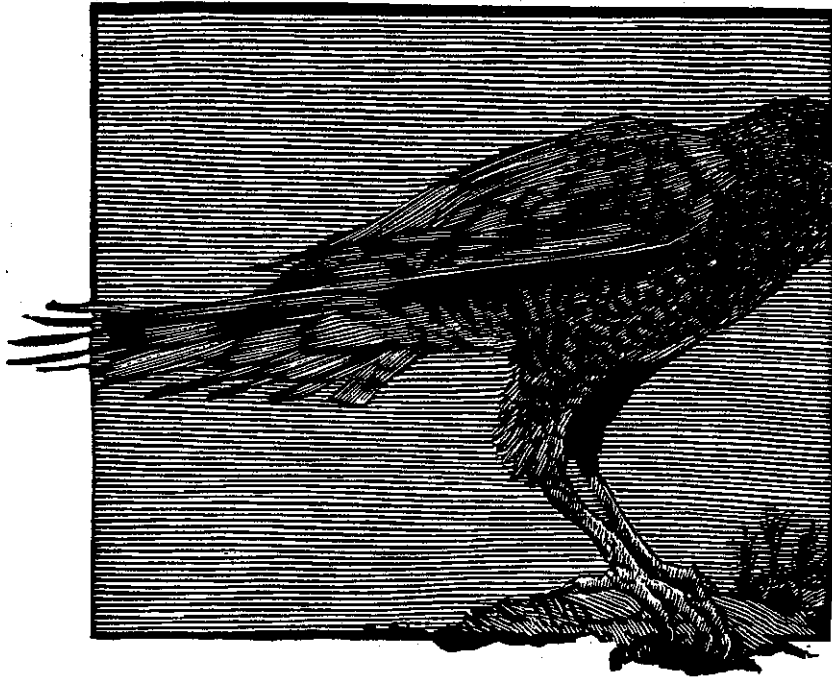
The river was the bride's highway, for she journeyed to Arthur by water, sailing as smoothly as a swan in a royal barge canopied in silk and ornamented with gold. Her oarsmen were liveried in white, and the gilded blades flashed as they swept the water.

Past the willows whitening in the breeze, the pale barge glided, past stands of aspen, past green river reeds, into the shadow of Camelot's walls. The oars lifted in unison then, as the barge slid onto the riverbank. There, the High King himself waited to welcome his Queen. The common people were clustered nearby, but they caught only a glimpse of her as she stepped from the barge and took the King's outstretched hands. They saw a tall young woman, her shining hair floating loose around her shoulders, as became a maiden, her underdress, called a cote-hardie, was as pale as moonlight, and the trailing panels of her overdress were edged in silver miniver. The courtiers of Camelot gathered around her, bright as birds of many colors, and hid her from view.

The maiden was Guinevere, daughter to Leodegran of Camelard. She was the lily of the west, the storytellers said, the only maiden worthy of Arthur the King. Yet Merlin the Enchanter had disputed Arthur's choice. In a voice as bleak as the winter wind, Merlin had told the High King that Guinevere would bring him sorrow. Arthur, mighty in victory, ignored the old man's warnings, and Merlin was silenced.

Leodegran felt nothing but joy, and he expressed it handsomely. For Guinevere's dowry he gave a hundred knights to Arthur's service. He also sent to the High King an enormous table, constructed in Uther Pendragon's time, its shape, a perfect circle, reflected the perfection of the company of warriors that Arthur was forming. Among that company, besides the knights of Leodegran and knights who had fought beside





A true warrior was young Gawain of Orkney, knighted on King Arthur's wedding day. His name, the poets said, meant "hawk of May."

Arthur, were three of the sons of Lot of Orkney. Arthur had kept them by him to train among his own people, their mother, Morgause, he had banished to her Orkney holdings. She had Lot's youngest son in her care. The eldest of the young men, Gawain, was knighted on Arthur's wedding day.

So the marriage was made and the days of feasting began. On the floor of the High King's hall, primroses and lavender were strewn among the rushes for sweetness. The long trestle tables gleamed with gold: with the nef, in the shape of a ship, used for holding the salt, with chased dishes divided to contain cloves, mace, saffron,

cinnamon, cumin, aniseed and coriander, the spices that the courtiers loved, with ewers and basins for the bathing of hands, with the heavy platters that bore swans, peacocks, partridges and pheasants, all of them roasted, then re-dressed in their feathers, with bowls for the stews of venison, rabbit, boar and pork. The amount of food was kingly indeed. A meal might offer only three courses—announced by a fanfare of trumpets—but the courses consisted of thirty dishes each.

The feasting hall was full of sound and movement. Pages moved to and fro, bearing dishes. Among the rushes, the King's hounds played and fed on scraps that were thrown their way. Above the celebrants, hooded in velvet, their jesses ornamented by silver bells, the King's hawks shifted on their perches. Higher still, in an oriel, harpists played and minstrels sang.

Guinevere presided by the King's side, her brown hair now braided and coiled over her ears in the seemly scrolls of a wife and covered with a net of gold. She had the composure proper to a queen, with a glance of peculiar sweetness and a becoming modesty that showed in the swift rose that bloomed in her pale skin when she bent her head under her husband's smile. "She is passing welcome," Arthur had said when he greeted her at the river. "I have loved her long, and therefore nothing is so dear to me as she." And it was true, as all could see, the King's ease and delight illumined the feasting and brought pleasure to all the company.



But Merlin's mood was different. Although he gave her the courtesy that was her due, his look was grave. The Queen made no comment on this, thinking, perhaps, that such was the Enchanter's habitual demeanor. But Kay, the seneschal, flushed with wine and bristling in his brother's defense, said at last in his surly, stuttering way, "These long looks poorly suit the wedding feast, old man."

Merlin replied: "Guinevere brings Arthur's sorrow, and she is here by his choice."

"It seems not. She brings him joy. Perhaps your magic has left you." Kay took a drink of wine and opened his mouth to make further observations, he shut it again, however, when he caught the Enchanter's cold gaze.

"You were ever an ill speaker, Kay," said Merlin. "You would do well to remember that my powers will not leave unless I let them go."

"Show your powers then," said Kay. Heads turned, for the seneschal had spoken loudly. A little silence fell in the great chamber.

"My skills are not for idle show. To use them at all—especially to use them lightly—invites attention from the old ones, who become vigilant when magic ruffles the air. Their eyes will turn toward us. And their gaze we will be safer without." Kay made the sign that averted evil, and around him, several older knights did the same.

Then the Queen smiled, breaking the tension. She said, "Lord Enchanter, we do not ask as a challenge to your power. Only make me an illusion for my bride gift, to give me pleasure."

And after a moment had passed, Merlin nodded. "Madam, as you wish," he said. "If you will come to me in your own tower court when the sun stands at noon, I will make an enchantment for you."

Almost as elusive as the folk of Faerie, Guinevere bore a name to match her character. The word was Welsh for "white phantom."



His dark robes billowing out around him, the old man turned and left the hall.

An hour later—for feasts in those days began at ten in the morning—the courtiers walked, in twos and threes, to the courtyard that lay before the building called the Queen's Tower, a pretty, sunny place, bordered by flowering pear and apple trees, that Arthur had built for his bride's pleasure. The Enchanter awaited them, his cloak was thrown back to reveal that he wore a sword. At his feet lay a small linen sack. A curious expression—a mountebank's leer—twisted his austere features.

The courtiers formed a whispering ring around him. Guinevere, her eyes as bright as a child's, signaled for the enchantment to begin.

"I give you old magic that I learned in Wales. This feat is not my own," Merlin said. With a glance at Kay the doubter, he added, "I summon the clouds." Lightly and slowly, tendrils and puffs of white drifted down from the blue and curled the tower roof, spreading to form a snowy ceiling forty feet above the Enchanter's head. Cool shadow fell on the tiles of the courtyard.

"And a ladder to the sky." From the linen sack, the Enchanter drew a coil of rope, which he held flat across both outstretched hands. He began to whistle, a reedy, wailing melody. In response, the rope trembled. Unwinding itself coil by coil, swaying serpent-like to the tune of Merlin's song, the rope ascended until one end vanished into the whiteness of the cloud and its long length hung straight, dangling free above the paving tiles.

"And a hare for the hunt." The Enchanter reached into the sack once more and withdrew from it a tiny creature, no bigger than a mouse. He held it to his lips and whispered over it, and as he whispered, the creature swelled until it took the form of a living hare, pale gray of fur and black of eye. Its ears twitched enquiringly as Merlin spoke. Then the Enchanter lifted his hand swiftly, as if sending a bird into flight, and the hare swarmed up the rope like a cat, disappearing into the cloud.

And a maiden to hunt the hare." The sack yielded a little doll in the shape of a peasant girl. Merlin set it on the pavement and whispered once again, and before the company's eyes, the doll grew and trembled into life. A maiden stood among them, blinking uncertainly and glancing from face to face. At her master's command, however, she grasped the rope and climbed it hand over hand until she touched the cloud. She reached for it as if it were solid earth and pulled herself up until she, too, disappeared into whiteness. The last that was seen of her was her bare dangling feet.

Observing his audience solemnly staring upward, caught in his spell, Merlin added with a wink, "And a man to comfort the maid," and dug into the linen sack once more. This time his catch grew into a sturdy, comely youth who grinned at his creator and swiftly climbed the rope into the cloud country above. The courtiers relaxed into laughter. This was a lusty conceit, suitable for a wedding feast. Even Kay laughed at the commotion above their heads, as the maiden in the cloud squealed and



gasped and then fell silent, save for muffled giggles.

But Merlin's face took on a tight-lipped, sour look. "This is not comfort, but mischief," he said. He snapped his fingers once. The giggles from the maiden ceased, and a moment later, the young woman he had fashioned slipped from the cloud and landed panting at his feet. Her tumbled hair and unlaced bodice told the tale of her adventure, and she hid her face from the courtiers' smiles.

Once more Merlin snapped his summons. In answer, the youth appeared, dropping lightly to the pavement with the hare in his arms. He gave a bow to the company and one to Merlin, then he reached for the maiden. But Merlin said, "For shame, for shame, to seduce a young maiden. Let her be." He turned to Kay, the senechal: "Surely the seducer deserves to pay a penalty?"

"Aye," Kay said, grinning. "He has vigor but lacks virtue."

In the next moment, the grin froze on his face. With a sudden movement, the Enchanter drew his sword and swung it. The young man's head fell to the ground. For an instant his body stayed upright, a fountain of blood throbbing into the air and spattering the pavement and the ladies' robes. Then the body, too, fell.

Arthur thrust his white-faced Queen behind him and said, "This



Merlin made magic for an amusement — a hare that climbed like a cat. The exercise was dangerous: It drew the eyes of Faerie.



is madness. Death is too severe a punishment for a dalliance you yourself invented, Merlin. What bride gift is this that you have made?"

"You find me too severe?" the Enchanter replied. "Well then, I must needs make a happy ending." He stooped over the body and the head so that his robes hid both from view. Then he stood back, and the young man arose, alive once more by Merlin's magic.

But something was awry. The youth stared at them, mouthing silently. His features faced over his shoulder blades, and his feet shuffled in his own blood. His head had been put on backward.

"Oh, pity of God," said Kay. "It is better that he die than live like that."

No punishment at all, then?" said Merlin. With one hand, he twisted the young man's head until it faced forward again. Then he touched man, maiden and hare in turn, they shrank to the size of toys, and he thrust them into the sack. A whistle brought the rope, and it coiled itself away. Above the courtiers' heads, the cloud faded into ribbons and blew away.

"You do ill to doubt my powers, Kay," said Merlin, adding to the Queen, "See, lady, it was illusion. Even the blood has gone." Then he, too, vanished.

So ended the entertainment, as capricious in its mixture of delight and horror, of promise and threat, as the Enchanter himself. But that exercise of magic, trivial in itself, did seem to stir the air and arouse the attention of the folk of Faerie, as Merlin had said it would. It was as if in playing with the power that he shared with the old ones by virtue of his fairy blood, the Enchanter opened wide a door to them, making the human men and women he counseled—and himself as well—vulnerable to their weapons.

The first of the old ones' incursions came almost at once, in the form of a drama played out in the High King's own hall. Arthur's wedding feast continued, as great feasts did then, through many days. And on a morning two days after the incident in the Queen's courtyard, the feasting was disrupted. Into the hall—unseen, it turned out, by the guards outside—a white stag leaped, its flanks streaked with a gray foam of sweat and blood showing at its nostrils. It tore through the chamber, pursued by a brachet—a dog that hunted by scent. Behind the brachet, a pack of coursing hounds streamed, and in their midst was a woman astride a white horse. She was a pale creature, crowned by the darkness of her flying hair, she wore the green gown of Faerie, and around her neck was slung an ivory hunting horn.

So wild was the gallop of prey and huntress, so sudden their advent and unearthly their cries, that the men and the women in the hall were struck still in their places. But the scene was over in a matter of seconds. The animals careered around the tables, from out of the air, a warrior appeared and seized the brachet, another man captured the huntress, and these vanished from the hall. The stag and the hounds escaped the chamber, leaving behind a trail of overturned tables and benches, of



broken glass and crumpled gold.

In an instant, the High King was on his feet, but before he could issue orders, Merlin forestalled him. The Enchanter sent three knights out: one to follow the stag and bring back its head, one to find the brachet and one to free the huntress. These knights obeyed him; they rode into the realm of Faerie, the chroniclers said, and found what they sought, returning weeks later with the stag's head and the brachet and word that the huntress was safe in her own lands. But the knights' adventures are not important to the story. What mattered was the meaning of the invasion of the hall—a meaning that was plain only to Merlin. After commanding the three knights to take up the pursuit, he stood gray-faced beside the King. His cheeks were sunken, as if he were a corpse; his eyes had the dull stare of the dead, his hands trembled.

"What ails you, Lord Enchanter?" cried the Queen.

When he answered, his voice was an old man's, cracked and weak. "She has come then," he said. "Still young, still un-schooled. And she has come through my own fault, I opened the gate that let her in."

"Who is the huntress?" asked the High King.

"Niniane is her name."

He would say no more, except that he was done with prophecy. That night, he left the fortress, and he did not return.

Before the month was out, the forces of the old ones struck again. May Eve, then called Beltane Eve, arrived. It was a sacred time, the hours that divided winter from



Queen Guinevere rode out on the first day of May to gather white hawthorn as a guard against the fairies. It proved an ill-judged mission. Forces of the other world awaited her.



summer, and throughout the High King's realm, the people made festival to drive away the fairies, who were free to roam that night, and to welcome in the season of growth and fecundity.

At moonrise on that night, bonfires were kindled, each with nine branches gathered from nine different trees by nine men. On every hill these fires blazed, miniature suns honoring the life-giving sun of heaven. And all around the fires, the people played out their ancient rituals, asking for health and growth. They baked Beltane cakes of barley and oats, round as the sun. These cakes were broken up and divided by lot, some pieces being designated as offerings for wolves, so that the predators might spare the lambs, and some for crows, so that the hungry birds might spare the chicks. One piece in each cake was blackened by charcoal, and the unlucky person who drew it became the Beltane carline, the sacrificial victim offered against the dangers that threatened human health. The carline's neighbors made a mime of casting him into their Beltane fire, throughout that year he would be called a dead man. The farmers drove their cattle through the fires, too, to protect the animals from disease. And all night long, the people's pipes and little drums sounded across the fields, calling the measure from the hillsides while men and women danced sunwise around the flames, black silhouettes against the gold, welcoming the season of light.

Just before dawn, when the fires were dwindling and the dancers trailing down from the hills, the women who had not danced left their halls and cottages and went into the countryside to see the summer sunrise and to bring in the May. They cut branches of hawthorn, the fairies' flower. These branches they wove into wreaths to give them greater efficacy, and with the wreaths they garlanded every door, to protect each household from the folk of Faerie.

Among the women was Guinevere, the very Queen of the May, people said, for in her marriage to the High King she had become—like the May queens crowned with flowers in every British village—the mother of the fields' fertility. Adorned in her bridal white and gold, she rode out of Camelot on a white horse caparisoned with gilded bells; her pages walked beside her and her squires and ladies rode behind. None of them carried sterner weapons than hunting knives, but all the weapons of the kingdom would have availed them nothing against the beings that walked abroad in those dawn hours.

Guinevere did not come back to her husband's hall that day. The pages and squires who had been her escort returned to Camelot without her. Rigid with terror, they stood before the High King and swore that they had seen nothing more than a mist or a cloud or a white radiance, a veil of light that enfolded the Queen and then vanished into the air, leaving her horse riderless. They could not defend her, they stammered. The attack had come and gone more quickly than a man could draw a single breath.

Arthur had them thrown in prison. Then he set out to search for the Queen.

Through every corner of the land his riders went, through every village rode small bands of knights, grim of face and cold of voice. The word spread among the people: Without the Queen's presence, the crops would fail and the land would die. And after some months, whispers reached the ears of the riders. The Queen lay at Glastonbury, a prisoner of Melwas, the Summer Country King, who if he was not himself an old one, had fairy protection. No one could tell for certain: Melwas' fortress—reputed to be built of glass—lay hidden within the hill called Glastonbury Tor. And the Tor rose in the midst of a vast waterland. The position was invulnerable, wrote the chroniclers, "due to the fortifications of thicket, reed and marsh."

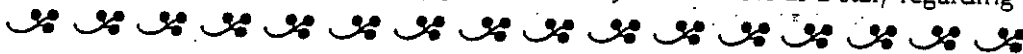
But Arthur's power was matchless then. The accounts of his actions are incomplete—and some are contradictory. The clearest version of the affair was left by monks who had settled in a small abbey at Glastonbury itself. According to them, Arthur raised an enormous army from kingdoms in Devon and Cornwall, with this army, he threatened to lay waste the Summer Country and open the Tor itself. At that point, the Glastonbury abbot and a monk called Gildas persuaded Melwas to release the Queen unharmed, it was they who arranged the truce that saved the land. So the threat of his own might—and the elders of the church—defeated the first strike at Arthur's heart. He had Guinevere safe again at his side.

But where was Merlin the Enchanter, he who should have brought his magic to defend the King against the forces of the other world? He had not been seen since the night he left Camelot. Only slowly, over months and years, did his story filter back, in minstrels' songs, in fragments of verse, in cryptic utterances from the old ones. He had gone to an island in the sea, said some, he was trapped within a tree by magic. But some chronicles told another tale:

Merlin left Arthur in order to follow his own fate, which he had discerned in the High King's feasting hall. His lot, it seemed, was to be reduced to a fool, an object of pity among those who had honored him. Sick with a desire induced by enchantment, he journeyed through England and across the sea to Brittany, pursuing the huntress Niniane, a daughter of Faerie, as he had known at once.

No humiliation was spared him, no silly behavior of a fond old man. He could travel as a deer for swiftness, as a hare or an owl for secrecy, but he made this journey in the guise of a young and handsome squire, hiding by illusion his white hair and raddled face—in the pathetic hope that his looks would please Niniane.

Because he was led by magic, he found her soon enough, in the forest of Brocéliande, a haunted place still within the rule of the other world. Decked in his false finery, he strode along a track that opened among the trees, and if he felt the eyes that watched him or heard the cruel laughter that rustled the leaves and crackled the branches, he gave no sign. The track led him to a clearing on the crest of a hill. There on the grass sat the fairy huntress, pale and lovely and remote as a star, regarding



him with eyes so wide and soft that the mortal in him trembled for her, even while the half that was not mortal withdrew in fear. He took her hand, as any gallant might, and offered her his heart. Niniane drew her hand away and shook her head. She



*In the clouds, held by fairy magic, the Enchanter lived,
lost forever to the King he had served.*

needed no young squire, she said. "I am more than a squire," the Enchanter replied. "See what my skill can make for you." He turned her so that she looked into the sky, and in the clouds he made her a palace. Stone by enchanted stone he built it, high above the birds' paths, adding for her pleasure soaring towers with roofs of gold, silken pennants that fluttered in the breeze, trees and flowers that grew where no land was. The whole splendid creation floated high above the forest, serene in the empyrean.

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As he made this illusion, the trappings of false youth slipped from him, but the fairy seemed not to notice, indeed, it would be surprising if she had not known him for what he was in any case.

"This is a wonder," she told him. "You are the master of enchantments my people have lost. Will you not teach them to me?" She smiled upon him, a secret smile filled with sweet promise. And Merlin gave the fairy what she asked. Hour after hour, he sat beside her. Singing the melodies that

made his magic, chanting the runes that shaped his spells, he gave Niniane his power. Illusion he taught her, and knowledge of the future, the words that brought invisibility and the thoughts that changed shape. With his old hands, he sketched the gestures that brought weapons from the air and forged chains no man could break, he gave her the secrets of battle and of entrapment.

For days they stayed together in the green forest clearing while Niniane listened



and smiled her secret smile and stroked the Enchanter's hand. And at last one afternoon, when the sunlight lay warm and still on his white hair, Merlin's voice faded into silence. In his long speaking, he had emptied himself of might, and now he lay on the grass, no more for the moment than an old man, frail as any old man is frail, left with nothing more than the memory of glory.

Then, with infinite gentleness, Niniane laid her hand upon his hair and said, "I have learned what you teach. Now I will give you rest, as you have taught me to do." In the softest of voices she began to sing to him. She rose and danced as she sang, and as she danced, she drew from her waist the floating girdle of silk that bound her robe. She dropped one end of the girdle at Merlin's feet. Tears glistened in his eyes as he watched her, then the heavy lids drooped, and Merlin slept.

When he awoke, he lay on a pallet on a stone floor, surrounded by curving walls of stone. Niniane stood beside him, coiling her girdle in her hands. Her song had stopped, the glance she gave him was cool and calm. "Do not believe that I will leave you here alone, Merlin," she said. "I will be here with you, from time to time." Then she turned and walked through a narrow door.

The old Enchanter slowly rose and followed where she had gone. At the door, he halted, staring dully out. Above his head, the gilded turrets of a palace soared. At his feet, all around the steps that led from the door, clouds puffed and curled and shifted, sometimes opening as a veil opens, to reveal the hills and treetops of Brocéliande, far, far below.

Ever living, ever estranged from the world of men and women, from the scenes of his power and the halls of the High King, Merlin was trapped in the prison that he himself had built. The masters of the other world, using Niniane, had taken him away from Arthur the King.



