

IV



❧ MORGAN ❧

Three Queens were sisters to Arthur, three women linked by blood and, it seems, by service to the old ones. The eldest, Morgause, brought a shadow early to Arthur's life. She had tempted him, she had lain with him, she had borne him the son who was prophesied to be a sword against him. Then, having done the deed, she retreated into exile on her cold Orkney island, rearing the child in secret, nourishing him until his time to act should come. Of the middle sister—Elaine of Carlot—the chroniclers had little to say, save that she remained in her own lands, remote from the High King and apparently harmless to him. The youngest sister, however, kept close to the High King for many years, an ever-present enemy, although she concealed her nature as long as she could. She was the Queen of Gorre, and she was the most powerful of the triad.

This sister's given name was Morgan, and she was also called le Fay—or fairy—because of the magic that was in her. It was said that she had a home in the other world, that her youth had been spent secluded in an island convent of the old ones, learning the secret ways of enchantment. According to some accounts, she had served on the Isle of Glass as one of the nine guardians of the caldron of inspiration that Arthur seized in his youth. Some said she had been schooled by Merlin, some claimed that she was Niniane, in different guise. Morgan understood the stars, people came to believe, and all the ways of healing; she could fly in raven form and hide herself in a spider's shape. Every subtle art was hers.

But this was not apparent during Morgan's first years at Camelot. She was one among many who became part of the High King's court, as the sun of his power climbed toward its apogee. With her husband Urien, she occupied chambers in the fortress. Just as Urien served among Arthur's warriors and her son Yvain trained among his squires, Morgan joined the company of the Queen's ladies-in-waiting. She was a handsome woman, but she was much given to solitude; she kept herself apart from Guinevere's other ladies and, it seems, from the knights who flocked around the Queen, a little court of blameless admirers. She was an oddity in a company so close as Arthur's then was, and this—with the singing that floated from her chambers in the



night, with the ravens that came at her call and fed from her hand, as if they were doves – caused talk. Although she did not presume on her kinship to the High King, it protected her from more severe comment – that and the presence of her husband and her son, men so valiant and so loyal that none dared speak a word against her.

In fact, Morgan was loose with the younger knights of Arthur's court. She had the certain age and knowingness that attracted them, and she drew power from their desire. At first, she concealed her activities, but as time went on, she grew careless – or perhaps too arrogant to bother with discretion. She gathered her own circle of gallants, and it became apparent from the quarrels that developed among them, and from Urien's long looks, that the knights' affection for her was far from blameless. Where Morgan moved, quiet and smiling, clouds of ill will seemed to gather and factions to form.

One spring afternoon, Guinevere entered a sunny chamber to find Morgan and a knight named Guiomar – Guinevere's own cousin – hidden in a deep window embrasure. Their whispering, quickly halted, and Guiomar's guilty glance showed clearly enough how the land lay. The Queen surveyed them, she was a new bride, and honor and loyalty had been bred into her soul. After some moments, she said to Guiomar, "You have my leave to go. I will take this matter to the High King." To Morgan she added, "You were best with your lord Urien, lady." Morgan's response was a bland smile. She curtsied and slipped past the Queen and out of the room.

The result of the discovery was that Guiomar was sent from court, to cool his hot blood in Arthur's northern garrisons. He left without protest and without bidding Morgan farewell, the liaison with the Queen of Corre had been dark and tiring, and he was glad to be free of it, to be riding in the clear air, away from the shadowed, overscented chambers where Morgan's enchantment had held him. Morgan stayed, for Arthur would not allow her husband to be shamed. Her public conduct was more seemly after that, for a while.

But she was merely biding her time until opportunity arose to avenge the humiliation. In secret, she turned to another paramour, a man named Accolon of Gaul. In secret, she fashioned weapons of magic to wield against the High King. And one summer afternoon, she used them.

Arthur hunted all that day in the hills beyond Camelot. Late in the afternoon, following a great deer, he left his comrades and plunged into a stand of trees. Deep into the tangles of the wood he rode. Behind him, the hunters' voices faded, until the only sounds were the crackling of the underbrush and his horse's heavy breathing.

The wood gave way at last to a meadow that sloped down to a riverbank. On the bank lay the deer. It was dead. But the animal drew no more than a glance from the High King, for beyond it, rocking gently in the river current, was a crystal boat with sails of membranous silk, the little craft was so pale and insubstantial that it appeared to be compounded of the water and the river mist. Although no hand guided it,



the boat turned and slid onto the sandy bank as Arthur approached.

This was a vessel of Faerie, a challenge from the old ones and an invitation to adventure. As any knight who prized his valor would have, Arthur took the dare: He dismounted, gave his horse a slap on the flank to send it home and stepped aboard. At once, the boat slipped into the water and moved downriver, its silken sails swelling with a wind from the other world. Through the waning afternoon, the fairy boat sailed, following the river as it twisted and turned into an unknown country, hidden behind a wall of heavy trees that swayed and sighed and whispered on the bank. At last the day faded, yet light danced along the gunwales of the boat, sparkling on the crystal. In that candleglow of enchantment, Arthur slept.

He awakened to darkness and cold, to prison stench, to the dull clinking of iron shackles and the muffled mutterings of imprisoned men. He spoke, and he was answered. His fellow prisoners were British knights, captured by a lord called Damas to serve in a battle against his brother over their inheritance. When each knight refused – as each did, for Damas was a cruel and petty tyrant and his brother a good man – he was thrown into prison. Some of them had been in the pit for years. Arthur listened in silence, waiting for word from Damas' messenger.

It came within the hour. A heavy door swung open; the figure of a woman stood in the arch, outlined by the flame of the torch she carried. Blinking in the brightness, Arthur said, "Lady, are you not a member of the High King's court?" But the woman shook her head, she was the daughter of Damas, she said, and a stranger to the court. She would not look at him, but she gave him her father's message: If he would stand as Damas' champion, he would go free.

"If these knights-prisoner are freed before the battle, I will fight for Damas," the



In a convent on an enchanted isle, Arthur's half-sister Morgan learned the arts of illusion, spirit-summoning and the shifting of shape.



High King replied. And that was done. The knights were freed from their shackles, guards led them away. Arthur also was freed, to await the return of Damas' daughter. When she appeared, she brought a shield and armor—and his own sword, Caliburn, in its jeweled scabbard. With these, she herself armed him.

"Lady, how came you by my sword?" said Arthur, staring down at her. But her face was hidden by a curtain of dark hair. She whispered, "It was sent to me by the Queen, your sister Morgan le Fay." She would say no more.

The maiden led him to a high hall where torches flared upon the wall, and in the flickering light, he saw the man he was to battle: a tall man, his face hidden in shadow, who stood leaning easily on a sword as fine, it seemed, as his own. The maiden withdrew out of range to watch. Without a word, Arthur swung his shield across his body and drew his own sword in the salute. The weapon was strangely heavy and lifeless in his hand.

Nevertheless, he raised it high, and before his opponent could parry, he struck. Arthur's blade glanced harmlessly off the other man's shield, and as he completed the swing, the warrior's sword flashed fire in the air, cutting in under Arthur's guard and sliding through his mailed sleeve into his arm. Hot blood soaked through the mail as he returned the thrust. Had Caliburn been in his hand, his strikes would have been lethal, had its scabbard hung at his side, no blade could have cut him. He was, it seemed, without its protection.

Yet Arthur fought on regardless. Grunting with effort, the two men swung and thrust, and Arthur took cut after cut, until he trembled with weakness and pain. Finding his own blade almost useless, he wielded the sword as a club, bringing it down again and again on his enemy's helmet, sending the man staggering dizzily back. Two hours passed while the fiery sword flashed in the air and Arthur bled. Still he fought on, unflinching. His enemy beat him to his knees. Arthur thrust upward, under the man's shield, and his own sword snapped at the hilt. The man raised his weapon for a final, deadly stroke. But the great sword flew flaming from his hand, an arc of light in the air, and clattered to the floor. The warrior swayed a little where he stood, rubbing his hand. His head swung uncertainly from side to side, seeking the cause of the sword's leap.

The cause was a tall woman who had appeared in the hall—a woman of Faerie, from her pale look. In a high voice as chill as the waters of a mountain lake, she cried, "That sword is Caliburn. It belongs to the water folk, but it is in the High King's keeping while he lives. You have no right to bear it, knight." Then she was gone, even before the echo of her words against the stones ceased.

Arthur caught up the sword. "You have been away from me all too long, and much damage have you done me," he cried to it. In the same breath, he shouted at his adversary, "Much pain have you given me with this sword. Now it offers your death."



He ripped Caliburn's healing scabbard from the man's side and sent it spinning across the stones of the floor. Then he brought Caliburn down in a mighty swing that tore into the side of the stranger's helmet. The man fell, blood bubbling from mouth and nose and ears, and in an instant Arthur was kneeling beside him, tearing his helmet from his head in order to deal the death blow. The helmet slid off, revealing the man's white, agonized face. It was Accolon of Gaul.

Voices murmured at the door; the dark maiden had disappeared, but the lord of the castle, Damas, and his brother crowded into the room with their people and heard the words of Accolon: "Woe that I had the sword, for it has made my death."

How came you by the sword? How came you to fight your own lord?" the High King demanded. And Accolon then told how, by her arts, his lover Morgan had made a counterfeit of Caliburn the Dauntless; how she had given the counterfeit to the King and stolen his own sword for Accolon; how she plotted against the King's life and sought also to take the life of her husband, Urien, so that she and Accolon might seize the throne by force and give the land into the hands of the old ones.

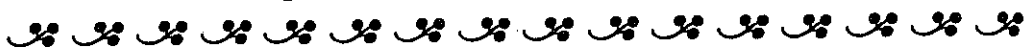
Having spoken, Accolon turned his head aside and died. Arthur's own hand closed the knight's eyes. Then he said to the watching group, "Which of you is Damas?"

"Lord, I am he." A man stepped forward, offering his sword hilt in submission.

The High King said, "You were a pawn in this matter, Damas. It was little you knew that you had the High King to fight your battles. For that I excuse you and leave you with your life. For your other deeds, I make this judgment: Your lands shall go to your brother and you shall serve as his vassal. And you shall ride upon a lady's palfrey until you prove yourself worthy of the destrier of a knight." He paused and wiped the blood from his eyes. Then he said, "Accolon was a man of more courage than judgment. Lay his body on a horse bier and carry it to my fortress at Camelot. Convey it to my sister of Gorre, and say that I send it as a present to her. Tell her that I have Caliburn and the scabbard. Say further that when I am healed of my wounds, I will deal with her." He swayed where he stood then, but the servants of Damas were there to catch him before he fell. They carried him to a manor on Damas' lands, where women lived who understood the arts of healing, and there he lay for some weeks.

As for Morgan, said the chroniclers, she proceeded with her plan. They recorded that on the night of Arthur's battle she had crept to Urien's bedside, armed with a sword to murder her husband. She stood for some moments by the bed, gazing down at him with grim satisfaction – and that pause saved Urien's life. Morgan's son, warned by a waiting woman, appeared and wrenched the sword away. He might have killed her then, but Morgan was too shrewd for such a young man as he. She fell weeping to her knees, claiming that a demon had enchanted her and that now she was free again, and her son believed these words.

Arthur knew nothing of these events. The place where he lay was remote and quiet.



The women who served there did not speak, instead, they communicated with one another by signs. Their heavy black robes made only the faintest sighs as they trailed along the floor. In that peaceful chamber, Caliburn remained always in Arthur's grip, its scabbard on the floor by the bed.

One night, however, the peace was broken. The clink of metal roused the King from his sleep. Grasping the sword tightly, he turned his head and in the feeble rushlight saw Caliburn's scabbard clutched in a woman's hand. Jewels glinted and a skirt rustled. An instant later, hoofs clattered on the cobblestones outside. At once, Arthur was on his feet, shouting orders to the women who cared for him. They armed him as he commanded, they saddled him a horse, and they showed the direction that the dark woman and her men had taken. They cringed before his anger, but they were helpless. The woman had been crowned, she had given orders that the High King not be awakened to greet her, and they had done as they were bidden.

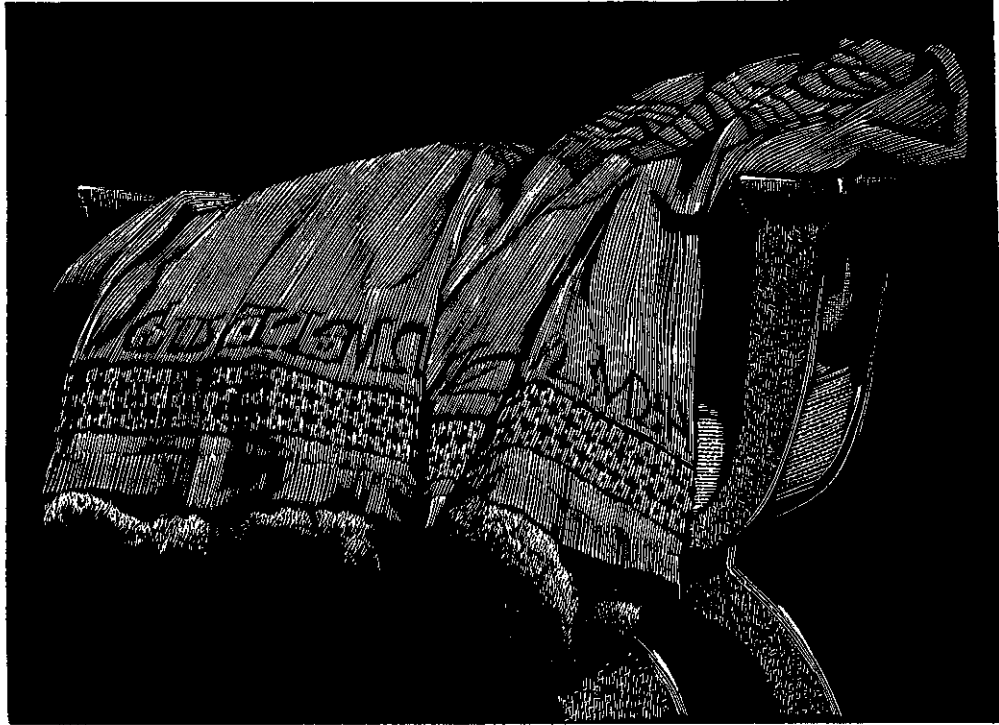
He spurred his horse and galloped out of the abbey court and into the forest beyond. Through the small hours he rode, with no more than moonlight to show him the path. At last, when the dawn came and a mist lay on the ground and clung to the trunks of the trees, he heard hoofbeats and low calls ahead. The trees gave way to plain. A lake was there, sullen in the dull light. The jewels of Caliburn's scabbard gleamed for an instant above the water. Then the scabbard vanished, and widening rings rippled outward.

On the shore, stone statues stood. The King moved among them and observed them with thoughtful eyes. By the water, Morgan rode, frozen into rock, all around her stood her men, caught fast in the attitudes they had taken when struck. So lifelike were the figures, so seemingly filled with action, that he rode close and touched them. But they were no

Ever active, Morgan sought to murder Urien and free herself for the sake of a lover. It was her son Yvain who stayed her hand and saved his father's life.



Asking clemency for her deeds, Morgan sent a gift to Arthur: a cloak of wool as fine as silk, as warm as fur. But into that cloak was woven a spell that would destroy the wearer.



more than stones, cold and dank already from the mist. The place was silent.

"A fitting punishment for the witch and her people," Arthur said. Then he wheeled the horse about and headed home.

Urien awaited him there, bleak-faced and gray for the dishonor done his name by his wife. He offered his life to erase the stain, but Arthur would not have it. He offered to depart for his own lands, but the High King refused to send him into exile. Urien was a loyal man and a strong ally. Yvain his son was another matter. The youth appeared too much a dupe of his mother. Arthur discharged him from court for a year, to prove his valor by adventure. Hotheaded Gawain of Orkney, incensed at the insult to his cousin, left with him. So even in death, it seemed, Morgan caused dissension.

But Morgan was not dead, nor was she bound in enchantment. Messengers began to arrive from her. The first was a young man named Manassen, a roughhewn knight who spoke in the rolling tones of those who lived by the western sea. He rode into Camelot unescorted and surrendered his weapons to the High King's men-at-arms, announcing that he had come as a herald for a lady and that his life was protected by the service he performed. It was true – and fortunate for Manassen: When he delivered his message in the High King's hall, Arthur's face grew white with rage.

"I come from the lady Morgan le Fay," said Manassen. "She bids me tell you that she does not fear you while she has the power to turn herself and her servants to stone and bring them back to life again. She says that she will stay now in her lands of Corre



and that the castles and towns in her rule are proof against any army. She says that at the end of your life, it is she who will welcome you into the world of the dead."

"A kind sister," was Arthur's answer. "Give this man food and drink and send him on his way."

After that, there was silence from the enchantress. The summer deepened into autumn, and the fortress of Camelot drew in upon itself. From the fields around the castle, the wheat, barley and rye were brought in and stored in tall barns. The apples were gathered and piled in drying sheds. In November, called "the bloody month," those animals that could not be fed through the winter were driven to the fortress – the cattle from the pastures, the pigs from the forests where they had run half-wild, fattening on chestnuts and acorns. Then they were slaughtered and the meat salted down for the lean season. From different parts of Britain, those of Arthur's warriors who had ridden out to find adventure returned, battered and weary, to the protection of Camelot: Summer, not winter, was the fighting season. On winter nights in the King's smoky hall, these venturers told their tales to please Arthur and his Queen.

And on one winter afternoon, when the snow lay thick on roof and field and the howling of wolves sounded in the forests, just before the curfew was blown to signify the closing of the castle gates, Camelot received Morgan's second messenger, a young woman who arrived on horseback, accompanied only by a page. She was a comely maiden, frail-seeming and so shy that her voice scarcely rose above a whisper.

The sentries sent the horses to the stables and the page to the kitchens. The maiden asked to speak to Guinevere. They took her to Kay the seneschal, who, seeing that she was harmless, led her through snowy lanes and courtyards to the Queen's Tower. Up a winding stair he took her, into a small chamber whose vaulted ceiling was fretted with stars. On the stone walls, brightly dressed huntsmen followed a deer that never was caught through green fields thick with a thousand flowers. In those painted fields, small animals – hare and fox, badger and hedgehog – forever played. Above them, wren and robin forever tumbled in the sky, silently caroling for the Queen. Her high bed, hung with tapestry, stood in this chamber, deerskin covered the stones of the floor, and a fire blazed in the deep hearth. Beside this fire, fur-cloaked against the cold, sat the Queen, who greeted the maiden kindly and asked for her message.

When she saw what the young woman had brought and heard the tale she had to tell, Guinevere sent a young page to fetch the High King. Arthur appeared soon enough, shaking the snow from his hair and shoulders, and throwing his cloak back as he entered the chamber. The Queen pushed the maiden gently forward, signaling her to speak.

"My lady of Gorre, your sister, sends greetings, lord," the young woman said. "She desires that you take this gift from her, and she promises that in whatever way she has offended you, she will make amends, in what fashion you demand."



"Does she so?" said the High King. "Let us see the gift of peace."

It lay across the Queen's hearth stool, a cloak of creamy wool, into whose border a pattern of silver and gold had been woven; it was a beautiful guard against the winter, fit indeed for a king. The maiden said softly that Morgan herself had woven it. She lifted it from the stool and held it for Arthur to see.

A silvery echo slid along the walls of the room, no more than the memory of a voice, too faint for anyone to hear the words. Anyone, that is, except the High King. Arthur halted in the very act of reaching for the cloak. "Maiden," he said. "This cloak you have brought I wish first to see upon your shoulders."

Morgan's messenger stared up at the High King, and the rosy flush left by the winter chill faded from her cheeks. The maiden shook her head and backed slowly away from him, wordless for a moment. Then she whispered, "Lord, it is not seemly that I wear a king's garment."

"Nevertheless, you will wear it now," said Arthur. His voice was level, and the maid bowed her head, having no choice but to obey the command. With the slowest of movements, she shook out the fabric of the cloak, raised it and swung it around her back. It settled on her small shoulders and fell to the floor in sculptured folds.

She gave one cry only, a cry lost under the explosion of light and sound that followed. Up above her head the maiden's hair rose, each strand a crackling torch flame. Beneath it, her face blackened and peeled, the melting eyes staring blindly, the mouth stretched wide in a soundless scream. Guinevere covered her face from the sight, but the High King stood rigid, watching the cloak's fire devour the messenger sent by his sister. The maiden bent in an arch of agony; she fell in a whirlwind of flame. In the end, nothing but cinders and stain was left to show where she had stood.

"It is finished," said the High King to his wife. "We do well to remember that my sister moves in hiding, a dark creature given to the dark." He sent soldiers to find the maiden's page, but the child had vanished into the air, taken back perhaps by Morgan's enchantments to the fortress where she laired.

