

The Magpie's Daughter

Faeries of the Revelations Book One

Chapter One

March eighteenth was just like any other day. Except it shouldn't have been. People only turn sixteen once in their lives. Sixteen wasn't as big a deal as eighteen or even twenty-one, but it was still her birthday, and Aeryn Walker wanted it celebrated, or at least acknowledged.

Her mother, Jenni, was gone before Aeryn even woke up that sunny spring morning. She'd left Aeryn a note on the dining room table, asking her to make sure the dishes were done and the trash taken out before she left for school. She also said she'd be working late and wouldn't be home until after Aeryn was supposed to be asleep. There was a \$20 attached to the note. That was nice; Aeryn knew how tight her mom's money was and appreciated Jenni sacrificing so Aeryn could eat lunch at school and maybe pick up the last Mary Stewart book, *The Prince and the Pilgrim*. But there was no mention in Jenni's note of Aeryn's birthday.

Depressed and hurt, Aeryn scarfed down a frosted blueberry Pop-Tart, the remainder of a carton of chocolate milk, and returned up stairs to her bedroom. She dressed in her usual clothes: jeans, t-shirt, funky socks, and tennis shoes. She also made sure she was wearing the amber pendant her dad had given her for her fifth birthday. Before shrugging into a navy blue Snowflake, Arizona high school hoodie, she ran a comb and some gel through her pixie-cut auburn hair, did her makeup, and dashed out the door.

The rest of the day was just as depressing. No one but the school's librarian, Mr. Dorian, talked to her long enough to say more than "Get out of my way, nerd." But it was kind of expected that the librarian was nice to her. He was a long-time friend of her mother's; Aeryn was sure he was just being nice to her so she'd report back to her mom about it and not because he was interested in being kind to her.

Aeryn went through the motions at school. She was glad she'd brought a book, her iPhone—last year's birthday present from her mother, bought third- or maybe fourth-hand off of eBay—and a pair of earbuds; they were the perfect way to tune out the inane conversations going on around her—stuff like plans for prom, and who was dating who, and who had cheated on who, and who wanted to beat up who. She didn't even notice when the fifth period bell rang and she had to run through the halls to her AP History class. Despite her love of the subject, she hated being the only sophomore in a class of seniors. It just made her feel that much more awkward and unwanted.

After school, she trudged home, her load of homework weighing her down as though her messenger bag was filled with bricks instead of a physics book, three notebooks, and a trigonometry workbook. She was grateful for the mild weather and for her mother's decision to return to Snowflake from Phoenix two years ago. Phoenix would have been crazy-hot, even in mid-March, while the temperature in Snowflake was a mild sixty.

When she got to her front door, she saw a brown-paper-wrapped package sitting on the front stoop. Delighted by the thought that someone had maybe sent her a present, she scooped it up and glanced at the return address as she fished in her bag for her house keys. There was nothing but her own name and

address on the front of it. The stamps were generic Forever stamps with pictures of the American flag on them, and the postmark was smudged, so she couldn't make out where the package was sent from. She thought maybe it said New York on it, which meant it was probably from her dad. He did a lot of business in New York. But still... It was a mystery, and Aeryn was intrigued.

Getting the door open at last, she tossed her bag and hoodie onto the second-hand couch that dominated the small, colorful living room, and headed into the kitchen to use the scissors her mom kept in the junk drawer to open her package. The gift was indeed from her dad, and she was filled with a sinking feeling that questioned why he was sending her something instead of delivering it to her in person.

Despite the fact that he lived in Nova Scotia and they only saw each other twice a year, she could count on him to come out for Spring Break—which usually coincided with her birthday—and for the week between Christmas and New Year's. When he wasn't with her, he made sure to call her every Sunday. He hadn't ever missed a single phone call. She liked that he was so dependable.

She opened the envelope that had her name scrawled across it in her dad's old-fashioned handwriting. There was even a dab of midnight blue wax on the back of the envelope, and a seal in the shape of a long-tailed bird had been pressed into it. She smiled and sniffed the envelope. It smelled like her dad—water-soaked stone, old paper, and leather. She slid her finger underneath the seal and pulled out a sheet of creamy stationery with her dad's monogram across the top—ARR, for Alexander Ryder Ross. The note said:

Aeryn:

I'm sending this to you as an early birthday present. I thought of you the instant I saw it and knew you had to have it as soon as possible. I hope you love it as much as I love you.

See you in a few days. We have so much to talk about when I get there.

Love,

Dad

With a grin that threatened to grow to her ears, she ripped the gold wrapping paper off the box and lifted its lid. Inside, she uncovered an ancient book. The exterior was worn green leather, and the gilt lettering was almost gone. She could just make out the words *Le Morte d'Arthur* on the spine. A book? It was kind of disappointing; while she did love reading and some of her best friends could be found between the pages of a well-worn paperback, she'd had her eye on this year's model iPhone and had told her dad about it extensively over the past month in preparation for her birthday. At least the book was about King Arthur, her biggest obsession. She was happy that her dad remembered, not only her birthday but that she loved Arthurian legends, too.

She opened the book. There was a gorgeous painting opposite the title page, and she studied it. It was of the sword Excalibur, driven into its stone. The stone and its sword sat in a beam of sunlight and was surrounded by a dark forest. The sunlight made the blade glow, and the painting was so realistic that Aeryn could almost feel the warmth of the sunlight and the coolness of the blade.

Aeryn looked at the title page and saw that the book had been published in Edinburgh, Scotland, in the early 1800s. Her brows raised in shock. The book was more than two hundred years old. Her dad dealt in old books, but she'd never personally owned something so rare. Closing the book and setting it

aside carefully, she put the mystery aside as well. He would be in Arizona in a few days. He could answer her questions then.

She cleaned up the wrapping paper and stood in front of the open refrigerator for a moment, trying to decide what she wanted to make for her solo birthday dinner that night. Since her mother was working, Aeryn didn't have to worry about her mom's weird diet. She could eat cake frosting and Doritos if she wanted—which she didn't—and there was no one there to tell her not to. Instead, she settled on warming up a piece of roasted chicken and slapped some leftover potato salad on the plate next to it. Grabbing her new book and a bottle of orange-flavored Mexican soda, she took her plate and her messenger bag up the stairs to her room.

Pausing for a moment in her bedroom, she dumped the bag on her bed. Performing a feat of amazing balance, she opened the large window opposite her bed and stepped out onto her private patio, carrying her plate, drink, and the book without dropping anything. A table and two mismatched kitchen chairs sat in the tiny space, along with a large wooden flower box that was planted with pink and white tulips and yellow daffodils.

She settled down at the table and ate her dinner while reading the book, taking great care not to smudge the delicate pages or get any crumbs on the covers. Though the language and spelling were weird, she worked her way through the slim volume and discovered it was the full story of Arthur's life, from birth to death. It included stories about Tristan and Isolde, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, tales of the Questing Beast, and even a little about Merlin before he became Arthur's most trusted friend and adviser.

The story was the perfect thing for an Arthurian-obsessed reader, and she lingered over it, entranced by stories she'd never read and facets of the legends she'd never heard. By the time she'd finished reading and eating, it was dark and too cold to stay outside much longer, so she gathered up her things and returned to her bedroom. While her computer started up, she did her dishes so her mother wouldn't have anything to yell at her about when she came home. She locked up the house, hoping Jenni had remembered her house keys, closed all the curtains, and turned on the porch light and a single lamp in the living room.

She returned to her bedroom and sat down at her computer. A quick check of her email turned up no messages from her dad and a look at Facebook revealed the same. It was six o'clock, making it nine in Halifax, where her dad lived. There was still time for him to call or chat on Messenger.

Leaving Facebook open so she would hear the notification if her dad sent her a message, she got started on her homework. Three hours later, she finished the last formula of her trig assignment and her dad still had not called or messaged. It was past midnight in Canada, and she resigned herself to not talking to him tonight. A little seed of worry took root inside her gut.

Even more depressed than she had been earlier, she turned off her computer and got ready for bed, changing into her favorite black, purple, and white plaid flannel pajamas before climbing into bed. She made sure her phone was plugged into the charger on her nightstand and turned off the lamp.

“Happy birthday to me,” she sang, her voice barely filling the emptiness in her house. She fell asleep soon after, her face still turned towards her phone.