

When Carter and his best friend, Penny, release Merlin from an ancient spell, magic is afoot! Together they must battle an old enemy that threatens this world and the legendary Avalon, and learn the secrets of their own past.

Merlin's Door

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Merlin's Door

Mary Triola

CHAPTER ONE

The Vision

The mirror gleamed fluid silver as the girl drew closer. She picked up her brush and began to stroke it gently through the red hair that framed her strong face in flames. Three candles cast weird, wavering shadows on the walls as the flames moved with the slight breeze from the girl's movements.

A loud rap at the door roused her from her thoughts. "The lights are back on now," came her mother's voice from the other side. "Don't forget to blow out those candles before you go to bed."

"Okay, Mom," she answered, absently pulling the brush through her hair. She made no move to switch on the electric lights; she preferred the warm, but eerie, glow of the candles instead.

The mirror drew her gaze again. Her hands still moved, but not, it seemed, of her own volition. She began to hum to herself, a tune that she had never heard before, but now it seemed familiar as it wound its way around her thoughts and buried itself in memory. Deeper and deeper her gaze penetrated into the mirror, until she no longer saw her own reflection or was even aware of herself.

Mist trailed out of the silver surface, thickening and swirling as she continued to gaze, mesmerized by the sight. Then, as though a breeze had arisen, the mist parted. She could make out the figure of a woman, then two more. Their hair hung in ringlets down their backs, merging with the gossamer folds of their dresses. They peered with great interest at the blue sphere that floated between them. "Can you see it, Amera?" one of the women asked.

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The lady in the middle shook her head, her gleaming strands of silver and black hair shimmering with the movement. “No, it is not yet clear, Granuaile.”

The girl felt herself drawn into the scene. Now she seemed to be standing among the three, who took no notice of her. Her eyes were also riveted to the sphere and to the scene that was unfolding there. A man lay as though asleep on a narrow bed that was draped in silver, his well-kept, long brown locks falling across the satin pillow on which his head rested. A sword lay lightly upon him, its jeweled hilt clasped in his hands upon his breast.

“I see him now; do you, Granuaile?”

“Yes. How peaceful he appears.” A shadow crept over the man’s face. A slender figure in a hooded cloak stepped into the scene and stood at the man’s side. For a moment it simply stood, perhaps in contemplation of the inert form.

“Who is that?” Amera whispered, a hint of fear in her soft voice.

“I do not know.”

The figure raised an arm high above the sleeping man. The young girl gasped. “It’s a knife! No!” she whispered. “No! No! They have to stop it!”

The third woman spoke in raspy tones. “She who bewitched the enchanter...it is she!” The old woman passed her hand over the sphere and the scene changed. “There,” she cried, “that is what she is after!”

The three women peered closely at the robed figure who now sat on a throne with her hood thrown back, revealing a beautiful and ageless face. She wore a golden circlet on her head and held a shining sword aloft while throngs of people of every nation bowed down to her. Many of the people trembled even as they cried out, “Long live our queen, she who has conquered the mighty!”

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The woman lowered the sword and smiled upon her subjects, a terrible smile that curled with a cruelty the young girl had never before seen in her short life. “Yes,” the woman murmured, “you do well to worship me in fear.” Then she whispered to a huge warrior on her right and gestured toward a small group of people in the front of the crowd. The man, who wore a breastplate of leather studded with silver spikes, motioned to other guards like himself and strode toward the crowd.

Suddenly the crowd at the front dispersed, deserting the group indicated by the woman. These people wore robes and had not bowed to her. The warriors surrounded them and pushed and prodded them toward the queen.

“So,” the queen began sweetly. “You do not wish to bow to me? When I have destroyed all hope?”

“There is always hope,” replied a young man’s voice from beneath his hooded cloak.

“But not for you,” the queen retorted, the cruel smile curling her thin lips again. Turning to her warriors she commanded, “Make an example of them.”

The warriors rushed into the group, slashing and stabbing with their swords. The young girl reached out toward the sphere crying, “No!” The sphere went black and dropped to the ground. The three women turned to the girl. For a moment they stared at her as if trying to recognize her, then Granuaile smiled.

“I—I couldn’t stand it!” the girl began.

“Just remember what he said: There is always hope.” Then the women vanished and the girl found herself looking at her own face in the mirror. Frightened, she ran to the light switch and turned on the overhead light. She returned to the mirror and touched it. Nothing of the vision remained. Her features relaxed.

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“Just a trick of the light. Yeah, that’s what it was,” she whispered to herself. She picked up her brush and resumed grooming her hair. “Flickering candles can do that,” she continued to reassure herself. She bent to blow them out. But she could still hear Granuaile’s voice. “Remember...there is always hope.” Hope? For what? Maybe she was just nervous about her math test the next day. But she shouldn’t be; she had studied and, besides, math was one of her best subjects.

As she climbed into bed, she reached for the bedside lamp, and then hesitated. No, maybe it would be better to leave it on tonight. She didn’t want to see that scene again. It had been horrible to watch the warriors attacking the people in robes.

It took a long time for her to finally fall asleep. The last image in her mind was of the three women looking at her from out of the mirror. How had they known she was even there?

CHAPTER TWO

An Odd Pair

Carter settled into the back seat of his mother's station wagon. "Don't forget your seatbelt, honey." His mom smiled sweetly at him in the rearview mirror.

"Already got it on, Mom." Sheesh! Couldn't she trust him to do anything himself?

"At least you're getting out of school," she reminded him. Yeah, that part was nice, but he had never liked going to Great Aunt Belinda's house; it was dark and full of dusty antiques.

"I will miss her, I think," he murmured as he gazed out the window at the tree-lined hills. They were pretty, with the leaves just beginning to change colors from summer greens to fall yellows, oranges and reds.

Great Aunt B, as they used to call her, was an eccentric old lady with long, silver hair as straight and shiny as a sheet of metal. She hadn't been much of a housekeeper, but she was always particular about her antiques. "Don't touch anything you don't want to pay for," she would warn Carter. "And everything is expensive."

That kept him either sitting very still in whatever chair she approved for him or outside roaming the woods that surrounded the huge, gabled house. Carter preferred the woods. He didn't like to admit it, but he was afraid of that house. Not just because of the expensive antiques, but because there was something unsettling about the place, with its high ceilings and baffling sets of passages that sometimes seemed to go nowhere at all.

Penny was much braver than he was. He admired her for that. Nothing frightened her—and she was a girl.

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Mrs. Blume looked at her son, morose in the rearview mirror. “This might be fun for you, Carter. Maybe your little friend will be around.”

“Yeah, maybe so,” he answered. He wished his mom wouldn’t call Penny his little friend. He could hear her now, red curls bouncing with every word, hands on hips. “I am *not* little!” she would declare, but never within earshot of Mrs. Blume.

At twelve, Penny was a year older than Carter. Her mother home-schooled her and planned to do the same for her baby brother, Daryl. Penny only had to spend three or four hours a day doing schoolwork. The rest of the day was usually hers.

Carter felt vaguely jealous when he thought of that. He hated going to school. The kids bullied him because he liked science, and he knew things that even surprised his teachers. The other boys had no appreciation for his advanced knowledge. They’d rather pound on him or throw spitballs at him. Carter put up with it, picking off the day’s spitballs before going home so his mother wouldn’t see. He had learned long ago that most of the teachers couldn’t, or wouldn’t, stop the bullies—something about not upsetting their parents. He did wonder what kind of parents would want their kids to get away with bullying other kids. Maybe they were bullies when they were in school, too.

His mind returned to the present and why they were even going to his great aunt’s house. After years of uncomfortable visits with Great Aunt Belinda, she was gone. Mrs. Blume had brought him along to help her sort through Great Aunt B’s possessions.

Carter knew he could look forward to several visits to the house over the next few months. There was a lot of stuff to go through, organize, and finally send off to whoever was named in the will. The rest would probably be sold at auction.

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The best part was that he would be able to see Penny. She was one of the few people that really liked him for who he was. He tried not to think of what would happen when his mom was finished with the house. The family still had to decide whether or not to sell it. If they sold the house there would be no reason to go there and no chance of seeing his friend again. No, best not to think about that.

“Let’s stop for lunch.” Mrs. Blume’s voice broke Carter’s reverie. The car turned off the highway and onto the exit ramp. “You hungry?”

“Uh, yeah, sure,” he answered absently. He usually spent these trips gazing out the window and wondering how people lived in the houses and farms they passed.

He didn’t pay much attention to the fast food place when they pulled up, just another Burger Deluxe. But as he and his mom got out of the car, his gaze was drawn to a silver Rolls that had just turned into the parking lot after them.

“You don’t see those very often,” his mother commented.

“Rolls Royce Silver Shadow,” Carter murmured, awestruck.

“How do you know that?”

“Oh, Uncle Mark gave me one from his model collection.” Carter stared as the car was parked with care at the far end of the lot. The driver’s door swung open and out stepped a gentleman wearing an impeccable, gray suit. He made his way around to the other side of the car and began to open the passenger door.

“C’mon, Carter. I’m starved.” Mrs. Blume stepped into his line of sight and made for the restaurant.

“Yeah, coming,” Carter replied, moving around his mom so he could see the passenger from the Rolls. He watched as the well-dressed man offered a hand to his traveling companion. Carter saw a gloved hand reach out and grasp the proffered support. A tall and elegant woman stepped out. She was

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completely dressed in black, from the high-heeled shoes on her feet to the black hat crowning her straight, black hair. A short veil hung in an elegant curve over her eyes. But Carter could still see the glittering light in their depths as she gazed about in an unhurried inspection of her surroundings.

When the woman looked at him he turned and walked quickly after his mother, who stood holding the door for him. "You shouldn't stare like that, honey. It's rude." But he noticed his mom couldn't help watching the two strangers as they headed for the restaurant either.

"C'mon, Mom." Carter tugged at her sleeve. "It's impolite to stare."

Mrs. Blume grinned sheepishly and followed him. "Guess anyone can have a hankering for fast food," she commented under her breath. She glanced back one more time before striding up to the cash register.

As they made their way to a table with their lunch, Carter and his mom witnessed the grand entrance of the peculiar couple. The man opened the door and held it for his companion, who had pulled her veil up onto her hat. Carter's eyes were irresistibly drawn to her face, ageless and smooth as fine porcelain. Her eyes were large and unusually bright. She stopped in the doorway and inspected the restaurant with an imperious gaze. In leisurely fashion the woman walked toward the cashier. Her companion followed swiftly, glancing around with an air that assured the rest of the patrons that these two were of a much higher station than the normal clientele.

"Oh, aren't we privileged," a woman muttered at a nearby table. Mrs. Blume struggled to suppress a laugh at the sarcastic remark.

"What are they doing in a place like this?" Carter asked in a whisper.

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His mom shrugged. "Maybe they're from another country and they just want to see how Americans live."

The strange couple took a table in a far corner, their tray piled with sandwiches, fries, and pies in thin cardboard boxes. The gentleman had to return to the front for another tray, this time loaded with drinks. The lady then proceeded to eat a prodigious amount of food. In fact, she seemed to be eating it all. Carter's jaw dropped as he watched her drink five milkshakes after downing the same number of chicken sandwiches and hamburgers.

"How can she do that?" he murmured, incredulous.

"Let's not stare, honey." But his mom didn't seem to be able to take her eyes off the unusual sight, either. Even more peculiar was the fact that the woman's partner did not consume a thing. He simply sat and watched with disinterest.

Mrs. Blume stood and picked up the tray of trash. "C'mon, Carter. We better go. I've got a lot of work ahead of me."

"Yeah," he replied. He followed his mother out the door, still watching the strange couple.

As they drove from the parking lot, Carter noticed the vanity plate on the Rolls. It simply read "Fate."

CHAPTER THREE

A Strange Request

The streets grew more familiar as they neared the house. Carter remembered playing here with Penny. There was the basketball court where she had taught him how to shoot free throws. Now they were passing her place, a comfortable two-story house with white wood siding. He liked that place a lot better than Great Aunt Belinda's grim mansion.

The car nosed onto the old street with a black and white sign that read "Dead End." "They were right about that," Carter muttered to himself. They passed a couple of blocks of older homes, each one bigger than the last. At the end of the street they stopped at the black iron gate.

"Would you get that for me, honey?" his mom asked.

"Sure." Carter jumped out and ran to open the gate. He waved his mom through.

"Thanks. Getting back in?"

He shook his head. "No, thanks. I think I'll walk up."

"Okay." The car wound up the paved driveway. Great Aunt Belinda had always kept the driveway free of cracks and potholes so there wouldn't be any bumps when she wanted to move her antiques or bring new ones home. Carter had often wondered if his great aunt would ever stop buying antiques. It seemed that she always had a new one to show off every time they had come for a visit.

Mrs. Blume parked the car and got out. She waved at him before opening her purse to look for the house keys. Carter made his way up the drive. Suddenly a huge raven called from the tree next to him. Startled, he broke into a run. The bird flung itself into the air and flapped alongside him. Carter ran faster. The raven croaked at him in what sounded like raucous laughter before it turned and flew off into the distance.

“Did you see that?” Carter called to his mom as he slowed to a walk in front of the steps.

“See what?” Mrs. Blume pulled a set of keys out of her purse. “Aha! There they are!”

“Uh, just a big bird. Nothing important.”

“Now to see if these work,” his mom said as she slid a key into the deadbolt lock above the door handle. She turned it and heard the bolt slide back. “Well, that one worked. Let’s see about this one.” She put another key into the polished lock of the handle. With one, smooth movement she turned it and pushed the door open.

“Our lock doesn’t do that,” Carter observed.

“Well, Aunt B had to have good locks to protect all of her things.” She stepped into the house. “Stuffy in here.”

Carter hung back as the powerful scent of antique woods and upholstery rushed out the door to meet him like so many ghosts. He wrinkled his nose and hunched his shoulders.

“C’mon in, honey.” Mrs. Blume flipped a switch and looked around the foyer. White plaster walls glowed pale yellow in the light from the chandelier. The dark wood floor shone with a recent polish.

Carter walked carefully into the house. At any moment he expected his great aunt to come down the huge staircase before him and warn him not to touch anything.

Mrs. Blume hung her jacket on the iron coat rack by the door, turned to the right and walked into the large parlor, Carter hanging at her side. Kicking off her shoes she sank her toes into the thick, red Persian rug. “Ooh,” she sighed. “I’ve always wanted to do that!”

She sat down on a velvet-covered divan and pulled some papers out of her tote bag. “I guess I’ll start with this room.” Glancing up, she noticed Carter standing uncomfortably at the edge of the rug. “Do you want to watch T.V.?”

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“Uh, sure. I can do that.” T.V. sounded safe. He turned and walked back across the foyer to the den where he had often taken refuge so he wouldn’t disturb Great Aunt Belinda’s antiques. He settled into an overstuffed chair and flipped through the channels. Nothing looked very interesting. Just as he was about to turn the T.V. off he heard a loud rapping at the front door.

“Would you get that?” his mom called. “It’s probably your little friend.”

Little friend—hope Penny didn’t hear that, he thought as he got up and hurried to the door. He smiled, glad that Penny had come over so quickly. But the smile froze on his face when he opened the door and saw the strange couple from the Burger Deluxe.

A vague look of half-surprise crossed the gentleman’s features for a moment, before it cleared and was replaced by stiff formality. “Good day, young sir. Are you a relative of Miss Feltree’s?”

“Who? Oh, Great Aunt B. Uh, yeah, I mean, yes. She’s my great aunt.”

Mrs. Blume hurried to Carter’s side and peered out over his shoulder. “May I help you?” her polite tone barely hiding her annoyance at this intrusion. She tried not to stare when she recognized them.

“Good day, Madam. I wish to extend our condolences to your family.”

“Thank you.” Carter’s mom nudged him aside and stepped forward into a protective stance. Her voice had taken on a wary tone. “Is there a problem?”

“No, no problem, Madam. We are antique dealers of Miss Feltree’s acquaintance.”

Oh, boy, the vultures had descended, Carter thought to himself. What could be so important that these two would come

so quickly after his great aunt's death? She had just been buried last week. Now this strange duo stood at the door wanting something that Great Aunt Belinda had. Maybe his mom would turn them away before they said another word.

"I will be brief. Miss Feltree had an antique door in her possession. It is a cumbersome thing. We thought that we could relieve you of the burden of having to move it from the house and find a buyer." He leaned forward, the white tips of his teeth glinting in the sunlight. "We will pay very handsomely for it."

"You will, huh?" Mrs. Blume shook her head. "Look, I haven't even started going through her things yet. I don't even know if she has the door, much less what she wanted us to do with it."

She placed a hand on Carter's shoulder and pushed him behind her, out of the doorway. "You'll just have to come back another time and ask, maybe in another month or two." She put both hands on the door, intending to shut it.

The gentleman stepped forward and gave her a little bow. "I am so sorry to have disturbed you. We are only in the country for a fortnight." He reached into the inside pocket of his jacket and brought out a business card. Handing it to Mrs. Blume with another bow, he added, "Our hotel number is on this. Would you be so kind as to call us as soon as possible about the piece?"

She took the card and glanced at it. "Okay, if I find this door and figure out what I'm supposed to do with it, I'll give you a call."

"Thank you, Madam." He stepped back as Mrs. Blume closed the door. Carter hurried to the window in time to see the woman hit her partner with her purse. As they walked toward the car, she looked as though she were scolding the gentleman, who seemed to take it very meekly.

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Mrs. Blume watched the odd conflict at the other window. "What's that all about?" she muttered. "He should drive off and leave the old bat on the side of the road."

Unperturbed, however, the gentleman opened the door for his partner, who continued her scolding even after he had closed her door and walked around to the driver's side. He got in the car and drove off.

Mrs. Blume shook her head. "Weird!"

"What's on the card?" Carter asked, coming up beside her.

She handed it to him. It read: "Nimway and Stonehurst, Dealers in Fine Antiques, in the U.S. and the U.K." The name and number of a local bed and breakfast was handwritten in careful script at the bottom.

Carter didn't have long to ponder over the card. A couple of quick rings of the doorbell told him that Penny had arrived. She always rang like that. He flashed a smile at his mom. "There she is!" he exclaimed as he stepped to the door and pulled it open.

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