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Opening extract from

The Shadow World

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CHAPTER ONE

An Unwelcome Visit

Ben Arnold sighed and sat back against the wall of the tree-house, brushing a strand of straw-blond hair out of his eyes. The book he had been holding slipped to the floor, where peachy mid-morning light sliding through gaps in the planks illuminated a picture of a huge dinosaur confronting a band of ancient hunters dressed in animal skins. The tyrannosaurus, its alarming mouth agape to reveal an array of massive, sharp teeth, looked down upon the tiny ant-men out of one vast, intelligent eye. It looked slightly puzzled, Ben thought, as if it was wondering why these strange little creatures were making such a noisy fuss. Or even why they were there at all – waving their

pathetic-looking spears even though all the dinosaur was doing was meandering along trying to find a little breakfast – since, according to Mr Malarkey at school, dinosaurs and human beings had never even walked the Earth at the same time in history.

Then another thought struck Ben: what if the author of the book had known that all along? What if the story was not actually set in this world at all, but in another place entirely: a place where miracles and monsters, dinosaurs and dragons, goblins and ghouls, selkies and sabre-toothed tigers, all coexisted? A place he had once visited.

He looked up. Above him, spirals of dust motes filtered down from the roof of the treehouse turning gold as they passed through the rays of sun. Just like little streams of magic. It made him think of his mother; and that made him feel sad.

'Morning, Sonny Jim!'

The head of a small black-and-brown cat with shiny amber eyes appeared suddenly through the opening to the treehouse.

'The name's not Sonny Jim,' said Ben. 'It's Ben.'

This exchange had become something of a running joke between the two of them. He grinned, despite his gloomy mood.

The little cat – known by many as the Wanderer, and by Ben as Ignatius Sorvo Coromandel, or Iggy for short – regarded him with his head cocked on one side. After a while he said, 'She has to go back, you know.'

'I know. It's just . . .' Ben scratched his head. 'It's just – well, I'm scared for her.'

'Of course you are. She's your mother. But she's also Queen Isadora of Eidolon. The Secret Country is where she belongs.'

The Secret Country. The Shadow World. Eidolon. As Iggy had once described it to him, it was a place which no true human being had ever seen; a world which existed everywhere and nowhere; which lay between here and there; between yesterday, today and tomorrow; between the light and the dark; tangled between the deepest roots of ancient trees, and yet also soaring among the stars.

That had been before he had seen for himself the magic which was Eidolon, and discovered that he was a son of that mysterious place, as much as he was of the world he was in now. They called him a prince there, but he'd never been called *that* here. Lots of other names in the playground, but never *prince*.

He moved to make room for Iggy to sit beside him, and the sunlight fell across his face and shone into his eyes – one of which was a sensible hazel-brown, the other a vivid and startling green.

'I know that, too,' he told the cat. 'And I knew she had to go back soon, before she got any sicker. I just wasn't expecting it to be today.'

'She sent me to fetch you. I think she wants to talk to you.'

For a moment, Ben felt a tiny stab of envy that his mother was also able to converse with the little cat. He had thought this ability his own private gift; but it seemed that anyone touched by the Secret Country could communicate with its creatures.

Then his expression brightened as another thought struck him. 'Perhaps she wants to take me with her. To Eidolon.'

Ignatius Sorvo Coromandel looked at him sardonically. 'In your dreams.'

'Darling, don't you think you should take a warm coat?'

Mrs Arnold laughed. 'Don't fuss, Clive.' She pulled herself to her feet, steadying herself against the bedside chair, and gave her husband a big hug. 'Eidolon will provide for me.'

'Yes, you keep saying that,' Mr Arnold said, almost crossly, 'but what does it mean, "Eidolon will provide"?'

'Exactly what it says. My country and my folk will look after me, I know it.'

'Well, I'm packing your winter coat, anyway.' Mr Arnold stepped around Ben and Iggy and went thumping down the stairs.

Mrs Arnold sighed, for a moment looking tired and wan; then she saw her son standing in the doorway with the little cat sitting smartly at his feet. She smiled. 'Thank you, Iggy.'

Ben hung back uncertainly. 'Can't I come with you?'

Mrs Arnold took her son by the shoulders and looked at him steadily. Her eyes seemed greener today than they had for months, he thought; and her pale cheeks were washed with pink. She was excited about going back to the Secret Country, Ben realised suddenly: she actually *wanted* to leave them for her original home. A lump rose in his throat and he swallowed furiously, unable to say anything.

'Iggy will carry messages for us, won't you, dear?' She

reached a hand down, and Ignatius Sorvo Coromandel bobbed up on his hind legs to rub his cheek against it, purring like a motor.

'It would be my honour,' he growled in his strange gravelly tones, which sounded just like the voice of an American detective who lived on whisky and cigarettes.

'Besides,' Mrs Arnold added, 'you've already been very brave, Ben, rescuing my folk and getting them back to Eidolon; but I don't want you taking any more risks.'

The evil petshop owner Mr Dodds (who in the other world stood eight feet tall, had the head of a dog and was known as the Dodman), in league with Mrs Arnold's brother, Awful Uncle Aleister (known in the Shadow World as Old Creepie), had been stealing magical creatures out of Eidolon and selling them. Dragons, to be used as garden incinerators; mermaids and selkies, to adorn rich people's lakes; sprites, to be used as fancy lamps; sabre-toothed tigers and direwolves, to be hunted for sport; unicorns and satyrs, pterodactyls and dinosaurs, to be enjoyed by private collectors. But away from their home in Eidolon the creatures had sickened and died. And each death reduced the sum of magic in the Shadow World, and made Mrs Arnold sicker and sicker.

And that was not the worst of it.

Uncle Aleister was in prison now, and the Dodman had fled: no one knew where he was. But he had left an unsettling message for them.

Tied to the gate by a knotted string had been a big black bird with orange eyes: a mynah bird that he had last seen in the

petshop. 'You have not heard the last of the Dodman,' it had declared. 'He will come for the Queen. And when he does, nothing in the world will stop him; indeed, nothing in *either* world.'

Ben had been so horrified by this threat that he had kept it to himself, and with each passing day it had become more difficult to speak about. But now his mother was about to walk right into the Dodman's hands . . . He hung his head.

Seeing his downcast face, Mrs Arnold felt her heart pierced. She caught him to her. 'Look after your sister and your father for me, won't you, Ben?' she said with her nose buried in his hair.

He stepped back sharply. 'You said *sister*, not *sisters* – does that mean you're taking Ellie with you, then?' he asked jealously.

Mrs Arnold smiled sadly. 'No, love,' she said, 'I'm taking Alice.'

Ben looked at her in horror. It was bad enough when she had been going back on her own: but how would a tiny little baby survive the dangers of the Shadow World?

'You're *what*?' Mr Arnold had appeared in the doorway with his wife's soft blue wool coat folded over his arm. 'Did I hear you right? You're thinking of taking the baby with you?'

'I *am* taking Alice with me, yes, dear.'

Mr Arnold sat down suddenly on the bed as if his knees had given way. 'I admit that I don't understand all of this,' he said quietly and with considerable restraint, 'but I really don't think that's a very good idea. How will you feed her? What will she do for nappies? Where will she sleep?'

Mrs Arnold patted his arm. 'Eidolon will provide,' she said. 'Alice belongs in Eidolon. She will be its next Queen.'

'What?' Ben's older sister, Ellie, stood in the doorway with her hands on her hips. Her cheeks were flushed and the make-up was smudged around her eyes as if she had been crying.

'Oh, Ellie.'

'Why's *she* going to be Queen? Why not me?'

'Now, now, Ellie,' said Mr Arnold, 'that's not really the point—'

'I want to go to Eidolon. Ben's been!'

Mrs Arnold put her arms around Ellie, and Ellie promptly burst into tears.

Ben looked at his father. They both rolled their eyes. Ellie could be a drama queen, but Queen of Eidolon? Ben thought not.

Iggy jumped up on to the bed. 'Now, now, Eleanor,' he growled. 'Queen Isadora must go back to her country: it will not be forever, and when the balance between the worlds is restored, you can visit her there. But it would be too dangerous for you now, for you have less of its magic in you than do Ben or Baby Alice; and your father would not survive there long at all, being a Dull and entirely human.'

Mr Arnold heard all of this merely as one long and rather raucous miaow, but Ellie narrowed her eyes at her brother. 'I want—' she began, pouting; but at that moment the doorbell rang.

Mr and Mrs Arnold exchanged worried glances, then Mr Arnold crossed quickly to the bedroom window. Outside,

parked askew, partly on the pavement and partly across the next door neighbour's driveway, blocking the gate, was a large black Range Rover with shiny new wheels and shiny new paintwork.

'Oh no,' he breathed. 'It's Sybil and the awful Cynthia.'