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The Shadow of Avalon

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Introduction

Ivy Callahan had always considered herself ordinary, defined more by what she lacked than what she possessed. Her world was the indistinct gray of college lecture halls, stagnant coffee, and the only-too-familiar walls of a cramped Boston apartment. The days blurred, one into the next, marked only by deadlines and disappointment. There was no trace left of the mother who had once spun bedtime stories about lost queens and magical isles—her mother’s shoes had long since vanished from the entryway, her laughter replaced by echoing silence.

The fracture between Ivy and her mother was more than absence; it was a canyon carved by secrets. Arguments had become routine before her mother’s disappearance. The final words they had exchanged—wounded and sharp—lingered like a phantom bruise. Ivy tried not to remember, to bury the ache in textbooks and routine. But each time she glimpsed a battered photograph or a threadbare sweater, the sense of loss shifted and deepened.

Yet, in the corners of her reality, strange things whispered. Lamp bulbs would flicker in her peripheral vision; she caught shadows drifting where none should be. Once, she yanked a dog-eared novel from a shelf and watched a tiny blue spark dance from her fingers to the cover, vanishing before she could call it anything but her imagination. Ivy told herself it was just fatigue, tricks of the mind—but unease gnawed at her.

Fate changed its direction on a rain-streaked November evening when Ivy, sorting through what remained of her mother’s possessions, stumbled across something that did not belong. In a faded velvet pouch lay an artifact: a bronze pendant etched with symbols she didn't recognize, cold and impossibly heavy in her palm. As she traced its intricate patterns, a shiver coursed up her spine—a sense that she held more than just another remnant of the past.

That night, dreams beset Ivy—vivid visions of green hills shrouded in mist, voices calling her name in languages she almost understood. When she awoke, the pendant burned against her skin. She barely had time to process her fear before an accidental gesture, a word uttered without thinking, and the world around her shifted. With a flash and a lurch, the boundaries between what she knew and what she once dismissed as legend shattered.

As Ivy tumbled into a land both eerily familiar and utterly fantastical, she realized her search for answers had summoned more than she bargained for. The ordinary was gone, replaced by magic threading the veins of an ancient world—and at its heart, the secrets of her family, her mother, and a destiny that waited in the shadow of Avalon.

Chapter One: The Empty Seat at the Table

The world, Ivy quickly discovered, did not cease to exist just because she had. Or, rather, just because her world had been upended and she'd been unceremoniously dumped into a different one. The air here was sharp, carrying the scent of damp earth and something impossibly ancient, like petrichor mixed with forgotten magic. Her ears still rang from the sudden, disorienting tear, and her eyes, wide as saucers, struggled to process the kaleidoscope of greens and grays that now surrounded her.

She landed, not gracefully, but with a jarring thud that knocked the wind from her lungs and sent a jolt up her spine. A clump of mossy earth softened her fall, but didn't prevent a sharp, stinging pain in her left knee. Groaning, Ivy pushed herself up, blinking rapidly. The Boston street, the grimy brick of her apartment building, the familiar drone of distant city traffic – all gone. Vanished as completely as a forgotten dream.

In its place stretched a landscape ripped straight from a pre-Raphaelite painting. Towering trees, their branches gnarled and impossibly old, formed a dense canopy overhead, dappling the forest floor with shifting patterns of light and shadow. The light itself was different here, softer, diffused, as if filtered through a perpetual morning mist. Moss clung to every surface – rocks, tree trunks, even the air itself seemed to hum with an almost tangible green energy.

The pendant, that innocuous bronze artifact, pulsed faintly against her skin, a warmth spreading outwards from the spot where it rested against her chest. It was still there, secured on a thin leather thong she'd impulsively slipped it onto. A ridiculous impulse, she thought, to wear something so strange, so out of place. But then, *she* was out of place. Wildly, terrifyingly out of place.

A rustling in the undergrowth nearby made her heart leap into her throat. She instinctively froze, every muscle tensing. Was it an animal? Something else? Her mind, still reeling from the impossible transition, cycled through every B-movie monster and fantasy creature she'd ever encountered in fiction. Given the current circumstances, a unicorn prancing by wouldn't have entirely surprised her.

The rustling grew louder, closer. Ivy strained her eyes, trying to pierce the thick foliage. Then, a figure emerged, stepping from behind a cluster of ancient ferns. He was tall, clad in what looked like tarnished, practical armor over dark, fitted leather. A sword, sheathed at his hip, glinted dully. His face, framed by dark, wind-swept hair, was chiseled and intense, marked by a faint scar that bisected his left eyebrow. He looked... weary, but alert. And undeniably dangerous.

He stopped, his gaze sweeping over her with an unnerving intensity, as if he were trying to discern if she was a threat or merely a particularly disheveled woodland creature. His hand instinctively went to the hilt of his sword.

“Who are you?” His voice was deep, resonant, and carried a faint, archaic lilt she couldn't quite place. It was English, yes, but accented in a way she'd only ever heard in historical dramas.

Ivy swallowed, her throat suddenly dry. “Ivy,” she managed, her voice a reedy whisper. “Ivy Callahan.” She paused, then added, lamely, “And you are?”

He didn't relax his stance. “That is of no consequence. How came you to be here? This path is closed to outsiders.” His eyes narrowed, fixing on the pendant at her chest. A flicker of something, surprise or recognition, crossed his features. “The... the gate was opened?”

Ivy glanced down at the pendant, then back at him. “Gate? I... I don't know. I was just in my apartment, and then...” She gestured vaguely at the magical forest surrounding them. “Then I was here. I don't understand any of this.”

His gaze sharpened, a flicker of something she couldn't quite name in his eyes. Curiosity? Suspicion? “An accidental passage,” he murmured, more to himself than to her. “That is... unusual.” He took a cautious step closer, then another. “That pendant. Where did you acquire it?”

“It was my mother's,” Ivy blurted out, a wave of familiar grief washing over her. “I found it among her things. She... she disappeared. I was looking for answers.” The last words trailed off, a fresh wave of despair threatening to engulf her. She was supposed to be searching for her mother, not falling through a magical doorway into Narnia.

The knight paused, his posture softening almost imperceptibly. He lowered his hand from his sword, though he didn't fully sheath it. “Your mother,” he repeated, a strange inflection in his voice. “Disappeared, you say?”

“Yes. Months ago.” Ivy felt a sudden, inexplicable urge to trust him, despite his imposing appearance and the sword. He seemed less threatening now, almost... intrigued. “Do you know her? Her name is Elara Callahan.”

A subtle shift in his expression. A hint of recognition, perhaps? Or just thoughtful consideration. “I know of an Elara,” he said slowly, his eyes sweeping over her face as if searching for a likeness. “But I cannot say if it is the same. Many carry that name.” He hesitated, then added, “My name is Gareth. Sir Gareth, if such titles mean anything to you.”

Sir Gareth. Ivy's mind, despite the surreal circumstances, latched onto the name. A knight. Here, in a place that felt like legend. This was truly happening. "Sir Gareth," she repeated, testing the words. "So... this isn't Boston. Or, you know, Earth?"

He gave a faint, almost imperceptible smile. "No, Ivy Callahan. This is Avalon."

The name hung in the air, a chime of ancient power and impossible beauty. Avalon. The mythical island, the land of Arthurian legend, whispered about in her mother's bedtime stories. It couldn't be. And yet, the forest, the knight, the pendant - it all fit a narrative too wild to be real, too vivid to be a dream.

"Avalon," she breathed, the word tasting like magic on her tongue. "But... it's real?"

"As real as you and I," Gareth replied, his gaze unwavering. "And currently, it is under a grave threat." He finally sheathed his sword, though his posture remained one of quiet alertness. "You arrived at a perilous time, Ivy Callahan. The very boundaries between worlds are weakening. And your arrival, through a passage long thought sealed, is... significant."

He walked a full circle around her, his eyes taking in her modern attire - her faded jeans, her worn college hoodie, her sensible sneakers. A strange expression, a mix of amusement and something deeper, crossed his face. "You are dressed for a leisurely stroll in a public park, not for war."

War. The word jolted Ivy back to a harsh reality. "War? What war?"

"The war against the Shadow," Gareth said, his voice dropping, the light tone gone. "An ancient evil, stirring again after centuries of slumber. It seeks to consume both our world and, it seems, yours." He gestured to the pendant again. "That artifact... it is a key. A powerful one. And its activation suggests the Shadow's influence stretches further than we knew."

Ivy's mind raced, trying to keep up. Her mother, the pendant, Avalon, war, a 'Shadow.' It was too much, a cascade of impossible information. "My mother... she knew about this? About Avalon?"

Gareth's gaze became distant, thoughtful. "Perhaps. There are lineages, families with deep roots here, even across the veil. Names whispered in old texts. Callahan... it is not unfamiliar."

A sudden, sharp cry echoed through the forest, closer this time, accompanied by the clang of metal on metal. Gareth's head snapped up, his hand flying back to his sword hilt. His eyes, now intensely focused, scanned the tree line.

“Trouble,” he muttered, his voice grim. “The Shadow’s agents are bolder with each passing day. Stay close to me, girl. If you are to survive Avalon, you will need to learn quickly.”

Before Ivy could even process the warning, Gareth moved, a blur of practiced motion, drawing his sword in one fluid arc. The blade caught the diffused light, gleaming with an otherworldly sheen. He ran towards the sound, leaving Ivy standing alone for a terrifying moment, the ancient forest suddenly feeling far more menacing than magical.

Then, a new sound cut through the air – a low, guttural growl, followed by a high-pitched snarl. And Ivy, despite every instinct screaming at her to flee, took a shaky breath, swallowed her fear, and ran after Sir Gareth. Her quest for answers about her mother had just taken a decidedly sharp, and very dangerous, turn. The empty seat at her family's table suddenly felt like the least of her concerns.

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