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Portal to Ashenborough

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Introduction

Every town has its quiet corners, but few are as steeped in dust and dreams as the library of Birchwell, nestled at the edge of civilization. Within its ancient oak walls, Lenora Faulkner found solace and purpose. Her days drifted by to the scent of crumbling parchment and the hush of turning pages, the outside world little more than a curiosity glimpsed through stained glass. Books were her companions, their whispered stories more vivid than any reality she imagined herself destined for.

It was on the eve of an autumn storm that the course of Lenora's life was forever altered. A stranger appeared at her desk—a figure swathed in indigo robes, eyes shadowed with both wisdom and worry. He called himself Osric, and he pressed upon her not a request for any ordinary volume, but a cryptic plea: to follow him into the night, with only an ancient map and her unshakable curiosity as guides. Though fear prickled at the edges of her mind, Lenora sensed in him the gravity of something long awaited—a call that reverberated deep within her soul.

As the secrets of the map began to unfurl before her, Lenora was confronted with truths stranger than myth. The kindly librarian was no mere custodian of knowledge; she was, in fact, a portal keeper—a rare being bound by blood and fate to guard the passageways between worlds. Ashenborough, Osric revealed, was a realm imperiled by darkness, its magic waning and its people desperate for salvation. Only Lenora, with her latent gifts and the map's enigmatic guidance, could hope to restore balance or watch both worlds fall.

Yet, destiny's road is never paved with certainty. Lenora grappled with doubts, haunted by the enormity of the task thrust upon her. Memories of her parents' whispered tales—once dismissed as fairy stories—returned with new meaning. Were her quiet years in Birchwell mere prelude to a far grander saga? Could she face not only dangers undefinable by logic, but the tumultuous revelations about her own lineage and legacy?

Drawn inexorably into Ashenborough, Lenora was forced to leave behind every comfort she had known. She would encounter friends and foes, creatures of wonder and terror, and mysteries as labyrinthine as the library's stacks. Every answer unearthed would yield new questions, every fleeting triumph tempered by the looming shadow of loss. Amidst dazzling magic and perilous intrigue, Lenora's journey would become not just a battle for a threatened realm, but a quest to discover her truest self.

So begins the tale of 'Portal to Ashenborough'—a tale where the quietest among us

might contain the mightiest destinies, and where every story, no matter how improbable, has its roots in hidden truths waiting to be revealed.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Librarian's Secret

Lenora Faulkner often thought of her life as a carefully cataloged collection of predictable events. Every morning, the scent of rain-soaked earth would filter through her small cottage window, mingling with the aroma of brewing Earl Grey tea. Every afternoon, she would walk the cobblestone path to the Birchwell Public Library, a stately, if slightly crumbling, edifice that had been her sanctuary since childhood. And every evening, she would return home, a well-worn novel her companion, the quiet hum of crickets her lullaby. It was a life devoid of grand adventures, yet filled with a profound, understated contentment.

Her hands, slender and graceful, were more accustomed to turning fragile pages than wielding swords. Her spectacles, perched delicately on her nose, had seen countless worlds unfold within the confines of a book, but never beyond. Lenora was, to all outward appearances, the quintessential librarian: neat bun, sensible shoes, and an encyclopedic knowledge of Dewey Decimal classifications. But beneath the calm exterior lay a restless mind, a spirit that secretly yearned for the extraordinary, even as it found comfort in the ordinary.

The library itself was a living entity to Lenora. Its ancient oak beams groaned with the weight of centuries of stories, its stained-glass windows painted shifting tapestries of light on the dusty floorboards. She knew every creak in the floor, every draft that snaked through the stacks, every book by its spine and its whispered history. She found joy in the mundane tasks – re-shelving forgotten tomes, repairing frayed bindings, guiding a bewildered child to a picture book about talking dragons. These dragons, she often mused, seemed far more engaging than most of Birchwell's gossipy residents.

One blustery Tuesday, as autumn began to truly sink its teeth into the landscape, a peculiar incident disrupted the library's usual tranquility. A small, rather plump woman named Mrs. Gable, known for her devotion to romance novels featuring brooding dukes, returned a book that, to Lenora's surprise, was not a romance at all. It was a thick, leather-bound volume, its cover unadorned, its pages filled with elegant, unfamiliar script and strange, intricate diagrams. "Found it tucked away in the fantasy section, dear," Mrs. Gable chirped, oblivious to Lenora's sudden prickle of unease. "Seemed a bit... dry for my tastes. No dukes, no daring rescues."

Lenora thanked her, a polite smile plastered on her face, and watched as Mrs. Gable bustled off, presumably in search of a more suitable hero. Her gaze, however, remained fixed on the book. She had never seen it before, and she prided herself on knowing every single item in the library's vast collection. Even more unsettling was

the faint, almost imperceptible tremor that ran through her fingertips as she picked it up. A strange warmth emanated from its covers, a sensation that was both comforting and vaguely alarming.

She carried the mysterious volume to her desk, a heavy oak monstrosity that had served generations of Birchwell librarians. As she set it down, the ornate brass clock above the circulation desk chimed a mournful four o'clock. The library was nearly empty, the last few patrons having retreated from the growing chill outside. A perfect quiet settled, amplifying the subtle thrumming she now felt emanating from the book. It wasn't just a book, she realized; it felt... alive.

Carefully, Lenora opened the cover. The pages, though ancient, were supple and surprisingly robust. The script twisted and curled, a language unlike any she had ever encountered, yet somehow, she felt a flicker of recognition, a primal stir deep within her memory. The diagrams depicted celestial bodies, interwoven with geometric patterns that seemed to shift and dance if she stared too long. There were symbols, too, etched with remarkable precision, that reminded her of something both familiar and utterly alien.

As the last rays of the setting sun slanted through the tall windows, casting long shadows across the reading room, Lenora found herself tracing one of the symbols with her finger. It was a star within a circle, surrounded by what looked like spiraling vines. A faint glow pulsed from beneath her touch, sending a shiver down her arm. This was not simply a book; it was an artifact, brimming with an energy she couldn't explain. Her heart began to beat a little faster, a rhythm that echoed the strange thrumming of the book itself.

The bell above the library door jingled, startling her. Lenora quickly closed the mysterious volume, tucking it discreetly beneath a pile of return slips. She glanced up, expecting to see Mrs. Henderson with her usual query about the best way to prune roses, or young Tommy Jenkins, perpetually late for story time. Instead, a figure stood silhouetted against the deepening twilight, a shape that seemed to absorb the fading light rather than reflect it.

He was an old man, stooped with age, his frame wrapped in voluminous indigo robes that rustled softly as he stepped further into the room. His hair, a shock of pure white, fell to his shoulders, and a long, gnarled staff, tipped with a polished, dark stone, supported his weight. But it was his eyes that truly captivated Lenora—deep pools of ancient knowledge, sparkling with an intensity that belied his apparent frailty. They held a sorrowful wisdom, and a glint of something akin to hope.

“Good evening,” Lenora managed, her voice a little higher than usual. She felt an inexplicable urge to straighten her already perfectly neat desk. He offered a small, knowing smile, revealing a few missing teeth. “Indeed, Miss Faulkner. Though for

some, the evening is only just beginning.” His voice was a low rumble, like distant thunder, yet carried a clear resonance that seemed to fill the quiet space.

He moved with a deliberate slowness, his gaze sweeping over the towering bookshelves, pausing for a moment on a particularly obscure tome on forgotten folklore. Lenora felt a strange sense of being observed, not with curiosity, but with a deep understanding. It was as if he knew not just the books she housed, but the unspoken dreams she harbored.

“I am Osric,” he finally said, turning his gaze back to her. “And I believe you have something of mine.” His eyes flickered, briefly, to the stack of slips beneath which the mysterious book lay hidden. Lenora’s breath hitched. How could he possibly know? She hadn’t even had time to properly examine it herself. A knot of apprehension tightened in her stomach.

He took another step closer, his staff tapping softly on the wooden floor. “Fear not, child. I mean you no harm. Quite the opposite, in fact. I bring news, and a plea. A plea that only you, Lenora Faulkner, can answer.” He leaned forward slightly, his eyes boring into hers. “The realm of Ashenborough is in peril. And its fate, it seems, rests on the librarian of Birchwell.”

Lenora’s mind reeled. Ashenborough? A realm? This man spoke of such things with the casual certainty of discussing the weather. Her rational mind screamed that he was a madman, a harmless eccentric who had stumbled in from the fringe of town. But the inexplicable warmth still lingering on her fingertips from the mysterious book, and the unsettling clarity in Osric’s ancient eyes, argued otherwise.

“I... I don’t understand,” she stammered, her composure beginning to fray. “I’m just a librarian. I catalog books, I help people find information. I don’t... save realms.” A small, nervous laugh escaped her lips, sounding thin and reedy in the sudden, charged silence of the library.

Osric’s smile softened. “Ah, but that is where you are mistaken, Lenora. You are far more than just a librarian. You are a keeper. A guardian of thresholds. And that book, the one you so carefully concealed...” He gestured subtly with his staff. “...is not merely a book. It is a map. An ancient map, and it holds the key to Ashenborough’s salvation. And, I might add, to your own forgotten lineage.”

He paused, letting his words hang in the air, heavy with unspoken meaning. Lenora stared at him, her heart thumping against her ribs like a trapped bird. Forgotten lineage? Guardians of thresholds? This was more than a peculiar encounter; this was a chasm opening beneath her feet, revealing a world she had only ever dared to dream of between the pages of a fantasy novel. The ordinary had just taken a very sudden, very decisive turn into the extraordinary, and Lenora Faulkner, the quiet librarian, felt

an exhilarating, terrifying thrill stir deep within her soul. The storm outside began to rage, mirroring the tempest that had just erupted in her carefully ordered life.

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