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# The Solstice Portal

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## Introduction

Emma Bridger considered herself perfectly ordinary. She was a sophomore at Willow Glen University, majoring in history, known for her quiet presence and ever-present notebook. While others her age chased excitement and adventure, Emma spent her days cataloging ancient artifacts and losing herself in dusty old tomes at the local museum, where she'd just started an internship. Her world revolved around deadlines, academic dreams, and nightly cups of tea with her cat, Newton. Nothing in her meticulously ordered routine hinted at the possibility of magic.

Yet, from the moment Emma first stepped through the museum's heavy oak doors, she felt a peculiar kinship with the place. The artifacts whispered from their cases, and shadows seemed to flicker just beyond the edge of sight. Most would chalk it up to her imagination, the byproduct of reading too many fantasy novels as a child. But Emma couldn't shake the sensation that the museum—and perhaps her life—held mysteries yet to be revealed.

This sense of quiet longing had always followed Emma, a persistent ache for something more than essays and exhibits. She couldn't explain it, even to herself. Was it simply a yearning for the past she so often studied, or was there a deeper current running beneath her everyday world? Strange dreams sometimes haunted her sleep: visions of timeless forests, unfamiliar languages, and a voice calling her name across chasms of light and shadow. Emma kept these dreams to herself, fearing they might make her seem odd, even in her own eyes.

As winter approached and the days grew shorter, Emma's routines took on a subtle urgency. Solstice season brought with it an air of anticipation, as if the world stood poised on the cusp of change. One frosted December morning, while cataloguing an unassuming collection of ancient trinkets in the museum's attic, Emma's hand brushed an artifact unlike any she had seen before—a ring of stone etched with unfamiliar runes. In that instant, something stirred, not only within the artifact, but deep inside Emma as well.

Unbeknownst to her, Emma's life was about to shatter and reforge itself in ways she could never have predicted. The artifact she uncovered was no forgotten relic: it was the key to a gateway as old as time itself. Drawn into a world where myth, history, and magic entwine, Emma would soon discover that even the most ordinary lives can conceal extraordinary destinies. The solstice approached, the portal waited, and Emma's journey into the unknown was about to begin.

## CHAPTER ONE: The Artifact in the Attic

The museum attic was a repository of forgotten histories, a dusty labyrinth where time seemed to slow, and the air hung heavy with the scent of aged paper and wood polish. For Emma, it was her sanctuary. Unlike the pristine, climate-controlled exhibits downstairs, the attic felt alive, a place where stories lingered, waiting to be rediscovered. She hummed a tuneless melody as she meticulously cataloged a box of what the inventory sheet optimistically called "Miscellaneous Medieval Trinkets." Most of them were rusted buckles, cracked pottery shards, and what appeared to be a petrified turnip.

Her internship at the Willow Creek Historical Society Museum was, by all accounts, exactly what she'd wished for. It beat flipping burgers or suffering through mind-numbing retail shifts. Here, she was surrounded by the echoes of the past, even if those echoes occasionally smelled faintly of mothballs. Her supervisor, Dr. Aris Thorne, a man whose enthusiasm for forgotten footnotes bordered on evangelical, had tasked her with a particularly daunting assignment: bringing order to the attic's chaotic backlog.

"Every piece has a story, Emma," Dr. Thorne had declared, his spectacles perched on the end of his nose, as he gestured vaguely at the stacks of unlabeled boxes. "Even the most mundane can reveal a fascinating truth about those who came before us." Emma suspected he just wanted someone else to tackle the dust and spiders, but she found a strange satisfaction in the task. Each item, no matter how insignificant, represented a sliver of human existence.

Today, however, the "fascinating truths" were proving elusive. She'd spent an hour wrestling with a particularly stubborn clasp that refused to yield its secrets. With a sigh, she set it aside and reached for the next item in the box. Her fingers brushed against something cool and smooth, entirely out of place amidst the rough textures of iron and clay. It was nestled beneath a tangle of faded silk ribbons, almost as if someone had deliberately hidden it.

Carefully, Emma pulled it free. It wasn't metal, nor wood, nor any material she immediately recognized. It was a ring, about the size of her palm, crafted from a dark, smooth stone that seemed to absorb the dim attic light rather than reflect it. Intricate, swirling runes were carved into its surface, foreign symbols that hummed with a silent energy. They weren't Nordic, Celtic, or any ancient script she'd studied in her history courses. These were something else entirely, something primal and elegant.

A prickle of unease, quickly followed by a jolt of exhilaration, ran down Emma's spine.

This was no ordinary artifact. The air around it felt denser, as if the ring itself was breathing. She turned it over in her hands, her thumb tracing the cool, smooth lines of the unknown script. The stone was seamless, without a visible join, and unnervingly perfect. It didn't look like something carved by human hands, not with such precision and alien grace.

As her fingers lingered on the runes, a faint warmth spread from the ring into her skin. It was subtle at first, like the lingering heat of a mug of tea, but it intensified, growing into a gentle thrum that resonated deep within her. The attic, usually so quiet, seemed to hold its breath. A faint, almost imperceptible shimmer danced along the edges of her vision, a playful distortion of the dusty motes floating in the thin shafts of sunlight.

She frowned, shaking her head slightly. Lack of sleep, perhaps. Or too much time inhaling old paper. Yet, the warmth persisted, and a low hum, like a distant beehive, seemed to emanate from the artifact itself. The runes on the stone began to glow, a soft, ethereal blue that pulsed with a slow, deliberate rhythm. Emma gasped, dropping the ring onto the worn wooden floorboards with a clatter.

The blue light pulsed once more, brighter this time, illuminating the shadows of the attic like a tiny, self-contained supernova. The humming intensified, growing into a deep resonance that vibrated through the floorboards, up Emma's legs, and into her very bones. The air crackled with an unseen energy, raising the fine hairs on her arms. Her breath hitched in her throat. This was impossible. Artifacts didn't glow.

Fear warred with a compelling curiosity. She stared at the ring, lying innocently on the floor, still radiating its faint, otherworldly glow. It called to her, a silent, insistent whisper that bypassed her rational mind and went straight to something deeper, something ancient within her own being. It felt like a memory she couldn't quite grasp, a truth she had always known but never acknowledged.

Hesitantly, Emma reached for it again. Her fingers trembled as they closed around the cool stone. The moment she touched it, the blue light flared, blinding her for an instant. The hum became a roar, a crescendo of sound that filled the attic, pushing against her eardrums. The air around her twisted, not in the way heat haze distorts vision, but as if the very fabric of reality was being stretched and pulled.

The faint shimmer she'd noticed earlier erupted into a swirling vortex of iridescent light, directly in front of her. It started as a small, shimmering tear in the air, then rapidly expanded, growing taller than she was, wider than the dusty old shelves. It pulsed with an inner radiance, a kaleidoscopic symphony of blues, purples, and emerald greens, unlike anything she had ever witnessed. It was beautiful and terrifying all at once.

A strange, sweet scent filled her nostrils, like damp earth after a summer rain mixed

with something metallic and electric. The swirling lights deepened, coalescing into a tunnel, a swirling pathway leading into an unknown abyss. Emma felt an irresistible pull, a sensation of being drawn forward, as if an invisible hand was tugging at her very soul. The ring in her hand grew intensely hot, almost burning, yet she couldn't bring herself to drop it. It was fused to her grip, an extension of her own bewildered self.

Panic began to set in, cold and sharp. Her mind screamed for her to run, to escape this impossible phenomenon. But her feet remained rooted to the spot, held captive by the mesmerizing spectacle and the relentless pull of the portal. Her gaze was fixed on the shimmering maw, utterly captivated. It wasn't just pulling her body; it was pulling at her understanding of the world, shattering every rational explanation she had.

"What in the...?" she whispered, her voice barely audible above the rising hum. Before she could finish the thought, before she could even consider whether to step forward or resist, the portal surged. A powerful, unseen force slammed into her, ripping her from the ground. The world spun, a dizzying kaleidoscope of attic beams, dusty boxes, and the blinding vortex of light. She felt a profound sense of falling, a stomach-lurching plunge into an unknown void.

The last thing Emma registered before everything went black was the metallic tang of ozone in the air, the intense warmth of the stone ring on her palm, and the distinct, resonant echo of her own name, whispered not in English, but in the language of the shimmering runes. It was a voice that seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere, a voice that promised both ancient danger and unimaginable destiny. Then, the world dissolved into pure, vibrant light, and Emma Bridger, the ordinary college student, vanished from the museum attic.

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