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The Forge of Emberfall

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Introduction

Emberfall was once a name sung with reverence—the pulse of a kingdom, a city that claimed both splendor and sorrow in equal measure. Wreathed in the warm glow of its renowned forges, it clasped a legacy of magical achievements and mechanical marvels. But the chronicle of Emberfall is now a cold echo, for magic faded generations ago: the stones of the city are dark, and a restless hush plagues its winding streets. Its people, survivors of greatness, endure each day beneath the weight of past glories and the certainty that what is lost may never return.

In the shadow of towering smokestacks and the sprawl of once-glittering bastions, Lira toils at her master's anvil. As the city's youngest blacksmith apprentice, she shapes swords for men who speak of war in hushed tones and dreams of wielding destinies forged by her own hands. Orphaned young and raised among hammers and molten steel, she yearns for a life beyond Emberfall's crumbling walls—a life rich in purpose, where hope is forged anew, not salvaged from what's left behind. Yet in a world void of wonder, ambition is both a blessing and a peril.

Whispers drift on the autumn winds: rumors of court intrigue, of fires burning beyond the city gates, and of misgivings gnawing at the heart of the realm. Emberfall's lords, divided by suspicion, cling fiercely to scraps of power. Trade dwindles on the Old Road, and fear lurks behind every closed door—fear that the age of peace is slipping, replaced by the old wounds and rivalries that magic once soothed but now fester unchecked. To most, these troubles are distant and political; to Lira, they are the steady, dull ache of a city on the verge of surrender.

Yet all is not as it seems beneath the city's soot and shadows. Ancient threats, long thought vanquished or myth, are staring awake as if summoned by some unseen force. The old stories, once scorned as fancy, begin to breathe again in hurried whispers and the glint of unearthed relics. For in Emberfall's very foundations lie truths that even kings have forgotten, and a single act is enough to tip the fragile balance between ruin and renewal.

For Lira, the ordinary is about to shatter. When a mortally wounded stranger staggers through Emberfall's gates, clutching a strange, rune-inscribed shard, fate ignites within her hands. The simple rhythms of her existence will be swept aside by the call to something greater—and far more dangerous—than anyone in the crumbling city dares imagine. The return of magic, tied now to one apprentice's choices, will awaken enemies, test loyalties, and forge heroes in fire and in darkness.

Welcome to Emberfall, where hope smolders and the past waits to be rewritten. The

journey begins at the anvil's edge, where sparks fly and legends are born.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Stranger by the Ember Gate

The clang of hammer on steel was the music of Lira's life, a rhythmic beat that echoed the pulse of Emberfall itself. Soot stained her hands and smudged her cheek, a badge of honor in the city's grimy heart. The forge, a roaring beast of heat and light, swallowed the chill of the autumn morning. Master Borin, a man built like a barrel and with eyes perpetually narrowed against the sparks, grunted his approval as Lira struck the cooling blade, coaxing it into shape with practiced precision.

"Good, Lira," Borin rumbled, his voice a gravelly counterpoint to the hammer's song. "That'll hold an edge. Better than half the guardsmen in this city could manage, even with a smith twice your age." It was high praise from Borin, who doled out compliments like gold dust – sparingly and only when truly earned.

Lira allowed herself a small, soot-streaked smile, wiping a bead of sweat from her brow with the back of her wrist. The smell of hot metal and charcoal was home to her, far more than the cramped, damp room she slept in above the smithy. Since her parents had succumbed to the Grey Fever when she was small, Borin had been her anchor, teaching her not just the craft, but resilience. He often said, "A good smith doesn't just shape metal, Lira. They shape patience and purpose."

Her gaze drifted to the open archway of the smithy, framed by the smoke-stained brickwork. Beyond, Emberfall stirred. Merchants hawked their wares in the distant market square, their cries faint against the city's hum. Wagons rumbled past, laden with goods from the surrounding farmlands—or what was left of them. The land outside the city walls had grown leaner, more unforgiving, in recent years, a subtle symptom of the kingdom's creeping decline.

The people of Emberfall moved with a quiet resignation, their faces etched with the strain of a kingdom that felt like it was slowly eroding. The grandeur of old Emberfall, whispered in legends of soaring spires and magical fountains, felt like a cruel joke in the face of sagging rooftops and broken cobblestones. Lira sometimes wondered if the very stones of the city held a sigh of what was lost.

"Daydreaming again, girl?" Borin's voice cut through her reverie, though the gruffness was tempered with a hint of affection. "Unless you're planning on forging dreams into steel, you'd best keep your mind on the task at hand. The Queen's Guard wants these blades by sundown."

Lira snapped back to attention, picking up the next raw bar of iron. "No, Master. Just... watching the city wake up." She didn't voice the deeper yearning, the quiet rebellion

against the mundane, against a life lived within the confines of a forge in a fading city. She wanted to *make* things, not just swords, but change. To forge a future that wasn't just a repeat of the past.

A sudden commotion from the direction of the Ember Gate, the city's main northern entrance, pulled her attention again. It was unusual; the gate was typically quiet at this hour, reserved for early merchants or travelers seeking to avoid the midday crowds. A murmur rippled through the street, growing louder, tinged with alarm.

Borin, ever attuned to the city's pulse, paused his own work, his hammer resting on the anvil. "What in the blazes...?"

A few moments later, a small cluster of people emerged from the direction of the gate, walking slowly, their heads bowed. At their center, supported by two nervous-looking guardsmen, was a figure that immediately caught Lira's eye. He was a man, cloaked in travel-worn leathers, but his gait was faltering, one arm clutched to his side. Even from a distance, Lira could see the dark stain spreading across his tunic.

"By the Maker's beard," Borin breathed, his face clouding. "He's cut bad."

The group moved towards the heart of the city, their path taking them directly past Borin's smithy. As they drew closer, Lira saw the man's face. It was pale, etched with pain, and his eyes, though clouded, held a desperate intensity. He was no common traveler; his cloak, though tattered, bore faint embroidery that spoke of finer origins, and the ornate hilt of a dagger protruded from his belt.

One of the guardsmen, a young recruit named Kael who often brought his dulled blade to Borin for sharpening, looked utterly out of his depth. "Master Borin! Help us! This man... he collapsed near the gate. He's bleeding badly."

Borin, despite his gruff exterior, had a strong sense of civic duty. He quickly grabbed a clean rag and a flask of potent healing salve from a shelf. "Bring him in, Kael. Lay him on the work bench." The workbench was usually reserved for assembling intricate mechanisms or laying out designs, but today it would serve as a makeshift cot.

The stranger was heavy, his body going limp as they tried to support him. As they carefully laid him down, a small, dark object tumbled from his grasp and rolled across the stone floor, coming to rest near Lira's foot.

It was a shard, no larger than her thumb, jagged and irregular. But it wasn't just any stone. It was a deep, impossible blue, like a piece of the midnight sky had shattered and fallen to earth. And as Lira looked at it, she saw faint, swirling lines etched into its surface, too intricate to be natural, too precise to be accidental. Runes. Ancient, forgotten runes that whispered of a time when magic had been real, not just a

children's tale.

A strange warmth radiated from the shard, a faint thrumming against her boot. It felt alive.

Borin was already working on the stranger, tearing away the soaked fabric to reveal a deep, jagged wound in his side. "He's been stabbed. This isn't the work of a common bandit." His voice was grim. "Too clean, too precise."

The stranger groaned, his eyes flickering open. He saw Lira, then his gaze fixed on the shard by her foot. A flicker of alarm, quickly replaced by desperate urgency, crossed his face. His pale lips moved, forming words that were barely a whisper.

"The... shard... protect it..." His hand, trembling, reached out towards her, then fell back weakly. "The... warlord... awakens..."

Lira knelt, mesmerized by the glowing shard. The warmth intensified, spreading through her fingers as she reached out and picked it up. The moment her skin touched its surface, a jolt, not painful, but startlingly vivid, shot through her. It was as if a dormant power had suddenly stirred, humming through her veins. The runes on the shard seemed to glow with a faint, inner light, pulsing in time with the beat of her own heart.

A sudden, sharp gasp from the stranger broke the spell. His eyes were wide, fixed on Lira, a mixture of awe and terror in their depths. "It... it chose you," he whispered, his voice barely audible. "The prophecy..."

Borin, distracted by the wound, didn't seem to notice the strange glow or the man's cryptic words. "Kael, fetch me fresh water! And some clean linen, quick!"

But Lira heard. She felt the shard's presence in her hand, the quiet hum that resonated with something deep inside her. It was as if a lock had turned, a door long shut, now creaking open. The blacksmith's apprentice, whose life was defined by the tangible and the practical, felt a tremor of something ancient and inexplicable.

The stranger coughed, a terrible, rattling sound that brought fresh blood bubbling to his lips. "They're coming... for it... for the magic..." His voice was fading fast. "The Eye of the Serpent... beware... the Eye..." His eyes rolled back, and his body went slack.

Borin pressed a hand to the man's chest, then slowly, gravely, shook his head. "He's gone."

Kael returned with the water, his face paling as he saw the unmoving figure on the bench. "No... he can't be."

Lira stood, the glowing shard still clutched in her hand. The warmth persisted, a constant reminder of the impossible moment. The warlord. Magic. The Eye of the Serpent. The words, uttered in a dying breath, swirled in her mind, nonsensical yet impossibly real. She looked down at the shard, its blue light pulsing faintly, hidden now within her closed fist.

Borin sighed, his broad shoulders slumping. "A grim start to the day. We'll need to report this to the city watch. But first, let's wrap him. Give him some dignity."

Lira nodded mutely, her gaze still fixed on the dead stranger. Who was he? What was this shard? And what had he meant by 'the warlord awakens'? The mundane world of the forge, of hammering steel and sharpening blades, suddenly felt impossibly small, overshadowed by a darkness she couldn't comprehend.

As Borin turned to cover the body, Lira quickly slipped the glowing shard into her tunic pocket, feeling its warmth through the fabric. It was a secret now, a weight against her skin, and a promise of something profound and terrifying. The ordinary was indeed shattered. Emberfall, she instinctively knew, was about to change, and she, the humble blacksmith's apprentice, was somehow at its heart. The rhythm of the city no longer sounded like a hammer on steel, but like a distant drum, beating a warning.

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