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Riftborn

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Introduction

Arin had always believed his life would be as unremarkable as the blackened anvil he toiled over each day in Elderglen. The peaceful village, nestled between ancient forests and rolling golden fields, spun its days to the rhythmic clang of hammers and the soft hum of old wives' tales. For all its charms, Elderglen was small, and Arin smaller still—a mere speck in the long shadow of the great kingdoms beyond. His world was iron and fire, sweat and smoke, the comfort of routine, and the certainty that magic was nothing more than a fanciful legend whispered around hearths at night.

But as the first dawn of his twenty-first year broke over the thatched roofs, Arin's world began to unravel. He felt it first as a subtle tug behind his eyes, a prickle at the edge of his senses whenever he touched metal heated white-hot in the forge. The village felt smaller, the air heavier, as if the very fabric around him strained against some invisible seam. Until one fateful night, strange lights flickered in his dreams and shadows that didn't belong danced at the edges of his vision. When he woke to find a shimmering rift hovering above his anvil—a tear in reality itself—his life changed forever.

What began as an accident quickly spiraled into something far greater. With each attempt to close the rift, Arin found himself peering into worlds altogether different yet hauntingly familiar. Some teemed with wonders—skies alive with flying ships, cities carved into mountainsides, forests that sang in unfamiliar tongues. Others, however, radiated menace—a creeping darkness slithering across lands left barren and shivering, eyes watching from the gloom. It was there, amidst one such rift, that he glimpsed the force which now threatened to devour not just his reality, but every world touched by the fragile web of existence.

Terrified and awed by the power now at his fingertips, Arin struggled to hide his secret in a community that trusted only what it could see and touch. But when a darkness seeped through his accidental gateway, consuming the village's edges and leaving only silence and cold, he could keep his secret no longer. Elderglen's fate—and perhaps all fate—was now in his hands.

Thus began Arin's journey: from the safety of iron and fire into a realm of uncertainty, where courage and hope could be as fleeting as the worlds glimpsed through the rifts. Along the way, he would make unlikely friends—warriors, mages, scholars—each nursing their own wounds and secrets. Together, they would march into the heart of darkness, crossing the boundaries of reality itself, driven by the hope that their actions might yet heal what Arin's mistake had undone.

In the following pages, you'll travel alongside Arin—from the quiet heart of Elderglen to the farthest reaches of worlds unseen. Through magic entwined with peril, and friendships forged in the crucible of adversity, discover how a blacksmith's son became the Riftborn—savior and harbinger, hero and outcast, the one upon whom the fate of all worlds would ultimately hinge.

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CHAPTER ONE: Embers in Elderglen

The insistent clang of the hammer against hot steel was Arin's earliest memory, a lullaby woven into the very fabric of his existence. For twenty years, that rhythm had defined his world, a comforting pulse in the heart of Elderglen. Today was no different, or so he told himself, even as an unfamiliar tingle prickled at the base of his skull. The forge, a roaring beast of fire and smoke, cast dancing shadows on the rough-hewn walls of his small smithy. Sweat beaded on his brow, mingling with soot, a familiar testament to an honest day's labor. He pulled a glowing ingot from the coals, its heat radiating against his calloused hands, and placed it on the anvil with a practiced thud.

Each strike of his hammer was a conversation with the metal, shaping it, coaxing it into submission. Today, he was crafting hinges for old Master Elara's barn door, a job as mundane as any other. Yet, with every impact, the strange sensation intensified. It wasn't pain, not precisely, but a subtle vibration, a discord in the usual harmony of his senses. He paused, wiping his brow with the back of a grimy hand, and glanced around the smithy. Everything was as it should be: tools hung neatly on pegs, sacks of coal piled in the corner, the scent of woodsmoke and iron thick in the air. Perhaps he was just tired. He'd stayed up late the previous night, sketching out designs for a new plough blade, a task he often found himself doing, despite the fact that Elderglen rarely demanded innovation.

He picked up the hammer again, his muscles protesting slightly, and brought it down. *Clang!* The vibration shot through him, sharper this time, like a distant bell ringing inside his head. He frowned, his brow furrowing in concentration. It was tied to the metal, he realized. To the heat, perhaps? He plunged the nearly-finished hinge into the water trough, a hiss of steam erupting around it. The prickling eased, only to return with a vengeance when he pulled the cooled metal out.

This was new. Arin had spent his entire life around the forge, had inherited the smithy from his father, who had inherited it from his father before him. He knew the ebb and flow of the fire, the temper of the various metals, the way a hammer felt in his hand as intimately as he knew the lines on his own palm. Never had he felt anything like this. It was as if the very air around the forge was vibrating, alive with an unseen energy.

He tried to dismiss it as a phantom ache, a trick of the light, anything but what his instincts were beginning to whisper. Magic. The word was a foreign concept in Elderglen, relegated to children's stories and the wild imaginings of travelers passing through. Old Man Hemlock, the village elder, would scoff at the mere mention of it, reminding everyone that true magic lay in hard work and good harvests. Arin had always agreed. His world was solid, tangible.

Yet, as the afternoon wore on, the phenomenon grew more pronounced. Each time he touched the glowing iron, the sensation intensified, blossoming into a dizzying pressure behind his eyes. He felt a peculiar drawing sensation, as if something unseen was trying to pull him forward, or perhaps, pull *through* him. He started leaving the metal in the coals for shorter periods, trying to avoid the peak heat, but even a dull warmth brought a fainter echo of the feeling. The hinges were taking longer than usual, his concentration fractured by the strange internal hum.

By evening, with the last rays of sun painting the western sky in hues of orange and purple, Arin was exhausted, not from the physical labor, but from the relentless, unexplained energy coursing through him. He extinguished the forge, the roaring flame dying down to a bed of glowing embers. The heat, the heart of his smithy, receded, and with it, the strange vibration quieted, leaving only a dull throb. He sighed, rubbing his temples. A good meal and an early night, he decided, would clear his head.

He walked home through the winding lanes of Elderglen, nodding greetings to old Farmer Giles, who was mending a fence, and to young Lyra, chasing a stray chicken. The scent of cooking fires mingled with the earthy smell of the fields, creating a familiar, comforting perfume. He tried to focus on these ordinary things, to anchor himself in the known, but the subtle hum persisted, a ghost of the afternoon's intensity.

That night, Arin dreamed. Not of hinges or hammers, but of light. Blinding, ethereal light that twisted and turned, shaping itself into impossible forms. He was floating, weightless, pulled by an invisible current towards a shimmering vortex. Voices, like wind chimes in a distant storm, whispered words he couldn't quite grasp, yet their meaning resonated deep within his bones. He saw glimpses of other places: a sky filled with emerald spires, a desert of purple sand, a forest where trees glowed with an inner light. Each image flashed by, vivid and fleeting, leaving him breathless.

He woke with a gasp, his heart pounding a furious rhythm against his ribs. The first hint of dawn painted the cracks in his cottage walls with pale grey light. For a moment, he was disoriented, the dream clinging to him like mist. Then, he noticed it. The air in his small bedroom shimmered, not like heat haze, but with an internal luminescence. A faint, almost imperceptible hum filled the silence, echoing the whispers from his dream.

He sat up, pushing the heavy woolen blanket aside, his bare feet meeting the cold stone floor. He rubbed his eyes, convinced he was still half-asleep. But the shimmering remained, concentrated near the far wall, where his old, unused practice anvil sat. This anvil had been his father's first, too pitted and worn for serious work, now relegated to holding a dusty pile of discarded bolts and nails.

As Arin watched, the shimmer intensified. It began to coalesce, drawing inwards, like water swirling down a drain. A small point of light appeared, no bigger than a firefly, then rapidly expanded. It pulsed, a soft, inviting glow of deep sapphire. The air around it grew noticeably cooler, carrying a scent Arin had never encountered—like ozone after a lightning storm, mixed with something indefinably ancient, like wet earth and distant stars.

His breath hitched in his throat. This wasn't a dream. This wasn't tiredness. This was... real. A profound sense of dread, mixed with an equally potent current of awe, rooted him to the spot. The sapphire light expanded further, forming a perfect circle, about a foot in diameter. It hovered above his practice anvil, spinning slowly, revealing a glimpse of something beyond.

It was impossible to describe fully, for the image flickered and shifted, defying simple categorization. He saw a flash of vibrant green, like leaves unfurling after a long winter, then a blur of silver, perhaps a river, or a structure. It was a window, a portal, into a place that was decidedly *not* Elderglen.

Arin stumbled out of bed, his legs unsteady, and moved towards it, drawn by an irresistible curiosity. Every instinct screamed at him to run, to bury his head under the covers and pretend this wasn't happening. But another, deeper urge, a nascent thrill of discovery, propelled him forward. He reached out a trembling hand, his fingers outstretched towards the shimmering circle.

Just as his fingertips grazed the edge of the sapphire light, a jolt, not painful, but incredibly potent, shot through his arm. It felt like touching a live wire, yet instead of burning, it filled him with a surge of energy, electric and strange. The images within the portal solidified for a fleeting moment: a vast, alien jungle, vines thick as his arm, pulsating with soft, bioluminescent light. He heard a faint, melodic chime, like crystal bells ringing in a breeze.

Then, as quickly as it had appeared, the sapphire light flickered, shrank, and vanished, leaving only the mundane reality of his dusty anvil. The hum in the air dissipated, the strange scent faded, and the cool spot warmed. He stood there, hand still outstretched, breathing heavily, his mind struggling to process what he had just witnessed.

He looked around his simple room, the familiar objects now seeming... less real. The wooden beams, the patched quilt, the scent of stale hearth smoke—all seemed dull in comparison to the vibrant, impossible world he had just glimpsed. A rift. That was the only word that came to mind, a tear in the fabric of reality. And he, Arin, the blacksmith's son from Elderglen, had opened it.

The memory of the dream, the intensifying vibrations in the smithy, the prickling sensation—it all clicked into place with terrifying clarity. It wasn't just a coincidence. It was him. He was the cause. A cold knot of fear tightened in his stomach. What if he couldn't control it? What if he opened another one, and something... undesirable... came through? Elderglen was peaceful, unprotected. It had no need for guards or walls, for generations. What could possibly stand against whatever might lurk on the other side of such a gateway?

He spent the rest of the early morning in a daze, trying to convince himself it had been a particularly vivid hallucination, a side effect of overwork and a peculiar dream. He splashed cold water on his face, forced himself to eat a piece of stale bread, and tried to focus on the tasks of the day. But the sapphire light, the glimpse of the glowing jungle, was etched into his mind with an almost painful clarity.

When the sun was fully risen, he ventured back to the smithy, his steps heavy with a new kind of trepidation. He stared at the forge, its dormant coals now cold and grey. He picked up his hammer, its familiar weight now alien in his hand. Could he... could he do it again? The thought was both exhilarating and terrifying. He knew he had to try. He needed to understand this, to master it, before it mastered him.

With a deep, shaky breath, Arin began to stoke the forge. The flames licked at the fresh coal, growing stronger, hotter. As the first piece of iron began to glow, a faint hum started in the air, a familiar thrum that sent shivers down his spine. He was no longer just a blacksmith. He was something else entirely. And his world, as he knew it, was about to shatter.

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