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THE UNKNOWN REGION: VAULT OF POWER

By

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CHAPTER ONE

A lone man trudged up the grassy hill as the sun rose, the hood on his brown cloak pulled up to hide his face. The sky slowly cleared as morning broke, illuminating whatever the light touched in a soft yellow glow. As he reached the peak of the hill, he glanced back at the path he had taken while it flourished in the morning light. Pushing himself on the wooden staff, he pressed on across the plains.

For the early hours, he kept moving, paying close attention to the sounds of his surroundings. Although he seemed wary, he moved with confidence and without fear of what lies ahead. As the day wore on, more of the scenery could be seen, including forests, fields and a small village or two in distance. Eventually, he came across a set of ruins. It looked like they used to be an old outpost, demolished by a forgotten war, left to wither away from the face of the land. All that was left of the site now were three piles of rubble, a couple of walls half standing, and the crumbling frame of the main building. If you were planning to stage an ambush for a patrol coming across here, this would be the most ideal place. But there was no road passing through here so it was an unlikely place to strike.

That fact seemed to please the hooded man as he entered the area, weaving through the walls and rubble. But all the while, he kept glancing in the direction of the main ruin. He could feel it. He wasn't alone.

Once he was in the centre of the once standing complex, he stopped and leaned on his staff, listening to his surroundings. For the first few seconds, nothing could be heard but the slight wind whistling through the stones. Then, the sound of a snapping twig echoed somewhere to his right. In the main building, several small pebbles clattered down the aging steps while a figure rushed past one of the windows on the first level. The hooded man stood motionless, calmly listening as several other sounds could be heard from all around him. He adjusted his grip on his staff as he waited. Glancing to his left, he saw the sharp point of an

arrow loaded into a crossbow aimed directly at him. Yet he remained calm as several more soldiers came out of hiding, displaying their shining blue and silver armour, many armed with shields as they approached him. They all had the image of tower with the twin dragons flying around it, a crest known well across these lands.

And yet the hooded man remained silent as the soldiers surrounded him, bearing their swords and crossbows. The Captain of this squadron stepped in front of him and placed a hand on his belt. “What be your path, commoner?” he demanded, standing firmly in place.

No answer came from the hooded man. The captain looked at his comrades to ensure they were in place. “If you don’t tell us your path or business, you’ll need to come with us.”

Again, the man didn’t answer. Nor did he move.

The soldiers shifted slightly, somewhat unsure of the situation. But the captain remained calm, despite the anger that was starting to bubble inside him. “State your business or come quietly” he barked.

Still no reply.

The captain was getting agitated now, placing his hand over the weapon he knew he’d need. He’d performed this sort of routine many times with convoys and travellers. He knew if they didn’t cooperate, it meant trouble. He looked at his men, who were now sporting a mix of annoyed and wary expressions. Most cooperated so they didn’t usually need to interject.

Until now.

Looking back at the man, he ordered to his soldiers, “Men, take him.”

Half of the soldiers advanced towards the hooded figure, careful to keep their weapons trained on him. As they got closer, they could hear a quiet, low grumbling sound. When it stopped, the man lifted his head so he was looking directly at the captain. The man’s face was slightly visible now, showing a calm expression, piercing eyes and a slight smile. The captain

stared back at him, staring right into his eyes. As the soldiers got closer, the man's smile widened into a sneer.

The captain's eyes widened in shock as he realised what he was. He yelled to his men, "Get back!"

Too late.

The figure raised his staff and slammed it on the ground, which shook at the impact, causing rubble to fall from the ruins. At the same time, the soldiers froze in surprise. A split second later, a shockwave erupted, blowing all the soldiers around him about five metres into the air.

The hooded man remained where he was, surveying the scene as several soldiers lay far from him. As far as he could see, they had all landed heavily on walls or piles of rocks, breaking their necks or cracking skulls open. It appeared no one survived.

He started forward again, away from the mess he'd created. But as he passed a stone wall roughly his height, he heard the swish of something slicing through the air behind him. Quick as a flash, he moved his head to one side, narrowly dodging the arrow as it struck the wall, a flash of sparks exploding on impact.

The man looked at what was left of the arrow, then slowly looked back at its source. One of the archers was still alive in the ruin building, reloading his crossbow behind a wall on the first floor. He saw a second archer behind another wall on the same floor. As he began to turn around, another tell-tale sound came from his left, revealing yet another soldier, one who hadn't hit a solid object when the shockwave erupted. He was advancing on the man with his shield raised. Another survivor came from behind another wall, pointing his weapon at him, a single piece of wood about thirty centimetres long.

The man just smiled. He wondered when a real fight would begin.

The soldier flicked his stick in the man's direction. He instantly dived to the left, behind a low pile of rubble, just before a small explosion of sparks exploded behind him. Crouching down, he began muttering some more words like the one that created the shockwave. When he finished, he stood up and pointed his staff, firing a surge of energy at the advancing soldier. It struck him in the centre of his chest, launching him back several feet before landing on the ground in a smoking heap. The other soldier looked at his fallen comrade, then began backing away from the hooded man.

He turned to the soldier, pointing his staff in his direction and challenged him, "Draw your wand!"

The soldier considered the challenge, his hand hovering over the weapon by his side. But then he glanced in the direction of the ruined building. The man realised what was coming. He sprinted forward just as an arrow shot from the building and struck the ground where he once stood, sending another burst of sparks and dirt into the air. He kept moving, weaving through the ruins as a few more arrows flew around him. When he looked across, he saw the other man had drawn his wand and was also firing shots of energy at him over his shield. He spoke a single word and sent a blast at him, striking harmlessly against the enchanted metal.

The soldier kept firing and the arrows kept coming, but the figure wasn't afraid. He was confident they couldn't beat him. When the latest arrow struck the ground next to his feet, he stopped and turned towards the archers, muttering once again.

One of the archers shot at him. Holding the staff with both hands, he held it in front of him and blocked it. The arrow bounced off it at full speed and struck the soldier's shield, sending a surge of electrical energy through the metal and into the flesh, stunning him instantly. With another sharp spell, he fired another blast and the soldier collapsed lifelessly.

He turned and deflected another arrow as he faced the final archers. They paused to steady their aim. He took the opportunity to calmly mutter a lengthy sentence as he slowly raised his

staff above the ground, then struck it down when he stopped talking. A huge surge of energy flowed through the staff, into the ground, across the space between him and the building and engulfed the ruins in an explosion of fire. The two archers screamed as they were burned alive, falling silent after about a minute of having their flesh melted off their bones.

The hooded man watched as the ruin went up in smoke, charred meat and barbeque scent filling his nostrils, before turning away back onto the path he was walking. After a couple of steps, he heard someone walk up behind him. He turned to see the captain of the ambush standing there with his wand at his side. They stood quietly, motionless, facing each other. The captain was breathing heavily, winded from the landing he took from the shockwave. When he finally spoke, his voice was raspy and low. "Surrender!"

The hooded man looked around at the fallen soldiers around them. "To what army?" he asked sincerely.

The captain looked around then sighed, trying to keep his composure. "Why are you here?"

The hooded man smiled. "This war cannot last forever" he said confidently. "One side will have to defeat the other. That time will soon be upon us. We will be victorious."

"What makes you so sure?" the captain challenged. "You're deserters! Traitors! What makes you think that you can beat our order?"

The man's smile widened. "Because I can open the Vault. I hold the key that will decide the outcome of the war. When the time comes, we will have the power to overthrow your council, your King. And then all of the land will fall by our hands." Then he fixed a cold stare at the captain. "And no one in your kingdom can stop us."

The captain stared back at the man, bewildered. "The kingdom spans over the entire Realm. You can't hope to win."

The man grinned. "We will. The Oracle has foreseen it. No one of this world can stop us."

The captain took a step back in shock. He couldn't believe what he was hearing. If the Oracle had truly stated this prophecy, then no-one stood a chance. He raised his wand and pointed it at the man, unsure if he would actually succeed in striking him. "You lie!" he yelled at him defiantly.

The man looked at him sadly, then started muttering a sentence that would end the captain's life. The soldier was in too much shock to stop him. He stared blankly at the man while he worked his magic, awaiting the end.

Out of nowhere, a sound penetrated the hopeless silence, followed by the sound of something solid sinking into flesh, and the hooded man staggered backwards, clutching his side. Blood leaked over his hand as he clutched an arrow shaft that had pierced his body, struggling to remove it. The captain looked back to see a fallen archer, his lieutenant, pass out on the ground. He'd used his remaining strength to ensure the man didn't leave alive. The captain smiled, admiring his determination.

But then he turned back to see the man speaking another set of words. As the words fell from his mouth, the wind picked up and loose dirt and rubble started to billow around him, creating a tornado around his feet. The captain screamed a curse. "NO!"

He rushed toward the man but wasn't fast enough. A massive burst of wind blew him back as a flash of light engulfed the mage at the centre. When the light faded, the wind died down and the captain was left standing in the middle of the ruins, surrounded by the bodies of the dead, staring at the empty space where the hooded man once stood.