

THE UNKNOWN REGION: THE EXILE

by

Philip Whitby

## PROLOGUE

### *Thirty Years Ago*

They were all tired and exhausted, the hot sun beating down on them like an oven, the desert sands stretching out in all directions as they wiped the sweat from their brow. It had been four months since they were last in civilization, the nearest town over seventy miles over the horizon, and Yeusef missed the buzz of the streets and bustle of the crowds. Out here, it was as silent as a ghost town. He slammed the shovel back into the dirt, scooping another pile of sand into a wheelbarrow.

The rest of the camp worked like a furious machine, everybody having a part to play. Tents were set up to shield the facilities from the scorching sun as trucks supplied them with food and water. Sections of the dig were fenced off as teams carefully examined the pits to uncover one of the deserts many secrets. Meanwhile, their American benefactors gazed over them, waiting for a result from their expensive enterprise. Yeusef watched them as they paced the camp perimeter, barely even glancing at the men and women that scurried around them. They worked long and hard for the little pay so men like that can claim responsibility for finding a piece of history they'll sell for thousands. It may not have been fair but Yeusef had worked with worse. At least this expedition treated them fairly, giving them the supplies and equipment they needed to excavate a dig as big as this.

He stomped down on the shovel, pushing against the hardened lower layers of the sand to dig deeper. He wasn't sure what exactly he was looking for. On previous digs, it was usually old architecture and the occasional gold coin or two. So far they were coming up empty and they'd been at this hours. He looked across to his friend Rafal, who glanced up to shake his

head. If they didn't find anything soon, the Americans will likely get grouchy. Four months and just a few old rocks to show for it.

Rafal put his shovel down to get a drink, leaving Yeusef alone to fend off the scorching sun. He wiped his brow with his sleeve, looking up at the empty sky wondering why Ra would punish them like this. It's the hottest it's ever been out here, almost as if the gods were warning them away. Even as he kept digging, something felt wrong. Three workers had already quit in the last week because of some bad vibes, believing this place could be cursed. He wasn't as superstitious as them, but even he was starting to get the feeling they shouldn't be searching here. Yet they carried on because it's the only way to get paid.

He grasped the shovel tightly and slammed it back into the ground again. The earth cracked under the blade like a spider web, which seemed unusual. But Yeusef was so tired he didn't notice as he put his weight behind his foot to push down.

He was taken by surprise when the floor collapsed beneath him, taking half the desert with him.

One minute, Yeusef was melting in the blinding sun. The next, he was sliding into a pitch-black void. Sand and dirt showered him in a waterfall as his body tossed and tumbled down a steep incline through the darkness before eventually rolling to a halt on the dusty floor. He lay there, face in the dirt as sand covered him head to toe, waiting for his vision to stop spinning.

Only when he believed his limbs could support him did he rise onto his hands and knees, shaking sand out of his hair and clothes. He glanced up to see the hole he'd inadvertently created, casting sunlight down like a lamp. He couldn't have fallen more than twenty feet, the collapsing desert forming a cushion at the bottom. Shadows danced overhead as figures looked down from above, many calling his name. He told them he was alright, turning his attention to the newly discovered chamber.

The darkness made it difficult to see, but the glow of the sun's rays revealed a corridor twenty feet tall lined with carvings and hieroglyphs. Yeusef rose unsteadily to his feet and ran his hand over the writings. None of it made sense to him. He recognised many of the symbols, the Eye of Horus, The Symbol for Sobek and so on, but in this context it was pure gibberish. He looked up to the roof lined with cracks and fissures. They'd been on top of this for months, it was a wonder the whole place didn't cave in. The light picked out a large statue to his right, crumbling and old. He stared at the sculpture carefully. It bore a striking resemblance to Osiris, God of the Afterlife, but couldn't fathom why he'd be down here.

There was a sudden burst of red light as someone lit a flare behind him and Yeusef found himself staring at the startling sight of a corpse staring back. He cried out in horror, falling onto his ass as he scrambled away from it. The dead body was leaning against the statue, eyes hollow, facing towards him, skin a decayed grey coming off in flakes. As the rest of the exhibition climbed down the fissure to join him, green beetles scurried away from the light further into the chamber. He stared at them as they vanished.

*A bad omen*, he thought.

"Fascinating" one of the American archaeologists commented as he examined the walls. Many of the workers didn't speak their language, but Yeusef understood enough to translate. "Ancient writings that are almost exactly like that from the pyramids, but older. This could be the original inspiration for the language."

"I came here for a bit more than old cave drawings" the larger American, their benefactor, said as he stomped through the chamber with his two heavies following. Yeusef never got his name, but always referred to him as *Goldman*. The archaeologist was called Harold Winters and he was the one in charge of the dig. Yeusef liked him, as did the rest of the work force. Goldman only cared for results, which meant he didn't have time for people like them. Rafal

appeared by Yeusef's side and offered him a hand to get to his feet. The two of them stared wide eyed at the body.

As the exhibition crept closer, the skin suddenly crumbled to dust and the whole thing collapsed into a pile of sand. A couple more flares were lit as they trudged cautiously into the chamber. Yeusef glanced back to find a good portion of the workers had decided to stay above ground, looking down at them fearfully. This time he understood their trepidation. *Something was seriously wrong down here.*

They ventured further into the structure, the dark corridor stretching further and deeper. The red flares cast long shadows around them, making the darkness appear alive. Beetles scurried over the walls and floor, scuttling around the handful more statues lining the walls and the dozen more bodies in their path. The shocking thing about them was they were all standing, like they had just turned to stone. Skin and bone crumbled to dust as they passed, while Goldman and his goons shattered a few of them in irritation. The sight was creepy in itself, but what worried Yeusef was the fact they were all facing towards them, all running away from the darkness. He stared at them all in horror, the hairs on the back of his neck standing on end. He finally saw the vapours of his breath coming from his mouth and realised how cold it was, which should've been impossible out here in the desert.

*They shouldn't be here,* he thought.

The corridor finally opened up into a large chamber about the size of their encampment, nearly forty feet tall. The exhibition fanned out with their flares to reveal the same writings lining the walls with statues surrounding them, all resembling the gods of old. Ra, Osiris, Anubis, Set. Yeusef stared at them all. *This wasn't right. They shouldn't be here. This shouldn't be possible.* All around the chamber, more sand piles and frozen bodies littered the ground, and in the centre was a raised platform where an altar sat alone and intact. Upon it was an object

completely alien to him. Winters approached it with fascination and awe. “Remarkable” he whispered.

Rafal stood beside Yeusef as the rest of the group approached the platform cautiously. “This is it, isn’t it?” he whispered in their native tongue. “The stories, they were true?”

“They can’t be” Yeusef replied. “It’s just not possible.”

“But if they are” Rafal insisted, “then the curse must be real. Look around you! What else could’ve done this?”

They stared at the crumbling figures around them as many of the workers began to mutter fearfully, chanting prayers and falling to their knees. Yeusef could’ve rolled his eyes, but he was starting to believe too. He didn’t know how but this place was cursed. They had to leave before it was too late.

The Americans had different ideas.

Winters stepped up to the altar in amazement as he examined the relic sitting on top of it. It looked like an orb, glinting in the red light as the object glowed. Winters blew the dust away to reveal the orb was smooth, metallic and shiny, the material appearing to be bronze. “Is this it?” Goldman asked pointedly, like he had somewhere better to be.

Winters stared at it through his rimmed spectacles, peering gleefully at the strange relic. “I think so” he answered. He carefully reached out to pick it up, his hands trembling with anticipation. Yeusef cast a glance around the chamber, the statues glaring at them menacingly as the wind echoed around them. *Was it his imagination or was the wind getting louder?* One of the workers warned them not to touch it, waving his arms wildly at the walls in an attempt to be understood, but the men ignored him. A handful of them started to back away in fear as Yeusef glanced worryingly at Rafal, who was starting to do the same.

*They shouldn’t be here.*

Winter's fingers brushed the orb lightly until his hands wrapped around the relic like he was holding the sun. He marvelled as he lifted it off the altar, grinning for joy until he suddenly screamed. The scream was hollow and ghastly, like something else was suddenly screaming through his lungs. Everybody fell back in a startled frenzy as the chamber shook from a suddenly gust of wind that came out of nowhere, shaking the walls and statues, sand crumbling down from the cracking roof. Beetles squealed at them as they stared at the altar, fear holding them in place like a vice. Yeusef tried to turn and run, like he should've done in the first place, but his legs were like stone. Winters stood holding the relic in his hands as Goldman shouted at him, the scream a continuous howl. His skin started to peel and his flesh started to decay rapidly, eyes shrinking into the man's skull while his clothes withered apart. Bones started to pierce the thinning flesh and Winters was reduced to a mummified husk in front of their eyes.

Goldman was able to pull his men out of their paralysis long enough to order the relic be retrieved. The chamber continued to shake as the platform began to spew mist and smoke from the stones, seeping through the cracks and funnelling into the air. One of Goldman's heavies managed to pry the orb from Winter's withering fingers, but then suddenly cried out as his hands began to smoke, dropping the relic to the floor. As it rolled towards the second of the heavies, the first man watched as his flesh began to boil and smoulder like he'd put them in acid.

Goldman paid no notice as he approached the cursed object, pulling out a leather bag and emptying its contents so he could scoop it up and stuffed it into a satchel, avoiding making any physical contact with the metal orb. "Let's go!" he ordered and turned to leave.

The chamber suddenly howled and Yeusef found himself praying with the rest of the workforce as the hovering smoke, bright yellow in colour, exploded out across the floor to fill the chamber. He screamed as he scrambled to get away, eyes glued to the cloud as it covered

the remains of Winters and the screaming body of the heavy. He managed to reach the corridor before the cloud washed over the rest of them like a tidal wave. Goldman sprinted down the corridor without looking back, leaving Yeusef to watch his friend Rafal and everyone else get caught by this unnatural force. The smoke wrapped around their legs and snaked across their bodies like they were encasing them in wrappings. They all screamed as they tried to run, but the cloud made their movements sluggish, like they were stuck in mud. Yeusef reached out for Rafal but was forced to watch in horror as the cloud drained the life from him. The man screamed as he reached for his hand, his arm becoming grey and shrivelled as his voice became low and hollow. Light blue mist started to bleed out of the pores on his skin, being sucked back into the epicentre of the chamber as his cries followed it. Around him, more blue mist was pulled out of the bodies of the screaming workers as they froze in place. Yeusef stared at Rafal's body, cold and decaying just like the dead they'd seen, believing he'd just witnessed his soul be devoured by this malevolent curse.

He finally snapped out of his gaze to see the cloud closing on him. Unwilling to be another victim he turned and ran for his life, passing the statues of the gods as they looked down at him impassively. He understood why they were here now. They were a warning, one he should've headed. They should never have come here!

He got as far as the entrance before the smoke engulfed him, wrapping around his limbs like bandages to mummify his body. He fought desperately against it, even as the cloud snaked into his mouth and down his throat, up his nose and into his ears. The air was a putrid smell as it ate away at him and he could feel his soul being wretched out of his body while his scream shrank into a piercing howl. He felt his skin shrivel across his muscles and bones turn brittle, like he was decomposing within seconds.



Then he was pulled back into the darkness, leaving his decaying body behind as it reached out desperately for the sunlight while he was forced to join his fellowship in the Duat.

## Act One

## RETURN

## CHAPTER ONE

He always did appreciate these quieter moments where he could sit back and gather his thoughts. So much has happened in the last few months, to him and to some of his most trusted allies and, more importantly, to the men under his command. This war has taken its toll in more ways than one. *How much has he lost? How much has serving in the Realm's Guard forced him to sacrifice?*

The carriage drew to a stop and he opened his eyes, bringing his mind back to the task at hand. The blue sky hung above him as the soft white clouds hovered graciously overhead with the golden sun beating down upon them. The air was warm but the cool wind chilled him to the bone, a sure sign of death in the air. The feeling always sent shivers down his spine. He hopped down from the carriage, his leather boots landing squarely in the gravelly dirt, the grassy fields stretching out in all directions. Flowers dotted the landscape as trees sprouted in the distance, spreading into forests and woodland. The soldier scanned the horizon as he adjusted his uniform; brown leather trousers with matching boots and dark leather jacket, silver armoured bracers strapped across his arms and legs for extra protection, a blue cloak draped over his shoulders with the Realm's crest on the back, the *Tower with Twin Dragons*, along with a hood which he pulled back over his head. He looked out over the scenery, his gloved hand running over the belt around his waist where he kept the carved oak wand holstered by his side. Once upon a time he used to wear the classic full silver and blue armour like his soldiers. But ever since a rather disastrous mission he opted for a more lightweight attire, strong protection with more improved mobility. So far it's proven to be a wise decision.

He took a deep breath and marched into the outpost built in the middle of the field, tents and sheds surrounding an abandoned farm house. Horses skittered around the building as more

soldiers sprinted around, performing a variety of duties from carrying goods to running patrols. Set-ups like this were becoming more and more common these days, hastily put up and easy to dismantle in a hurry. With the Guard being stretched thin across the Realm, it's a wonder field bases like this are able to remain standing. Even now, as the general walked through the crowds of mages, they cleared away rubble and put out fires, gathering their dead to be buried at a later date. He gazed upon the faces of the bodies being thrown onto a bonfire dressed in black and green, feeling nothing but disgust.

One of the soldiers saw him approaching and broke away to greet him. He was dressed in a traditional silver and blue armour, plated shoulders and chainmail gloves. His hair was a slick black, long enough to slightly cover the serious burn across the side of his lean face. His deep brown eyes matched his own as he drew up with a friendly smile. "Captain Jennings?" Hanson greeted, shaking the soldier's hand.

"What's left of him" he replied jokingly. "Welcome to the battered front lines, General."

Hanson chuckled as he was lead deeper into the outpost. The soldiers gave him a courteous salute as he passed them, which he returned each time. He cast a weary glance around as everyone continued with the repairs, the infirmary tent filled to the brink with injured. "Care to tell me what happened?" he asked the captain.

"I could just give you the report" he said grimly. He glanced around at the damage, as if calculating how much they really lost. "Several hours ago, the Death-Hunters lead a full scale attack on this place. Approximately thirty hostiles. We suffered heavy losses but managed to push them back into a full retreat. We tracked them into a hidden alcove a few miles out, smoking the last of them out. We were able to capture the remaining eight survivors and detain them here."

“Which is why I’m here” Hanson nodded. “The council wanted me to personally escort these prisoners back to the Citadel for interrogation.”

“Personally, huh?” Jennings raised an eyebrow. “Do they always send respected war heroes on missions like this?”

He shrugged as the Death-Hunters came into view round the corner. Eight figures sat on their knees with their hands bound behind their backs, staring at the ground while three guards watched them carefully with crossbows in their hands. “Eleven years we’ve been fighting this war. And in all that time, we’ve never captured had any prisoners. Closest we came was a convoy that got attacked five miles outside the city walls, but they ensured we were forced to kill all of them.” He pulled up to a stop in front of them, looking down at the Hunters as they refused to meet his gaze. “I guess they want me to make sure these lot are our first.”

“Makes sense” Jennings nodded as Hanson crouched down to look at them. None of the prisoners acknowledged him as he glared at each of them. They all wore dark grey armour with green cloaks, a grim reflection of the Guard’s uniform. Their faces were smudged with dirt and grime, somewhat deliberately. Hanson could see the black tattoo on each of their necks, along with all manner of scars the figures shared between them. The one Hanson was crouching directly in front of was the only one who dared to look him in the eye, so he guessed he was the leader. He stared at him with a haunting gaze, one eye tinted grey while the right one was a milky white, burn scars framing it with deep cuts running down his left cheek. His black hair was groomed back, topping the sinister appearance rather neatly.

Hanson stared at him dispassionately. “They say anything?” Hanson asked calmly.

“Nothing” Jennings answered, staring down at them with the same detachment of emotion. “They went quiet the moment we captured them. They didn’t even struggle as we disarmed and tied them up.”

“So you didn’t find a motive for the attack?”

“Not from them, but I think it was more than we were supposed to see. While we were cleaning up, we discovered the command room had been searched, possibly whilst we were distracted.”

“Anything missing?”

“I’m running an inventory now. So far everything’s accounted for, but it’s hard to say. My guess is they were gathering Intel. On what, I don’t know. We don’t keep a lot of secrets here worth stealing.”

“All secrets are valuable to the right people” Hanson muttered. He glanced across to the silent figure next to the scarred man. This man was bald, hiding under a hood as he stared at the floor. He looked back at Scarface, whose gaze had also drifted down to the ground. They looked calm and patient, like they were waiting. Hanson studied them, his eyes finding a glint of a silver medallion around the hooded man’s neck. He didn’t need to focus to sense the enchantments inside it. “I thought you said you disarmed them?” he barked, turning back to the captain.

“Of course” he said. Hanson nodded to the hooded man and Jennings walked over to get a closer look. When he saw the medallion, he sighed in frustration. “I thought I asked for all enchantments to be removed from the prisoners?” he called out angrily.

The soldier guarding them looked down at his feet nervously. “I’m sorry sir” he said.

He rolled his eyes and waved him over. “Search them all again. Anything looks like they shouldn’t be there, anything with a hint of magic, I want it removed.” The soldiers nodded and they approached to thoroughly search each of the prisoners. The captain turned back to Hanson apologetically, “We’ve had a crazy few days.”

Hanson smiled as he rose back to his feet. "Haven't we all?" he replied. The two of them walked away to allow the soldiers to search the Hunters again. "So what about the rest of the outpost?" he asked him.

Jennings surveyed the area. "We'll live, to say this was supposed to be an observation post for the district. Been out here three weeks without an incident, until now. How's the rest of the war going? We winning yet?"

Hanson laughed, about say he doesn't know.

Then he froze. The air chilled around him as the hair on the back of his neck stood on end. His blood ran cold and a shiver ran down his spine, static jumping across his hair. He was suddenly overwhelmed with a feeling of absolute terror, like death was suddenly breathing over his shoulder. He knew that feeling. He dreaded that feeling. He glanced across to Jennings, who had turned as pale as a sheet. He sensed it too, the burning sun sitting behind them, scorching their senses like a beacon.

There was only one race in the Realm that had an aura like it.

They whirled around to face the prisoners, all as quiet as a mouse, still kneeling on the ground. The sergeant was crouched in front of the hooded man with the medallion in his hands, having removed it from his neck. He stared at the man in terror as he looked up calmly, his eyes glowing a bright red as he smiled.

Hanson cried for them to get away from him, but it was too late. The man exploded in a flash of light and everyone was thrown back by a burst of energy.

Hanson woke up in a daze moments later, lying on his back staring up at the blue sky. Grey smoke drifted over his vision, making him cough as he rolled onto his side. His blurred gaze picked out the shapes of fresh bodies lying across the ground while fires burned behind them. The sound of screams rang in his ears, but he couldn't be sure he wasn't imagining it.

He tried to push up to his feet but his arms were weak, falling back onto his shoulder. He saw the Death-Hunters on their feet, the scar-faced man finishing off the fallen sergeant on the ground as they retrieved their weapons. The Hunter looked across to him and smiled, his milky white eye fixed on him before the lot of them vanished in a plume of black mist into the sky. Hanson tried to rise again, falling onto his back as his vision slowly cleared.

He attempted to put his thoughts in order when the same feeling of terror overcame him again. The hooded man was suddenly above him, hood drawn back to reveal the bald head of the middle aged Sorcerer as he wrapped his hands around Hanson's throat. The general struggled against the mage, grasping at his calloused fingers as he gasped for air, the man's hands like a vice around his neck. He looked down at him like a predator, his eyes stone cold while his mouth twitched into a sneer. "Who'd have thought I'd be the one to kill the famous General Hanson of the Realm's Guard?" he said in a deep, calm voice. Hanson fought against the man's iron grip as he sat there straddling him, his hands clamped around his neck as sturdy as stone. He pounded his fists against his arms and chest, clawing at his face trying to disrupt his concentration. He kicked out with his legs attempting to knock him off, but he held firm. He could feel the strength rippling under the Sorcerer's skin, able to crush him in a heartbeat if he wanted. But Hanson could see he was enjoying this moment, toying with him, letting him see his life flash before his eyes.

But it was more than his life Hanson saw appear before him. He stared up at the man, his killer, and it suddenly morphed into something else. Maybe he was losing oxygen to his brain, hallucinating in his final moments. Whatever it was, it must've been a cruel joke. The man's face stretched into a grotesque snarl, his skin tightening into grey flesh against a decaying skeleton as it shrieked in his face. He stared up at the monstrosity, fear gripping his heart like a block of ice as he stared into the face of his waking nightmares. He tried to scream, but the



hands choked out his cries. He pounded furiously, his feet scrambling in the dirt as he felt the ghoul drain the last ounces of his life away. The creature laughed, the voice gravely in his throbbing ears.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Jennings rise up with several other figures, firing bolts and arrows at the monster. The nightmarish creature grunted, before screaming in a bellow unleashing a blaze of fire from its mouth scattering them. “Is that the best you’ve got?” it asked laughing. “I could chew you up and spit you all out!” the ghoul taunted as it stared down at him with fiery eyes and a sickening hungry jaw.

Hanson moved instinctively, reaching down to pull his wand out of his belt. Hanson struck fast, jamming the oak stick into the things gaping maw, the point punching into the back of its throat making it gag. He didn’t know what he was doing, panic controlling his actions as his dying mind raced with all the things he’d yet to do, all the living his had left. He didn’t want to die, not like this! “Chew on this” he muttered with the last of his breath, forcing himself to focus. Magic swirled around his wand as he forced it to bend to his whim and do the only thing he could think of. The monster choked as smoke began to billow out of its skull, blue light glowing inside its mouth. It let out a startled shriek as its glowing eyes widened. Hanson felt its gruesome claws tighten around his neck, cutting off the last of his airways just as its head disappeared in a flash of blue light.

The pressure on his throat vanished and Hanson found himself sucking in air again, gasping for breath after breath as he pushed the limp body off of him. He stared up at the sky waiting for his vision to return to normal, his wand held tightly in his hand covered in blood. He rolled onto his hands and knees, coughing and gasping for air trying to stop the world spinning. Hands grasped his shoulders as Jennings crouched down to face him, asking him if he was alright. “The prisoners?” he coughed.

“Gone” he said bluntly, looking back at the mess they’d caused. Hanson looked back to see the circle of chaos the sorcerer caused, bodies strewn everywhere in burning heaps. The Death-Hunter’s headless body lay on its side, the hole on its neck still smouldering with blue mist. He rubbed his own, still feeling those iron fingers wrapped around it. “How the hell did he get so close without us sensing him?” Jennings asked in bewilderment.

Hanson rose unsteadily to his feet, stumbling back to where the sergeant was murdered. He found him still holding the medallion, the powerful enchantments still pulsing strong. “I don’t know” Hanson said quietly, reaching down to pick it up and hold it before him. “But I intend to find out.”

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