

The True Hero

Granite walls echoed to the sound of footsteps as three heroes walked through the forest of stone columns as they approached the high seat on its raised platform. They had come to find the master of this fortress; the great Wizard skilled in magic, steeped in knowledge, and Guardian of one of the five seals. Ever since the magic portal had opened and stood the world on its head, rumors flew that items existed that when combined together would seal off the flow of magic. According to the rumors, if the magic were sealed the world would return, back to the way it was before the portal had opened. The three had faced many trials and overcome impossible challenges, in their determination to set the world to rights.

As they approached, they saw no one sat in the throne, in fact the hall appeared to be completely empty. Then they heard the quiet scratching of a pen on paper as they stopped before the steps. Off to the side in a small alcove with a window stood a simple writing desk strewn with several books, papers, pictures, and other unusual paraphernalia. Seated at the desk was a man, he appeared to be in his early 30's of average height and build with brown hair and a blonde beard. His garb was not of richly woven fabric as might be expected, but rather it was simple, sturdy, and average clothing that so many people had taken to wearing.

"Is there something I can help you with?" The man said as he finished the line he had been writing on the paper.

"We seek the master of this castle, the great Wizard and Guardian of one of the Seals of Magic." The youngest of the three, a man in his mid-20s clad in finely made clothing of leather covered in expertly crafted metal plates, as if he wore the skin of a great lizard. At his side hung a Hand and a Half sword with an ornate pommel and cross guard inscribed with Runes of Power and ending with the heads of wolves.

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Leo Landon laid aside his pen and stood in a slow and graceful manner. Turning he took up from the back of his chair a black coat, a perfect replica of one that might have been used by a cowboy in the old West; and with careless ease swing it about his shoulders.

"You have found him" he said as he took up a staff black in color, with a polished burr at its head and save for the handle was covered in the filed remains of thorns. For a moment there was silence save for the rhythmic tapping of his staff and footsteps as he crossed the platform to stand before the throne and face the three heroes. "You are correct I have in my possession one of the five seals that are necessary to close the Magic Portal. Why should I give it to you?" Asked the Wizard in a bland tone. The only hint of anything besides indifference was a slight focusing of the eyes, an intent to know the answer to his question.

"To turn the world back to the way it was and let everyone have their lives back." The second hero answered; a man who appeared to be of an age with the Wizard, though leaner of build and clean shaven. This hero wore an odd assortment of weapons and armor that made him appear to be something between a musketeer and modern-day soldier before the magic portal. The most striking example of this was the rifle he carried, at first glance one would've been forgiven for mistaking it for an actual musket. That is until you took a closer look, and saw the fine workmanship, perfect artistry in combining the very best of materials, technology, and styles together into a unique tool of war.

"I see. However, what if some people are happier now than they were before the portal was opened?"

"Nonsense" said the sorceress. She was a woman of great, yet fading beauty, stern of face, and regal; between her late 50s and early 60s with her hair tied into a bun on the back of her head. She was dressed in what appeared to be a business suit though on closer inspection you

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would see colorful threads woven through it in unique patterns. Upon the four fingers of her right hand sat four Rings each adorned with a precious gem inscribed with an elemental Rune. A bracelet of precious metals encircled her left wrist bearing five Words of Power. "No one's lives are better now. The only way to make everything better is to bring back..."

"You're V. R. game design Company" said the Wizard pointing at the young warrior "your Tech startup" he said pointing to the marksman "your position as CEO of a publishing firm" he finished pointing to the silver haired sorceress.

"Hundreds of people feel that everything they worked and fought for was stolen from them, like us."

"Thousands more feel that the opportunities that were denied to them before the portal opened are theirs now, including me. The life I always craved is mine; I have a stable income, the power of magic is at my command, the ability to not just tell my stories but share them with hundreds of people, and a family who I love dearly. You would have me and others give up everything we obtained simply so you can have everything you lost back!" The Wizard's voice starting as serene as a valley meadow, gained strength, and resolve until it stood firm as a mountain.

"You have to help us turn the world back" shouted the warrior in a voice full of blind courage. "As the Guardian it's your duty to seal up the portal and prevent magic from rewriting the world." He said while shifting his posture, relaxed his muscles, and moved his hand to the hilt of his sword before the last word flew from his lips.

"That is not my duty. It is to ensure that magic is allowed to flow into the world and to prevent the seal from falling into the wrong hands."

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"My predecessor believed the world was a better place with a trickle of magic and so allowed the seal to be used to block the flow. But that was never its intended purpose and so the seal broke under the pressure, and as with all things in nature magic flowed again to restore the balance. As Guardian I have determined the world is a better place with a never ending flow of magic into it."

"If that's the case we will just take the seal from you by force!" Shouted the warrior as he charged forward his sword leaping from its sheath.

"You are more than welcome to do so, if you can." Said the Wizard cool and composed as a lone tree before an onrushing storm. "But you will have to first feel" he said as the warrior reached him. Then with speed greater than the wind, the Wizard deflected the warrior's sword strike with his staff and grabbing the blade with his free hand wrenched from the warrior's iron grip. "My fear" said the Wizard without a pause as he brought his staff down with a resounding strike on the stone. A moment later the warrior lay quivering on the ground screaming in abject terror.

After a moment's hesitation the marksman and the sorceress moved to strike. With a look of iron contempt the Wizard raised his staff blocking a shot from the marksman; the bullet went wide as if bouncing off an invisible wall. "You will know my agony" spoke the wizard striking the stone again. In that same moment the marksman dropped to the ground and curled into a ball whispering "so alone, why can't I join your group, why won't you take a chance on me" over and over again. The sorceress recited an incantation bringing forth a ball of violet lightning. The Wizard, even as she prepared her strike only raised his staff a third time "you shall know my despair" and struck the stone a final time. The sorceress spell faded as she sank to her knees the

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once proud face a mask of loss, as if seeing every effort, hope, and dream had been stolen from her hands before they even had a chance to be.

"Each of you now has a taste of what I endured in the world you wish to bring back. Be gone from my site, and know that if you ever come near me, or my family the spell shall return threefold upon you. You are not defined by past successes or failures; see what you can make of yourself in this new world instead of chasing the dreams of the old." The Wizard brought his staff up and swung it before him, a moment later the great hall was empty of all human presence save the Wizard. With a heavy sigh he turned and walked to his writing desk and taking his pen in hand returned to his truest passion. After a few moments he was again interrupted.

"Darling, it's time for lunch." The Wizard looked up a brilliant smile on his face as he called back to his beautiful wife and children, where they stood in the doorway on the far side of the throne. "Perfect timing, I just have a little work to finish and I'll join you in the garden" said the Wizard. His wife lovingly smiled as their children joyfully cried and ran back out the door they've come through. As his wife turned to follow their children the Wizard looked down at the work he just finished. The pages of the book were covered in an intricate and detailed story that required one final touch. *The Fall of Hollow Heroes*, he wrote in a clear steady hand across the top of the page. With that final detail completed he set aside his pen and taking up his staff quickly jogged to catch up, to his greatest treasure.