

Red Leaves

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PROLOGUE

Alone in his private study, the School Master leaned closer to a large worn book laying open on his desk. His features, sunken with old age, echoed the handsomeness of his youth. The room around him was true to its purpose, a place for quiet, peaceful, study.

Books, neatly shelved by size and theme, spiraled up the walls, separated every few feet by the dark stained trim of a book case, all washed in the warm glow of a small oil lamp sitting on his reading desk.

He shifted position on the hard unforgiving bench. This wasn't his usual place to read, his body was reminding him. But then, this wasn't his usual book. And he liked the idea that reading it required a bit of discomfort. Its large size and fragile condition prevented him from taking it to his soft chair across the room. He turned an ancient and heavily worn page.

It was the Journal of the Reds after all. He should pay something for the privilege of reading it. Shouldn't he? He wasn't even sure how many copies remained.

It was something he studied on occasion when he had the time. At this moment, however he didn't have time. His schedule was already overflowing with meetings and lectures that he was completely unprepared for as it was. And yet here he sat, reading something completely unrelated.

A feeling of dread had settled down over him a week or so ago. It was as though he was suddenly aware of a critical responsibility regarding the Token that had gone unfulfilled. As though there was something in its purpose that he did not fully understand and had thus left neglected. But why now, he could not answer.

The feeling had brought his mind back to a question he had struggled to answer for many, many years. The question was central to his understanding of his duty towards the Token. And he felt a degree of shame at the void of knowledge regarding something so core to his self identity. He was the keeper of the Token. He should not lack knowledge concerning it. Perhaps answering one would help answer the other, he thought.

Once again, as the week rolled on, he'd found himself lost in the chaos of his administrative duties, so much so that he was surprised that his questions did not completely slip his mind. There they sat at the top of his thoughts, a nagging reminder at the end of each day that there was something of profound importance that he did not understand. Something that as the School Master he should know. But he did not. So here he sat digging into this

journal, hoping somewhere in its pages he'd find the answer.

His ancient question concerned the Reds themselves. It'd been over a thousand years since the last page had been written in the journal. It'd been over a thousand years since any of the Reds had been seen. A thousand years! So much time, he could scarcely comprehend. He struggled putting the figure into context. More than ten of his own life times.

Of course, he knew why the pages had stopped. That wasn't the question. There had been a war. A horribly devastating war that tore the world into three.

As a historian he spent a great deal of time trying to understand such pivotal moments. Where hours end up defining entire centuries.

Before, there was no distinction between them. They were brothers and sisters, united under one Crown. Physically there were differences, sure. But they were not defined by them. Not before.

The idea fascinated him. Especially in light of the current political environment. Each of the three held the other two at fault historically for the inciting the division. There was probably a legitimate argument from each side, he supposed. As a historian, he tried looking at the past without his national Zoen bias. He tried, but some historical events, such as this war, that carried such personal significance, made that difficult if not completely impossible.

The war started with the murder of the last living Red. An act from which the world had not yet recovered. And that was at the heart of his question.

The Petra attacked first. Out of jealousy, the Botan said. Out of revenge, the Zo argued. They came in the night without warning, a rumbling storm of rock tearing through the center of the city. They bore down on the Botan with a wrath the Botan had never experienced, easily overwhelming the handful of guards protecting the Red.

The Petra with their bodies hewn out of stone, rough cut and rugged, could inflict mortal harm by simply standing still, like a jagged stone wall, while others with softer bodies stampeded into them. They were virtually indestructible next to pale green limbs of the Botan or the soft fur covered Zo.

But this army hadn't simply stood still. They marched forward, filled with religious fueled wrath that boiled them to the point of murder, of the use of such aggressive force that they would kill anything that stepped in front of them.

The Botan, grown from the earth, bodies of branches and leaves, did the only thing they could. They ran. Those who were cut off were forced to stand by helplessly and watch as the most sacred member of their society, their Red, was cut down, thrown to the earth and burned.

The Petra killed the last Red, not because it was Botan, the Reds were unique creatures unto themselves, not Petra, Botan, or Zo. Nor did they kill it because it belonged to the Botan, the Reds considered themselves to belong to all three people or rather, that all three belonged to them.

No, the Petra killed the last Red because the Botan lay claim to it as if it were there own. They walled it off and hoarded it, allowing only Botan access to it. The Petra killed the

last Red because the Botan used it to claim superiority, saying that it was a sign of their Divine privilege.

The Petra killed the last Red because their own, the Red whom they had laid their own claim too, had died, leaving them at a disadvantage. They killed the last Red because the Zoen Red had grown ill over the years and it too had died, leaving only the one.

One that fueled the arrogance of the Botan.

Before their Red passed away, it was the Zo, with their hunched over furry animal like bodies, who claimed a position of prominence over the other two. They, just as animals of the world, were the highest form of life. Higher than the plants, higher than dirt and stone. The Red they claimed as their own echoed the same prominence over the other two Reds. It was animal in form while the second most closely resembled a large tree and the last, stone and soil.

They revered all three of the Reds but like their brothers, they had chosen their favorite.

The school master understood all this. He'd studied it in great detail, year after year. What he could not understand, the question that burned unforgivably in his mind was this: Why after a thousand years had the Reds not come back?

They had died before. Many times in fact. For one reason or another the world would become inhospitable for them and they would perish as a result. But in every instance, given enough time, fifty, a hundred years maybe, the Reds came back. Every time, except this.

A thousand years was long enough to wait. It was clear, this time was different!

Click! A metallic noise reverberating through the book filled room brought the School Master out of his thoughts. He lifted his long nose up from his book.

A heavy wooden door creaked behind him as it turned slowly on its rusty hinges. Footsteps clanked into the room.

“Yes, yes, what is it?” He shouted glaring over his shoulder towards the open door. Students, for some reason or another had lost their respect for his private hours. This would have to be corrected.

Not hearing a response he spun completely around. As soon as his eye caught sight of the intruder he felt his heart stop. His body froze in horror. His jaw refused to open, chocking off a cry for help.

In that moment, he realized that he had completely misinterpreted the dread he had felt regarding the Token. It had nothing to do with the ancient disappearance of the Reds. It was a warning. A warning he had not headed.

#

Nemi sat at a rustic wooden table, his green cheek in his broad leafy hand, his elbow propped up, and his face buried in a book. His light green skin was gnarled and twisted like a piece of drift wood. His hands were like mittens, two broad leaves forming a wide scoop and another to act as a thumb. Long stalks grew up from his back sprouting a halo of decorative leaves behind his head.

“Petchu, Petchu!” Frezen, playing on the floor behind Nemi, imitated the sound of a

gun with his mouth as he aimed a toy animal up at an older boy face.

“Stop it.” Bedic, the older boy, scolded as he snatched the toy from Frezen’s hand. “I’m trying to read.” He turned back to his book resting open on a small child sized table.

SLAM! The thick wood door to the room burst open spilling the elderly School Master in his flowing yellow and brown robes into the room. Blood dripped from saturated pools collecting in his robes. Open wounds wept from his neck and face. As he stumbled further into the room he held up two objects in his arms. A large book and a small metal chest with a key hole.

“Master!” Nemi jumped up and rushed to his side, supporting him. “What happened?” He pulled at the heavy book and chest, trying to ease his burden, then turned to the older boy. “Bedic, get some water.”

The School Master grabbed Nemi by the arm, looking him in the eye. “Nemi, stop fussing and listen to me. Someone is coming!”

Nemi glanced back at the door, alarmed.

“I have to ask you to do something for me and we don’t have much time,” He continued.

“Of course,” Nemi answered.

The School Master stumbled over to the table where Nemi had set the book and chest down. He looked up at Nemi but didn’t speak.

“Tell me!” Nemi implored.

The school master shook his head and looked away. “I never wanted to put this on you. I’m so sorry. I should’ve prepared you at the least.”

“Prepared me for what? Who’s coming?” Nemi asked.

“Valance,” The School Master mutter almost to himself as he sat down. “There was so much anger when he left. The students were divided. Perhaps I could’ve handled it better. But he saw too much. Things that students aren’t allowed to see. And now he’s come back for the Token.”

The School Master’s mind flooded with memories. The day Young Valance left the school played over and over in his mind. He’d gone down the secret path to the Temple as he did every six months to keep his responsibilities. How could he have known Valance was hiding in the bushes watching him as he took the Token out of his robe to open the temple pathway.

Valance saw everything. The Token shining in his hand. The stone Archway opening up out of nothingness as soon as the Token was revealed. The stone pathway was only visible by looking through the archway. He never thought a student would violate the path by following him through the archway.

The School Master picked up the small metal chest from the table and held it in his gaze. “He’ll kill you for it. He’ll kill your family for it.” He tried to read Nemi’s reaction. Another Botean frustration. Nemi’s face remained impossibly smooth, revealing nothing of what went on inside. “I’m sorry I have to ask you to do this. He grabbed Nemi’s wrist. But

you must do it. There's no time and there's no one else. You must do everything in your power to keep it away from him."

Nemi stared at the metal chest. The School Master put it down and lifted the book. On the cover was an illustration of the Token, the shining object the School Master had taken out of his robes to open the archway. It was a small plant with a round stone holding its roots and an bird wrapped around its trunk. "This book will answer your questions. I'm sorry there isn't more time." He told Nemi as he pushed the book and the metal chest over to him.

"Take the children and go through the back passageway." He got up from the table and herded Nemi towards the back of the room.

Footsteps clanked in the hallway outside the study. The School Master turned to the now closed door. The footsteps stopped. He turned back to Nemi and yelled, "GO!"

The door crashed in. Two huge Zo soldiers in full armor charged into the room, long swords drawn.

The School Master threw up his robes and pulled a large dagger from a belt sheath hidden underneath. The dagger's blade shimmered with a blinding white light filling the room.

The closest soldier lunged and struck the School Master before he could get his dagger fully up to block. "Aaah!" The School Master cried as the blow sunk into his left arm.

"Drop your weapon," The soldier commanded before he lunged again. This time The school master was ready. But his strength wasn't what it once was. He deflected the blow from his chest to his shoulder.

"Aaagh! Take it and get out of here!" He yelled.

The attacking soldier stepped back and turn to Nemi. "Let's not run off just yet, my friend." He turned his attention back to the School Master. "I'll tell you what old man. Give us what we want and I promise you I'll make this painless for all of you."

Nemi stopped running. The school master turned, "What are you doing? GO!" He turned back to the soldier, "He isn't here yet."

Suddenly, the old man lunged forward and attacked the closest soldier with his dagger. The soldier laughed and lifted his sword complacently to block the tiny dagger.

To the soldier's surprise his sword didn't stop the dagger. The glowing blade passed right through it and continued through the man's armor stopping full hilt in his chest. He gasped and dropped to his knees.

The second soldier watched with wide eyes and an open mouth.

Nemi took advantage of the distraction and hit the standing soldier over the head with a chair. The soldier regained his composure turned to Nemi.

The master rushed in quickly from the other side and pushed his dagger through the second soldier's armor. He gasped in pain, dropped his sword, then fell.

The master, bleeding heavily, collapsed as well. Nemi rushed to his side.

"How many times do I have to tell you. Take the kids and go!"

"But...", Nemi pleaded.

"Don't argue, just go!"

Nemi reached his arms around his Master and tried to lift him up. "Master, I can get you out of here!"

"Please, I'm already dead. If he gets the Token... We'll be worse than dead!" He grabbed Nemi's arm and put the glowing dagger in his hand. "I'm sorry Nemi, I never prepared you for this."

Nemi got up and backed away reluctantly. His mind spinning, he turned and led the two children through a false door in the back of the room.

#

Outside the wall of the school, Nemi knelt down beside his son Bedic and handed him the dagger and the Master's book.

"Go find your mother. Tell her something bad has happened and she needs to leave the city. Don't tell any one where you're going." He told him.

He turned to Frezen, "Stay with Bedic."

"Daddy!" Bedic cried.

Nemi turned his son around by the shoulders and scooted him along. "Go!" He instructed firmly. "I'll see you soon."

He watched for a moment to make sure they kept going before he crossed the empty space separating the school from the rest of the city.

#

Captain Brigan stepped past his men to get a better view of the large black carriage approaching from the flat plains south the School.

He wasn't expecting anyone.

Two large Zoen men rode as an escort out in front of the carriage on two well bred black horses.

The captain turned to his first officer. "Have them turned back. The school isn't accepting guests at the moment."

The captain watched as two of his men rode out to intercept the visitors. The carriage stopped as the men conversed. After a moment captain's men turned around and returned. The carriage didn't turn back but followed right behind them.

The captain threw the twig he'd been chewing on to the ground with a frustrated grunt. He turned to the first officer with a scowl then shook his head. "Who did you send?"

"Andrea and Cactau." The First Officer answered.

"Worthless."

Private Andrea stopped his horse abruptly in front of the small group of officers. "A Lord Valance requests permission to speak to you, sir."

"Looks like you already gave him permission, private. Captain Brigan answered as the black carriage approached behind the soldier.

The captain shook his head and spat on the ground. "Well bring him up."

As the Carriage stopped the two horsemen dismounted and stopped beside the carriage door.

The door opened and another large man pushed through. The three men approached the group of officers together.

The man from the carriage spoke first. "Who's your ranking officer?"

"State your business Mr. Valance," The captain answered.

"It's Lord Valance," he leaned in to make a show of inspecting the Captain's uniform to determine rank, "Captain."

"It is my understanding that you are here to provide security for my visit, correct? Your men have not entered the School have they?" He glanced over at the school main entrance for signs of a breach.

"We are here at the Lord Governors request, Lord Valance." Responded the Captain giving the visitors title extra emphasis.

"I have not been instructed to divulge the details of this operation to you. With respect I ask that you and your men turn around and head back to the city. Once we have accomplished our objectives we will notify the Lord Governor who may then, at his discretion, notify you." The Captain finished.

Lord Valance let a friendly smile creep across his face.

"I admire your strict adherence to orders. I assure you there has been a misunderstanding somewhere in your chain of command. Unfortunately, I do not have the time to work out the errors in your organization. I'm here now with work to do. I must insist."

The Captain let out a raspy chuckle. "Insist what?"

"That you step aside and allow me to do what I came to do."

The captain turned to his first officer. "I think we're done here. Have our guests escorted back to their coach."

"The use of force will be met with consequence, Captain. I would not advice it." Lord Valance explained calmly.

The first officer stopped and turned back to the Captain who replied with an impatient look and a motion to continue.

Four nearby soldiers moved to surround the three men.

"As you wish." Lord Valance sighed in frustration. He threw back his overcoat to expose the hilt of a sword strapped tightly at his waist. It clashed strangely with his modern business attire.

"Lord Valance. To draw weapons on the Crown's Special Guard would render you an enemy to the sta..." The Captain fell silent.

Lord Valance had moved his hand to the hilt of his sword. A pattern etched in the metal glowed brightly, even in the light of day. He looked back at his two companions.

They responded by throwing back their overcoats. The first rested his hand on the hilt of his sword. In response to his touch the hilt gave off the same tinted light Lord Valance's had.

Immediately the four soldier moving on them stopped.

The second companion followed, placing his hand quietly on his sword. A third glow echoed the first two.

The group of officers dropped to their knees and grabbed their heads and crying out in pain.

“Tell your friends in the guard we are not to be disobeyed.” Lord Valance grunted as he kicked the bent over Captain to the ground.

“Your soldiers will be under Lord Barnus’s command. If any of you remain when we return from the school we will draw our weapons.” He stepped over the frozen officers still bent over moaning. “And you will die.”

#

The School Master opened his eyes to the noise of foot steps echoing down the hallway just outside. The broken door squeaked as someone entered. He watched without lifting his head as legs of a business suit stepped over a shattered bookshelf and kicked aside scattered books.

“Master!” A heavy voice cried.

The schoolmaster strained to lift his head. The man in the suit, someone he thought he recognized knelt down beside him.

“How badly are you injured.” The man asked as he pulled debris off the School Master’s body.

“Valance?” The schoolmaster asked, not believing his eyes. The man looked like Lord Valance, his student. But, so many years had passed. This man was far too young.

“I can’t begin to apologize... They were supposed to provide security for my visit. I don’t know why they attacked.” Lord Valance tried to explain.

The schoolmaster’s mind was overwhelmed by a sudden flood of memories. Every conversation he’d had with this man when he was still a student. Every thing that led up to their conflict. “I knew you’d be back someday ... I didn’t think I’d be this old when you finally came.”

Lord Valance’s two men clanked into the room. The School Master shifted his weight to look over at them.

“Barnus and Whitting? The three of you stuck together all of these years?” They looked just as impossibly young as Valance did, he thought.

“We didn’t come for revenge, Master.” Lord Valance explained.

The schoolmaster paused to study their faces. Was he right to judge them so quickly? So much time had passed. He had no idea who they’d become. Yet forgiveness had a price. He had so much to protect, so much at risk.

“I will do everything in my power to stop you from taking it. You must know that.” He told them with as much strength as he could pull together. To add emphasis to his words he struggled, sitting up enough to rest on his elbows.

“Master, please. You assume the worst of us. That’s not why we’re here.”

“Then what do you want from me.” He questioned.

"I'm no longer the angry young boy that left here so many years ago. I've come to regret rather deeply the way I ended our relationship. The memories are... an embracement."

At least they agreed on that. The events were an embracement to both. Never had he been so grossly humiliated by a student to whom he had bestowed so much trust. True, it was the boy and not himself that broke his covenant with the school and the order. Yet he held himself just as accountable. The boy was his responsibility.

He had left for his monthly trip to the mountains to perform his duties. The young Valance must have followed him into the woods. He must've been there hiding in the trees watching him when he took the Token from his cloak and opened the path.

That path was visible only to the holder of the Token. So he gave little thought to preserving its secrecy path. He never thought he'd be followed.

At the end of the path, below the grey peaks of mountain range that separated the Zoen lands from the Petra and Botan, a majestic white building rose up out of the mountain wilderness.

He had always paused for a moment as he came through the trees to take in the beauty of the Temple. The Temple of Order of the Reds. It was the only one he knew of in existence.

"You went where you were not invited and took what you were not given!" The School Master accused.

"Yes, yes I did." Lord Valance admitted.

It wasn't enough that Valance had followed him to the temple. He was seen hours later returning to the school ground with a sack of weapons and armaments.

He stole from the temple!

The School Master looked up at Lord Valance. "I follow the same rules I asked you to follow? I go now here unless invited and take nothing that is not given. It is their decision. And to you they did not give."

The School Master had remembered pushing through a crowd of students that had gathered in the commons. He found Valance at the center of the crowd standing over his lot of weapons trying to stir up the students with his stories of secrecy oppression. He had wanted to show the students what was being kept from them. How they were being held back.

The School Master had expected their confrontation to be abrupt. He expected the young Valance to back down, admit his error and accept punishment. Instead the boy bent over, picked up a sword, removed it from its sheathe and held it up as a threat.

The mass of students crowding around them took a step back in reaction. Not just from the young Valance's aggressiveness, but the blade that he had unsheathed was moving, or rather, flowing as though it were made of a black liquid. Its entire length radiated a halo of darkness.

The situation had progressed into the most horrific possibility he could've imagined. Violence was something he abhorred. Violence against a child, a student, was unthinkable.

As the boy stood there holding this dangerous weapon his glare fixed on his target, the outcome became clear. He slipped his hand into his cloak. In that moment all thought pushed out of his mind, all that was left was instinct.

The boy lunged.

The Schoolmaster stepped aside to dodge the blow, slipped the dagger from under his cloak and put it to the boy's throat. "Put it down," He had commanded.

His short blade shined with a blinding light, filling the room. He remembered the look on Valance's young face as his resolve finally began to weaken. He dropped the tip of his sword.

The awful ordeal was over he thought. Until another young boy stepped out of the crowd and picked up a weapon from the pile under Valance's feet. He unsheathed it and held it against the schoolmaster. An instant later he was followed by another boy.

"Let him go!"

Their tone was insult enough without the weapons they held up against him. He should've known the young Valance would not have acted entirely without support.

The Schoolmaster dropped his dagger from Valance's neck and stepped back.

"Leave now!" Were the last words he uttered to any of them. Apparently their fates had been sealed together ever since.

He looked up and considered the aged face of his old student. How much of that angry little boy was left, he wondered.

"I've come to ask forgiveness." The aged lord Valance pleaded.

The Schoolmaster regarded him for a moment then took the Lord's hand. He pulled back the strong fingers to reveal the center of his palm. A black mark appeared in his skin, as if the fancy embroidery from the hilt of a sword had been branded onto his skin.

The Schoolmaster let out a sigh of disappointment.

"As I feared."

Lord Valance stared at his own palm, stunned.

"Forgiveness? You still have the mark of the weapon on your hand. How long has it been since you've used it? A day, two?"

The Schoolmaster dropped Valance's hand. The mark disappeared.

"I..."

Valance looked up at his old Master then back at Whitting, bewildered. He regained his composure.

"We had no idea what it was that we took. Their power... Its more than we anticipated. We came back to ask... we need... help."

The Schoolmaster leaned towards him. "Bring me the swords!"

"If only it were that easy." He shifted his weight. "As you said. One or two days is the most I seem to be able to be apart from it."

"What you've done cannot be undone with a wave of the hand. Bring me the swords and I will help you endure the pain that will come. And I promise you this temporary suffering will pass and in return you will find... rest."

"I understood there was another way."

The Schoolmaster shook his head. "The Token cannot help you now. To use it to find them would only seal what's been done."

"But the writings say ..."

"Valance," Lord Whiting interrupted.

Lord Valance turned. Lord Whiting pushed open the false door in the back of the room revealing the passageway.

Several sets of footprints marked a trail in the dust covered stone floor.

Lord Valance hurried to his feet and rushed to the back of the room, knocking over a shattered table in his haste. He stopped himself with the stone wall surrounding the passageway and turned back to the schoolmaster.

"What is this?"

Lord Barnus stepped into the room. "Valance, the Soldiers reported a man and two children running from the outer wall."

"There is one way and one way only. Bring back the swords!" The Schoolmaster shouted.

Valance eyed his old master. Then turned to Barnus.

"Bind his wounds. Keep the soldiers here. Whiting and I'll go after the man and children."

He motioned for Whiting to follow him as he charged down the passageway.

Lord Barnus, alone with the schoolmaster, climbed over the debris to stand over him.

"Let's just say, I don't share Valance's affection for the past."

He pulled his overcoat back over hilt of his sword and drew the dark blade

#

Lord Valance and Lord Whiting raced down the dark stone passage way. The tunnel turned sharply before ending in a large stone door.

They pushed it open and found themselves on the outside of the outer wall of the school.

The grassy pasture rose up into gently rolling hills to the south. On the top of one of those hills a Botan man paused in his flight to look back at them.

Lord Valance smiled.

The Botan man, upon seeing them, doubled his speed.

#

Nemi ran to the edge of the cliffs and looked down over the edge at the sea below. A blur of panicked thoughts raced through his mind. What were his options? What should he do? He'd been fortunate enough to elude them this long. But how much longer could he count his luck? Should he continue running along the coast to the west? Could he evade them? Or would he just end up putting the Token in their hands? Could he risk that? Even at the expense of his own survival?

He opened the small wooden chest and took out the tightly wrapped bundle inside. As he unwrapped it, fold by fold, a soft pale glow cast beams of red light through the moist air.

He pulled back the final fold and revealed the source of the glow. He had always thought that someday he might inherit the right to hold the Token, to see it with his own eyes. But now, under these circumstances, the impact of seeing it horrified him.

He stared at the perfect beauty of its carved form, resembling a shrunken tree with a ball of roots at its base and a slender bird wrapped around its trunk. He had never know what it looked like, only its function and importance. And now, he would've given anything to have the honor of beholding it taken from him. Everything about his possession of it meant that something was wrong.

The clomping of horses in full gallop peaked above the roar of the sea below. Nemi turned abruptly.

A tight pack of black horses raced across the black rock of the cliffs towards him. The men on the horses held their swords above their heads ready to strike.

The blood drained from his face. His time was up. There would be no escape.

He turned back to the ocean and held up the figurine in front of him. Its beautiful, he thought, as it glowed softly in the evening light.

He glanced back at the horsemen bearing down on him, only moments away.

"G od F orgive m e!" H e w hispered.

He pulled the Token back and threw it as hard as he could over the edge of the cliff, doubling himself over with the effort. The wind caught it as it fell pushing it further out into the sea.

With a cacophony of screaming men and clacking hooves, the swarm of horses over took him.