



Red Leaves and the Living Token - Book 1 - Part 1
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*To my wife and my children,
You make everything worthwhile.*

Chapter 1

A lone 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 spiraled up the walls on neatly spaced shelves, arranged by size and theme. Stone support pillars interrupted at regular intervals, giving a stark contrast of cool against the warm wood and leather spines. A warm glow washed across the room from a small oil lamp sitting on his reading desk.

He shifted position on the hard, unforgiving bench. His sore body reminded him this wasn't his usual reading place. 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.

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 sure how many copies remained but doubted it was more than a handful.

A week ago, a feeling of dread had settled over him. 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 didn't fully understand, and had thus left neglected. So here he sat digging into this journal, hoping somewhere in its pages he'd gain insight to his apprehension.

Click! A metallic noise reverberated through the musty, book filled room, snapping the School Master out of his thoughts. He lifted his pale green 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 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, choking off a cry for help.

In that moment, he realized that he had thoroughly misinterpreted the dread he had felt regarding the Token. It was a warning of imminent danger. A warning he had not heeded.

Nemic sat at a rustic wooden table. His green cheek rested in his thin, spindly hand, as he stared into an open book. His light green skin was gnarled and twisted like a piece of driftwood, the unfortunate effect of age. Long stalks grew up from his back, sprouting a halo of decorative leaves behind his head.

"Kacha, Kacha!" Frezen, playing on the floor behind Nemic, made an attack sound as he aimed a toy animal up at an older boy face.

"Stop it!" the older boy, Bedic, 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 child sized table.

SLAM! The thick wooden door to the room burst open, spilling the elderly School Master, with his flowing yellow and brown robes, into the room. Blood dripped from a saturated pool that had collected on the front of his robes. Open wounds wept from his neck and face, exaggerated by the red against green skin. He stumbled further into the room, holding two objects in his arms; a large book, and a small metal chest with a key hole.

"Master!" Nemic jumped up and rushed to his side to keep him from falling. "What happened?" He pulled at the heavy book and chest, trying to ease the old man's burden as he led him towards a chair. He turned to the older boy. "Bedic, get some water."

The School Master grabbed Nemic by the arm, and looked him in the eye. "Nemic, stop fussing and listen to me. Someone is coming!"

Nemic 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," Nemic answered.

The School Master stumbled to the table where Nemic had set the book and chest. He looked up at Nemic but didn't speak.

"Tell me!" Nemic demanded.

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."

"Prepared me for what? Who's coming?" Nemic asked.

"Valance," the School Master muttered almost to himself as he sat. He's come back for the Token."

The School Master picked up the small metal chest from the table and held it in his gaze. "I'm sorry I have to ask... " He grabbed Nemic's wrist. "You must do everything in your power to keep it away from him."

Nemic stared at the metal chest. The School Master put it down and lifted the book. On the cover was an illustration of the Token, a small plant with a round stone holding its roots and a bird wrapped around its trunk. "This book will answer your questions. I'm sorry there isn't more time." He told Nemic 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 Nemic 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 Nemic and yelled, "GO!"

The door crashed in. Two towering Zoen soldiers in full armor charged into the room, long swords drawn. One had an exceptionally long snout, even for a Zo, covered in thin coarse hair. The other was hunched over more than the other. His long neck pushed his head out in front of his furry body.

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

The closest soldier lunged and struck the School Master before he could block with his dagger. "Aaah!" The School Master cried as the blade sunk deep into his left arm.

"Drop your weapon," the soldier commanded."

"Take it and get out of here!" The School Master yelled at Nemic.

The second soldier moved around the School Master. "Let's not run off just yet, my friend," he yelled after Nemic.

The first soldier stepped closer to the School Master, lifting his sword again. "I'll tell you what old man. Give us what we want and I promise I'll make this painless for all of you."

Nemic stopped.

"What are you doing? GO!" the School Master shouted.

Without warning, the old man lunged forward and attacked the closest soldier with his dagger. The soldier laughed and lifted his sword complacently to block the 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.

Nemic took advantage of the distraction and hit him over the long, extruded head with a chair, sending the soldier forward in an awkward stumble. He regained his composure after a few steps and lifted his sword towards Nemic.

The School Master rushed in quickly and pushed his dagger through the second soldier's armor. The soldier gasped in pain, dropped his sword, then fell.

The School Master, bleeding heavily, collapsed as well. Nemic rushed to his side.

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

"But..." Nemic pleaded.

"Don't argue, just go!"

Nemic 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 Nemic's arm and put the glowing dagger in his hand. "I'm sorry Nemic, I never prepared you for this."

Nemic stood 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, Nemic 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 anyone where you're going," he told him.

He turned to Frezen, "Stay with Bedic."

"Daddy!" Bedic cried.

Nemic 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 that separated the school from the rest of the city.

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

He wasn't expecting anyone.

Two large Zoen men escorted the carriage on two black, well bred horses.

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

The officer motioned with his hand to two nearby soldiers who climbed on their horses and rode out to intercept the visitors. The carriage stopped as the men converged. After a moment, the soldiers turned around and returned. The carriage, rather than turning back, followed right behind them.

The captain threw the twig he'd been chewing on to the ground with a frustrated grunt. He scowled at his First Officer then shook his head. "Who did you send?"

"Andrea and Cactau." The First Officer answered.

"Worthless."

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

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

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

As the carriage stopped, the two horsemen dismounted and stood beside the carriage door. The door opened, and a large Zoen man with thick black hair and hard angular features pushed through. He was tall and held himself more upright than most Zoes, adding further to his stature. 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 inspect the Captain's uniform, "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?" Lord Valance glanced at the school's main entrance for signs of a breach.

"We are here at the Lord Governors request, *Lord* Valance," the Captain said, giving his visitor's 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 advise it." Lord Valance said calmly.

The first officer stopped and turned back to the Captain who responded 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 well tailored business attire.

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

Lord Valance moved his furry hand to touch 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.

Lord Barnus's overcoat was already thrown back, his hand already on the hilt of his sword. The same pattern was etched from the handle to the blade. A bright glow trickled down from the hilt in the grooves of the etching.

The four soldiers froze in place.

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

The Captain and his group of officers dropped to their knees and grabbed their heads and cried 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 you or any of your officers remain when we return from the school, we will draw our weapons." He stepped over the frozen men, "And you will die."

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

"Master!" A heavy voice cried.

The School Master strained to lift his head as the man in the suit knelt beside him. Something about the man seemed familiar.

"How badly are you injured?" the man asked, as he pulled debris off the School Master's body.

"Valance?" The School Master asked, not believing his eyes. The man looked like his former 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 School Master's mind flooded with a sudden burst of memories; every conversation he'd had with this man when he was still a student, everything 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.

"We didn't come for revenge, Master," Lord Valance explained.

The school master paused to study their faces.

"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 gather. He struggled to push himself up enough to rest on his elbows.

"Master, please. You assume the worst of us. That's not why we're here." Lord Valance tried to explain.

"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 embarrassment," Valance said.

The School Master remembered his monthly trip to the mountains. The young Valance had followed him into the woods and watched as 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. He thought, foolishly, that he'd never be followed.

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

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

"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 the young Valance had followed him to the temple, the School Master thought. The boy was seen hours later, returning to the school grounds 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 nowhere unless invited and take nothing that is not given. It is their decision. And to you, they did not give."

The School Master 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 loot of weapons, trying to stir up the students with his stories of secrecy and oppression. He had wanted to show the students what had been kept from them, how they had been 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 sheath, and held it up as a threat.

The mass of students that had crowded around them took a step back in reaction, not just from the young Valance's aggressiveness, but from the weapon. 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 School Master slipped his hand into his cloak.

The boy lunged.

The School Master stepped aside to dodge the thrust, slipped the dagger from under his cloak and put it to the boy's throat. "Put it down," he commanded.

His short blade shone with a blinding light, filling the room. He remembered the look on Valance's young face as his resolve finally weakened, and 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 School Master. An instant later another boy followed him.

"Let him go!" The boy shouted.

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

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

"Leave now!" were the last words he uttered to the three of them. Apparently, their fates had been sealed ever since.

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

"I've come to ask forgiveness." Lord Valance pleaded.

The School Master 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 School Master 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 School Master 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... It was more than we anticipated. We came back to ask... we need... help."

The School Master leaned towards him. "Bring me the swords!"

"If only it was that easy." He shifted his weight. "As you said. I can't seem to be apart from them for more than one or two days."

"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 separation will bring. And I promise you this temporary suffering will pass and in return you will find... rest."

"I understood there was another way."

The School Master shook his head. "The Token cannot help you now. To use it to find them would only seal to you 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 jumped 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 School Master.

"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 School Master shouted.

Valance eyed his old master, then turned to Barnus.

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

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

Lord Barnus climbed through the debris to the injured old man. A smile crept across Barnus' face as he stood over him.

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

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

Nemic ran to the edge of the cliffs and looked down at the sea below. Normally, the salty mist and rhythmic crashing of the waves had a calming effect. Instead, a blur of panicked thoughts raced through his mind.

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

He pulled back the final fold and revealed the source of the light. 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 known what it looked like, only its function and importance. And now, he would've given anything to have the honor of seeing it firsthand taken from him. He was supposed to have waited another ten years at least before the School Master was to give it to him as part of the rights of succession. Everything about his possession of it now meant that something had gone wrong.

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

A tight pack of black horses raced across the top of the jagged 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 raised the figurine in front of him. It was beautiful, he thought, as it glowed softly in the evening light.

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

"God forgive me!" He whispered.

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 overtook him.

Chapter 2

Sixty Years Later

Raj Handers pushed through the oversized hospital room door; his heavy leather work apron swung in behind him. He had a habit of forgetting to take it off after work. Not that he made much of an effort to remember. His physical appearance had slipped far from the top of his concerns. He was sure he was breaking some sort of social code of conduct to be seen publicly in work clothes, given his social standing. But then, it wasn't his own reputation that would be called into question. It'd be his in-laws. He was sure if they saw him in his work apron he'd hear all about it.

Raj had a heavily hunched back and had lost most the fur on his head and neck. His posture had gotten worse with age and he'd given up trying to fight it.

"We brought you a little treat." Raj said as he put a small plate down on the counter.

Rinacht struggled through the door after him, balancing a small stack of books in each hand. His small Petra form and formal servant attire contrasted harshly against Raj, his much larger Zoen employer. The Petra looked like they were hewn of stone, a collection of sharp rocks clumped together. Compared to the Zo, they like were giant boulders. Rinacht, though, had been the blessed recipient of exceptional genetics. He was small and exceptionally so. In his own land, he'd been a peculiarity. Odd, but not enough to stop you in the street. Here, though, he was a peculiar variety of an almost non-existent breed. There were almost no other Petra in the city. To see a miniature one? That was enough to stop you in the street.

"We got you some new books!" Raj said as he circled around to the back of the hospital bed that filled most of the room.

"Yes, we... " Rinacht lifted the stack still in his arms to emphasize the word, "brought you all that we could carry."

Emret looked up from a weathered old green book he had spread out over the bed covers next to him and sat back against a pillow. "Hey Dad, Rinacht."

Emret was just crossing into those awkward teenage years. Raj was having a hard time seeing him as anything other than how he'd always seen him - as his little boy. Only now he was stretched out a little funny, and he seemed to disagree with him a lot more than he used to.

The boy's attractive young Botan nurse closed the book softly and stood. "Hello Mr. Handers." She greeted him with something slightly more than a friendly smile.

Moslin was beautiful. The Bota were a beautiful people. At least he thought so. They weren't hunched over, furry messes like the Zo, or cold unforgiving clumps of mass like the Petra. No. They were slender and elegant. Their skin was a smooth creamy green that flowed in long graceful curves with only the thinnest hint of fuzz. Raj couldn't imagine what it would be like not to have to deal with his thick pelt.

Emret picked up the book they had open and put it on his lap. They'd been reading it together... again, Raj thought, as he returned the smile. He took her hand and bowed slightly. "Miss Moslin."

Despite the annoyance of her continual disregard for his desire that she not read that particular book to his son, he couldn't help but smile when she was in the room.

"What happened?" Emrett asked, a bit surprised.

"What?" Raj leaned to the side to see his boy around the lovely Moslin. He followed the boy's glance down to his apron. The thick leather had long gouges cut down its full length. It appeared as though a large set of claws had raked across it a few times.

"Oh. The Attly Clan's bears. They've become a little aggressive lately, stopped responding to clan issues. I've had to work with them all week."

He leaned over by his son and kissed him on the forehead. "How you feeling today?"

"Fantastic." Emret answered dryly. "What are you trying to do, book a room here next to mine?"

"Funny," Raj responded. He turned his attention to the aged green book laying on Emret's lap. It looked like it belonged in a museum rather than a kids hands. "What are you guys reading?"

Moslin looked away, uncomfortable.

Emret stared at the book. "Same thing."

Raj turned his attention to the nurse. "I appreciate you taking so much time with my son."

"My pleasure," she replied.

"Although, you run the risk of making your other patients jealous," he said with a half grin.

She laughed. "I don't think it's the other patients I have to worry about."

He smiled.

She picked up the green book off the bed and stepped past Raj towards the exit.

"Where're you going?" Emret asked.

"Your father's right. I do have other patients."

"Thanks Dad," Emret muttered sarcastically.

"Don't worry, sweetie. I'll be back later," she said as she slipped out the door.

"Didn't you two just finish that book?" Raj asked as he turned back to the bed.

"Yeah. Why?"

"Well, how many times have you read it?"

"I don't know."

"Don't you have other books you could read?"

"Dad! Seriously."

A scratching noise reverberated from the wall across from the foot of the bed. They both turned abruptly, startled by the noise.

At the base of the wall near the door was a small, ornately trimmed hole. The scratching grew louder until a small rodent scampered out onto the lip of the trim and hopped down onto the floor.

It scurried across the tile and stopped in front of Raj with its chest exposed. A metal plate, engraved with the crest of his wife's family, hung to the underside of the small animal.

Raj dropped his shoulders. It was such an ugly creature. And it stunk. Fit the message, he supposed, chuckling to himself.

The rodent rubbed his hands together for a few seconds then scampered back the way it came.

Rinacht got up from his seat and moved towards the door. "Shall I admit them, sir?"

Raj stared at him for a moment before responding. What if he said no, he thought. He could. He could simply not let them in. That wouldn't be that bad, would it?

He looked back at his son who was watching him with a disapproving look. "Yes, of course. Why would you need to ask that, Rinacht?" He

delivered an uncomfortable fake laugh to his son and then pointed at Rinacht as though he didn't know what had gotten in to him.

He followed his glum servant to the door to meet the arriving guests. "And we were having such a nice day." He muttered.

Rinacht turned to him and whispered, "She could fall. You know... accidentally. The floors are quite slippery."

Raj laughed. "You're a good man, my friend."

A light rap on the door cut off their exchange. Rinacht opened the door and made a welcoming gesture to the guests standing outside. "Please come in."

Emret's grandparents and an aunt danced into the room with an explosion of chatter. Rinacht bowed politely. "Sir and Madams."

They side stepped Raj and Rinacht without a word of acknowledgment and continued their exaggerated waltz towards their grandchild, singing his woes all the way to his bedside.

Emret leaned forward to greet them as they wrapped him up in a warm and loud embrace.

His grandpa grabbed a handful of Emret's hospital gown and pulled on his stomach skin. "What're they feeding you in here boy? You're ten pounds heavier every time I see you."

"So when do we getta break ya outa here?" asked his aunt.

"Yes that's a good question," the boy's grandmother said, then paused. "Raj?"

Raj glanced over from his hiding place in the corner. "I'm sorry?"

She didn't turn to face him. "When is he coming home?"

"We don't exactly know, just yet."

This time she turned. "What do you mean you don't know yet. The poor boy's been here over a month! You should know everything there is to know by now."

"Well, they're... " He tried to answer.

"What're you trying to do to the poor boy?" She interrupted.

"The... the doctors are doing everything they can." He stammered, uncomfortable with the direction the questions were headed.

She stared at him coldly. "Are they?"

Raj scowled, then grunted to himself as he looked away, shaking his head. She knew that she could speak to him however she wished and he'd give no resistance. What would you call a person who took advantage of a mans guilt? Foul? Treacherous? Conniving? That was part of the problem. He couldn't call her anything. Such was the power of guilt.

She knew the power that she held over him and she used it every time he failed to avoid her.

A knock on the door broke the tension. Moslin entered without waiting for permission. "Excuse me. I need to check his vitals."

"If you'll excuse me. I'll be back in one moment." Raj said as he slipped out the door.

Moslin stopped in front of Emret's grandmother on the way to his bed. "I understand you have a concern about Emret's treatment? If you'd accompany me outside, I can answer any questions you might have."

"Oh, that won't be necessary," she answered with a polite smile.

"With all due respect ma'am, the hospital staff as well as your son are doing everything in our power to help Emret. Please refrain from antagonizing patients or their family while in this hospital.

"Raj isn't my son." the old woman answered.

"Visiting hours are over. You have five minutes." She turned and left the room.

Moslin hurried down the cold plaster hallway. "Raj wait," she called.

He stopped at the other end of the hallway and turned to her.

"You don't have to leave. As Emret's legal guardian, you have the right to restrict his visitors for any reason," she explained.

He laughed. "Thanks, but... Any pain saved now would be paid back in measure later. Besides they're good for Emret. He needs their enthusiasm."

"She's wrong you know," she said quietly.

"She's wrong a lot, but I've never had the privilege of telling her." He smiled. "Now I'm jealous."

"Oh, you heard that?" She looked away, embarrassed.

"Thing is, though," he paused, unsure of how to explain. His mother in law had a knack for finding his weak points and drilling them. "What if...?"

"Uh, Oh. Don't go down that road. Trust me," she warned.

"Am I doing everything I possibly can? I don't know. What if there's something else I haven't tried. Maybe I'm not pushing the doctors hard enough. Maybe this isn't the best hospital for what he needs. Maybe there's a doctor with more experience with his symptoms," he said.

"Then you push, and you try, and you ask, and you do everything you know how to do. That's your job. You make sure they do their job to best of their abilities," she said.

He looked at her for a moment then nodded his head.

"I know you'd never give up on him. No matter what people said or how hard it got. You're a good father, don't ever doubt that."

He stared at her. "Thank you. Sounds like you're speaking from experience."

"I've been through this in one form or another. One of the worst parts of my job." She looked up at him. "Can I share something with you?"

He nodded his head.

"Come with me to the next service." She handed him a card with the date and time of a church meeting, a Botan church meeting. He frowned, not sure how to respond.

"I know you're not of the same... you know... its just, it offers a lot of comfort. You've got a lot of difficult questions ahead of you. The kind that people don't have answers to."

He looked at the card again. "Thanks but I don't... "

"Think about it. Just an invitation, that's all."

"Mr. Handers!"

Two Zo doctors had come up the hallway behind them. One of the doctors motioned for Raj's attention.

"Mr. Handers, I've been looking for you. Can we speak in my office for a moment?" He gestured for Raj to follow.

"Sure, Dr. Eghart." He followed him around the corner to his office. The doctor let him in and shut the door behind.

"Please, have a seat." He pointed to a chair.

Raj sat down while Dr. Eghart put some charts up on a white board. Each chart had his son's name written on a label in the corner. He had no idea what they were for. One was some sort of graph. Another was a strange series of lines.

"First of all, thank you for your patience this last month with this long series of tests. I know it's extremely difficult not knowing. We believe we've discovered the underlying cause of your son's condition."

"Great. That's good news."

"Well it is, and it isn't." He put his hands together and paused. "Um... We believe your son's binding... Well, we believe he's becoming unbound."

"What?"

"I know its difficult to understand, you... "

"That's not possible. He's never missed a single day of Manea."

"Unfortunately, we don't understand what's causing his bond to deteriorate. Because of that we haven't been able to stop its progression."

"What do you mean?"

"We don't have a solution yet, but we're hopeful, with time, that will change."

"How much time do you need? How much time does Emret have?"

"That, of course, is our greatest concern right now, and, unfortunately, we don't have the answer."

Raj sat back in his chair. His head was spinning. This isn't what they told him when he first came. They said it was a minor issue, a chemical imbalance of some sort. A month of testing later and his condition deteriorates to this? How was that possible? Something, somewhere must've gotten mixed up. Could someone have switched the charts?

"I don't understand what's happened? You said... "

"I know this is not what you were expecting to hear," the doctor said calmly.

Raj leaned forward rubbing his head. This couldn't be real. This was not possible.

"I'm sorry Mr. Handers. This is an extremely rare condition. Because of that we've had little chance to understand it. There are only a few prescribed treatments, and none of them have been able to stabilize his bond."

He took a deep breath, trying to clear his head. He tried to see the situation clearly through the fog of emotion. If the doctor was right, he had to figure out what to do next. He had to fix this. "What happens when his binding fails completely?" he asked.

"His body will begin to revert. He'll lose his higher functions. You have to be aware; it's not a condition he's likely to survive."

"So what do we do now? What the next step?"

"I'm sorry Mr. Handers. We're already doing everything we can."

"Why can't we just feed him more Manea? Cut out all his other food and give him only Manea!" he demanded.

"Unfortunately, like many diseases, once the damage has been done it cannot be undone through a change in diet. Additionally, we don't believe Manea deprivation caused his condition. As you said early, he hasn't gone a day without eating it," the doctor explained.

Raj shook his head.

"So that's it? You're saying he's going to die because you can't think of anything else to try right now? But maybe you'll think of something later?" The anger began to swell up into his face, pushing out through heavy, labored, breaths. He struggled to rein it in, to keep himself from completely breaking down.

"We can't simply throw random treatments at him and hope that something will work. The wrong treatment could kill him," the doctor said.

"But if you take your time debating about what might and might not work, he'll die anyway. I think its time to take some risks here." Raj was shouting now. The rage had ripped itself free of his meager attempt to restrain it.

"Mr. Handers..." the doctor tried to interject.

"I refuse to accept that there isn't a better way to do this. There's always a better way!" Raj was on his feet now.

"Mr. Handers, please. You have to understand. Any loving parent would exhaust all effort looking for something to heal their child. I understand that. You'd go to go to the ends of the earth if needs be." The doctor stood.

"What I want you to understand is that's not necessarily what he needs right now. That's not what you need right now. A natural part of the grieving process is coming to terms with an outcome beyond your control. The unending quest for new and exotic methods is contrary to that grieving process.

"It's a desperate attempt to control something that has proven itself to be uncontrollable. Believe or not, the powers of modern medicine are, in fact, finite. We can't cure everything... yet."

"But..." Raj tried to interject.

"Endless searching will only prolong the pain and rob you of the time you do have left to say good bye. Let *us* worry about finding the solution. You worry about the time you spend with your son. If your son's last day comes soon, that will not be something you can control. What you can control is how you prepare yourself and your son for it," the doctor concluded.

Raj grabbed his coat and slammed the door as he left.

He found himself wandering out the back of the hospital and down the dark street that led to the sea cliffs. It was the first place that came to his mind when he thought of somewhere he could be alone.

A steep staircase, cut into the black rock, led down from the street to the sandy beach below. He stumbled down the steps, holding an arm in front of his eyes to shield against the sand blowing off the rocks.

He'd come here before for the same purpose, he remembered. The same thought had come to him then, to come here, to be alone, to think.

He wandered out onto the wet sand and felt the spray on his face from the dark waves that crashed against the beach. Night had come while he'd been in the hospital. Yet the night, with the moon glowing through a thin layer of clouds, seemed to add to the environment he was seeking. He tried to avoid the thoughts that were stirring in his mind, the thoughts of her, of the last time he'd come here from the hospital. It'd taken him so long to forget, to push the memories back far enough that they stopped hurting. He had to. He had his son.

The moon went dark behind a cloud. A flash of lighting flickered from the horizon, giving a momentary glimpse of the approaching storm. He felt a crushing weight growing from inside, pushing down on him. He couldn't afford this, not now. He had to fight it back.

He dropped to his knees, digging into the soft sand. The dried top layer caught in the gusts of wind and swirled around him. He looked up into the darkness above. He didn't know what he was looking for. Sometimes just seeing something up there staring back down was reassuring. He got no such comfort from the black, starless void above him. The crushing weight increased, almost as though the void had reached a slender finger down to him and was working its way inside him. His desperation grew to panic.

"Please," he voiced into the wind. "Help me."

Another flicker of light flashed across the sky, showing for a brief instant the beauty of the clouds as the lighting etched its zigzag through them. The illusion of emptiness broke. The slender finger withdrew.

"Please," he begged. "Don't take my son away too!"

He turned away from the sky. What right did he have to ask such things? Why should he expect such favors? The proposition was ludicrous.

He looked up once more. Ludicrous or not, he had nothing left.

"Please," he whispered.

His thoughts dropped to a sharp pain in his knee. He shifted his weight to move his knee off a sharp rock that had been poking him from under the sand.

Another flicker lit up the sky. As he looked down into the depression that his knee had left, he noticed a faint trace of light had remained after the lighting's bright flash.

As the wind blew, the trace of light grew brighter. The sharp stone that he'd felt under his knee was emitting light! As the wind continued to clear away the sand, the object grew in size and complexity. It was some sort of carving, the figure of a small plant or a miniaturized tree! There

was something else, something on the tree. He wanted to reach down and feel it, to pick it up, but hesitated. It wasn't natural. The wind cleared away the sand down to the base of the figure. It had a long bird curved around its thin trunk and a solid round base of roots.

His curiosity overcame his apprehension, and he reached down to pick it up. As his fingers made contact, a burst of blinding white light overtook his vision. His ears rang with a high pitched whine. After a moment, his sight and hearing returned, but he was no longer on the beach. He was standing in the street a few blocks from the hospital. In front of him, an ancient stone archway rose up out of the ground, completely blocking the road. A stone pathway extended beyond.

He couldn't imagine that it had been there long. It would've blocked traffic, had there been any. He stepped towards it.

His vision burned to white again. After a moment color returned, and he was standing somewhere else - outside an old school. He was sure he'd seen it before but wasn't sure where it was. He remembered he'd been impressed by the high stone wall that surrounded the school. In the street beside the wall, he saw another archway. This one, unlike the first, was made of white stone and seemed rather modern. At least the stones seemed almost perfectly cut. Yet, it too seemed completely out of place as it blocked the road.

The white returned. When it receded he found himself in yet another place. This time he was on a mountaintop in the middle of the day. A meadow stretched out in front of him. At the end of that meadow, a beautiful structure made of white stone sat, its spires leading his eyes up to the bright sky. The blue burned into white.

Then he saw his son crumpled on the wet forest floor. A wave of red light washed over him. He opened his eyes, then stood up. The forest blanked to white again.

His sight cleared, and he found himself back on the beach. A stabbing pain registered in his fingertips. He jerked his hand back from the glowing figure. His fingers were bleeding where he had touched it. He took a handkerchief out of his pocket, wrapped it around the figure and tucked it into his jacket.

Rinacht climbed onto a rock overlooking the beach. He could see Raj kneeling in the sand below.

"Mr. Handers!" he called.

Suddenly his employer got to his feet, without acknowledging him, picked something up and put into his jacket. Rinacht may not have seen it clearly, but it had appeared as though the object Raj had found was glowing. Raj turned and walked away down the beach.

He must not have heard his call, he thought. So he hopped down off the rock and rushed over to the stairway that led down.

Raj hurried through the thinly populated city streets. He knew the one he wanted wasn't far. He just wasn't sure exactly which way. He turned the corner and looked up. It looked familiar. He walked around the side of the building to get a view of the open street. There, taking up more than half the road, was the archaic stone archway, just as he'd seen in the vision.

He pulled himself back behind the building and hid himself up against the wall, shaking his head. This was not good. To dream about it, to see it in your mind, sure, fine. But to see it there in front of you, awake? That was a problem. He leaned out again, peering around the building. It was still there.

"How..." He took a deep breath to calm himself. There had to be some way of making sense of it. He'd have to get a closer look. Perhaps it was a trick of his mind, a latent image of some sort. He hurried to it. The stones, worn with age, stacked tightly without mortar, gave no impression of illusion. Proximity had only further solidified the reality of its presence. Perhaps to touch it would help, he thought.

He pushed hard against one of the stones, catching himself in case he fell through it. The stones were cold to his touch and held firmly against his weight. Either this truly was here blocking the entire road or he was simply, insane. To further confound his dilemma with reality, as he stared through the stone arches, there was a pathway, made of large, irregularly shaped stones, cut into the small and well worn cobble stone road. The pathway extended out the back and continued down the street. He was positive these larger stones were not there a moment ago.

He backed away and circled around to the front of the arch to look at the path from another angle. The path was gone! Without a sign of it ever having been there. He took a calming breath. Perhaps this was still part of his previous episode, part of some kind of odd dream.

He doubled back behind the arch and, sure enough, the pathway was still there. This would induce a migraine; he was sure of it. He stepped sideways to see around the stone pillar. Now he could see through and

around it at the same time. The path was clearly both there and not there! Viewed through the archway, it extended down the street and into the city. Viewed from outside, it didn't exist.

The illusion was fantastic! His mind started to wander. What would happen if he stepped through it? Would it remain when he tried to step on it, or was it like a mirage, always just out of reach? How good was the illusion, really?

He took a quick step through to see what would happen. His foot landed firmly on the first stone of the pathway. He stepped back, surprised. Apparently he had become comfortable with the idea that this was just a trick of the eye, and a trick of the eye was not something you were supposed to feel under your feet.

So this was not an illusion. He laughed to himself. Nether was the enormous stone archway blocking the road. Neither made sense to a rational mind. It looked like he'd have to make a decision, as trying to prove or disprove the reality of this thing was pointless. He could walk away or walk through. He stared at it, imagining the outcomes of both scenarios. What was the worst that could happen? Well, he could die. There was always that possibility. He could be tortured.

And what was the best possible outcome?

He remembered what had led him to this point, the larger context of the experience, his overwhelming need to find a solution for his son. A moment later he found himself hurrying down the strange and unexplainable path.

Rinacht stopped and watched Raj from behind a corner. His employer was in the middle of the street in front of him. He felt the automatic urge to call out to him but suppressed it. Raj had his hands up in the air as though he were leaning on something. Only there wasn't anything there. He then paced back and forth, circling around as though there were an object in the way. After what appeared to be a moment of deliberation, Raj turned and marched straight down the road.

Rinacht tried to add it up in his head. Raj found something highly unusual on the beach. Now here he was wandering about the city in the middle of the night, pantomiming in the empty street. The worst had finally come, he feared, as he slipped into the dark and followed quietly behind.

Raj rushed down the path of rough-cut rocks, anxious to get to wherever it may lead. He rounded a corner and found a heavy stone wall rising up in front of him. The high wall extended a considerable distance in both directions. To his right, it wound around to a large gated entrance. The entrance looked familiar. Then it came to him; this was the old school that he'd recognized earlier.

If that were true then would he see a second archway, he wondered? His path turned down an alley beside the school wall. At the end of the alley, the path turned again. He raced down the alleyway and turned to follow the back of the wall.

About halfway down to the next building, he found what he was looking for. A large white stone archway stretched half way across the road, making it difficult to go around. He approached quickly, checking behind him to see if there was anyone around. The last thing he wanted was a crowd. Fortunately, the street was empty.

Up close the archway was quite different from the other. The white stone blocks were cut perfectly smooth and perfectly square. The stone gave off a glow like the little figurine he'd found. Cut into the stone on each pillar were two figures, one on each side, one male, one female. He studied their details. They weren't stooped over in posture like the Zo. Nor were they squat and rounded like the Petra or twisted and stretched like the Bota. They were unusual, to say the least, he thought.

The pathway beyond the arch seemed to be made of the same white stone. Not surprising, it seemed to be playing the same visual trick. When viewed from the side, the path was the same as the one he was on. From through the arch it became white and glowed.

The old school next to him sat on a high point in the city. Through the archway, he could see the street drop into the distant expanse of buildings and roads. He traced the glowing line of the path as it wound down into the city. It emerged on the other side and disappeared into the green line of the forest. Even from a distance he saw it peek in and out under the trees, continuing with the forest as it lifted up into the mountain range. Finally, it rose to the base of one of high peaks and ended abruptly.

He blinked as he realized what he was looking at. Without thinking, he'd followed an impossibly thin line across the city, through the forest and up to the top of the mountain. Somehow he could still see it. He could see the path leading to a white building, a building below a mountain peak. He squinted. He shouldn't be able to see a building on the side

of a mountain a thousand miles away, at night. This was making his head hurt, he thought, as he turned away.

Still, he'd come this far. Was this enough for him to reconsider? No, he supposed. He stepped forward through the archway. As he passed, his vision burned to white. After a disorienting moment of blindness, the flash receded, and he found himself standing on a mountain, below the peak where the path had led. In front of him was the same white building he had seen from afar.

A bright light overtook him. A moment later he found himself standing in a room with soaring walls of white stone. He was inside the building he'd just been staring at, he assumed. There were two sets of stairs on opposite sides of the room. One led up, and the other down.

As soon as he took notice of them, his body shifted. An instant later, he stood in the upper room beyond the stairs. In the center of the new room, he noticed a large basin of water. He moved closer again with the thought. Below the surface of the water was an assortment of weapons and armor. One long sword was unsheathed revealing a blinding white blade. Without thinking it, he reached in and took the sword.

A haze of white washed over him. A moment later Raj found himself in an open field. In front of him, a wall of soldiers advanced. He spun around. Another wall of men stood behind him, their eyes fixed on him, with their weapons half raised, waiting. He looked down. Held tightly in his hand was the long white sword with the blade of white. His arms, chest, and legs were covered in armor, white glowing armor.

His body twisted unnaturally as it turned around of its own accord to face the opposing army. Without issuing the command to his arm, it lifted the sword high into the air. His voice rang out with a horrible cry, and his legs bolted forward. His cry multiplied into a deafening roar by the thousands of men who followed behind him. An echo of that cry sounded from the hordes in front of him as they dashed forward with a war cry of their own.

He watched helplessly as death approached. His body refused to respond to his panic and flung itself full speed into peril.

His charge was interrupted by a blur of light. It faded and he was back on the street standing under the arch. After a moment of disorientation, he stepped back from under the arch.

"Crazy!" He muttered. "This is crazy!"

He turned and stumbled away, down the street and into the safety of the city.

Around the corner, hidden by the wall of the school, Rinacht watched Raj back up, turn, and disappear down the street.

"What did you find, my friend?"

Chapter 3

Lord Valance stared at the Clan Lord Ranth, a short and stubby little Zoen man, who was frantically paddling his squatty little legs to keep up with the group. He hated the man; he hated how much influence he had over the greater House of Clans; he hated that he had to invite him here to his largest, most profitable, orchard just to gain audience with his more powerful friends. It was insulting.

"Arrg!" The Clan Lord cried as he stumbled over a dead branch. Lord Valance wanted to laugh but kept it in. The site of the man rolling around on the ground, trying to pick himself up, suddenly made his presence here more tolerable.

An entourage of scientists, administrators, and security stopped to wait for the distinguished guest. The grey of broken, rotting branches had smothered what was left of a pleasant green grass. It was impossible to walk through it without keeping a constant eye on the ground.

"Why don't you have someone clear these out?" The Clan Lord demanded.

"We do." Lord Valance answered. "Almost every day."

After crossing through several rows of perfectly lined trees, the group stopped. Several men and women, wearing light jackets emblazoned with the orchard's bright red insignia, stopped at the trunk of a gnarled old tree. Its branches twisted into a dense canopy over them. They waited as Lord Valance and the Clan Lord pushed through from the back of the crowd.

"This is our oldest." Lord Valance announced to the Clan Lord as he rested his hand up against the trunk. "She produces more fruit than almost ten younger trees."

He followed the Clan Lord Ranth's gaze up into the fruit laden branches above them. The coverage was thin compared to the younger trees they'd just passed. The tree could easily have held two or three times the count.

"How quickly is she declining?" Lord Valance asked one of his men in the light colored jackets.

"Fifteen percent per year now." He answered.

"Fifteen percent?" The rate had increased since he'd last reviewed the numbers. "And this is the highest rate?" he asked.

"Yes. She's the worst case scenario. She was the first to show the decline and has so far contracted the farthest."

The Clan Lord stared at the old tree then redirected his gaze to the young scientist in the jacket. "OK. So what are we saying? The rest of the trees are going to hit fifteen percent when they get as old as this tree?"

"With some margin of error, yes, we believe so." The young scientist answered.

"So you have to tear these out and plant new trees? I'm not sure I understand... "

"The life cycle of the trees isn't the concern." A middle aged woman interrupted. Valance and the Clan Lord both turned.

Lord Valance extended a hand towards the new voice. "Clansman this is Doctor Bihinlem. She's been heading our alternatives research. Go ahead doctor."

The Doctor nodded in greeting. "What concerns us is the distribution of our production load across the age range of our trees. These relatively few older trees produce almost half of our total yield. As Lord Valance said, one produces as much as ten younger trees."

"OK. I'm still not sure I see the problem. Won't all your young trees grow into large, high producing, old trees?" he asked.

"Yes, naturally that should occur... "

"What do you mean, should?"

"It'd be better if we showed you." Lord Valance motioned for the Clansman to follow him, as he carefully stepped over the fallen dead branches from the giant tree.

He led the group through more rows of the massive old growth trees. It seemed so strange to him; they were such immense creatures; they looked so healthy and strong. In many ways, they were the symbol of his vast empire, his power and vitality.

The change was abrupt as they crossed over into the younger section of the orchard. From one row to the next, the young trees were nearly a quarter the size of the older. Their branches weren't even tall enough to step under.

"These are the oldest of the next expansion of trees. They were planted a decade or so after the older ones." Lord Valance explained.

"Only ten years younger? They can grow that much in ten years?" The Clan Lord asked.

"No they can't. The size difference between these and the older represents what would typically be fifty years of growth."

"I don't follow."

"These trees, for all intents and purposes, are as large as they'll ever be." Lord Valance explained.

"But that's... "

"The simple matter is this," he paused, "For some reason that we cannot explain, our younger trees are not growing to what we would consider a mature size."

"Has this ever happened before?"

"Not that we're aware."

"Are there other orchards that have been affected in this way?"

Lord Valance took a moment before he answered. "There are no orchards that have escaped this problem."

"All of your orchards? That's more than half of our supply of Manea!"

He cleared his throat. "Not all of our orchards. All of the world's orchards. All Manea orchards have been affected."

"What?" the Clan Lord stammered. "How could that be?"

"We're trying to understand that."

"So what does all this mean? Have you planted enough new trees to make up for the fact that they don't make as much as they used to? Is that what we're up against? Planting a lot more trees?"

"Manea does not grow everywhere as I'm sure you're well aware. Otherwise, people would have it in their back yard. It's strangely fickle," Lord Valance said.

"Right. Right."

"We've been unable to discover any substantial new land that will support an orchard. We've pursued this avenue vigorously, I assure you. And if we had missed anything our competitors would surely have found it."

"So as the older, higher producing, trees reach the end of their lifespan, not only are the younger trees too small to make up the difference but you can't plant any more of them?" the Clan Lord asked.

"Yes," Lord Valance answered.

"But what about grafting the plants or cross breeding. Can't something else be done?" he asked.

"Yes. We've made some progress in that area," Doctor Bihinlem answered. "That's my area of specialty, alternate breeds."

"And?"

"The grafts have potential, but even if we had a perfect tree now, it would take twenty years to wipe the land and grow a mature orchard," she answered.

"But we don't have twenty years, right? Is that were this is going? How long do we have? Five years?" the Clan Lord asked.

"Six months to a year," Lord Valance added. "Before the decline in the old trees causes major disruptions in supply."

"Your business will be ruined!" The Clan Lord sputtered.

"If the decline continues at that pace, there won't be anyone left to sell too," Lord Valanced added.

"Lets not be overly dramatic. Besides, what do you expect me to do about any of this?" the Clan Lord spat, not making any effort to hide his outrage.

"Talk to the other Clan Lords. We have a plan." Lord Valance answered calmly.

Emret heard the click of the door that signaled someone was coming in. He wiggled and pushed himself up to a sitting position in time to see Moslin shut the door behind her.

"How we doing today?" she asked.

"Same as yesterday... " he adjusted his blankets, "...and the day before, and you know... the day before."

Moslin smiled and sat down on the bed next to him. She set the large green book down beside her. "Do you want to read a little today?"

He let out a depressed sigh. "No, not really."

"No?" She said in surprise. "You've been hounding me for the last two weeks to read at every available moment. Now suddenly you don't want to read?"

"Sorry. I don't just feel like it today."

"I sense a little discouragement," she said sarcastically, trying to lighten the mood.

"No, I'm fine," he answered, not catching the sarcasm. "Maybe we could read this one for a bit." He leaned over to the side table and tried to grab a smaller red book.

She turned and picked it up for him. "Ah, we're finally getting around to reading one of the books your dad bought for you. He'll be happy his effort didn't go to waste," she joked.

He forced a smile and nodded his head.

"You don't seem that excited about this book either," she said.

"What's to be excited about? It's just something somebody else made up."

She re-adjusted her position to face him more directly. "Books aren't just something somebody made up." She paused. "Well, maybe some of them are but not all of them."

He looked up at her, the first sign of life showing on his face since she arrived. "So how do you tell if the book you're reading wasn't just made up by whoever wrote it?"

"Well..." she took a moment. "There are some books that are based on researched fact. School books, for example, they show you at the end of the chapter where they got their information, so that you can double check it.

"Biographies, for another example, are about certain people's lives. Usually based on interviews with the person or people who knew him or her. Then there are historians who study records of events in the past and write about them.

"And then, of course, there are books like this one..." She held up the smaller red book, "... that are stories based on someone's thoughts and experiences, and even though they may not be something that actually happened, they can still be terribly meaningful."

He squinted at her skeptically.

"The people that write them do so in a way to express something that they've found to be real and meaningful to them. But instead of just telling you in a text book way that $a+b=c$, they take you through a life experience with them and show you what its like to have that happen. You get to draw your own meaning from sharing that experience."

He furrowed his brow, trying to grasp the idea.

"Say I were to ask you what it would be like to raise two twin boys. What would you say?" She asked.

He looked up at her, then glanced away. "I don't know."

"Well, if you wanted to know what it'd be like to be a parent of two little babies at once you could read someone's story about it. They would take you through the experience of childbirth, staying up all night with them, and trying to figure out how to feed them when both were hungry at the same time. They could share how much fun they had watching them both learn to hold their heads up, and then sit up by themselves, and eventually crawl. Even though you're just a boy yourself, when you read the story you get to be the parent and see things how a parent has seen them."

He nodded his head. "I think that makes sense."

She put the red book aside and picked up the larger tattered green book. "But its my guess that you're not talking about books in general. I'm guessing that you want to know about this book in particular. Whether or not this book is actual fact or simply made up."

He stared back at her, waiting patiently for her to continue.

"Are there sources of information that can be verified? Possibly. Are there historical records that could be cross referenced? It would take a little work. It's possible. Are there scholars who could tell us if the book is consistent with what they believe the historical facts are? Maybe.

"But really, your concerns and questions aren't actually about this book either?" she continued.

They aren't? He thought, surprised. He was pretty sure they were.

"This is about you trying to wrap your head around whats happening to you. This is about you being thrown towards the edge of a cliff, and you not knowing why, or who's doing it. This is about you wanting this all to make sense.

"This book has some ideas about all that. Can they be proven, cross referenced and verified? No. That makes your dad uncomfortable. He doesn't want you to get wrapped up in something that isn't true. I can understand that."

She put the green book down on the side table. "So it's your choice. The book offers the idea that the world is not lost in chaos; that we haven't simply been thrown into the wind, waiting to see where we might land, that there is order in everything, structure, that there are patterns that extend beyond this world and this life, even though we may not see or understand them, that we are not just on a globe, hurdling through space at a million miles per hour, completely out of control, waiting to crash into the next immovable object in our path.

"If those kinds of ideas appeal to you, then read the book. No one can tell you if its right or wrong. You have to decide that for yourself. It's up to you to find the meaning in the book by experiencing the stories as you read them."

Emret processed this, reflecting on the stories she'd read to him so far. The most compelling of those was about a young boy called up to fight a monster. How did that fit into what she was explaining?

He tilted his head to the side slightly, then asked, "The story about the boy who fights the monster?"

"Yes?"

"How was that story about life being full of order and purpose?"

"Very good question," she admitted. "How does your own life fit into that order and purpose? How can that story help you understand your own relationship to this life? The story is a repeating pattern. Not a historical account of something that happened just once. It explains a pattern that we may fit into, in one way or another, and in different ways at different times. The structure of that pattern may help us to understand the structure of our own life, the choices that are available to us. Sometimes we are not even aware of them until they are pointed out."

He followed through the analysis outloud. "This boy, who's called up to fight the monster, what choice does that represent? What great order does reading that give to my life?"

"I can't answer that question for you," she said quietly.

He looked down, not happy with the answer

"When you were excited about reading it, what was it that you liked so much?" she asked.

He looked at her firmly, moisture forming in his eyes. "The boy wins! Everybody says he'll die, but he doesn't. He wins," he answered.

"Well, there you go." She patted his leg. "That pattern has meaning to you."

Raj clicked open the door to his son's room and pushed through, finding a very familiar sight. Moslin was sitting on the bed next to Emret. He looked around for the over-sized green book she usually had open but didn't see it. They both looked up at his arrival.

"Hi Dad."

"Where's Rinacht?" Raj asked.

"We sent him to look for you," Emret replied.

"Oh." That was strange, Raj thought. He wondered where he'd gone. He set some food down on the corner table and moved in closer to the bed to give Emret a kiss on the head. On the side table behind Moslin, he noticed the big green book. So it was here after all, he thought.

"What're you reading?"

"We were actually just talking this time. For a change," Moslin answered.

"Oh?" Raj said, his attention still focused on the book.

She got up off the bed and grabbed her book.

"Hey!" Emret protested.

"Sorry, its your father's turn for some attention." She patted him on the head then smiled at Raj.

"You don't look so good. Everything OK?" she asked.

Raj didn't meet her gaze, just stared at the book. They were just talking? But she still brought the book to read even though he'd politely asked her to read other things more times than he could remember. She noticed that he was staring and followed his eyes down to the book.

"Can I talk to you for a moment," he asked, motioning her towards the door.

"Sure," she answered hesitantly, then followed him out the door.

Raj waited for her to pass then closed the door slowly behind her, waiting for the click. She turned and leaned up against the wall holding the book behind her.

"I know, I know. You want him to read other things," she started to apologize.

"I think maybe if you didn't bring it with you it might be easier for him to choose other things to read," he interjected.

"No, you're right. You're right. It's just... I have a hard time saying no to him. You know? He's stuck in that bed and it's the only thing that seems to make him happy."

"Well I guess that's kind of the problem. I didn't want him getting obsessed with it. Looks like it's a little to late."

"I know, I'm sorry."

He shifted his weight and paused for a breath. "What is it that's so appealing?" he asked.

She flipped open the book and stopped on a two page illustration of a young boy holding a white glowing sword.

"Well, the stories he's most interested in are all about a young boy who's sort of the least likely hero candidate yet ends up becoming the hero anyway."

"That doesn't sound to bad," Raj admitted.

"He's small and gangly and doesn't really have a whole lot going for him. Yet, when his village is threatened by a demon, he's the only one who volunteers to try to fight it."

"Courage. That's good," he added.

"Everyone thinks the boy will fail, that he'll die. But he doesn't. He wins, and he lives."

"How does he do that?" he asked.

"Well... The story says that he had a firm belief that no matter what he was up against, if he trusted in the power of the Reds, they would deliver him. And in the story, despite facing impossible circumstances, the Reds not only saved him but helped him turn away the demon."

She finished the story without making eye contact, as though she already knew he'd disapprove of the conclusion.

"So the boy overcomes death by divine power?" he asked, agitation already creeping into his voice.

"Well, its symbolic..." she tried to explain.

"You don't see the problem with this?" he asked.

"No, I don't," she defended firmly.

"What happens when the things in that story don't happen for him in real life? He's building hope and expectations in something that can't possibly happen," he demanded.

"The expectations and relationships in the story go beyond life and death. If the boy in the story had died in the end, he still would have succeeded. That was the point of the story."

"That doesn't make any sense," Raj argued.

"Because he trusted in the Reds, they changed who the boy was. They helped him become more than he ever could've on his own. They gave him courage, confidence, strength. If he had died at the end, it wouldn't have mattered because the change had already happened. He would've faced that moment of death with a hero's heart, regardless of the outcome.

"What your son needs, what your son wants, more than anything, what he's searching desperately to find, is some courage to face his own death. He's scarred, Raj. He doesn't know what's going to happen to him. So I bring him these stories every day because he tells me that when he reads them he isn't afraid," she explained.

"Moslin, this is what you get out of these stories. This is your interpretation. Emret is just a boy. He doesn't understand that things are not always meant in a literal way. If he became obsessed about a story where the boy is saved from death through a miraculous power and then suddenly you noticed his fear had gone away, wouldn't it be possible he's just putting the two together? I mean, how do you know what's going on in his mind? How can you say he isn't thinking that if he believes hard enough he'll be saved too? And that's why he isn't afraid.

"How long before he figures out the miracle isn't going to happen for him. What do I tell him then? Can't you see how much more difficult this is making things? Not just for him? But for me?"

"I'm doing the best I can to help him," she said.

"Well I don't think you're helping. In fact, I think it would be best if you stopped helping him all together," Raj turned away as he finished. "I'm going to ask that you not be assigned to my son any longer."

Moslin's mouth dropped a little in reaction. She turned and cleared her throat trying to regain composure. "You only get one chance at this with your son. Don't screw it up!" The words came out of her mouth like venom. The anger was palatable.

He watched her stormed away down the hall and immediately felt a terrible weight of regret pulling on him. He knew as soon as the words had left his mouth that it wasn't really what he wanted. He wanted to call her back, to apologize, but it was too late. What he said could not be unsaid.

Lord Valance stared through the thick glass separating him from a plain white room beyond. A bare skinned creature, roughly the same size and shape as a Zo adult, male raced back and forth from wall to wall, keeping its attention on Lord Valance through the glass.

Without warning it leapt at the glass, snapping its teeth viciously. The impact reverberated through the room with a sickening boom. The creature crumpled into the glass from the force of the impact, its face and neck twisting and contorting. Then it fell to the floor.

Lord Valance and his two companions jerked back in reaction.

A doctor in a white lab coat stepped up behind the men. "Gentlemen."

Lord Valance turned, then smiled as he recognized the man. "Hello Doctor Brite."

The Doctor turned his attention to the creature. "From what we can tell, the damage is irreversible."

Valance turned back to the glass as well, stepping forward to see the creature slowly getting up from the floor.

"How many?" he asked.

"This is the first to completely lose his binding. Half a dozen more aren't far behind. We've recorded nearly a thousand that have begun to show signs," the doctor answered.

The twisted creature snarled at Valance and other healthy fur covered Zoen men.

"Why is it affecting the population so unevenly?" Valance asked.

"The binding is a fascinating thing, really. The chemical components of Manea that we think create and maintain the bond are very elusive. We don't yet fully understand how they work, but they do seem to affect each person a little differently. As a result we believe some are simply more sensitive to the change in purity than others."

"I see." Valance said with his arms folded.

"Now that we've had enough time to track the data, we've been able to compare the rise in incidents with each incremental dilution of the Manea supply. We think the current rate of seventy percent concentration has caused a big spike," the doctor said.

"Where would you feel more comfortable?" Valance asked.

"At eighty percent the number of affected individuals was far less noticeable. People today aren't familiar with what its like to become unbound. Its been hundreds of years since it was common place. Most have never seen it or know anyone who's seen it.

"I think with anything lower than eighty percent you're going to have enough people turn into this," he pointed to the hairless beast, "that it would cause a wide spread panic."

"Eighty percent dilution isn't going to buy us much time," Valance concluded, then turned to Lord Whiting. "Call the Clan Lords. We need to talk."

He glanced back at the doctor. "Thank you for your diligence. I'd appreciate your continued discretion."

"Of course," the doctor said with a forced smile.

Lord Valance and his companions, Lord Whiting and Barnus, followed a house servant and an accompanying array of clans animals through a vast, dimly lit chamber. They kept their distance.

Domesticated under the strict control of clans or not, he still found the presence of large cats unnerving. And typically, large clan cats weren't kept for cleaning or running messages. They had one purpose socially, and that was aligned with their strengths in nature. They were adept killers. There were at least three leopards, half a dozen male lions and a few panthers. One of the panthers, buried in the middle of the group, let out a low pitched snarl and swat his large front paw at another large cat. The second cat snarled and clawed back.

The house servant stopped. "Alexia, no!" He reprimanded the unruly panther. "Come." He opened a large leather pouch hanging from his waist, pulled out a large piece of dried Manea and pushed it into her mouth.

"My apologies," the house servant said, turning to Valance briefly before continuing down the chamber.

What did the High Clan Lord Mar think he'd come to do, Valance thought, rob him?

He turned his attention back to his footsteps. He liked to know how far he was from an exit at any given moment. Especially in the dark, surrounded by a pack of deadly animals.

The chamber they crossed was impressive. Massive stone columns rose into the blackness above them, holding some sort of stone arched ceiling, he was sure, even though he couldn't see it. Either the room was too big for them to adequately light or they wanted their visitors to feel a bit uncomfortable. Probably a bit of both. He noted the red flags and other red decor displaying the crest of the High Clan. Other than those few bits of color, the hall was austere. No furniture, rugs or anything to indicate the hall was in use for anything specific. No windows either, which made it slightly suspicious and more uncomfortable.

He thought it remarkable that after so many years in dealing with the Lord Mar that he'd never actually been to his home. Mar had always come to him.

They crossed the threshold into a more brightly lit and comfortably furnished room. Here, the ceiling was clearly visible as well as a thin balcony that circled the room. A small scattering of men stood watch behind the balcony railing. In the far corner Mar reclined against an impressive array of over sized, multi colored pillows. He was dressed in an evening robe with a pipe in one hand and a book in the other. A confusing message, Valance thought. Apparently, his visit didn't warrant enough attention for the man put on clothes. And yet enough attention make sure Valance was aware of his security.

The servant crossed the room in front of them to announce their arrival. The High Clan Lord didn't respond in the slightest. His attention remained with his book. His pipe popped into his mouth for a suck without a glance up at the men who had just arrived.

"Have a seat," he muttered.

Valance gritted his teeth. "Where are the other Clan Lords?"

Mar dropped his book and looked up for the first time. "I'll hear what you have to say. But I can't compel anyone else to listen."

That of course was the complete opposite of the truth. If Mar had requested, the other Clan Lords were indeed compelled to attend. Mar was obviously not as sympathetic to him as he'd hoped. He thought the disturbing evidences that he had sent to Mar via Clan Lord Ranth would have persuaded him of the seriousness of the situation. Instead, Mar greeted him as though he'd come asking for money. There must be some sort of political maneuvering behind this. Political maneuvering was the exact thing he had hoped to avoid.

"Clan Lord Ranth presented you the report from my orchards I hope," Valance asked.

"I've read the report, yes."

"And the medical review of the incident at the hospital?"

"Of course," he said turning back to his book.

Valance stared at him with a look of consternation. He was not used to being treated in this way. In fact, he didn't think he'd been treated with such disrespect since he was a child.

"You'll forgive me Clan Lord, but you seem a little more at ease about this than I anticipated."

"At ease? You insult me. I am fully aware and alarmed by this turn of events. What would you like me to do? Throw myself to the floor while I scream and cry and beg for your help? Is that what you came here for, to see me make a mockery of myself?"

Valance smiled. The Clan Lord showed his intentions. They were not here to talk about how to deal with the crisis. They were here to jockey for position.

"Let me ask you this, my good and kind Lord Valance. How long have you been aware of this developing shortage? And why have you chosen today as the day to make us suddenly aware of it?"

"I assure you, we have not delayed in making you aware of this problem." Valance said.

"Haven't you? These are your orchards. This crisis has developed under your direct supervision. If you are only now aware of it, then I beg your pardon, but you're a bigger fool than I supposed."

Lord Barnus pushed aside his robe to reveal the hilt of his sword. He grasped it firmly. Valance shot him a glance. Barnus relaxed his grip.

"What is this?" Mar jumped to his feet. "You come into my house bearing weapons?"

The men watching from the balcony drew and aimed their weapons.

"I apologize for my overly zealous companions. I must travel with protection at all times as I'm sure you can understand."

Mar stepped towards Valance, pushing his large protruding belly right into Valance's thin waist.

"This problem is a reflection of what you've become Lord Valance! Your own incompetence has allowed this to happen. And now you come here expecting us to shoulder the burden of consequence? You want us to help you fix this. Yet, while you've sat in your soft palace high above this people, forgetting your duty to the very people who put you in that palace, we've remained here on the ground without missing a day of

work. No disruption of service. The mechanics of this city have remained in perfect order.”

Valance stepped back.

“I applaud you for your diligent, uninterrupted, service to this city. It’s this reason, in fact, that we’ve come to you first. We’ve prepared a mitigation plan to give us the time to grow the needed alternate supply without causing irreparable damage to this city and every other city. I feel you and your clans are essential to this plan. Not in an effort to shift burden to you but to offer you shelter from the storm that is most certainly to come. Because you provide essential services to this city, the purpose of our plan is to ensure your services are not interrupted.”

Mar relaxed slightly, dropping his arms to his side and unclenching his fists.

“I will hear your plan.”

Lord Whiting handed Mar a thin booklet.

“Here are the details. To put it simply, the supply shortage is projected to reach fifty percent within two years. The markets, left on their own, will starve the poor to feed the fearful rich. Everyone who can afford it will hoard to protect their future. Everyone else will... struggle. You and I both know that if those with money are the only ones left to survive, unfortunately, our society will not. Those with wealth as a group do not possess the full gamut of experience, practical knowledge and skill required to maintain a functioning society. The wealthy need the tradesmen and the clansmen.

“The wealthy will ensure their own survival. We need not worry about them. The tradesmen and clansmen, however, need to be protected. We must have a rationing plan. Rich and poor. That evaluates the most vital parts of our economy and protects them. Our food and water systems. Transportation. Animal controllers. The things on which life depends must be protected from the whims of the market.”

Mar took a deep breath and whistled as he exhaled slowly through his nose, staring pensively at the ground. “I’m inclined to agree with you.”

“I’ve called a hearing before the Senate. Will you support me?” Valance asked.

“In return for our support you will protect the interests of the clans in this rationing system?” Mar asked.

“Of course” Valance said.

“And it’ll be you who makes this judgments on who is to live and who is to die? You will say this man is vital, and this man is not?” Mar said.

“That is what I propose.” Valance said.

“And what if the Senate approves your plan but does not approve you as the manager of it? There is unprecedented risk in this rationing plan. Whomever we support in this action must be the sure candidate to win Senate appointment. If we tied our boats to the losing team, the potential repercussions would be unimaginable.

“I will speak plainly to you Lord Valance because I feel we must be perfectly clear on this point. While I believe your plan has merit, I do not believe you are the man to bring it to the Senate. I do not believe you would win popular support. My friend, you are not the young man I once knew, and quite honestly, feared.

“I suggests that you and I both align ourselves with another Senator, someone already strong enough to gaining the necessary support. Allow that person to present the measure. I have a few names I could suggest.

Outside Clanlord Mar’s estate, a servant opened the door to a silky black carriage as Lord Valance, Barnus and Whiting approached.

Lord Whiting sat forward as Valance and Barnus settled into their seats. The Carriage driver closed the door. A moment later they felt the jolt of motion.

"Three of the Clans will support any plan we put forward," Lord Whiting began.

Lord Valance took in the information as he tapped his foot impatiently.

"Three are middle ground, which means they won't go against their own. The other four are against us," Lord Barnus finished.

Valance sank further into the soft leather of his seat. "The Senate review will be difficult." He let out an exhausted breath.

His mind pulled back to the conversation with the Clan Lord Mar. It was political maneuvering at its finest. The Clans would spare no opportunity to reposition themselves with greater advantage. They’d agree to his plan but not to his leadership? Convenient.

He’d been foolish to assume political aspirations would’ve been set aside in light of the potential crisis. Foolish, yes, but he felt it was more than that. This was the first real attempt to exercise his influence in a great while. The first time he’d had to ask anyone for anything. The asking was bad enough, the result of that asking was horrid.

Twenty years ago no man would have dared directly oppose him the way the Clan Lord just had. Sure they might’ve talked in quiet corners, rallied numbers to mount an opposition, but they’d face him as a group.

This single man had called him weak to his face and simultaneously proved it at the same time.

How did this happen?

Going up against the Senate now seemed like a complete waste of time. Or worse, it could further expose his lack of influence. Those outside the inner circles of government may still respect and fear him. A public display of disrespect could destroy whatever standing he may have left. That would have a directly negative impact on his business dealings, and his ability to negotiate contracts and acquire more land at a favorable price.

If his plans were to be effective, he'd need to start putting things into place now. There was no time for this political battle. Couldn't Mar see he was trying to avoid catastrophe, the collapse of their society?

For now, he'd have to risk calling a hearing with the Senate. He should at least have that much influence left. In the mean time, he'd have to start putting together a plan to circumvent their authority. There had to be a way to get around them.

"We've received," Lord Barnus interrupted, "information that might be of relevance."

Valance continued tapping his foot, half listening.

"Someone came forward," Barnus continued, "albeit, asking for money, but seemed to have very specific information about the Token. He knew exactly what it looked like."

Valance looked up. His foot stopped.

Chapter 4

Raj pushed aside a pile of papers to make room on the small table for a plate of snack cakes he'd brought. The hospital room was so small it was hard to keep it from getting cluttered.

"Good morning. Sorry I'm a little late." He tidied up the rest of the table a bit.

"Emret?" He turned towards the unusually quiet hospital bed.

Empty!

That's odd, he thought. He didn't remember any scheduled appointments this morning. He peeked under the bed. Nothing. Was he really that distracted that he'd forget a doctor's appointment? Emret wouldn't take it well if he did.

He pushed open the bathroom door. Again nothing. Maybe they pulled him out to clean the room or change the bed sheets? He stopped at the nurses station down the hall where three plump ladies sat behind a high curved counter top, chatting. The one closest was covered in deep golden brown fur. She had long fluffy tufts on her cheeks and a shorter than typical Zoen nose that added to her overall roundness.

"Excuse me," he interrupted.

The one closest broke from her conversation and looked over at him, obviously annoyed. "Yes?"

"My son Emret isn't in his room. Could you tell me where he might be?"

"Emret? Let me check." She sorted through a stack of folders on the desk, stopped at one and pulled it out. After a quick glance at the pages she added, "his only appointment for today is later this evening. He should be there."

She put the folder back and smiled.

"Well, he isn't in there." He stared back at her, expecting her to make a little more effort in trying to figure out where he might be.

Instead, she folded her arms. "I'm sorry, I don't know where else he'd be."

"OK, which nurse is assigned to him right now?"

She looked up at a board on the wall with columns of names. "That would be Moslin, but..." She paused.

"But?" Raj said, raising his brow.

"She hasn't shown up for her shift yet." The nurse continued.

One of the other nurses sitting further down near the end of the station turned in her chair. "Oh, I was supposed to tell you that she was gonna come in late today. She had a church meeting."

"So who's covering her shift?" The nurse sitting in front of Handers asked.

"I told her I would." The nurse at the end answered.

"When was the last time you check on Emret?" Raj asked her.

She turned toward the board on the wall with the names and giggled. "Oh. I guess I didn't see him on her list."

The nurse in front of Raj suddenly looked confused, then concerned. She turned back to Raj.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Handers. Let me find out who saw him last and at what time."

"Did Moslin come in at all today?" Raj asked the nurse who was covering her shift.

"She did. She came in for a few minutes, just to grab a few things." She answered.

Raj took the card out of his wallet that Moslin had given him earlier. On the back was a schedule of services. Sure enough there was one mentioned this morning. Maybe she took him with her.

"Thank you ladies. I'll be back later."

"But Mr. Handers..." The nurse in front of him called after him.

He wound through the streets quickly, following the directions on the back of the card. He turned the last corner to find the ancient stone church rising up above him. Then his stomach sank as the realization hit him. Starting on each side of the church, a high stone wall stretched to the end of the block in both direction. The same high stone wall that he'd seen just a few nights before. The school grounds! This church sat on the back side of it. A sudden wave of anger flashed over him. What possible connection could the church and this school have with his son? With Moslin?

He wandered past the large stone columns of the Church's foyer and stopped beside the over sized double doors that led into the chapel. The pews were half filled with a sea of green Botan heads. A quiet, mostly Botan, congregation listened to an elderly Cleric who was offering his sermon.

Raj scanned the back of the crowd for Moslin. It was impossible to tell from behind. Botans, he thought in contempt, had too much natural camouflage. A fan of leafy green tendrils sprang out of the backs and heads of everyone there.

He moved quietly to the rear of the congregation and took a seat. His eyes moved over the crowd again. Nothing. Where was she? He thought. She had to be here. Nowhere else that made sense.

After the services concluded, the congregation filtered past him, allowing him to get a clear view of each face. The crowd flowed past him and started to thin, yet he still hadn't seen her. After the last of them passed, save a few who were still standing by the pews talking, it was clear that she wasn't there. How utterly frustrating, he thought! Where in the world had she taken him? He tried to release his clenched fist in an effort to temper his anger.

He made his way through the last lingering groups to the front where the Cleric who gave the sermon was still gathering his papers. He looked up as Raj approached.

"What can I do for you, my friend?" the Cleric asked.

"I'm sorry, this may seem a little out of place but... did you see a young Botan woman with an thirteen year old Zo boy in this morning service?" he asked.

"See? No. But we do keep records of our congregation. Why do you ask?"

Raj fidgeted with his shirt nervously. "My son is missing. I think that this woman... "

"I see." The Cleric put down his papers. "Do you know her name?"

"Moslin Verdu and my son's name is Emret."

The Cleric stared at him, his brow furrowed. "Moslin Verdu? You're sure?"

Raj explained, "She's my son's nurse. She invited me here earlier. I thought she might've brought my son."

"Might I suggest we continue this conversation somewhere a little more private?" The Cleric gestured towards a door in a nearby corner of the chapel.

The Cleric pulled open a heavy wooden door and led Raj into a small room. A young Botan girl, a few years younger than Emret, sat in a chair by the corner window, reading.

"Sinesh, could you wait in the hall for just a moment?" the Cleric asked the girl.

The small room was surrounded with bookshelves. In front of the shelves, as apparently there wasn't enough shelving, the books were piled on the floor. A large desk took up almost the rest of the space. There were two chairs crammed against each side of the desk.

Sinesh picked up her bag and the book she was reading and left.

"Thanks dear," the Cleric said with a smile.

Raj stood next to the empty chair but didn't sit. He was still fascinated by the intensity of the clutter.

"I take it, you know Moslin," he said without looking at the Cleric.

"Yes I do," the Cleric answered as he squeezed around his large desk and sat in his formal chair. "She's my daughter."

Raj stopped looking at the books in front of him and turned to the Cleric.

"Master Cleric Bedic Verdu," Cleric Bedic extended a hand of greeting.

Raj shook it. "Your daughter? I had no idea she was the... "

Bedic let out a grunt sort of laugh. "If you had would that've changed the way you spoke to her last night?"

Raj stared at him. "Excuse me?"

"She came by my home last night, upset. We had a nice conversation about what happened," Bedic explained.

"Listen, I like your daughter. She's been really kind to my son." He noticed a large book on a small waist high table next to a shelf. The cover of the book, partly covered in papers, appeared to be an illustration of something similar to the carving he found at the beach. He stepped towards the book.

"But at the same time she refuses to respect my wishes in some important areas regarding his care. As a parent, I can't tolerate that."

"Oh?" Bedic replied.

Raj slid the papers aside to reveal the full illustration on the cover of the book. It was an image of the carving. He was right! What would that be doing here? He wondered.

"She won't stop reading him a book that influences how he perceives his illness. It's deceptive and unfair. When he realizes it isn't true it's going to be incredibly destructive."

Bedic got up and scooted over to the book that had attracted Raj's attention.

"So you asked her to stop reading him the book, and in retaliation, she kidnapped your son? That's a pretty drastic reaction, don't you think?"

"I didn't say she kidnapped him. I... I can't find either of them. The other nurses said she came here this morning."

Bedic moved in to pick up the book, forcing Raj to back out of the way. Bedic continued to a nearby shelf and slid it into an empty spot.

"I sympathize with your situation. I can't imagine the panic you must feel, missing a child like this." He stepped to the door and opened it.

"I think in this case, your emotions are your enemy. You're grabbing whole heartedly to the first possibility that comes to mind. I suggest you go back and collect as many hard facts as possible. When my daughter returns from wherever she went to blow off steam from your argument, I'll have her contact you." He stepped out the door. "If you'll excuse me, I need to attend to my granddaughter. You remember the way out?"

Raj let out a frustrated sigh and followed him to the door. He supposed the old man was right. Perhaps he'd been a little quick in making his conclusions. It was a little early to know what happened. But at this point he sure could use some help. If Moslin had nothing to do with it, he'd bet she'd be willing to help look for him.

He watched Bedic and his granddaughter holding hands as they disappeared down the stone hallway. The image brought a wave of unpleasant emotion. What if he never saw his son again? What if he never got to hold his son's hand? He quickly pushed the thoughts from his mind. He'd find Emret. He had too. But... What then...

He watched Bedic and his granddaughter turn the corner, then glanced back at the open door to Bedic's office. That book! He didn't like thinking about the fact that he'd been seeing things mystically disappear and then reappear in front of him. What was it, a hallucination? Not a pleasant thought. There had to be some rational explanation. He slipped back into the room and over to the shelf where Bedic had put the book. With a quick scan, he located it and put it back onto the pedestal.

After a quick peek out the door to make sure he'd still be alone for a few more minutes, he hurried back to pedestal. On the way, his arm brushed past a sloppy stack of papers leaning precariously near the edge of the large desk. He turned in time to see them sliding off and made a

vain grab at them, but it was too late. They hit the ground with a loud smack.

He cursed under his breath and listened for a moment for any reaction outside the room. Nothing. He looked at the door then back at the book. The image of the carving was clear and unmistakable. What is this thing? He wondered as he traced his finger over it.

He flicked the cover open and flipped through the first couple of pages. Lots of small print. Then a full page illustration. He stopped. A beautifully executed pen and ink depiction of a small animal with bright red fur sitting in the underbrush of a thick pine forest. Next to it was a small plant with bright red branches and leaves. Below them was an area of bright red soil. Red was the only colored ink. A caption on the page labeled them as: *The Three Reds*.

He turned the page.

It was another illustration in simple pen and ink with accents of color. On one side, a person stood in the corner of the page holding the glowing white carving from the front cover. A brief description next to him described what he was holding as the Token.

Across the page from the person was the small plant with bright red leaves. Mountains and forests, drawn more as small icons, separated the person from the little plant.

Raj's vision blurred unexpectedly. A bout of nausea rose from his bowels. He thought he was passing out. Then as suddenly as the dizziness had come on, his head was clear again. Only he wasn't in the room looking at the book any more. He was standing in a pine forest holding the Token up in front of him.

Oh no, he thought. This wasn't good. A portion of the forest began to glow in the pattern of a path, starting where he stood and stretching out as far as he could see through the trees. In a jolting blur of motion, his feet lifted off the ground and he shot forward above highlighted path. He moved faster and faster until the individual trees turned to streaks. The forest ended abruptly, and his body crumpled with inertia as he he shot almost straight up, climbing above the jagged cliffs of a mountain range.

He crested a peak descended the other side as fast as he had climbed. At the base of the mountain, he hit the ground with a jarring impact and continued forward into another forest without pause. The trees blew by then abruptly stopped. The sudden lack of motion caused his head to spin. He fought urge to vomit. Below him the same little plant with the red leaves sat under the dense canopy.

As soon as he caught his breath, he was yanked backward, as though being sucked through a sheet of glass. Then he was back in the Cleric's office standing in front of the book. He stepped back from it.

This wasn't what he needed at all. He scooted to the door and stepped out. The hallway was still empty. He took a deep breath and cursed again. He doubted he'd have this chance again. He had to see if there was anything else that'd be useful.

He returned to the book, leaned in and very delicately turned the page.

What looked like a giant inkblot filled almost the entire left page. Armies of Zo, Bota, and Petra filled the bottom of both pages like ants swarming around a much larger animal. The inkblot appeared to be some sort of creature that was attacking the tiny armies, thrashing its black arms and tail.

In the middle of the army, one man stood apart. He was drawn much larger than the rest and was holding a glowing white Token in his outstretched hand.

Raj's vision blurred, and he fell forward. He caught his balance and looked up. He was in an open field of heavily trampled grass. So much dust had been kicked up that it clouded out the horizon. Again he was holding the Token in front of him. Zo soldiers ran frantically past the side of him, fleeing from an unseen danger. He turned as a black mass struck with impossible force, toppling the fleeing soldiers into the air. The ground trembled, and the explosion hurt his ears. The sky filled with their bodies twisting and turning. Horror trembled down his spine as he saw their faces and heard their screams.

Raj tried to turn away from the looming black mass but his body refused to obey. He followed its form up into the sky, looking for its top but could see nothing but black above him.

From the left, a piece of it shot out and came down towards him. His arm held the Token up to it as though it were some kind of weapon. The creature's appendage bore down at an incredible speed then twisted backward in a deafening collision. The Token's glow had grown to a blinding glare. The appendage seemed to have collided with that glare, with the aura of light emanating from it.

Raj's head spun; he felt the same sensation of falling backward through a plane of glass. Then he was back in the room again standing over the book.

Raj stepped back again, then just stared at the book for a moment, trying to grasp the significance of what he had just seen. He felt like he

wanted to throw up. It just didn't make any sense. None of it. There had to be more of an explanation.

On the bottom of the page a caption read: *His Prison Wrent Marks Judgment Nigh.*

He turned another page.

The man with the Token was now wearing a glowing white royal crown. The massive black creature appeared to be attacking from the left. This time he was holding up a glowing white sword and a shield in defense instead of the Token. Behind him, the little red plant and the animal sat on a spot of red ground. The man appeared to be protecting them.

A caption read: *A Protector Delivers Whom Mercy Claims.*

He turned the page quickly before anything happened.

The small white sword that the man had been carrying was now a shaft of light shooting into the sky from its hilt. The shaft of light seemed to be cutting through an appendage of the black creature.

Raj turned the page quickly.

The drawing showed a destroyed landscape. Crops burned, earth scorched. Nothing lived. In the center of the blackened landscape sat the red plant and animal on the spot of red earth. Unharmed.

A caption read: *From Death's Ashes New Life Springs. What Fire Burned Red Will Heal.*

"What is this fascination with that book, if I might ask?" Bedic's voice startled him. He hadn't heard the sneaky old man come in.

"Oh, I'm sorry, I..." Raj tried to explain. He shut the book and stepped back.

Bedic stood in the doorway staring at him with an amused grin. "You know this book is a compilation of many of same stories that you yelled at my daughter for reading to your son. I'm having trouble understanding your obsession."

"What is this book? Where did it come from?"

Bedic walked to the pedestal. "Its called the book of Healing. It came to me as an inheritance."

"The book of Healing?" Raj asked.

"Tell me something Mr. Handers, here you are digging through one of my most valuable books, causing who knows what kind of damage, and I delay calling to have you thrown out in order to save you some embarrassment, yet you linger. Is there a reason you're still here talking to me?"

Raj pushed past him to get to the door. He heard the old man take a deep, pensive breath behind him as he left the room.

"Mr. Handers." Bedic called from behind.

Raj turned to see that Bedic had followed him into the hallway.

"I've been thinking since our conversation. As I said, my daughter came by last night rather upset. You had quite an effect on her, it would seem. Something she said before she left has planted a seed of doubt in my mind."

Raj stared at him.

"She asked me if the stories I told her as a child were true. I couldn't figure out why in the world she'd bring that up. But now in the context of your son's illness and sudden disappearance, the explanation looks troubling."

Raj stepped towards him. "What do you mean? What stories?"

"The only other time she's asked me that question she was about three weeks away from losing her oldest daughter to a horrible disease. So you can appreciate the kind of mind-set she was in at the time."

"She lost a child? I... She never told me."

"Well, we don't talk about it either. Not directly. Instead, she brings up these stories that I told her as a child. So here we are again only it's not her child this time. Its yours."

"What were these stories?" Raj asked.

"The same ones she's been reading to your son. Stories about healing."

Raj gave him an angered look. "Faith healing?"

"You have no idea, young man, where either of us has been. You'd be wise to keep your criticism to yourself. I have done everything in my power to help her get past this. But she seems intent on punishing herself to the bitter end."

"I thought you said she died of disease?" Raj questioned.

"Does it matter? The fact is her daughter died, and she couldn't prevent it. To her that was inexcusable." Bedic let out a frustrated sigh and shook his head. "She had completely unreasonable expectations of what she needed to do. If she'd just have been a little more daring, if she'd just had a little more... faith."

Raj glared at him. "That's exactly why I didn't want her reading those stories to my son!"

Bedic looked away. "If I'd have known it would've caused her so much guilt I never would've read her those stories myself."

"Where did she take my son?" Raj demanded.

"I told her the stories were figurative! Not to be taken literally! But, she wouldn't listen. She already had it in her head of what needed to be done. But when it came time to act she didn't have the guts to do it. Her

daughter died, and she saw it as a result of her cowardice." He whispered to himself, "It wasn't her fault..."

Raj rushed up to Bedic, grabbed him by the arms and shook him. "Where did she take my son?"

Bedic looked up to meet Raj's eyes. "This time it would seem she's found the courage. I believe she took your son to find Red Leaves... to be healed!"

"What?" Raj demanded.

"I told her when she was a little girl that 'Red Leaves' grew in the center of the old city."

"The old city?" He asked.

"Yes, in Shishkameen. That's what she meant when she asked if the stories were true. She was asking if 'Red Leaves' was real."

"And you told her yes?"

Bedic looked away and nodded slightly. Raj dropped him. His feet didn't hold, and he fell to the floor.

"I thought telling her the truth would do more harm than good. She's fragile." Bedic continued.

"She's going to feel pretty good when she finds out you lied to her," Raj stabbed.

His footsteps echoed down the stone hall as he stormed away.

Finally outside again, he hurried around the back wall of the school, wanting to return home and gather some things together as quickly as possible. But as he turned the corner to head back into the city he was stopped abruptly. A large stone archway blocked the walkway in front of him. "Not again!" he muttered to himself. This was enough to drive a person mad.

He took a deep breath and stepped around it. If he just closed his eyes and kept going, eventually he'd forget he saw it. But the images from the book and his previous encounters with the arches flooded into his mind, one after another, forcing him to remember. He opened his eyes and turned back. A pathway extended behind the archway now that he was on this side of it.

His eyes followed the path as it rose towards the mountains in the distance. As before, he could see the side of the mountain in extraordinary

detail even though it had to be hundreds of miles away. At the top of the path, he could see a white structure shimmering in the distant sunlight.

"Shishkameen is that way," Bedic's cracked old voice called with as much volume as it could manage from the school wall above him. He was pointing north towards the river while Raj was facing the mountain range due west.

Raj looked up at him. "Thanks."

Raj turned back to the Archway and pointed. "What's this?"

"What is what?" The old man asked.

Raj stared at the distant blue mountains and then back at Bedic, "Nothing."

"I would suggest you hurry before she gets too far ahead of you."

Bedic kept his arm up pointing towards the river.

"Yeah, thanks." He answered. "I know where the port is, old man," he muttered to himself as he crossed the street away from the archway and headed back into the city. He had to pack first anyway.

The Story Continues in Part 2

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