

## *The Last Expedition*

The rundown theatre known as the Auditory, located on the center of the Institute campus, is abuzz with the drone of chatter. Among the crowd are a number of students gathered to see Honorary Professor Tobias Reaves give his lecture on the last expedition sent to the Old City. Without any formal introduction, the middle-aged, silver-haired man walks slowly towards the front of the Auditory's stage to take his place. Each step is accompanied by the crack of a wooden cane on old wooden flooring.

Upon taking his place in the front, the loud hum of voices quiets and Professor Reaves stands still. His cane is placed in front of him, hand folded over hand as he leans against the cane. He takes a few glances to either side of the audience.

“I best guess y'all are here to hear me talk about the expedition, huh? I know many of you are here just to skip your afternoon training classes and get credit towards your lectures; and I know as many of you are honestly interested in my stories. Well, I thank y'all either way for coming today and showing me your respects, though I don't necessarily know I am deserving of it.

“If you didn't already know, my name is Tobias Reaves. I'm one of the head trainers up at the Talker Corp in the little town just over the mountain from here, Union Station. We're about a few hours walk from here but,” Professor Reaves nods at his cane, “I might move a little slower than most folks. Those of you that aren't already from Union, feel free to come visit us some time. And don't let the fancy title fool you. They only considered me important 'cause I was there when something important happened. And I ain't a 'professor' by any means, but the Institute felt they had to call me something.

“Since I reckon y’all may not know much about us Talkers since we train in a separate school over in Union, I’ll let you know a little about what I do. I train them new kids to talk between themselves using their minds and we make new Chains between them so we can communicate longer distances. I can be in one place, and my Link, the other Talker that I am mentally communicated with, he can be in a complete different place miles and miles away and we’ll still be able to talk with each other. In fact, why don’t y’all say ‘hello’ to my Link, Callum.”

With a blink, Tobias’ left eye turns green and the ghostly echo of another voice comes from his mouth. The diction, too clean and proper and the accent, not as harsh.

*“Greetings, students. Hope you all are doing well and enjoying Tobias’ story,”* the voice called out. The students close enough to see the physical change shuddered back in their seats, fearful because they had never seen a Talker actually speak with their Link in person.

*“Okay, we’ve had our fun,”* Callum’s voice echoed from Professor Reaves’ mouth. *“I’ll speak with you later, Tobias.”* After a few moments, Reaves’ eye turns back to its natural blue and his voice regains its former draw.

“The Chairman, here at the Institute asked me to come here today and tell a bit about last time we went to the Old City and explored the ruins there. As you all know, we don’t often send teams out there. Too dangerous to venture into the wilderness outside of the towns anymore. But the Institute gave me and a few others a bit of a mission to go and see what we could find and report it back. Even twenty and some odd years after the expedition, I ain’t quite sure why they sent me along, other than that I was the only Talker that wasn’t still in the Corp back then. We were a bunch of kids manifesting a new

ability back then. Not like you kids here. There's been Lights and Strong-Minds and Sparks like yourselves for nearly a century now."

A young girl near the front, tiny in stature and dressed in a proper white uniform, pops her hand into the air with eagerness and curiosity of a brand new student, "Professor Reaves, do you know more about how the Red Bloods came to be?"

Some of the older looking students around her chuckle and mock her for not knowing this answer to a seemingly basic question. Professor Reaves quickly interrupts their mockery and answers the girl. "Yes, little lady," Reaves tries to raise the girl's esteem with a complement. "Actually, I consider myself quite lucky to have a few stories from my grandparents still rattling around in my head from my childhood. My grandfather told me some stories he'd heard from his grandfather. See, he'd actually been a young man back when our kind started turning up. He was told all these legends about the Old Country. About how they disappeared overnight or how the people who were still alive back then were a bunch of savages fighting for food and water and burning down all the old places people used to live."

The same little girl who asked the question has a look of shock and confusion on her face as she takes in the graphic details but Professor Reaves continues on.

"Now don't be so upset hearing how things were back then. It wasn't some pretty picture, but if it weren't for all that savagery, we'd never started manifesting all these abilities that help us so much today. In fact," Professor Reaves points out a large burly man sitting near the front, wearing a uniform like the little girl, but in black. "It's because of all that savagery that ones like you Strong-Minds even exist. All that primal instinct coming back out of people started making us bring out little aspects of ourselves that I

suppose the Old Country had suppressed over time. Anyways,” Professor Reaves nods to the girl, “I thank you for your question, sweetheart.”

“Well now that I right scared you new kids and let y’all into our not-so-civilized beginnings, I guess we should get along to talking about the expedition. The Institute saw fit that sending a smaller party this time would be best. Like I said, they sent myself, but they also sent along a big brute of a Strong-Mind named Stephen. He was a mighty young fellow, but stronger than any of the overgrown bears you’ll find in the wilds outside town. They also sent a pretty little lady named Etta. She was a well-trained Light, studied here in Haynesville, and she looked a bit like the little gal here in front, probably just as curious too. They even sent along another fellow to take hold of all the artifacts or record the information we came across. Never did figure out what was so special about him.

“I still remember those days. Whole expedition only took a week, though I suspect it’d have taken longer if we’d not stumbled upon something so important. I figure we got so antsy to get back with the Lineage documents that we couldn’t sit around another four days with just me to communicate back to the Institute. Callum was back here acting as our Chain. Back then they really only had the two of us at the Corp, and since we lived in the same area, they figured they’d send one of us away, just to put our abilities to use.

“Well, we set out just a few weeks before the harvest season. I remember the weather being awful nice. No storms or nothing during our journey. Only took us a few days to get there on foot; ‘A week’s journey towards the sunrise’, as they like to say. I

figure the other teams that went those few times before us must've been moving pretty slow.

“Now when we got there, it was unlike anything I'd ever seen. We'd topped the last hill just before seeing the Old City. And there before us, she lie in ruin. Buildings of shiny marble were crumbled and collapsed in places. Others were as intact as they were a couple centuries ago, before the city was deserted or abandoned.”

Another student in the fourth row, interrupts, yelling out to Reaves, “Do we know what happened? What left the Old Country deserted? Why was the Old City abandoned?”

Professor Reaves pointed out to the student with his hands still clasped over the cane. “Not exactly, but I thank you. Most we can figure is that there were two groups. You should know from your Lineage studies that we are descendants of the Red Bloods, and there was another group, that we called the Blue Bloods. These two sides remained at peace for a long, long time; hundreds of years, in fact.

“But it seems at some point, these two sides became enemies and eventually broke out into war that left the entire country destroyed. Some say they were an advanced people, but we see little evidence of this, besides the size of the ruins of the Old City. That led us to think that these people did something to destroy all the technology they had. Seems they couldn't survive without it. We don't know exactly how many died because of that, but considering the small size of our town here and how widespread the few other cities we know of are, I'd say it was a pretty big disaster. Best we can figure is that we might be but a tiniest fraction of the population of our ancestors. Thanks for the question,” Tobias paused for a moment, deep in thought, “Now where was I?”

“Oh yes, the things we saw when we got to the Old City. Well, somehow we’d got turned around a bit on our trek there, so we came in from the southern side of the city, rather than the southeastern where we’d planned. Needless to say, we felt lost when we made our way into the city. We were seeing things the other teams had never seen before. Most of the land on the outskirts of town was leveled with overgrown foundations of where buildings used to sit. Outlines of roads, everywhere, so travelling into town wasn’t all that hard, save for the river we had to cross to get in.

“There before the area we were supposed to head to, were wide stretches of flat land, and the rivers were at their widest. We headed north to find where a large structure with five walls once stood. That place was plain huge, obviously important, but we’ve yet to send an expedition to that area for observation and research. So, who knows what we’ll find there. To get to where we were headed, we needed to cross over what was left of an old bridge, and let me tell you, we didn’t just walk into the city. We had to carefully climb over the pieces of that rickety old bridge. I remember Stephen, the thick-bodied brute of a man that had been sent on the trip, having to carry Etta over on his back because she had such a tiny little thing.

“We almost had a bit of a tragedy too, if it weren’t for Stephen. See, as we were crossing over, Etta slipped from Stephen’s back and began to fall. I remember hearing her scream behind me, and as I turned around, I saw her falling down to the waters and rocks below the bridge. I was froze in absolute terror when I noticed she had stopped falling and was hanging in the air. I looked up and saw Stephen with his arm outstretched to her. He had been keen enough to think quickly and focus on catching her.

“We were lucky we had him. Only a Strong-Mind like Stephen would have been able to wrap their focus around Etta and catch her from an otherwise fatal end. I stared at Etta as she slowly floated back up into Stephen’s reach and as soon as she could touch him, she wrapped her arms tight around him, might have even seen her give him a peck on the cheek. Rightfully deserved for saving her life, if you ask me.

“When we made it across, we first stopped for shelter in an overgrown round building made of marble, and what was inside shocked us. A large statue of a man stood before us in bronze. *‘All men created equal.’* and *‘I have sworn upon the altar of God eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man.’* We didn’t know what these words meant, but thankfully, one of our team was smart enough to write down what they could of the text on the damaged stone walls.

“We spent the night in that small temple to the man. The gentleman who took the notes and I sat and discussed if we felt the bronze man was some king of the Old Country, or a great mind. Etta and Stephen must’ve taken a liking to each other after the incident on the bridge, because much of the night I remember hearing Etta’s tiny voice echoing through the temple, telling stories to Stephen. I sat and just watched as the both of them exchanged old stories from training at the Institute and before long I fell asleep at the foot of that statue.

“Waking up the next morning, we crossed a smaller bridge to get us off the island in the river that the small temple was on, and over to the land we knew we were sent to explore. It wasn’t long before we came to an open field full of ruins of the Old Country. Before us was the remains of a giant marble monolith. The pillar must’ve stood higher ‘cause next to the taller of the two halves, the pointed upper half was speared into the

ground nearby. It had broken and toppled over and left the rusted metal core of the inside standing where it once was.

“On the left, there as another temple-like building, not round like the first, but much larger. Out of the things we saw, we explored this one first. The building must have been one large room before, but the ceiling had collapsed and left the outer pillars as the only things standing. Words like ‘Dakota’ and ‘Nebraska’ were etched into those chunks of the ceiling. Names we think. Though names of what, we ain’t really sure. But the greatest thing of this temple was the statue of the great king seated on the throne overlooking the Old City. It was clear he was important, a great king of the Old Country. Seems the Red Bloods might even descend from him directly, something we are mighty proud to discover.

“Surrounding him were just a few remaining walls of important writing. The rest had crumbled in. I remember some of the lines about him on a tablet behind him, ‘*In this Temple as in the hearts of the people for whom he saved the Union*’. We don’t know what exactly, but he did something great to reunite the Old Country the first time the people had separated. And the people built his great temple to remember him and to keep him watching over them. Ironic how he still sits there now, after watching the Old City be destroyed and abandoned after he had worked to reunite them.

“As we were leaving the temple, we saw something we hadn’t noticed on our walk toward the temple of the great king. Between where the monolith and the temple was large rectangular hole just beneath the pond of water that had collected in front of the temple. The rectangle was too perfect to be part of the pond, maybe the water was lower



when the Old City was in its prime. Just a couple miles past the monolith stood this massive white marble temple, even larger than the one we were standing in front of.

“So we moved as fast as we could to get there and stood in awe when we got there. Being a bunch of young ones, sent to a city we’d only heard about back when the Old City was just some people in some fairy tale stories our parents told us, most of which we’d figured up as legends, you can imagine we were pretty stunned at anything we came across.

“We only did a little exploring in that Great Temple. At least two of the previous teams had led expeditions there, so we already knew a good bit about the place. It wasn’t hard to miss. All marble on the outside and a half-collapsed dome in the center of the roof. Old expeditions had found rooms full of statues of men and women who were important to the Old Country. The two buildings on the sides seemed to be there for the Old Country to choose kings and make laws. We stayed only long enough to see the place for ourselves.

“Our final stop for the day ended up being our last stop for the entire expedition. We had a lead from the previous expedition about a building we thought to be an archive of the Old Country. They weren’t able to get in and explore the place, but we were under direct orders to find anything we could in the building. If you’ve been paying attention to your Lineage studies, then you know we did, in fact, find something.

“It only took Stephen an hour or so to clear out the chunks of heavy rubble in front of the doors that got us inside the main chamber. When we got inside there were large remains of old paintings of people gathering hung high on the walls. We made our way over to the far side of the room to find these glass panels that had nothing under

them but chutes that went down several feet into darkness. Etta came over and popped an orb of light from her hand and shined it down through the glass. We saw something in the bottom of the chute. At first, we thought there was no way to break through that thick glass but Stephen put his fist right through that glass panel and cleared the way for Etta to climb down. Personally, I think Stephen was just trying to impress her since they'd been awful sweet on each other most of the trip. He could have just ripped the glass panels from the marble case, but instead the brute had to make a show out of it just for her.

“Anyways, Etta hopped into that first chute and slid down. I remember seeing a point of light moving around down at the bottom as Etta was lighting her way around down there. She came back out a few minutes later with an old torn document while Stephen was off to himself cursing the pain in his hand from punching the glass.

“While Etta climbed down the second chute, I linked up with Callum, who was back here at the Institute waiting to hear back from us. And I began to read the document through him to the researchers who were listening in. ‘*We find these truths to be self-evident... that all men are created equal*’. We both just froze. That worn piece of paper was important. Very, very important. Today we of course call that document the Lineage because it was the first in the series of old documents and fragments of Old Country relic that allows us to start piecing together the history of Old Country and how they worked and lived. Since then we've found lists of old Kings and lists of laws. Even the second piece of paper Etta came back up with ended being a list of rights that each citizen of the Old Country had just for living there.

“A bunch of twenty-something young adults discovering what we knew would change everything. We were excited, to say the least. We planned on leaving the next day

to come back to the Institute to being research on these documents we'd found. But that night before we left, I couldn't sleep. The buzz of an important discovery bounced around in my head. I was trying to figure it all out. I decided to take a walk out into the dark streets of the Old City. The High Moon was out, so I didn't bother asking Etta to come along and provide some light.

“I found my way back to that monolith that had collapsed into the ground and decided to take a look around and meditate a bit. I walked around the place where the top had pierced the ground. After a few laps, something caught my eye. I walked underneath the leaning pillar and began to dig at the ground below. I was too curious to be afraid of that pillar falling over and crushing me, or any number of other terrible things like the packs of wild animals that could be running around the city at night. I dug down about four or five feet along a rusted metal pipe when I saw something of an interesting color. I pulled and pulled and it finally tore free, leaving me with a small cloth about the size of my hand. Two red stripes with a white stripe. I figured it was an old Red Blood banner from the Old Country in its prime, or at least a piece of one.”

Professor Reaves stands quiet for a moment too long, surveying the gathering of students and the line of guardsmen in front of him. The audience grows uncomfortable in the silence, confused at why Reavess isn't continuing the lecture. He begins to shuffle one of his hands into the inside of his jacket, looking for something.

“And if you can keep a secret,” Professor Reaves whispers, breaking the silence as he looks back up into the crowd. A knowing smirk grows across his face. He pulls the same cloth he'd just described out of his jacket and holds it up to the crowd in one hand. Gasps and shock fill the room, sending the Auditory back into a clamor. At that same

moment, the group of men at the front of the stage step up to Professor Reaves and whisper in his ear before ushering him away. A balding grey-haired man in a black suit steps to the front and hushes the crowd, "Let's thank Professor Reaves for coming and speaking today." His voice is concerned and he tries to start an applause, but the room is too distracted by the sight of the relic to pay any attention.

The suited man rushes into the hallway where the other men have Professor Reaves seated on a bench.

"You've been keeping secrets."