

CHAPTER 2

A gust of wind rushed through the tent and scattered the papers on Holt's desk. He cursed and snatched the fallen parchment from the frozen canvas. Even the paperwork proved difficult.

Kesoto thirsted for iron, gold, and silver; these mines quenched the country's demand if only Holt figured out how to deal with the Teque.

After twenty years trudging his way through the ranks, he had a chance to shine, to stand out as a leader, to secure his place in the People's Army; instead the failure weighed on him like a drowning man in a raging ocean.

Holt smothered his face in his hands. *This should have been a simple task. How could anybody expect this much resistance?* Nothing stymied the Teque. If Holt deployed soldiers to guard critical locations, another squad found their tents under siege by fire-tipped arrows. When he left a target undefended as bait, they'd ignore the trap and strike a secured section of camp; a few volleys of arrows riled the guards, before the attackers fled back into the wilds. His men used to pursue the cowards, but without fail a different group of Teque took advantage of the disorder and struck the now soft target. Each attack left Holt angrier than the ones before.

Aers will have my head for this.

"Commander."

Holt lifted his head and turned to face the soldier standing in his tent's entryway. The canvas flaps snapped under the howling wind, and Holt wasn't interested in giving the merciless cold any further opportunities to torment him. Holt waved the soldier in. "Make sure you close the tent; I don't want any more wind getting in here. You better have good news, soldier."

The soldier paused just long enough to secure the tent's entrance from the unyielding wind. "We captured a Teque who took part in the mine attack yesterday. He's being prepared for interrogation now. Do you want us to wait for you before we question him?"

Holt shuddered. The attack left an iron mine as nothing but rubble. At least a half-dozen soldiers were dead, another ten injured, and nobody had the slightest idea how many of the miners fled or lay buried under rock. It

would be months, under the most optimistic scenario, before the mine opened again. Unless Holt pulled workers from their current tasks, forcing production to suffer even further, the delays only grew worse. Holt still hadn't slept since yesterday and the vein on his neck bulged.

Capturing one of the Teque responsible for the decimation wouldn't restore the mine. This wouldn't bring back the soldiers he lost. Aers wouldn't care and one prisoner wouldn't save Holt's hide. Torturing this man would quench Holt's bloodlust though; that was enough for today. He and his soldiers wanted vengeance; Holt was happy to deliver retribution.

"You can start without me. I'll be there shortly."

"Yes, Commander." The messenger turned to exit.

"Make sure he stays conscious."

The soldier turned back to Holt from the tent's entryway. "Yes, Commander." He resealed the tent leaving Holt alone with his reports.

Lucas stared at the razed fields from atop Smokedust. *How did Holt screw up this badly? He can't even secure food for his men and he's in charge of the entire operation?* Lucas shook his head in disbelief while Smokedust trotted past the ashen fields and mounds of snow. The cold cut to Lucas's teeth, but at least the rest of his body was warm. Thick gloves crept halfway to Lucas's elbows and his pants were tucked in leather boots. A thick fur-lined cloak, the same pitch black as the rest of his clothes, trapped the little warmth.

When the camp's main gates peeked from around a low hill Lucas swallowed the lump in his throat. Two soldiers barred the camp gates, both wearing frowns and glaring at the man perched on the coal-black warhorse. Besides their frowns both guards had the typical tanned-leather uniform, and each had a long sword at his hip protected in plain leather scabbards. The soldier on the left welcomed Lucas by turning his head and spitting into the snow. As the mucus-filled liquid splashed in the snow, he turned back and sneered. "Secure area," he said. "Get lost." His partner slid his hand across his body and rested it on the hilt of his sword.

"I'm Captain Lucas Uzual. I'm here under orders from General Aers." Neither guard reacted. Lucas fished in his saddlebag and retrieved a crisp white envelope sealed with bright red wax. He extended the envelope to the soldiers barring his path. "I'm here to see Commander Holt. I'd prefer you don't keep me waiting."

The soldier on the left snatched the envelope and examined the crisp parchment for a few seconds before turning to his partner. "You recognize this?"

The partner shook his head. He twisted his neck and spat into the snow. "Nope. Who you from again?"

“General Francis Aers. I have urgent business with Commander Holt. I need to see him immediately.”

The guards shared another glance. “Let him through,” the soldier on the left said as he returned Lucas’s envelope. “The commander will decide what to do with him.”

The partner crossed his arms. “How do we know he’s not with *them*?”

“You think the Teque got a horse like that?” the first soldier asked as he waved his arm at Smokedust. “Or a cloak like that one? They don’t look nothing like him.”

The second soldier still glared, but he pushed the heavy oak gate open enough to clear Lucas’s path. “Go on then,” he warned with a groan, “before we change our minds.” Lucas squeezed Smokedust’s sides and the horse trotted through the narrow gap in the gate into the camp.

Every military base Lucas had ever visited was similar. Small tents, many with small fires burning outside, dotted the camp. Larger tents stored food, weapons, and other supplies. The camp’s senior officer, Holt, would be somewhere near the center of everything. Lucas steered Smokedust toward the middle of camp.

Soldiers glared at the stranger in their midst and glanced over their shoulders. Every man wore with armor and sword. Dismal scowls and frowns painted faces. Soldiers in tiny groups with hushed voices hunched over bowls of pale gruel. General Aers told Lucas the operation was not going well; morale was crumbling. Lucas tasted the bitterness hanging in the air. The aura permeating the camp was impossible to miss.

Lucas swung from Smokedust and wrapped the reins around a small tree. He gave the reins a sharp tug but, the branch held firm. Lucas fetched the envelope back from the saddlebag and pushed his way inside Holt’s tent.

“Commander Holt I presume?”

Holt sighed and bowed his head. He turned to face his new annoyance. “I don’t recall inviting you into my tent. Who do you—”

“Captain Lucas Uzual. General Aers sent me.” Leaving the tent open, Lucas walked to Holt and presented the envelope. “I trust you’ll find everything is in order.”

The parchment snapped as Holt snatched the envelope from Lucas. He lifted the envelope and stared at the bright red seal. His pink cheeks turned white and the rage fled from his eyes. “You’re a...”

Lucas fought back a smirk. *He recognizes the seal.* “I’m an Thunder God, yes.”

Holt sucked in fresh air broke the seal. The crisp parchment was silent as he it free from its envelope. Holt’s eyes darted across the page as his cheeks

returned to their natural pink, followed by a deep crimson matching the broken Thunder God seal. "The general sent you to check on me," Holt stammered. "Things haven't gone according to schedule but—"

"General Aers sent me to observe your progress here. Your failure is unacceptable; my job is to ensure you have everything under control. General Aers's letter is rather detailed."

"I'm sorry, *Captain*, but you can tell General Aers—"

"With all due respect, *Commander*." Lucas paused as the temperature drop several degrees. "This wasn't a request. I'm an emissary of General Aers, speaking on his behalf and with his full authority." Lucas took a step toward the sitting commander and stared into the senior officer's eyes. "If it's all the same to you, *Commander*, I'll review your status and decide for myself what I'll be telling General Aers."

Holt face grew redder with each syllable crossing Lucas's lips. Holt's heart thundered in his chest as the trickle of rage grew to a raging river. "Very well," Holt oozed through clenched teeth. "What do you want to know?"

"Let's start with the razed pastures I passed on my way to camp. How are you feeding anybody without the fields? Shipments from Viktorsburg were supposed to be a temporary solution, but without your own source of food I don't know how we can stop sending you supplies. You're aware we need to keep our own stores in the capital?"

"There have been... complications," Holt grumbled.

"I'm aware of the guerrillas you've been dealing with. Why haven't you solved the problem?"

Uncomfortable silence filled the tent as the canvas walls bucked and bowed against the wind. "We're making progress. The number of attacks have been decreasing."

"When was the last attack?"

"Yesterday."

"What happened?"

"They burned some of our food stores and—"

"The fields I passed? That happened only yesterday?"

"No." Holt cleared his throat as paused. "The Teque razed a tent on the edge of camp."

The tension in the tent grew thick enough to choke Smokedust. "How did they reach your stores?" Lucas demanded. "What happened your sentries? Are they capable of defending a military encampment?"

Holt sighed. "Some Teque set off explosions in one of our mines. They distracted guards and used the window to attack. My—"

"How did they set off explosions in a mine?" *This is a complete disaster.*

Holt's voice quieted enough it was almost drowned out by the wind. "We think they stole some barrels of oil. The camp—"

"Stole barrels of oil from where? There's a shortage in Viktorsburg, and I don't remember any shipments on the manifests I reviewed."

"I don't know."

Lucas closed his eyes and rested his index and middle fingers on his forehead. "When will your workers have the mine operational again?"

"Two months... at the earliest. The Teque—"

"I wasn't expecting anything this... interesting." Lucas raised his head and resumed staring at Holt. "Is there anything positive you can share?"

"We managed to capture one of the terrorists behind the mine attack. He's being interrogated now."

"Take me to the prisoner."

Holt held the tent open for Lucas. Two soldiers stood over another man Lucas assumed was the prisoner. Coarse rope bound the prisoner's wrists and ankles, turning red as he pulled against his bindings. He was helpless before his tormentors, one of whom delivered a solid kick to the restrained man's face. Blood soaked the rag stuffed in his mouth and an obvious broken nose dripped blood. Thick, black hair soaked with sweat fell in his face. His left eye was already swollen shut. Bruises covered his face, ugly crimson marks staining his olive skin. Purple blotches peeked through filthy, moth-eaten rags; the clothes were unfit for any civilized person.

"Get him up," Lucas ordered.

The guard who delivered the previous kick glared at the strange man. "Who the—"

"Do it!" spat Holt. "When he gives an order," nodding toward Lucas, "assume it came from me."

With one last defiant pause the soldiers jerked their prisoner to his feet. They were rougher than necessary, not that it was worth dealing with at the moment, and the prisoner winced at the sudden movement; he contained any cry of pain instinct would force him to emit.

All eyes remained on Lucas as he found a small stool in the corner and carried it to the prisoner. "Please sit down."

The prisoner responded by charging Lucas, but was held back by his tormentors.

Even captured and beaten he refuses to surrender. "It's up to you," Lucas said with a shrug of his shoulders. "You'll be more comfortable sitting."

The prisoner's eyes fired daggers through Lucas.

Given the chance, he'd kill everybody in this tent without hesitation. "I'm going

to remove your gag," Lucas explained. "I want to ask you some questions. Nobody will hit you again." He looked over his shoulder to make sure Holt understood. Lucas pulled the bloody rags from the prisoner's mouth. "What's your name?"

He spat in Lucas's face; the wad of phlegm, more blood than saliva, landed on Lucas's left cheek with a squelch. "Do what you will! I serve Zhēnzhǔ. Is honor to die in his service!"

Lucas wiped the bloody fluid off his cheek with the back of his glove, the red lost in the deep black of the leather. "I'm an official representative of Kesoto's Leadership Council," he explained. "I only a few questions and you'll be free to go. Can we start with your name?"

Holt stepped forward. "You, you can't just let him go! This is the first time we've caught one of these animals alive! They usually kill themselves before we can capture them, and this is the first chance we have to interrogate a Teque. If you let him go, we'll lose the—"

"I not fear you!" the prisoner screamed. "Die for Zhēnzhǔ is honor!"

Lucas sighed and turned his gaze to Holt. "He's willing to die for his god. Can you do anything to change that? I need information so I can fix this problem for you. Be quiet and watch." Holt's face turned a brilliant scarlet as Lucas returned his attention to the bound man before him. "My name is Lucas Uzual. May I have your name?"

The prisoner spit in Lucas's face again.

Lucas wiped spit from his face for the second time. "I'd like to resolve this peacefully. I have the power to solve any problems you have with my country, all we need to do is talk." Lucas waited, but no spit flew to his face this time. "Can you speak on behalf the men you're working with?"

"We *never* have peace with you. Zhēnzhǔ order us kill his enemy. Your cities will burn. Your people will choke their blood. You will *beg* for the death!" He spat in Lucas's face for the third time.

Lucas wiped away the spit. He shifted his gaze to a small table in the tent. A dagger rested on top, its blade chipped and dotted with rust. Lucas lifted the dagger, checking its weight. "Is this his?"

One soldier holding the prisoner nodded. "He cut up one of the men who caught him real good. He's lucky we bothered keeping him alive."

Lucas returned to the bound prisoner. "You're free to go." Lucas knelt and used the dagger to cut the rope binding the Teque's feet together. "I'll escort you outside camp."

Holt stepped forward. "Why are you releasing him? He destroyed one of our mines!"

"Why did your guards give him the chance?" Even the winds seemed to

cease as the tent became silent. All attention was on Lucas and Holt. "I asked you a question, Commander, and I expect an answer."

"My... my guards are spread thin. You can't expect—"

"When a badger gets in a coop and eats the chickens, you don't blame the badger. Animals follow their nature, and men like this are no different. Killing one badger doesn't keep another from attacking the chickens later, and killing our friend here won't stop future attacks against us. It's the responsibility of the dog to protect the chickens *before* the badger gets a chance to butcher them, and it's the duty of the farmer to train the dogs. If your guards are spread too thin it's your responsibility, *your obligation*, to fix the problem."

Lucas back to the terrorist, ignoring the inferno of rage erupting from Holt. "I'm showing our guest that the people of Kesoto only want peace and to leave the violence and destruction behind us. Make sure your men know not to disturb us." Holding the prisoner's dagger in his right hand, Lucas slipped his left under the prisoner's arm and escorted him through the tent's entrance.

"This won't save you!" hissed Lucas's companion as he stumbled over a rock. "We kill everyone you know, everyone you love!"

Lucas ignored the threats and continued toward the camp gates. Soldier after soldier stared in anger, horror, and shock as they watched their prize slip away. "Are you familiar with the large hill to the west? It's maybe two hours from here at a brisk walk?"

The question caught the man off guard. "That hill—"

"I'll be there tomorrow at midday, alone." Lucas paused as the two men passed through the camp's gate, then turned to face his companion for the first time since the interrogation tent. "You're free to go, but please tell whatever leaders you have where I'll be. I'm hoping whoever gives you orders will be more open to discussing peace than you are."

"This will not save you, Lucas Uzual! We spill your blood!"

Lucas lifted the dagger from the tent to face level, hesitated, then threw it into the blanket of snow smothering the clearing in front of the camp gates. "You can use the dagger to cut the ropes binding your hands. Please deliver my message." Ignoring the threats and taunts coming from the man beside him, Lucas turned and passed back through the gates into camp.