

## Revised Chapter 1: Blood and Dirt - Jacen's Point of View

Shackled, I walk. My eyes fixated upon the taunting red banner, swaying from the stick that the man in front of me is carrying so proudly. This banner, this dreadful banner, the symbol of my demise. Chains drag behind me on the coarse, barren earth. I stop briefly, only to hear the crack of a whip. My back bleeds, the cloths that cover me are stained red by the lashes that cover my body. Each step pulls me closer to my fate, but I must move forward. Do my legs betray me? It was but a fleeting thought as I trudge on, yet it still haunts me. I carry myself to my own death, one foot in front of the other, the wind whipping past-

"Hear ye... Hear ye!" The squire bellowed from atop the podium we approached. I continue to stumble forward as the crowd steps aside, forming a path, making way for their entertainment. What sick fools must you be to enjoy watching a man have his head lopped off? My death will be no more than a spectacle, an event for the ignorant. All of them oblivious to the evil who sits in front of them, high upon his iron throne with a belly full of wine and a mind clouded by drunken rage. The squire shuffled a bit uneasily once all eyes were upon him.

"The king would like to have a word now," he shouted. I watched as the king graciously lifted himself from his chair, so very nobly. What a hero he is. It's ironic; this big gluttonous bastard who does nothing but indulge his every desire is putting me to death for a single loaf of bread? Amused by that thought, I chuckled to myself, but as soon as I did, I felt an armored knee strike me in the leg, causing me to fall to my knees in front of the crowd. I looked across their faces, and they all looked back at me. Some looked on with anger, some with disgust, but not a single one seemed to have any sort of pity for the dead man before them.

"Here we have a man," the king slurs, "who thought it right to steal from you, the people of this good city." He raises his staff, proclaiming my fate, "And for that, he shall lose his head!" The crowd bursts into applause as if something wonderful was about to happen. It's odd, never did I expect my death to carry much significance, nor did I expect to be mourned by more than a handful, but it is unsettling to think that my death is not only accepted, but gleefully celebrated by many. The king, seemingly proud of himself, smirks and staggers back into his chair where he sits oh so smugly. All of these people were so quick to brand me as a thief, using that sentiment to strip my life of any value. They don't care about the bakery I stole from, nor the minuscule amount of goods that I stole, they just want to morally justify themselves as they play God. Little do they know, if I didn't steal that loaf of bread I would've starved... I'd die either way; I suppose it is better to do so on a full stomach.

"Off with his head!" shouts the king. The executioner readied his blade, donning black leather gloves and a mask. I looked up into the eyes of my killer, eyes which were as black as coal; his gaze was cold and empty, like I was staring into a void, but something within the void stared back at me. This was death himself. I hung my head as I was locked into the pillory, feeling the rough wood around my neck and wrists; a bag was placed over my head. Perhaps so they feel a little better about murdering a man? Hm... I pray, readying myself to meet my fate. The executioner raised his blade, ready to strike me down in cold blood, but just as he was about to

swing, he stopped. He turned his head and stood still for a moment. The crowd murmured amongst themselves as they grew impatient, but the king stood and shushed them as he tried to listen as well. There I heard it, a low rumble in the distance, but it grew louder by the second.

The king looked at his men with wide eyes, "Find our soldiers," he said in a shaky voice to the guard standing beside me. Was he afraid? I think the guard sensed the urgency in his demeanor as he dropped that banner he had held so high moments ago, running off the stage.

The low rumble that we heard before now sounded like thunder. Hooves pounded the dirt as hundreds of men on horseback appeared over the horizon.

"Get... GET TO YOUR STATIONS," shouted the king as he stumbled backward, trying to retreat to his quarters. "MAN THE WALL, READY OUR WEAPONS, PREPARE OUR DEFENSE—" He was cut off mid-sentence by an arrow piercing his skull. The crowd was frantic, running every which way, trampling over one another, trying to find their way to safety. Bells rang out through the city as soldiers marched forwards with shields above their heads, fiery arrows rained down from the sky, setting the city ablaze. I hear the cavalry smash through the gates, yelling as they run past, some sort of battle cry I suppose. I hear swords clashing as they slash down from atop their horses. ...This was an ambush; the king's army didn't stand a chance; they slaughtered them. This wasn't a battle; this was a massacre. The men on the horses didn't just kill the soldiers, but the men, the women, and the children too. Blood and dirt ran together and coated the ground with a thick red mud as bodies piled in the streets. I see nothing but hear everything. I hear shrieks and screams, hooves thumping and fire crackling, I hear pleas and cries, the clashing of swords and the whistling of arrows, and footsteps, footsteps approaching me. Oh God, here we go, I thought.

The bag was ripped off of my head. I opened my eyes to see the worn silver boots of a soldier standing before me. He unsheathed his sword with a sharp \*shing\* and placed the cold steel beneath my chin, forcing me to look up at him. He looked battered, worn. He had a scruffy beard and dried blood spattered across his weathered armor that I am sure had shined brightly at one point, but his eyes... he had this look in his eyes that terrified me.

"Did you think you got lucky, boy?" He grumbled with a voice so grating it sounded as if his throat was full of gravel. I lower my head. I was ready for death's cold embrace hours ago, so I guess it is all the same; this is the end for me. He steps back, raises his sword, and with a \*hmp\* brings it down with enough force to chop cleanly through a log, let alone my neck. I closed my eyes, expecting never to see through them again, but... I didn't feel anything. I opened my eyes; I could see, my head was attached, I could move my fingers, I breathed and air filled my lungs; I could feel my heart still beating inside of my chest; I was alive. The soldier's blade had stopped just before it reached my flesh, as if frozen in time. He seemed to be suspended in some sort of a stasis. As I glanced up, my eyes met his, and all I saw was fear. His body remained motionless, incapable of movement. Slowly, his feet lifted off the ground, levitating ever so slightly. Then his breastplate caved in. I could hear his bones crunching like twigs beneath the misshapen metal. He attempted to scream, but all that came out were gurgles. That's when I saw him — a dark-cloaked figure emerging from the shadows, with his

hand slightly outstretched towards the soldier. With nothing more than a slight flick of his wrist, the soldier was flung into a pillar, with enough power to shatter the stone like glass.

The dark figure now walked towards me, cloaked in black robes, a shroud of darkness embracing his every move. As he gets closer, his features become more noticeable. His silver hair peeked from beneath his hood, and a matching sterling beard framed his features. A scar ran from his left eye down his cheek, jaw, and neck. That eye was concealed by black cloth, tied around his head like an eyepatch. He bore the weariness of a man who's seen a million battles yet exhumed the confidence of a man who had won them all. The lines etched across his face whispered tales of conquest, and his gaze held the cold certainty of one who has taken countless lives in his wake. A shiver ran down my spine, a knot of fear tightening in my stomach. How could he do these things? How did he fling that soldier into the pillar without touching him?

"What are you?" I ask, "Your powers... are you some sort of a God?" I managed to croak, or at least I think I did. I still hadn't found my voice yet.

"Less than a God..." He says as he unlocks my restraints with a motion of his hand. "But more than a man... come, we have work to do."

We walked through the ransacked city. Bodies lay in smoldering piles on either side of the cobblestone road we traveled. The same ones who let out cheers and applauded at my impending doom just moments before now lay in heaps, their joy turning to ashes in their mouths. Buildings crumbled as the fire raged beneath. A soldier approaches us.

"Lucian!" he shouts, running in our direction. "The city has been cleared, sir. There are no more civilians. We estimate around 16,000 casualties."

Lucian briefly looks at the soldier, giving him a nod of approval before setting his gaze straight ahead once again. He barely even bothered to look around him, not even at the atrocity he and his army had just committed. He seems completely unfazed, like this is routine to him. Horrified, I ask,

"How could you do this to these people?"

Lucian chuckles, "These people? You mean the ones who just sentenced you to death?" he scoffs, "You should be thanking me."

Conflicted, I look down. He was right; he saved me from these people. They were planning on killing me; he just killed them first. But... I looked up. Taking in the destruction that surrounded us. These were homes that were destroyed; my gaze shifted to the heaps of bodies – some of them were mothers, children... What about the innocent lives caught in the crossfire, I wonder? Were those who condemned me truly irredeemable? I stop walking. Lucian senses this; he can feel the conflict within me.

"Walk with me, or I drag you through the mud behind me like swine," he snarls, never breaking stride. I sigh and pick up my pace.

"Who are you?" I ask, "What do you want from me?"

He looks to the sky, as if checking to see how much time remains in the day.

"I take it your memory still has not returned?" Puzzled, I ask, "My memory?" Lucian continues to walk forwards swiftly; he moves with a purpose, as if he has somewhere to be.

"Yes, your memory. Do you know who you are? Where you come from?"

I pause for a moment in thought. No, actually, I don't know where I come from... I don't remember anything before I woke up in that cottage. I don't even know my name.

"...Okay, who am I?"

Lucian smiles, "There you go... You are the son of a very powerful man. Your father was the most powerful holder this world has seen in over a millennia."

"Wait, holder?" I ask. He continues,

"Yes, holder. There are people in this world who were given the gift of power. They have abilities unlike anything you've ever seen. Picture this, they can lift things into the air without touching them; they can manipulate the elements at will, and some are even powerful enough to influence time itself. They call themselves The Holders of Power... Holders for short. I happen to be one of them. Of course, just like in anything, there are some who are more powerful than others. Anyone can grow to be powerful with enough training, but there exists a limit. A ceiling as to how powerful they can get. Yet occasionally there is one, like you, that is blessed with enough raw talent to bring entire kingdoms to their knees once they reach their potential... just like your father did. He commanded the largest army of all 6 kingdoms and ruled 4 of them. He was a just ruler; he was good, fair... and you are his heir."

"You mean... he's dead? How did he die? ...Why can't I remember him?" Each question hung in the air as my mind raced, trying to comprehend everything he just told me.

Lucian sighed, "Yes, I'm afraid he's dead. Murdered in cold blood, behind him he left a void that plunged his kingdoms into chaos. The peace he brought upon the realms was destroyed, and war emerged from its ashes. I did my best to hold his people together, but alas, I am not him. But you... you are the closest thing there is. You can unite the kingdoms just as he did. Your memory loss is a result of injuries you sustained in a battle just before his death, but once it is restored... we will reign once more."

Lucian's words weighed heavy upon me, and a question scratched at my conscious. I have to know,

"Who killed him?"

Lucian looked me in the eye for the first time since I've met him, "Iroh, your brother."

