

PROLOGUE

MARCH 6, 1836

THE MORNING WAS smoke and blood.

The captain slogged across torn, broken earth that writhed around him. Arms and legs moved and twitched without purpose, driven only by pain. Faces, scorched by the firing of their own muskets, lifted pleadingly for help, mouths too dry to form words.

The day's colors had turned hideous. Blue jackets, white trousers, and black shakos lay in red pools, all suffused in a sulfurous miasma that hung over the field littered with severed limbs.

The last sounds of battle had ended several minutes ago with a final volley of screams, sporadic gun shots, and steel blades sinking into flesh, leaving only the laments of the wounded, the jubilant calls of winged scavengers whirling over the coming feast, and the buzz of blowflies drawn to the fresh breeding ground.

The assault on the rebel-held fort had begun before dawn. Four columns totaling more than a thousand men. General Cós to the northwest corner. Colonel Duqué to north wall. Colonel Romero

to the east wall at the cattle pen. Colonel Morales to the south wall and the palisade between the chapel and the south gate.

The artillery barrage that had lasted throughout the siege had been lifted the night before the assault, luring the exhausted defenders to sleep. In the silence an hour before sunrise, the columns crept forward undetected. But as they approached the walls, the attackers broke into shouts and cheers, rousing the defenders who quickly rushed to their positions and opened fire on the massed enemy. Rifles picked off targets and cannon gouged bloody holes in the attackers' ranks, repulsing the first two onslaughts and inflicting heavy casualties.

Among the wounded was Duqué, shot from his horse. General Castrillón took command of the remnants of Duqué's troops and again threw them at the north wall while Morales shifted away from the marksmen at the palisade and concentrated on the fort's southwest corner.

On the third attempt, the breakthroughs came. Using ladders, crowbars, and axes, the attackers climbed over or broke through the north wall. Cós's men swept right and breached the west wall, Romero stormed gun positions at the cattle pen, and Morales gained entry at the south wall. Bolstered by reinforcements, the attackers poured into the fort. The outcome was decided.

However, the attackers' promise that they would show no mercy and take no prisoners gave the surviving defenders no choice but to fight or flee. A few went over the walls and ran into the fields around the fort but were cut down by cavalry. Some retreated to the long barracks, firing through windows and loopholes before being killed to the last man in brutal hand-to-hand combat. Others made a last stand behind makeshift barricades in front of the chapel, where they were blasted by their own cannon wielded by the attackers and finished with bayonets.

The captain, a member of Duqué's Toluca Battalion, spent the battle on horseback, reporting to Castrillón after Duqué fell and delivering messages between Cós and Romero as they tried to coordinate their attacks. For an hour, the captain rode back and forth across the battlefield while under fire. He felt bullets zipping around him but never had the opportunity to fire a shot nor draw his sword.

Now the captain walked beside his sweat-soaked, stumbling mount. He took off his white, wide-brimmed hat and wiped his smallpox-scarred face with a bandana. His breathing had slowed but his heart still raged and his left hand trembled slightly. Just one hand, a trivial quiver, and he thought it odd.

When the carnage ended, when the shooting and stabbing finally subsided and a bugler sounded recall, the captain found himself by the west wall. He dismounted and headed to the north wall where his battalion had begun the morning and was so savagely cut to pieces.

He paused by a dead Toluca private and looked at the holes in the corpse's face—gaping mouth, stilled nostrils, staring eyes, and the terrible crater where a Texian bullet had blown off the top of his head. A spray of blood and brains was spread on the ground beneath him, and the captain imagined himself lying there.

The captain tried to clear his head and fight off the shock of the battle's aftermath. There was much to do.

While many were dead—too many to count at a glance—the majority of casualties were alive, yet no one was attending to them. Soldiers who escaped injury could offer paltry help to their fellows as they carried no bandages, no canteens, nothing that could provide aid, and the captain could see no medical personnel anywhere, leaving the wounded to fester in their misery.

“Corporal!” the captain called to a man kneeling over a dead comrade. The corporal had removed his shako, which now lay in the dirt. “Where are the surgeons?”

The corporal just shook his head without looking up.

“Corporal!” the captain yelled, advancing on the grieving man. “Corporal,” he said, lowering his voice. “Look at me.” He put his hand on the corporal’s shoulder. That broke the man’s reverie. With a shaking hand, the corporal located his shako and put it on before rising to meet the officer.

“Sir.”

“Do you know where the surgeons are? Have you seen the surgeons?”

“No, sir. I have...” he trailed off. “I haven’t seen any...” and he looked around at the mass of wounded, anger and disgust welling up. “Captain, where are the surgeons?”

“Corporal, stay with me,” the captain said, trying to steady the man. “We’re going to get organized and help our people.” Not soldiers, not the men, our people. That struck a chord with the corporal. “Here’s what I need you to do. Gather some men who are not injured or at least not too badly wounded and can walk.” He waited to see if the words were sinking in.

“Yes, sir.” The glaze in the corporal’s eyes appeared to be lifting.

“I want you to look for Sergeant Alvarado and Lieutenant Heredia. Do you understand?”

“Sergeant Alvarado and Lieutenant Heredia, yes, sir.”

“Whoever you find first, tell them to go into town and find civilian doctors or nurses or anyone who has bandages and can use them. Bring them here immediately. I don’t care if they have to drag a doctor here at the point of a bayonet. Understood?”

“Yes, sir!”

“Good man. I’m going back to the camp and find the army surgeons.” *Incompetent butchers though they are*, he thought. “I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

The corporal, freshened by purpose, spun, picked up his musket, and jogged away. The captain noticed the man wore sandals instead of proper soldiers' brogans. The army didn't even have enough shoes to go around.

The captain took another look around for Toluca officers, saw none, and turned toward the camp. He had only taken a few steps when the corporal called out.

"Captain!" The corporal was standing thirty yards away beside a small knot of soldiers, one of whom was kneeling. "Lieutenant Heredia!"

The captain jogged toward the group, putting his hand on the sword and scabbard on his left hip to prevent it from swinging as he ran.

The closer the captain got to the group, the more his heart sank. He could see three men, and none was the lieutenant. But the kneeling soldier stood and moved back, revealing a fourth man lying on the ground.

"No...no, no, no, no..."

The soldiers parted and the captain moved past them, paused for a moment, and knelt beside the man on his back.

"Captain," Lieutenant Heredia said, offering a smile on his clean-shaven, handsome face. He always had such a pleasant countenance.

"José," the captain said, breaking formality. "How are you?" It was a stupid question. He could see very well how Lieutenant Heredia was. He was shot in the chest, but the young officer was calm as ever.

"We did well," Heredia said. "The men made a valiant charge." His sword was still in his hand, as it was when he urged his platoon toward the walls. As it was when he was cut down. "You were right. The Texians are excellent marksmen."

“Rest easy, José. Help is on the way,” the captain said, and turned to the ashen-faced enlisted men gathered around. “Corporal, take one man and go to our camp. Find a surgeon and get him here for the lieutenant as quickly as you can. If anyone questions you, tell them the surgeon is for Lieutenant Heredia.”

The corporal paused. This wasn't shock any longer; the corporal just didn't want to abandon Heredia, who was regarded an honest, fair man, respected by the officers and beloved by the men. But he needed help and that moved the corporal to action. The corporal pointed to a short private with unkempt hair and mustache, who a moment before had been kneeling at Heredia's side, and the two of them dashed off toward the camp.

“Does anyone have some water?” the captain asked. No one did, so one of the privates was dispatched to find some. A few more soldiers had gathered around the fallen officer.

“I told you,” Lieutenant Heredia said. “I told you I would not see my family again.”

“You're not dead, not yet,” the captain said, and addressed the group. “Has anyone seen Captain Macotela?”

“Yes,” Heredia said. “He's dying, too.”

“I saw Captain Macotela fall,” confirmed one of the newcomers, a man the captain recognized as a private named Vega. Vega had been wounded in the right thigh and was using his empty musket as a crutch. “I think he was shot like me, from back there.” Vega shook his fist at their own lines.

The captain nodded. Reserve companies had tried to provide support fire to suppress the Texians on the walls. It was a foolish waste of ammunition as the walls and their defenders were well out of range of the army's Brown Bess and India Pattern muskets. Worse, the terrified, poorly trained reserves had fired blindly into the smoke and darkness, and consequently into their own assault troops.

“Has anyone seen any surgeons?” the captain asked, then noticed Vega’s injured leg. It was bandaged.

“Yes, sir,” Vega said. “I saw an officer—I think it was Captain Huerta—run there.” He pointed to a hidden door in the north wall, which had been forced open during the battle. “Huerta was with three men. When they got near the wall, there was more shooting inside the fort. Huerta told the others to wait while he went inside. One of the men with Huerta saw me. He said he was a doctor, and he put something on my leg. He said, ‘This will hurt, but it will help,’ and he bandaged my wound. Then Huerta returned and called to the doctor and led him into the fort.”

“Who was this doctor?” the captain asked.

“He was civilian, I think. He was wearing a long, gray coat, not a uniform. I don’t think he was Mexican. Huerta called him Dr. Thorn.”

The captain glanced at the fort. “Did you see the doctor again?”

“No, sir,” Vega said.

The captain straightened. “Vega, you and the others remain here with Lieutenant Heredia. I’m going into the fort to find this doctor. Keep an eye out for the corporal bringing help from the camp. I’ll be back.”

He leaned toward Heredia. “I’ll be back, José. I promise. You stay still.” Heredia nodded.

It was almost an hour before the captain returned. He was alone.

“No doctor, Captain?” Heredia said.

The captain shook his head. “There’s been no surgeon from the camp?”

“No, sir,” Vega said.

The corporal who had been dispatched to the camp returned a few minutes later, looking as dejected as the captain.

“I’m sorry, Lieutenant Heredia,” the corporal said. “We looked in the camp and in the town. Captain, there are no surgeons for the men.”

The captain’s jaw fell open. “It can’t be.” He shook his head.

“They didn’t even set up a field hospital!” the corporal shouted.

“Cheap bastards,” Vega said.

“They won’t spend a peso for us,” a private muttered.

The captain did not chastise his soldiers for their insubordination. Many of these men had been pressed into service and provided minimal training. They had risked their lives—and too many had lost their lives—assaulting a fortified defensive position. It was unconscionable that surgeons and medical supplies were not standing by. But the generals had been holding back supplies since the army began the march north from Mexico and this was no different.

The captain would have to wait to give vent to his anger. “We’re going to get organized, right now,” he announced. Behind him, a column of nauseating, black smoke rose from beyond the fort. The bodies of the dead Texians were being burned.

By now, more than a dozen men of the Toluca Battalion had gathered, and the captain fixed his piercing eyes into their haggard, gunpowder-blackened faces. “I know you are exhausted. You’ve done everything anyone could expect. You are the bravest men in this army, and I’m proud of every one of you. But our friends are hurt, maybe dying. We must not fail them.” Nods all around. Men stood a little straighter. “Corporal, assign what’s left of your squad to bring water from the river and food from the camp. The rest of you, gather anything you can find to make bandages. Sheets, shirts, anything. We will give whatever help we can to our wounded comrades. Go.”

Before Vega could get away, the captain grabbed him by the cross belts on his chest and pulled him closer. “Private, what is your Christian name?”

“Uh, Rafael, sir.”

“Rafael, I need you to do something for me,” the captain said. “I want you to ask around. Find out what you can about that doctor...”

“Thorn, sir.”

“Dr. Thorn. Where did he come from and, more importantly, where did he go? Keep this quiet, Rafael, between us. Tell no one else. Understood?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Help the others now, but stay off that leg as much as possible.”

The remnants of the Toluca Battalion spent the rest of the day making the wounded as comfortable as circumstances allowed. But as the days passed, still no surgeons or medicine became available, and every day more of the wounded succumbed. As many men died in the next two weeks as were killed in the assault.

Heredia lasted longer than most. The young lieutenant accepted his fate bravely, but all who attended him knew he was in dreadful pain. Thirteen days after the battle, Heredia received the sacrament of the Eucharist and died surrounded by friends and comrades. Officers, including the captain, served as his pallbearers, and men wept openly at the funeral, which was held on Heredia’s birthday.

Thirteen days of needless suffering and death left the captain with a fury he could barely contain and a hatred for the man he felt responsible.

And standing outside the ruins of a place in Texas called the Alamo, he swore revenge.