

PATH OF DEVASTATION

CHAPTER 2 TEST OF RESTRAINT

By Aeryn Rudel

Between Bainsmarket and Fort Whiterock, 609 AR

Borok watched a young cavalryman named Emmet Sterns come down the road, plumes of dust chasing after his horse. The Steelhead reined up next to the master sergeant, almost eye to eye on horseback with the massive ogrun standing on the ground.

"There's a town," Sterns said. "Three miles, give or take."

Borok glanced behind him. Lieutenant Samuel "Briggs" Briggsway sat astride his horse at the head of their very short column of Steelheads, Sergeant Ashley Pemberton marching alongside. They looked tired; all the platoon did. It wasn't just fatigue, but the deeper ache of what they had been through. It had been a hard ride from Almsbrook, which they'd left four days ago in a hurry. They had defied the captain, but only after doing things to quell the civilian crowd that none of them would soon forget.

Briggsway, the only officer in their small troop, rode up to Borok and Sterns. He turned to the ogrun. "What's your opinion, Master Sergeant?"

Though technically outranked, Borok had twice Briggs' experience. He was used to officers deferring to his judgment—the smart ones, anyway. He'd spent ten years in the Cygnaran Army as a trench buster, gaining the rank of sergeant there. After mustering out, he'd joined the Steelheads and soldiered across western Immoren for another ten years. He'd refused to be made a lieutenant—he didn't want to be involved in the nonsense that came with officer rank—so the company commander had made him master sergeant instead. No one else in the outfit, so far as he knew, had that title. It had brought a degree of respect, plus more pay.

"We're low on feed for the horses," Borok said. "That's a problem."

"Not just for the horses," a high-pitched voice said from behind the lieutenant. "We're low on food all around." Borok leaned and saw the tiny form of Tak seated behind him on his horse. Though not technically part of their platoon, the gobber cook was part of the support crew for the company, those overlooked but essential personnel who kept any unit running. When they'd fled Almsbrook, Tak had come along. Borok couldn't blame her. Her friendship with them wouldn't have done her any favors with Captain Miller.

Briggs swatted a fly from his face and frowned. "How big's the town?" he asked Sterns.

"Hard to say," the Steelhead replied. "Two hundred people?"

"I don't know," Ash said as she joined the small group. "Stopping at any sizable settlement will just make it easier for Miller to find us. We're deserters now, after all."

Borok shook his head. "We are *not* deserters, Sergeant," he said.

Briggs snorted. "We left the captain. We left the company. We're deserters," he said. "Look, I made the same choice as all of you. It was the right thing to do, but let's not dance around this and call it what it isn't."

Fury rose in Borok. He wanted to drag Briggs from his saddle, preferably by the neck, and squeeze the life out of him. The lieutenant was right, though. Perhaps they would be able to make the ranking officers at the Martenburg chapter house understand their reasons, but the simple truth was they'd broken their oaths.

"Lieutenant," Borok said through clenched teeth, "I would advise that we keep talk of desertion to a minimum. We need to remind the soldiers they are still part of something. We need discipline."

"He's right, Briggs," Ash said.

Briggs opened his mouth to respond, then seemed to think better of it and simply nodded, perhaps reacting to Borok's anger. Despite a reputation for being cool-headed and reasonable—it was part of what made him an excellent NCO—the ogrun's capacity for violence was well known. Everyone in the platoon had seen the master sergeant eviscerate a trollkin warrior with a single slash of his trench knife or smash a bonejack into scrap with the butt of his grenade launcher. Once, he had even accidentally shattered the jaw of an insubordinate recruit with a simple open-handed slap.

"Fair enough," Briggs said after a pause.

Borok said, "As far as the town goes, I suggest we risk it. We need to resupply."

Briggs nodded. "Agreed. I doubt Miller has sent word to the chapter at this point, and even if he has, they're well behind us." The lieutenant waved the rest of the troop forward.

Borok had seen the company's maps of the region, and he was sure this town wasn't on any of them. It was off the main roads and well away from the railway. Still, it was sizable for a backwater, maybe forty buildings along two roads that intersected in the main square.

This was inhospitable country: foothills at the northernmost stretch of the Upper Wyrmwall that gave way to flat scrub with the occasional stand of hardy oaks. Without much in the way of game here, Borok surmised the town made its living on subsistence farming, fishing a nearby stream, and maybe panning for gold or silver at the base of the Wyrmwall. A meager existence if he ever saw one.

He, Briggs, and Ash led the platoon into the town, the huge ogrun in front. There wasn't a wall, but a makeshift guard post had been erected, recently by the look of it. It wasn't much more than a hastily constructed box on stilts. Borok was sure a single hard shove would knock the whole thing over.

As they approached, a rifle barrel protruded from the shadows within the guard post, pointing down at them. "Stop right there!" a masculine voice called out, wavering with what could be fear or age. Borok guessed both. "Yellowhill is closed to outsiders."

They reined up some twenty yards from the post. Borok looked past it into the town and saw the street ahead was empty, the buildings silent and dark. Something was wrong here.

"We do not mean you harm," Borok said, and he held out both hands to show he wasn't holding a weapon. He heard Ash give a soft order behind him and knew the rest of the platoon would be doing the same. "We just want to purchase or trade for supplies. That's all."

"We have nothing," the voice responded. "The last group of raiders took everything."

"We are not raiders," Borok said. "We are Steelheads from the Martenburg chapter, headed home."

There was a pause. "You're mercs?"

Borok didn't like the desperate hope he heard in that simple question. "Steelheads," he said. "We have coin."

A face appeared behind the rifle in the guard post: a man, closer to sixty than fifty, as Borok had suspected. Though lean and haggard, he seemed hale—not the look of one softened by ease or luxury. He lowered the rifle. "I'm sorry," he said. "We've had some . . . problems of late."

"There's a war on," Briggs said from behind Borok. "Everybody's got problems."

"My name's Duncan," the man said, ignoring Briggs, and climbed down from the guard post. He held his rifle, an older Cygnaran model, with his finger still on the trigger. "If you'll fight for coin, you need to speak with Raylund Hicks. He runs things around here."

"We are not looking for work," Borok said. "Just supplies."

"If you want supplies from *this* town"—Duncan spat—"you'll have to fight for them."

"We are not looking for a fight, either," Borok said.

Duncan stared at Borok, his gaze hard, unflinching. The ogrun master sergeant couldn't help but admire the man's sand. "Well," the old guard began, "Like your man there said, everybody's got problems."

Borok had to admit, Raylund Hicks knew how to win over mercs. The town constable had opened Yellowhill's only tavern and had tapped three barrels of decent ale overlooked by the previous raiders. Thirteen Steelheads now sat, full mugs in hand, ready to listen to what the man had to say. He didn't waste time getting to the point.

"Most of our young men and women have left, called to fight for king and country." Raylund sat at the head of a long trestle table; behind him stood Duncan, the man they'd met at the guard post. Borok was seated to Raylund's left, Briggs and Ash across from him on the constable's right. "We had a militia of sorts that might have been able to handle our problem, but now we've got no option but to do what they want."

"What is this problem, and who are 'they'?" Briggs asked.

"Answer's the same to both questions: farrow," Raylund said. "They showed up about a month ago demanding tribute. Twenty or so, led by a big one calling himself Count Irontusk. They've taken most of our food."

Borok looked across the table at Briggs, who shook his head.

"I sympathize, but we can't get involved," the lieutenant replied. "We've got reasons I'm not at liberty to discuss. We'll buy what you have left if you want to sell it, maybe trade a few weapons, but that's all we can do."

"I'm sure you have your reasons," Raylund said. "But if you don't help us, these farrow are going to start taking more than food."

"Like the lieutenant said, we can't get involved," Ash said.

"Look, I know a thing or two about farrow," Raylund said. "I was with the rangers out of Fort Whiterock for twenty years, and I fought my share."

Borok wasn't surprised Raylund was ex-military. The man had that bearing.

"You don't need to fight them," the constable continued. "Just be here when they show up. Farrow like easy prey, and if they think we're protected by something stronger, they'll move on. Chances are they won't come back for a good while."

"That's a gamble," Borok said. "Our presence might just provoke them."

A high-pitched voice rose from the end of the table. "Sir, if I might speak?"

"Don't call me 'sir,' Tak. You're not part of the platoon," Briggs said half-automatically. "What do you have to say?"

Borok turned to stare at the diminutive gobber. He had forgotten she was even with them.

"The constable is right," Tak said. "We dealt with a band of farrow a couple of years ago, when I was helping the Cygnaran Army."

"Go on," Borok said. He noted with interest that she hadn't said "working for" or "cooking for" the army. What did "helping" mean? The little cook was a bit of a mystery.

"I saw this skirmish once, near Crael Valley," she continued. "The trollkin had hired a bunch of farrow, but since the Cygnarans had superior numbers, the pig-faces didn't stick around. Once it was clear they were on the losing side of the fight, they ran for the hills. They're cowards, most of them."

Borok had heard gobbers called the same thing, but he didn't say as much. A murmur of consent went through the assembled Steelheads. The ale had made them more confident. Again, Borok looked across the table at Briggs. This time the lieutenant gave him a look he'd seen from many officers he'd fought with: pursed lips and a slight tilt of the head that said, "Your call."

Raylund said quickly, "We'll pay you half of what we were going to give them as tribute. Plus provisions, feed for your horses, maybe a bit of coin."

Borok drew in a deep breath. His next words felt like poison on his tongue: wrong, dangerous. "All right, Constable," he said, despite his misgivings. "We'll do it."

They stood in the town square facing south, where Raylund had said the farrow would come from. Borok stood behind six halberdiers, Sergeant Ash at their center. His trench knife was sheathed within easy reach at his hip, and he carried his grenade launcher in his right hand. His armor—breastplate, greaves, and pauldrons—was thick enough to stop a rifle bullet from the right angles. Raylund, Duncan, and a few other residents of Yellowhill stood behind them. These civilians were armed with a motley assortment of rifles and pistols, most of them older than their respective owners.

Briggs and the five other horsemen were out of sight, in one of the narrow alleys between buildings. The cavalry were the trump card. Borok and Ash would lure the farrow in with the smaller force on foot, then bring out the mounted warriors. Raylund said the farrow had no mounts of their own, and if things got ugly, the cavalry might make the difference.

"Here they come," Raylund said. The ogrun heard the ex-ranger behind him pulling back the pin on his long rifle as a mob of farrow came into view. A huge specimen, probably seven feet tall, led them.

"You should be the one to speak to Count Irontusk," Raylund told Borok. "Farrow respect size and strength."

"Count Irontusk?" Ash said over her shoulder.

"Farrow warlords like titles," Raylund said. "Even if they don't have a clue what they actually mean."

Borok felt the others tense and heard the clatter of armor as the halberdiers shifted their grips on their weapons.

"Easy," Ash said. "Keep your halberds pointed at the sky until I say."

Borok took stock of the farrow. There were around twenty, most armed with simple axes and clubs. He saw a few firearms, which looked crude as well. Count Irontusk held what looked to be a Caspian battle blade, balancing the heavy sword over one shoulder. He was one of the few farrow with any armor, a hodgepodge of plate and chain likely scavenged from past victims.

"Who are you?" Count Irontusk said in surprisingly good Cygnaran. He pointed his sword at Borok.

"I am Master Sergeant Borok Shatterhaft. Yellowhill is under our protection, Count Irontusk," The farrow's name sounded even more ridiculous when he said it aloud. "You will leave or you will die."

The big farrow's snout crinkled into a sneer. "You're a big one, but you and your six warriors cannot turn aside Irontusk's horde."

"Twenty farrow is a horde?" Ash said under her breath.

"More than six," Borok said. Ash put her fingers in her mouth and blew a sharp, shrill whistle. With a clatter of hooves on stone, Briggs and the rest of the cavalry rode up and formed a line next to the halberdiers.

Grunts and squeals rose up from the farrow, and some of them took a few uncertain steps back. Irontusk's eyes narrowed. He bellowed something in the farrow tongue and stepped forward as the "horde" quieted. Borok felt a slight sense of relief; the farrow leader wanted to talk.

Ash nodded to Borok and Briggs. The cavalryman rode over to join them, and the three moved forward to meet Irontusk between their two respective forces.

They stopped ten feet from the farrow leader, who glared at them and then raised his sword in the air. "I have decided to be merciful!" he shouted. "This town has nothing left to offer us, and the horde will move on."

This might actually work, Borok thought.

"But first, I demand tribute!" Irontusk added. His pronouncement was met with a chorus of squeals.

Borok's relief evaporated. "What tribute?" he said.

The big farrow looked over the three of them, and then his gaze fixed on Briggs. "That," he said. "I want the gun." He was pointing at the scabbarded blunderbuss on Briggs' saddle.

Borok looked over at the lieutenant. "Give him your blunderbuss," the ogrun said.

Briggs was frowning. He didn't reach for the gun. The silence stretched, and Borok felt the tension mounting. Now he was staring at Briggs, wide-eyed. *Don't be stupid.*

"First, Master Sergeant, I don't take orders from you," the lieutenant began. "Second, I've had this gun since I was a recruit. You can't expect me to give it to this swine—" He didn't get a chance to finish his insult.

"They refuse to pay!" Count Irontusk bellowed. "We will take our tribute—in blood!"

"Oh, hell," Ash said. She began to back away. Borok followed, and Briggs wheeled his stallion back toward the rest of the cavalry. The farrow surged forward. The line of halberdiers opened up and then closed around the three, leveling their weapons at the enemy.

The farrow hit them a heartbeat later. Four were skewered on the points of halberds, but three managed to slide between the long shafts and get close enough to strike with their axes. Borok gutted one with his trench knife, and Ash opened the throat of another with a dagger. She slashed at the third farrow, but it dodged around her and buried its axe in the skull of the trooper to her left, a man named Jennings who had joined their platoon only a few months ago.

A shot rang out, and the farrow that had killed Jennings stumbled backward, a bullet hole above its right eye. Borok wasn't sure where the shot had come from, but he heard more, then the throaty roar of a blunderbuss.

"Wedge!" Ash shouted, stepping over Jennings' bleeding body and shoving her halberd forward. The remaining halberdiers formed a short triangle around her.

Borok pulled back and scanned the town square. It was chaos. The other farrow had split into groups of four and five and were plowing into the defenders. Many were engaging the cavalry at close range; things had gone bad so quickly, the Steelhead horsemen hadn't been able to mount an effective charge. Borok looked for Irontusk and found him leading a large group of farrow toward three mounted Steelheads who were already beset.

Borok brought his grenade launcher up and pulled the trigger. The big gun thumped into his shoulder as it released a black plume of smoke and a thunderous roar. The heavy shell landed in the middle of the enemy and exploded, sending pieces of farrow flying in all directions. When the smoke cleared, he saw that Irontusk still lived, although the left side of the warlord's face was burnt and blackened.

Ash and the halberdiers were holding their own, piling up enemy corpses. Briggs had rallied four of the cavalrymen, and they were pushing forward, cleaving farrow with their axes or blasting them with pistols.

Despite their casualties, the farrow did not break as anticipated. Their leader was still alive. Borok thought he could do something about that. Irontusk was charging toward a lone Steelhead cavalryman who had become separated from the rest. It was Sterns, keeping two farrow at bay with his axe and his horse's slashing hooves.

Borok broke into a sprint, barreling across the square toward the farrow warlord and shouting. Irontusk ignored the challenge; he had almost reached Sterns, who had not seen the new threat.

Irontusk came up behind the Steelhead, his blade flashing in a murderous arc. Borok wasn't going to get there in time. He watched as the blade struck Sterns in the back, saw the plume of blood as the man tumbled from his saddle. Two other farrow descended on the fallen horseman, their weapons rising and falling.

Borok loosed a guttural roar as he reached Sterns's corpse, and the two enemies barely had time to glance up as seven hundred pounds of ogrun and armor smashed into them. He brained one farrow slashing with its axe. The weapon struck his breastplate with a dull clang but failed to penetrate. The ogrun master sergeant flipped his trench knife over into an icepick grip, stepped forward, and drove the blade through the top of the farrow's skull. Its eyes rolled back in its head and it collapsed, yanking the weapon from Borok's hand.

Irontusk chose this moment to attack. He leapt forward, slashing with his battle blade. There was no avoiding the farrow's weapon, so Borok turned his right shoulder into it, taking the blow on his pauldron. The heavy steel crunched, and Borok felt a stab of pain and the warm trickle of blood down his arm. The farrow took a step back, exploiting his superior reach, and brought his blade up over his head for a killing blow. Not even the ogrun's heavy armor would stop that next strike. Still, Borok thrust his grenade launcher up in a futile attempt to ward it off.

Sudden motion caught the corner of Borok's eye, as Tak appeared behind the farrow warlord. She threw her body into the back of Irontusk's legs, causing him to stumble. His blade hit the ground rather than splitting Borok's skull to the teeth. The ogrun didn't waste the momentary advantage. Throwing his grenade launcher aside, he bulled forward, wrapped both his arms around the farrow's body, and squeezed. Although Irontusk was big for a farrow, Borok had two hundred pounds on him, and the ogrun's immense strength was further enhanced by rage and adrenaline.

The inexorable grip forced Irontusk's breath from his lungs in a stinking gasp, and Borok squeezed harder, grunting with the effort. The warlord squirmed and bit, but the ogrun did not relent. Borok felt the farrow's breastplate buckle, then his ribcage, and Irontusk spewed blood as ribs pierced lungs. The warlord's vertebrae shattered with a dull snap, and he went limp.

The ogrun master sergeant let the corpse fall to the ground. The muscles in his arms and back burned, and he was breathing in ragged gasps. Tak appeared at his side holding out his grenade launcher, her wide mouth set in a toothy grin. The weapon was nearly as big as she was. Borok reached down and took it from her. He didn't have enough breath to speak, so he nodded his thanks.

The battle was over. Having seen Irontusk's death, the remaining farrow were retreating, at first in something resembling an orderly withdrawal and then in panicked flight. Briggs and the rest of the cavalymen began to give chase, but Ash's voice rang out over the din. "Briggs, let them go!"

Briggs glared back at the sergeant, then reined in his mount and wheeled about. The horsemen rode back to count the dead.

Borok found Briggs standing with Ash over Jennings' body. The sergeant was speaking softly, but it was clear she was upset as she pointed to the corpse. Briggs looked serious, maybe even sorry—but not sorry enough for Borok.

"You stupid son of a whore!" the ogrun shouted and rushed the lieutenant. Briggs' eyes went wide and he stepped back, but Borok wrapped one massive fist around the lieutenant's neck, yanking the man off his feet. Briggs needed to answer for the deaths of Jennings and Sterns and eleven men and women of Yellowhill. "Do you know what you did? Do you *understand*?"

Briggs couldn't answer. He was trying desperately just to breathe.

"Master Sergeant!" Ash shouted from behind Borok.

Borok realized the rest of the Steelheads had gathered around them, staring, some with their hands on axe hafts or pistol butts. He sensed that the fate of the platoon was on a knife's edge. That realization made him stop. Restraint was more important than Briggs getting what he deserved.

"Fine," Borok said. He released Briggs, who fell to the ground gasping and sputtering.

Ash stepped close in front of the ogrun, blocking his view of Briggs. Her face was hard. Her voice was quiet but every bit as hard as her expression. "Get yourself together, Master Sergeant. The platoon needs you."

Borok nodded. "Fine," he said again. He was still angry—at himself for losing control, but mostly at Briggs, who had repeatedly proven he was unworthy of his officer's commission.

"Help with the wounded," Ash said and placed one hand on his chest, gently pushing him.

Borok didn't resist. He turned and walked away. He heard Briggs try to say something; he couldn't make out the lieutenant's words, but Ash's response was loud and clear.

"Shut up, Briggs," she said. "You bury them."