

# PATH OF DEVASTATION

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## CHAPTER 3

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# HOMECOMING

by Zachary C. Parker

Tak watched the remnants of the platoon from the back of the column. Her elbows hung over the railing, and her chin rested on the backs of her diminutive hands. The only sounds were the monotonous beat of hooves and the creak of the supply cart, bucking and jostling beneath her with each dip in the road. Martenburg hung on the horizon, the shapes of its buildings offering no sign as to whether they would be welcomed or run off.

A week had passed since the clash with the farrow at Yellowhill, and still Master Sergeant Borok and the other Steelheads continued to keep their distance from Lieutenant Samuel Briggsway. Harsh words had flown between the lieutenant and the master sergeant after the dust had settled, and in the end Briggs had buried the dead alone. Sergeant Ashley Pemberton had forgiven her childhood friend, but he chose to ride alone.

The cart and the mule pulling it had been given to them in Yellowhill for services rendered. By now most of the supplies were gone. Only half a sack of flour and an armful of apples remained, but Tak had made do with far less. Like most gobbers, she had been raised to be resourceful. Humans too often looked inside the cart rather than beyond it, Tak reflected. The previous night she had lured a skigg from its hole with a sprinkle of blasting powder and used its guts—along with a few fistfuls of Cygnaran sweetgrass—as the basis for a stew. As foul as skiggs smelled, their insides could be savory when properly prepared. The platoon had eaten the meal without complaint.

“Good afternoon, Lieutenant,” Tak said. Lieutenant Briggsway had dropped out of his position in the column and was now keeping pace with the cart. He had a habit of drifting back when he wanted to talk.

“For the last time, you aren’t enlisted. Call me Briggs. Not ‘Lieutenant.’ Not ‘sir.’ Briggs.” He sounded gruff, but Tak knew it was mostly show.

“Almost to Martenburg,” Tak said. “Must be nice to go home.”

“I grew up there, but I wouldn’t go so far as to call it home.”

“What would you call it?” Tak fished one of the remaining apples from the sack and tossed it to the lieutenant. His hand snapped up and caught it.

“Boring.” Briggs took a bite of the apple and chewed as he talked. “Tavern aside, the chapter house is the only point of interest—and it certainly *will* be interesting if the chapter decides to string us up for abandoning Captain Miller.”

After ordering the dispersal of the mob in Almsbrook, Captain Miller had initiated a downward spiral of war crimes and barbarism. Protests were met with gun lines and a wall of halberds, leaving dozens dead. Miller’s last order to the platoon had been to burn a Morrowan church at the center of town that had become a rallying point for the mob. Tak had watched as Lieutenant Briggsway torched the church over the protests of his men. She had seen his tormented expression. He had done it so none of the others would have to—Miller had threatened to hang anyone who defied him.

That night the platoon met in secret and decided to leave Almsbrook before the next sunrise. They could only hope the ranking Steelhead officer at Martenburg would consider the departure justified. Tak had been witness to many violent and deplorable acts in her youth, but it hurt her to see the company sink so low. She was there to meet the group at dawn, eager to go with them.

“The rest of the platoon seem glad to be returning, and Master Sergeant Borok thinks we can make our case.” Tak nodded to

the head of the column, where the huge ogrun rode alongside Sergeant Pemberton.

The apple crunched as the lieutenant took another bite. "The others have something worth going back to, and Borok still thinks he can salvage our jobs and find something worth fighting for. Coin and blood—that's all there is in this line of work."

"You don't believe that," Tak said. She watched his face for a reaction and wasn't surprised when he looked off into the surrounding countryside.

Briggs placed a hand on the stock of the blunderbuss holstered on his hip and absently ran his fingers over the grain. The farrow warlord who fancied himself Count Ironstusk had demanded the weapon as tribute for leaving Yellowhill in peace. The lieutenant had refused him, and his soldiers had died in the resulting battle. "Some people can't come to grips with who they are. I've never had that problem."

"You've been spending a lot of time back here with me lately," Tak said. "Not that it's my business, Lieutenant, but have you considered offering an apology and putting what happened in Yellowhill behind you?"

"You're right, Tak." Briggs leaned forward in the saddle and fed the remains of the apple to his horse before spurring the animal ahead. "It isn't your business. And stop calling me Lieutenant."

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Martenburg was quiet, the many storefronts along its main street devoid of activity. Somehow the creak of the cart and the clop of hooves seemed louder than they had out on the open road, amplified by the absence of life in a normally lively town. The cavalry riders shifted nervously on their horses, and the Steelheads on foot glanced from left to right at each passing alleyway. Sergeant Pemberton marched alongside Master Sergeant Borok and spoke to the ogrun in hushed tones. Lieutenant Briggs had ridden up beside them, his blunderbuss in one hand and the reins in the other. Something wasn't right. Everyone could feel it.

Chapter houses typically took root in established cities, but Martenburg was an exception. Before the Steelheads, it had been nothing more than a cluster of farms with a dying mining operation. The town had grown with the mercenary company's success. Soldiering was far more profitable than farming, and mercenary work had become the town's primary industry. Local youth grew up with the notion of enlisting in the Cygnaran army and then returning home to throw in with the Steelheads.

As they continued up the road, the platoon closed ranks. Up ahead, the Steelhead standard hung from the flagpole of a squat, two-story building. The establishment across the street carried a sign declaring it the Winking Mauler, no doubt

the tavern Briggs had mentioned. Tak found humor in the placement of the lieutenant's two points of interest.

Those on horseback moved to secure their mounts to the rails in front of the chapter house. Ash ordered her halberdiers into a protective half-circle around the dismounted cavalry, blades at the ready.

"Where is everyone?" Tak asked. She clambered over the front of the cart and up the mule's back until she was perched on the animal's neck. The mule flicked its ears and gave a shake but soon settled, having grown accustomed to the gobber's habits.

"Good question." Briggs swung down from his saddle. "I didn't expect a parade, but I didn't expect this, either."

Someone let out a raspy cough. It came from a bespectacled figure with wisps of white hair crowning his head who hung limp in nearby stocks. From previous visits to the chapter house, Tak recognized the old man as the company accountant. She had never spoken to him, but he could often be found there poring over a ledger, tilting his spectacles at the page with one hand and running the other anxiously over his pate. Even now, his fingers were stained with ink.

"Wilhelm?" Briggs holstered his blunderbuss and started for the accountant. "Thamar's teeth. What's going on here?"

A gunshot rang out, the sound reverberating from the boards of the various storefronts and echoing down the empty street. Their heads jerked up toward the rooftops, where a single smoking rifle pointed up in the air; others were aimed in the platoon's direction from crouching marksmen.

"That's far enough!" The chapter house doors swung outward and a man in a ragged duster stepped forth. He was young, with close-cropped hair and a crooked nose. A dozen Steelheads filed out behind him, and as many more exited the Winking Mauler. He spoke again. "That man is in my charge, as are all the people of Martenburg."

"Lawson," Briggs said, eyeing the man with open contempt. "Not a very warm welcome."

"What is the meaning of this?" Master Sergeant Borok shouted. He pointed to the accountant. "I demand to know what crime this man has committed. He has kept this chapter's books straight since before I was born." He shouldered his way through the halberdiers. "Where is Commander Gamberlin? We must speak with him."

"I'm commander here now," Lawson said. "You can address your concerns to me." A pendant bearing commander's insignia hung from Lawson's chest by a bit of ribbon pinned to the front of his duster. It looked wholly out of place. Most Steelhead officers, Tak knew, took such baubles from desk drawers only for the occasional ceremony or a trip to the founding house in Berck. She also felt certain the man had been a sergeant when they left.

"Ridiculous," Lieutenant Briggsway said. "You've been bumped back to Private more times than you've pissed into the wind, and that's saying something."

Lawson took a step forward, his face reddened. "I'd hold your tongue, Briggs. Things have changed around here."

Tak pulled a dog-eared book from a side bag and scrambled from the mule to stand beside Master Sergeant Borok. She opened the book and flipped through the pages, the ogrun's shadow eclipsing her tiny form. "According to section three, article six of the Steelheads handbook, a chapter house may have only one commander. In the event that—"

"Commander Gamberlin has been relieved of duty," Lawson interrupted. "That is all you need to know." Before Tak could quote the accompanying rule that a new commander could only be selected from among existing captains, he withdrew a letter with a broken wax seal from an inside pocket. "I received word from Captain Miller this morning. His messenger arrived by horseback a few hours ago. Your presence here proves you are guilty of desertion, if not outright mutiny."

The troopers looked at one another, unsure how to proceed. They had expected to reach Martenburg before word of their desertion, but the fight in Yellowhill had slowed them. Tak noted the grim faces of the opposing Steelheads. Like the pendant on Commander Lawson's chest, there was something off about them. During the past year she had gotten a feel for the company, just as she had gotten to know the Cygnaran soldiers she had worked alongside. The men surrounding Lawson possessed a different air. It was something in the way they carried themselves. One of the men on the roof held his rifle against his hip, pointed away. Others leaned on their polearms rather than holding them at the ready. The Steelheads had high standards—such slapdash behavior was quickly drilled out of recruits in basic training.

Borok said, "I can explain—"

"Arrest them!" Lawson interjected. "Keep them in the jailhouse until we put them on trial."

The opposing Steelheads advanced. The platoon drew closer together and readied weapons, but the numbers were not in their favor, and the dismounted cavalry would be at a disadvantage.

One of Commander Lawson's Steelheads moved to secure Briggs, but the lieutenant drew his blunderbuss and smashed its butt across the bridge of the soldier's nose. The man sprawled in the dirt, grabbing at his face as blood gushed through his fingers. Rifles on the roof converged on the lieutenant.

"Back off!" Briggs shouted, pointing the blunderbuss at the opposing Steelheads one after another. Tak could feel the tension building within the platoon like a tightly wound spring. Ash and her halberdiers had assumed an aggressive stance, prepared to launch into action at the slightest provocation or

a word from the lieutenant. The riflemen on the rooftops were the larger problem. Tak couldn't be certain, since some of the faces were covered with helmets or goggles, but the platoon could be facing men and women they had previously served beside.

"Commander Lawson, if I may," Borok said, his deep voice carrying. One massive hand rested on the stock of his grenade launcher, but he had yet to draw the weapon. "Captain Miller's judgment was no longer reliable. He'd overstepped his bounds and turned his forces against those he had been contracted to defend. I'm ashamed to admit my part in it. Given the circumstances, I consider our departure justified. We were given unlawful orders."

"I'm not interested in what you consider justified," Lawson said. "Stand down or I'll have you shot dead in the street. The jailhouse or the ground—what will it be?"

Tak moved to the lieutenant's side and tugged on his trouser leg. "Something isn't right," she hissed. "These aren't regular Steelheads. Not all of 'em, anyhow."

Briggs held up a hand to silence Tak and nodded. "All right," he said, looking from one rooftop to the next and then at the soldiers flanking Commander Lawson. He tossed the blunderbuss to the ground. "I know when I'm outgunned. We demand a fair hearing." The rest of the platoon followed suit. Ash was the last, pitching her halberd into the dirt with a sour expression.

The opposing Steelheads shackled the members of the platoon. A runner was sent to retrieve a larger set of restraints for Master Sergeant Borok when the standard issue failed to encircle the ogrun's wrists. One of Lawson's men ordered Tak to bring her cart around to the back of the chapter house and unload the remainder of the supplies. After that, no one so much as looked at the gobber, let alone tried to arrest her; in the end she was left standing with the mule and the supply cart, watching as the others were led down the road to the jailhouse.

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After depositing the supplies in the storeroom, Tak scouted out the interior of the chapter house to find the barracks nearly empty. Then she slipped away and waited until dark, hiding amid a haphazard stack of crates in a nearby alleyway as she pondered her options. Aside from the Steelheads, she had seen almost no sign of other townspeople. A few scant lanterns hung along the street, but most of them were broken and unlit, giving Martenburg a subdued appearance Tak didn't care for. An off-kilter melody carried from the Winking Mauler, growing more out of tune the more Lawson's Steelheads drank.

When it seemed safe, Tak crept from the alley and made her way to the stocks that held the chapter's former accountant. He had managed to fall asleep and was snoring lightly. Tak gave his cheek a light slap, and the old man's eyes fluttered open.

"You!" Wilhelm said with a tone of surprise. "How are you not locked up with the others?"

"I'm not technically part of the platoon," Tak said with a smile. "Cooks have a way of not being noticed. A gobber cook is practically invisible. What about you? Why are you here?"

Wilhelm sighed. "Remember Marcellus Yannus? Headed up the local wagoners' outfit? A month ago he took an interest in the abandoned mine on the east end of town. Brought in a prospector who hit on some precious minerals down there, so he got it in his head to restart the mining operation. It's been a while since the people of Martenburg had anything to look forward to besides soldiering and farming, and farming never pays much. He made some promises, bought a few rounds of drinks at the Winking Mauler, and the locals were sold."

"He didn't live up to his word?" She examined the lock as she spoke.

"Sure he did. Had people lining up for work and the mayor in his pocket. Things were great until contracts called most of the remaining Steelheads away. Captain Miller had been in Almsbrook for months, and the last of the men left to do some dirty work for the Cygnarans up north. That's when Yannus made his move.

"I found Commander Gamberlin dead at his desk. Before I knew it, Lawson had taken charge, though clearly he was in no position to do so. He's always been tight with Yannus, so I knew what was coming, but no one listened to me."

The gobber looked around quickly, then unsheathed a small paring knife, removed a bobby pin from the lining of her cap, and set about picking the lock that held the stocks closed. "The men who follow him—they aren't real Steelheads, are they?"

"Nothing but the dregs, half-wits willing to be bribed by Lawson. There isn't a handful of salt among them. Those with any loyalty were arrested and hanged. They share a common grave in a nearby field. I was lucky Lawson and Yannus were satisfied with sticking me in here. Maybe they didn't have it in them to kill an old man outright. Or maybe they just wanted to humiliate me first.

"The others are Yannus' thugs dressed up to look legitimate. Lawson swore them in as quick as he could with not a day of training. They might know how to scap in a back alley, but they aren't Steelhead material. Thieves and bandits, mostly."

Tak considered these details, a plan forming in her mind. "And the townspeople? The place looked deserted when we rode in." She squinted at the lock and worked the bent pin back and forth.

"Mandatory labor in the mines," Wilhelm replied. "Once Yannus had the chapter in his pocket, he didn't bother making false promises about higher wages and prosperity for the town. Used his muscle to round up anyone who could work and sent them down to labor in that forsaken hole day and night. There

was a time when the mayor might have stood up to them, but his title is meaningless now. Once Commander Gamberlin and the remaining Steelheads were gone, he convinced everyone else to do as Yannus and Lawson said."

A click issued from the lock and it popped open. "There," Tak said. She stood on her tiptoes and helped Wilhelm remove himself from the restraints.

"My thanks," Wilhelm said. He straightened his glasses and rubbed at his wrists, trying to work the stiffness from his body. Now that he was upright, he looked ten years younger. Tak could imagine him leading the charge on some distant battlefield in his youth. "Where does a cook learn to pick a lock?"

"I picked up a few skills back in Five Fingers," Tak said. "What about the messenger from Captain Miller, the one who carried the note about the desertion? Did he return to Almsbrook?"

Wilhelm massaged the back of his neck, wincing. "Yannus enlisted him shortly after he rode in. Offered to triple his wages. The man turned traitor on the spot."

Tak nodded. Anyone who continued to serve Miller after Almsbrook had no scruples.

"The workers have recovered a number of precious stones from the mines. My guess is Yannus will gather what jewels he can and disappear. The rest of them will be left holding the bag when Miller or one of the other captains finally gets back to town. With the war on, that could be quite a while." Wilhelm glanced around. "We should get out of here. If we hurry, we can slip away before Lawson and his lowlifes notice."

"No," Tak said, shaking her head. Her ears flopped from side to side. "My friends might go to the gallows tomorrow. I have to take care of this myself."

The accountant laughed bitterly. "You and what army?"

Tak sheathed the paring knife and returned the bobby pin to her cap. "A good cook knows how to do more than pick a lock. Show me the way to this grave you mentioned."

"Why?" Wilhelm asked.

"I have a recipe that requires a specific ingredient," Tak said with a wide grin.

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The grave was shallower than Tak had expected, and it took little effort to unearth the first bodies. A hand already protruded from the soil when they arrived, several of its fingers chewed off above the first knuckle by some scavenger. The remaining fingers cast crooked shadows in the lamplight.

"Morrow preserve me," Wilhelm said for the fifth time. He pressed a handkerchief to his nose and mouth. The Steelheads had been buried weeks earlier, and the smell was tremendous.

Tak hunkered down and peered at a corpse they had pulled from the ground. "Ah, here we are." She held the lantern aloft, painting the deceased in its soft glow. A variety of insects crawled over the dead man's body, wriggling both under and over his decaying uniform. A spider the size of a coin emerged from the man's mouth and skittered into the dark.

"Whatever you're doing, do it fast," Wilhelm said. A smear of dirt covered the right lens of his spectacles, but he made no effort to clean it off.

Tak removed a pair of tongs from her belt and plucked a pale grub two inches long from the victim. She held it before her face and examined it as it flailed slowly, its stubby legs making circles in the air. Satisfied, she lifted the grub toward Wilhelm. The accountant held up a hand in a warding gesture.

"Grave grub," Tak said. She dropped the wriggling creature into a pouch and plucked another from the corpse, this one nearly twice as fat. "They're a delicacy on Hospice Island."

"You couldn't pay me to eat one of those things," Wilhelm said, his face a shade of pale close to that of the grubs. There was also anger in his tone. Tak knew he was indignant about her digging up his fallen comrades. She sympathized, but this was her best chance to free the others.

"Cyg narans are so peculiar when it comes to food," Tak said. "Some pay good coin for grave grubs done up in butter with a few spices."

"Not me," Wilhelm said. "You can keep them."

"The grubs feed on corpses close to the surface, so they secrete a toxin to discourage birds and the like from eating them. Just touching one can cause paralysis. Proper preparation neutralizes the toxin, but accidents can happen."

"And your plan is what?" Wilhelm asked. "You think the thugs guarding your friends will *eat* those things? Unlikely."

"Have faith," Tak said. She dropped another grub into the pouch on her hip. "You've never tasted my cooking. Now help me with the rest of these bodies. We're going to need a lot more grubs."

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Tak held the platter of fried grave grubs above her head with one hand and rapped on the jailhouse door with the other. The grubs smelled positively delicious, their aroma similar to that of roasted pheasant. After pilfering the chapter house storeroom for fixings, she had cooked them up in the abandoned kitchen. Each lay on a piece of greenery, the stubby legs removed, seasoned with an enticing array of spices. Presentation was important; people eat with their eyes as much as their mouths. Skigg guts or grave grubs, Tak's culinary skills could make someone's mouth water at ten yards.

Behind her, the mule raked a hoof over the ground. In the cart were three kegs of ale, also taken from the storeroom. Tak had rolled them out the back door to where Wilhelm helped

her load them into the cart. The accountant was gone now, riding for the neighboring chapter house in Corvis to report the situation.

Voices droned on behind the jailhouse door, and Tak knocked a second time. A moment later a slat in the door slid open, and a pair of eyes peered out into the dark. The eyes squinted, examining the mule before flicking to the kegs in the cart.

"Down here," Tak said.

The guard shifted his gaze downward and eyed Tak suspiciously. "What's this about? State your business."

"Mr. Yannus sent me with drink," Tak said. "He wanted to thank you for your continued service. No reason you shouldn't get a little reward while everyone else is at the tavern."

"Drink?" the guard asked, his interest piqued. He looked again to the cart. Tak could practically hear the man swallow at the thought of ale.

"Three whole kegs," Tak said. "More than enough for the evening."

For a moment the guard said nothing. There was the sound of sniffing. "Something smells delicious," he said. "What have you got there?"

"Can't rightly celebrate on an empty stomach." Tak lifted the platter closer to the opening, fanning the grave grubs with her free hand.

There was a dull clang of a bolt being drawn, and the door swung open. "Hey," the guard called over his shoulder, "the boss sent food and drink. Come give me a hand."

Without hesitation, Tak stepped through the door. She held the food over her head, looking every part the servant. The guards heading out to retrieve the ale turned their heads to follow the wonderful smell wafting from the grubs as she passed, and more than one plucked a morsel from the platter.

At the end of the short hall stood the entrance to the cells, and there on the wall hung a ring of keys. Tak resisted the urge to rush to the aid of the others. Instead she turned off into what served as the guards' quarters and set the platter in the center of a table nearly the length of the room. A moment later the ale was brought in. Tak set about pulling tankards and stacks of plates from a nearby shelf and distributing them. The humans paid her little attention and before long were engaged in boisterous conversation.

The grave grubs were as much a hit as the ale. As they ate, the Steelhead imposters mused about what animal produced such a texture. One of their number professed to having eaten a particular breed of snake that tasted similar. Another guessed goose and was scoffed at.

A large man with a double chin and bald head sat in front of the platter, helping himself to generous portions. He was halfway through his second tankard of ale when he smacked

his lips, glanced about the table at his companions, and fell forward to plant his face amid what remained of the grubs. The impact was loud enough to silence the room.

The others looked from the collapsed man to one another and then to their mugs. Their eyes widened as they rubbed fingers over numb lips and pinched their cheeks. Since the early stages of the paralysis felt similar to the effects of alcohol, only now did the revelers suspect something was wrong. Some tried to rise from their seats, but their legs would not cooperate. Others drew weapons and staggered about the room in search of a foe that wasn't there before weakness overtook them and they sprawled on the floor.

Tak slipped from the room even as someone barked out a half-intelligible question or order. At the end of the hall she used the handle of a broom to lift the key ring from its hook. She smiled as the mess of keys jangled in her hands. With a twist she unlocked the first of several barred doors.

"I'll be damned," a familiar voice said as Tak entered the cell area. Lieutenant Briggs was on his feet and gripping the bars. "Tak, how did you get in here?" At his words, the others rushed to the bars of their cells and stared down at the gobber cook.

"Trade secret," Tak replied as she slotted the key into the lock of the lieutenant's cell. "Let's get you out of here before my cooking wears off." The door swung open, and the lieutenant and a halberdier named Kiel stepped out.

"We have company!" Master Sergeant Borok shouted. Tak turned in time to see three of their jailers stumble into the room, slowed but still moving. At the sight of the open cell, the frontrunner gave a shout to his fellows, and the three drew the weapons they had at hand, two with clubs and one a small blade.

"Open the cells!" the lieutenant told Tak, then charged headlong into the enemy despite having no weapon but his fists. Kiel followed, his face taut with a mix of fear and determination.

Lieutenant Briggs took a club to the shoulder but landed a solid right hook to his opponent's face. The halberdier ducked his head and plowed into the stomach of another guard before straightening, sending the man up and over him to crash onto the floor.

The club of the third connected with Briggs, spinning him around. The one Kiel had knocked down slashed up with a short sword to cut a gash across Kiel's chest, sending him reeling as the guard stood. Tak glanced down at the ring of keys in her hand. Uncertainty filled her.

"Take these!" Tak thrust the ring of keys through the bars and into Ash's hands. Then she drew her paring knife and joined

the fray, ignoring the alarmed shouts of the others still locked in their cells.

The wounded halberdier awkwardly grappled with his opponent in a losing struggle to keep the sword's edge from his throat. As Tak passed the pair, she slashed through the tendons just above the guard's right ankle with one swift motion of the perfectly sharpened blade. He toppled with a cry of pain. Kiel fell back against the wall, holding a hand to his bleeding chest.

Tak was already on the move, darting between another set of legs. A club narrowly missed her, leaving the weapon's wielder open to a series of sharp stabs to the gut that dropped him to his knees. The shouts of warning from the cells died, replaced with shocked silence.

Lieutenant Briggs had managed to recover the dropped blade and lunged, driving the point into the side of the last remaining guard. Though wounded, he retaliated with a vicious backswing of a club that caught the lieutenant full in the face and sent him crashing into the bars of a nearby cell. Briggs lay dazed as the guard limped toward him and lifted the weapon again to crush his skull. Kiel shouted and took a step toward him, too late to intervene.

Time seemed to slow as Tak saw the killing strike begin. Without conscious effort, the paring knife spun in her hand until she gripped the blade between thumb and forefinger. Reflexes learned a lifetime ago on the streets of Five Fingers returned as her arm pulled back for a throw. With a snap of the wrist she sent the knife sailing forward.

The point struck the guard squarely in the throat, ending his attack mid-swing. With a last gurgling gasp, the man twisted and slumped to the floor, where he lay motionless.

Briggs pressed a hand to the side of his rapidly swelling face and stared unblinking at Tak as she labored to pull him to his feet. "To think we've had you cooking meals and saddling horses this whole time!"

She grimaced and said, "I'm just a cook, Lieutenant."

He scowled at her. "You're not 'just' anything," he said. "You're as much a member of the squad as I am." She blinked at him in surprise. He continued, "You didn't have to join us when we left Almsbrook, and you didn't have to help get us out of here. I won't forget it."

He nodded before turning to help with freeing the others. They weren't out of danger yet. Tak felt her heart hammering, but her hands were steady as she wiped the blood from her knife. She knew there would be plenty more blood to come before the day was through.