

Chains of the Heretic—Excerpt

Braylar, Vendurro, and I walked through the pickets and tents, and Syldoon nodded or saluted the sergeant and captain and pointedly ignored me. Though Skeelana was a manipulative viper, she at least had been one other person in the company I could chat with who was also an outsider of sorts. With her gone, I was relegated again to the fringes, or even farther, given the captain's foul mood and Vendurro doing double duty of late.

When I saw that we were heading towards Mulldoos, I nearly walked off towards the wagon instead. He was difficult enough to measure or respond to under the best circumstances and the last few days had *not* been the best. Despite all their bickering, it was clear he and Hewspear were close, and no change in the older Lieutenant's condition had to be weighing on him. But even if Hewspear had been back on his feet, Mulldoos himself was hardly better, still stricken by whatever Rusejenna had done to him in Sunwrack before Braylar brained her.

Still, if calamity was approaching, it was better to hear about it now than to sit in the wagon and wonder, dreaming up the worst scenarios imaginable. So I followed the captain and sergeant. Vendurro looked at me and whispered, "Best not to mention the eye. Or the face. Or really anything about him. Ayyup. Best not so say much of nothing."

Sound advice.

The pale lieutenant was ignoring us as we approached, back against the gnarled trunk of one of the odd twisty trees, his eyes closed.

Captain Killcoin asked, "So answer true, Lieutenant, how are you faring?"

I was fairly certain Mulldoos wasn't sleeping, but he took his time opening his eyes and replying, and I understood instantly why. The left side of his face was still immobile, and his words came out slurred, "Plaguing fantastic, Cap. Never been better. Can't barely use this arm for shit. Sight's all blurry. Got the balance of newborn colt, the energy of an old man. I—" he swallowed hard, and it looked like it took real effort. "Yeah. Real plaguing good."

Mulldoos closed his eyes again and leaned his head back, and I was secretly glad of it—seeing that drooping eye on one side and murder in the other was as disconcerting as it got, no matter what warnings Vendurro gave.

For once, Braylar seemed at a loss for what to say. Slowly, he went down on one knee and laid his hand on the big man's shoulder. "You know as well as I, the effects of some memory magic aren't permanent."

Without opening his eyes again, Mulldoos slurred, "Ain't like you to deal in false hope, Cap. Figure you owe me better than that."

"Very well. No one knows if you will regain what you've lost. But you are alive still. That is something. And so long as you manage to remain so, you will have the chance to visit some measure of vengeance on Cynead. Hold on to that, if nothing else."

Mulldoos laughed, though with only half his mouth working, it was a broken, ghastly thing. "Hate's the only thing keeping me going right now. That, and trying hard not to shit myself. Got no time for nothing but those two things."

Braylar grabbed Mulldoos by the arm that seemed nearly paralyzed and shook him hard. "You will make time. You are still an officer of the Jackal Tower. The men depend on you. I

depend on you. Do your job. Stew in your self-pity all you like, but maintain and do your job, Syltoon. I owe you the truth, yes? Well, you owe me your service, and you will perform your duties to the best of your abilities, even if they are halved. You might very well shit yourself, and if you do, you will wipe it off and keep doing your duty, as you have always done. Do you understand me?”

Mulldoos opened his eyes again, and the good one was focused and hot as he jerked his shoulder away. “Duty and performance, is it? That’s rich, coming from you. How many times did me and Hew, Ven, even your plaguing scribbler there, cover for you, prop you up when your flail was doing its best to lay you low? More times that I can plaguing count is how many. And now Hews is husked and me. . . well, I can barely sit the saddle, or walk twenty paces without getting spinny like I been drinking half a day. All I ever been good at is fighting and teaching other whelps how to fight, but now I couldn’t hardly take Arki there. Even jawing at you now is winding me. Lot of plaguing good hate does when you can’t even—”

Braylar buffeted him across the chest with the back of his hand, rocking the beefy lieutenant into the tree. Mulldoos started to push off the bark, mostly with the right arm, when Braylar backhanded him in the chest again.

I’d seen Mulldoos angry a hundred times, but for the first time witnessed naked fury contorting half his face, with the other oddly slack. I thought for sure he would strike the captain back and looked around, noticing Vendurro was doing the same.

Braylar hissed, “We are as we are, Mulldoos. Damaged, diminished, yes, but not dead. Not yet. And until such time, you will get your ass out of the dust and do your duty. I do not care if the men see you wobble, or curse, or struggle, but they will not see you succumb. I thought we

were damned in the streets of Sunwrack, penned in as we were against overwhelming odds. And I was willing to offer myself up, just as you were, for a chance to spare the men. Our men. But that was a mistake. We fought free at tremendous cost, Lieutenant, but free we are. And now. . . now we die with weapons in hand or readying the troops, no matter what else befalls us. We do not surrender. We do not succumb. And we do not lie in the dirt bemoaning our fates. Have I made myself clear?”

Mulldoos glared at him, and I half expected him to reach for his falchion or try to grapple the captain, but instead he turned and spat into the dirt. Or tried. At least half the spittle landed on his chin, and Mulldoos laughed then, reached up with his good arm, wiped it off with his fist, then shook his head. “Real plaguing inspiration to the troops I am.”

Vendurro said, “They don’t look to you for spitting lessons, Mull. Just being there, among them, that will go a long ways. They just need to see you, is all.”

Mulldoos glared at the sergeant as Braylar stood back up. “You think so, do you? Just me tripping amongst the troops going to boost morale is it?”

Vendurro didn’t hesitate. “Not the tripping part so much, no. Maybe you ought to just settle for standing for now. Leaning against something. But ayyup, telling it true. We need you. So do what Cap here says. For once.” He smiled. Mulldoos did not.

Braylar offered his arm and Mulldoos glared at that too. But the captain left it hanging there until Mulldoos finally clasped forearms and Braylar hoisted him to his feet. Mulldoos hadn’t been exaggerating his condition—he did look besotted. But he found his footing and nodded once.

The captain gave his big shoulder one more squeeze. “Very good. Now then, let us check—”

Vendurro interrupted. “Cap, got company.”

We all looked and saw a Syldoon running towards us, covered in the dust of the road. He thumped his chest and spun his salute.

“Report, Syldoon.”

The soldier replied, “Way’s clear ahead, Captain. Far as we can tell, that is. But we got company from the rear.”

“See!” Vendurro said. “Told you!”

Braylar ignored him. “I imagine if it was the Imperial army on our heels, you would have a bit more urgency in delivering the news, yes?”

The soldier nodded. “Sorry, Captain. Couple of scouts ought to be here straight away.”

Braylar took a step forward so that the soldier was close enough to smell his breath. “Are you trying to tell me that the only Syldoon who can actually inform me of anything have yet to arrive? I do hope you did not interrupt us here just to tell me that. Because then I would be left thinking you are either a simpleton or you are intentionally doing your best to frustrate me, and neither option will do.”

The soldier turned crimson and stared straight ahead. “No, Captain. That is, I only meant to say that the scouts are escorting your sister. They’ll be here shortly.”

The captain stepped back and nodded.

Mulldoos shook his head and said, “Well, ain’t that a hard kick to the jewels.”

The reporting soldier glanced at him after hearing the muddled words and then quickly looked away, but not before Mulldoos noticed. “You got anything else to say, you dumb prick. That the sum total of your report? Anything else you want to add just now?”

The soldier kept his eyes fixed straight ahead. “No, Lieutenant.”

“Good. Then get your poxy ass out of here, you stupid whoreson. Dismissed.”

The soldier saluted again, spun on his heel and headed towards the rest of the troops with the fastest walk possible, clearly glad to be away from his temperamental officers.

Vendurro puffed out his cheeks and exhaled loudly. “What are you supposing that means, Cap? Soff following us, showing up?”

Mulldoos replied before Braylar could, “Can’t be nothing good, I’ll tell you that plaguing much.”

The captain locked his hands behind his back and started walking. “I cannot say what she intends. Or what motivates her from minute to minute. I never could. But we would not have escaped Sunwrack without her surprising intervention. That much is certain.”

Mulldoos said, “You can’t seriously be thinking of welcoming her with open arms, Cap? Been betrayed by one Memoridon bitch already, and they all lick Cynead’s rings now, every last one of them. Memes are the enemy now, every last one.”

Braylar gave a twitch-smile. “Perhaps. But I doubt very much the Emperor authorized her to help destroy an Imperial battalion. She acted on her own. I reserve judgment as to what game

she plays, but she did aid us. No doubt for her own purposes. But there is a good chance we would all be dead or in irons if she hadn't assisted us. There is no disputing that."

Muldoos spit again, and managed it only slightly better now that he was upright. Then he slurred, "Mistake to trust her, is all I'm saying, Cap. Plaguing huge mistake."

The captain started walking to the camp. "That is entirely possible. We shall see."