



CALLED TO BATTLE: VOLUME II

AN EXCERPT FROM “MIND OVER MATTER”

Written by

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“Lieutenant?” Murdock’s voice sounded terrible, like he was crying and drowning at the same time. “Oh, sweet Morrow, Doc, you gotta wake up.”

Carlisle opened his eyes. Murdock was crouching over him, eyes wide and bloodshot.

“I’m awake, Private. What is it?”

Murdock pointed to the bars. Two trunks and several satchels lay stacked against the bars, on the inside of the cell. Carlisle recognized them immediately, and his heart leapt.

“My equipment!”

“Doc, they got in,” Murdock said. “I couldn’t . . . I don’t even know what they . . .” His voice trailed off into a groan.

“It’s okay, son. Look, whoever they were, they brought me practically the whole field hospital. They obviously don’t mean us any harm.”

“Not Khadorans,” Murdock said. “All in black, with glowing red eyes. And metal arms, extra ones, like giant bug legs, bolted right into its back. It looked at me, and then there were hornets in my head and I couldn’t move. I couldn’t even speak. It opened the cell, and then the bare-chested things, with helmets, and hoses, and mechanical hands, they carried in your stuff.”

Carlisle took a closer look at the stack of gear. Neither trunk had been damaged, and none of the satchels had fallen open.

“They were careful with it, Murdock.” Morale. “They’re concerned for our well-being, for our health.”

Murdock shook his head. “You didn’t see them, sir. You didn’t feel that thing in your head.”

“Private, do you have another explanation for why they’d leave us with all the tools of a field hospital?”

Murdock shook his head again, his eyes shut tight.

“Collect yourself, soldier! Anders and Longstead both have wounds that need cleaning, and I may require an assistant who has his wits about him.”

SPECIMEN 6 PERFORMING INVENTORY. EVALUATING.

Wits about him, indeed. That voice was floating, like the cloaked figure it belonged to, floating in the very back of Carlisle’s pounding head. Evaluating?

Carlisle swept the satchels full of bandages aside and opened the first trunk. Sure enough, the drudges had carried it without dropping it. Stacked inside were tray upon tray of bottles, each labeled and filled with a different alchemical agent useful for surgery or medicine. None were broken. Carlisle shifted the trays around and removed one of his three bottles of coal-tar antiseptic, a weak acid that didn’t eat bandages, only burned the skin a little, and kept putrescence at bay. Soon he had his jar of dumbwort, a pickled herb that worked better than uiske to deaden pain and brace the patient for surgery. There were also four jars labeled “POISON,” which contained strong but horrible-tasting *uiske*, whiskey only an Ordsman could love, camouflaged to prevent theft.

He closed the first trunk and lowered it to the floor. His head pounded with the effort.

The contents of the second trunk were much less likely to be damaged, though there were some glass and ceramic beakers wrapped in cloth down in one corner. Those wouldn’t be useful since he didn’t have the reagents to brew anything in here, but the rolls of thread and gauze would be critical. He unstopped the antiseptic and dropped in a roll of fine thread, a roll of heavy thread, and a roll of gauze to soak.

He reached once more into the trunk, lifted out a battered, stained wooden box, and sighed. These scuffs and stains were not from rough handling of the trunk. They were the result of years of use during hurried amputations in the field. Carlisle had long ago considered cleaning and polishing the case, but the scarred and discolored wood served as a reminder of what had been lost.

Not lost. Taken. He was reminded of what he had taken from others.

He opened the box. His bone saw lay in a dark velvet rack alongside a dozen clamps, five long-handled hooks, and a thick-gripped scalpel with a longer blade than any other he owned. He let out a heavy sigh, closed the box, and set it atop the trunk, bracing himself. With a pair of trained assistants in an operating theater, he could perform an amputation in less than a minute, from the first cut to the final sutures. In his field hospital with a corpsman beside him, it would take twice as long. In this cell, with a rattled, wounded trencher who was good for nothing but pinning the patient to the floor? It might take a full five minutes.

He opened the first trunk and removed two tin shot cups. He poured uisike into each, then approached Murdock.

“Drink up, Private. This should steady your nerves.”

Murdock took the cup and sniffed it suspiciously, then quaffed it. “Thank you, sir. That’s good stuff.”

“You don’t get out enough,” Carlisle said with a smile.

He looked down at the second cup in his hand. He thought he’d been pouring this shot for a patient, but his own nerves needed a bit of steadying. All this propping up of morale was taking its toll. He tossed it back, then collected Murdock’s cup and dropped them both into the trunk.

He patted Longstead on the shoulder, but the boy only moaned softly in his sleep. He pulled the lad’s coat from atop him and saw the locket hinged open in his relaxed hand. Carlisle teased it from Longstead’s grip and took a closer look. One side held a tiny mirror, the silvering ragged and corroded on the lower two-thirds. The other side was white, with the words “Be Always True” written in a stylized Caspian script. Good advice, that. Morale and discipline summed up in three words. He closed the locket and tucked it back into Longstead’s hand. Then he turned his attention to the boy’s wound.

The sutures had held, and the small application of antiseptic had helped. The swelling was lower, there was less pus at the edges, and it had lost much of its yellow stain. No bleeding, either. Carlisle would not need to open this wound back up for scraping and flushing.

He checked Anders. As soon as he crouched next to the soldier, he smelled putrescence wafting from the bandages on his hand. The gangrene had set in. Carlisle pulled the bandages back and winced in sympathy. The rot had reached the surface, blackening the edges of the wound, and Anders’ fingers were already starting to go green. Angry traces of red radiated up from the heel of the ruined hand halfway to the elbow as the infection fought its way up toward his heart.

Carlisle pulled a grease pencil from his kit and made a mark an inch above the furthest-reaching trail. Then he pulled the tool trunk into the middle of the room and set the wooden box atop it.

SPECIMEN 6 PREPARING FOR PEER MODIFICATION. EVALUATING.

Carlisle shut his eyes tight against the voice.

Was he really going through with this? Here, in this filthy cell?

Did he have a choice?

“Private Murdock, I need your help now. You and I will be operating on Private Anders.”

“Oh, no, sir. I’m not qualified to do that.”

“Qualified? Are you qualified to drive a bayonet into a red-coated belly? Or put a bullet in a Khadoran heart? If you can kill, you can certainly help me save a life. Fill my washbasin at the bib,

and then roll a bandage around one of the leather straps in that satchel there, so he has something to bite down on.”

Carlisle poured a double shot of uisike and then shook Anders awake.

“Unnnghh oh gods that hurts.”

“I know, boy. Drink this, down the hatch.”

Anders opened his eyes. “Uisike? Where’d we get uisike?”

“Our captors brought me my supplies. And none too soon. Your hand is going to have to come off, son.”

Anders gaped. Carlisle held the cup closer to the boy’s face. Anders took it and tossed it back, eyes shut tight against escaping tears.

“And again.” Carlisle had another cup ready. “This isn’t drinking with chums. This is a race to get drunk.”

“Exactly like drinking with chums, then,” Anders said. He drank the second shot, then accepted and downed a third.

Carlisle helped Anders into the middle of the room and laid him down alongside the trunk, then gently pulled the lad’s left arm away from his side to fully extend it. He fished a bit of dumbwort from its solution and crushed it against the arm, tracing a full circuit around where he planned to cut.

“Tingles a little, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah. How much is this going to hurt, Doc?”

Carlisle sighed. “I won’t lie to you, Private. This will probably hurt more than catching that axe, but it’s going to hurt a lot less than dying from gangrene. Or than taking that axe to the head. So this path we’re on? It’s the best one. And you’ll keep your elbow, so there’s that.” He took the bandaged strap from Murdock and held it in front of Anders’ mouth. “Open wide, and bite down on this.”

Anders bit down on the roll.

“Private Murdock, come over here and straddle Anders, kneeling, and put your full weight on his arms. You’ve only got one good arm, so I won’t ask you to hand me tools, or pull on anything at all. You just need to stay up there and keep him still. Can you do that?”

“Yes, sir,” Murdock said, climbing atop Anders.

Anders groaned under Murdock’s weight and shuddered, but his arm remained still. Carlisle began laying tools in neat rows atop the trunk. With saw and scalpel laid ready alongside clips and hooks, Carlisle began threading three needles with fine antiseptic-soaked thread, one each for the radial, the ulnar, and the interosseous arteries. If the cut were closer to the hand, he’d have needed four or even five sutures, but this close to the elbow he only required three.

He reviewed his preparations, taking his time so the alcohol could work on Anders. Then he tied a tourniquet just above Anders’ elbow.

He picked up his scalpel and began.