

## Anything For A Friend

*An alternate POV of "Caught Shirking" from SMB Vol. I*

Regulus angled his head back to get a better look his reflection in the evening light. He sat on the dirt outside the tent he shared with Dresden, shaving in front of a small mirror hanging on a long string from a tent pole. The sharp edge of the folding razor blade scraped over his neck, taking off the shaving oil and short layer of fine stubble.

Drez teased him about the clean-shaven look—he was quite proud of his own beard, but Regulus' beard didn't grow as evenly as Drez's. Some of the older mercenaries heckled him a little about it, too. Nineteen years old and he couldn't even grow a proper beard. It wasn't entirely his fault, though. If he let it grow out, he ended up with a ridiculous uneven line where no hair grew over the scar that cut across his right cheek. Accordingly, Regulus didn't let his facial hair progress past a shadow of stubble unless the mercenary troop was too busy to allow him time for a shave.

He wiped off the blade on a cloth, then rubbed shaving oil over his right cheek, except for over the pinkish scar running from below the outside corner of his right eye, along his cheekbone, down through the corner of his mouth, and ending at his chin. His throat tightened as he picked the razor back up and braced himself. The uneven skin around the scar was easier to nick, and a cut there seemed to hurt worse than anywhere else. Or maybe it just dredged up the memory of the pain from when some of Fletcher's mercenaries had given him the scar.

At least the worst the men under Captain Samuelson's command had done was some friendly ribbing, not pinning him to the ground and cutting his face while he screamed, and Dresden ran for help. Captain Fletcher hadn't even punished the perpetrators, claiming that if

Regulus and Dresden couldn't defend themselves, they didn't deserve to be in his troop. He didn't even try to prevent them from leaving, just laughed and told them not to come back.

Regulus didn't know what they would have done if not for Captain Samuelson. The two troops had worked together on a security job for a couple of wealthy Vaneltian nobles throwing an extravagant wedding to bring an end to a decade of blood feuding. Understandably, they'd decided a neutral party would make better security, and the bride's family had hired Fletcher's troop to defend the groom's family, while the groom's family had hired Samuelson's troop to defend the bride's family. As no fighting broke out, it'd been the easiest job they'd done in the three months that Regulus and Dresden had been in Fletcher's troop. Or it was, until after the wedding when some of the mercenaries got drunk, Regulus told them to stop hassling local young women, and they'd decided to teach him to "respect his elders."

Samuelson had still been in the area, and when Regulus and Dresden showed up at his camp begging to be hired, he'd let them join without even testing them to see if they could fight. But they'd shown they could in the ten months since, especially since Regulus had been desperate to prove his worth once he realized how badly he wanted to stay in this troop. Their new captain was tough but fair, attentive, took troop discipline seriously, and had quickly won Regulus' respect. Where Fletcher had been crude, prone to drunkenness, and took the highest-paying job without a care for what it was, Samuelson was somber, sharp-minded, and never rushed into a contract or accepted one he didn't like.

Samuelson's men trained together, cooperated on camp tasks, and always had each other's back on the battlefield. Samuelson said a troop was a wolf pack, strongest when they worked together. For the first time in his life, Regulus had people other than Dresden he dared to think of as friends. Like their fellow Monparthians, Caleb and Perceval, or even Lieutenant Ivan

Cheznik, who took great pleasure in sparring with Regulus because only Perceval and Regulus could keep up with the muscular Segiledan's swordsmanship.

Satisfied his skin was once again as smooth as his scar would allow, Regulus snapped the blade closed and returned it to his leather pouch, then rinsed off his face and tossed out the dirty water. The sun was dipping close to the horizon, turning the sky pink, and tinting a few wispy clouds orange. Maybe he'd go for a run before turning in for the night. He had an early morning watch he should rest up for.

After putting away his shaving supplies inside the tent, he stretched out his legs and back. The air cooled as the sun sank. Yes, an evening run would be a good end to the day. Especially since the last several days had been boring. They'd likely be moving on in a day or two, as mercenaries didn't stay where they weren't working, and so far, no one in this region of Craigailte was hiring.

"Hey, Jakobs!"

Regulus straightened and looked over as Serat stomped closer, striding past other mercenary tents. The Geirish man scowled as he came to halt and crossed his arms, the dark tattoos swirling across his brown skin peeking out from under his sleeves.

"Jakobs in there?" Serat jutted his chin toward the tent.

"No, he left...an hour ago or more." Regulus shrugged. "Said he was going 'out.'" Which likely meant either partying or to see a girl. Probably the latter. "Why?"

Serat muttered under his breath in Geirish, but Regulus heard enough to understand his brother-in-arms was cursing at Dresden. Maybe Regulus couldn't grow a beard, but he could pick up foreign words quickly. Or, at least, foreign curse words.

Regulus stiffened. "What's going on?"

“He was supposed to relieve me at the east watch an hour ago!” Serat waved his hands. “James happened to wander out that way and I asked him to stand guard long enough for me to go find Jakobs’ lazy *kiphun*, and you’re telling me he’s not even here?”

*Damn it.* Regulus squashed his panic. “You tell the captain yet?”

“I’m starving,” Serat grumbled. “I came straight here so I could go eat.”

“Right.” Regulus nodded. Okay, this was bad, but not unsalvageable. “You go eat. I’ll go relieve James. Just...” He hesitated. “Don’t mention this to the captain, yeah?”

Serat harrumphed. “Yeah, sure, but only because it’s you asking. And only if you give Jakobs an earful.”

Regulus snorted. “Oh, he’ll be getting that.” *What’s the fool thinking, not keeping track of his shifts?* Worse, if he’d forgotten his shift, he likely hadn’t asked permission to leave camp. They had a good thing going under Samuelson; why did Dresden have to be so reckless?

“I appreciate it, Serat,” Regulus said.

“Yeah, just get going.” Serat nodded toward the east. “James is cranky he had to take the watch, even for a few minutes.”

“Why would James take the watch for a few minutes?”

The air seemed stolen from Regulus’ lungs at the sound of Captain Samuelson’s voice behind him. He turned to face his captain and saluted. “I...forgot my shift, Captain. James took it while Serat came to remind me.”

Samuelson frowned, his bright blue eyes flashing. “Skipping watch is a punishable offense, Hargreaves.”

“Aye, sir.” He inclined his head, his nerves winding tight.

Serat cleared his throat. “It was just forgetfulness—”

“It’s funny, though,” Samuelson interrupted. “I don’t recall you being on watch tonight, Hargreaves.” He tilted his head. “Could have sworn I’d marked you down for pre-dawn.”

Regulus gulped. Curse Samuelson for being an organized captain—in this situation. Maybe a half-truth...if Samuelson didn’t double-check the schedule, he could still keep Drez out of trouble. “No, it’s Jakobs who’s scheduled for pre-dawn, Captain.”

Samuelson nodded slowly. “Where is Jakobs?”

“...asleep.” *Stupid.* All Samuelson had to do to confirm that was a lie was look in the tent.

“Mm.” Samuelson stepped toward the tent, and Regulus’ stomach dropped.

“I should really get to my shift—”

“Just a moment,” Samuelson said as he lifted the tent flap and peered inside. He dropped it and faced Regulus again, his expression unreadable. “Where’s Jakobs, Hargreaves?”

Regulus had to fight to stand still and not squirm under Samuelson’s iron stare. “I...don’t know, sir.”

Samuelson sighed, disappointment lining his wrinkled, suntanned face. “You lied to me, Hargreaves.”

“Yes, sir.” Regulus hung his head, dread mounting. What was the likelihood Samuelson would forgive him? Low. Samuelson didn’t make exceptions.

“Jakobs missed his shift, Ulnim?”

“Aye, Captain,” Serat said apologetically.

Samuelson shook his head. “Hargreaves, the truth—is Jakobs in camp?”

Regulus licked his dry lips. If he lied again, Samuelson would just ferret out the truth. He wouldn't have saved Dresden any pain, and he would have only brought more on himself. "I don't believe so, sir. He said he was going out and expected to be back late."

Samuelson clicked his tongue. Regulus couldn't bring himself to look at his captain, to see the disappointment. "You've earned yourself five lashes for lying, Hargreaves." He sounded almost sad. "Do you want them now or would you rather face them when Jakobs gets his fifteen?"

Regulus flinched. Fifteen. Ten for skipping watch, leaving either the camp unguarded or a fellow soldier unrelieved—a betrayal of trust. Five for leaving camp without permission—a breach of proper conduct. *Drez, you fool.*

"Now," Regulus murmured. He wasn't sure he could bear to watch Dresden receive his. He would have to, of course, unless the captain did it while Regulus was on watch. All the mercenaries except for those on patrol were required to watch discipline be carried out. Public sentencing served as a warning and a reminder to the rest of the troop, and it punished the offending soldier with both pain and the humiliating weight of his companions' watching eyes.

Regulus always hated watching. It was fair, and it was the rules, and it kept discipline, he understood that. Believed in it, even. But he hated the sound of the whip cutting through the air, the snap as it bit skin, the moans and screams that the men tried to hide. Maybe it reminded him too much of the humiliation and pain he had suffered as a boy at the hands of his cousins.

"Ulnim, tell the men to gather for a sentencing," the captain ordered.

Regulus dejectedly followed Samuelson to the center of camp, dragging his feet as they walked past the central fire to the captain's tent. *Why didn't I stop Dresden? And why didn't I pay closer attention to the schedule?* He usually did. For months, he and Drez had noted their

own watches and each other's, to have each other's backs. They'd grown complacent recently and hadn't checked each other's schedules so often. This time, Regulus hadn't, and if he'd just checked...

He should have asked Drez if he'd cleared leaving with the captain, and if Drez had said he hadn't—which he sometimes didn't, because Samuelson might say no if he was feeling grouchy—Regulus should have prevented him from leaving. Regulus had dragged Dresden into this life. The least he could do was protect the only family he had.

*Family.* Not that Drez saw him as family. How could he, after so many years as Regulus' servant? Sometimes Regulus even feared Dresden wandered off without him because secretly, Dresden hated him for his years of servitude. But maybe...he could make it up to Dresden. Prove Drez was his friend, not merely his former servant or a fellow mercenary.

“Captain.”

Samuelson paused in the entrance of his own tent, on his way to get the whip. “Yes?”

“I'll take Dresden's punishment.” The moment the words were out of his mouth, Regulus almost wished he could take them back. But then he'd have to stand there silently and watch his best and oldest friend be hurt, and he wasn't sure he could bear it.

“What?” Samuelson straightened, his wiry salt-and-pepper eyebrows furrowing. “That's not how this works.”

“I know. But—”

“Jakobs has to learn.”

“It was a mistake,” Regulus said, his voice taking on a pleading edge. “I know he won't make it again.”

“I don't make exceptions, Hargreaves.”

“I’m not asking you not to give a punishment. I’m asking you to give it to me.”

Samuelson shook his head. “Jakobs is the one who—”

“It’s about the lesson, right?” Regulus pressed, committed now. “About showing that actions have consequences. That disobedience won’t be tolerated. All that matters is that the lesson is conveyed, right? He’ll understand.”

Wherever their friendship might stand, they were still close. When Fletcher’s men had cut Regulus, Dresden had vomited twice and been so furious he could hardly sit still to stitch up Regulus’ cheek. Regulus’ pain would almost certainly distress Dresden as much as Dresden’s pain would upset Regulus, but this way, neither of them would have to stand there, helpless to do anything but watch.

Samuelson hesitated as the rest of the mercenaries gathered behind them. “You wouldn’t get out of your lashes, you know,” he said quietly, his dark eyes searching Regulus’ face.

“I understand, Captain.”

Samuelson’s lips thinned. “Regulus. You’re a good young man, and I admire your loyalty to your friend, but—”

“I’m stronger,” Regulus blurted. “I can take it better than he can, anyway. I’ll be back in fighting condition faster.” It was a bluff, most likely. He was stronger in terms of muscle, a bit broader and taller, but he doubted he was any tougher. Drez would probably be furious with Regulus for making him sound weak, but if it protected him...

The captain threw up his hands. “*Twenty* lashes, Hargreaves. Are you certain?”

Regulus’ tongue knotted. He swallowed hard and gave a sharp nod.

“Fine.” Samuelson shook his head again and ducked inside his tent.

Lieutenant Ivan approached Regulus from the side. “What’s going on? *You’re* to be lashed? But...that can’t be right.”

Regulus lifted a shoulder. “I lied to the captain.”

Ivan’s eyebrows shoved toward his blond hair. “Why?”

Samuelson emerged from the tent, preventing Regulus’ reply. “Lieutenant Cheznik.” He held a length of rope toward Ivan, the whip curled in his other hand. “If you please.”

Ivan took the rope and looked at Regulus with apology. Regulus pulled off his shirt and tossed it aside, then held out his hands.

“At least it’s only five,” Ivan muttered as he bound Regulus’ wrists. Regulus smiled sadly but couldn’t bring himself to correct the number. Ivan led Regulus to a small tree growing a few feet in front of Samuelson’s tent and knotted the rope to a branch, so Regulus’ hands were raised about shoulder height, then stepped away.

“Regulus Hargreaves, you stand before us to answer for breaking our rules,” Samuelson’s voice rang out behind him. “You lied to your captain, a sign of grave disrespect that cannot go unpunished.”

Some of the mercenaries murmured. Regulus shifted in the growing dark. Torches were lit from the fire burning nearby, ensuring his punishment would be seen. Their gazes bored into him, judging his actions, waiting to see how he would handle his punishment, reevaluating their opinion of him. He had to be strong through this so they wouldn’t lose respect for him. He couldn’t lose this troop and his new friends when he was just starting to feel like he belonged somewhere.

“You lied to protect your friend,” Samuelson said. “But loyalty to your captain must come first. For your lies, you are sentenced to five lashes.” The captain cleared his throat. “For

abandoning a watch and leaving camp without permission, Dresden Jakobs is sentenced to fifteen lashes.”

Confused muttering rose from the soldiers. Regulus rolled his shoulders, his stomach twisting. He hoped Dresden wouldn't suffer any judgment or mocking for this. But Drez was charming and tended to win everyone over; he would be fine.

“Where a rule has been broken, there must be correction. An example must be made,” Samuelson said, his voice gravelly. “At your insistence, Hargreaves, the example shall be yours. Men, when you do not do your duty, you hurt your brothers-in-arms. Your disobedience, lack of responsibility, and disloyalty harm your entire troop. May you remember that as Hargreaves, at his request, takes Jakobs' punishment.”

“*What?*” Ivan exclaimed.

Around them, mercenaries protested or expressed disbelief.

Regulus pressed his eyes closed. *Please, just get it over with.* He tried not to tense, but his lungs were tight, and his mouth so very dry.

“For the good of the troop,” Samuelson said. The mercenaries droned the words back.

There was a whir, and Regulus' muscles seized in horrified anticipation. Then the whip cracked against his back. He flinched and clenched his teeth. Again, and again. The whip wasn't like Kimberly's belt. That had been a wide slap that stung and bruised down to his bones. This was a tongue of fire licking down his back, ripping and tearing. By the tenth lash, Regulus collapsed to his knees, tears streaming down his face as he whimpered.

Some part of him had hoped Samuelson would hold back. He didn't. The whip sliced into Regulus' skin, opening line after bleeding line, the wounds crisscrossing. Black and white spots danced in Regulus' vision as he screamed, no longer able to disguise his agony. The whip

snapped against his broken skin again. Surely it had been twenty by now. Another lash, another hoarse scream. *It's over, it must be—*

Another strike, and if it weren't for the rope holding his hands above him, Regulus would have collapsed onto the ground. He sagged there, waiting for another blow. It didn't come.

"Justice is completed," Samuelson announced. "Disperse."

Regulus pried his eyes open. Some of the men shuffled off, but many lingered as Samuelson grabbed his arm and pulled him to his feet. Regulus bit his tongue, stifling a cry.

"You held yourself well," Samuelson whispered.

Regulus tried to laugh, but it sounded like a sob. "I screamed."

"Good thing, too. The men might have thought I was holding back, otherwise." A bit of humor laced Samuelson's tone, but Regulus wasn't in the mood. The captain unbound Regulus' hands and spoke quietly. "They all scream, Regulus."

The reassurance didn't make Regulus feel any better. He moaned as his hands fell to his sides, shifting his back and setting the wounds on fire.

Ivan appeared at Regulus' side and grabbed his arm. "Come on, *meshikni*." A Segiledan word that Ivan had told him loosely translated to *sword-brother you trust with your life*. Something Ivan had taken to calling Regulus ever since Regulus had saved his life a month prior. "I'll help you back to your tent and clean you up. I have some salve that—"

"No," Regulus pulled away, acutely aware of Samuelson watching him with an appraising expression. "I'm fine."

Ivan snorted. "Right."

Samuelson frowned. "Cheznik knows about—"

“I’m all right,” Regulus insisted. His own screams still rang in his ears. Half the troop milled around, staring at him. Waiting to laugh when he showed a sign of weakness and proved that he didn’t belong.

“I’ll arrange for your watch to be covered,” Samuelson said.

Regulus shook his head. “I’ll be there.”

“Don’t be stupid,” Ivan growled.

“I said I could handle it,” Regulus mumbled. He wouldn’t make himself a liar. “I’m going to go rest.” He trudged away, avoiding eye contact with any of the other mercenaries.

Ivan’s tense whisper followed him. “All due respect, Captain, but what was that? I thought you liked the boy.”

“Let’s discuss this inside, Lieutenant.”

Regulus didn’t know what to make of what he’d overheard, so he ignored the conversation and focused on getting to his tent. This was worse than the cut to his face, both the pain and the humiliation.

A figure stepped into his path. “Hargreaves—” Perceval started.

Regulus turned away and hurried past the burly Monparthian, afraid if he said anything, he’d betray how close he was to breaking. *“Pathetic. Disgraceful. Crying over a little hit like the peasant child that you are.”* He tried to shove the memory down, the way he always did, but the pain was overwhelming, and he couldn’t focus to keep the recollection locked away.

It was before Dresden arrived. Regulus was ten and training with a wooden sword with Hendrick. They’d finished a round, and the tutor had praised Regulus’ grip and criticized Hendrick’s sloppy footwork. Since Hendrick was three years older and his training was far ahead of Regulus, the tutor was always harder on him, and Hendrick was seething. As he often did, he

took out his frustration on Regulus when the tutor's back was turned. He slammed the wooden blade into Regulus' ribs, making him cry. Hendrick's father, Lord Kimberly, had stopped by to watch, and he merely scolded Regulus for his tears.

*"A waste to even bother training you. You'll never amount to anything, you worthless son of a servant wench."*

The bruise had lingered for two weeks, and Regulus had learned to hide his pain as much as possible. Pain was bad enough without adding mockery and shame.

He ground his teeth against the agony on his back as he stooped to enter his tent. There was no way he could attempt to rinse off the blood as intended. Instead, he simply crawled onto his mat and let himself silently weep into the thin pillow.

It took hours for Dresden to return, or at least it felt like it. Regulus tried to sleep, but it was difficult when he could barely breathe without his back stinging. By the time Dresden snuck in, Regulus wasn't sure if he was angry with him or relieved that his friend hadn't been waylaid by bandits on his way back. But as cold air brushed over his bloodied back while Dresden fastened the tent closed, and he remembered how Drez had jeopardized their place in the troop, hurt won out.

"Have fun out shirking your duties?" Regulus muttered. *Stupid*. He was too tired to deal with Dresden right now. He should have kept quiet.

"Shirking? ...oh." Dresden cursed. "I had watch tonight. I forgot."

Regulus just grunted.

"Did the captain notice?"

"Ha." Regulus snorted and immediately regretted it as pain lanced through his back. *Just act normal*. "He's not a slob like Fletcher. He always notices."

“I’ll see the captain in the morning,” Dresden replied in the dark. “Maybe if I go in bowing and scraping, he’ll go easy.”

*If only.* But the last thing they needed was Dresden pestering the captain for no reason. “Don’t bother. I talked to him.” *Sort of.* Part of Regulus wanted to yell and accuse and blame, but he’d made his choice. Too bad that didn’t make his back hurt any less. “Just...keep your head down for a while. And pay better attention to your shifts, Jakobs.” He hesitated. “And maybe invite me next time you run off to have fun.” He’d meant it to come out jocular to lighten the mood, but his bitterness bled through, anyway.

“See, I would,” Drez said, sounding unconcerned with Regulus’ sour attitude, “but your stiffness around the ladies is off-putting. Your refusal to get too close to a lady you see no chance of marrying ruins all the fun.”

Regulus’ snort came out more of a grunt. “Excuse me if I don’t want to bring any more bastards or fatherless children into the world.” Every word pulled at his back, and he wished Dresden would go to sleep already. How was Regulus ever going to get up in time for the pre-dawn shift? He should have let his stupid pride go.

“Kissing a girl won’t get her pregnant, you stick-in-the-mud.”

“Just go to sleep,” Regulus grumbled. *Please.*

Something metallic clinked, like coins spilling, and Dresden cursed. “Where’s the lantern?”

“Clean it up in the morning.” *No. I can’t. I can’t deal with him finding out right now. Etiros, please, not now.*

“Yeah, if I want to put a hole in my foot,” Dresden said. “She gave me her brooch, and if I step on that pin in the morning, I won’t be happy.”

*Always a girl*, Regulus thought irritably. *And maybe you deserve a pin in your foot*. He was immediately glad he hadn't voiced that thought. Flint rasped, and Regulus' panic mounted. He didn't want Dresden to see him like this. In the morning, he could cover his wounds, and Dresden wouldn't need to know how bad it was.

"Then feel for it," Regulus said. "I'm tired, and I don't want a light."

"Then turn your head," Dresden snapped back.

"Leave the light and go to sleep!"

The lantern sparked, and Regulus turned his head away, internally cursing. He stared at his shadow on the tent wall. Maybe Dresden wouldn't look over.

"What is your..." Dresden went silent.

So he'd looked. Regulus' face heated. "I told you to leave the light."

After a moment, Dresden croaked out, "Were you lashed?"

"Whatever gave it away," Regulus intoned drily, trying to ignore his pain and embarrassment.

"Why?" Horror filled Dresden's voice. He wasn't going to be happy when he learned the truth, and Regulus wasn't certain he had the energy to explain.

"Find your precious brooch and go to sleep."

There was a very long pause in which Dresden didn't move. When he spoke again, his voice cracked. "Regulus. Tell me those weren't my lashes."

Well, Regulus couldn't tell him that.

"Why would you do that, you idiot?"

*Because as much as this hurts...at least I don't have to live with the guilt of knowing you were whipped because I had the brilliant idea of becoming mercenaries. Because you're my*

*brother, and that makes you my responsibility, and I should have had your back before you even left camp.* But all Regulus said was, “Go to sleep.”

“I’ll be back.” Dresden fumbled to his feet. “I’m getting fresh water to clean your back. You still have that watered wine? I’ll cut up some bandages once you’re clean. I... Regulus, why?”

Regulus watched the flicker of lanternlight on the tent canvas. “I’m working on a full-body scar collection.”

“That’s not funny.”

Regulus thought it was a little funny, but he didn’t trust his tangled emotions enough to say anything more, and he was tired of talking and irritating his wounds.

Dresden left and returned several minutes later with fresh water and news about Ivan hassling him about Regulus’ lashing. *That won’t do*, Regulus thought as Dresden cleaned and bandaged his back. *It was supposed to protect Drez.*

The cleaning and bandaging hurt like hell, but he gritted his teeth and made it through. Dresden insisted on taking Regulus’ morning shift, and despite his pride, Regulus was grateful. He wanted to sink into unconsciousness for as long as possible.

He’d been right about one thing: Dresden hated what Regulus had done. Drez promised to be on his best behavior, but that didn’t matter to Regulus nearly as much as something else Drez said.

Something Regulus had been wrong about.

*“I didn’t like being the servant boy... But I hated the Kimberlys, never you... That’s why I’m still here. Because you’re my friend...”*

There was no lie or hidden resentment in Dresden's words. As Regulus drifted to sleep, the ache in his back seemed to lessen.

Whatever their pasts, whatever either of their faults might be...it was comforting to know Dresden was just as loyal and cared just as much as Regulus did.

Maybe an unwanted bastard whose only friend had called him *master* for years didn't deserve that friendship. But Regulus was going to hold onto it, anyway.

*"People are the only thing that matter in this world,"* his mother used to tell him, over and over again. *"How you treat people matters more than how they treat you. You love people, and you've succeeded more in this life than kings and generals."*

And if Regulus didn't have his friends, all he had was his deadly skill with a blade. His ability to hurt. Without his friend...

He had nothing that truly mattered.