

A Soldier's Life

Chapter 118: Aerial Ballet

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The wyvern made the drake look small in comparison as they positioned themselves with the blue backdrop. Sebastian turned hard and low as he flew his drake among the scattered trees. The wyvern did not pursue but instead landed at the base of the tree where the summoner was. Konstantin and I huddled under the lower branches for cover, with a narrow window on the scene in the distance. The summoner emerged from the tree and stood before the wyvern that towered over him. Its serpentine neck got within feet of the brave summoner.

"How is that not a dragon?" I whispered with some awe and fear. Just the head of the red-burnt colored wyvern was larger than the summoner.

"I would guess that beast has a fifty-foot wing span," Konstantin said studiously. "Dragons can get much larger. Maybe we will get lucky, and the wyvern will eat the elf and leave my sword," he added with some hope. I was hoping he would eat the Master Mage myself so I wouldn't have to worry about his pursuit of his brother's collector.

The summoner seemed to converse with the beast before it bolted back into the air after Sebastian and his drake mount. The buffeting wind knocked the summoner to the ground. When the wyvern disappeared over a hill, I asked, "What should we do? If we go after the summoner and the wyvern returns, we will be caught in the open."

Konstantin considered and grumbled, "If I had my bow, I could easily hit him from here." I had multiple bows in my dimensional space, but taking one out would reveal to Konstantin the extended size of my space. I did have spare bowstrings in my space that I had forgotten about. The strings were small, and I had recovered enough aether to take them out. I moved the bundle of bowstrings to my hand and was about to hand it to Konstantin when a shriek echoed beyond the hills.

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Sebastian and his drake came speeding over the hill and targeted the elf. He barely got back under cover of the tree as the drake turned away and rose into the sky. Only seeing the drake, I asked in disbelief, "Did Sebastian defeat the wyvern?"

My question was answered when the dragonkin appeared again in pursuit of Sebastian. It was clear to see that the drake was faster and more agile than the wyvern. They both took to the skies in a display of aerial acrobatics. I had to admire Master Mage's riding skills. He would let the wyvern get near but prevent it from getting too close. The drake even puffed a thin stream of fire at the wyvern, scorching its head slightly on one clash. This only enraged the beast to pursue the wyvern with more intensity.

I placed the bowstrings in my pocket. If I gave them to Konstantin, then he might decide to take a shot at the wyvern, and the last thing I wanted was the attention of a fifty-foot-long dragonkin. "Why doesn't the wyvern just breathe fire in retaliation?" I asked.

Konstantin had an answer, "Wyverns cannot breathe fire. Only dragons and certain drakes." We watched the show through the thin canopy of fall leaves. After ten minutes, Konstantin said, "I think he is trying to wear it out. I am guessing, but it's much larger body would tire more quickly."

Minutes passed. "Why has he not led it away from here or toward the company and mage Zyna? I am guessing High Mage Zyna can kill it easily enough," I asked while pressing to the ground. Konstantin had been worried the summoner might see us, so we had both been lying prone and still for the last few minutes.

"I can't tell you the mind of the Master Mage, Eryk," Konstantin said, watching the aerial dance. "But...it looks like he is...that stupid bastard. I think he is trying to dominate its mind."

I rolled over to my back to look at the sky instead of craning my neck. The mage would position himself behind the wyvern and then pass close by, but he was not taunting the beast like I had thought earlier. It did look like he was trying to cast a spell...or use a spell form. Maybe Konstantin was right, and he was using mind magic on the creature.

"Will he succeed? How much longer until the company gets here?" I asked, watching the mage play cat and mouse with the massive dragon-like creature.

Konstantin watched the sky and surmised, "It would be quite the prize for him, and he wouldn't have to give the essence to Zyna. By keeping the battle over the tree, the summoner cannot escape either. Very tactical of Sebastian."

I decided the moment was right to hand Konstantin the bowstrings. He looked at them incredulous, "You had these the whole time?"

I brushed it off, "I just remembered I had them. They were in my dimensional space."

"Where did you get these?" He asked, pleasantly surprised as he immediately made to string his bow.

"Been carrying them around for a while," I said non-committedly. "Just don't go shoot at the wyvern and draw attention to us."

"I wouldn't do anything so foolish. Do you have any arrows? Most of my etchings are burnt," he said anxiously.

"No, just the strings. Arrows do not exist in my dimensional space." I said as he inspected his nine remaining arrows, pulling the three best out.

Konstantin started talking to himself, "One hundred and twenty paces. The wind is light from the left." He notched his bow and studied the summoner under the tree, who was also watching the aerial combat.

The summoner did not seem to know what to do with himself; he couldn't see, or Sebastian could make another attack against him. The summoner walked two steps to the right to get a better view, and Konstantin launched his arrow. He missed high as the arrow whizzed over the summoner's head by inches. Konstantin already had a second arrow notched, and evaluating how he missed, he launched the second. The summoner had only turned at the sound of the arrow. The second arrow struck into his arm, pinning it to his side. Konstantin had launched the third arrow, but the summoner had already fallen to the ground and scurried behind his tree trunk. "Fortuna's cursed luck. If he had not turned, that arrow would have pierced his heart."

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I studied the sky to see if Konstantin's attack had drawn the combatants' attention. It looked like they had missed the few seconds of action and were still in their dance. The summoner was slumped against the far side of the tree. "I bet he has a healing potion," I said.

"He still would need to pull out that arrow first, and he has no leverage to do so," Konstantin was searching for his remaining arrows, but the rebal had damaged them all.

"Look," I nudged Konstantin's focus skyward. The wyvern was diving down and landed heavily a quarter mile away, well on the other side of the tree the summoner was hiding behind. "We should run..."

"I agree," and Konstantin gained his feet and ran to the summoner. I was going to say we should run back to get the company. Instead, I had to follow Konstantin in what amounted to a suicide charge if the wyvern spotted us. I thought seriously about not joining him, but my feet took me after him for some reason.

It did not take much effort to catch up to him. As I passed him, I said, "If this gets me killed, I will haunt you till the end of time."

I reached the summoner first, and he was struggling to remove the arrow. He jolted in surprise, and pain laced his face at my appearance. I did not hesitate to press the point of my blade into his collarbone and down into his chest. He weakly grabbed at the sword, trying to stop it as blood oozed out of his mouth because I had pierced the lung. He dropped a potion in his other hand.

He was dead before Konstantin reached us. He was breathing heavily, and I took the potion on the ground, "I think he was going to drink this once he got the arrow out." Konstantin smiled as he broke the seal and drank the potion. The effect was immediate as his burned skin healed, fading away, and his knee gave an audible pop. While he was healing, I turned my sights to the wyvern.

The wyvern was on the ground, and Sebastian was still circling fifty yards overhead. The wyvern watched the drake almost hypnotically and did not look in our direction. Sebastian landed far away, and I could tell his own drake was exhausted. The wyvern appeared to be breathing heavily from the aerial pursuit. Had the Master Mage tamed the beast's mind?

It seemed to be a standoff, the mage assessing whether he had achieved success and the wyvern staring him down, waiting. Sebastian dismounted and started to walk cautiously toward the wyvern. Shit, he had really done it then. I could see him weaving spell forms between his hands as he approached, probably reinforcing whatever control he had. The wyvern studied him as he stopped about twenty yards away. It lowered its head in a show of submissiveness.

Konstantin seemed to notice what was going on for the first time. He had busy freeing the blade on the summoner's hip—Konstantin's missing runic weapon. I certainly hoped all his tenacity in the chase was not so that he could reclaim his weapon, but by the euphoric look in his eyes, I guessed that might be the reason. He gruffly said, "Looks like the mage did it. His standing in the Empire will rise if he commands that creature."

Sebastian stopped approaching the wyvern, and I could see the confusion on his face even at two hundred yards away. He stepped back as the wyvern raised its head and smiled? Sebastian whistled for his mount and turned to run, but he was too far away now from the drake. The wyvern bounded two steps, shaking the earth and swallowing him whole. Blue arcs of defensive magic arched in its mouth, but that did not matter in the beast's powerful jaws.

Konstantin elbowed me as I was gawking, "Time to go." I was sickly enthralled with the crunching of bone. The drake charged the greater beast and was quickly slammed to the ground, trapped under its claw. It snapped at the wyvern's leg, but it was helpless. "Eryk!" Konstantin hissed, already twenty yards away. He was no longer crippled and moving with his usual speed.

I took a step back, and the wyvern turned its head. The eyes told me this creature was not some mindless beast even at this distance. I turned to run and catch up with Konstantin. I heard the shriek of the drake before its life was snuffed out and then a terrible crash. I looked behind me to find the tree that the summoner's body was under had been knocked over, and the wyvern was studying the body. I had not even extracted my blade.

"Run faster!" I heard Konstantin yell from in front of me. We were a quarter mile from the dense evergreen forest. I was running at my best speed, but visions of the wyvern came down and inhaled me in one bite played in my mind. Was it odd that both brothers had died to their own overconfidence hubris?

Somehow, Konstantin was faster than me, and I couldn't blame him for not waiting for me. Did I have enough aether to move the creature's head into my dimensional space? Maybe, but it was crowded in there. Maybe a cubic yard of space—what body part, then? The heart—no, I would be dead before it mattered. It had to be the brain before it swallowed me. That was the only out.

I looked behind me, and the dragonkin was taking flight and coming after me. I did not doubt that. I told myself not to look and just run faster. The false safety of the pine forest was just steps away. The pine trees were suddenly in a gale of wind in front of me as the wyvern landed, crashing into some branches and shaking the ground as it cut off my escape.

The ground had lurched from the landing of the multi-ton beast, helping me stop. My heart beat so loud in my mind I couldn't hear anything. The false scene in front of me seemed too surreal. An arrow shattered on the back of the beast's head. "Konstantin, run!! Don't worry about me!!" I yelled at him even though I could not see him. A second arrow shattered, and the wyvern didn't even turn around. It just studied me like a mouse.

At least the creature had not just crushed me from above. "You prefer to play with your food? Well, bring it on!" I said with bravado. No more arrows came, and I hoped Konstantin was running. I did not want him to see this. I just needed the wyvern to get a little closer.

A voice echoed in my mind, "You killed Vaeril, my apprentice?" Intuitively, I understood that it was not the wyvern but someone talking through the wyvern.

My heart thudded, "Traeliorn?" I asked, gulping. Shit, if he was inside or controlling the wyvern, would it count as joined aetheric resistance? Would I be able even to use spatial power on the creature's brain?

The voice echoed again, angrier, "Did you kill my apprentice?" The large black eyes of the wyvern had a depth to them as they studied me.

How should I answer the powerful summoner behind the impossibly formidable creature? "Yes." My answer was dry and factual. Even if I said no, he would not let me go. A large scaled claw stepped forward, bringing the head closer on its craning neck.

The voice echoed again, "Then legionnaire, know that it was I who sent you to your afterlife for your crime, Traeliorn Kelran, Vaeril's teacher and friend." The wyvern roared unnecessarily and lunged with its powerful legs, and extended its neck at me to close on me. I focused on the skull's interior and moved a large piece to my dimensional storage. It was a strong tug-of-war with the creature's resistance—I immediately knew it was just the creature, not the mage. The struggle hung in time, but I succeeded in claiming the brain. Unfortunately, the momentum of the wyvern's lunge slammed into my body.

I heard my bones crack, and I was sent flying with a tumult of earth and stone as the beast collapsed into the soft earth. My only fortune was I had not been trapped under the body when it struck me. My aether was bottomed out, and I had no potions on my person. I was also in severe shock as I realized my hand didn't work and my wrist was at the wrong angle.

As the pain started to ebb back into my consciousness, my only thought was I had killed a dragon—well, something that looked like a dragon. I laughed aloud, but the act enhanced the pain throughout my body and caused me to black out.

