

A Soldier's Life

Chapter 119: Broken

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I was cold. My body felt like I was left out in the snow naked. I was in the barn that I had arrived in this world. I was naked, and the air was freezing. My skin was goosebumped, and I felt like I was frozen solid, unable to move. I tried to force myself to move, and pain erupted through my whole body.

The barn door rattled, and my eyes focused on the light bleeding through the corners. The door suddenly burst into a thousand pieces, and a massive wyvern was perched at the entrance. My eyes shot open, and I stared at the sky. My body felt hot and cold at the same time, and I felt weaker than a mouse. I tried to move, but that was not going to work.

The pain was real but hidden behind a curtain of shock. I checked on my aether. I had been unconscious for about an hour based on my aether core recovery. I used my self-healing spell form to explore my injuries.

My heart was still pumping, and I was not bleeding anywhere on the outside. My chest cavity had blood from a lacerated spleen and liver—the most serious injuries. At least, I assumed that organ was my spleen. I healed that first. I then used as little aether as I could to work over my other damaged organs. I left the broken bones alone for now, as living through this was more important. I had essentially been hit by a bus—not a speeding bus. If I had not woken up, I would have died.

A massive breeze of foul air washed over me. I craned my neck up a little. The wyvern was twenty feet away and still breathing, its chest rising shallowly and falling. Panic and fear welled up, but as my vision focused, its eyes were wide, bloody orbs, and a steady pool of blood was coming out its nostrils. The wyvern's brain had forgotten to tell the body it was dead. Well, that part of that brain must be in my dimensional space.

I relaxed on the ground. This was actually good news. Maybe if it was still breathing, I could harvest its essence later. I still had the essence given to me by Zyna from the hill giant. I reached into my space, brought it into my hand, and immediately dropped it. That wrist was broken and was a swollen mass of blood. I focused on aligning the bones and repairing the damage. While I was at it, I healed some cracked ribs that had been making breathing difficult. Not that I noticed.

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I did not finish before I ran out of aether, but I could search in the grass and collect the essence sphere. I had been planning to save this major essence of constitution for Ginger, but I needed it more right now. I placed it in my mouth and savored the tingly feeling spreading throughout my body. It was not going to heal me, but it should minimally help increase my body's ability to heal.

I relaxed into the grass, no longer worried I was going to die. Where was Konstantin? How much did he see? He had shot those arrows from quite a distance. It made me feel good that he had not abandoned me until the last possible moment. Once he saw the wyvern lunge at me, he probably assumed I was dead.

I waited for my aether to recover with my eyes closed, trying not to fall asleep. The breaths of the wyvern got further and further apart. When I did not hear an exhalation, followed by the foul air of its breath, I moved to get up.

Sitting up was not pleasant as I had a lot of healing yet to complete. Standing was not in the cards at the moment as I crawled to the creature's head. I had enough aether to remove the collector and use it. The head of the wyvern was larger than a horse, and memories of Sebastian being consumed and chewed like a piece of gum had me hesitate in approaching. Air exhaled from the lungs again, very slowly, but the blood dripping from the nostrils had coagulated and was no longer flowing.

Leaning against the head, I placed the collector on top like a memorial death crown. I channeled aether into it and stepped back as the azure mist swirled from the body. The massive creature shivered like it was resisting its life force being taken from it. I watched as the collected wobbled slightly, the beast shuddering in its fight against the collector. More essence was drawn than normal—maybe because it was still alive.

An apex essence formed and rolled onto the ground. The beast's abdominal cavity slowly collapsed as it loosed its final breath. It had been holding onto life like any creature would. Now, it was dead. I picked up the unfamiliar sphere—azure blue with white swirls. A two-tone meant it was most likely an essence for a magic affinity. I used the head to help me stand and leaned against the creature while I rested.

If Konstantin or the company found me right now, I would look pretty badass. Of course, walking was going to be a chore. As aether became available, I started working on my hip joint. The socket where my femur sat in my pelvis was a mess.

Thankfully, I did not need to be a doctor to figure things out. I just needed to know where the issue was and direct the healing spell form at it.

I took a tentative step. Then another. I healed some ligaments in my knee to eliminate a limp. I collected my helm nearly a hundred feet away. Then went to the dead summoner's apprentice. It had been almost two hours since I had killed him. I tried the collector anyway, and it did not trigger. Extracting my blade from the body took a little work, and I cleaned it in the grass.

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I searched his person for another healing potion and found three different potions secured on his belt. All were labeled in elvish, so I was curious to know if they were healing potions. I sent the potions, the collector, the two blades from the elf woman, and the apex essence into my dimensional space. I pulled out a canteen and filled it with rum from my space.

I sat down next to the dead summoner and drank. It had a mellow sweetness, but I was drinking it more for the alcohol to get the numbness of being drunk. After a few swigs, I offered the summoner some, but he was uninterested. I was waiting for Castile and the others to find me. I switched to water, not wanting to get completely drunk in case I needed my faculties. I healed injuries but kept enough aether available in case Traeliorn sent another creature after me.

I removed the baron's son's sleeping roll at sunset from my space. I weaved my way into the branches of the tree the wyvern had knocked over and set up a place to sleep. I figured any creature trying to get to me would have to break the branches and wake me. The alcohol made falling asleep easy enough after an extremely stressful day. I woke once during the night to an owl that was curiously sitting on a branch, hooting at me. I tossed a stick at it, and it flew away to leave me in peace.

I was up with the morning sun and continued my healing until I could move without pain. Zyna must have decided a fight with the wyvern was too difficult without the drakes, as they had yet to arrive. Konstantin would have told her that Sebastian and I were made into wyvern snacks. I started to backtrack from the direction we had chased the elves.

I searched the ravine to see if the company had come and searched it. There were no footprints other than mine and the drakes. The company had not come looking for me. They must have assumed I was dead. I climbed out of the ravine, found a broad stream, and cleaned myself. I had been bathed in earth and stone when the wyvern came up short of ending my life.

I remained on alert as Konstantin had taught me as I contemplated. I might be able to sneak away. If everyone thought I was dead, then it shouldn't be too hard to ditch my legionnaire armor and make my way... Where would I go? East was the Bartradians. North and west were the orcs. South, there was a massive and dangerous mountain range. But on the other side of that range were the older kingdoms of Desia.

A deep voice intoned from behind a rock, "Eryk, is that really you?" I almost jumped in surprise but didn't. I just pretended that I had heard the goliath sneak up on me.

"You know, Maveith, you shouldn't disturb someone when they are bathing. I thought you were a goblin coming to steal my boots." I looked up at the goliath on the rocks twenty yards away.

He narrowed his eyes, "You did not hear me, and I would not sound like a skulking goblin if you did hear me." I shrugged at his annoyance at being compared to a goblin.

"So, where is everyone?" I asked conversationally.

Maveith walked cautiously down to the water but stood a dozen paces away. He sat on a stone and studied me, "Konstantin told everyone that a wyvern ate Master Mage Sebastian and you as well. Zyna was not prepared to fight a wyvern the size Konstantin described. Especially without support in the air."

"So, are they camped nearby then?" I inquired while putting on my damp clothes.

"They headed back to Sobral. Konstantin said you killed the summoner we were pursuing." He finally seemed to believe I was not a ghost, and he relaxed and sat on a boulder.

"Why are you here then?" I asked.

Maveith's brow furrowed, "I was going to see if there was anything left of you and return it to the earth."

"You came to bury my body parts?" I laughed at the absurdity of it.

Maveith did not see the humor. "Mateo said you were too lucky to get killed by a dragon look-alike. He said bringing you down would have taken a real dragon. Benito even started a betting pool that you would walk out of the woods smelling like you had just taken a bath." He looked me over, "I guess he was right." I just laughed again.

"How far behind the company are we?" I asked as I finished dressing and feeling much better without dirt in every crevice of my body.

Maveith stood as well, "They left this morning, so they are maybe half a day ahead now, but Zyna had them moving at a fast pace. I marched with them until they took a break and wandered off into the woods after telling Flavius where I was going. He said he would give an excuse for my absence. I hoped to bury your remains and reach them during the night."

"Well, thank you, I guess. We should get moving then," I stood and started walking, and Maveith fell in beside me.

There was a silence for a long time before his curiosity overwhelmed him. "What happened?"

I had been waiting for the question. "You remember the female manticore?"

"You poisoned the wyvern?" Maveith said in disbelief.

"Yes, I did the same thing to the wyvern that I did to the manticore," I said truthfully. Maveith was surprised but seemed to believe me.

After a time, I asked, "Maveith, when you left Stone Mountain Island, you must have been to a lot of places in your travels. Tell me about them. Why did you normally choose to live in the woods north of Sobral."

Maveith did not want to be reminded of the reason he led his people, but he eventually answered. "The truth was this was as far away as I could get, and living alone in the woods seemed like a suitable punishment. I spent most of my time on ships getting here but did explore some of the more interesting port cities."

I listened to Maveith talk enthusiastically about the cities he visited as we walked to sunset. We camped together in a small shallow cave. I felt relatively well rested, so I took the first watch. Neptune's Tear blue light illuminated the woods below. Tomorrow, we would catch up with the company if we push. How was I going to explain my miraculous survival to them?