

A Soldier's Life

Chapter 120: Revenant

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In the morning, we made our way to catch up to the company. I was having some trepidation about answering questions about my miraculous survival. No one had seen the dead wyvern, and I probably should not have told Maveith I had poisoned the beast as he had trouble with the idea of lying. I also should not have healed all my injuries. Maybe if I returned like I had been put through a meat grinder, they would have thought my escape was more probable.

I paused to check the ground and read the passing of the company, "Maveith, these prints are dry near the stream. I don't think we are going to catch them today. They are going to beat us back to Sobral. Do you want to detour to your cabin?"

Maveith contemplated before answering, "We can make the Citadel by dark. I think perhaps we should do that. Your company will want to know you are alive as soon as possible."

I thought I would be fine with Castile and the others in the company, but I was slightly worried about High Mage Zyna's reaction to seeing me alive after facing a wyvern. She was obviously much more important and had more sway as a First Citizen. I didn't argue with Maveith, and we slightly increased our pace to make the Citadel by dark. In the end, we arrived a few hours after dark. The gate guards let us through after conferring with their captain. I assumed word of my return would reach Tasevia, the Duchess' gate captain.

I went to the northwest tower to sleep in the bed there. The four beds we had hauled up here were still there, and Flavius and Konstantin occupied two. Only a dim glowstone lit the room. I backed out into the stairway and stopped Maveith from coming up the stairs. I whispered, "Maveith, I want to play a little joke on Konstantin. Can you help?"

Maveith did not look like he wanted to play along, so I added, "Just pretend you cannot see or hear me. I want Konstantin to think I am haunting him from beyond."

Maveith processed what I said, "Like an apparition?" I nodded and motioned him to be quieter as his deep voice echoed around the stone stairs.

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I had Maveith go in first, and both Flavius and Konstantin stirred to see the goliath before getting up. Konstantin mumbled, "Did you find anything left, Maveith?" I moved into the archway of the stairs and just stood there.

Maveith was quiet, trying to decide what to say. He rumbled, "I did not find a dead body."

Konstantin rolled over to look at Maveith, "The wyvern ate him. I told you would find nothing." I wanted to jump up and down and draw Konstantin's attention to me but remained quiet.

Flavius said in a low tone, "Your loyalty and bravery in looking for your friend is admirable, goliath. Get some rest. The pain of loss will be temporary." That was surprisingly nice for Flavius to say. Maybe the news of Sebastian's death had loosened him up a little.

I scuffed my feet and nearly broke into a grin as Konstantin rolled over to look in the archway. His eyes slowly widened in surprise and fear. He rolled off the bed and was drawing his runic blade, "Revenant!!" He yelled.

Flavius turned and reached for his own weapon. "Maveith, arm yourself!!" Flavius yelled as the stationary goliath.

Maveith turned slowly to face the door, "What? I don't see anything unusual." The grin on his face told me he was enjoying this. On the other hand, I was doubting my joke was going over as well as I had hoped. Both experienced legionnaires looked ready to kill me. Flavius was already notching an arrow.

I put up my hands, "Don't kill me. I have had a really bad few days."

"Maveith, did you bring back an animated corpse," Konstantin rasped angrily at the goliath.

"What? I don't see a corpse. Is something wrong?" Maveith said mechanically, still enjoying the game and pretending I was not here.

"Joke is over, Maveith," I said nervously. "They might actually kill me if they think I am some undead creature."

Maveith nodded in agreement, ending the joke. "I didn't find a dead Eryk. I found a live Eryk," Maveith said triumphantly, pointing at me.

Konstantin looked incredulous at Maveith, "Impossible. Eryk or whatever you are, move to that wall." He pointed with his sword. "Flavius, go get Castile," he ordered. After I moved out of the stairway, Flavius rushed off to get Castile.

I was seeing the downside of my joke going awry. After Flavius left, Konstantin did not relax; instead, he moved to the stairs. "What happened then? I saw the wyvern lunge at you. You were as good as dead."

This was a lot harder than I thought it would be in my mind. "The Elven High Mage Traeliorn was controlling the wyvern. That was how he fooled Master Mage Sebastian into thinking he had control of the wyvern. He talked to me through the creature."

Konstantin's eyes narrowed some. "And how are you alive? Did you bargain with him?"

Well, at least Konstantin was not calling me a liar—a traitor, yes—liar, no. I leaned against the wall to appear relaxed. "Why don't we wait till Castile gets here so I don't have to explain things twice?" That would also make sure I didn't actually change my story.

Konstantin just turned to Maveith and said, "Where did you find him?"

Maveith answered, "I was following the trail to the wyvern, and I found him bathing in a shallow stream on the way. He said I sounded like a goblin when I snuck up on him." Maveith shook his head, still upset that I said he sounded like a goblin.

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Konstantin rubbed his forehead like he was getting a headache. He still had his runic sword in his hand, ready to defend himself. During his time in the Hounds, I knew he hunted various creatures that could change shape, so I was not too surprised he was skeptical I was me. He studied me, "If it is you, Eryk, I am glad you are alive, but things are not good. Master Mage Sebastian was a very important mage in the Empire. A favorite of the Emperor. His death is going to have consequences."

Castile arrived in a nightshirt with her boots on a moment later. She was breathing heavily like she had run here. Her eyes went wide, "Dragon shit. It's true."

"Don't get excited. I am still not sure it is actually our lost legionnaire. He might be an undead or a shapeshifter," Konstantin said doubtfully. His voice was laced with skepticism as he added, "He has not told me how he survived."

Castile looked me up and down, "Well, I am sure it will be an interesting story. Let me confirm he is not an undead." Konstantin's grip tightened on his sword as Castile closed her eyes. Flavius was in the archway for the stairs and was also ready to respond.

When Castile opened her eyes, she spoke, "Not an undead, and his aether core is familiar. I think it is legionnaire Eryk. Now, Eryk, please explain." Her eyes danced in happiness or maybe amusement. I couldn't tell.

Konstantin relaxed visibly, which I was glad about. "The summoner was controlling the wyvern. Not the apprentice summoner we were chasing, but Traeliorn Kelran." Castile's eyes rose skeptically. I added, "The mage talked to me through the wyvern."

Castile settled into a chair, falling heavily and going into thought, "It would make sense. We learned the wyvern was attacking a village far to the north. It suddenly stopped and flew hard south. The apprentice must have communicated with Traeliorn and asked for help." Castile was thinking hard. She finally looked up. "What happened to the wyvern then?"

"It is dead." I knew they would want more than that, "I poisoned it when it got close. It was so close I could touch it. I placed poison in its mouth, and it didn't even realize it." I looked at Konstantin, Flavius, and then Maveith to my left. Castile knew I could heal, but they did not. "I was mortally wounded as it crushed me in its death throes." I thought about lying and saying I had healing potions, but that would lead to more questions. "I was barely able to heal myself—it took me over half a day since I have so little aether."

Castile nodded slowly. Konstantin was exasperated, "You have a healing spell form?" I was surprised Konstantin was more angry about not knowing I had a spell form than the fact I just said I used poison.

Castile gave him a sharp look, "He can only heal himself." A look of realization came across his face as he pieced things together from the past.

He whispered to himself, "The aqueduct...the run to the capital..."

Castile focused on me, asking hopefully, "Did you get Sebastian's collector?"

"Did I what?" I asked, perplexed. Then I remembered that Sebastian had a collector. I had not thought about searching inside the wyvern for Sebastian's body. "No, I did not. It was not on his body when the wyvern ate him. It must have been on his drake. The wyvern killed the drake, too. It might still be there."

Konstantin sheathed his blade, realizing how foolish he looked holding a sword at me. "I can get there and back in three days," he volunteered, his eyes still on me. I knew he also wanted to verify my story.

Castile considered Konstantin's offer, and Flavius extended his services, saying, "I can go with him." Great, there were two of them that wanted to verify my story.

"Yes. Recover Sebastian's body for the Emperor. Get the collector if you find it. I will send a message to High Mage Zyna that the wyvern has been killed, and we are attempting to recover Sebastian's body," Castile said, still thinking.

"The High Mage is not in Sobral?" I questioned. I probably had too much relief in my voice and tightened up.

"No, High Mage Zyna rode hard to a portal to get back to the capital. She needs to explain and account for Master Mage Sebastian's death," Konstantin interjected.

"Will Octavian cause you trouble again?" I asked, concerned.

"Unlikely," Castile said. "High Mage Zyna was in charge of the hunting party. The fault is with her. If they choose to investigate and call a Tribunal, you and Konstantin may have to go before the Truthseekers."

Even from the grave, Sebastian was still causing me anxiety. I nodded to Castile. Konstantin started packing for his expedition. Flavius joined him. "What do you need me to do?" I asked, still feeling under the microscope. I had a feeling Konstantin and Flavius were going to go over the battle site with a fine toothcomb. I did not leave any evidence that I could remember.

Castile stood and smiled, "Rest, Eryk. I am sure the company is going to be shocked to see you at breakfast. Once Konstantin and Flavius return, we will take the company to the Ruins of Caelora."

"Shit," escaped my mouth before I could hold it in. "The Scholar found enough evidence the dungeon is in the city?"

Castile arched her eyebrow and smirked, "You are remarkably well informed. Yes, there is a dungeon near Caelora called the Shimmering Labyrinth. Maybe it is even inside the city. Scholar Favian is still not sure if it is viable. It was still being delved when the city fell some fifteen hundred years ago, so we assume it is still there."

"How are we going to deal with the specters?" I said, concerned. I had a nightmare about our company being ambushed inside the city, and now it was coming true.

Castile smiled tightly, obviously not happy, "The Duchess has managed to get fifty runic arrows, three runic blades, and a kettle of souls."

I thought the Duchess was poor. That sounded like a major investment. While I was pondering this, Castile left the room. Konstantin and Flavius left in the middle of the night, saying they couldn't waste time as there was always a chance someone could loot the site. In the morning, I went to breakfast in the barracks early. Lirkin was preparing the company's breakfast, and I hid in a hallway and waited.

A lot of solemn, whispered conversations were happening at the table. When everyone was sitting at the table and eating, including Castile, Adrian, and Delmar, I walked out and sat at the table next to Benito, "Can you pass the potatoes?" I asked innocently.

"Sure thing, Eryk," Benito said, handing me the potato bowl after taking two for himself. Benito kept eating away, but silence slowly spread throughout the dining table as all eyes focused on me. Delmar and Adiran's grins told me they had already been informed of my resurrection. Benito was oblivious as he kept eating until Felix elbowed him. "What was that for?" Benito whined while rubbing his ribs.

Felix said with all seriousness, "A dead man is sitting next to you."

With all eyes on me, I took a bite of the potato, "I can assure you. The rumor of my demise has been greatly exaggerated." Benito fell backward off the bench as realization struck him. Normally, the company would have laughed at Benito's misfortune, but instead, silence hung in the room as I enjoyed my potato.