

## **A Soldier's Life - Chapter 121: Flavius and Konstantin (Epilogue)**

The early morning sun was showing, but the forest was in a mild fog of late fall as two men in crimson armor jogged through the woods. One was scouting left and the other right as they progressed in harmony. Flavius, on the right, asked, "You didn't know he could heal, did you?"

Konstantin did not say anything for a mile as they raced toward the site where the wyvern had killed Master Mage Sebastian. Slightly out of breath, he finally responded to Flavius's question.

"No, I did not know he could heal himself."

There was silence between them for a time as Konstantin was trying to remember the battle at the aqueduct and replaying Eryk's actions in his mind while maintaining his alertness. Flavius asked another question, "Where is Eryk from? Someone told me Tsinga, but he is awfully pale and tall for being from that southern kingdom."

Konstantin had them halt with a hand motion and take cover as a giant elk grazing appeared ahead. It raised its massive rack to study the two men. Elks were dangerous this time of year as they were rutting and fiercely defending their territory. They moved to the right in unison to avoid the beast. "He is from Tsinga—some backwater village. Appearances do not mean much. There are always outliers," Konstantin said, defending Eryk.

When the two men paused to refill their canteens, Konstantin had a question for Flavius, "Why did you want to come with me so badly? Do you owe Sebastian's family something?"

Flavius coughed on the water he was drinking, "No." He appeared to look over his shoulder like he might be heard, "I am glad he is dead, and seeing the body myself will quell some bad dreams. He had no family besides his brother—at least none I am aware of. I think a few illegitimate children are on his estate, but all his property will revert to Duke Ocavtian as it is in his province."

Konstantin paused as he processed the information, "I did not know that was where his estate was located. I heard he had quite the menagerie of creatures."

Flavius was removing his boots to check his feet, "Durandus regularly visited his brother. He raised the drakes for the Emperor's Dragon Legion. Fire, ice, and smoke drakes mostly."

"Smoke drakes?" Konstantin questioned the unfamiliar creature.

“Smaller black drakes that are too small to ride,” Flavius informed him. “They have shiny dark gray-black scales with red glowing eyes. They breathe a dark, fiery cloud of black smoke. Malicious creatures that suffocate their prey to kill them. Sebastian only had a pair of them but used them to hunt, relishing in the drake’s manner of killing.”

“I heard that Master Mage Sebastian was malicious,” Konstantin said.

Flavius grunted in affirmation, “He has a pack of dire wolves that he hunts with as well. Mage Durandus joined him once when we hunted down a carriage with a baron and his family that betrayed the Emperor. I tell the truth when I say Sebastian was smiling as his pets tore apart the man and his family. He took pleasure in their cries of pain.”

No more words were spoken as they soon continued their run. It was just before sunset when they arrived in familiar terrain. Konstantin had them pause. “The mage and his companion dropped their packs here when they ran. They should be around here somewhere.”

The two men circled the area and approached the ravine. “Did Eryk take the packs?” Flavius asked.

“No, maybe some goblins found them, but I do not see any tracks. Let us check down in the ravine. The summoner’s companion was killed by Sebastian’s drake down there.” Konstantin decided.

There was still enough light of the day to see as the two experienced men searched the area. The prints of the large drake were easily identified. “Dried blood on this rock. Eryk said the drake bit and tossed the smaller elf into the rocks. It was a female, probably a Ranger with some fire magic.” His hand ran unconsciously up to face.

“Curious, there is no body or signs of it being eaten or dragged away by scavengers. Maybe the elf had a healing potion. Eryk probably forgot to confirm the elf was dead.” Flavius commented.

“I was thinking the same thing. Eryk still needs training,” Konstantin said. He was carefully moving dried leaves aside to look at prints underneath. “The drake took to the air, and only Eryk left the ravine. But if the elf were a Ranger, she would have concealed her tracks.” He theorized.

They had spent too much time investigating the ravine, and Konstantin decided they would camp the ravine tonight. They split their time on the watch and were up at the first hint of sun to go to the site where the wyvern and drake had battled.

The wyvern lay at the edge of the pine forest, as Eryk has described. The smell of death hung lightly in the air and got stronger the closer they stepped cautiously closer. Both men were apprehensive about approaching the corpse of the gargantuan creature.

They circled from a distance, and Flavius commented, "I don't see any wounds on the creature."

"Eryk said he used poison to kill it. Oblivion pills," Konstantin grunted out.

"Oblivion pills? Four or five can kill a man, but a wyvern," Flavius said skeptically.

"He said he used a hundred," Konstantin reminded him, but his voice also sounded uncertain. He was having trouble seeing the wyvern, pausing over Eryk to gloat while the summoner controlled the creature.

They both found where Eryk had lay after getting rammed by the wyvern, his dried blood evident in the earth and grass. Neither spoke as they read the terrain independently. Konstantin finally said, "Let's go and check the drake and see if the collector is there. Should be on the other side of that felled tree."

When they reached the tree, the dead elf summoner had large maggots crawling all over his body. "Eryk killed the summoner?" Flavius asked apprehensively, kneeling to inspect the body.

"He did not hesitate if that is what you are insinuating. I disabled him with an arrow, and Eryk killed him before he could heal himself," Konstantin noted Eryk's prints around the site and a legionnaire canteen. He picked up the empty legion canteen and sniffed the contents, his face growing wide in surprise. Flavius looked up at his shock.

Konstantin smiled, shaking his head, handing him the canteen, "Alcohol, probably rum. I guess Eryk had it in his dimensional space for a special occasion. He said it took him half a day to heal himself. He probably needed it to kill the pain," Konstantin guessed.

Flavius searched the elf and handed some folded papers to Konstantin. Neither could read Elvish, so Konstantin just secured them. Konstantin muttered to himself about Eryk's failure to find the documents. They both walked to the drake. The throat had been ripped out, and the body was chewed on in many places. "Coyotes, wolves, or another scavenger," Flavius noted the corpse had been scavenged. "They are probably watching us as they are not done with it."

"They chose to scavenge this one rather than the wyvern as the scales were probably too difficult to get through." Konstantin thought, "Maybe the poison Eryk used scared them off the wyvern carcass as well."

Flavius nodded in understanding. They started to work the drake over to get the saddle bags underneath. As they worked, Flavius commented, "I heard the poison barb on the wyvern tail is a most deadly poison, and they are immune to it. Do you really think even one hundred oblivion pills could kill a beast that size?"

If you stumble upon this tale on Amazon, it's taken without the author's consent. Report it.

Konstantin grunted as he finally got the large saddle bag free. "I don't know. Eryk doesn't strike me as the type of person who thinks things through but has Fortuna sitting on his shoulder even when he is taking a shit." Flavius smirked slightly but erased the expression just as quickly as it appeared.

Konstantin was already digging through the pack and pulling out the collector. He had a big smile on his face, and it looked undamaged. Flavius took the pack and emptied the remaining items, going through the contents: camping supplies, two spell books wrapped in oiled hide, and some coins. "What should we do with these," he indicated everything on the ground.

Konstantin was packing the collector and looked over. "Castile would have us split the coins, but still, we will give them to her first. She will probably want the magic books. Any essences?"

Flavius searched the pouch with the coins again, "No. I guess he consumed them as he got them. I know he rarely rewarded his legionaries with essences. I saw him give a few essences to this beast before, though," he kicked the mutilated fire drake. "His collector is not very efficient, rarely yielding an essence from smaller creatures. I remember the two mage brothers arguing about it all the time when they were together. Sebastian was always envious of Durandus' dungeon collector. One of the best in the Empire. Strange how it disappeared." Flavius glanced sideways, judging Konstantin's reaction, but he had none.

"Well, this is better than having no collector. We still need to retrieve the body." Both men looked over at the wyvern carcass.

When they got closer, Flavius walked to the head and inspected it, "Looks like a lot of blood dried and pooled here, maybe from the mouth or nostrils? Can obviation pills do that?"

"Lots of poisons can destroy organs and cause bleeding." Said off-handedly.

"I think I will ask an alchemist if obviation pills can cause something like this," Flavius said contemplatively. He was studying Konstantin for a reaction but once again Konstantin did not seem concerned.

Konstantin had his enchanted blade out and was cutting into the throat of the dead wyvern. Grunting, he noted, "Pity we did not have more men here to harvest this creature. It might have solved the Duchess' coin problems."

"Unlikely, this is the Emperor's land. She couldn't claim it," Flavius said.

Konstantin glanced at him sidelong, "How many times has Sebastian not reported the facts about harvests and essences?"

Flavius huffed a short laugh and shrugged, "Point taken." Mage commanders have always had a lot of leeway in the Empire.

"Some, not all," Konstantin said tersely.

Konstantin worked his blade from the chest to the abdomen; working the blade between scales and cutting the hide was difficult work. He then had to fight through muscles and fascia to get to the organs.

As Konstantin worked, Flavius continued to explore around the creature. He saw movement on the edge of the woods and prepared his bow, "Konstantin, a few wolves are watching us. Don't think they will bother us." A few minutes later, the wolves were gone, "I know wyvern hide is prized for leather bindings on books and cloaks. Should we take some?"

"You can if you want to spend the time, Flavius, go ahead. I am already not looking forward to carrying back Sebastian's body as it is," Konstantin grumbled as he was arm deep in the abdominal cavity. The cold liver came out first, blood still flowing as it had not coagulated without access to air. This turned Konstantin's arms, armor, and clothes red as he had to clear the massive liver away to reach the bloated stomach. Flavius did not volunteer to help as he was watching the treeline and was still trying to figure out exactly what had happened here that allowed Eryk to escape.

Konstantin reached the stomach and cut into the rubbery lining, and he dodged as a squirt of stomach bile was expelled from his incision. He made more holes to drain the yellow bile and partially digested contents. The air smelled putrid as he held in his gag reflex. He avoided touching the bile and finally cut a long line from the top to the bottom. A small wave of compressed bones and flesh spewed out onto the ground, emptying the stomach as the lower abdominal cavity relaxed in a swoosh and hiss. The acidic air made Konstantin's eyes water as he worked.

Flavius walked around to look at the mess. There was more than one body in the mess. "That one with the dark blue robes is Sebastian. He really is dead. Would never have believed it if I had not seen it with my own eyes."

The two men took to extracting the body from the mess. Two children, a man, and half a horse, were in partial phases of digestion mixed in the ball. Most of Sebastian's flesh and clothes sluffed off as they laid out the body. Konstantin noted, "The wyvern was attacking a village before it flew here. Guess these were some of the victims."

"Should we take the artificed items?" Flavius asked, indicating Sebastian's body. He had two bright gold rings, one on each hand, and a thick silver necklace. "These all look

like dungeon artifacts.” They both knew if that was true, they would be worth hundreds of gold each, if not more.

“We will pack them for Castile. If they are registered with the Collegium Scholarium, they may come looking for them,” Konstantin said while removing the three pieces.

“What does that mean?” Flavius asked, confused.

“Some powerful artifacts are documented with the Emperor’s College. If you have no descendants or family, they become the property of the Emperor,” Konstantin informed Flavius. “Part of the job of the Hounds is to track down these artifacts for the good of the Empire.” Konstantin also knew sometimes the Empire made sure there were no descendants to pass an artifact to, either through misfortune or the courts not recognizing them as a relation to the artifact’s previous owner.

He cleaned off each ring and the necklace with water from his canteen and placed them in his pack. The last thing they had to do was prepare the body of Sebastian for transport. “We should have brought the goliath to carry the body back,” Flavius said, not envying the task of carrying the dissolving corpse. “Can I borrow your sword? I want a souvenir from the wyvern—just a tooth.”

Konstantin looked at his blade. He had just gotten it back and did not want to loan it to Flavius, but they had worked well together so far. He had also spoken more words today than in the entire past week. He handed the runic weapon to Flavius. Flavius turned to work on the jaw, “I wanted to let you know, Konstantin, that Sebastian sent me to see if Eryk had his brother’s collector.”

Konstantin was immediately on guard by the statement but didn’t show it. He stepped back half a step, pretending to work on preparing for the return. “And?” He asked, unconcerned.

“Doesn’t matter now. The bastard is dead, but I think Eryk has it,” Flavius said as he was cutting into the gums. “He is smart enough to know when not to use it, but it is the only thing that makes sense. Nothing in the swamp would have taken it.”

“They searched his space when you were all questioned at the Mage Tribunal concerning Durandus’ death,” Konstantin said cautiously.

“Yes, but Eryk was not with us the entire time. When we got back to the city, he went and took a bath,” Flavius said, causing Konstantin to chuckle at Eryk’s love of being clean. Flavius pressed, “So he could have stashed it somewhere before and retrieved it after the tribunal.”

“Does it matter if he has it now?” Konstantin asked seriously but was considering a lot of things now. But Konstantin already knew the collector was one of the artifacts that the College of Scholars would want back with both mage brothers dead. It was a collector

made by a dungeon, much better than ones artificed by human hands. One that would have to be returned to the Emperor if no other family members claimed it.

Flavius shrugged, "No, I guess not," he got both hands on a large tooth and started wiggling it free with all his body weight. The tooth was ten inches long, giving him leverage. Blood flowed from the mouth as he worked. It finally popped and started to move. It still took twenty minutes, and the help of the runic weapon to free the tooth. Flavius returned the runic blade, and Konstantin relaxed his guard. It had been in the back of his mind that Flavius might use it on him.

Sweaty and tired from the effort, Flavius sat on the ground inspecting his prize, "I will send this to my daughter and tell her that her father slew a dragon," he said, smiling. Konstantin nodded, but taking the credit for someone else's kill was something he would never do.

The pair were soon headed back. Each of them had half of Sebastian's body on their backs, wrapped in an oiled tarp. When the body reached the capital, Konstantin knew that the Emperor would call on a Necromancer to talk to the deceased Master Mage to confirm how he died. It should help High Mage Zyna if there were any doubt she played a role in his death.

As they jogged, Flavius had pieced several things together. The wyvern had lunged at legionnaire Eryk and just died. It had crashed into him and tossed him a good distance after colliding with him. No poison killed instantly like that. That left only magic. He doubted Eryk was a powerful mage in disguise. If he were a powerful mage, joining the Legion of the Lion wouldn't make any sense. That meant he must have a powerful artifact on him that killed the wyvern.

With Sebastian dead, he had no one to relay his assumption to. He looked at Konstantin, who ran a few steps ahead to the left. Konstantin worked for a Praetorian Guard. Maybe he could use this information to get in the graces of his own Praetorian Master.

END OF BOOK 2