

A Soldier's Life
Chapter 113: Sebastian's Entrance

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The march on the road was mostly orderly. We kept three men abreast, spaced ten feet apart, with Castile, Adrian, and Delmar leading. We passed refugees headed to Sobral every few hours. The refugees found the most interesting thing about our company was Maveith. I had Maveith on my left and Brutus on my right, so it felt like every refugee was also staring at me. It felt like it had been a long time being part of the company since I had worked in small groups and foraged for the alchemist. The voices of everyone around me blended in a comforting background noise.

I noticed we had no scouts out as Konstantin was walking next to Firth, two rows ahead. Maveith was walking and working on sewing in the white leather lining to the manticore pouch. I didn't have the heart to tell him I didn't need it. After all, I had a dimensional space. We had marched about a dozen miles when we noted _____ve legionnaires were sitting in the road ahead. It was Flavius and the men he had been tasked with retrieving; Pascal, Remus, Cyrus, and Soren.

Remus was the only legionnaire from Mage Gregor's company that had survived Macha. He kept to himself, and I couldn't imagine how he felt losing his mage and everyone in his company. He was also easy to identify when we had our helms off as he was the ginger in the company.

The _____ve men were sitting on large blocks of rough-cut white marble stacked on the side of the road, and I could see a well-worn path heading into the woods. It looked like these were the province markers the men had been burying in the ground for weeks. Two buried markers on either side of the road reinforced my guess.

This must be where they started the project and delivered cut marble from the quarry. I did not see the point of all this effort to place these markers, but I guessed rich people in every world liked to remind people what was theirs.

We paused for a snack, and Blaze sat with Maveith, Brutus, and myself. "So those are the stones you have been burying in the ground? They look heavy," I patted the marble I was sitting on.

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Each marble block was roughly one-foot square and three feet in length. "Those blocks weigh as much as four men. You got to laze about and walk in the woods while we did all the real work, Eryk!" Blaze said with a half smile.

Maveith thought to inform him, and maybe he was defending me a little, "Eryk has been _____ghting manticores, ettins, and goblins. How many creatures have you killed since arriving, Brutus?"

Brutus laughed, "No need to take things so literally, goliath. I was joking! Everyone in the company knows if there is danger on the horizon, it is best to keep your distance from Eryk as it will surely _____nd him."

Maveith nodded slowly, "Do not worry, Eryk. If danger _____nds you, I will stand beside you to face it."

Brutus laughed, "You may not quite get humor, Maveith, but at least you are good at checkers."

Maveith reached for his pack, "I brought the game board. Do you want to play?" We all laughed, and after Brutus lost a game of checkers, Castile had us headed into the woods.

Flavius and Konstantin took off ahead of us, and I walked to Adrian and asked, "Should Maveith and I be scouting as well?"

Adrian looked to Castile, who gave a sharp nod, "No, with Falvius back, you don't need to. But with your new air shield, we would like to keep you close to Castile. I typically protect her right side and Delmar her left. We want you to protect her rear."

I nodded in understanding. "So, should I be marching with you then? At the front?"

Adrian con rmed, "When the sense of danger is in the air, yes."

Maveith was behind me and asked in his baritone, "What do you want me to do? I told Eryk I would stand with him."

Delmar turned his head to look at us as he walked next to Castile, "You can cover him with that monstrous bow of yours."

Maveith nodded, happy at the answer, and continued to focus on _____nishing the pouch. For having such large hands, he was doing such _____ne detail work in the stitching. The path was well-trodden, as they had carted dozens of stones into the woods. The men behind him were joking about the effort and how the donkey cart they used was constantly getting stuck.

The stones were buried with only about twelve inches showing. The white marble tops made a clear dotted line in the landscape. As we walked deeper, Flavius and Konstantin rotated back to the company. Being closer to Castile, I could overhear their reports. They mostly reported what type of tracks they found. So far, nothing dangerous.

As evening settled, we made camp in a clearing, and two long strips of white tarp were staked into the ground, making an X. Castile watched them work and informed me, "That is for Master Mage Sebastian. He is not due for a few days, but we will put it out when we stop to rest and camp. It has a light aether signature to it, so he can _____nd it easily when he over _____ies it."

"How will we _____ght alongside drakes?" I asked as I unpacked my bedroll and tarp.

"We won't. They will be in the air, covering us and scouting. High Mage Zyna will join us on the ground for the real _____ghting."

Castile relayed tacturnly.

I hesitated momentarily before asking, "Do I have anything to worry about?"

Castile looked at me, "Not from Zyna. She, like me, was a plebian before attending the Mage College. She completed her service quite some time ago. I think she has a manor in a coastal town somewhere."

"And from Sebastian?" I pressed.

Castile looked into the woods where Flavius was circling the camp in the opposite direction of Konstantin, "He is unpredictable. Knowing his temper, I am surprised Flavius returned to us. Keep your distance from him. I will shield you if I can." I nodded and thanked Castile before setting up my tarp tent.

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Maveith had a tarp but chose to sleep under the stars since the buggy season had passed. After dinner, I lost a game of checkers to Maveith and went to sleep. I was asleep for maybe four hours before someone was kicking my boot. I was instantly awake and putting on my helm. Felix smirked, "All is _____ne, Eryk. Your turn for watch."

I groaned as I had forgotten that I would be part of the night watch rotation since I was no longer scouting. I was paired with Pavel, and we took the positions and huddled in our cloaks to keep the body heat trapped inside. It was cold enough tonight to see our breath form a cloud on exhaling. Pavel had a legion cloak, and I had my black manticore cloak. It did a much better job retaining warmth. I would roll it up and send it to my dimensional storage after the watch to minimize wear and tear.

Pavel was not much of a conversationalist. He was also struggling to stay awake. The only excitement all night was a normal owl swooping down and catching a rodent of some type. I slept another few hours and was up before dawn and packing. Lirkin fed the company, and we continued our trek, following Konstantin toward the last place he had seen the elven summoner.

During our afternoon break, Maveith proudly presented the manticore sack to me. He had dyed it black to match my cloak. It was large enough for me to squeeze both hands inside—or Maveith's single hand. It looked exceptional, except I knew where it had come from.

Maveith excitedly explained, "I used the ice drake hide for its natural chilling properties. It can keep herbs you gathered potent for much longer. The manticore leather should be able to take a pounding but still last you a lifetime. I have seen warriors in my village pass one down for generations."

"It is fantastic, supple and smooth, Maveith. Your effort and care in making it will cause me to treasure it always," I studied it for a moment longer under his watchful eye, and then sent it to my dimensional space. I explained, "This way, it will not get ruined while I am _____ghting."

The second night in the woods, Konstantin had us be more cautious. He estimated we were about _____fteen miles from where he found the summoner. Castile ordered the camp to be made and informed everyone that we would wait here until Master Mage Sebastian and High Mage Zyna arrived rather than risk an engagement without their support.

Maveith noted the weasel den was probably in this area. Delmar barked with a smile at the news, "Since we have a few hours of daylight and do not know how long we will be here, I want a trench line dug there and there," he pointed. We were on a small hill clear of trees, so at least the ground would be free of roots.

We spent six hours digging two defense trenches at right angles and staking them. We were also given assigned sleeping areas by Delmar. It almost felt like he was trying to get more rigid with the camp to show off to the two arriving mages. The regular army would construct elaborate camps every night when they marched. Small mage companies, not so much.

Everyone except me was used to digging from the last few weeks. Digging blisters were different from weapon blisters on the hands, and I voiced a vocal dissent to the work. Of course, I would heal them just enough tonight so they would not bother me. Maveith joined us but was relegated to rolling large rocks out of the ditch for us.

The company cleaned up in a stream, and I was fortunate to get the _____rst watch this evening. It was early in the night when the familiar two bangs of warning came. The camp was roused, and Firth, who had been on the other side, informed Delmar that he had spotted one of the giant weasels.

"Beast was bigger than a horse and moved just as fast," Firth told the awakened men and prepared company.

Everyone looked to Castile. She closed her eyes and sent out her all-seeing-eye. I knew we could see it in the dark, and so we waited. A few moments later, she spoke, "Two giant weasels are moving away from our camp."

Maveith said, "They are smart creatures and would not attack our camp with so many men. I just suggest no one wanders in the woods alone at night to relieve themselves."

Adrian nodded, a thank you to Maveith, "We will double the guard." Some men groaned as going from six to twelve meant most of us would get half as much sleep. Clouds rolled in, covering the moon and making it extremely dark for the remainder of the night, and light stones were placed out in the woods. It was a relief when the morning came.

Delmar had us _____nishing the defensive square after breakfast, and no one complained. We now had a square camp on top of a hill about forty feet to a side. The ditch was just three feet deep but had a stake every foot.

As we were eating lunch prepared by Lirkin, a chunky potato, and salted beef soup, Blaze pointed to the skies, "Drake!"

I looked up and saw the silhouette. I had no idea how he saw something so small. Then, I spotted two others trailing the _____rst. They passed our camp, and I thought they missed the large white X at our center, but they soon started circling above our camp. My heart was racing at the possibility of confronting Master Mage Sebastian and him accusing me of having his brother's collector. I caught Flavius sneaking glances at me, which did not help my comfort level.

The drakes circled for an hour, slowly descending from their heights. Castile was standing next to me and noted, "He is scouting around our camp, but also, I think he is drawing it out to make us wait."

"Who is on the other two drakes?" I inquired.

"Two of his legionnaires. Probably drake tamers from his estate. The Emperor rarely has Sebastian help with missions. He contributes a lot by raising the _____re drakes for the Dragon Legion," Castile stated.

Castile looked up and suddenly smirked, "If he doesn't land soon, I think Zyna is going to throw him off." I looked and could see the largest drake, which had one person riding a pillion. I guessed Castile was using her all-seeing eye to spy on them.

The smaller drakes landed at the bottom of our little hill. The largest drake landed in our midst. The powerful wings blew tarp tents and sleeping rolls everywhere. I could tell that Master Mage Sebastian had intended the dramatic effect. He sild out of his saddle to the ground, smiling smugly. His grand entrance made, he addressed Castile imperiously, "Mage Castile, it seems it has become a habit of mine to come and rescue you."

The woman behind him dismounted less gracefully, and her legs were a little weak from the ride. The woman did not look like a wisened old mage. Her auburn hair was braided into a long ponytail. Her light brown eyes were lively. She appeared middle-aged, maybe in her late thirties, and was one of the tallest women I had seen in my time, nearly matching my 6'1" frame.

She ignored Sebastian and came to Castile and gave her a hug to Sebastian's consternation, "Castile, my child, it has been ages. You have never visited my estate."

Master Mage Sebastian frowned at being ignored, but if my understanding was correct, then she outranked him as a High Mage. His drake bristled, shaking itself out and mimicking its master's dissatisfaction. Castile broke the hug, "My company was never sent on assignment near your coastal town, Baroness."

If she was a baroness, then she was also a First Citizen. But I thought Castile said she grew up poor. Zyna turned to Sebastian, "You and your men should _____nish that patrol I interrupted by insisting you land. You said scouting the entire region before you landed was important." There was some terseness in her words.

Sebastian ground his teeth, "Yes, High Mage."

Castile and Zyna moved off to talk privately, walking outside our forti _____cation. I slowly moved back from the giant _____ying lizard, now that Castile was no longer at my side. Dragons and I did not mix.

Sebastian led his drake through our barricade, destroying some of it, and down to the stream to let the drake drink before heading into the sky with his two men. A handful of men were at the water, Flavius among them. I was sure I noticed him and Flavius make eye contact for more than a moment while the drake satiated its thirst. My paranoid self was sure it would not be long before Sebastian took a detour to question me about his brother's death.

I watched the three drakes getting water while Sebastian conferred with his two legionnaire riders. I just had a bad feeling about this whole situation. Adrian called to me, "Eryk! Castile and the High Mage wish for you to join their conversation!" I looked to see them at the bottom of the hill opposite the stream. I wondered what this was going to be about.