

## A Soldier's Life

### Chapter 114: Zyna, the Fire High Mage

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I had been ordered to talk with Castile and the High Mage, who seemed familiar with each other. I walked down the hill from our camp, stepping between the stakes. Castile was a head shorter than the auburn-haired High Mage. They both turned and faced me in unison. Castile introduced the mage, "This is High Mage Zyna, Mistress of Fire, Baroness of Piscatio, a small village on the northern coast."

Zyna looked me up and down and extended her hand. We formally shook wrists, and the formality confused me. She asked, "This is him? He is a big boy but looks young—and inexperienced. If he is going to watch my back, is he any good?"

Castile smirked, "As good as Delmar or Adrian. He has a decent air shield spell form as well as a dimensional space." The High Mage arched her eyebrow, reassessing her initial appraisal of me. Castile addressed me, "While Zyna is with us, you will be her personal guard." My surprised look had her explain further, "High Mage Zyna outranks Sebastian, so as long as you are in her service, he cannot command or question you."

I was confused but understood this was a way to protect me. Did that mean Castile trusted Zyna? I tried to sound happy at the assignment and asked the High Mage, "Should I call you Mistress, Baroness, or High Mage?"

Zyna laughed, amused with a musical voice, "Just Zyna is fine, legionnaire Eryk. I no longer teach at the Mage College or command a legionnaire company. My First Citizen status is only so the Emperor could continue to call on my skills when needed."

"So that is why you are here? The Emperor called on you?" I asked and realized perhaps I had overstepped.

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Zyna pursed her lips in anger, and I got worried, "I volunteered," she said tersely. "The small fishing community where my estate is located was inundated with giant waves. Twenty-four of my people were killed, and most of the fishing boats were destroyed. I am here to get some revenge on the elven summoner who summoned the water elemental that caused the disaster." Her eyes took on a blue glow of aether that tinged with red, and I could feel her aether stirring violently in her core. This little display showed me why she was considered a High Mage. The air of volatile power disappeared as quickly as it had come.

Castile nodded to me and left me with Zyna. "What do you need me to do for you, Zyna?" I asked with as much respect as I could weave into the words. It was definitely not because I sensed her oppressive power a few moments ago.

"We must wait for Sebastian to give us a marching direction. Show me to your tent until then," she waved her hand up the hill at our square fortification.

I led her up the hill and showed her my tarp tent in the camp. It was very simple, with thick poles cut from branches forming three A-frames at the ends and middle. The tarp was staked over the frames, one end was open, and the other was closed. My weasel pelt was laid out on top of my legion-issued bedroll. She assessed the space, and I was worried she was either going to be sharing it with me or kicking me out. It would be a tight fit for two people, but doable.

"It has been a few years since I camped on the march. You can set up my tent next to yours," Zyna informed me, and before I could ask where her tent was, a large backpack hit the ground with a thud.

My mind raced, and I put it together quickly, "You have a dimensional space?"

Zyna smiled, "Not a spell form like you, Eryk." She tapped a ring on her finger, "A dungeon artifacted storage ring. Works the same way as your spell form, and it is twice the size of yours," she said with a smirk.

Maveith, who had been watching from a distance, approached, "High Mage, can I interest you in a game of checkers while Eryk sets up your tent?"

"Maveith, wouldn't you rather help me set this up?" I indicated the large, tightly wrapped tent.

"No," the goliath assessed my task. "I would rather play checkers with a more challenging opponent." Brutus, Maveith's usual opponent, huffed from a dozen feet away.

Zyna smiled at our playful interaction but then sided with the goliath, "Friend goliath, I would be honored to play a game of checkers with you." They moved off to some logs and a makeshift stone table in the camp that the others cleared for the High Mage as she approached. The drakes took to the skies from the stream and began their search while Maveith and Zyna set up the board. Brutus came to my aid and helped with the tent.

It was a large tent, requiring a dozen eight-foot poles to be cut to assemble it. Thankfully, Brutus was familiar with the style. The final assembly gave the High Mage a roughly eight-foot cube tent out of the oiled canvas material. There was a square door panel as well, but no bedroll. Maveith and Zyna had a lively conversation during their game nearby, and I was worried that the goliath might have retold about my prowess with the manticores.

With the tent finished, Zyna approached, nodded in thanks, and entered. She left the flap shut for privacy. Maybe she had more space in her ring and was laying out a luxurious interior. Maveith sat with me, "She is a charming woman. She even won one of our six games."

Konstantin and Flavius had taken down a large deer for dinner. The best cuts were for the men, while the remainder would go to the drakes. When Lirkin had dinner prepared, Castile brought a portion into Zyna's tent and did not exit before the sun was setting.

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We were waiting for the return of the drakes. They returned just after sunset, and Sebastian landed his drake again in the middle of camp. I think he was attempting to blow over Zyna's tent, but Brutus and I had double-staked it. The men in the camp had done the same to their own tents, expecting the childishness of the Master Mage. Not one tent was blown away this time, which seemed to make him upset.

Sebastian entered the tent unannounced, and the conversation was obviously being muted by magic. We all looked at each other, not knowing what to expect. Everyone kept their distance from his drake, which appeared tired and curled into a ball. Lirkin came and gave it a haunch of the deer, and it greedily ate it. The crunching of bones was not something I enjoyed being so close to.

It was a good hour before Sebastian emerged unhappy. He gave me a hard look before leading his drake down to the stream where the other two drakes had already been unsaddled and fed. Adrian and Delmar were called into the tent. When they left at dark, Delmar went to bring Castile's things to the tent while Adrian gave orders.

"The Master Mage did not send any sign of the summoner. We will be marching northwest in the morning, following Konstantin. The drakes will keep watch from above." Everyone felt better knowing the three powerful drakes would be overhead, but I was not so certain.

That night, there was a commotion in the woods. The loud squealing, hissing and sounds of combat woke the entire camp, and Konstantin went down and came back to report, "The drakes killed one of the giant weasels. They are feasting on it now. It should quiet down in an hour."

Maveith seemed upset, "Waste of a good pelt. Should have skinned it first."

The following morning, we packed up camp, and I struggled to get Zyna's tent rolled tightly enough to be returned to her dimensional ring. Maveith and Brutus had to assist me. When we marched, Brutus and I were on either side of Zyna with Maveith behind us.

After a few hours of Maveith and Zyna discussing different board games, I asked, "How do you know Castile?"

Zyna smiled, "I was an instructor at the Mage College, finishing my own service to the Empire when Castile started there. Those not of royal blood tend to have a difficult time. I mentored her and helped her acclimate. I am the reason she chose the Legion over serving Duke Octavian."

Blaze and Wylie in front of us couldn't help but turn around in shock at the gossip but quickly focused forward. Zyna just smiled. Maveith, unaware of human decorum regarding age, asked, "If a mage is required to serve twenty years and Castile is almost done with her service. Does that make you sixty? You do not look it." Maveith liked to puzzle things out, and this was not something he should have tried.

I reflexively stepped away from the mage, and Brutus did likewise on the other side of the High Mage. Zyna just laughed her musical laugh, "Maveith, I am eighty-three. I served twenty-six years as a mage commander and twenty-four years at the Mage College. After fifty years of service, the Emperor granted me the writ of *primus civis*, making me one of the few to be named a First Citizen without the blood of the First Legion in my veins."

Maveith grunted, "I would not have guessed you for being older than forty."

"Thirty, Maveith," Konstantin said, appearing from the woods. "If you are dumb enough to guess a woman's age, always guess ten years younger than you think. She won't burn you to a crisp if you are wrong."

I added my wisdom, "Maveith, it is best never to guess at all."

Zyna laughed, "Maybe, but I have seen enough for two lifetimes, and someone asking my age is not going to upset me—much. And the Emperor does grant favors if you are useful enough to keep around."

Konstantin walked next to Zyna, "High Mage, I was training your bodyguard in the finer arts of scouting. I would hate for his skills to get rusty. Do you mind?"

Zyna nodded, "Just do not wear him out, Hound."

"I am no longer a Hound, High Mage," Konstantin grumbled. It appeared that these two knew each other as well.

"What does Cornelius always say? Once a Hound, always a Hound?" Zyna replied.

"That old goat says a lot of things. Sometimes, I think he just likes to hear himself speak," Konstantin grumbled. "Come on, Eryk. I found some interesting tracks that I want to show you."

When we got off into the woods, Konstantin showed me some bear tracks and old gnoll tracks. We worked our way on the right side of the column while Flavius was on the left. Konstantin seemed a little anxious about this quest, and I finally asked him when we stopped to take a break while the company caught up.

"You don't appear to be your normal cheerful self, Konstantin. What has got you on edge?" I said, chewing on some jerky.

"When you are hunting mages, nothing ever goes as planned. I do feel better with Zyna here. Just hope she doesn't burn down the woods while we are in them," he said, sipping water. "With a summoner, you never know what type of creature they may have summoned as well. Also," he paused, "there may be more than one summoner. I only saw the young elf, but that does not mean there are not more."

I finished the afternoon with Konstantin, and we found another hill for the company to make camp on. Delmar wanted trenches dug again, so we stopped with a few hours of daylight. Since I had scouted for half the day, Adrian informed me I was off trench and guard duty tonight. Scouts did travel two to three times the distance of the rest of the company.

I still had to set up Zyna's tent. Maveith helped this time. We had not staked it yet when Master Mage Sebastian landed in our midst. The tent was blown away, and he dismounted smugly. He went to Castile and Zyna with purpose, "The summoner just summoned two hill giants twenty or so miles west of your position. If you hurry, you can catch him before he relocates."

Adrian approached, "Night hike with two hill giants in the woods is not advisable. If we are going to fight them, I would want it to be in the light of day."

"Not your decision, legionnaire," Sebastian barked at Adrian.

"Not yours either!" Zyna said forcibly. Sebastian narrowed his eyes at the woman who was deciding on a plan of action. Zyna finally said, "We will leave at midnight. That will give Castile's men some time to rest and should put our encounter with the giants after sunrise."

Sebastian was not happy and growled out, "We will rotate watch during the night on the giants." He was holding in his anger. "The summoner will not be trackable from the air." He mounted his drake and took to the air, blowing the camp into more of a mess.

I turned to Maveith, "Just how many frigging kinds of giants are there?"