

A Soldier's Life
Chapter 115: Pig Roast

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I had asked my question about the variety of giants to be rhetorical, but Maveith answered me anyway. "The Titans come in many varieties. There are the cloud and fog giants of the Dresimere Mountains. Then, the corrupted two-headed ettins, but you are familiar with them already. The stone giants are builders but are nearly extinct as all the great Titan cities have been destroyed. The storm giants ruled all the giants before the Civil War ages ago. The hill and mountain giants are cruel warriors and the most populous of the giantkin. They are both solitary from other races and live in tribes."

Maveith counted on his hands, trying to remember, "Ah, yes, the frost giants live in the harsh, cold north. But they keep to themselves. They do not like outsiders."

"You forgot the fire giants," Zyna said, having overheard our conversation. "The fire giants love battle more than anything and are always looking for a reason to engage."

"Why haven't the giants taken over the world?" Benito entered the conversation as he was untangling the tangled mess from the drake's buffeting takeoff.

Zyna shrugged, "I have not studied the histories, but I think the Titans once ruled all of Desia."

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Maveith nodded, "They did. The storm giants were similar to your First Citizens. They governed all the giant races. Goliaths used to be Bloodbound to the stone giants and helped them build the world's marvels. Tales are passed down in my tribe from before the schism and Civil War among the Titans. The giant races fought and destroyed each other all across the land. None of their great cities stand today." I kept my mouth shut.

Maveith looked at Benito, "To answer your question, all the Titans are cursed. Not only is conceiving children extremely difficult for most of them, but it takes over fifty years for them to mature. Some of them have other permanent maladies. For instance, the hill giants have the mentality of three-year-olds."

Benito quipped, "I have met some pretty smart three-year-olds."

Adrian grunted at Benito and didn't comment on Benito's intelligence assessment. "Most of the giant races are hunted in Desia as well," Adrian added. "Don't bother setting the tents. Just get some rest. This night march is going to be taxing, and there is a fight at the end."

We cleaned up the camp from Sebastian's landing and packed our backpacks. Zyna had a small tarp and laid it down a few feet from my bedroll. Zyna had no problem appearing to fall asleep, and I guess, as her temporary bodyguard, I needed to keep an eye on her while she slept in the open. I set my bedroll against a stump to use as a reclining chair.

Brutus brought me dinner. It was salted fish that had been boiled into a vegetable soup. Sometimes, you have to eat things that are unappetizing to keep your calories up. This was not one of those times. I poured my bowl of soup down a hole in the stump I was sitting on. Hopefully, whatever creature made its home down there would like it more than me.

I took out some hard salami and cheese from my dimensional space when it got dark and before the blue moon revealed itself. I ate more than I should have but doubted there was going to be a chance to eat again before the battle. I watched our camp be restless all night as it was the eve of battle. When Delmar called for the march to begin, we all moved slowly, not looking forward to facing the hill giants.

Maveith had chosen to stay on the other side of High Mage Zyna, which I greatly appreciated. The blue moon had decided to show itself, and the cloudless sky gave the woods an eerie blue light. A single glowstone was carried by the last man, Mateo, in our line. This was so the drakes could find us from above.

Progress was slow, and Konstantin and Flavius were leading us. I only saw a drake silhouetted against the blue moon once on the march when we passed through a clearing. I felt better knowing we had three ferocious beasts overhead. Some men whispered back and forth as we made our way. High Mage Zyna then asked a question I always dreaded hearing, "Eryk, you are from Tsinga? I love their national delicacy, caramel bread."

"It is pronounced car-mel in my small village. We only had it on special occasions as there were only a few goats from which to get milk," I replied smoothly. I had the name of the village ready if she pressed.

"Oh, so you know how to make it then? After we finish this hunt, I may spend a few days in Sobral," Zyna said excitedly. I was not sure if she was being genuine or if she was trying to entrap me. At least there was a recipe for the bread in one of the books in the dreamscape.

"I would like to try it, too!" Maveith said in his deep voice, overshadowing the whispering. Maveith realized his error, but he could not whisper well. But he tried talking softer, "I heard it is an amazing dessert. Melts in your mouth and is salty, savory, and sweet all at once!"

Zyna didn't pry into my past again but tried for my other secrets. "Castile wouldn't tell me if you had any spell forms other than your storage and air shield." When I didn't respond, she tried in a motherly tone, "I have instructed hundreds of mages at the Mage College. Do you require any assistance in learning spell forms?"

I considered my response and tempered it, "No, Castile has helped with everything that is needed. My aether shaping is too terrible to learn to cast spells."

A plume of fire in the sky appeared a few miles off. "Are they fighting in the sky?" Blaze asked no one in particular as we all stared.

Zyna replied hotly, "No, they found the hill giants and are marking them for us."

Felix responded from behind me, "But that means we won't be able to surprise them. He basically signaled that someone found them."

Zyna huffed angrily, "I think that is the point—Sebastian's way of showing his displeasure at not making the decisions. Come, Eryk, we will move to the front. The giants look to be just two miles away."

I nodded but decided I did not want to be the bodyguard of a High Mage if they were always at the front. We moved forward, and Adrian hissed, "Pile your packs here! We are closer!"

The twenty-three men of the company quickly and quietly dropped their packs. Everyone was on high alert for the sight and sound of the enemy. The blue gloom lighting from the moon made it easy to see movement, but if something remained still, they would blend in. Castile was at the front and using her spells. Zyna put her hand on Castile's shoulder and leaned in, "Do you see them?"

Castile did not respond for a moment, then she pointed, "There, the giants are gathering rocks...they are throwing them at the drakes." A crash far away could be heard as a wayward rock landed deep in the woods. It caused all the creatures to go silent as more rocks returned to the earth.

Delmar muttered from my right, "They are not going to be able to hit anything. But then again, they are not the smartest of creatures. They will keep trying."

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Zyna advised, "We will use this as a distraction. Archers behind me as I move to engage. Castile, stay back and be prepared to help if needed," Castile frowned in the moonlight but nodded. "Shield bearers, be prepared to allow the archers to retreat between you. Spearmen support the shield men if the giants charge." That was all the orders she gave as she walked confidently forward. I was on her heels and Maveith on mine.

Our armor made rasping sounds as the hard leather rubbed as we walked, but I had practiced with Konstantin and Maveith, and I was fairly silent. Konstantin appeared from behind a tree, "High Mage, there are just two of them that we can tell. Both are adult males. Before they were disturbed by the drakes, they were eating a bear carcass."

Zyna asked patiently, "What are they doing now?"

"Throwing rocks the size of a man's head into the sky," Konstantin replied, and I looked up anxiously. Over our heads, we had a thinning canopy of fall leaves, but the sky was still obscured. A flash through the leaves told me Sebastian was taunting the hill giants.

"Any signs of the summoner?" Zyna inquired.

"None," was all Konstantin said as he focused on where the giants were.

"Lead me to them then. We can kill the hill giants and see if we can find the trail of the summoner," Zyna said determinedly.

"You make it sound so easy," I muttered softly.

Konstantin tittered at me, "Oh, Eryk, you are about to see a light show. You will see why they call her a High Mage."

We followed Konstantin down a rocky stream bed that gave us some cover. We had timed our march fairly well, and the coming morning sun was teasing its arrival, graying the sky. I could see the three drakes high in the air circling. A rock was being tossed in their direction every few moments. The hill giants could barely reach them with the hundred-pound spheres. At least they were distracting the giants from our approach.

Zyna stood and marched up onto the small hill. I was unprepared for her boldness, but I stayed by her side. The archers were already formed, seven men ready with their bows; Konstantin and Flavius had moved into their ranks. Six men with body shields behind them.

When I cleared my line of sight, I was disturbed to see the sixteen-foot hill giants. They were on an exposed rocky hillside for easy access to their ammunition. They looked overweight and childlike as they bent over and dug in the rocky ground for a fist-sized rock to throw.

One grabbed a smaller rock by mistake and using it disgusted at the drakes. Being smaller, it was using further and faster. By some miracle, the stone connected with the wing of a drake. A hissing scream of pain as the drake spiraled to the ground. Unfortunately, it was not Sebastian's as the largest drake remained aloft. The giants had not even noticed us as they raced to the falling drake. I felt the ground tremble as they ran.

Zyna cursed, "Hades, take him! They are rushing out of my range, and that rider is as good as dead if they reach him." She turned, "Form the archers on that hill over there. I will see if I can draw them back to us." She ignored the men and started casting small dart-sized flames at the backs of the running giants. The darts flashed across the vast distance to the target, homing in and connecting.

Dozens of darts sprayed at the giants. It seemed to be causing minor burning marks on their backs. That was the unusual thing—these giants were wearing some semblance of clothes. They looked ragged, but they were wearing some heavy-cloth or hide. One of the giants swatted his back like he was swatting a mosquito. He howled, realizing his back was on fire.

Zyna steadily advanced on the giants, closing the distance while the archers got the higher ground. Both giants stopped and helped each other put out the flames. Zyna ordered, "Arrows!!" She stopped her own assault. I stood to her right, and Maveith towered behind us. The twang of his large bow was heard behind me. The giants were a good three hundred feet away as our seven archers fired a steady stream. Half the arrows connected with the behemoths.

The giants continued helping each other with the flames, ignoring the arrows momentarily. They soon realized they were being attacked. These giants seemed oblivious to the world and could only focus on one task at a time. Maveith had said their mental capacity was limited. I thought they would charge our position, but they just bent over and started hurling rocks at our archers.

"Curses!" Zyna spat. She started moving forward to get them in range of her magic. I moved with her, ready to use my air shield. Before we got in range, a rock hit Quentin in the torso. His body was torn apart. "Take cover!" Zyna screamed as a weave of fire formed between her hands.

I was not sure if she was talking to me or the archers. I remained at her side and was fascinated as the head of a fiery snake formed and snaked into the sky. The snake quickly grew in size, and the giants were fascinated as it twisted in the air, growing larger and larger, being fed by Zyna's aether. This is what truly powerful magic was. I could feel its heat even fifty feet away from the massive fire snake.

The snake twisted in the air and dove at one of the giants, opening its flaming maw. The giant held up his hands in protection, but nothing could stop the magic as the snake swallowed him and slammed into the ground. A pillar of flame erupted as the giant was burned alive. His fatty body melted, and the fat-fueled the flames more. He howled only for a moment as the flame penetrated his lungs and burned them as well.

The other giant stumbled away but knew where the giant snake had come from. He slung a rock at Zyna. I was prepared and had an angled air shield in front of her. The rock de ected into the sky, destroying the shield but saving her life. "Thank you," was all Zyna said as she weaved her next spell between her hands.

A large flaming ball appeared over her head and sped toward the giant just a hundred feet away. The ball struck him and exploded. A blast of heat hit me, drying my eyes and throat and bringing the smell of burning pork to my nostrils. The explosion knocked the massive hill giant down, and his clothes were burned to his flesh. He staggered to his feet, howling in pain, and he was now clearly blind, as his corneas had been burned out.

"Archers!" Zyna called. Konstantin was the first to start firing, followed by Maveith and the others. The giant ran blindly forward, trying to escape. The arrows had trouble penetrating his thick clothing and fatty tissue. He stumbled and fell and stood, trying to figure a direction away from the attacks.

The archers began targeting its head, and it used its burned hands to protect its face. The problem was the archers were close, and not many were missing. The behemoth howled in pain and frustration. It almost made you feel sorry for it. Zyna, drenched in sweat from her powerful castings, formed one more spell in her hand. A much smaller version of the snake raced away from her and consumed the head of the hill giant, forcing itself into its mouth and ending its suffering and its horrid cries.

I looked on in horror as it struggled to breathe. "Do not feel sorry for it," Zyna stated, seeing my face. "Those giants eat humans, preferably raw and still alive." The body churned only for a brief moment before stilling. Zyna turned to me, appreciative but smugly, "Thank you for the shield. I had a defense ready for the rock, but I appreciate the thought."

The company joined us on the open field. Quentin had been killed, and his body was brought down, his entire right ribcage missing. Quentin had been one of Durandus' men. That meant he had been a legion volunteer and not conscripted. He had been on the road guarding our gear while we attacked the storm giant. I don't know how well he adapted to our less structured company, but it was sad to see another comrade fall.

Zyna and Castile moved off to talk while some men went to retrieve our packs, some men buried Quentin, and some worked to start preparing camp. I looked at the charred corpses and wondered if they would yield an essence.

I didn't have time to think more of it as Sebastian's large drake landed on the first body and took a massive bite out of it like it was enjoying a pig roast. It was like he was claiming it as his kill. Then Sebastian took out a collector and placed it on the body—activating it. It was a large collector similar to the shield-sized one Castile used to own. An essence formed, but I could not distinguish it from this distance.

I was a little angry that Zyna and Castile were allowing this. He let his drake feed and collected an essence from the second hill giant. He then walked to Zyna and unhappily handed her both essences. That was a relief. They exchanged some heated words, and Sebastian walked onto the woods to find his downed drake and rider.

Delmar turned and announced to the company, "We make camp here till mid-day. After the mid-day meal, we march in search of the summoner. Konstantin, Flavius, and Eryk, go search for signs."

Konstantin smiled at me, "Come, Eryk. Let's go work on your tracking skills." Damn it, I volunteered again.