

A Soldier's Life

Chapter 116: Pursuit

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I started to walk with Konstantin when Zyna halted me, "Eryk, good job protecting me. Castile suggested I give you one of these as a reward." She placed an essence in my hand, "Don't get yourself killed," she smiled and returned to talk with Castile, Delmar, and Adrian.

Konstantin walked beside me as we entered the woods. Flavius was already ahead of us to the left. When everyone was out of earshot, Konstantin asked, "You know I serve a Praetorian Guard?"

I cautiously replied, "I do."

"She has tasked me with keeping an eye out for potential, and you have drawn her attention," he said to silence. "It would mean spending a few years in the Hounds as preparation. I will tell her you declined her offer." I did not reply. Konstantin added, "It is what I would have advised you anyway. No matter how appealing they make it sound, it is a life service. If she asks you personally, tell her I asked you and offered you ten thousand gold for ten years of service, but you still declined."

I laughed internally, then aloud, "Ten thousand gold does not do you much good if you are dead."

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Konstantin smirked, "I keep telling people you are not as dumb as you act. Now, tracking the hill giants to where they were summoned should not be too difficult." How did I ever act dumb?

It was easy to follow the broken branches and large footprints pressed into the earth. The two giants were summoned to the north. As we moved, Konstantin constantly reminded me to move in stealth—using bushes and trees for cover. It caused me to move slower, and Flavius also slowed his pace so as not to get too far ahead. My training with Maveith significantly improved my ability to move stealthily. Konstantin even noted my improvement with a grunt.

The path was well-marked as we moved further and further from the company. After about five miles, Flavius came back to us to confer, "The ritual summoning circle is just ahead. I do not think the summoner is still there, but there is a cave."

Flavius had deferred to Konstantin, who gave it some thought. "I will explore the cave. You two guard the entrance and stay close." Flavius did not argue and moved off.

The summoning circle was large, almost fifty feet across, and was charred into the charred grass. It looked like the summoner had fed the hill giants after summoning them to contract them. The grass was stained red, with a deer head and giant elk antlers within the circle. The cave that Flavius found was just fifty yards away. I took cover behind a boulder. The woods were to my back, as well as a quiet stream. I figured a splash would alert me if something came at me from behind.

Konstantin moved along the rock face to the cave and waited for a long time, listening outside the cave before entering. After a few moments, the cave lit up from a glowstone. Konstantin waved us over, and we moved inside. The cave was only twenty feet in depth and fairly small. A large pit was in the center, and Flavius dug in it with his hand. He sighed, "Been out at least half a day. We should head back and let the mages know."

Konstantin shook his head. "We will follow the tracks and follow them. The summoner should be exhausted after summoning those two brutes. He is vulnerable, as I killed his two hounds. We can catch and take him out if we are fast enough."

There was some tension in the air. Finally, Flavius caved, "I have a plan. I can signal Master Mage Sebastian."

"A plan?" Konstantin said with amusement evident. I sensed something between them, and maybe it had to do with Sebastian. "Use it. We will continue tracking the summoner."

We went to the clearing with the summoning circle, and Flavius lit off the flare. It was not gunpowder but some other alchemical concoction. A tail of blue fire propelled it in the air, bursting into a bright green star—without any sound. "Wait here for the drakes," Konstantin said as he waved me to follow.

When we got to the edge of the clearing, Konstantin slowed. "Why are we leaving Flavius behind?" I asked, concerned.

"We are not. We are searching for tracks leading away from here. We will circle wide and hopefully find something. Most elves have a fair amount of woodsman training, but we should come up with something." Konstantin studied the ground as we moved. He paused near the stream. It was wide and had soft sandy soil along the edges. Even I could see the tracks, but that meant nothing, as they could have just been getting water here.

Konstantin studied the tracks for a long while before announcing, "They left through the stream. Either up or downstream. I don't know. Down is the hill giants' direction, so I am assuming upstream. You take that side, and I will take this side."

"How are you so certain?" I asked, not seeing it in the mess of tracks.

"There are two sets of fresh footprints here. The smaller one appeared to be the one getting water for the camp. The larger prints only occur once, leading to the water but never away from it." Konstantin revealed.

"I thought you said the summoner was alone?" A cold feeling washed over me. Were we walking into a trap? Maybe there were more elves out and about.

"It is a small woman. Maybe she was sleeping when I spotted him the first time. If she is also a summoner, then we need to be double quick about eliminating the threats," Konstantin said firmly.

A drake landed in the summoning circle. It was one of the legionnaires, not Sebastian. We headed over as Flavius was conversing with him. The rider gave us the update, "The other drake survived the crash, but the legionnaire broke his neck. The Master Mage is healing the drake. I will be escorting it to the estate to get another rider. We should be back in two days. Master Mage Sebastian will be staying. I will inform the High Mage of your location." The drake rider mounted, preparing to take to the air. His face was impassive, but I could tell he did not like this business.

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Konstantin informed him, "We are going to be following that stream," he indicated the wide, shallow water. The rider nodded stiffly and burst into the air. I was buffeted by sand and dirt. I did not like the landing and takeoffs of these beasts. I spat out the crunchy sand mixed with my saliva and moved to the stream with Konstantin.

Konstantin took the left bank and Flavius the right bank. I was the rear guard, ordered to stay fifty yards back and not make a lot of noise. The two experienced scouts weaved along the banks, looking for where our quarry might have exited the water. About two miles later, Konstantin found the location.

We crowded around him in an expanse of rocks. "What?" asked Flavius.

Konstantin pointed to a small puddle in the center of an exposed rock. "They must have rung out their socks here. It has not rained in a few days, and the rock is exposed to the sun. It should have been completely dry." I was glad that Flavius looked as doubtful as me. We split some sticks to lay on our path so the company could follow us. Laying the fresh white wood face up made easy markers to indicate our direction. That ended up being my job.

We spread out on the rocky ground and searched away from the river. A triumphant Konstantin found a footprint a mile from the water. Heading off into the thick woodlands. "They are heading west," Flavius noted. "Deep into the wilds."

Konstantin grunted, "They know we are out here. They must have heard the combat or seen the drakes. Look," he pointed. "They sprint into the tree line. We have to push, or they will get too far ahead. We are maybe six hours behind them now." Konstantin was already moving, and Flavius huffed in disagreement but followed. I arranged a split stick and followed as well.

As he went, Konstantin was at a light jog, pointing out signs of passing. The elves were making mistakes now that they sensed we were getting closer. Flavius just nodded as he moved with him. Flavius grumbled that he was a good animal tracker, but tracking elves was a different game. I knew Konstantin had been a Hound, so maybe he gained his skills tracking humans there.

We moved miles into the woods, and I had trouble keeping up because I had to split sticks and lay them as we went. Running and trying to split a stick with a knife was not advised, and I was glad I could heal myself. Konstantin halted up ahead, and Flavius took cover. I crouched and approached them.

Konstantin nodded to me and pointed to blood grass, and I understood. The red sap from the root was dripping from a damaged leaf. I had harvested enough of the plants to know the sap only dripped for about fifteen minutes before hardening sufficiently to seal the damage to the leaf.

All three of us were still as we listened. I listened out Flavius' breathing and then my own heartbeat. My heart was racing more from adrenaline than fatigue. I didn't hear any birds, which meant they were also on alert. The mage summoner and his companion had to be close. Both Konstantin and Flavius removed, strung their bows, and notched an arrow. Flavius went right, and Konstantin left. That meant I was in the middle and was going to be the bait—something I was familiar with. At least I had my air shield. With my sword drawn, I moved forward, searching with my eyes and ears.

I lost track of Flavius and Konstantin as I moved. I paused once again, seeing dripping blood grass. There was a lot of it here. I started to think they intentionally left the trail to ambush us. No, Konstantin would have thought of that. I kneeled by the dripping grass and moved the dead leaves, exposing the soil. It was definitely a male-sized footprint. I looked into the woods, scanning and listening. I flicker of movement in the trees to my right—it was Flavius about sixty yards away.

I was about to take a step and paused. Something was tickling my mind—something I had seen or done. I looked up and scanned the trees. They wouldn't have been dumb enough to climb a tree? I split my vision from the ground to the trees. There! On a massive tree, its trunk over six feet in diameter, there was a thick branch about twenty feet off the ground. Two gures lay prone on it, covered in brown cloaks.

If only one had been, I would have overlooked it, but two brown lumps were very suspicious. A bow twang to my left made me know Konstantin was fighting something—more elves? Flavius' bow sounded as well. I looked up to see an enormous spider rapidly repelling toward me.

I slashed and rolled away, using the rebound from my strike to gain distance. The crunch on my blade told me I had removed a leg, but a second spider was also coming for me. I created an air shield over my head to prevent the attack and backed away. I had a trio of dog-sized spiders on the ground, advancing in unison now. One walked awkwardly from the missing limb.

The two brown lumps suddenly leaped off the branch to the ground, rolling as they landed. One of the spiders coiled, drawing my attention. As it leaped at me, I barely had time to establish my air shield. It crunched into the shield and fell to the ground, stunned. I lunged and stabbed its abdomen before retreating further and making sure I did not have any more visitors from above.

"They are poisonous!" Flavius yelled a warning from my right. I grunted; of course they were.

My eyes darted from the spiders to the canopy to the two elves running away. Maybe they would have stopped to fight us if they knew we were only three. Blue ooze leaked from the spider I had stabbed, and it was struggling to move, slowly dying. A second spider leaped, but I was ready with an air shield and hacked its carapace, cracking it and taking two legs with it. My last opponent was the injured spider, which could not do its leap attack with the missing limb.

I pressed forward and stabbed it in the mandibles. One of its legs stabbed me through the thigh. I had not expected the quick attack, and the pain flared. I hacked the leg off and fell on my ass, cursing. I worked the spear-like spider leg out of my thigh, blood oozing with the removal. I applied my spell form to heal the injury and muscle while staying alert. I could hear Konstantin fighting, but it was quiet from Flavius's direction.

With my leg mostly healed, I ran to help Konstantin. He was hacking into the last of his spiders—four in total. Two had arrows in them. I declared, "I saw the elf pair. They were wearing brown cloaks. They ran when the spiders attacked."

Konstantin nodded and kicked the spider, "Summoned creatures. At least no variety of spiders I have seen before." He looked around, "Are you okay," he indicated the blood on my pants. "Is Flavius alive?"

"Just a scratch, used a salve I had purchased in the capital." I ignored his focus on my leg and looked back to where Flavius had been fighting. "It was quiet on his side, so I came to help you first," I responded.

Konstantin nodded appreciatively and retrieved his bow. We both raced to check on Flavius. Flavius was leaning against a log and breathing heavily. A pair of spider fangs was lodged in his vambraces. I counted four dead spiders around him. I had received the lucky draw with just three spiders.

Flavius looked up with glassy eyes, "Some disorientation poison. I can't stand without falling over."

Konstantin asked, "Can you hear me now, or is it muffled?"

"Muffled," Flavius huffed.

"Most likely seasickness poison. Probably jungle canopy spiders. You should live. You will lose your hearing in a few minutes and may bleed out your ears, but you will live, and it is healable," Konstantin informed the scout.

Konstantin stood and looked in the direction of the fleeing summoners. "Ok, Eryk, it is just me and you then. Let's go." He started after them, and I hesitated for a heartbeat before joining him.