

A Soldier's Life
Chapter 117: Familiar Faces

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I followed Konstantin as he moved quickly through the trees. I knew he was experienced at this, but he seemed too aggressive—too excited. Why not wait for the company to catch up? I am sure Zyna could handle the summoner by herself. "There!" He whispered harshly to me. About two hundred yards ahead, the brown cloaks were moving steadily.

We were gaining ground quickly, and I guessed a mage was just not as good as a legionnaire. Konstantin noted, "Expect them to make a stand when they realize they cannot outrun us." I nodded and focused on the pair. The shorter one was probably a woman and in superior shape. Maybe she was not a mage then. She was definitely waiting for the taller one as she appeared she could outrun him if needed as we got closer.

Both elves tossed their packs on the ground when they noticed us gaining on them. I hung back just a little, and as we reached the packs, I slowed for half a step and sent them into my dimensional space. Konstantin was in front of me and did not see me take them. Konstantin suddenly dropped to a knee and fired an arrow in a smooth motion. He missed the tall one by inches. He blamed his miss on the archer's etching, "Harpies tits, the archer's etching was loose," and resumed pursuit.

Konstantin was right about them making a stand. The cloaked woman leaped over a massive downed tree and stopped running. Konstantin did not stop running. When we were just thirty feet from the log, the elf woman stood up and launched a fireball from her hands. Konstantin swore, "Demon shit!" but there was nowhere to hide. I jumped prone and placed an air shield in front of me. Konstantin was four strides in front of me, trying to get out of the path of the incoming sphere by diving right.

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The fireball crashed where he had been standing a second ago and exploded. Konstantin was thrown into the air by the blast. The fire, heat, incoming leavers, and blasted earth washed over me, briefly making my location an oven. My lungs hurt from breathing in the hot, dry air, but other than that, I escaped unharmed as the pings of small stones stopped echoing on my armor. Konstantin was not as lucky. He was rolling on the ground thirty feet away in some pain and dazed while trying to put out flames on his exposed clothes. He had also lost his helm, and his salt and pepper hair whirled about as he rolled.

A blue bolt of light shot from the cloaked woman and struck my air shield, causing it to become visible briefly. I recognized the type of bolt from the dungeon. Castile had used a wand that cast arcane missiles like this. I added another shield as mine was about to expire. She launched two more missiles, and they splashed uselessly against the first air shield but shattered it. The mage stopped firing the arcane bolts, and I sprinted for Konstantin, ready with another air shield if needed. She fired another missile, and I thought there was no way it would hit me.

The fucking arcane arrow changed directions, and my armor got a blackened scorch mark on the back as it thudded into me and caused me a brief stumble. Konstantin's face was burned and blistered again—first a hellhound and now a fireball. His face was an angry red, blistering, and his facial hair, which had just started growing, was gone again. He had protected his eyes, at least. I dragged him behind a tree for cover, taking two more arcane arrow strikes. One burned my armor, and the other connected with my arm, burning deeply into my bicep. The smell of my cooked flesh hit my senses, and my mouth reflexively salivated. What a fucking Pavlovian response to have in battle!

I didn't dwell on the wrongness of it and focused on the pain, and I got both of us to cover. Konstantin had signs of a concussion. He was unable to focus his eyes and was speaking nonsense. I didn't have anything that would help him. I healed my own injury and realized I didn't have much aether left. I did have enough to use my dimensional space to kill one of the mages if I could get close enough, but that meant I wouldn't be able to use my air shield again.

"Dropped my bow," Konstantin sounded irritated and angry, but at least he was now coherent.

"Doesn't matter, the string was burned up in the heat," I said, peeking around the tree and studying the enemies. I decided to whine a little, "Why the fuck did you think it was a good idea for the two of us to go after two mages!"

Konstantin croaked out, "Thought he had to be out of aether after summoning the giants and spiders," he groaned as he moved to look around the tree as well. "If we wait long enough, the company should reach us in a few hours. Do you have any water?" It was the closest I would ever get to Konstantin begging me for something.

I realized he had probably inhaled a lot of hot air and produced a canteen from my dimensional space for him. He drank the entire canteen of cold water and tossed it away. "I can still move. I can distract them while you circle that way," he indicated the upturned roots of the tree they were using for cover.

"They possess a wand that shoots arcane arrows, just like the ones Castile used to have, Konstantin. You wouldn't stand a chance." I pointed out the scorch marks on my armor to reinforce my point.

Konstantin studied the burns and nodded, thinking. Konstantin was not a person that was good with waiting. I checked for the fifth time around the trunk. "One of them is running, Konstantin." He twisted his body and craned his neck to see.

"It is the taller one—the male summoner. We cannot let him get away," Konstantin growled. "He is slower, so the woman is covering his retreat." He grunted, getting to his feet in obvious pain. "I will draw her attention. Get to her as quickly as possible. I don't think I can run, wrenched my knee on landing." He did not say more as he hobbled to the right at a light jog. We could have just waited for reinforcements, but Konstantin needed to have his win. How had the man survived for so long?

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He meant to bend over for his helmet as he moved, but his leg gave out on him, and he stumbled to the ground. An azure missile burned into his armor. Fuck it, I thought. I ran to the right, using the distraction he was giving me. The cloaked elf fired a blue bolt at me. I managed to get behind the roots, and it slammed harmlessly into them. I was now at the base of the downed tree she was behind. I moved around the corner to peek. The elf woman was sprinting away.

I looked back at Konstantin, who was hobbling but he had his helmet on. The small elf was running to catch up with the summoner, and I thought it would be stupid to chase her as the other one could have set up another ambush. "Get her! I will be right behind you!" Konstantin yelled at me.

I started running and mumbling to myself, "Don't let them get away, Eryk. Gather herbs in my place, Eryk. Time to practice your fighting, Eryk. Eryk, you are the decoy for the scary monsters. Go with a prick mage and fight a storm giant. Chase after the fleeing mages by yourself, Eryk." The shorter elf was not slow, but my longer stride had me covering the ground quickly. I wanted to catch her before she reunited with the summoner. She moved from the thick-trunked forest into a sparser wooded area with evergreens. The scent of pine needles assaulted me as I sprinted and closed the distance. My adrenaline-fueled sprint was going to overtake her.

We hit a descent into a small ravine, and I used gravity to close quickly with her. Before she reached the bottom, I was swinging my blade into her back. Déjà vu occurred as the elf spun and parried my attack with a dagger. Her momentum took her into a roll as she crashed into the bottom of the ravine and skidded across the dried pine needles on her knees facing me.

I surfed the pine needles to a stop ten feet away. The elf's hood had come down as she stood to face me with a long dagger in one hand and a short parrying dagger in the other. She looked familiar as her chest heaved for oxygen—but that was impossible. I left that elf burnt and dying at the aqueduct. Her face showed surprise as her eyes got bigger and bigger—nope, it was definitely her as she recognized me to.

In elvish, she said something to the effect, Don't you taint me again with your evil magic, legionnaire. Although, that may be a cleaner version of it.

I sought for the elvish words I had been learning from the scholar, "Surrender, I will kill you—not."

Her eyes narrowed and got hard, and in accented Telhian, she said, "Your elvish is terrible. I will not surrender." She did not attack and seemed more ready to run again than fight. Then again, the last time we met, I had stored her in my dimensional space for two days.

Thankful to be speaking Telhian, I said emotionlessly, "Yeah, I only started learning your language a week ago. But you do either need to surrender, or I will have to kill you." I was already planning to rush her if she started to form a fireball. I needed to keep my aether for the summoner so I would have to kill her quickly.

Our standoff ended when a drake crashed through the pine canopy, showering us in both pine needles and broken branches. The confusion allowed Sebastian's drake to crash into the elf girl, seizing her in his jaw, crunching her body, as her bones audibly popped. It lunged her into a rock. Her body crumbled, full of oozing puncture wounds. Still mounted on his drake, Sebastian asked, "Was that the summoner?"

A little shocked, I answered, "No, Master Mage. She was just a guardian, I think. The summoner is close. Just a few minutes ahead of me in that direction," I pointed. He looked down at the elf, sneered in contempt, and took off into the sky, showering me again in more pine needles. I moved to the elf girl and was about to pull out the collector but thought better of it. Sebastian and Konstantin were too close.

The young elf's body was broken and bleeding. Her skull was probably fractured, and her torso was crushed, a few bones showing visible. Her chest was not rising or falling. She must be dead. I could store her and get her essence later when I was sure Durandus was not around. Greed overcame my judgment. I listened and didn't hear anything, so I moved the elf into my storage.

She must have been only mostly dead because my aether bottomed out with the backlash. Crap, without aether this was going to be a problem. Konstantin was up on the ridge while I was trying to decide what to do, "Eryk, I saw Sebastian's drake. Is he here?"

I pointed, "He went after the summoner." Konstantin nodded, did not descend into the ravine, and hobbled in the direction I indicated. That man was too tough for his own good. I took a deep breath and picked up the elf's two daggers—the smaller of which appeared to have runic writing. The long dagger was also shiny steel but did not have any markings other than the smith's mark.

I looked at the scene. If Sebastian returned, he would probably wonder where the body went. There was nothing I could do about it now with no aether. I moved down to the end of the ravine and climbed out to join Konstantin.

It did not take me long to catch him, and I could see the drake in the skies circling and searching ahead of us. Konstantin's voice was labored, "Is the elf woman dead?"

"The drake crushed her body and tossed it into a boulder. I collected her weapons," I replied indicating the two short blades in my belt. He nodded, looking pleased one opponent was handled. The thick evergreens thinned to grassy hills dotted with large trees. We could now easily see the drake about a mile away circling one tree.

Konstantin grinned and sounded elated, "Looks like Sebastian has treed our prey. Let's get closer, but let the mage do his work."

We slowed to a walk and watched the drake circle a two-hundred-foot pear-shaped tree. When we got within a hundred yards, we took cover behind another tree, Konstantin pulling me aside, "Best to remain here in case Sebastian decides to burn down the tree."

Sebastian circled the tree, tormenting the summoner taking cover under it. Konstantin suddenly pulled me back hard, pointing into the distance, "Don't move and hide yourself from that!" A creature was still far away but was already bigger than the drake that Sebastian was riding.

"Is that a dragon?" I asked numbly and in awe while pressing myself down.

"Could be a juvenile dragon, but I think it is a wyvern," Konstantin said emotionlessly. Sebastian finally noticed the massive beast, and realized he had turned from predator to prey.