

“I can’t tell you. It’s a secret.”

I narrowed my eyes at Xapano. “You want us to perform a secret task for you but you won’t tell us what it is?”

The biata elder’s feathered eyebrows fluttered a bit as he blinked. “Well, it wouldn’t be much of a secret if I told you now, would it?”

Squire Darlissa nodded her agreement. “I trust Xapano. If he wants us to perform a task for him, I’m sure it’s perfectly fine and legal.”

“Legal,” grunted Squire Rendal. “Of course.” He spread his hands to include Dar and me. “Squires. Can’t do anything illegal.”

Xapano held up his hands. “I never implied otherwise.” He took a sip of his tea and then clasped his hands together while giving us each a short but serious look.

I remained suspicious. I suppose that comes from my background as a bard. Even though I had been a squire—a knight in training—for a few years now, I still didn’t think of myself as one of those privileged nobles. Darlissa, a biata herself, was much more comfortable in the role, but then again, she was in her sixties and had lived a full life by human standards while still being considered young by biata standards. I could tell that Rendal, a fellow human like me and around my age, clearly shared my hesitation.

On the other hand, we had worked with Xapano before, during the War of the Arch, and he had proven himself trustworthy and honorable.

Still, I was uncomfortable.

I reached for some honey and gently poured it into my tea. The soft sounds of birds singing outside the window combined with the bright summer sun made everything feel safe and happy, despite the warning bells going off in my head. “Why do you need us to perform this task?” I asked. “Surely there are some talented biata adventurers who would appreciate the job.”

“Because of the secrecy,” Xapano said. “You’re all squires. You’ve taken oaths to follow the Code of Chivalry. You can’t lie. I can trust you in a way I cannot trust those who work for me.”

Rendal held his hands to his cheeks in mock surprise. “Are you implying that biata may not always be trustworthy?”

Dar scowled. Except for the feathers in her eyebrows and her hair, she looked every bit human, but I knew she and Xapano did not think the same way we did. “Oh, ha ha, very funny,” she said. “He means that he knows that if we give our word, we will keep it.”

Xapano pointed a finger at her while nodding. “Yes. Exactly. I trust you three. You’ve accomplished great things in the past, so I’m sure you can succeed. I need you to perform a perfectly legal but secret task for me, and promise not to talk about it with anyone other than yourselves.”

We exchanged glances and slight nods.

“Very well,” I said. “We promise. You have our words. What’s the task?”

The elder biata scratched at his face. “Ah, well, I also need you to promise to allow me to remove your memories of the task once you are done.”

I frowned and crossed my arms. I had never completely trusted the biata

and their ability to go into your mind and change your memories. “The idea of someone messing around in my head doesn’t appeal to me. I’ve never had that done to me before, and I don’t think I want to start now. “

“Come now, Terin,” Dar said. “You can trust Xapano.”

“Trust isn’t the issue,” I said. “I mean, that’s like saying ‘you can trust me to only cut off your left hand and nothing else.’ I don’t want someone playing with my brain.”

Xapano leaned forward. “You won’t feel a thing. You’ll just have no memory of having performed the task. I know how to find those specific thoughts and block them while leaving everything else untouched.”

“Block?” Ren asked.

“Biata can’t remove memories and thoughts,” Xapano replied. “We can only block them. It’s like we’re building a wall around them.”

“So someone else could later return those thoughts?” I asked.

Xapano nodded. “But only if they’re more skilled than I am.”

We looked to Dar who shook her head, admitting that she couldn’t do it.

“Look,” Xapano said. “Here’s my offer: You perform this task for me. Afterwards, I’ll block those memories temporarily. When, in the future, it is safe for you to know, I’ll remove that block.”

“I agree,” Dar said immediately and then turned to us, daring us to say no.

The sun beamed through the window and warmed my back, providing a serene comfort. I shook my head slowly. “Fine, I guess. I hope I’m not making a big mistake.”

A multitude of candles lit the dark room. Soft moonlight shone through sheer curtains. Xapano smiled at me. He wore a long black robe covered in that strange biata writing. I had a sharp pain in my knee and my head hurt.

I spun around, confused. Darlissa and Rendal stood nearby, looking just as bewildered.

“Thank you!” Xapano replied. “I am so grateful. Please feel free to relax here as long as you want, but I must be off.” He dashed out a door, smiling broadly.

I blinked. “What happened? Where are we?”

Dar found a chair and sat down while glancing around the ornate room. “I think I recognize this place. We’re at the Biata Council building in Bloodstone.”

“Bloodstone?” Rendal said, grabbing another seat. “That’s a week’s journey from Ashbury.”

“Walking, yes, but you could get there faster by horse...”

“Wait,” I cried. “I’m still trying to figure all this out. Are you telling me that we already performed the task?”

Dar nodded. “And apparently we were quite successful.”

I waved my hands. “And then Xapano removed a week’s worth of memories from us? The last thing I recall was talking to him back at the castle.”

Dar frowned. “I’m sure he had the Duke’s permission first. His Grace would not be happy to have three of his squires disappear for a while.”

Rendal snorted. “Sometimes I think Duke Frost would prefer we disappear completely.”

“That may be why he agreed.” I grabbed a chair and rubbed at my knee.
“But for now, I’m really frustrated. What did we do?”

“I’m sure we did nothing wrong or illegal,” Dar said. “So we don’t have to worry. We’ll rest tonight and then head back to Ashbury. And knowing that a biata elder owes us a favor? Well, that’s not a bad thing.”

I stopped rubbing my hurt knee and then noticed that we were not wearing our squire tabards displaying the ducal colors, nor did we have the traditional red belt representing our status. “That’s odd.”

Dar noticed my look and immediately understood. “I’m sure we have a room here somewhere. Our clothes and supplies are certain to be there.”

Rendal seemed pleased that his two weapons were still strapped to his side. “We can get everything later, but for now, I need a drink.”

“Excellent idea,” I said as I stood unsteadily. “Dar, you must know a good pub around here. I feel a bit hungry, too.”

Dar stood and brushed some dirt off her sleeve, pointedly noticing a prominent rip. “That’s not a bad idea. I could use some wine myself.”

She led us outside, and we found ourselves in the middle of an active downtown. Oil lanterns on tall poles illuminated the street, accented by the moon’s glow. The stores were closed but second-floor windows were open to let the summer air flow into the living quarters. Everyone seemed to be enjoying the nice weather, and laughter and singing echoed from the taverns and inns that lined the street.

Dar pointed to a sign indicating “The Dragon’s Flagon” and we entered

and grabbed an empty table. A pretty biata woman showing way too much cleavage distracted me and Ren but we managed to place our orders anyway, and soon we were feasting on roast duck and potatoes. Ren and I complimented the owner on the nice, thick beer while Dar remained silent about the wine she had been served.

“So why aren’t we wearing our ducal tabards?” I asked over a bite.

Dar gave a slight shrug. “My guess is that we removed them ourselves.”

“Makes sense,” Ren said, mouth full of potatoes. “Easier to travel without attracting attention.”

“I hope I was heroic,” I said over a bite. “The good news is that at least if I was cowardly, I’ll never know.”

Rendal pointed his fork at me. “I’m just happy you can’t write a song about it.”

“This memory loss thing could be useful,” I said. “I wouldn’t mind someone removing the image of Elmeki mooning me as we left the Hidden Kingdom a few months ago...”

“Oi!” came a voice. We turned to find a short rabbitkin waddling up to us. His purple cap was adorned with a pale yellow feather and his long, furry ears flopped behind him like a ponytail. He had his hands in his vest pockets as he beamed us a broad smile.

Although I had seen the various animal-like wylderkin before, I couldn’t recall ever seeing a rabbit-based one. I tried not to stare. He stared back.

“You’re here! Alive! That’s bloody good.” He did seem relieved to see us.

"I says to meself, Kipper, I says, them's smart ones. They wouldn't be squires now, would they, if they was dumb? They'll be able to take care of themselves, they will."

"Yes," I said. "We did."

He walked up to the table and leaned against it. "So! How'd it go?"

Dar gave me a stern look. I pursed my lips and leaned toward Kipper.

"How did *what* go?" I said in a low voice.

His eyebrows shot up. "Ooh, right, sorry." He placed a finger aside his pink nose and nodded. "Mum's the word." He smiled and looked at us each in turn.

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