

“Braaaaaaaaiiiiiiiiiinnnnnnnnsssssss.”

I backed away and swallowed deeply. Although I had faced zombies before, it didn't reduce my fear of them. They were unnatural, created through chaos magic, ripped from the fabric of order. They felt *wrong*.

Plus they had that ridiculous limited vocabulary.

The once-human creature struggled to place one leg before another as it stared at me with blank eyes. Clumps of dirt fell from its ragged clothing as it advanced, arms outstretched. This was someone's friend once; someone's father or brother.

I reached within myself and felt the power of the earth beneath me, all around me. I drew those energies into me and concentrated them, and hurled a pure Healing spell toward the abomination.

The power of order—of the natural progression of life—slammed into the twisted form. The burst of energy canceled the necromantic magics that held it together. The creature collapsed to the ground, a lifeless body once more.

“Terin!” Darlissa yelled. “Behind you!”

I spun around. My eyes grew.

Limbs askew, eyes vacant, and smelling of rot, dozens more of the undead shambled our way.

Rendal screamed and charged the horde. His twin swords slashed from side to side. His strength and speed proved no match for the undead creations.

Arms, legs and twitching bodies fell to the ground—but more zombies shuffled forward to replace the fallen.

Darlissa kept pace a few steps behind Rendal. A rancid zombie slashed at Ren. He cried out in pain. Dar tossed a Healing spell at the creature and it fell to the ground. Another spell healed Rendal's wound. He never looked back.

Jumping from side to side like a trained monkey, I tried to get around Rendal. Zombies turned to moan at me. I aimed a healing spell at the closest but missed. It continued toward me oblivious.

A scream came from behind. One of the braver town locals dashed past me. A bloody pitchfork stabbed into the zombie's neck. With a twist, the neck snapped.

Around me, other people jumped out of buildings. Rusty knives and heavy sticks crashed into mindless skulls.

“Braaaaaaaaiiiiiiiiiinnnnnnnnsssssss.”

Pitch-covered torches lit the area with bright fire. A young man to my right swung his like a mallet. It crashed into his target, tossing the zombie backwards. The creature fell to the ground aflame.

I continued to toss healing spells at the zombies. The effort weakened me.

One horrid-looking undead lumbered toward me. A young woman ran up to the slow-moving zombie and whacked it in the back of its head with a shovel. The zombie's jaw fell to the ground. It moaned and turned toward its attacker. I ran forward and finished it off with another spell.

The problem was that there were more zombies than there were townsfolk, and the zombies never tired.

A rotten undead came around a building toward the battle. I ran toward it.

“Riiiiiiiiinnnnnnngssssssss.”

Rings? Did that zombie say ‘rings’?

I stopped, puzzled. It continued toward me. I threw a Healing spell at it and enjoyed the sight of the abomination falling to the ground.

I ran among the combatants. Five more zombies fell to my magic. Three villagers were healed.

I breathed heavily, exhausted and positive I did not have the energy to cast one more. Then I realized there was silence.

I scanned the town. The battle had ended. Lifeless body parts filled the streets. Bloodied townsfolk peered nervously from side to side.

“Check and make sure none of the fallen are ours!” I yelled. Shaken villagers flitted from body to body and called out to family and friends to assure themselves that none of the corpses were familiar.

Rendal and Darlissa approached. Ren handed me a waterskin and I drank deeply. We wordlessly nodded to each other.

“Never a dull moment with you around, Terin,” Rendal said. “The Duke said this would be a nice peaceful trip into the countryside to deliver a message. Nothing to worry about! But no, when Terin is along, someone will always stop by to try to kill us.” He gave me a sidelong glance and a bit of a smile. “This is all your fault, you know.”

"Well, it's a good thing we happened by just now," Dar said.

"It is indeed!" A broad man with a full white beard stepped up to us. His eyes widened when he noticed the red belts we wore, signifying that we were squires of Duke Frost Vardik.

"We are honored and thankful to have you here in our village, squires!" he said nervously. "I am Geoffrey, the town Elder."

"I am Squire Darlissa, and this is Squire Rendal and Squire Terin."

"Terin!" Geoffrey said. His mouth opened and closed a few times. "Squire Terin? Here in our—"

Booming evil laughter echoed along the street. Heads turned, seeking the source.

A bright flash from a nearby building blinded everyone. When our vision returned, the wicked laughter drew them to the balcony of the tavern. A horrid-looking human, his greasy hair plastered to his face, leaned against the railing. He waved his arms dramatically.

"I am the Zombie King!" he shouted. "I create and control all of the zombies! I demand that you bring the rings to me, or I will call down more zombies upon this village! I have—"

He paused, noticing Rendal and Darlissa rushing to the tavern door. I raced after them.

"No!" the Zombie King yelled. "Not yet! Listen to my glorious plan!"

Ren burst through the tavern door first and dashed for the stairs leading to the balcony. Unable to match Ren's athletic prowess, Dar and I stumbled our way past the overturned tables and chairs and slipped on the spilled beer.

"Surrender!" I heard Ren yell.

As I reached the top stair, a blast of magical fire lit up the night. I threw myself to the ground. Unable to stop in time, Dar tumbled over me. Her chin jabbed into my back. The burst of fire from the Zombie King flew over our heads and splintered the wood with a deafening crack and a wave of heat.

Darlissa got off me and I pushed myself up. Ren stood near the edge of the balcony, the shadows on his dark face dancing in the firelight. The bleeding form of the Zombie Master lay at his feet.

"He didn't surrender," he explained.

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Darlissa took a deep breath and once more ran her fingers through her long brown hair. "Let me see if I understand this."

The town elder swallowed and tried not to meet her eyes. He scratched nervously at his beard. I wondered if this was the first time he had encountered a biata before and was unnerved by her feathery eyebrows. Or maybe he just wasn't accustomed to three ducal squires appearing in his small town.

Geoffrey's private meeting room provided ample comfort for the four of us. Dar sat in the primary chair and looked at the candle that flickered in the glass jar

on the table. Squire Rendal sat to her left, munching on a cold chicken leg someone had provided. He squinted at a small bit of parchment on the table while taking another bite.

I sat to Dar's right. As the youngest and newest of the three squires, I was more than happy to let her do the questioning.

Geoffrey shifted uncomfortably in his seat and continued to glance at me from the corner of his eye. "We are here to help, Good Squire."

Dar crossed her arms. "You said that a young woman named Millicent came into the village a few weeks ago. She had the mind of a child and hardly spoke any words, and she was wearing a very unusual ring. Right?"

"Yes, and we thought it was quite—"

"She had a map, and some of your braver citizens followed it to a cave where they killed some giant spiders and found another ring that matched the first one."

"Belfir still has a scar from that battle," Geoffrey said, looking to me. "He used to be in the army though, so it's not like he—"

"And when that ring was given to Millicent, she put it on, and some of her memory returned."

Not wanting to be interrupted again, Geoffrey merely nodded.

"She recalled where a third ring lay hidden, and you found that also."

Geoffrey stared down at the table.

"And after that was found, she—*would you look at me when I'm talking to you?*"

Geoffrey jumped in his seat, knocking his drink onto the floor. "I am so sorry, Squire Darlissa! Please forgive me! I do not mean to disobey! Do not punish me!" He stared open-eyed at her, afraid to look away even for an instant.

Dar sighed again and calmed herself. "You have nothing to fear from any of us. We are squires and are in service to the people of Ashbury."

"I know," Geoffrey replied. "But shouldn't Squire Terin be the one leading this discussion?"

Dar turned to me, fire in her eyes.

"It's not my fault!" I cried.

I had been wrongly named as the hero of the Arch prophecy earlier in the year, but somehow I'd managed to solve the problem anyway. Songs and stories of my adventure had quickly traveled the duchy. Now wherever we went, even in this remote village, everyone expected me to be a great hero. Darlissa and Rendal, my constant companions, had yet to become used to this attention.

Truth be told, neither had I.

"It's all right, you can tell Squire Darlissa," I said to Geoffrey. "Without her, I would never have been able to accomplish all those things in the tales."

Geoffrey gasped. "You mean she helped you fight off those giants when you saved the babies?"

"What? I—*giants*?" I sputtered. "I've never even *seen* a giant!"

Geoffrey's brows creased in disbelief, but he refused to look away from Dar.

“Can we please get back to the problem at hand?” Dar said. “Elder, you don’t need to stare at me. Relax and tell me what happened next.”

Geoffrey lowered his eyes and pursed his lips. “Two of our citizens died getting the third ring. It was deep in an abandoned dwarven mine. They had to fight a pack of monsters there. After that, we decided that helping Millicent just wasn’t worth the trouble.”

Dar crossed her arms. “Did she ever tell you what significance the rings have?”

“Well, no, but I’m not sure she knows, or even understands in her current condition. Maybe you should talk to Millicent yourself. She was the one the zombies were after, you know.”

Ren looked up. “Did they hurt her?”

Geoffrey held up his hands. “No, no, they didn’t touch her, but they certainly all seemed to be trying to get to her. We fought them off each time.”

“Each time?”

“Yes. Ever since Millicent showed up in our town, there have been zombie attacks. They always headed straight for her rings. We’re not trained fighters and we don’t have any real weapons. Good thing they move slowly. Tonight’s was the biggest attack, and we weren’t doing too well. Fortunately, you happened to be traveling by and heard the battle.”

Dar’s feathers fluttered slightly. “Has the Zombie King ever appeared before?”

“Well, no. I’ve never heard of him until tonight.”

“He’s a crazy necromancer who laughs maniacally and wants the rings because of the great power they will give any spellcaster,” Ren said.

I laughed. “And how do you know that?”

Ren held up the parchment. “He wrote it in this note. I found it on his body.”

I snatched it out of his hands and stared at it. “I, the Zombie King, must obtain all four of the Rings,” I read. “With them, I shall have vast power to create zombies endlessly! They must not get into the hands of Millicent, who will remember her past and continue to use them to fight against necromancy! They belong to me! Muahahaha!”

Dar started. “Wait, did he really write ‘Muahahaha’?”

For more of this story, get “Tales of Fortannis: A Bard’s Eye View”

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