

Remembering the Future

*From the book "Terin Ostler and the Zombie King (and other stories)"
by Michael A. Ventrella*

"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 Second 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? 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. “Oh, ha ha, very funny. 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. 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.”

“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.”

“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.

After a few awkward seconds, Dar said, “May we help you?”

Kipper gave a small cough. “Well, there’s, um ...” He glanced from side to side, but no one in the place seemed to be giving us the slightest bit of attention. “There’s the matter of payment.”

“Ah,” Dar said. “And?”

He shrugged. “Well, not meaning to be rude or nothing, but I’d like it.”

“I don’t recall ...” I said, and then stopped, realizing that I might be giving something away.

“Don’t recall?” Kipper said. “Don’t be daft. You pulling me leg? You promised.” His eyes grew. “Wait a bloody minute. You ain’t wearing those ducal clothes no more.” His voice began to rise. “You’re a bunch of lying thieves, ain’t you? Pretending to be squires and what not? Why, I oughta...”

I waved him down. “Quiet, good sir! We just changed to, uh, get more comfortable. We’re off duty now, you see?”

“Off duty?” He looked us up and down. “Thought bleeding squires were always on duty.”

“We don’t have to wear the tabards all the time,” I said. “I mean, come on, let’s not be slaves to fashion. We promised and we’ll deliver.”

He looked skeptical but said, “That’s better.”

My curiosity was killing me. I leaned forward him and spoke reassuringly. “Tell you what ... let’s go over everything you did for us and then we can discuss whether you should deserve not only what we promised but a nice bonus as well.”

“Now we’re talking!” he said, as he pulled up a chair and bounded into it. He swung his feet back and forth and motioned for the waitress to bring him a drink.

“Terin!” Dar hissed. “We’re not supposed to know what happened!”

“I can keep a secret,” I said. “I really didn’t need some biata making me keep it.”

Rendal slapped me on the back. “I agree. It’s like he didn’t trust us.”

Dar jutted out her jaw. “He *did* trust us, and now we’re breaking his trust!”

I waved her down dismissively as our rabbit friend grabbed his drink. “So, good sir, let’s review your work. Quietly, though.”

Kipper took a long draught and then wiped his mouth on his sleeve. After casting glances left and right, he leaned forward and spoke in a soft voice. “I keep me ears to the ground, you know? I spends a lot of time here, and we don’t get nobility here much so you attracted me attention. I listened in.” He twitched his long ears to make the point. “Not much gets by me. I hears you was worried about traveling through the Cursed Woods. And that’s how you hired me as a guide.”

“Of course,” I said dismissively. “We know that part. What services did you perform for us where you deserve a bonus?”

“Well, remember when I heard something coming and we all hid as a bunch of ogres marched by? That was good, wasn’t it?”

“You saved your own tail as well, though,” Ren pointed out.

“Hey!” Kipper said, pointing a furry finger at Rendal. “Nothing from you. I ain’t forgetting the frying pan incident.”

I tried to keep from laughing at Ren’s puzzled look. “But how did you help us achieve our quest?”

“Well, I kept you from getting lost, didn’t I?” He snapped his fingers. “That’s why the woods are cursed, you know. People just wander around for days if they don’t know where they’re going. I helped you find that tomb you was looking for.” He paused and wouldn’t make eye contact. “I see you got back safely without me.”

“Yes,” I said. “No thanks to you. What happened?”

“Well, come on, you didn’t think I was going to go into the tomb with you, did

you?” He took a deep breath. “I was waiting, really I was, and then I gets this creepy feeling all deep down inside. Like all humming and making my teeth shake, you know? Didn’t you feel it?”

We looked at each other and remained silent.

“Well, maybe you inside the tomb didn’t feel it but something wasn’t right where I was. And it was coming from the tomb, I could tell. I was sure you was all dead so I ran.” He pasted on a buck-toothed smile. “I’m so happy to see you’re all well! So, uh, about that payment?”

“Remind me,” Dar said. “What did we promise you?”

“Five gold.”

“Five gold pieces!” I laughed. “Are you kidding? That’s outrageous. We don’t have that much money.” I pulled out my coin pouch and emptied it on the table to show him. More than a dozen golden coins fell out, along with some silvers, a few coppers, some gems, and a strange amulet. My mouth fell open.

Kipper laughed. “Ah, you’re a funny one, you are. Always said so. Liked that song you sang about the hobling and the purple pixie, too.” He reached over for the coins but Ren grabbed his hand.

“Friend,” Ren calmly said, “we haven’t yet decided how many coins you should get.”

Dar took the opportunity to grab the amulet. She held it to her face, concern in her eyes. “This is the seal of the Norik family.” She stared at it. “One of the more prominent and important biata families in Ashbury.”

I sat back. “Did we rob a Norik tomb?”

Dar knew more than Ren and I combined, plus about everything twenty other people knew, and probably a few scholars from the great libraries added in, but this appeared to have her stumped. “Xapano is from the Corak family. Why would he have us steal something from another family’s tomb? He promised us we wouldn’t be doing anything illegal...”

A deep, growling voice came from the doorway. “*Where is the one called Rendal Smith?*”

A large, hairy human stomped his way toward us. His arms looked like he carried entire logs under them daily, and his neck was camouflaged under bulging muscles. Running behind him, looking quite upset, was one of the most beautiful women I had ever seen—about my age, with long, black hair cascading down over her shoulders—and as that occupied my attention, I jumped when I realized the man was at our side.

Dar scooped the coins and pendant into the pouch and pulled it out of sight as Kipper dived under a table.

Ren stood and looked not at all concerned. “I am he.”

The man looked Ren up and down. Ren was a large fellow himself, although his muscles were trim and toned. I knew that if a fight broke out, Ren’s training would allow him to avoid most of this man’s attacks—but if one swing of that huge fist hit Ren’s head, he’d be out.

The room was silent.

The man turned to the woman, raised an eyebrow, and pointed a thumb at Ren.

“Rendal, I’m sorry,” the woman said. “Daddy made me tell him where I was that night.”

Ren did an excellent job of not showing any emotion, but I could imagine the thoughts running through his head at that moment. He remained silent, keeping his eyes on “Daddy” in case of any sudden movement.

Daddy frowned. “Levina said she spent the night with you.”

Ren started to cross his arms and then apparently realized that would make it harder to defend himself if something happened. He instead placed them on his hips, near his two swords. “She is clearly an adult and able to make her own decisions, good sir.”

“I’ve put out word but no one has seen you for a few days.”

“I am here now.”

Daddy looked Ren up and down and sneered. It was then I noticed that we did not make the most impressive group. Both Ren and I needed shaves (well, him more than me; I could still go a week before anyone noticing); our clothes were a bit dirty and Dar’s shirt had a noticeable rip; and we were dressed as wandering adventurers or mercenaries, and not ducal squires.

Daddy pointed a thick finger at Ren. “You took advantage of her and made her promises you can’t keep. You lied and told her you were a squire to the Duke.”

“That is not a lie.”

Daddy threw his arms out and gave a loud, fake laugh. “Ha! As if a squire to the Duke would have stolen my daughter’s heart like that.”

Levina looked as if she was about to cry. “Ren, I’m so sorry...”

The door to the tavern burst open. A wild-eyed man slammed the door behind him and pointed outside. “Skeletons!” he screamed, and then dived under a table, crashing into Kipper, who shouted out his displeasure.

Rendal is one of the bravest men I know. While I stood there for a second, trying to figure out what was happening, he had already dashed to the door, pulling his weapons from their scabbards.

“Move!” Dar said, bringing me out of my shock. I followed her as she pushed her way past screaming patrons.

As squires, it is our job to face danger. I had started to get used to acting against everything I had always stood for—mainly brass cowardice—and I found that what pulled me toward danger these days was more the worry that if I didn’t help, my friends could get hurt.

We ran into the night. Ren stood in the middle of the street, hands on his weapons. I took one side while Dar took the other. My eyes were taking a bit to adjust to the darkness, so I closed them for a second to concentrate.

I felt the life around me, flowing through every living thing, breathing and singing in harmony. The power of the earth came to me, and I breathed in heavily, feeling the magical power within which would allow me to cast spells. And there ... there, pushing against it was the power of chaos, of entropy, of destruction, seeking to undo everything life creates. The power that makes undead.

I opened my eyes. A large skeletal figure clothed in ragged chainmail walked slowly down the center of the street. A large jeweled pendant hung around its neck bones. It held a massive spiked club which it swung around effortlessly despite the lack of muscles. Damn necromancy.

Beside it were a half dozen smaller skeletons, equally equipped and ready.

As they neared, I could see that they all wore dirty, ripped tabards that had the

same symbol as the Norik pendant.

The large leader stopped. Red points of light glowed from its eye sockets. It raised a bony finger and pointed at us.

“Right, then,” it said. “Come on, give it back.”

Dar, Ren and I exchanged glances. From the corner of my eye, I noticed many of the townspeople watching us from open windows, scared but too curious to hide completely.

“Give what back?” I said.

“Oh, let’s not play these silly games,” it said. “You know perfectly well that you stole the Norik ring from the tomb. It’s not yours, right? So give it back and then we won’t have to kill you.”

Ren grunted. “So much for *that* secret.”

“You are the caretaker of the tomb?” I asked.

The skeleton stood taller and, despite the lack of any facial expression, looked proud. “I am indeed,” it said.

I gave a broad smile. “Excellent! It is always better to speak to the one in charge when things need to get done, don’t you agree?”

“Oh, yes, indubitably,” the skeleton said. “And especially when one has been without conversation for so long.”

“Of course,” I agreed. “I am Squire Terin Ostler, from Ashbury. Do you have a name?”

The skeleton crossed its arms and posed pretentiously, in a manner that reminded me of many bad actors I had performed with over the years. “At first I did not,” it said,

“but I studied from the books left in the tomb and after a while, I chose the name ‘Discipulus.’ It means ‘scholar.’”

Rendal shifted his feet. “This has been the weirdest day of my life.”

“A fine and fitting name,” I said to the skeleton. “Tell me, Discipulus, how long have you been guarding that tomb?”

Discipulus gave a shrug and some dust flew off its shoulder. “Hundred of years. Long, boring years, I have to tell you.”

“Yes,” I said. “I can imagine.”

“It wasn’t bad at first,” it said. “Lord Perdigon created me to guard the tombs. He was a great wizard and he’d come in from time to time and we’d have nice chats. Then, all of a sudden, he stopped coming. I have a theory.”

“Yes?” I prodded. “Do tell.”

“I theorize that he alone had the means to enter the tomb, and when he died, he took the secret with him.”

“And how long ago was that?”

“Exactly eight hundred and fifty two years ago.”

Dar gave me a serious look. “The War of the Arch,” she said. Like I hadn’t figured that out on my own.

“No one has been to the tomb from then until now, when you entered,” Discipulus said. “Which reminds me: I am quite upset about the number of my minions you destroyed. Had I not been distracted by a particularly interesting volume on the evolution of language in Thessi, I would have been in the main chambers when you stole the ring. You were very lucky, but now I am obligated to kill you and take it back.”

I gave a sad shake of my head. "I'm afraid things have changed during all those years. You see, necromancy is now illegal in these lands. We are required to destroy all undead. Perhaps it would be best if you surrendered and made it easier."

Discipulus' eyes burned hotter. "Do not assume that my genteel nature reflects a timid soul. I assure you, if you attack me, the only guaranteed resolution will be your death. And then, if I do not find the ring upon you, I will have no other alternative but to kill everyone in this lovely town until said ring is returned to its rightful place."

There was an audible gasp. I looked around and saw many heads ducking behind doors and shutters.

I pulled the power of the earth into me and released my most powerful healing spell at the creature, knowing that it would disrupt the chaos magic holding it together.

It enveloped Discipulus completely and then just as quickly, dissipated away. Discipulus turned its head slightly, giving me a rather sad look. "Pity," it said. "I was enjoying the witty banter. You have left me no other option. Minions, please attack."

Screams echoed from the doorways as the skeletons advanced. Ren ran forward and sliced at the first, which easily parried his blows and tossed them aside without showing any effort. Darlissa, who was immensely more powerful than I, cast spell after spell into Discipulus, none of which seemed to have any effect other than frustrate it.

"Oh come now," Discipulus said. "Perdigon made sure I was adequately protected against most attacks and I've learned quite a bit over the years to augment my power. And my minions? Well, they've had nothing to do for centuries except practice."

I turned my attention to the closest skeleton running toward me. I was sweating in the cool night air. I threw a healing spell at it and the skeleton came apart in mid-air. The

bones continued their forward movement and crashed against my face. I fell backwards as the creature's sword flew over my head.

I rolled aside, cracking my elbow on a bone, and jumped up. More were heading my way. I heard other skeletons falling to pieces. Dar had turned her attention to them. Ren ran past me toward Discipulus.

Two more fell from my spells before they could reach me—and then I felt a huge weight against my back. It was like a cannonball had been shot at me. My face cracked against the roadway stones and I heard my nose snap. Blood spurted into my mouth. My head pounded. The screams from the people watching didn't help.

The weight slid off my back. Ren pulled himself off me completely and then stood unsteadily. He staggered a bit as he reached for his weapons on the ground. I pushed myself to my feet.

"Bloody nose, eh?" Discipulus said. He stood with his hands on his hips, as if he didn't have the slightest concern. "Better than the broken leg you had the last time you fought my minions. They told me all about it. Still, soon you won't feel anything because you'll be dead."

"Your threats don't scare me!" I yelled.

"Oh, no, those aren't threats," Discipulus replied. "Just facts."

Ren threw himself again at Discipulus. The creature easily parried Ren's blows and then swung his massive mace. It crashed into Ren's stomach and he flew backwards, crying out in pain.

It was then I noticed the other skeletons had all been dispatched. Dar moved to stay out of Discipulus' reach, but her footing was uneven. She stumbled on a bone but

caught herself. She screamed out the words for a fire spell and launched it at Discipulus. His tabard burst into flames.

I didn't know what else to do, so I dashed toward Rendal, throwing a healing spell at him. His eyes opened and he jumped back up. He gave a nod as he ran back into the fray.

I ran to Dar. My bloody nose dripped steadily, painting the bones on the street. Dar was trying every spell she could, but none appeared to harm Discipulus. Its tabard was a sooty ruin, but it stood steadily. If it had a face, it would have been laughing.

"This has been fun," it said, "but I'm afraid that you may have been telling the truth when you said you did not have the ring." It continued to talk, despite both Dar and me tossing spells at it, and Ren trying to get a hit in with his weapons. "The longer I tarry," it continued, "the more likely that ring is traveling away from here, and then the more people I will have to kill to get it back."

It swung its mace toward Rendal's head. There was no way a blow that strong could be cured by a simple healing spell.

I knew I could not compete with Dar's vast knowledge of spells or her ability with them. And I had already cast every healing spell I knew into the abomination. In frustration, I threw the only other one I could think of—a minor disarming spell.

Discipulus' massive mace went flying from its hands. Rendal ducked. The weapon landed on a pile of bones, which cracked under its weight.

"Well, *that's* an interesting new spell," Discipulus said. It started to head toward the mace but Rendal was there. His weapons smashed into Discipulus but did little harm. The creature ignored Ren completely. It reached down to pick up its weapon.

The street lit as if the sun had suddenly risen behind me. I heard magical words and a bolt of pure light shot past me, hitting Discipulus square in the chest.

The creature looked up. The red glow in its eyes faded. “What—”

It fell to pieces.

A huge cheer rose around us. I spun around. Xapano stood behind me, his hands on an impressively carved staff that was covered with glowing biata writing. He smiled. “Got here just in time, I see.”

“Slightly anti-climactic.” I grinned back.

Xapano bowed his head. “I’m sure you’ll exaggerate it properly for dramatic effect when you tell the tale.”

His assistant Zatarina stepped forward, her long, frizzy red hair flowing down her back. She touched my nose, said a few words, and there was a loud *crack!*

“Ow,” I said, but I could feel that my face repairing itself and healing. The headache subsided.

People were coming out of their homes and the tavern to surround us and cheer, with Xapano rightfully getting much of the attention. He was their leader after all, and obviously, for good reason.

“Oi, that was great!” Kipper bounded toward me. He then passed right by me, jumped onto the skeletal remains of Discipulus, rummaged around a bit, and then pulled up the massive jeweled pendant it was wearing. “Never mind about that payment, mate,” he said. He thrust the pendant into a pocket and then took off running into an alley.

“Very impressive,” a loud voice said to my right. “Daddy” and Levina were striding up to Rendal. “I’ve been informed that you are truly a squire after all.”

“Yes, sir,” Rendal replied.

“I had thought my daughter had been tricked by some charlatan, out to steal her heart,” Daddy said. “She told me that you were one of the heroes of the Second Arch Battle a few years ago, but I didn’t believe her.”

Rendal was still breathing heavily from the fight, but he nodded and smiled. “It’s true. My name is Rendal Smith, and this is Terin Ostler and Darlissa—”

“Terin? *The* Squire Terin?” It was the first time he had really looked at me. “I’ve heard all about you from that damned song the bards keep singing. Rendal is with you?”

I smiled. “More like I’m with Rendal. I’d have been dead many times over without him. He is a true hero that any man would be proud to see with his daughter.”

Rendal coughed and gave me a look. I could hear Dar laughing behind me.

“See, Daddy?” Levina said. “You should’ve listened to me. And he didn’t steal my heart—I gave it to him.” She put her hands on Rendal’s face, gave him a quick kiss, and then reached down and pulled a heart-shaped pendant from around his neck. Rendal’s expression was priceless.

“My boy, treasure that heart,” Daddy said. “Do not break it.”

Rendal nodded, looking confused.

“Pardon us, good sir,” Xapano said, and Daddy and Levina backed away. Xapano strolled over and gave us all a big smile. Zatarina stood at his side.

“I wish I could remember what happened that night,” Ren said. “I apparently had a good time.”

“I suppose there’s no need to keep the secret now,” Xapano said, “since the entire town knows about it.” He suddenly kneeled down, reached into a pouch, and pulled out

an impressive ring. He held it up so we could all see. “The Ring of Norik,” he proclaimed in a serious voice. “Zatarina Norik,” he said, showing it to his assistant. “Will you marry me?”

Her jaw dropped. Her legs got weak, and she fell to her knees beside him. “Yes! Yes, of course I will!”

The crowd cheered its approval as the two kissed.

I turned to Dar, who was crying happy tears. “Wait, what? What just happened?”

Xapano and Zatarina stood.

“The Norik family ring had been handed down for generations as a symbol of the most powerful member of the Norik family,” Zatarina said. “But Brin Norik refused to hand it over as he was dying, and took it with him to the grave—and then did something to make everyone forget where he was buried.”

“Biata doing things to make people forget?” I said. “I’m shocked.”

Dar punched me on the shoulder.

Xapano laughed. “He had the tombs hidden with obscuring spells, which even caused the woods around to become enchanted. It took me years of research—which included some very dangerous ritual spells—but I finally discovered the general area where the tomb could be found. I knew you three could recover the ring for me. And I was right!”

Rendal crossed his arms. “But why all the secrecy?”

Xapano grinned. “Did you see her face when I gave it to her? That is a moment that we will treasure forever. I couldn’t risk her finding out about it before.”

Ren frowned. “So, we risked our lives and fought a gigantically powerful undead

for a ring?”

“No, not for a ring,” Darlissa said, happy tears still streaming her face. “We fought for the most important thing in the entire world. We fought for love.”