

First Dance

Xayah slowly turned on her heel, noting the weak points of each mercenary and marking the visibly inexperienced ones as her first targets. Her cape followed her movement, curving lightly across her back as the tip dragged along the ground.

The clearing she'd been cornered in was sparsely lined with trees, whose sturdy brown trunks gave way to thin, leaf-covered branches. The green foliage was interspersed with glowing teal wisps of magic, woven seamlessly into the land as it was supposed to be. The grass here had been downtrodden, likely by travelers passing through, though it still thrived. Ionia's magic had not been sundered here, and it would remain that way as long as Xayah still drew breath.

While Xayah had hoped to avoid a fight, a part of her was itching for battle. She had expected a fight, back in Vlonqo, but that vastayan entertainer's distracting performance had enabled her to complete her mission without a single confrontation.

The vastayan entertainer ... the very buffoon who had kept Xayah locked in her own thoughts long enough for the mercenaries to close in. She silently cursed herself as a fool.

Never get distracted on the job – that leads to mistakes.

Well, it was too late for her to avoid this now. So Xayah settled into a comfortable stance and plucked the first of many feathers she would need.

The mercenaries began to tighten the noose. It was not a perfect advance, she noticed; the humans were not in sync, leaving gaps she could slip through if necessary. But running was only a last resort, and she needed – no, *wanted* – the fight.

Before Xayah could pick out her first victim, however, a flash of yellow darted through one of the gaps, bringing the entire group of mercenaries to a sudden halt. Xayah found herself staring at the exact reason why she was in this predicament in the first place.

Rakan.

The male Lhotlan did not seem to care that he was vastly outnumbered, or that the female he stood in front of was just as likely to stab him as the humans surrounding them – though for a different reason. Namely, pure annoyance.

“Okay, everybody,” he stated loudly, “I'm here ... the party starts now!”

Xayah groaned softly. The buffoon was going to get both of them killed – or maybe just himself. She had gotten herself out of worse situations before, though not without sustaining injuries. Rakan’s arrival, however, likely had given the mercenaries further incentive to attack. And a small voice in the back of her mind added, *That’s the first thing he ever says to you?*

“What do you think you possibly could be accomplishing here?” she hissed at the other vastayan. “And before you say you came to help, *I don’t need any*. I was just fine before you came along.”

Rakan didn’t look at her. He stared off to her right, and at first, she thought he hadn’t heard her. But finally, he turned just enough to look her in the eye.

The last thing he said before all hell broke loose was, “I just didn’t want to miss the party.”

With that, Rakan dove to the side – right in the direction he’d been looking in before. The closest mercenary received a flashy, but still strong, kick to the chest, and was sent flying into the closest tree with enough force to daze him. The two men who had been standing on either side of the now-incapacitated mercenary did nothing but stare at the unexpected assailant – that is, until two violet daggers found their targets. A third feather shot past Rakan’s head to embed itself in his original opponent’s chest.

And that was when the mercenaries charged.

Rakan ducked under several wild swings and swept out a leg, as if he were dancing and this was merely the next move in the sequence. The handful of men he tripped went down, sprawling across the packed dirt. He then gracefully sidestepped a young mercenary’s reckless charge before darting forward to catch a new opponent off guard.

Xayah, meanwhile, was weaving through the mercenaries’ attacks, pausing for a moment now and then to hurl a well-timed dagger into an unprotected throat or chest. She ducked under a larger man’s sword as he swung it out in an arc, and then stabbed him through the heart. She then pulled the dagger free and flung it at the nearest open target.

Not even pausing to check if she’d hit her mark, Xayah leapt into the air, hurtling over a handful of men who’d just been knocked off balance by another one of Rakan’s roundhouse kicks. The moment she landed, she snapped her fingers. The mercenaries that were now behind her

didn't get a chance to react before a barrage of feathers, freed from their previous victims, shredded through them.

Xayah finally paused to take inventory of the situation. Most of the mercenaries were dead, and Rakan was happily distracting the remaining humans. She watched him for a moment as he danced to the music only the vastaya could hear, darting between opponents and interjecting a punch or kick when the rhythm allowed it. Then she rejoined the fight, slinging her now-bloody quills at the final remaining targets.

It wasn't much longer until only two hearts continued to beat. Xayah and Rakan stood at opposite ends of the clearing, staring at each other, the bodies of their victims scattered around them. Both bore cuts and bruises, but they were alive – a luxury that their opponents could not claim.

Xayah abruptly turned in the direction she had been heading in, not saying a word. She picked her way through the corpses carefully before vanishing into the treeline.

Rakan watched her go, and then paused, thinking to himself.

"I think she liked my dance," he said out loud. And with that, he sprang in the direction she'd vanished in, hoping to catch up to her.