

A Small Problem

"Why could that fool not just hold it until we got to the lake?" thought Lydia. "I knew I should have stayed with him, but he insisted I continue on and wait for him to catch up."

Xavius had been missing for an hour. The warm, breezy air of the Shalador Forest became cool and still. The sky above the lake clearing had turned orange, red, and magenta. Some local Shaladori began emerging from their burrows. They were short, being only four feet tall, and had brown skin that matched the nearby dirt in tone. Most wore their hair quite long, going about halfway down their backs, but some males kept their hair short, letting it grow at most half way down their head. Their long ears grew back at an angle and curved slightly upward with a point at the end. Lydia had heard that the Shaladori were not like the other elven races, but in person they seem nothing like any elf she had met before.

Slim bodies and long, pointy ears were the only things the Shaladori had in common with their elven kin. Most elves grow as tall as humans, give or take a few inches, and have pale skin, varying in tints of pink, gold, teal, and grey. Other elves sleep at night and are active during the day, while the Shaladori are nocturnal beings. Although all elven races have their own distinct customs and values, the Shaladori remain the only elves to not build houses, develop trade with other races,

and most importantly, use magic. The Shaladori believe that magic is for the gods, and the gods alone. To them, mortals that attempt to harness magic for their own use defy nature. Most races embrace magic to varying degrees, and as a result the Shaladori have grown spiteful towards the other races of the world.

Lydia could feel unwelcoming glares as the Shaladori began lighting totems surrounding the lake. She knew that she was an unwanted guest before even entering the forest, but it was the only route to get to Oakhaven on foot. She could hear the Shaladori whisper to each other in a tongue she had never heard before, and there were a couple of hisses directed towards her as well. She avoided eye contact with the little elves, but she could feel their gazes, nonetheless. "Thank heavens the elders' records were right," Lydia muttered to herself. "I do not know what I would do if they were wrong about the Lake of Life."

The Lake of Life lies in the heart of the Shalador forest. It has been there since before the dawn of man. Shaladori legends say that Eithos, the goddess of life, gave birth to the first elf inside the lake. They believe that the lake is tied to their gods, and as such have turned it into a holy sanctuary for their people. Violence is forbidden near the lake, but anything beyond the tree line surrounding it is fair game. Not many make it deep enough in the Shalador forest to even catch a glimpse of

the lake in the distance, for the Shaladori guard their land fiercely and attack any intruders. The elves even go as far as assigning groups to patrol the forest during the daytime when the rest are asleep.

Lydia and Xavius had been fortunate enough to enter the forest shortly after a different traveling group that were trying to save time on their trade route. The merchants, despite being well equipped with weaponry from their stock, stood no chance against the tiny elves. They were outnumbered, out skilled, and out of luck. They couldn't even hear them coming. The Shaladori knew the forest better than most humans know their own village, and their small size and slender figures allowed them to slip through trees and brushes swiftly and silently. The first strike came from a male, jabbing his spear into the spine of one of the merchants. The other merchants only heard the spearhead grind against bone and their friend cry in agony. Before any of the merchants could scramble to their weapon stock, they were surrounded by thirty elves, clutching spears, daggers, bows, and clubs.

After the slaughter finished, the elves dragged the merchants' bodies into the nearest cave, and set them ablaze. It took four elves to drag a single body. As the bodies burned, the elves made their way back to the attack site. They wanted nothing to do with the intruders, so they needed to remove their

belongings from the forest. They gathered the merchants' stock, full of swords and axes, linen and cotton, and jewels and gems, as well as their stash of gold coins. Once they reached the edge of the forest, they dropped the goods, spat on them, and promptly retreated back into their land. Within minutes, a group of humans covered in grime swarmed the pile left just outside the forest. Some fought over the gold coins, while others grabbed as many goods as they could carry and scurried back to their little huts nearby. It was quite common for the poorest humans in Hillsbarrow to leave the city and live as close to the Shalador Forest as they dare so they can scavenge the belongings of those that don't survive.

Lydia and Xavius had argued over the best way to get through the forest. Xavius wanted to use his demonic magic to create a dark fog around them to scare off any elves that spot them. Lydia insisted that he refrains from using his magic unless a life or death situation arose, much like how he had previously insisted the same about her sword. As they argued, Lydia spotted the merchants enter the forest, and decided they should seize the opportunity. Xavius didn't like the idea of using other people as bait, but it was the only way to guarantee the elves would be distracted long enough for them to sneak in and hopefully make it to the Lake of Life.

Lydia's plan had worked. They made it in unnoticed, and could see the lake clearing. Lydia threw her head back and sighed in relief. "We are almost there," said Lydia.

"Damn it," said Xavius. "It's still so far away. Shit. I can't hold it anymore. I gotta piss." Xavius turned towards the nearest tree and started walking towards it while fumbling to undo the laces on the front of his trousers.

Lydia grabbed Xavius' shoulder and spun him around. "Not so fast. It is far too dangerous to waste time away from the lake."

Xavius pulled her hand off of his shoulder and started backpedaling towards the tree. "I won't be long. Just keep going and I'll meet you there, okay?"

"No. I will not have my partner die on me because of his poor decisions. Let us move on."

Xavius felt himself bump into the tree. He turned around and started relieving himself. He twisted his neck until he could see Lydia out of the corner of his eye. "Sorry, but it was gonna come out now regardless of what you wanted."

Lydia turned her head in disgust. "Fine, just hurry up before the Shaladori find us."

"Um, it's gonna take a while. Just go to the damn lake if you're that worried."

"Do I need to repeat myself?"

"Yeah, yeah. *I will not have my partner die on me.* You've said that ten times already on our journey, and we left yesterday. Look, if it comes to life or death, I get to use my magic, right? I'll be fine, just go to the lake if you're this worked up about it. Maybe you'll learn to calm down and relax for once."

Lydia grunted. "Fine. But no magic unless you absolutely need it." She marched towards the lake, not looking back. After making it to the clearing, Lydia took a deep breath and sighed. She slowly approached the lakefront, still not looking back. She sat down inches from the water and took another deep breath. She took a moment to enjoy the scenery, still not looking back. She listened to the sounds nearby, the wind whistling through the trees and birds chirping their mating songs. She tried to focus on hearing Xavius' approach, still not looking back. Her heart sank deep in her chest and felt her body go cold when she realized she can't hear him. She stood up and wrapped her arms around her chest, still not looking back. "He said it would take a while, right?" Lydia said to herself. She unwrapped her arms and straightened her posture, still not looking back. "I bet he is finishing up now and resuming his approach to the lake." She finally looked back. The path was empty...

Now that the Shaladori began to wake up, Xavius was in more danger than those merchants. Lydia new that if she didn't find

him before the elves he would stand no chance on his own. She felt a shiver rush down her spine and her heart began to race. She took three deep breaths in an unsuccessful attempt to regain her composure. "I will not let my partner die on me," thought Lydia. She rushed back into the woods, leaving the safety of the lakefront behind.