

Cracking the Shell

Von elektroyu

Kapitel 4: Conjurer

This end of the camp was usually pretty deserted, and now was not an exception. I led Kweh to the right, where I knew from previous visits that usually there were a few vacant beds and a nice hearth fire available. I called out to a guard that was patrolling near the door.

"Excuse me, could you help me carry him inside? He needs to get out of the cold quickly or he's not going to make it!"

My voice sounded completely stressed out even in my own ears. At least the guard came without hesitation. Outsiders like us weren't very much loved around Coerthas, although it was a lot easier here in the Camp, where Lord Haurchefant was frequently and openly keeping ties with outsiders.

I pulled Foulques down Kweh's back carefully by the shoulders and held him up with my arms around his chest, while the guard grasped him around the thighs after a moment of hesitation. I had a feeling Foulques would very much hate being carried like this, but he was still out cold right now, so we'd get away with it.

We carried him into the building, which immediately called Lady Ninne's attention. She shot up and ran upstairs to notify the others of our arrival.

I was sweating even before we got to the stairs. This damn Elezen was heavier than he looked and the slightly warmer temperature of the building didn't help, either. I accidentally bumped the back of my foot against the first step, swaying slightly. The guard looked a little worried.

"You okay? Can you make it?"

"Yeah. The faster he's up there the better. I can still rest after that's done."

My smile was a little strained, but heartfelt. The guard nodded and we continued.

Then Foulques tensed in our grips, and the guard's face got very dark. He looked at Foulques, ice in his eyes.

"Want me to drop you right now, huh?"

Since I couldn't see his face I could only imagine that my previous assumption was true and Foulques, unable to move on his own and completely helpless within our grips, stared down the guard with as much venom as he was able to put into his glare. I could feel his increased heart rate and breathing where I held him, but it was harder to keep him safe in my grip when he was so tense. I took care to keep my voice calm except for the exertion, but it still sounded a little exasperated.

"Calm down, you idiot. We're almost there, just endure it for a bit longer."

Foulques must actually have listened to me, since he kind of stopped struggling, even though he was still as rigid as a metal rod in my grip. The guard's face was still tense, but he finished carrying Foulques upstairs without another complain. Thankfully he didn't follow his threat, either.

Old Meduil was waiting for us at the stairs and directed us to the beds. I chose the bed nearest to the wall in favor of at least a little privacy and hoped it didn't give off too much cold. The other beds were mostly unoccupied at the time, except for one. The guard nodded to me when I thanked him and quickly left us to reclaim his spot outside. Foulques had closed his eyes again and was looking pale. Hopefully we hadn't hurt him further, but judging from his tense expression he was still conscious. I turned to Meduil.

"I'm sorry for intruding, especially so suddenly, but we need a healer as soon as possible. Is there-"

She waved her hand dismissively at my words. "I can see that, son. Be quick and find the one that was treating this poor soul here just a couple of minutes before Lady Ninne came upstairs."

I looked at Foulques for a moment, then turned on my heels and sprinted downstairs and out the door. I caught the same guard that was helping us just a minute before.

"Sorry for troubling you again, but did you see the healer that's supposed to have just left?"

He still looked a little grumpy when he turned to me, but he pointed towards the other end of the camp. "I think they left this way, but I'm not sure if you'll still catch them."

I hastily thanked him and called for Kweh while I ran. Riding without a saddle felt pretty uncomfortable, but I shoved the thought aside. I'd also deal with putting Kweh's stuff away later, when everything else was taken care of. I looked around the camp for anyone that might be a healer. Near the main entrance I spotted a figure in white, a Miqu'te, and had Kweh go full speed. I watched them talk with a Hyur and called to them as soon as I was in hearing distance.

"Excuse me! Are you a healer?"

Her ears turned back to the direction of my call before she turned around with a surprised look on her angelic face. I returned the look slightly surprised myself: she was a Keeper of the Moon, as well. Slightly curled, white hair was flowing down her back, and her robe was nearly pure white as well. Now I noticed the staff she was carrying. A conjurer, and she looked every part of it.

"Yes, can I help you?" Her voice was very clear and showed the same astonishment I saw in her face before, but it was very pleasant. Her golden eyes regarded me with interest.

I nodded and dismounted. "I'd like to borrow your skills for my friend who's badly injured, if possible. Meduil sent me after you."

I motioned vaguely to where I came from, and she blinked in surprise. "Yes, of course."

Nodding to the Hyur in acknowledgment and goodbye, respectively, we excused ourselves and returned to the northern part of the camp. The healer nodded to my quick explanation about Foulques' injuries on the way. "That shouldn't be a problem, don't worry."

She smiled at me and my mind eased. She would help him.

"Oh, and of course I can pay you. I'm not asking you to heal him for free or anything."

Now she was laughing and shot me a big smile. "Oh, don't you worry about that!"

I wasn't sure how exactly to take that, but before I could ask we arrived at Foulques' bed and she immediately turned to him. Foulques seemed to have fallen asleep.

"You'll have to do something about his armor, though. It's probably safer to take it off before I heal him, just to avoid any accidents."

Foulques definitely wasn't aware, as he didn't show the slightest reaction to these words. Which was all for the better, in this case. I quickly got to work and removed his armor, hoping it wouldn't wake him. The healer helped move him when it was needed. Foulques didn't wear much under his armor apart from a sturdy, well worn shirt, so he was left in undergarments when I was done, his armor sitting in a pile at the foot of his bed. Maybe I could get the merchant below to repair all this before he woke up again.

Stripped of his armor he looked awful. Several deep slashes and even more messy bites and bruises were littering his body. He'd probably lost quite a bit of blood in that fight. Not all of his wounds seemed new, though, and I could make out a lot of scars where his flesh was still intact. The sight let me easily guess just how reckless he could be in his quest for strength and worthy opponents. Indeed, he'd gone overboard with this. My brows creased in worry, but I stepped back a bit and made space for the healer.

She in turn took a step forward and started her magic. It only took her a few heart beats, but she had to weave her spell a couple of times. I witnessed the many slashes

and bites closing neatly on his skin, a few older scars blending a little more with his dark skin than before. She seemed adept at healing, and I felt incredibly relieved to have found someone skilled so quickly. Finally she nodded with a satisfied smile.

"All done. Let him sleep off the effects of the magic and he'll be as good as new the next time he wakes. Don't worry if he sleeps for one or two suns straight, it can happen."

I thanked her and asked for the payment. She laughed again and softly clapped me on the shoulder twice. "I told you not to worry about it."

Her expression and tone softened. "I know how hard it is to lose a loved one, and healing him was no big deal. Now if you'll excuse me, I was on my way home."

She said another goodbye to Meduil and then she was gone. I should have asked for her name, at least.

Meduil passed me, shaking her head.

"You can't leave the man lying around naked in this cold, son. Don't forget about your comrade just because you've seen a pretty woman."

My cheeks reddened at her assumption, but there was no reason to argue. I picked up Foulques' armor while Meduil was already stacking blankets and my cloak on top of him.

"Is there anywhere I can get something else for him to wear? These will take some time to repair."

"Just try the merchant at the bridge if you're going to him anyway, or you could ask around the Elezen in the camp. There are a few here that should share his size and could spare a tunic for a while."

I nodded in thanks and went outside again with my bloody bundle. The merchant wasn't exactly what I'd had in mind. In fact, I'd hoped for a cheaper solution, but Meduil was right. I'd see if he did have something that I could afford with the gil I was carrying with me. I'd left most of my fortune in Gridania, and right now I didn't want to leave Foulques alone to retrieve it, not even by aetheryte. Delays had a tendency to appear in just the wrong places, after all...

I went out the door when a familiar voice called me. I stopped dead in my tracks.

"Khuma'zi! I didn't expect to see you again this soon! You're looking as good as ever!"

Lord Haurchefant somehow had spotted me immediately and jumped down the last few steps from the bridge's staircase before jogging in my direction. I went to meet him and returned his smile, although not quite as exuberantly. He just was something else entirely in that regard.

"A good day to you, Lord Haurchefant. I hope you've been as well as it looks to me."

"Oh, you're overdoing the politeness, Khuma'zi. Take it down a notch, will you?"

He was still grinning when he stopped in front of me. His arms twitched in what may or may not have been a desire for a hug, but he didn't follow through. My previous visits to Coerthas had proven that I usually needed a while to get used to his overly enthusiastic ways, so I was grateful for the restraint. I looked up at him, my own smile still in place. I felt tiny so close beside him, barely reaching his chest, but I should probably get used to it if I made so many Elezen friends.

Then Lord Haurchefant's eyes fell to the messy armor in my grip. "What's that? That's not yours, is it?"

Lord Haurchefant was a little bit too intense for my tastes sometimes, but in general I couldn't help but feel happy around him. His concern for me was ever so obvious and so honest, and I hadn't yet met anyone else who'd shown their appreciation and loyalty so... unconditionally and with so much passion. I also was deeply impressed by his genuine desire to help the weak. You didn't find a lot of people who were as passionate about this as he was, especially not if they were in a more powerful position. Lord Haurchefant truly was very special in many regards.

"No, these are a friend's. He's upstairs resting, now that he's finally healed."

My relief about that fact must have shown, as Lord Haurchefant smiled warmly at me.

"That's good to hear, very good. I hope I can find the time to visit you and your friend later, so I can deliver my well wishes in person. In the meantime, please pass them along for me, will you? In any case, make sure to seek me out before you leave! I'd hate to find you gone without a proper farewell. And of course, I'd also be delighted anytime to see your splendid muscles in action, if you can spare some time. Ahh, the thought alone already makes me shiver with pleasure!"

He put a hand over his heart, eyes rolling back into his skull. My smile got a little bit strained and my cheeks hot, but he either didn't notice or he didn't care. He straightened again and winked at me, before leaving me to my errands with a „See you later!“. Still a little flustered I went to the merchant nearby, who greeted me with a very wide grin.

"Pretty fond of you, isn't he? He's a great guy."

"... he is."

Since I still could feel the heat on my cheeks, which, I decided, the merchant could interpret however he liked, I chose not to answer in more detail than that and just showed him my bundle.

"How long do you think you'd need to repair this?"

He carefully looked at the mess, then shrugged. "Well, that's a lot to do there... if you need it any sooner than two or three suns, I'd recommend you just get something else instead. Also, if anything more pressing comes up on my end it may take even longer."

I'd figured as much.

"I'm not sure if something new is an option, but I'll find out. In the meantime, how about just repairing the main piece and boots? I'll get back to you about the other parts, if that's okay."

He nodded. "Fine by me. Whatever you'd like, as long as you pay for the services." He winked at me and I felt oddly reminded of the wink I'd just received from Lord Haurchefant. Only that it honestly crept me out when the merchant did it.

I forced a smile on my face and retreated.

Kweh was still wandering around freely, so this was my next task. It was probably a good thing that she tended to be a bit standoff-ish to strangers, so instead of harassing the people she lingered in the quieter corners of the camp and was checking everything that seemed remotely edible. I picked up her saddle, which I'd left in the snow by the door, and led her to the stables. A stable boy showed us to an empty stall, but I politely turned down his offer to care for her. Cingur had taught me to not delegate this if possible, since it was an important part of both properly caring for the bird as well as of bonding. Kweh shook herself dry once she was inside, showering me in melted snow. It was a good thing that bird feathers were kept waterproof, much in contrast to my hair and clothes. I patted her back in goodbye after I fed her with vegetables, some grain and fresh water.

„See you later, girl.“

She only chirped distractedly at me, favoring her well deserved food. With a last fond glance I left the stables and went hunting for some clothes for Foulques.