

Cracking the Shell

Von elektroyu

Kapitel 5: Stick to Me

Back upstairs I almost collided with him. I'd heard him quarreling with the others already from the door, so I'd flown up the stairs two steps at a time. We both stopped short when I appeared around the corner. He was still wearing nothing but his undergarments, old and new scars plainly visible on his dark skin. A few feet behind him were Meduil and the other two, obviously trying to talk some sense into him. I glared at him.

"What are you doing here? You should be sleeping!"

"Where are my things?!"

I ignored his furious demeanor and pushed the bundle into his bare chest. It consisted of both the borrowed clothes as well as some parts of his armor.

"Here, you can wear this until your armor is repaired. I left some of it with the merchant below. I can bring him the rest later if you want."

He didn't move to take the clothes, he just stood there and stared at me with a strangely suspicious expression. The moment stretched awkwardly and my ears flicked backwards in confusion.

"What's wrong? Just take it and get dressed. Then I'll get us something to eat, since you're up anyway."

His stare was softened by confusion, but he slowly raised his hands to take the clothes I was still holding to his chest. I blinked at him, confused as to why he would be confused, but I quickly turned around when I was sure he wouldn't drop the bundle.

"Just stay put until I'm back.", I warned him.

The kitchen below was deserted, so I asked my way around the camp and shortly had found the main kitchens. I asked for something light that would warm up a recovering person and got two bowls of deliciously steaming soup, which I quickly took back to Foulques.

From the small side room I could see him sitting on his bed, his face slack from

exhaustion, but with a dark look in his eyes. He looked too much like he forced himself to stay awake, which made my brows crease. At least he had dressed. I placed the bowls on the table. "Here, eat something."

Juline left with a small smile, taking Duchesnelt with her. I couldn't decide if they were fleeing our company or if they wanted to give us some privacy, but either way, it was probably more comfortable for everyone that way. I pushed Foulques' bowl to the seat nearest to the fire, and took a seat myself. The warmth of the fire was loosening up my muscles, and I suddenly felt completely exhausted.

"You look like shit."

I looked up at Foulques, who still had that strange dark and wary look to him. He really didn't look any livelier than I felt, though. I shrugged and felt the corner of my mouth rise a little.

"Just like you do. But I did get a completely different compliment not even a bell ago."

The soup was just short of a culinary masterpiece and since I hadn't eaten all day it immediately warmed me both physically and mentally. It was delicious. My fingers and toes started to tingle with warmth, just like the tail and ears.

Foulques kept staring at me between spoonfuls, waiting for an explanation of my earlier comment while he ate. I complied after another spoonful of my own.

"I met the man in charge of this place, Lord Haurchefant. I don't know if you know him. He told me I was looking good, although he obviously didn't account for my lack of sleep. Oh, and by the way, he's sending you well wishes. I almost forgot to tell you."

Foulques raised an eyebrow, but didn't comment. He continued his meal with a brooding look on his face.

We finished in silence. I leaned back in my chair and sighed, closing my eyes. I didn't feel like moving even an ilm. Even my tail hung lifeless from the chair. I was full and warm, although not yet completely dry again. And I was dead tired. I'd sleep right there in the chair, but that was hardly appropriate. With another sigh I forced myself to raise.

"I'll take these back to the kitchens. You can just go to sleep, you're needing it after that healing."

Foulques shot me a look, then grinned a little. "Forget it. I'll wait here and stay nice and warm. No chance I'm returning to that icicle bed."

I hesitated and glanced over to the sleeping Elezen in the other room. Other than him there was nobody here anymore, so... as long as Foulques wasn't picking fights with anyone... I shrugged and went to return the dishes.

When I came back Foulques was still in his chair, but he had fallen asleep on the table. The others were still below, even Meduil was not to be seen. I went over to him slowly, contemplating if I should wake him or let him sleep. He wouldn't get real rest in that position, but it *was* warmer than in the other rooms. I took my place from before and looked at him. I couldn't see half of his face, since his arm was in the way, but he looked fairly relaxed. I hadn't ever seen him like that before. There had always been some degree of tension in him, even back when we'd met for the second time in the East Shroud. From then on he'd gotten more tense every time, although it had never been directed at me. At least not until Alder Springs.

I sighed and leaned back, feeling the pain that memory brought me mirrored in my face. I didn't want to remember that. How broken and disappointed he had been. Not only with the guild, but even with me, and I hadn't had a clue until he'd told me. Foremost I didn't want to remember how close he had been to fall down that cliff. My hands balled into fists in my lap. That look in his eyes... my chest tightened painfully at the memory.

I opened my eyes again to chase it off, and jumped a little at the unexpected sight of Foulques sitting up and watching me. I hadn't heard him move.

"Did you have a nightmare?"

"Uh, no. I wasn't sleeping. Just some bad memories."

I couldn't suppress the heat that crept onto my cheeks, so I just looked the other way. Foulques didn't reply.

The silence quickly grew uncomfortable. I sighed and turned back to him, meeting his eyes only for a split second. Why was he still watching?

"So... how do you feel? Shouldn't you still be tired?"

"I am. I don't have any intention of staying here, though."

I stared at him.

"What? But where would you want to go now? Especially since your things are still with the merchant. And I left your lance in the Vigil, too. I was thinking of returning there tomorrow to retrieve it."

His brow creased.

"Then I'll have to go there first, obviously."

I sat up, leaned towards him and gripped the edge of the table.

"No no no, are you crazy? You'll freeze to death without proper clothing! You can't mean to go in just that tunic!"

The tunic and trousers I'd gotten him were actually not all that thin, but they were still not designed to keep you warm outside in that cold. Only the boots looked like they were up to it. And maybe my cloak would help a little, if he'd be willing to take it. Foulques' look darkened to a glare, but I interrupted him before he could say anything.

"And besides, what's wrong with just staying here for two or three suns? We can both get some rest, get great food, and stay in a safe and relatively warm place! And as soon as you're recovered and your armor is repaired, we can leave this place, get your lance, and then we--"

I broke off and hesitated. I closed my mouth, looking down at the table.

"And then what? You're not planning to stick to me after that, do you?"

His voice was not loud, but it had a harsh tone that sent a needle through my chest. I didn't meet his eyes.

"No... actually-"

I hesitated again, but Foulques just waited. His eyes were hard when I met them.

"Actually, I was hoping you'd stick to me. At least for a while."

"Why would I do that?"

He still sounded angry, but at the same time genuinely curious. I looked at him again and felt completely helpless. He'd think me a total creep, there was no way he'd actually stay with me. I swallowed, but couldn't make myself speak. The tip of my tail danced around nervously, but other than that I didn't move. After a few moments he let out an exasperated sigh.

"Just spit it out."

My tail flicked to the side with a little more force, but I gathered all my courage and looked at him again.

"I said it before, in Alder Springs. I like you. I want to get to know you better. And I can't do that if we part ways again. And, well..."

I paused again and shot him a pained little smile, then dropped my eyes to the table again.

"... I'm actually also afraid what you'll do when I let you leave again just like that. The last two times we met weren't under all that great circumstances. I honestly don't want to experience that a third time."

It was silent for a while and I slowly sat down again. Then Foulques leaned back and sighed. His voice was even lower than mine had been.

"What is it with you? Why do you even concern yourself with me so much?"

I didn't know if he really expected an answer, but after a moment I tried.

"I don't now. Maybe it's because you constantly sought me out in Gridania. And, I don't know, you're so strong and you could accomplish so much. We could accomplish even more if we combined our skills!"

The second half my speech got more urgent and I held his eyes. Then I shrugged a little helplessly. Foulques didn't seem surprised. If anything, he looked grim and a little exasperated. Or probably just dead tired.

"What in the world do you think we could accomplish together?"

I shrugged. "I'm running around doing things for people all the time. For the higher-ups, for the common people, whoever needs help. Sometimes it's more diplomatic stuff, but many times I have to deal with all sorts of monsters. I thought if you came along for a time, we could learn skills and techniques from each other and possibly explore each other's idea of courage firsthand while we're at it. That had always bugged me right from the beginning."

He looked at me as if I'd lost my mind, so I quickly threw in another point.

"And well, it usually pays well enough to get by easily."

Foulques leaned forward with a heavy sigh and closed his eyes. He hid his face in his hands and shook his head slightly.

"You know..."

He fell silent again for a minute, and I felt horrible while I waited. Like I was awaiting my sentence. Breathing was suddenly a hard thing to do.

Then he sighed again and got up. "I need some sleep."

I only watched as he went to his bed with heavy steps. There was nothing I could do or say. I had to wait for him to make up his mind. But it still felt horrible to be left behind like that.

After a while I moved my eyes to the fire to give us both more privacy, but other than that I still felt too heavy to move. I didn't know for how long I sat there, but the fire had lost much of its strength when I became aware of it again, and some of the other beds were now occupied. They must have been really quiet. Maybe in consideration of their recovering comrade, but I was grateful nonetheless.

At some point Meduil came back, checked on the healed guy and disappeared in the room at the far back after a quiet "Good night". I wished her the same and decided to go to bed as well. Foulques should be fast asleep by now, and the recovering guy next

to him hadn't moved much at all since our arrival. I fed the fire for the rest of the night before I left the small room.

Belatedly I realized that I hadn't thought of organizing any sleepwear for myself, but there was nothing to be done about that now. I removed my armor and carefully stacked it beside the wall. My sleeveless shirt and thin trousers did nothing to keep the cold away. I hoped no one would mind if I took the blanket from the vacant bed next to mine as well. I risked a last glance at Foulques. He had his back to the room and seemed to sleep. I crept under the blankets and curled myself into a tight ball, hoping to keep what was left of the fire's warmth until I'd fallen asleep.

The next morning I woke late, and only to a slight commotion around the bed next to me. The Elezen that was occupying it apparently was conscious again, and Juline, Meduil and another guy were surrounding his bed. Judging from the delighted comments he was nearly back to his former shape. I remembered that the conjurer that had healed Foulques had also healed this guy, and he'd slept so soundly that he hadn't woken even once since we arrived there. Not even when Foulques had been quarreling with us.

Raising my eyes to the bed behind him I saw Foulques, still in the same position with his back to us. I hoped he'd been able to sleep. Maybe he'd be out of it the entire day as well.