

Cracking the Shell

Von elektroyu

Kapitel 6: Dangerous

The next morning I woke late and only to a slight commotion beside my bed. The Elezen that had slept so soundly through *our* commotion yesterday apparently was up and about again, which brought general joy through the entire room. I was happy for him, too, and I hoped Foulques would be in comparably good spirits as well once his condition was better.

The room was illuminated by hazy cool light, so it was time to get out of bed anyway. Despite that I was still tired and actually contemplated getting back to sleep, but there were things that needed my attention. First of all, there was Foulques' lance still in the Steel Vigil, and then I wanted to check how the repair of his armor was coming along. The earlier it was completed the better, and if I was lucky I could have the merchant do the rest of it as well after all. I took a deep breath to steel myself for the inevitable cold and folded back the blankets, swinging my legs over the side of the bed. Meduil and Juline were still joking and laughing with the awoken Elezen behind me.

Then I heard a gasp from the stairs and turned my attention. Lord Haurchefant was there, staring at me with wide eyes.

„*Splendid!*!”

I shot up and retreated a step when he was suddenly over me, his hands hovering inches from my bare arms. I was so shocked that I didn't even manage to greet him. I felt all eyes in the room on us. My cheeks burned up.

„Lord Haurchefant! Good morning!”

Meduil remembered her manners immediately despite her apparent surprise and the others followed quickly. Lord Haurchefant found a vibrant smile for them and returned the greeting along with a few delighted words about the recovery of the Elezen, but didn't move away from me. On the contrary, he returned all of his attention to me right away. He was practically glowing.

„Look at these finely sculpted muscles, the *perfection* in which they are flowing and intertwining around your body! Ah, Khuma'zi, this is... exquisite! Truly exquisite!”

His hands were moving along my arms as he spoke, but never touching. I still couldn't speak and just stood there blushing, ears folded backwards and the tip of my tail between my knees.

„Such a fine way to start a day, I must say.“

His eyes glided over my shirt-covered chest and stomach appreciatively and I vaguely wondered if it really could be something all that special. After all, he himself and his soldiers surely kept themselves in equally good condition, right? He came another step closer, taking my cool hand in his and gently covering it with his other hand. Strangely enough, the gesture chased off some of my uneasiness. I stared up into his serious eyes, feeling my ears relaxing a bit.

„You tempt me, Khuma'zi, showing me half of this and keeping the other half covered. Please, my friend, allow me to invite you to another practice match. My soldiers are undergoing endurance training later today, and it would tremendously please me to see you joining them.“

His clear blue eyes went very soft, his voice getting low.

„Or if you're uncomfortable with such an open display we could get sweaty and breathless all alone together somewhere more private.“

Despite myself I felt a grin starting to form on my lips. A second later I chuckled quietly at him. His words were so ambiguous, almost suggestive, yet he said them in all earnesty. Sometimes I wondered if he was even aware of that.

„My lord, please remember that I'm not alone here this time. I'd surely do you the favor, though, as long as the plans for the day allow it.“

His answering smile was pleased and gentle, but his eyes were sparkling with intense delight.

„Excellent. Then I hope it will work out favorably for us. In any case, would you join me for a late breakfast? I couldn't bear letting you out of my sight just yet, after what you'd shown me.“

He raised our hands a bit. „And I can see that you could use a place to thoroughly warm yourself at.“

I blinked and turned to look at Foulques' back. If he was still sleeping like he was supposed to, then I would... I tensed when I met his stare. He was sitting on the edge of his bed, face a mixture of disbelief and... outrage? Lord Haurchefant followed my gaze. I didn't look at him, but I could hear the very polite smile in his voice.

„Ah, of course I'd be delighted to expand the offer to your friend as well, if he likes.“

Foulques' expression got a wary undertone when his eyes moved to Lord Haurchefant, but he remained silent. He didn't look like he'd be happy to comply, so I

quickly averted Lord Haurchefant's attention from him.

„Thank you for the offer, it would be a pleasure. Just let me get dressed and I'll meet you in a bit.“

Lord Haurchefant smiled and nodded, finally releasing my now warm hand.

„Well spoken, my friend. I'm awaiting you in my office.“

„He's completely crazy. Hard to imagine someone like this carries the title „Lord“ and any amount of power. What in the world made you take this nonsensical offer??“

Foulques stared at me, hands at his hips and completely unbelieving. The others had all left a while ago, presumably to either get some breakfast themselves or to start their duties. I coughed out a small laugh and continued dressing.

„What's nonsensical about an invitation to breakfast? And he's not crazy. Only a little overzealous when it comes to... certain things.“

„You call that *overzealous*? He almost jumped you right in front of us and practically invited you to his bed!“

Now it was my turn to stare at him in disbelief, my smile almost vanished. Almost.

„He did not. He just tends to word things in a very misunderstandable way if he gets excited. Believe me, he's a very honorable man, right to the core.“

Foulques still looked at me, not in the least convinced.

“I didn't know you were that self-delusional. You can't *not* see how obviously he's hitting on you. And I bet he means it.“

I returned his look with a frown and a slight head shake. Lord Haurchefant didn't mean it quite like that, I was sure of that. I didn't argue, though, and just let the matter go for now.

„So, how do you feel? I'm not sure if you're supposed to be up already... but you do look a lot better.“

He shrugged dismissively, averting his eyes after a moment.

„I'm just fine, don't worry about it.“

„Will you be joining us for breakfast, then? Lord Haurchefant can be a little awkward to deal with sometimes, but maybe you'll reconsider your opinion of him once you've seen his more serious sides.“

Foulques snorted, then straightened up and looked down at me while I still sat on my bed, putting on the last pieces of my armor. He gave off an incredibly arrogant aura. I blinked at him.

„Maybe I should. I can't imagine this man to have any seriousness in him, though.“

I smiled at him and nodded, but he just shook his head. He probably wouldn't enjoy this meal very much, at least not the company he'd be in, but I felt a lot better now that he had agreed to join. I was still afraid he'd just leave if I let him out of my sight, as we hadn't have a chance yet to continue our discussion from the previous night.

Breakfast was... strained. Some of the people there were Wildwood Elezen, and the looks they gave Foulques were not exactly welcoming, which seemed to put most of the others on guard as well. The only one who absolutely didn't seem to care was, naturally, Lord Haurchefant. While he made sure that everyone knew I was a Warrior of Light, he didn't direct the attention of his soldiers to Foulques more than necessary. I was both grateful and chagrined by it, because he kept coaxing stories from me and used them to paint me as a warrior exemplar for his soldiers to learn a lesson from. I tried to look unfazed, but my ears felt hot. I felt Foulques stare when I talked about the encounters with Ifrit and Titan, but his face didn't betray much of his thoughts when I glanced back at him.

The story coaxing went on a little too long for my tastes, but I just resigned myself to it to humor Lord Haurchefant. And it did keep some of the attention away from Foulques, although there were still looks and some whispers. Foulques himself was ignoring them, not joining the conversation at all, and obviously taking advantage of the excellent food. He did, however, radiate tension the entire freaking time. Sitting directly at his side this drove me crazy, especially since my own nerves were on edge already from being the center of attention for so long. My tail frequently lashed from side to side, I just couldn't help it. At some point I couldn't bear it anymore and nudged Foulques' leg under the table, whispering a request to relax a bit, but it just made him whip around and grip my collar, pulling me into his face. My ears flipped back from surprise. He whispered his reply, but I was sure everyone else could hear exactly what he was saying in the sudden silence. Now talk about being the center of attention...

„Don't tell me what to do! You have no idea!“

I met his angry glare with a frown. Then I sighed and patted his arm in both an apology and as a request to be released. He was right. I shouldn't ask things of him that I wasn't able to do myself. The whole situation was very uncomfortable for both of us. I held up my hands.

„Sorry. I didn't mean to upset you.“

He released my collar with a glare and turned back. He didn't finish what was left on his plate, but luckily the meal was about to be finished anyway. I was still surprised at

how much he had managed to eat.

Well, that certainly was not what I'd imagined. Now the meaningful stares and whispers had increased a lot, and as some of them were directed at Lord Haurchefant he couldn't quite ignore them anymore. Except that he did, at least until the official end of the meal.

When we were about to leave he called me back, taking me a little to the side and leaning in, so his quiet words couldn't be overheard. He looked worried.

„Are you sure about your choice of friends? I don't want to be judging, but he seems a little... difficult. Dangerous, even. I hope he won't cause you trouble.“

I nodded with a wry smile.

„I know. I'm sorry for the trouble. I think he's just a little overwhelmed with so many people around him, but... I trust him.“

Lord Haurchefant nodded hesitantly, not convinced, but also not wanting to doubt my judgement.

„If you say so. Just be careful, please. And let me know if you need any assistance. With anything.“

I smiled warmly at him, thanked him for his kindness and promised to do just that.

On the way back Foulques was still a little grumpy, but it got better as soon as we were back under the cloudy sky and away from people. It was still snowing, but only lightly right now. We visited the merchant and Foulques changed my order in that he wanted only the most important damage repaired instead of every torn detail. I feared this would put his departure that much more into reach, but held my tongue until we were halfway up the stairs to the barracks.

„What are you going to do?“

He looked back at me, towering even taller over me on the staircase.

„Huh? Nothing. It's just faster this way, and you're not going to have to pay as much. Also, I told you before that I'm not staying in this place.“

My heart sank.

„So you're really not willing to keep me company any longer?“

„I didn't say that. Now take your lance, we're leaving.“

„We're... what?“

