

Cracking the Shell

Von elektroyu

Kapitel 7: Aegis

A couple of minutes later we were on the way to the Steel Vigil, even though Foulques still wore not much more than his borrowed clothes. My plea to find something in addition went unheeded, so I insisted he should take my cloak. At least I managed that much. A little later he had raised an eyebrow as I took Kweh from the stable, but it was just common sense. Not only did she need regular exercise just as we did, but she also had a few skills that came in handy during fights. Of course, riding was not an option with Foulques only on foot. Or so I thought.

As soon as we were out the gate he started trotting in what seemed a comfortable pace for him. However, my own legs were considerably shorter and I struggled to keep up, so after a while I decided to abandon courtesy in that regard. Foulques grinned at me triumphantly when I caught up to him, and I shot him a glare. Before long we reached our goal.

I halted Kweh and called out to Foulques before we entered the Vigil.

„Wait a minute. Something's off. Look at that.“

I pointed at the entrance to the inner Vigil, which from our viewpoint was barely visible between the ruins in front of it. There were a few more aegis there than usually and I could spot a couple of wolves as well. They had most likely been attracted by the abundant carrion everywhere. Foulques was completely unarmed and I wasn't sure I was able to defend us if all of these creatures came at us at once, even with Kweh's help.

„I know. It won't be a problem. They're either already too fat to move quickly or they're so busy gorging that they won't have much care for us. We just have to make sure not to get too close.“

„I don't think it's going to be that easy, Foulques. They're directly in front of the path leading inside.“

I unmounted and cued Kweh to follow me.

„At least let me go first, you're not even armed.“

Foulques grabbed my arm.

„No. I'm fairly sure I have quite a bit more experience with this. Stay close behind. Keep the lance at the ready and if I tell you to, just run.“

I gave him a flat look.

„That experience didn't prevent you from almost dying the last time you were here.“

„That was different.“

And with that, he went. I held my lance in a tight grip and swallowed, following him.

To my surprise, though, he was right. We managed to tiptoe around the creatures definitely not unnoticed, but unattacked. I let out a relieved sigh when we entered the inner Vigil. However, Foulques motioned me to a stop as I stepped beside him. There was a somewhat strained grin on his lips.

„Those two are different. You should only take them on one at a time.“

I couldn't discern much of a difference from the ones outside, so I questioned him with a look.

„Yes, they look almost identical to the Downies, but it's a different species. They're considerably stronger and even more aggressive. If we're approaching their food they'd probably rip us apart in not even a second.“

That was a bad thing, because they were, of course, feeding on the aevis that blocked the small space between the walls where I'd found Foulques. The lance we were about to retrieve was still in there.

„So we need a distraction.“

He nodded, his eyes not leaving the two aevis.

„And that distraction is going to be me.“

I grabbed his arm in outrage and hissed at him.

„No! You've just recovered! Have a care for your life, you idiot!“

He wasn't very impressed when he turned to me.

„What, do you have so little confidence in your skills? The faster you finish the first one off, the faster you can pull the second one from my back. It won't be able to land a hit every time if I run around fast enough. And that's the only way to keep it from attacking you as long as you're busy with the other one. Or do you have a better plan?“

I stared at him wordlessly for a while.

„We could wait for them to leave. Or come back later.“

„Oh please, you're not saying that in earnest. Don't tell me Ywain managed to turn you into a coward, after all.“

I slightly smacked his arm.

„That's not it, you idiot! I'm scared for *you*! What if-“

„Khuma'zi, stop motherhenning me already. It's insulting. I'll be just fine, and you'll be finishing them off in no time, then we can leave this place. I can't believe you're making so much fuss about some aevis when you've fought *primals* before.“

I stared at him for a moment longer, then turned to watch the two aevis that were still feeding on the carcass. Foulques was right. I needed to calm down and regain composure or I wouldn't be able to see this through with minimal damage. Letting go of his arm I took a deep breath and closed my eyes, calming the whirling, fuzzy energy within me into a strong and solid flame. When I was done I sought Foulques' eyes again and nodded. He returned the gesture.

„Good. Now. We'll have to approach them at the same time and divide their attention. While you're attacking the left one I'm going to use this here-“

He bent down and gathered a handful of fresh snow that he compressed into a hard ball.

“-on the other one, and as soon as I have him I'll run. Whatever you do, don't let yours get away.“

I nodded again. I was ready.

We moved quickly and, just like Foulques had planned, each of us managed to capture the attention of an aevis. Foulques lured the aevis away from me, so I could concentrate on attacking the second one while being left alone by the first. Kweh was assisting me by attacking as well, and healing me if I got hit. Still, I kept an ear at Foulques, and after a while I heard him gasp and fall. I shot him a glance and froze completely. My aevis immediately knocked me down hard, all air leaving my lungs, and I had a hard time getting air back in. It hurt, but my attention was immediately on Foulques on the ground again. The aevis was now attacking him unhindered, and with an abyss right behind him there was no way for him to escape. This couldn't be true. Not again.

Gasping I commanded Kweh to stop attacking the aevis and ran. Kweh and the other aevis at my heels it took only a few moments to reach them, but I'd be too late like this. Foulques had curled up to protect himself, but the aevis attacked relentlessly and with a force that pushed him closer to the abyss with every hit. My heart thundered in my chest and I gasped for air. I felt both cold and sweaty with fear, but I

ran as fast as my legs would carry me. As soon as I knew I was close enough I threw my lance at the aevis, still running towards it. Upon getting hit it turned around with a furious cry, facing me. Kweh immediately started attacking it and I sprang forward and to the side to grab the lance that was still sticking in the aevis' neck. The other aevis had reached us as well and attacked my side, so I had to let go and escape a few fulms. I ran a half circle around both creatures and threw myself between them again when I saw a chance. I grabbed the shaft of the lance and with a wild cry I tugged it free, then used that same momentum to slip behind them.

I slipped on the frozen ground and landed on my side. The aevis were on me again immediately, but I managed to slice one of them across the chest scales. I got up and retreated a few steps, panting heavily. Now with both aevis on me I couldn't afford to switch my attention to Foulques, but I needed his help. I couldn't see him, I had no idea what condition he was in, but I blindly called to him. I didn't get an answer, but I saw an opening in one of the aevis when it bit at Kweh and thrust my lance into its neck. The other aevis took advantage and dealt me a hard blow that sent me flying a couple of fulms.

For the second time I got the wind knocked out of me and gasped. The good thing was that I landed near Foulques. I had only a second to get up and ready again, and I used it to also call out to Foulques again. He was staring at the aevis with wide eyes, frozen stiff by fear. There was a lot of blood on his tunic.

„Foulques, get up! *Get up!!* I have them both, get your lance! Now!! I can't- ugh!“

The aevis almost managed to bite my leg, and while I'd stopped it with the shaft of the lance the impact still pushed me backwards. For a moment I was clinging to the creature's muzzle, my heart almost stopping at how close it's sharp teeth were to my belly. I forced a knee up at its jaw and luckily it shook me off instead of biting me in two halves.

„Foulques!!“

I wanted to throw something at him to force him out of his shock, but neither did I have something to throw other than my lance, nor did I have a chance to. Those aevis were a nightmare indeed. I didn't know how long I'd be able to withstand them with only Kweh's help. Adrenaline coursed through my entire body, filling me with hot strength. Still, I knew I wouldn't be able to make it alone.

„Foulques, *get moving already!*“