

Cracking the Shell

Von elektroyu

Kapitel 10: Cillien

I found some of the lancers and asked to see Cillien, but they were pretty reluctant to tell me anything. They obviously weren't completely sure if my intentions of settling this matter peacefully were actually true, but after a bit of talking they told me. I found Cillien in a small room in one of the buildings near the edge of the observatory. There were two others in the room with him, all three glaring at the door when I made myself known.

Upon recognizing my face Cillian slowly stood up, watching me warily.

"What do you want from me?"

He sounded gruff and hostile. So he was already on the defensive? Great.

"I'm sorry for intruding, but I'd like to talk to you for a moment. About Foulques."

"About him, yeah? Well, *I don't* like to, so you can just leave. I don't have anything to say to you."

My tail flicked.

"Then let me just ask this of you: please try to not cross his path. I don't want him getting a chance to hurt you, nor do I want you getting hurt."

Cillien's face changed to a curious mixture of a snarl and a smirk.

"Ohh, don't you? How *honorable* of you. I'll tell you something. I'm not planning to get out of my way to track him down, but if I meet him again I will see to it that he'll not be able to swing his spear around any longer. You can rest assured that he only took me by surprise earlier, or I would've done it already, and with pleasure."

His smile won over the snarl, but I knew he was nothing but full of hot air. Still, I kept my anger from my face as best as I could and contemplated my words for a moment. I couldn't keep my hands relaxed, though.

"Please don't, Cillien. I think we can agree that the path he's taken until now is not the best, but you and I both know that it was you and your friends who betrayed him in

the end. I'm not asking you to apologize to him, but at least stay out of his way."

Cillien snorted at that.

"To the seven hells with you. I bet he's told you a heart wrenching story about how *he* was the *poor* guy who took all the blame all alone, but guess what? He *was*. And he deserved every minute of being jailed, bloody treacherous Duskwight that he is."

Cillians friends grinned at that and I took a moment to make sure my ears stayed upright.

But I couldn't believe what I'd just heard. This guy actually had the nerves to dish up this blatant lie to me?

"If I had any say in the matter I'd see him executed yesterday rather than today, 'cause as we have seen again today he's a dangerous and lying liability. Just what you'd expect from the likes of him. Now leave this place at once, or I'll make you. If you can call this scum a friend you can't be any better yourself. You're all nothing but liars and bandits anyway, aren't you? No wonder you're running to each other for comfort, heh."

I swallowed a growl and suppressed the impulse of biting off the finger he pointed at me. I did, however, stare him down until he averted his eyes before turning to leave without any other word. I was fuming.

It was no wonder Foulques wanted to make him pay. After that encounter I was more than a little ready to do the same. But of course, that wouldn't do much good, so I took Kweh with me and left the observatory to go for a run in the icy woods until I was so miserable with cold that my anger got subdued. After that, I brought Kweh to the stables. I apologized to her for making her accompany me in this cold, but she was just happy to dig in when I supplied her with food and water. This time I stayed with her for most of the day, and decided to share her stall at night instead of asking for a bed somewhere. It was comfortable and warm enough.

The next two suns went by without any further incidents. I tried to talk to the guards and then their superiors about Foulques, but they were clearly irritated by my insistence of just letting him go. Talking to Foulques was like talking to a wall, so I kept my visits short.

Entering the prison the next day I greeted the guards and quietly asked if there had been anything out of the ordinary, but one of them shook his head. And again I asked them to let Foulques go. Surely he'd had enough time to calm down, it's been three suns, after all. With a sharp sigh the other one informed me that right now their authorities were below, negotiating his release. That dumbfounded me a bit.

"Negotiating?"

"There seems to be a condition he has to agree to, but they're at it for a while already. Doesn't look too well, I think."

The other guard unhappily followed the short conversation, only offering the barest of nods to that. I thanked them and quickly turned away to see what went on downstairs. Ghosting down the stairs I prepared myself for whatever would greet me below. At last I heard displeased voices, and slowly, quietly turned around the corner.

A small group of high ranking people were gathered in front of Foulques' cell. Some were shaking their heads, some only showed stiff faces.

"Look, we don't want to keep you here any longer than we already have, but we're not going to release you if you're about to cause any more trouble. Leave this observatory at once and leave our people alone. Now and for as long as you live, and nobody will bother you anymore. Otherwise, we'll have to deal with you in a different fashion."

I was staying a little back, but close enough to glimpse into the small cell. Foulques was still alone in it, standing against the wall. He didn't answer them and kept his silence. Then he noticed me. As soon as he recognized me his eyes darkened even more and he turned his head, ignoring me. This made the others notice me, too, and they turned to me.

"So you've come. Just as well. You've been begging me to release him before, so I agreed to relieve him of his cell. Your friend here, however, doesn't seem able to just quietly leave our observatory. You can try your luck, maybe he'll listen to you. I've had enough for today, I'm going to prepare appropriate measures for this problem. Good day."

And with that, the gathered authorities shuffled out of the prison without any more acknowledgments. Well. At least they were giving me a chance, even though they obviously deemed it impossible for me to turn Foulques around. I was sure it wouldn't be easy, especially after my opposition to him, but I wasn't planning to let them do something to him just because getting that agreement out of him would be difficult to accomplish.

„Hi there. How are you?“

Unsurprisingly, I didn't get a reply. I stifled a sigh and got right to the point.

„You know, I do think their condition is reasonable, and I ask the same of you. Please, Foulques, don't go after Cillien anymore. Or anyone else, for that matter.“

Here his eyes did darken yet again, and my voice got more urgent.

„I know he did something awful to you and you're rightfully angry at him, but that's no reason to kill him. There must be other ways for you to deal with this. I... talked to Cillien earlier, and well, he wasn't thrilled. In fact, he was a complete ass about this whole thing, but he won't cross your path on his own if he can help it. I'm sure he's actually scared shitless of you. So please, don't go after him.“

I could see the muscles in Foulques' jaw tighten, but he still didn't reply.

„Promise me that, Foulques. Please. They won't let you out of here until you do, and you've heard what their idea to solve this problem is.“

He was silently raging, his fingers digging into his crossed arms. But he still neither said a word nor did he look at me. His eyes tried to burn holes into the far wall. I waited for a while.

Nothing happened.

„Well, it's your decision. But I'd rather see you outside under the sky than another sun behind bars, or worse. And I'd like to get home soon myself. I'm sure you do, too.“

I waited some more. The frantic movement of his jaw muscles would have been fascinating to watch if I'd not been preoccupied with coming up with more persuasion ideas. I didn't really succeed, though. To someone like him freedom would probably be the most powerful incentive. I didn't know what else would be capable of achieving that goal if killing his foes was no option.

After a while he finally looked at me, if only for a very quick and very hateful glance. That caught my full attention immediately.

„Fine. I promise I won't kill that ugly bastard of a traitor.“

He sounded almost as if he gagged on the words, but I nodded. That was all I wanted to hear. I flew up the stairs to find the people that had left a bit earlier.

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A little later we walked out of the observatory's gates. The clouds hung deep in the sky and had an ominous darkness to them that mirrored Foulques' still sour mood. He hadn't talked to me since he gave his promise, but again I was glad he hadn't just left me there and run off on his own. Granted, I hadn't even given him much chance to. Still, the angry silence ate at me. I hadn't tried to get him to talk nor had I said anything to him myself. It would've just made him even angrier.

I looked up at the brooding sky, completely trusting Kweh to alert me of any nearby attackers. She made small, unhappy noises from time to time, ruffling her feathers along with it. I guessed it had something to do with the weather, maybe there'd be a snowstorm soon. If we hurried, we could probably avoid it. It wasn't that far to the border now, the number of trees had already increased significantly. The sight was very comforting despite the deep snow that was still decorating them.

Right when I opened my mouth to tell him to hurry Foulques turned and went for the trees on our left. Automatically I followed him.

„Wait, where are you going? We should hurry, the weather's going to get bad.“

„I *noticed*, thank you. Now will you leave me alone for a bit of private business or would you like to follow me for that, as well?“

He still didn't look at me and his tone was icy. At least he finally said something. Then he shot me a glare from the corner of his eyes, still not directly looking at me. But I stopped, unwillingly. Why did it have to be *now*? We shouldn't stay here and wait for the storm to hit.

Kweh whined again. She was getting really anxious, dancing from foot to foot and just not keeping still at all. Again and again she looked at the sky behind us. I took her reins and petted her reassuringly, but it didn't do much to calm her down. I shivered; the cold crept through me from just everywhere if I didn't move. We really should get out of here. A few first snowflakes fell from the sky, and soon after the wind picked up as well. It felt as if it blew right through my armor and down to my very bones. I dearly missed my cloak right now. I shivered again and looked into the trees where Foulques' footprints vanished, but still no sign of him. Just how long did he need to simply empty his bladder? I knew from undressing him before that his breeches weren't overly complicated to open. It really shouldn't take him that long.

I froze, both in- and outwardly. What if he wasn't doing that at all? It was such a perfect chance to ditch me and find Cillien again.

My heartbeat quickened, but I hesitated. Maybe I was just impatient because I wanted to be on the move again. Also, I probably shouldn't be assuming right away he'd ditch me just because he was taking a little longer. Maybe he'd reappear any moment.

But he didn't for another few shivers. They were coming increasingly faster now, though.

I decided to get moving in any case. The wind was getting even stronger and I'd just freeze if I kept standing there. Should I find him innocent of my wild accusation, he'd get angry again, but well, that wasn't anything new. And besides, we *really* should get out of here asap anyway. So there.

I mounted Kweh and followed his trail into the trees. I hoped there was no need to follow him very far, as the wind already started to erase his footprints.

A few heartbeats further along his trail the distance between each track suddenly grew. I cursed. That idiot really had ditched me, running in a wide half circle back to where we had just come from. And right into the direction of the snowstorm. I desperately wanted to hit something. Just why did I have to care for a person with such a moronic obsession? And why did this person have to have such a strong attraction for dangerous situations on top of that?

I nudged Kweh into a fast trot. The snow was getting denser, we needed to hurry. Kweh was certainly faster than Foulques, but his tracks would be completely erased soon, and although I was pretty sure whom he wanted to find, I didn't know where exactly that someone was located right now. And judging by how fast the weather was getting worse, there was the likely possibility of Foulques interrupting his hunt to seek shelter somewhere. I only hoped I'd find him before anything disastrous happened.

I'd lost his trail soon. It had just disappeared into the wide sea of snow that was blanketing the ground and everything else outside under the sky. I was completely drenched, my head wanted to split itself apart from the sharp wind and I could hardly see or hear anything in this snow anymore, let alone feel my body. And with both our destination as well as this area being rather unfamiliar to Kweh I couldn't even leave it to her to find the way. In fact, I had a hard time getting her to run around in that storm any longer, as she kept moving towards every tree, every rock that promised shelter. I wasn't completely sure where we were, but I assumed the observatory wasn't too far away in front of us and slightly to the left.

Maybe I really should stop my search and wait for the storm to pass. I wasn't accomplishing anything like this, except maybe getting Kweh and me sick. It should be next to impossible that Foulques would actually find Cillien outside right now. No one in their right minds would be about in this weather, which indeed made me question my own state of mind for a second. I shoved the thought from my mind angrily.

I doubted Foulques had entered the observatory again, so he most likely was waiting somewhere for the weather to pass. I should do the same. I wasn't sure yet what exactly I'd do, but if I returned to the observatory alone I'd immediately put suspicion on Foulques. So that was out of the question for now.

I turned Kweh towards the rocks; she was more than willing to comply. We went along it for a while until I spotted what I'd hoped to find: the opening to a cave. I dismounted and took Kweh's reins. She was a bit nervous to enter such a place and needed some conviction, but after a couple of moments she followed me inside. It was a relief to get out of the biting wind and wetness. Kweh shuffled her feathers and shook herself dry. Even just a few furlms away from the entrance it was pitch black in there, so I had to rely on my sense of hearing and be very careful about placing my feet. The reflected sounds of our footsteps told me that this cave was pretty big, so I could keep us moving in circles near the entrance. After a while I could see a few shapes if I strained my eyes, so I picked up a little speed. It was still not enough to really keep me warm, but if I stopped I'd just get sick. I didn't know how long I went on walking in circles, but it felt like hours. The dull walking set my nerves on edge as much as it tired me out, so as soon as the light from the entrance got lighter and the howling of the wind lessened I led Kweh back outside.

It was still snowing, but this was nothing compared to before. I mounted Kweh again and scanned our surroundings for a minute before deciding to head northwards. This was the direction Foulques had originally taken, so I'd continue my search there for now.

For a while I saw nothing but a pristine blanket of snow wherever I looked. Only Kweh's footprints behind us were disturbing the smoothness and I didn't even see or hear any other creatures. But then I found a trail ahead of us that definitely didn't belong to any wildlife, cutting straight across our path to the northeast. I followed it and soon a second trail came into view, merging with the first one after a while. The snow was deep, but the distance between the individual tracks again hinted at a running speed. In two places the tracks were broken by a larger imprint and some

smaller, straight marks beside it. It looked like someone had fallen, and the smaller marks most likely originated from something narrow. Like a blade, or a lance. It made me worry. I clung to the thin hope of finding Foulques before he would do something stupid, or maybe finding something entirely unrelated to him.

I did find him, though, and I was torn between despair and a dulling disappointment. He was standing calf deep in fresh snow, his back to me and the lance pointing to the ground. At his feet was Cillien, whose spilled blood was quickly freezing. He was dead.

„Why? Why did you do that?“

My question was no more than a whisper, but Foulques turned around to me, his somewhat peaceful expression quickly turning dark.

„What kind of question is that?“

„Now you've made a target of yourself again. If they catch you you'll end up in jail yet again, or even worse!“

„I won't. I'll just have to kill them first.“

He said those words utterly unagitated, as if he was talking about last year's weather. It shook me that he just didn't seem to care at all what he did or what was going to happen to him.

„But this way you'll only make more enemies! You can't kill half of Eorzea's population!“

He huffed dismissively, looking the other way, but didn't reply.

„Is that what you want for your life? Always having to be on the run, always in danger of getting arrested or killed? Do you really want to be the bad Duskwight that everyone looks at with condescending eyes?“

He whipped his head around, his eyes furiously burning holes in my skull.

„What difference does it make now? They already do!“

„But of course they do! What choice are you giving them?! Just look at what you've done in the last moons and years. You've went about the world and killed things, and then killed several people on top of that!“

He took a moment to reply, looking at me with a strange expression.

„Just what's wrong with you? Why can't you leave me alone already?“

„Because I think you're still a decent person, deep down, and I want you to remember that.“

His face turned almost disgusted, but he didn't object. I went on, my voice getting heated.

„Just think about what you told me in Alder Springs. You said you had to *work* not to forget your hatred. You probably would have just let it go if not for all the work you'd put in feeding your hatred, wouldn't you? Or think about your time in jail. I really don't know what it was like, but I imagine it was anything but easy. But you still endured it without fleeing or killing anybody, even if you wanted to at some point.“

He just stared at the snow darkly, obviously not about to say anything to the words I threw at him.

„Or that lesson with the Alpha Wolf you gave me. After I'd defeated it you told me by doing that I'd have helped the people make Gridania safer. And before all of that even, you felt so bad about the theft that you felt the need to turn yourself in. Even the way you usually talk.“

I gave him and myself a moment before I continued a little bit calmer.

“That, I believe, is your true self. And you should be able to return to that, at least to a certain degree.“

His knuckles turned white and he started to shake a little. He turned to me.

„What do you even know about me?! You're just spouting some nonsense you desperately want to believe in!“

„I don't think I am.“

Our eyes were locked, his full of hot rage and mine probably quite stubborn.

„Have you ever thought about what you want to do with your life since you came out of jail? Aside from your revenge, I mean. I bet not. But maybe you should. There's all kinds of possibilities for you, you just need to find out what's right for you. Please think about it for a moment. I mean, what did killing Cillien do for you? It doesn't change a thing from the past. And I can't imagine it honestly did make you feel good about yourself.“

A lopsided grin was forming on his lips, and he slowly straightened himself. Even from the distance we stood apart he managed to look down at me with triumph written all over his face.

„Heh. What if it did, though? I felt pretty damn nice until you started spouting all that crap.“

„I don't think it will last, Foulques, even if you do feel like that right now. You're by far not stupid enough to be permanently content with that. There has to be a different way to deal with that, something that lasts a little longer.“

„What the hells do you even *know*?! Someone like you doesn't have the tiniest idea how it is to--“

„I *know* I don't. Of course not. But you know what? When I look at you your unhappiness with life just screams at me. Are you even aware of how much you're stuck in the past?“

We just glared at each other for a moment, postures angry and my tail slightly lashing from side to side. Foulques kept quiet, and I continued, raising my hands in a frustrated gesture.

„You don't have to *be* stuck in the past, you know. You can change that. Find something else to do, something that can give true meaning to your life. Something that will genuinely make you happy. At least try. I can see that you hate me for saying all those things and that you don't even want to hear them right now, but I honestly think it's worth it. You deserve better than what you're allowing yourself right now.“

I kept watching him waiting for an answer, but I didn't get one. Instead, Foulques turned his eyes to the ground, his whole attitude getting somewhat slack. I thought I could see the same confusion and loss for words that I saw back in Camp Dragonhead, when he had left me without answering my proposal about sticking together. Well, if he was actually willing to think it over I'd happily give him all the time he needed. However, there was something we needed to take care of, even if I got sick just thinking about it. I weakly gestured to the corpse at his feet.

„We need to do something about him. If someone finds him here they'll immediately know it was you.“

Foulques looked at me like I'd just lost my mind. I bristled.

„What? You're not eager to go back behind bars right away, are you? Then let's move him somewhere and bury him or something. And make sure you erase that blood in the snow as well.“

He still didn't reply, but at least he helped me put the corpse over Kweh's back and then buried the bloodied snow with enough fresh snow that it wouldn't be found immediately. The unfortunate thing was that we couldn't erase our footprints just that easily. We just had to hope that the weather would take care of that before anyone found the trail.

I was silently fuming the whole time we were on the move to dispose of the body, disgusted that Foulques' actions had made me take part in this. The right thing, of course, would have been to return to the Observatory and report the murder, but that would certainly not have resulted in Foulques happily returning home with me. I hated every second of it.

A couple of malms away we threw the body down into a deep crevice, where it fell into a pile of fresh snow that covered it almost completely. Maybe this would work. As soon as we were done I turned on my heels and stomped back towards the main path. I wanted nothing more than to leave this forsaken land of ice and bury all those painful memories where I never would find them again. With a fierceness that almost brought tears to my eyes I thought of my sister and my room in Gridania. I hoped this time there'd be nothing to delay us further.

In any case, something was missing, so I slowed my steps and then stopped altogether. I could only hear two sets of footsteps in the snow, and that were Kweh's and my own. I firmly denied the possibility that Foulques would part ways now, but it still took me a moment to turn around. He was still standing at the crevice, looking down into it's depths. Since his back was to me and his posture didn't give anything away I had no idea what went through his head at that moment. Did he think about what we had just done? About Cillien? Or about the things I'd told him earlier? Or something else entirely? Whatever it was, I didn't want to interrupt his thoughts just then, because I got a feeling that it was something important for him. So I just waited, my shivering getting worse as the minutes ticked by.

Right as I wanted to call out to him, after all, he turned around, looking at me. I couldn't read his face, but his glowering, speculative eyes were locked to mine. I waited. He was silent for a moment longer, then he sighed.

„What are you still doing there?“

Stubbornly I shoved away the cold grip of disappointment. If he was accompanying me back to Gridania there was no need to feel disappointed. Stubbornness crept into my voice.

„I'm waiting for you to get moving so we can go home, obviously. And I'd hoped it would be just a little bit faster, because I'm freezing.“

„What makes you think I was planning to do that?“

„You promised.“

„And I just broke another promise to you, and in a very obvious way at that. You were an idiot for seriously believing that cheap excuse.“

He barked out a short laugh, a strange half grin appearing on his lips. It quickly disappeared again.

„No, I wasn't. I believed in you.“

„You can't be that stupid. You should've known better.“

I stared at him. *I should have known better?* For real?

„Wait a moment. You call me an idiot for trusting you when you still hold a grudge

against the lancers because *they* didn't believe you all those years ago? You can't be serious."

Another strange grin formed on his lips, but I wasn't sure if it was directed at me or not.

„Heh, you make it sound so stupid."

I gave him a flat look, not sure if he was teasing me or if he actually meant that.

„That's because it *is* stupid. And now, would you please get moving already, I'm sick of this cold and I could use some *real* rest in a warmer environment."

I stared at him, hands balled into slightly shaking fists that had everything to do with the temperatures as opposed to my temperament. He stared back, considering his next move, until he broke the eye contact and started moving in my direction. He passed me, ignoring me completely, and continued along the beaten path that led back to where we came from. I still stared at him, knitting my brows. Was that compliance or just rejection and coincidence? Either way, I followed him. It was high time we got back, even Kweh was clearly eager to go home.

To both my relief and chagrin the snowfall got heavier again. The fresh snow would cover our tracks, but we'd also get wet again. I hadn't even completely gotten dry again yet, not even in that cave. At least the cold was easier to bear if I was moving. Once I was sure Foulques walked in the I tuned out the uncomfortable weather as best as I could and kept thinking about the nice warm air of our destination and a hot meal. And a good long night -or day, preferably- of sleep.

The way back was very silent, and overall mostly unremarkable. Not a word was spoken, and most of the way Foulques kept a certain distance, not only physically. He didn't regard me at all, but I didn't mind. I was content to watch his back in front of me, knowing that we were headed for the border. Apart from being dead tired and miserable from the cold, and thus not too keen on keeping up any conversation anyway, I was still crossed about the murder, though. I wondered if it was even possible to convince him to not end lives so easily anymore, and especially out of such reasons as revenge.

When I looked up after a while it seemed like Foulques was getting even further away. I tried to quicken my steps, to catch up to him, but I couldn't shorten the distance between us at all. I called out to him, but somehow I couldn't even hear my own voice. Even Kweh's low cries beside me sounded far away. Then my sight began to blur. What was wrong?