

Cracking the Shell

Von elektroyu

Kapitel 12: Face-Off

The hint she'd gotten turned out to be not very helpful. I found nothing at all, not even distinct tracks. Even several suns later I was still searching the whole Black Shroud without even the slightest success. Just what kind of crazily evasive squirrel was this? It was supposed to be a tame pet! But maybe it had reverted back to a really feral lifestyle to be so hard to track. Or worse, it could have fallen victim to another creature. I desperately hoped that wasn't the case.

It was already past sundown and it was beginning to drizzle. Maybe I should head home for the day and get something to eat. I turned for Gridania. I'd had left Kweh in the stable for convenience the past few suns, but I should take her with me next time. She needed some exercise, even if it meant risking her destroying possible tracks.

When the familiar canopied pathway came into view I stopped short and turned southward, straining my ears and eyes. Someone was there.

„Sharp as ever, eh?“

The slightly ironic undertone would've made me roll my eyes if not for the relief, even happiness I felt at the voice. Still, my words came out rather accusing.

„Where have you been? I wanted to talk to you.“

Foulques didn't look impressed. He didn't even answer my question, just hopped off of a branch and ambled in my direction. He reminded me of a wild coeurl; strong, smooth movements, but ready to flee instantly should any danger arise.

„What are you up to? Running errands again?“

„Pretty much, but not very successfully. But let's go somewhere dry. You hungry?“

He blinked at me and kept silent, not sure what to answer.

„I'll treat you if you like. I'm starving and I haven't had a proper warm meal for a while, so let's find a nice place to eat.“

I looked at him, but he still seemed taken aback. I cocked my head, knitting my brows.

"Or if you don't want to enter the city I could just bring--"

„Er, no, it's okay. A warm meal somewhere dry would be great. If it's not too public a place.“

I nodded and turned towards the gates, Foulques followed quietly.

„You're not going to tell me what you've been doing since we came back? You do look a lot better, though. How's your injury?“

He was wearing his usual battle outfit, which looked pretty much restored to it's former state, and I couldn't discern anything that hinted at the injury he'd gotten in the Steel Vigil influencing him in any way anymore. Either he got himself healed in some way or he made sure nothing of it was showing in his movements.

„Don't worry about it. Just tell me what you wanted to talk about.“

„Oh, that. It's not all that important, but I've wondered...“

I watched the gate guards from the corner of my eyes as we approached. While they did keep a somewhat professional expression they clearly were suspicious of Foulques, faces tense and eyes locked onto him. I wondered if they would've denied him access to the city if he had been alone. Then again, he must have entered the city before without any company. Except if he had entered somewhere else than the gates...

Once we were behind the gate and out of earshot of the guards, Foulques threw me a glance, prompting me to continue. He seemed a little tense, always keeping an eye on his surroundings, but otherwise he was calm.

„I've wondered about the way back from Coerthas. Qiah didn't know any details, she just told me you brought me back.“

He threw another look, slightly irritated.

„There's nothing else to say on the matter. You were feverish and passed out even before the border, so I brought you back. Don't tell me you wanted to stay there and freeze to death.“

I coughed out a small laugh. A smile stayed on my face as I looked at him.

„No, I didn't. I really didn't. But thank you. I'm honestly happy you did that for me.“

He made a dismissive sound and went back to studying the surroundings a little too grumpily.

„Lets grab something to eat from the Carline Canopy and just take it up to my room. No one should bother us there. Except maybe my sister, but I think she's busy with

work today.”

Foulques didn't reply, but I took his silence as agreement.

When we reached the inn I changed my attention to a waitress near the counter. She greeted me by name and with a smile, but it got unsure once she got aware of Foulques. My tail slightly flipped to the side.

When I asked her about taking our meals up to my room she seemed torn, eyeing Foulques and myself in turn.

„Usually we don't allow this, sir. But, well, I guess we could make an exception just this once.”

I had a strong suspicion she'd prefer the dangerous looking Duskwight out of the public room. She was not the only one eyeing him like that. I wondered how much of that was pure prejudice, or if any of those huffish glances were justified.

A glance at Foulques once the waitress had left confirmed my suspicion. Although outwardly he was amazingly calm the tense set of his jaws told me he was pretty uncomfortable the entire time we waited for our meals to be prepared. I'd figured he would ease up once we left the public, and well, he did. Kind of. But even so he still kept a strange tense air around him that seemed different from the uneasiness he had displayed in Coerthas. I couldn't help but ask about it after we'd finished eating in silence.

„Is something wrong? You've been taut as a bow since we went through the gate.”

He unglued his eyes from the window to look at me.

„Wrong? No. I'm just not very comfortable around so many people anymore, especially not *here*. You'd think you would've picked that up by now.”

I glared at him, but refrained from replying in the same wry tone. The corner of his mouth raised in a weak grin.

„That's not what I meant. There's something more to this, isn't it?”

„What are you talking about?”

I shrugged, gesturing vaguely at him.

„I don't know. Did something happen? You were different before. A lot more relaxed, I think.”

Foulques looked back to the window with a rather irritated expression and took a moment to find a reply.

„I just have some things on my mind right now. You don't need to concern yourself with any of it.”

I watched him a while longer, not sure how to react. He was so good at hiding his thoughts, it was hard to guess what he could mean by that. I carefully contemplated how to best continue the conversation; I didn't want him feeling intruded upon. I sat my empty bowl onto the desk, stacking the other one into it. Then I sat back on my bed. Foulques was still studying the drizzle on the window. It was turning into rain quickly.

„I'm sorry if I'm prying. I don't mean to. It's just that I--“

He silenced me with a sudden sharp look and stretched his long legs beside the desk. Then his expression changed and he regarded me with interest, although his voice didn't betray any of it.

„So, what is it you've been having trouble to accomplish?“

„Huh? You mean my errand?“

He nodded and I blinked at him. He'd asked that before. Why was this so important to him? Or was it just a means to keep up conversation? Or to keep me from asking about him? Should I just humor him?

„Nothing world-shaking. I'm just trying to find a pet which happens to be quite elusive.“

He raised an eyebrow.

„A pet? For whom?“

„Actually that's a funny coincidence. It's the Conjuror that healed you in Coerthas. I bumped into her in the Conjuror's Guild a couple of suns ago.“

I grinned at him, but he just stared at me, unimpressed. My grin faltered a little, and he crossed his arms over his chest.

„Tell me about it. What did she tell you, and why do you think didn't you succeed with it yet?“

I all but gawked at him. Was he honestly interested in this little errand? Or in Rhaya, possibly? That was probably more likely. But still, why? Did he want to help? He didn't look like he wanted to desperately thank her for her earlier help, though. I thought he should, by the way, but I didn't mention it.

He kept looking at me, waiting for an answer. I shook my head and decided to see where this went.

„Well, she told me the pet was not hers, but a friends, and that they originally had asked another adventurer to find it. But since that one wasn't available at the time she acquired a new hint she entrusted the task to me instead.“

„But you didn't find it either, obviously, even with a fresh hint.“

„I didn't. But what can I do? I just have to keep looking for it.“

„And you're doing that from sunrise to sundown every day until you find it?“

His voice was almost mocking now. I glared at him.

„Of course I do! How else would I be able to find it?“

I crossed my arms and looked at the window. Raindrops were splattering loudly at it now.

“Well, I have to admit that I probably wouldn't be able to keep it up forever. I'll just have to hope that I can find it before I have to leave for a more important task.“

„I don't think you'll *ever* find it.“

„What? Why not?“

Leaning forward, Foulques pointed an accusing finger at me.

„Because she's scamming you, you idiot.“

„Huh? Why in the world would she do that? She's not like that. You haven't even met her, have you?“

„It just sounds a little too fishy to be true.“

„What's wrong with you? Just because something doesn't go smoothly doesn't mean it's automatically a scam. You're way too distrustful, Foulques.“

„I think *you're* way too *trustful*. But I'm not discussing that with you right now. Either believe it or not, you'll see the truth sooner or later anyway. Thanks for the meal.“

He got up and headed for the door. I was too conflicted to even say another word, so I just watched him go from the edge of my bed, a thousand thoughts in my head at once. Did he really believe that? Did he have so little trust in people that such a minor thing already would make him jump to such a conclusion? What if he was right, though? But Rhaya just wasn't like that. Nothing even hinted at such a thing. She had helped us without a second thought, without any sort of payment even. And what reason would she even have, considered it would be just like Foulques thought? He was overreacting, definitely. The door shut with a soft thud.

I should probably call him back before he left the building. The rain had gotten pretty strong while we'd eaten and there really was no need for him to get drenched. I wondered why he even had felt the need to leave so suddenly in the first place. Something was just off about him today.

I hurried down the stairs as silently as I could. Down in the hall I asked the waitress

from before about Foulques and she told me he had left moments ago. I thanked her and ran outside, but couldn't see him anywhere. I ran to the Blue Badger Gate and outside through the Canopy, where I hesitated. From my position I had a good view of the nearby pathways, but over the rain I could neither hear nor see anything that hinted at where he had gone. I turned around to the guards, returning to the gate.

„Did the Duskwight I came with earlier pass through just now?“

They both looked a little uncomfortable and hesitated for a moment, but then gave me an answer after all.

„He did, yes. Seemed to be in hurry, as well.“

„Where did he go?“

„I... didn't pay attention to that.“

Inwardly I groaned, but I thanked them. At least I could be sure he'd come this way, even if that was the most likely direction anyway. I jogged down the path again until it branched in three different directions. Which one to take, now? Or should I just leave him be, after all? Apparently he wasn't much inclined to stay, even in this rain. Then again, nothing good had ever happened whenever I'd left him be. At worst, he'd get irritated and send me away. I could deal with that.

Standing at the crossroads I strained my ears, closing my eyes for better concentration. Under the omnipresent sound of the rain the faint sounds of birds and other critters greeted my ears from all directions. Some rustling on the ground to the left of me. I flicked my ear to clear it of the tingle of water droplets and listened again. A bird called faintly in the distance. Behind me the tiptoeing of a very small critter. And then, straight ahead, something else entirely. The sound of metal clashing? It was a bit too far away to be certain. Maybe I should've brought my lance. I hadn't anticipated Foulques to get away so fast, though. Anyway, this was the only clue I'd gotten, so this was where I'd look first.

I wasn't disappointed. When I arrived at the scene, Foulques was surrounded by five people, mostly guild lancers. Voyce and Kimison, the two I'd talked to before I went to Coerthas, were among them. I recognized Nantain and Thaisie, a Wildwood Elezen pair, and a young Midlander Hyur that I'd seen in the guild from time to time. I didn't know his name, though.

The lancers held Foulques at spear point, and he was ready to fight as well. For the moment, though, no one moved. Quickly Kimison noticed my arrival.

“Khuma'zi?! What are *you* doing here?“

Calming my labored breathing I balled my fists and met his surprised look squarely, coming closer.

“That's what I should be asking, Kimison. What are you all trying to do?“

My question was met with silence, not because it was obvious what they were up to, but because my arrival made them hesitate. Foulques only watched, water dripping from his hair. The fabric of my shirt and pants already felt sticky where it wasn't protected by armor. Slowly I walked towards the group and entered the ring of lances. Voyce, who was nearest to me, gently pushed at me with the broad side of his blade to keep me from reaching Foulques.

"Stay out of this. You know what he's done, and now we'll make sure he's gonna pay for it!"

He put more force into his push when I wouldn't budge, but I firmly planted my feet on the ground, readying myself. I grabbed his wet lance by the shaft, pulling it towards me with a firm yank and immediately pushing it out to him again to throw him off-balance. Balance was still one of his weak points, and he probably hadn't anticipated me moving against him. With another shove to the side I disarmed him and in the same movement rotated the lance so I could use it myself. Not that I really intended to use it, but I wasn't about to let them fight with Foulques and I needed something to back up my words just in case. Kimison's blade slightly quivered in my direction, not sure what to make of my move. I took place at Foulques' right so I wouldn't get in his way, facing the lancers at his back. He met my stern look for a short moment. He was waiting, still slightly surprised. He looked pretty calm despite his fighting stance, though, for which I was grateful. It gave me hope this wouldn't go the same road as his encounter with Cillien. I turned to the others.

"Just stop this, it's not going to change anything, even if you would succeed."

"What do you know?! He didn't kill *your* friend! *Your* family! *Your* lover! We're just not keeping silent about this any longer!!"

"And where would that lead? There's just going to be even more victims! I'm not going to watch you spill blood over something that won't even change a single thing!"

I looked at every one of them, Voyce, who was now standing a little outside of the ring, and Foulques included. Most of them weren't convinced, the looks I met were angry and hostile. Foulques just didn't look much impressed.

"The concept of revenge really is not very familiar to you, is it?"

I ignored his quiet, somewhat amused comment.

"All that's going to happen is that you're resorting to the very same actions you're hating him for!"

"Khuma'zi, why do you keep defending him? He's a murderer!!"

"And you actually want to become one yourself, Kimison?"

"That's different!! We're merely avenging the people that were dear to us!"

I almost rolled my eyes at that.

"And he's merely avenging the life he was robbed of! And besides, then what? Once you've killed him, someone's going to come after *you* to avenge *him*. And who will get injured in the process or even lose their life? I'm telling you, nothing at all will change. People will just keep dying!"

"Just back off! It's got nothing to do with you!"

It had a whole tonze to do with me, but that was not the point right now.

"I'm not going to back off, Kimison. Just stop it. I don't want this to turn into a fight. But if it does, I'll take on every one of you."

Again, I met each set of eyes. I also aimed a sharp look at Foulques, silently including him in that statement. He grimly narrowed his eyes at me. The others were silent, unsure of what to do. They knew that Foulques was strong from his previous interactions with the guild and with the Wood Wailers, and they also knew that I was strong. It's not that they weren't talented with a lance, but I was stronger than them, at least in a one-on-one match. We'd had enough chances to prove that over and over since I'd joined the guild. If I wouldn't take their side they'd have to face Foulques *and* me. After a few moments, Kimison lowered his lance, but kept his seething eyes mostly locked onto Foulques.

"Fine. We'll retreat for now. But know this isn't over yet."

The others were following his order slowly, hesitantly. Foulques and I remained ready to take action until they had bunched up around Kimison. When I threw Voyce his lance, he made a surprised sound and caught it with two hands. Foulques shook his head, not easing up his stance at all.

"You're an idiot."

I just threw him a quick glare from the corners of my eyes, then waited for the lancers to leave. Once they had their backs to us and were away a couple of yalms, Foulques relaxed, strapping the lance to his back and staring at me. Water dripped from his face.

"Why are you even here?"

"I just wanted to call you back, actually. I didn't want you to get wet needlessly, and I wanted to ask why you were so quick to leave in the first place."

He raised an eyebrow, disbelieving. He crossed his arms.

"Well, that's too late. And I told you, I just didn't want to stay there any longer. Now go home already."

"At least it's a good thing I followed you. Who knows what would've happened if I hadn't."

"Then there'd be a few more dead cowards if they'd kept this up."

I glared at him, balling my hands into fists; the base of my tail puffed up. I tugged at my wet hair in frustration.

"Yes, exactly! And maybe you'd have suffered a few cuts yourself on top of that! What's wrong with you all?! Can't you solve a problem without bloodspill?"

Foulques sighed, shaking his head.

"You're really an idiot. Sometimes you need to spill blood to solve a problem, and believe me, someone's blood *is* going to be spilled sooner or later. Besides, now you've made a couple of enemies out of your friends. That wasn't very wise either, don't you think?"

My hand fell back to my side lifelessly, my rage leaving me quickly.

"That couldn't be helped. I'm just glad no one was hurt."

"They're probably going to come after you."

I met his eyes, pondering this for a moment.

"We'll see. I hope it won't come to that."