

Cracking the Shell

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Kapitel 13: Friends, Family & Lovers

The next time I met him was just a few suns later. Rhaya had just given me a new hint about the lost squirrel and I combed through the North Shroud, trying to find the exact spot she had described, when I found myself surrounded by the same lancers that had challenged Foulques before. I could hardly believe my eyes, or ears for that matter. They'd spread around me, lances not quite challenging, but already in their hands. I stared at Kimison, who again kept talking for all of them.

"Khuma'zi, we know it's not fair to confront you like this, but there's no other choice. This Duskwight will have to pay, no matter what. So I'm asking this of you once again: back out of this. This is your last chance. If you keep defending him we'll have to take action against you as well."

"Why? Why are you so bent on spilling blood?"

My voice was overflowing with the disbelief I felt. I wasn't too concerned about their numbers, but it would be a lie to say I wasn't afraid at all. The tip of my tail quivered nervously to the side. Still, the weight of my own lance strapped to my back was comforting. Also, I still hadn't given up on talking them out of it. But I had to be more careful than last time.

"You can't even imagine how we feel, can you?"

I whirled around, shocked to hear this distinct clear voice here, now. Rhaya stepped into the ring of people around me, clutching her staff in both hands. Her golden eyes looked at me troubled, but determined. She was here? Here among those people who challenged me about Foulques? Had she really been lying to me before? But there had never been any indication that what she'd said hadn't been true. I didn't find any words, I just kept staring at her, trying to understand how this could have happened.

"You don't have anyone that's more important to you than your own life, Khuma'zi?"

I did. Of course I did. Qiah. My aunts, my cousins. Foulques. Of course.

"Well, even if you don't understand, please step back and promise that you won't interfere any longer. Please."

The pleading in her voice sounded honest, but my mind still hadn't kept up.

"Why are you here, Rhaya? I don't understand."

Her lips tightened to a thin line, but her voice was very quiet. Hardly more than a whisper.

"I... I lost a loved one to that Duskwight. I just didn't know it was him when I met you in Coerthas. Otherwise I would've denied my help. But I'm making him pay for it now. So please don't get in our way, or you'll have to share his fate."

Her eyes were torn and the set of her mouth grave, but the determination under all that emotion was as clear as a mountain spring. Still, she probably didn't really want to hurt or even kill me. I couldn't imagine her doing it either way. Not her. She was too pure, too honest for that. Maybe I could find a way to shatter that determination and change her mind.

"I can't. I'm sorry. But that doesn't mean either of us needs to resort to vio--"

"It's no use, Khuma'zi. Everyone here made up their mind. Nothing, *nothing* you say will change that. Ever."

When I looked back at Kimison, the lancers around me readied their weapons so they were pointing at me. Their faces were determined. A strong wave of aversion to fight them washed through me, and I clenched my fists, ears drawing back.

"Stop that. I'm not going to fight you!"

"You won't have to, it's your choice. But we'll still make sure you can't interfere and save that bloody murderer again. You've had your chances to back out!"

A thrust from him, and a slash from the side from someone else. The latter ripped the cloth of my pants when I dodged, but didn't hurt me much. My tail whipped to the side.

"That doesn't make sense, Kimison! I know full well that what he's done is beyond inexcusable, and I can imagine how much this hurts you! But how can killing him ever be able to erase even one bit of your sadness?!"

Again, a thrust from the side and from the back, and two from the front and from the other side right after. I couldn't dodge them completely, but my armor protected me. Still, the impacts hurt and knocked the air out of me. They were serious. They'd kill me if I didn't protect myself. I took the lance from my back and readied myself. The lancers around me didn't lose their determination, but their movements hesitated for a moment. My breathing was a little erratic still.

"There has to be a way to--!"

"No, Khuma'zi! There is nothing else for us here!"

Voyce backed up his words with a powerful slash aimed at my arm, but I sidestepped and knocked his blade to the ground. Before I could even lift my lance again, though, someone grabbed my tail, hard. It was a cowardly move, but it made me painfully realize just how serious they were. No matter what, indeed. I whipped around, hissing furiously, and slashed the lancer deeply across the arm. He let go of me with a yelp, but the others took the chance that presented itself. I kept moving, but I felt numerous blades at once inflicting cuts and bruises through the armor. Again and again I knocked lances down and away, and used the flat side of the blade for powerful blows against arms, legs and torsos. I had to somehow make them unable to fight without hurting them too much. But the lances around me drew blood and aimed to kill. And their wielders were receiving healing spells. My heart squeezed painfully. Rhaya didn't need to hurt me. It was sufficient for her to make sure that the others were kept enabled to do it. I still couldn't believe it, despite the evidence hurting me further every second. This was so very wrong.

My body worked on it's own. Dodging, blocking, thrusting, sidestepping, more dodging, more thrusting. Everything faded into a strange, surreal haze. I wanted to give up, but I just couldn't. I didn't want to hurt them, but I needed to. I couldn't do anything about their pain, but I couldn't let them hurt Foulques in turn either. I'd probably die here protecting him. Even so, I couldn't, just couldn't betray him.

Hot pain shot through my calf and made me fall to my knee. A sharp pain to my side followed closely. Something whizzed past my ear, stirring my hair and making two disturbing thuds as it impacted behind me. Another sharp pain as the blade in my side got removed. I strained my ears and echo to anticipate the next thrust, the next slash. But something was off. Nothing happened.

Belatedly I noticed footsteps behind the sounds of the many labored breathings and looked up. Hands clenched, eyes afire, he came walking towards us. His lips were curled up in a smile.

"Aren't you a mighty lot, the six of you bullying a single poor kitten? Let me join in on the fun!"

I blinked up at him, eyes wide. Why was he even here? Why now? And who in all seven hells did he call '*kitten*'?!

Mouth agape, my gaze followed him as he walked past the first lancers and past me. Nobody made a move to interrupt him. Everything was eerily quiet. It confused me at first, but then I understood why.

He nonchalantly set his foot to the lancer on the ground behind me and pulled his lance out of him with a sickening abrading sound. It was Kimison. No wonder the others were hesitating.

"Pardon me, it's only five of you now."

"Foulques! Why did you *kill* him?!"

He'd done it again. Despite all the pain and severity of my injuries I couldn't help but feel disappointed and angry. Foulques returned my upset look calmly, but a little irritated.

"Because, you idiot, he was about to kill *you*, and did you want that? And besides..."

A quick jerk of his chin motioned to Rhaya. She was already casting a spell. Raise? So she had mastered that spell? I'd heard it was one of the hardest spells to learn and very few people ever mastered it. I knew Rhaya was an experienced and high-class healer, but it was still a surprise. Her eyes were wet, but her mouth was still set in a hard, determined line.

"So it's six against two now, yes?"

"No! It's nobody against anybody. Just stop this nonsense, every one of you! It won't change a single thing."

I gasped and caught my breath when pain flared up from my wounds at my little heated speech. Still not able to move from my sitting position on the ground I glared up at Foulques, then at the others. My breathing was labored and I felt slightly dizzy from the pain, but this had to stop now.

"Just listen to me! All of you!"

Foulques' mere presence seemed to make them hesitate. They glanced at the newly raised Kimison, who didn't say or do anything for a moment and only stared back between his friends and Foulques. I used the chance.

"Kimison. Voyce. Rhaya. And you, too, Thaisie, Nantain. You there, as well."

I winced at Rhaya's name and gasped for air a little. It still felt unreal. The boy whose name I didn't know didn't make a move to tell his name.

"Tell him. Tell him who he ripped out of your life, tell him exactly what he did to you. And you!"

I glared at Foulques, a firm warning to heed my words.

"Listen closely, and when they're done... you know what to do."

His eyes narrowed, but he didn't object right away. He looked like he was contemplating whether to do as I said or to tackle the situation differently. The others were the same. It was silent for a few breaths.

Then the lancer's glances got impatient and I feared they'd attack us again, but from beyond Foulques I could hear Rhaya's broken, determined voice.

"He was my fiance. His name was Siltaire Fierlaine. We had... already started to

prepare for our wedding. Despite all the talk and condemnation we've gotten from people. We were ready to face it all, ready for the burden we'd have to bear for the rest of our lives. The wedding was just a couple more suns away."

Her voice hitched. Tears welled up in her eyes and she stopped. She sniffed and stifled a sob before she continued.

"I would have raised him, but-"

She had to stop again, wiping at her overflowing tears with shaking hands.

"... but you turned him into Ashkin, so..."

She couldn't finish her sentence. She didn't need to. She sank to her knees and fought for composure. I felt a sharp pain in my heart that was very different from the ones I felt on my body. I felt sorry that I'd prompted her to relive her loss, but at the same time I felt that it was the only thing capable of dissolving this mess. Somewhere in the back of my mind I wondered how Foulques had even gotten his hands on that powder he'd been using to turn those people into Ashkin, but I shoved the disturbing thought aside for now.

Voyce went over to Rhaya and laid a comforting arm around her tiny shoulders. It did nothing to lessen her sobs, but from the familiarity of the gesture I was sure it helped her, if just a little.

A quick glance at Foulques made me hope that it had been the right choice. He didn't move or say anything, and his face was dark, eyes fixed on Rhaya.

After a moment Voyce started speaking as well.

"Not only Silvaire."

He looked up at Foulques, hate and loss burning in his eyes.

"One of the others was my brother Noes, and there was our friend Maenne. They were all family to us! Every single one of them!! You didn't even think about those things, did you? The lives you were destroying, and the families you were ripping apart... because of what?!"

Voyce didn't move from his spot beside the still crying Rhaya, but he clearly started shaking with emotion. Tears were filling his eyes and began to overflow, and he wasn't the only one.

Thaisie spoke up as well.

"Maenne was my sister, and she was married to Nantain. You have no idea what you've done to our families!"

The nameless Midlander boy had followed Voyce and was now standing near him and

Rhaya. His voice was very quiet, I had a hard time understanding him.

"Noes was my best friend. I looked up to him, he was always there for me. My family died in the Calamity, so now there's no one left for me."

Voyce watched him with a pained expression, but didn't object. He looked like he knew those words well, but for some reason he seemed unable to fill the spot his brother had left behind.

It was silent for a while. Then Kimison finally spoke, his voice hesitant at first and slightly shaking.

"Silvaire was my friend. As were the others, but he was..."

I turned around to his quiet words, wincing at the pain that flared up in my side at that small movement. He stared at the ground, his eyes full of pain and hatred.

"He was like a brother to me. He was a very special person to all of us."

Some of the lancers nodded quietly, but all of them held so much loss and pain in their eyes that it was hard to take in. I watched them strickenly. I knew that all of them lost someone dear to them, but I hadn't had any idea that those people had been connected *that* closely. It just made everything all the worse. I glanced up at Foulques, waiting for his reaction to these revelations, and for him to answer the question Voyce had asked.

There wasn't either one, but he certainly looked kind of frozen, at least to me. I waited a few moments longer, and fervently hoped he'd say something. Preferably something acceptable that could lessen or even dissolve the need for any more violence. I tried to swallow, but my mouth was dry. I felt dizzy.

Kimison snorted when Foulques remained silent and unmoving.

"Nothing, eh? Thought as much."

He readied his lance and pointed it at Foulques, face distorted in rage and bitterness.