

Cracking the Shell

Von elektroyu

Kapitel 14: If He Dies

“No! Stop it, Kimison!”

Neither Kimison nor Foulques paid Rhaya's objection any mind, and their lances clashed violently. A new wave of adrenaline washed through me, but I couldn't move anymore. I felt so weak.

Rhaya immediately started casting a spell, and after another horribly long moment of more clashing Kimison sank to the ground. Voyce and everyone else turned to her in shock or surprise.

“Rhaya, what...?!”

Rhaya wiped at her eyes before getting up, and sniffled.

“I understand it now. Khuma'zi is right. We have to stop thinking only of returning the violence.”

Her voice was quiet and her face still full of pain, but she unmistakably had made up her mind when she looked at Foulques.

“But you'll still have to pay. Maybe I could've forgiven you in time if it had been a single occurrence, but you're still killing people. You haven't learned a thing yet.”

Was she referring to Cillien...? She knew about him? The realization felt like a whole mountain pulling me down into the ground.

Her eyes darted to me, another surge of pain washing through them. She quickly turned to Foulques again, gesturing at me weakly at the same time.

“But I can see that our words reached you, and that you're protecting him, so he has to mean something to you. I'm not going to heal him, so if he dies you can see for yourself how it feels to lose someone important to you. And with that, you should be able to make better decisions in the future.”

Her mouth formed a thin line when she ended her speech, and without another word she turned to leave. There were new tears on her cheeks, but she managed to leave

with a strong, upright posture.

The others hesitantly followed after a moment, taking the still sleeping Kimison with them. They still seemed unsure about this whole situation, but I guessed that Kimison and Rhaya were the leader figures in their circle, and with both of them not willing or able to continue the fight they retreated. For the time being I was glad there was no more fighting and bloodshed, though. For now that was enough.

Once they were gone, I weakly crumbled to the floor where I sat. I felt so weak and cold, I just didn't find the strength to do *anything*, not even sitting. The warm blood still oozing from my side mingled with the already colder stains, making me sick. I welcomed the cool sensation of the earthen path where it touched my skin.

"I'm not getting a healer for you, just so you know."

Despite the immediate meaning I could hear a certain amount of worry in Foulques' words. I didn't have the energy to make my reply anything more than a fleeting whisper. I didn't know if he even heard it.

"I know..."

I heard him move towards me, and then felt a touch first on my forehead, then around the shoulders. He was dragging me to the side of the road into the grass. I weakly groaned at the pain flaring up, the dizziness exploding. For a moment I concentrated to keep my belly in check.

"Do you hear me? I asked if you have any potions on you."

"No... but my sister has a few. In the market."

I hoped he heard me, but I fell into nothingness for a moment, forgetting about everything. When I remembered I contemplated how to convey to him that he could take my purse without passing out completely. I felt like I'd do that any moment, anyway, even without doing anything else. When I felt him groping for my purse I entrusted everything to him and gave myself over to the darkness.

The first thing I noticed was that the pain was back, and it almost made me want to retreat to the safety of my unconsciousness again. But alas, I knew there was something important here on the surface.

"Zi, come on!!"

"Just let him *be* for a moment, girl. He's going to be fine, how many times do I have to tell you?"

My sister's voice was near my head and frantic with worry, and Foulques' was...

exasperated and a little farther away. It came closer, though.

“Go over there or something, just don't get in the way.”

There was some shuffling of clothes, but the sounds weren't getting farther away. I felt my head being lifted a little, then something cool touched my lips.

“Careful now, incoming potion. Don't choke on it, please.”

The liquid was just as cool as the flask had been.

“You think he can hear us?”

“Pretty sure he does, after all that squealing and lamenting of yours.”

I wasn't sure if I wanted to roll my eyes or laugh at that, but then I groaned. The potion kicked in and painfully tugged at my innards and flesh, restoring everything to its former state. It burned, stung and pulled to the point of making me sick again. I hated that feeling, no matter how useful it was. That's why I preferred a healer over potions any time of the day. The hand under my skull left, setting me back into the grass.

“Zi!! Are you okay?!”

I could sense my sister leaning in, most likely to study my face. I didn't dare opening my eyes just yet, but I managed to croak out a single word to both of them.

“... thanks.”

“Oh, 'Zi! You're better now, yes? How do you feel? I was so worried!”

I managed to crack my eyes open after another moment, the disgusting pulling of the potion already lessening. I met Qiah's worried and hopeful grey eyes, then Foulques' unfazed pink ones, before turning back to my sister.

“I am. Thanks. Just a moment.”

My strength was returning quickly, but I waited a moment longer to ensure my stomach stayed calm. I took a breath and carefully sat up. My body felt fine, at least fine enough to move around again.

“Mega- Potion?”

“Yeah, he said that'd be the minimum for you. Want another one? You're still pretty pale.”

I waved the offer aside with a grimace.

“Nah, one was enough, thank you.”

Foulques' lips twitched in a very short pinch of a grin, then he rose. Qiah and, much more carefully, I followed suit and patted the dirt off of our clothes. Mine were still full of half dried blood, though. I wiped my hands on the cleaner parts, while I wondered at Foulques' mood. Did something happen while I was out of it? He interrupted my musings with a flat statement.

"So. We're even now."

"Even?"

I blinked at Foulques and he crossed his arms, regarding me with a look I couldn't place right away. Kind of... disappointed?

"You saved my life, I saved yours. I've no debts to you anymore."

"Wait, didn't he save your life more than once?"

Qiah sounded offended, but I ignored her. I didn't care about comparisons about who saved the other how many times. I thought Foulques would do the same, but he turned to her, gesturing angrily at me.

"His stupidity there was so grand it counts by itself and it weighs up anything else he might've done for me."

He shook his head, this time pretty disgusted, piercing me with his angry eyes for a split second.

"And I refuse to think of it as anything else. This just can't be nowhere near your real courage."

So that's what this was about. Of course. Sighing, my eyes wandered over to the spot where Rhaya and the lancers had vanished from our sight. The memory still hurt, despite us having gotten off lightly.

"I just didn't have the resolve. Not to hurt them, much less kill them."

Foulques' eye rolling was accompanied by an exaggerated movement of his head and gesture of his hands.

"That much was obvious. But they had a freaking *healer* with them! There was absolutely no need to hold back at all if injuries or deaths were of your concern. That woman could *raise*, which I'm sure you had noticed at some point!"

I mirrored his hand gesture, just not quite as wide.

"But Foulques, how could that ever have worked? Never mind my own morals, but I can't ask them to stop the killing while killing them off in the first place! That wouldn't convince *anyone*."

He crossed his arms and glared at me.

“Well, that certainly didn't prevent you from going all out on *me* before. And regardless, there's still no need for *you*—”

And he sharply pointed his finger at me here,

“*you*, a freaking Warrior of Light, to get killed for something as small as that. I thought you'd at least realized your own value by now. Get your priorities in order, you idiot.”

For a moment, I just stared at his angry face. He actually tried to make me believe he valued me as a *Warrior of Light*? That he had concerns about *Eorzea as a whole*? Who was he trying to kid? A grin formed on my lips, and I shook my head with a small chuckle.

“Thank you, Foulques. Really. Thank you for saving me.”

He turned away with a small snort, hiding his face.

“And you know that I never aimed to kill you in Alder Springs, even though you *had* pushed my skills quite a bit.”

He didn't react to that, so I gave him his privacy and turned a little to the side, catching Qiah's rather funny expression of confusion and astonishment. My grin widened as I lifted my eyes to the softly swaying branches above us. Thinking about the conversation we just had, I wondered if Foulques had been watching that exchange with the lancers from the very start. Why else could he have called it a 'small' thing that I basically had been willing to die to protect him? But... why had he even been there in the first place?