

Cracking the Shell

Von elektroyu

Kapitel 16: Going Home

Back in my room I noticed a letter on the desk. I set the lance aside and picked up the letter. It was written in the uneven hand of my mother.

'Zi,

I take it Qiah is in best health. Please bring her back home as soon as possible. She hasn't answered any of my letters and it's about time she got back.

Khuma

I carefully refolded the paper and put it back into the envelope, which I then sat back onto the desk. I closed my eyes for a moment and sighed, hands firm against the desk, head hanging from my shoulders.

So Qiah had received letters from mother. And of course she hadn't told me about it.

She definitely needed to sort out this mess, no matter how unpleasant it was. I sighed again before slowly removing my torn armor and clothes and, moving very carefully so my wounds wouldn't be strained too much, replacing the old things with a simple shirt and some pants. I took the damaged gear, the letter and the lance and headed for the market. Slowly.

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"I'm not going back. You know that."

Qiah crossed her arms and refused to look at me.

"I know you don't want to, but at least show your face this once and apologize to her. She deserves to know you're doing fine. And she needs to see it for herself or she won't believe it."

"No. I'm not going."

"Qiah, you've left home without her consent."

"I'm old enough to care for myself, 'Zi."

"Yeah, but she's still your mother. Just talk to her about it and show her that you're doing great, then you can still return here. She's worried about you. I know you don't want to be, but you *are* her only daughter."

Qiah sighed and shook her head unhappily. Her worried eyes met mine.

"I know she does. And I know I shouldn't have done that. But what if she won't let me leave? I can't stay there, I just... can't."

Well, that was what mother wanted, so I couldn't really blame Qiah for staying away. But still.

"We'll do something about that, I won't abandon you there. I promise. But first of all you have to talk to her or she's never going to let you live your own life. Okay?"

One of Qiah's ears turned back in displeasure, but to my relief she gave a small nod at last.

"Good. We'll leave once my armor is done, so you still have a few days to prepare. I'll let mother know in the meantime."

She just nodded again unhappily and I left her with a gentle pat on the shoulder.

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During the next days I kept looking for Foulques in my free time and cursed his tendency to completely disappear whenever he felt like it. I had no idea where he lived apart from that he had 'a few places to stay', as he'd told me earlier. How far away from Gridania would be comfortable for him? I doubted he'd stay in the city's immediate surroundings, so I didn't even bother looking there. My frustration grew when I still hadn't found him once my armor was repaired, even though I felt better wearing my familiar gear as I rather aimlessly combed through the woods near Treespeak in the North Shroud.

"What's up with you? You look like you'd bite people in the face if they come too close."

I almost jumped at being talked to all of a sudden, and while I was relieved Foulques had found me once again I also felt pretty grumpy about it. My ears turned back and I glared at him.

"Well, thanks for noticing. I've been looking for you, you know. You don't think there's any way for you to provide me with a means to contact you, do you?"

Foulques literally stepped back at that, but I couldn't make out if it was my sullen tone or the request itself. He didn't care to enlighten me, either way. My tailtip flicked to the side while I waited for his reply.

"So... what's up this time? Anything you need me for?"

I sighed and shook off my irritation. That's who he was, after all. At least he spoke to me out of his own motivation, and right now finding him was all I needed. I nodded.

"I wanted to ask if you'd accompany Qiah and me to our home in the South Shroud."

Foulques' expression became a strange mixture of surprise and wariness, but I continued explaining.

"You see, I don't want her to go all alone, because she's horrible with a weapon and I never know if I'm suddenly called by the Scions or something. And this trip won't be pleasant for Qiah in the first place and I don't want to leave her to herself there. So... would you be willing to come with us, and take Qiah safely back to Gridania in case I can't?"

I watched Foulques' stern expression, worried I'd asked too much of him. He was looking so incredibly unsure.

"Well... you don't know for certain that anyone will be calling for you, right?"

I nodded. "Yeah, it's mostly just to be on the safe side. But it could happen anytime."

Foulques watched the nearby bushes and the creatures in them for a few moments, then met my eyes again briefly. His brows were still furrowed deeply.

"Well, it's not that I really have anything else to do, so I guess I could do you the favor."

My face lit up in a relieved smile, even as he crossed his arms and kinda looked like he regretted what he'd just said.

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Qiah was not happy to hear about this addition to our party at first, but she accepted it soon enough once I told her Foulques would be her backup escort.

We were traveling on foot, as Qiah wasn't able to use aetherytes, but this whole trip would be over in just a few days anyway. Starting in Gridania the fastest way led us first through the East Shroud and from there into the South Shroud. We had to pass Quarrymill and then just keep going straight to the south, deep into the woods that weren't even included in my map anymore.

Qiah was chattering away like usual and while I listened one particular thing caught

my attention.

"Oh did you know that Bhaldwyn got really angry today at someone claiming my items were *stolen*? You should have seen how his eyes started glowing! Even Parnell got involved and defended us, can you believe that?"

I looked at her in mild surprise.

"Again?"

"Yeah, they even threatened to get the Wood Wailers to throw him out if he wouldn't leave me alone. But I think that he left in the end was because everyone there got kind of cold with him and asked if he'd be okay with their wares when they had the exact same chance of being stolen as mine were. I guess they all really value what you and the other Warriors of Light do for everyone."

Here she grinned at me proudly, but I lazily waved her praise away.

"I don't think it's mainly because of us. How many people would even know about a Warrior of Light? If the guys in the Shaded Bower didn't see you as someone trustworthy they wouldn't defend you like that, even if you do sell a few things that I collected."

She cocked her head in thought for a bit, watching the path.

"It wasn't like when we first arrived there, that's true. They were always kinda suspicious about us in the beginning."

Back then it had been a very different scenario whenever we had appeared around the market, especially when Qiah was just starting her own little shop. I was glad it now only was a memory for us, at least mostly. Here and there there would always be someone willing to kick some dirt onto us Keepers of the Moon, just like it was with Duskwights, as we'd seen in Coerthas a while ago.

Foulques behind us kept to himself most of the time. At first I was worried about it, but then I realized he just didn't feel like taking part in Qiah's tales. And Qiah likewise mostly ignored him, although I could see both watching each other from time to time. I idly wondered if those two would ever be able to get along at a closer distance.

The trip to the South Shroud was uneventful save for a creature here and there that was foolish enough for an attack, but before we reached our destination there was something we needed to take care of. I turned around to Foulques, who was following us at a little distance.

"It's not far from here now. But..."

I unfastened my lance and gestured into the woods around us. I grinned at Foulques' intent stare.

"First we need to do some hunting."

Qiah returned my grin and nodded approvingly, but Foulques' expression didn't change.

"Hunting?"

I nodded. "I can hardly show up without a gift, can't I?"

"Well, can't you?"

I doubted the murmur was really intended for me, but I just grinned wider at him.

"Come on, don't tell me you hate hunting. You can take care of an Antelope Stag and I'll go after one of the Does. This should be plenty for the clan, right?"

Qiah nodded to my question. "It should. I'll come with you! I won't disturb you, I promise."

I managed to smile at her, brushing away the uneasiness that had crept up at that statement. She'd do her best to stay quiet. Foulques unstrapped his own lance and half grinned at us.

"Fine, if it's just this. Whoever comes back first wins."

Qiah turned her grin to him. "Oh, you think you have a chance? 'Zi is good at this."

Foulques just gave her a snort and both of us chuckled at him. I shook my head when he left, but my own grin was still in place. He just had to make a contest out of everything, didn't he? But there was no reason to deny him a little bit of fun.

The task didn't take either of us long, even though I had to remind Qiah to be absolutely quiet when she accidentally spooked the first doe I'd picked. When we returned Foulques was already waiting with his stag, already cutting it's belly. He looked very pleased with himself, which amused me.

"Looks like I win.", was his greeting.

I grinned at him.

"Looks like you do. You already spoke a prayer?"

He nodded. I was pleased that he obviously respected the Elementals enough to give them something back after a hunt. Mostly it was prayers people offered in return, but it could be other things as well, depending on what was taken. Around our clan we tended to look over young trees in exchange for felling grown ones, for example.

"Good. Let's prepare them and get going, then. We're almost there. Oh, and one thing."

I went over to Foulques and spoke my words very quietly, so any possible bystanders wouldn't be able to overhear them. You never knew who hid behind a nearby tree.

"The point of this trip is to appease my mother. She wants Qiah to stay and continue the family, but you already know that Qiah has no intention of doing that. I don't want this visit to turn into a family fight, so please don't mention that to my mother. It would crush her."

Hesitation was plainly visible on Foulques' face, but then he shrugged and nodded. It wasn't of much concern to him anyway.

Qiah talked some more about her day while we quickly gutted the antelopes and got rid of the parts that we didn't need and that would spoil the meat if left inside the carcass for too long. As soon as we finished she quickly became more quiet.

The rest of the way was covered in silence. Foulques and I had to carry the antelopes and Qiah fell completely quiet at the prospect of meeting her mother. She looked stern and worried, but all I could do was watch over her and stand by her side. This was a thing she had to do by herself.

She stayed behind as we got closer to home, but soon mother had spotted us.

"Qiah! Oh, you're here and you're okay, right? I was so worried about you!"

Khuma rushed by, completely and utterly ignoring Foulques and me, to grab the unwilling Qiah at the shoulders and almost frantically pat down her arms. I felt Foulques' raised eyebrow more than I saw it, but I was thankful he didn't comment. At least I could *pretend* it didn't faze me. It was the first time coming home since I'd left my family 4 years or so ago. I knew Khuma didn't particularly care for me, but it still hurt to be ignored so completely.

I turned to Foulques.

"Let's put these away first."

I led him a little further along the small trail that went by our house and we hung the antelopes for bleeding. Depending on who was here at the moment the task of tending to them further could fall to either of the aunts, their children or any males if they were present. They'd tell us if they wanted us to take care of it, so for the moment we just left the antelopes there and went back to the huts.