

Cracking the Shell

Von elektroyu

Kapitel 8: Courage

Something in my breaking voice must have reached him, because he finally got to his feet. Slowly at first, but after a few steps he started to run into the direction of the gap between the walls. I lost sight of him when the aevis rounded up on me again. I dealt it a deep slash to its side and at that moment realized that the other one was going after Foulques again. I threw my lance again and hit its tail. Screaming in pain it turned back to me and I was surrounded by both of them again. I cursed and ran to the side, but the one behind me was already there and sank its teeth into my leg. Hot pain shot through my calf, I gasped roughly and fought the impulse to move my leg away from it. The aevis didn't let go. I turned, grabbing the lance near the blade and thrust it through the top of its muzzle. It roared and released my leg, but the force of my thrust made its teeth rip through my leg as well. I could feel teeth scratching my bone. Only barely did I manage to pull out the lance from its head again as it moved away. For a moment everything went black, the sounds got muffled. I sank to my knees and froze, I felt so sick I could hardly breathe. Then I could feel Kweh's healing spell working and setting things right inside my leg, but the second aevis didn't wait for us to finish. I didn't have a chance to get up, so I thrust the lance upwards and into its muzzle when it was close enough to bite. My plan didn't work, though, as it just ripped the weapon from my grip and spat it out again. It landed just a few steps from me, but the aevis blocked my path. I was still on the ground, and the second aevis was right behind me, coming for me again. At least I felt much better and somewhat ready to move again, so I rolled to the side and only escaped the attack because Kweh landed a hit on its head. Using the opportunity I got up, ignoring the lingering pain in my leg, and retrieved my lance with a long leap. I slipped and slid through the snow a few furlms, avoiding another attack by only a hair's width.

Panting heavily I got up and aimed at the aevis' eye. It hit, and the creature threw its head around wildly, roaring deafeningly. I held on to the lance that was still sticking out of the aevis' skull, and got whirled around before my fingers lost its grip on the lance. I prayed to all the gods it wouldn't send me over the edge of that abyss while trying to figure out how to get back my weapon.

Luckily, I didn't fall. Instead, I hit Kweh and sent her down with me, but we were right behind the other aevis now. It was already turning around as we struggled to our feet. Kweh powerfully kicked its jaw, which turned the creature's head towards the other aevis that already came running. I forcefully wondered if Foulques had found his lance yet. I could really use his help already! Focusing on my own lance I again ran, sliding

under the jaw of the aevis that had been kicked, and leaped up. I grabbed the lance, hoping the blood and slimy remains of the eye wouldn't keep me from holding on to it. I placed my feet on the massive head and tugged. It worked, but barely. I had to renew my grip and just barely escaped getting eaten by the other aevis. I fell against its side and down into the snow. Kweh was still attacking and thus distracting it, and in that moment the now one-eyed aevis turned the other way instead of taking advantage of my defenseless position. Foulques must have found his lance. I managed to get to my feet again and thrust the lance vaguely at the chest of the aevis beside me. It hit, but didn't do much damage due to the bad angle and the armor-like scales the creature was equipped with.

Now dealing with just this one aevis it was easier to keep a little distance from it, so I could make full use of the lance. Despite my breathlessness I managed to aim a thrust at it's neck, and with Kweh's additional attacks frequently interrupting it I got it for a second time after a couple of heartbeats. When I successfully went for it's neck a third time it started gurgling, then another powerful thrust from Foulques finally sent it to the ground. It was dead. The other aevis lay also defeated.

Panting heavily I turned to Foulques. He was breathing in short gasps, the front and side of his tunic red with blood. At least he was still standing, still here right beside me. He had *not* fallen down that abyss and he had *not* been killed by that aevis. He was still here, injured indeed, but very much alive and breathing and in no immediate danger of dying. My vision blurred. I went to him and weakly pounded my fist against his chest once, then pressing my forehead against him. He was shaking.

„All Twelve damn you, Foulques.“

He stepped back and flinched, probably out of surprise, since I took care not to hurt him, but it was all too much for me. This could've so easily went wrong, one or both or all three of us could've died if just one more thing had gone wrong. If he hadn't managed to shake off his fear, or if he hadn't found the lance in time, or not at all, or if mine had gotten broken, or if I'd made just another mistake... and not only that, obviously Foulques had some perverse attraction for almost falling down cliffs. It had been so damn close *again*.

Not caring about anything anymore I dropped my lance, took the one step forward that he had retreated and wound my arms around him, hugging him to me fiercely. I expected him to push me away immediately, but he didn't. He only grunted and I loosened my hug a bit to not hurt him further, but I refused to let go. I closed my eyes and pressed my face to his chest, hearing his labored breath and feeling the warmth of his body through his too thin tunic. I just noticed now that he must have lost the cloak at some point, but I could care less right this instant. He smelled of sweat and fear and he was shaking badly, but I didn't care. On the contrary, I even welcomed it. It meant he was still alive. What was, however, very unpleasant, was that he needed to be healed again. I cursed inwardly that I couldn't make Kweh heal people other than me yet. I let out a shaking breath.

„I told you it was a bad idea. Now you're hurt again.“

I felt him shrug stiffly, and his voice was as low as my own.

„It'll heal by itself. At least if we're going to return to somewhere warm anytime soon.“

I pressed my lips into a thin line and tightened my hold around him a little, not yet wanting to lose the comfort of hearing his beating heart, of feeling his body heat within my grasp. Again I was surprised that he hadn't made a move to free himself yet. I've always knew him as someone who carefully kept his distance from people, physically as well as mentally. I'd thought that in that regard, we were very alike. Then again, I took comfort from being so close to him right now, so maybe he was feeling something similar. He had been pretty scared as well before, and rightly so. Facing off such creatures without a weapon or armor of any kind was-

I felt an awkward, feathery pat on my wet hair. The snow had been getting stronger, but not enough to drench us right away.

„Come on, let's go. I'm not feeling like freezing half to death again just yet.“

I forced myself to release him and looked around for the cloak. It was lying crumpled in the snow not far from us, but since it was full of aevis blood and torn on top of that I decided to just leave it there. I didn't need a reminder of what had happened here.

Due to Foulques' injuries we decided to walk back to the camp instead of running, although neither him nor I mentioned it. I'd offered to let him ride on Kweh, but he had just answered with a glare.

We walked a while in silence. I was feeling kind of blank after that fight, and it certainly wasn't helping that the cold settled into my bones whenever I was leaving the direct vicinity of a fire.

„I hope we'll find a heale-“

„Don't even think about it. I will not stay here any longer.“

Our eyes had been on the path before us, but now I was watching him, worried.

„You did mention that before... but you also said you might be willing to stay with me for a while.“

„I might. But whatever happens, I won't stay another night in this cold and around so many people.“

„Which means I'll have to leave as well if I don't want to lose sight of you right away.“

He glanced at me and nodded. I returned my eyes to the path, but not actually seeing much of it. So he wouldn't even take the time to let himself get healed. He'd just need to pick up his armor from the merchant and do something about the borrowed

clothes that got pretty torn up and bloody. That would probably leave me until evening to seek out Lord Haurchefant. I'd promised to visit him for a proper goodbye, after all.

The good thing about leaving soon was that I could resume work earlier than I'd thought. At least if Foulques had no other plans.

„You wouldn't mind if we returned to Gridania, wouldn't you?“

Again, he shot me a glance.

„I would if you mean the city itself.“

„What do you mean?“

He looked at me as if I was an idiot.

„I'm certainly not inclined to enter the city if I can help it. That applies to every city, but Gridania especially. I'd just stay outside somewhere.“

„Where *did* you stay all this time, actually? You'd been in Gridania a few times since I'd joined the guild, but in between your visits you vanished completely.“

He shrugged and didn't seem too interested in this topic, watching the snowy, boring landscape.

„I do have a few places to stay.“

He probably was comfortable living in the wilderness, even if it meant almost no comfort at all and a more or less constant threat of being attacked by wild animals. From what he told me before I'd gathered that he most likely had been living in Gridania before he got into jail... but actually, that didn't necessarily need to be true. Only because he had been a member of the guild didn't automatically mean he had had to be located within the city. That was, actually, one of the many things I wanted to learn about him. How his life had been before his jail time, and how it had been during and after, as well. I knew next to nothing about him.

„Would you mind staying in a private room?“

He gave me a strange look. A little dark, a little confused and also a little wary. Another thing that always kept me wondering.

He didn't reply to that, but I kept looking at him waiting for an answer, so after a while he sighed.

„If it wasn't for an extended period of time.“

I noticed the path in front of us got more prominent. We were almost back at the camp. It took me a few moments to speak.

„So... we could return to Gridania, and you could stay at my room for as long as you're healing.“

I didn't phrase it as one, but it was actually a question. I'd feel better if I knew he was safe and could get enough rest and proper food. But I wasn't sure he'd even think about such an offer. He'd probably feel hemmed in very soon if I kept this up. I chewed my lip and watched the gate of the camp approach.

Again, Foulques didn't reply and I couldn't bear the suspense for long. When I met his eyes he looked taken aback. I stared at him. He couldn't honestly be surprised by this offer, could he? If my 'motherhenning', as he had called it, was any indication he must've seen this coming. Sometimes I had no idea what went on inside his head.

I kept silent and waited, but when we reached the camp he still hadn't given me an answer. Should I take that as a refusal? Not yet, I decided. We still had until evening or so, and then all the way back to Gridania and that was maybe enough time to think it over. And well, even if he did refuse, he had implied that he wouldn't vanish from my sight right away. So probably he wouldn't.

„Do you have any gil on you right now?“

„Huh? I do, why?“

„Would you mind lending some to me? I'd like to see how far the merchant got with my things. I'll come back to the barracks in a bit when I'm done.“

„Uh, sure...“

Actually I hesitated out of that stupid, nagging fear that he'd just disappear, but I pulled myself together before it became apparent in my movements. The merchant most likely wasn't even done yet, even considering Foulques' changed order from the morning.

A little later I blinked at him in shock, setting down the two cups of hot wine that I'd fetched at the tavern to warm us up. And maybe help me unwind from all that had happened in the last few suns. Unwinding seemed to be some far away concept, though.

„What? But he said it'd still take about a sun to repair.“

„It would have, if I'd let him. Instead, I used the gil you gave me to pay him for what he had already managed to do, and paid the guy that lent me his clothes with the rest of it. He wasn't exactly happy about it, but he seemed fairly content with the compensation.“

Well, he should be, since that was nearly everything I'd been carrying. But more importantly, Foulques had finished all of his preparations to leave in under a quarter

bell. He was ready to leave right away. I, on the other hand, still hadn't spoken to Lord Haurchefant or done anything else in preparation to leave.

„I... I thought this would all take until evening. I still need to visit Lord Haurchefant before we leave. I promised him.“

„Then, well, just get it over with.“

I sighed and took a seat in my chair from the previous night, suddenly feeling even more exhausted. I'd hoped to get a chance to rest a little more before we had to move again, but apparently that wasn't an option anymore. Not if I wanted to make sure he didn't leave without me.

I clasped my hands around the hot cup, feeling the warmth slowly seeping into my cold fingers.

„I will. Let's just take a moment to finish these. I need it.“

Foulques didn't object, but he didn't seem too happy about the delay either. At least he didn't rush and force me to break my promise.

It was silent for some time save for our occasional sips, and I idly wondered that the barracks were so empty. Maybe I didn't want to think about the reason why too much. Either way, it felt wonderful to get warm again, to feel the tingling of warmth spread through my body again. But then I remembered something.

“You know, I've been meaning to ask.”

Foulques returned my look kind of wary, but said nothing to prevent my question.

“What happened in the Steel Vigil? I mean, what were you doing here in Coerthas of all places? You don't even like it here, so I'm assuming you're not on vacation or something.”

His lips twitched as if he wanted to smile, but at the same time his eyes darkened. Then he stared into his cup, indicating a shrug.

“Nothing of your concern, but I do have my reasons.”

Of course he wouldn't tell me right away. It didn't really surprise me, so I tried again.

“I was told there was a fight with dragons going on up there. I can't for the life of me imagine a reason why you would join in on something like that.”

He shrugged again and still refused to look at me.

“I didn't mean to. It was an accident.”

An accident? I pondered that, still watching his tense face. If him joining this fight was

an accident, it meant that he had been there because of something else. I remembered his words about the two nasty aevis before... did he chose those as opponents to test himself and grow his skills? But there was no reason to come all the way to Coerthas for something like that. The rest of Eorzea was full of comparable monsters if you looked in the right places. There had to be something else.

He interrupted my musings by setting down his empty cup audibly on the table.

“Come on, let's get going already.”

I sighed and gulped down the rest of my own wine. It looked like I had to try some other time to get it out of him. At least I'd gotten warmer.

Lord Haurchefant motioned me to the side of his massive chair. I left my place in front of him, where the table was between us. Foulques was waiting in front of and a little bit away from the table, still looking rather grim.

„That's a shame, honestly, but you've always been a busy person.”

He let out a sigh, but smiled at me as he held out a medium-sized packet for me. I blinked at him questioningly and he grinned. He needed to look up only slightly from his seated position.

„This is just a little something to keep you nice and fed on your way. I've had it made especially for you, so I'm glad it was finished in time. Take care, my friend. Please remember that I'm here in case you need anything. And even if not, I'm always happy to see your face. If you can, come visit me.”

I mirrored his warm smile and thanked him in a touched and quiet voice. I wished I had something to give him in turn, but it seemed like that would have to wait until my next visit. I nodded.

„I will. And I'll see to it that I can honor my other promise as well.”

Lord Haurchefant's smile got wider. „That would be lovely. I'm looking forward to it.”

I accepted the packet with another thanks and went back to Foulques' side.

„May Halone be with you, my friend.”

I smiled at him, wishing him the same.