

Cracking the Shell

Von elektroyu

Kapitel 15: 13 & 14 - Rhaya POV

There he was. Finally.

That was our chance. Maybe the only one we'd ever get.

I wasn't ready for this.

It was wrong. I didn't want to kill. Not Khuma'zi, not anybody else, except the Duskwight, of course. Not just because I was a conjurer, but killing just wasn't what I did. But what else could we do? This sweet revenge, now almost here in our grasp, was the only thing that promised to ease the pain of losing Silvaire, if only a little. Him, the center of our lives. Him, the kindest, strongest, most perfect being that, for whatever reason, chose to be with us instead of all the possibilities he'd had open to him. Our own personal hero.

But no. I couldn't think of him now. There was something I needed to do.

I kept myself hidden behind a tree as Khuma'zi approached. His slowing, barely audible footsteps talked loudly about the surprise at finding our group here.

I wasn't ready for this.

With closed eyes I listened. Kimison speaking to him, asking him to mind his own business and save his own life, and for a moment there was that little spark of hope that he'd be reasonable and actually keep himself out of our vendetta. He didn't belong here. He didn't belong between us and our goal. He should be somewhere else, far away from the sharp tips of our lances.

But of course he wouldn't. How was it so hard for him to understand that we needed to fulfill this task before we could move on? It was truly baffling. Some rumours told he himself may not be entirely innocent of killing bad people, although I wasn't sure how credible those were. Clearly, he was a very skilled lancer, but from how he goes on and on about not killing anyone I wanted to doubt his ability to even go that far. But if it was true? What was the difference to him to what we were doing?

With a silent, deep breath I stepped forward, taking measured steps while steeling myself for what was to come.

Just confronting him would be difficult enough, but he'd likely continue to be so ridiculously stubborn about this that we wouldn't be able to let him go. It was a shame. He was a good guy. He should live.

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

His head shot around to me, his face instantly green, then completely gray with shock. I could see how his mind unsuccessfully worked to put together what was happening, how it desperately tried to fit all these puzzle pieces into one picture. How it failed over and over again. It broke my heart. How could he not understand this?

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

The confusion in his eyes just grew. His lips twitched as if he wanted to answer, but not a single syllable found the way out of his head. Seeing him like this was painful. It wasn't right. He should just go home and continue to go on his adventures happily and safely away from us. I would give him another chance.

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

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

Ahh... that hurt. So much pain, so much disbelief in this breathless whisper. It couldn't be. Had he really not suspected the littlest thing in all these suns? Even though I certainly messed up my act multiple times? He really bought everything?

Then again, I indeed never told him what had happened when the Duskwight stole the light of our lives. He probably deserved to know. Maybe it would finally make him understand.

I inhaled deeply, trying to steady my voice. Still, my words didn't come out much louder than his before. It was all I could manage.

"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."

Finally some hint of understanding in his eyes. But there was no *real* understanding. It wasn't enough.

I didn't want to tell him *again*, much less tell him myself, but he still looked so stunned that I wasn't sure if he was even capable of properly processing words right now.

"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."

This should be clear enough for him, at least I hoped so. His mind took a while to form a reply, his tailtip rapidly swishing from side to side, and all the while he still showed no sign of backing out.

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

I could feel my composure cracking at his stupid, stupid stubbornness that would get him killed so needlessly, but Kimison saved me from having to deal with it any further.

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

Yes. Listen to him.

But my friends got ready and my heart turned to ice, pumping only coldness through my body until everything was numb. It would happen. Somehow I regained control over my face. The coldness probably helped.

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

Yes, please just run away and never look back. *You* don't need to lose your life.

"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!"

No. It would happen.

I couldn't find my breath, and I couldn't tell my heartbeats apart, either. This was a nightmare. But there was nothing else we could do. He was in the wrong place at the wrong time and he didn't want to listen. There just was no other option.

My hands shook, even when I tried to still them by firmly wrapping my fingers around the the polished shaft of my staff. The sensation of the old wood wasn't comforting me like usual; a very weird and unexpected feeling. It was wrong. But the only thing we could do.

I couldn't watch, and I *didn't* watch too closely. Instead, I concentrated on the aether of my friends, healing them whenever they sustained any sort of injury. But there was hardly anything at all to heal. It was pathetic. Did he just want to get stabbed to death without even defending himself? Did he really want to die here? Protecting a murderer who also would be dead soon? Surely he was more than aware of it by now, it was simply impossible that he was not. Even if he was stupid, he wasn't that stupid.

It was so wrong. Wrong, wrong, wrong.

I tried not to listen to the sounds of metal crashing on metal and other, softer things, tried my best to keep my mind focused on the too-healthy aether of my friends and keep them in pristine condition. It would be over soon. Even if I could tell that they, too, were struggling with what they had to do... but they were making progress. It would be over soon, and then we could have our revenge, and by that some part of our lives back.

A small thud amidst the sounds made me jump in the worst way, turning my blood even colder and freezing my too fast heartbeat. I couldn't help but look, reluctantly, not daring to breathe. Khuma'zi was down on one knee, helpless, Kimison over him preparing to strike him down. Wrong, all wrong. I wanted to shout, scream to him to stop, or stop time myself, but it happened all too fast. A strange movement from behind Thaisie and at the same time Kimison was rapidly falling, moving in the other, the wrong direction from just right before, with such force that I feared his head would shatter upon impacting the ground. I couldn't even follow what had just happened, nor understand what I was seeing.

But then I did.

Everything slowed down to an eerily crisp pace, forcing me to experience it all in excruciating detail.

He was approaching, the Duskwight. I could hear every dry leaf under his soles crunching. Could see the worn, but well kept appearance of his armor, only strangely marred by a couple of small green leaves that were still falling off of him. One was stuck in the hair behind his ear. His empty gloved hands swinging slowly in time with his steps, weirdly relaxed and still already deadly. I could see the muscles in his face move to form a grotesque smile that would haunt me for the rest of my life. His mouth moved with some words, but I didn't hear any of them. The bloodlust suffocated me even from afar. He was a demon.

In this moment, everything turned.

Everyone stopped moving. My ears were ringing, the sound momentarily overriding any other sounds.

Why was the Duskwight here?

I forced air into my aching lungs.

How did he know? Or *did* he know? Was this just some sick turn of fate, that he was *now*, right as we were about to reach our first goal, stealing our single chance of making piece with what he himself had done to us?

No.

No, that couldn't be coincidence. We had planned this well in advance. No one would've talked about it to an outsider. Maybe Khuma'zi could have informed him where he was going, but for some reason that didn't feel true.

Maybe he had overheard somehow, but, granted, this was unlikely. The conversation with Khuma'zi had taken place near the aetheryte plaza in Gridania, there had been way too much noise to overhear our quiet chat. Or...

The image I had stuck in my head instead pictured him secretly trailing Khuma'zi, for whatever reason. Something like that would suit the sick bastard. The amount of

Khuma'zi's puzzlement seemed to support that he indeed hadn't been expecting him here.

But he was here, and it changed everything.

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

Time instantly moved normally again. The mocking tone of his words and the way he casually pulled his lance from Kimison filled me with instant anger and disgust. That he could kill so easily, so carelessly and on top of it had the audacity to ridicule us for it! As if he hadn't crushed our lives enough already! He destroyed and destroyed and destroyed even more. He needed to be stopped. *We* needed to stop him! And we would do it, no matter the sacrifices!

Kimison, however, wouldn't be a sacrifice today, nor anybody else of our group. That I swore to all the heavens and hells that were listening.

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

For a split second I fought the urge to do something about Khuma'zi's messed up aether. It was calling to me so strongly that I almost healed him out of habit. But Kimison's volatilizing aether demanded my immediate attention. I needed to act before it would leave his body entirely.

For a moment I closed my eyes to channel all my rage and put it aside, concentrating hard on getting a firm grip on Kimison's soul to direct it safely back into his body.

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

Ignore the words. Focus.

Then I set right Kimison's damaged heart and lung, alongside all the muscles and tendons and bones and all other tissue until I couldn't detect any damage anymore and every drop of blood was back where it belonged.

As my work was finished my anger swiftly trickled back into me.

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

It came back whooshing. How dare he make a game out of this-

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

Khuma'zi's quiet, pained gasp brought his aether back to my attention. It still tugged. Annoyed I squeezed my fingers around my staff and ignored it.

"Just listen to me! All of you! Kimison. Voyce. Rhaya."

He struggled to force my name out of his mouth, it was so obvious the others surely noticed as well. It hurt to acknowledge what it meant. But I tried to ignore that, too. I

had to think of a way to turn the tables around again.

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

Everyone stood still. No one knew what to do, including me, and of course Khuma'zi tried to use it to his advantage. Tried to still talk us out of our plan, but it wouldn't-

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

It was like being hit by a brick wall out of nowhere. Images of what I lost, what I once had, broke free from their carefully maintained prison inside me and clawed their way out. I couldn't do a thing to prevent it, it was too unexpected. Pain exploded. Memories washed over me and swept my feet away from under me... I was drowning. The ringing in my ears returned. My heart bled over me like whitewater, dyeing everything red, taking all my anger and resolve away with it. Only the pain remained and suffocated me all over again. I had to make an effort to breathe again.

Without all the resentment blocking my mind a quiet thought managed to enter.

What if, maybe... maybe it wasn't such a bad idea?

Like Khuma'zi, the Duskwight probably didn't even know what precisely drove us to such measures. He probably never thought about the consequences of his actions beyond his own concerns. And even if he did, maybe his imagination wasn't creative enough to come up with this level of devastation.

He simply didn't know. Probably.

The atmosphere around me shifted and I became awarer of my surroundings. Inhaling shakily I made up my mind. I needed to speak. Now, before it was too late.

"He was my fiance. "

I tried to form my words without allowing the memories to drown me again. Somehow they needed to go back to their prison.

"His name was Silvoire 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"

The pictures wouldn't go back to where they should go. His brilliant, yet soft smile. The warm touch of his palm in my hand. Beautiful light green eyes full of love and wonder... My inside continued to break apart piece by piece, leaving me raw and vulnerable and barely able to speak.

"Ready for the burden we'd have to bear for the rest of our lives. The wedding was just a couple more suns away."

It all had been set and ready, clothes waiting, guests invited, carefully picked out

menu and gifts for the guests, everything. We had been apart for a while due to work, but that hadn't stopped us from preparing from where we were at the time. We'd been planning to meet in Gridania the day before the wedding. The tears finally broke free, running down my cheeks unabated. I felt like my love for him would just kill me. It had nowhere to go anymore.

But there was more I needed to tell. He needed to know it all.

"I would have raised him, but-"

Wiping away the tears did nothing. More and more of them spilled out, there was no way of containing them anymore. Still, I somehow had to finish this. Even if the words didn't come out very clearly anymore.

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

I tried to keep the images away, but they wouldn't be stopped. How he laid there unmoving, unresponsive. Changed. His soul had still been there when I arrived, right there beside him. It had been intact still and desperately wanted to return to his body. But it couldn't. Not on it's own and not with my help. No matter what I tried or how often I tried, his body had been sealed forever by whatever the Duskwight had done to him. I had to leave him like that, the others too, horribly split apart from their bodies for all times. All they could do was send the souls back into the lifestream, or so I remember. They'd removed me from the scene before they started. Everything after that was hazy, except for the crippling pain.

I didn't want to see all that again, nor feel the despair of that day, that moment, of having the skill available to raise him and even his soul waiting right there, but *still* unable to do anything about it. Unable to save him. Unable to preserve his light for this world as it was meant to be.

I desperately tried to keep myself from going to pieces, I didn't know how I would be able to pull myself together again if I did. These memories weren't supposed to be out in the open, wreaking havoc on my body and soul like that. They needed to go down into their prison again and stay there, safely in check.

Distantly I could feel a soft, awkward touch on my shoulders. I couldn't see him, as my face was buried in my hands and my eyes useless anyway with all the tears, but it was Voyage's aether. And I could now hear his voice as well, and feel it softly vibrating through his chest. That was what I latched on to to anchor me. Don't listen to the words. Just feel the vibration of his voice and the movement of his chest as he breathed. Still, the memories were strong. They were trying to make me think of Silvaire's arms around me, but his touch had always been secure and confident, even as he was being careful and ever mindful of what I wanted. Voyage didn't have that, he felt very different. I was sorry I worried him so much, that he had to see me like this again, but also glad for his support. He did what he could. He always did, even though he was probably not even knowing if there was anything he *could* do. He was shaking a little, too. Don't dwell on why. Just lock up the memories first.

I don't know how long I tried, but at some point I noticed my surroundings again. A tentative attempt to consciously shift my focus beyond Voyce – and me not immediately breaking apart again – confirmed that I mostly had regained my composure. The memories seemed to have let themselves be imprisoned again, grudgingly. At least for now. I hoped.

It mildly surprised me to find Laurence standing near us. Maybe in such a dangerous situation he did feel better near Voyce. Or me, their healer. I hoped-

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

Kimison spoke, but I tuned out his words for fear of my makeshift prison crumbling again. Instead, I shifted my attention to the surrounded duo in front of us.

Khuma'zi was pale and honestly looked like he'd pass out any moment. His aether still desperately tried to get my attention, but I couldn't afford to give in.

So the Duskwight. Now that I'd laid my broken heart open before him – and the others seemed to have done the same – I needed to face him anyway. What would he do with this new knowledge? Assuming it was indeed new to him.

He had his face turned to Kimison, but the rest of him vaguely was facing my direction. He looked kind of tense, in a weird way, but didn't appear to want to speak. Then he slowly turned back and belatedly, first seeing more through me than anything else, his eyes focused on me. And as our eyes met I understood that it wasn't that he didn't want to speak. He couldn't. I wasn't sure where the clarity came from with which I suddenly knew this, but I somehow could see what his expression meant. Maybe because I knew that he now knew.

He was thoroughly stunned. He was still processing and trying to grasp just how far the scope of his actions had extended. And something else became clear, too. For a reason unknown to me he had allowed himself to be directed by Khuma'zi's words. He had accepted his lead and somehow, to an extent, was willing to see things from his perspective. Or was willing to try, at least.

There was something about that... I remembered the green leaves on him when he arrived. Right when Khuma'zi was about to get-

Yes, indeed. He was protecting him. Likely had followed him through the trees. Probably had even listened from the start, possibly hadn't planned to even reveal his presence at all. But how upset the prospect of Khuma'zi getting killed had made him. The incredible bloodlust. Yet as Khuma'zi was out of immediate danger he'd promptly been remarkably calm again. He could have killed us all, but instead he'd listened to our stories, just upon Khuma'zi's request, just like that. Clearly, Khuma'zi meant something to him.

Which meant-

"Nothing, eh? Thought as much."

Kimison's bitter snort jolted me from my thoughts like a bucket of icy water. Before anyone could lift a finger they were fighting again, clash after clash, fiercely.

"No! Stop it, Kimison!"

He didn't even hear me. He was completely focused on the Duskwight. Thankfully no one else made a move to join, but those few seconds it took my spell to built up just dragged on and on. Hurry up already!

Finally, Kimison's movements stopped and gods, please, don't let that be a mistake. The Duskwight's lance came dangerously close to his throat and my heart almost gave out. But the lance stopped right before piercing his skin and Kimison slumped to the ground with just a scratch.

I breathed. As I lowered my staff all of their questioning eyes weighed on me. Quickly I cleaned my tear-stained face with my sleeve and stood up.

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

Various amounts of confusion and doubt flickered over the faces of my friends, but I was glad to see Voyce already tending to the sleeping Kimison, silently urging Thaisie to take his lance before gently pulling him half up onto his lap. There wasn't a lot of time left before he'd wake up to go wild again, so I pulled myself together and addressed the Duskwight directly.

"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."

Just the thought of how casually he had sacrificed Kimison before made me clench my teeth hard. To ease myself I looked away from him, just to meet Khuma'zi's pale and stunned face instead, which abruptly called his poor condition back to my mind. I winced, quickly returning my attention to the Duskwight again.

"But I can see that our words reached you, and that you're protecting him, so he has to mean something to you."

From the corner of my vision I could see the faces around me get sterner, graver. Maybe they could tell where I was going with this. I wouldn't help spreading more violence today. Not anymore than I already had.

The Duskwight had the same grim expression, but the demonic bloodlust from before had entirely vanished.

"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."

His eyes narrowed, gripping tight his lance, but thankfully he didn't impale me with it, nor did he make any other move to hurt anyone. Beside him, I could still feel Khuma'zi's aether slowly trickling out of his body, which was maddening now that the immediate threat seemed to be gone. To prevent myself from giving in to the urge to heal despite of what I'd just announced I ground my teeth hard and turned to leave. I'd said everything that I'd needed to say and I couldn't bear to stay any longer.

I didn't want to see him die. I didn't want him to die in the first place, even though that potentially could teach a lesson to that Duskwight. But I couldn't be the one to save him. Not now, not here. All I could do was silently pray to all gods who would listen to have mercy on him. And on us.

Behind me, I could hear Voyce and Nantain quietly carrying Kimison along as the others followed reluctantly. Maybe they'd hate me for what I did. Maybe they'd try again later, without me. Kimison for sure wouldn't be happy about how things had turned out. But Khuma'zi's words still rang true inside me. *Who would die next?* I couldn't do it anymore.

Wiping away fresh tears I walked on briskly, away from those two, away from that horrible afternoon. Away from what easily could have ended up as the worst mistake of my life. And also away from the painful, threatening memories down in their makeshift prison. They weren't happy to be locked up again.

The light was beginning to turn darker, toning the forest around us in a soft yellow glow that was distinctly at odds with my mood. My heart was all drenched in sticky, red gloom.

"Rhaya. Wasn't he supposed to wake up?"

My ears turned back at the faint whisper. I felt a surge of gratitude towards Voyce, mixed with a pang of conscience. He was always looking out for each of us, no matter what. Likely having a good idea what was going on inside me he'd made sure to give me a chance to easily ignore his soft call. Some part of me did indeed want to shut out everything. But instead, I turned around to look at Kimison, still fast asleep between Voyce and an unhappy looking Nantain. A measure of concern creased my brows.

"Normally, yes."

His aether was good and healthy, though, so he wasn't in danger. Most likely...

"It's probably because of the raise. Let's get him home quickly and get him some thorough rest."

It didn't take much longer to arrive at his apartment in Gridania. I was grateful I'd managed to get my tears under control by that time, even though I still felt raw and exposed. And I was relieved Kimison would wake up out of the public eye.

After they'd lowered him to his bed Nantain left with Thaisie in tow. Neither had said a word the entire time, which was worrying me. Maybe I could talk to them later,

when each of us was better rested with a clearer head. Laurence quietly waited by the door, avoiding everyone's eyes. It was probably best to leave him to Voyce, he didn't exactly seem eager to talk to me right now.

Voyce was just finishing to put a blanket over Kimison when he addressed me.

"Do you want to get some rest, too? I can watch over him if you like."

I managed a smile for him. An exhausted one. The idea of resting was enticing, in theory. In practice, however?

"I don't think it's a good idea just yet if I'm alone with myself. But thank you."

I was afraid what would happen to my makeshift prison if I had too much time to myself now. It didn't feel very sturdy, and the memories were strong.

Voyce looked concerned. "He'll be really angry, I think. Maybe it's better for him to cool off before he gets all into your face about it."

I sighed, pulling out a chair from the table. "Maybe you're right. But in the end, I'll need to face him anyway. And it's Kimison we're talking about. He's not going to cool off very soon."

Voyce let himself plop onto the chair next to me with a gloomy sigh of his own.

"Yeah... "