

Cracking the Shell

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Inhaltsverzeichnis

Kapitel 1: Lost	2
Kapitel 2: First Hints	6
Kapitel 3: Steel Vigil I	12
Kapitel 4: Conjurer	18
Kapitel 5: Stick to Me	24
Kapitel 6: Dangerous	30
Kapitel 7: Aevis	35
Kapitel 8: Courage	39
Kapitel 9: Jail	46
Kapitel 10: Cillien	54
Kapitel 11: Rhaya's Squirrel	65
Kapitel 12: Face-Off	71
Kapitel 13: Friends, Family & Lovers	80
Kapitel 14: If He Dies	86
Kapitel 15: 13 & 14 - Rhaya POV	91
Kapitel 16: Going Home	102
Kapitel 17: Khuma	108

Kapitel 1: Lost

He edged away from me, a look of pure terror in his eyes. "Noooo! Come no closer!"

I froze, but only for a moment. He was so close to the cliff that another step would send him over the edge. My heart picked up even more speed and I wanted to tell him to get away from the cliff, but my mouth wouldn't work.

Slowly I lowered my lance, ignoring the numerous protesting cuts all over my body. The movement triggered Foulques to back away further and I threw all caution to the wind. I wouldn't make the same mistake with him again. Letting go of the lance I sprinted towards him as fast as I could. His foot slipped.

The terror in his eyes mirrored the one I felt blazing through my entire body.

NO!

For a moment he stood off balance right at the edge, his arms wildly ruddering. I was still running to him, but it felt like I wasn't moving forward at all. He still held on to his lance, our eyes were still locked, mutually mirroring the terror we both felt.

He was losing his balance and was falling away from me, comprehension and a wordless plea in his eyes. I thought I was going to fall right with him. I thought my heart was going to stop.

Not him. I couldn't lose him. Not now, not here, and certainly not to this stupid cliff!

I felt his wrist in my grip and threw myself to the ground, whirling around with all the strength I could muster. I was small for a male Miquote and being an Elezen Foulques was significantly taller than I was. It shouldn't be possible, but somehow I managed to tumble us both back on safe ground.

I landed halfway on top of him, but neither of us moved for a while. It was silent save for our panicked pants. I was shaking so much that I couldn't move a finger, and I could hear his frenzied heartbeat even from under his armor. My eyes were still wide, unable to focus on anything. But I was so glad, so incredibly thankful that I could feel his breathing, warm body under me that I almost broke out in tears. Maybe that also had something to do with not being able to move.

After a while I was calming down a little. The shaking lessened, and I managed to swallow.

I pulled myself up from his chest and roughly grabbed him by the collar. I pushed him back into the ground with all my might, not giving a single care about the injuries I had dealt him earlier.

"YOU IDIOT!! You almost got yourself killed!"

His blank stare moved from the sky to my face, but aside from that he didn't react. Again I pushed him.

"Be a little more careful next time, okay?! I'm not going to lose you to something so random and meaningless as a damned cliff!"
Something blocked my throat, so the words came out a little choked, and my voice broke at some point.

Foulques' stare became more focused and slightly confused, then he shot up and roughly pushed me away from him. Being caught off guard I landed on my side while he backed up a few steps. His hot stare bore into me. Absentmindedly I got into a sitting position. I was too absorbed by his apparent mistrust to move any further. He was not seriously afraid of me, was he? I returned his stare in shock. The terror from before was mostly gone from his eyes, but I could see wariness and anger. A lot of them.

"What are you talking about? You were about to finish me off, what difference does it make to you if I fall off a cliff? Did you so desperately want to kill me with your own hands?!"

I still stared at him, sitting on the ground. It took me a bit to find my tongue. It came out more aggressively than I wanted it to.

"I never intended to hurt you! But you didn't give me a choice, coming at me like that! You didn't even listen to anything I'd said to you. I told you before I didn't want to fight you!"

Anger welled up in me while I talked. I stood, hands balled into fists, and glared at him.

"You were so absorbed in your own world that everything else was just wiped off of your mind! Does your life mean nothing to you? Do you really think I wouldn't care if you died?!"

Foulques moved back another step, but his answering glare was still impressive. Nonetheless, he seemed unsure underneath the anger. After a moment he found a reply.

"Words! What do your petty words mean to me? You're just as much a liar as everyone else in the Lancer Guild!"

Again, I stared at him wordlessly. My anger left me as soon as it had come. His words struck me, but I didn't know how to reply without alienating him further. This was going to be tough.

His gaze quickly darted to his lance that was still lying behind me, close to the cliff. I waited a moment, but he didn't move to retrieve it.

I dropped my eyes to his feet for a moment, then went back to retrieve the lances. It

hurt that he was so obviously afraid of me. I wasn't armed, he could have just picked it up himself. Then again, in his mind he had just gotten away from deaths door twice in rapid succession. That had to leave a mark. And well, he's had trust issues before all that. I shouldn't be surprised.

I anticipated the wary look when I turned around, "armed" with two lances. His tension was almost tangible, but at least he didn't back up any further when I approached him.

I offered his lance to him, but when he took it I kept my grip on it. His eyes challenged me, but I felt mostly calm, if a little defeated. Confusion mixed itself in his gaze upon realizing my lack of aggression.

"... what are you going to do now?" My voice was quiet and calm, almost sheepish.

"What's it to you?"

I dropped my gaze, but found his eyes again as I spoke.

"I don't want to part ways. Will you not stay, so we can sort this all out?"

"There's nothing there to sort out. I'm going to do what I will, and you're staying with your cowardly friends of the guild. End of story."

He tugged at the lance, but I wasn't finished yet. His words sparked some anger in me again. I met his eyes firmly.

"Yes, I'm staying in the guild, and why shouldn't I? I'm not saying they're without fail, but overall those are good people. And I think you could come to see that, as well. These are not the same people that let you alone pay for your joint misdeed. Also, I'm sure you could be an even better lancer than you already are if you'd learn to not block yourself so much."

He looked at me darkly and took a breath to reply, but I continued my speech.

"Just give me a chance, Foulques. I really do like you, despite of what you did, and despite of what you may think of me. And I highly respect your skills with the lance. I honestly want to take your earlier offer of friendship, even if I probably can't agree to your concept of courage. And... I honestly regret that I didn't come after you after the incident in the Bramble Patch. I did want to and I should have trusted my feelings on that instead of listening to Ywain. I'm truly sorry I didn't realize it in time."

He was silent and returned my pleading look sternly. I was almost convinced that I got through to him, but then he tugged his lance free from my grip and turned to leave.

"Please, Foulques. Stay."

He didn't even turn back. I ran after him, grabbing him by the elbow. He hissed at me at the unexpected contact, but I just threw my questions at him.

"Will you be back? We'll meet again, will we?"

His eyes darkened and he freed himself from my grip, but he didn't give an answer. Instead, after another long, dark look, he left me standing there. My hand fell to my side.

Well, that was clear enough. I felt my shoulders sag and my heart and legs going heavy as I watched him go.

The image of the look in his eyes when he realized he was going to fall assaulted me. I was never going to forget that. Especially if I had to lose him to his fears this time.

I took my time going back to the guild to report to Ywain. His dismissive reaction angered me despite my concern for both the injured guild members as well as the ones that lost their friends to Foulques. I swallowed my anger back, though. It wouldn't do any good to lash out at anyone else. And besides, Ywain probably had more pressing matters to attend to than a certain Duskwight rogue lancer. He had repeatedly told me to just forget Foulques. But at the same time he had sent me after him whenever he'd appeared. Intended to or not, he had made Foulques my responsibility, and I was going to take care of it.

At least, I hoped there still was something to take care of.

After checking in on the wounded lancers and trying my best to help arranging burials for the dead, I first stopped by my room to grab a potion. The injuries I had suffered in that fight with Foulques weren't life threatening, but annoying enough to endure the nasty pulling that always accompanied a potion's healing. Once that was done I went into the woods to clear my head and do some farming for as long as my body would let me. The labor always helped keeping unwanted thoughts away, and it wouldn't hurt to gather some additional things for Qiah to sell.

This night I didn't return to my guest room in Gridania, though. I slept outside, far away from people and surrounded only by the comforting sounds of the forest.

Kapitel 2: First Hints

The moons went by. I ran all sorts of errands for all sorts of people all over Eorzea, but some errands I ended up running for myself, as well. Such as assisting Ywain's friend Ser Alberic in an important task that, as he said, needed to be dealt with very discreetly so as to not upset all of Ishgard should it come to light. It was about recovering an invaluable Ishgardian relic, called the 'Eye', which had been stolen by a rogue dragoon by the name of Estinien. After my first encounter with said dragoon I learned that he was not just any dragoon, but 'the one chosen by the Eye', the Azure Dragoon. Upon meeting Estinien I was reminded of Foulques more than I cared to admit, but he was even more standoff-ish and aloof and not even his fairly pleasant, deep voice was able to warm my feelings towards him very much. He proved to be downright rude on our first encounter, something that Foulques had hardly managed at his worst. Still, there was something about him that made me hesitant to judge his personality purely on those first encounters. There seemed more to him than just the displayed rudeness, I just wasn't sure if it was something better or worse. So it wasn't that I immediately disliked him, I simply wasn't sure how to feel about him. Never being able to get a glimpse under his armet didn't help that at all.

Additionally, I wasn't sure I wanted to deal with another rogue lancer that simply took matters into his own hands, but something else made me accept the request without any further brooding. Ser Alberic and Estinien himself were convinced that, despite it being completely unprecedented, the Eye had chosen a second Azure Dragoon in me. And I could feel the truth of it resonating through my entire being, a new strength completely different from what I knew to this point, but at the same time it felt just... right. Like that was where it belonged. Where I belonged. The sheer potential of it was incredible, and although I could sense a certain danger or... pull from this new strength, it was faint enough to be mostly ignored. And thus Ser Alberic, a former Azure Dragoon himself, had started to train me as a dragoon. For him, it was most likely a means to deal with Estinien's actions in the first place, but for me it was incredibly fulfilling to continue my path as a lancer much further and deeper than what I was able to learn before. I felt myself getting so much more powerful and skilled, and I was looking forward to every new lesson. At times, I wondered if Foulques would enjoy the training as much as I did, if not more.

During my frequent travels I noticed that people were beginning to entrust more and more important things to me. It was both flattering and unnerving to see them starting to recognize me, especially in the cities. I wasn't sure I really wanted all this attention, but I guessed it was kind of inevitable if I made an effort to be of help. I liked being able to use my talents to make things better wherever I could, big or small, and I liked learning about Eorzea and its people firsthand. It was nice to learn that I indeed could do things for people that not just anyone was able to do, or at least not able to do at a certain time. Especially the Scions of the Seventh Dawn repeatedly sent me alongside other echo-equipped, skilled adventurers to deal with primals. Those were always nerve-wracking experiences, but I couldn't deny that a

certain thrill tended to come with them, followed by a deep satisfaction upon our successes. Additionally, I'd gotten to see quite a bit of Eorzea in my travels for the Scions, which was something I greatly appreciated. When I'd left my home I only knew rumors and tales about the world, but to see everything with my own eyes was an experience that didn't at all compare to even the best of stories.

Sometimes I wondered how much of that had been experienced by Foulques before, how many of those places he'd seen as well in his neverending pursuit of true courage and proving himself.

Again. Again he crept into my thoughts. Whenever my head wasn't full of the things I needed to do my thoughts would inevitably circle back to him.

I closed my eyes and let my head fall back into my pillow. The room was dark, only a little bit of moonshine would find its way through the big windows from time to time. Everything was silent, except for some far away sounds of nocturnal creatures near the city.

I didn't mind thinking of Foulques, but it usually left me restless ever since he disappeared. I hadn't heard or seen anything of him since we parted in Alder Springs. Before that unfortunate day, he would frequently make himself known, either in the guild or directly to me. But now - nothing for several moons. Was he okay? I desperately hoped he was. He definitely was able to defend himself, most people knew he was strong. But still, I got the nagging feeling that he might go overboard some day, that he would seek a challenge he was not up to.

I groaned and rolled onto my side, pressing my hands to my face. Don't do this again. Clear your head. He'd be just fine, like he always was. Maybe he just needed time to think things over. Or maybe he'd even abandoned his business with the guild altogether. It didn't seem impossible. And whatever he was doing, he surely was doing fine.

I laid on my bed unmoving for some time and willed myself to believe that. Then I took a deep breath and concentrated on the slow and steady in - out - in - out of my breathing until I fell asleep.

* * *

I spent the following morning in the guild and helped polish the wooden staffs that served as practice lances in base training. I liked joining the morning drills to keep my fundamentals in good shape, and well, I also vaguely hoped to get any news on Foulques somehow. At last, my hope wasn't disappointed this day.

I looked up from my work when I heard some of the guild members whisper among themselves. They had their backs to me, but I could hear an underlying spiteful tone

that sent cold shivers down my spine.

"Did you hear about that crazy Duskwight? A friend saw him in Coerthas recently, and apparently he was in pretty bad shape. Maybe he even hit the bucket already."

"Ha, that loony bastard! Serves him right! I'd gladly impale him onto my lance myself if I had the chance to."

"As if...! Hey come on, don't look at me like that. I know you want your revenge. I know I want mine." He dropped his voice further, so I hardly could hear him at all anymore. "But look at us. We're no match for him. And besides, he probably already got what he deserved from what I heard."

I closed my eyes for a moment and let out a silent sigh. Like I feared, these most likely were friends of the Wood Wailers that Foulques had killed in Alder Springs. Kimison and Voyce were their names. I didn't know them very well, but I'd seen them frequently around the guild and we've even had a few practice matches here before.

"You sure? What exactly did he tell you? If he's seen him himself he gotta know more than just that."

"Yeah well, he said he was in..."

Their voices were getting too low to hear, even for my Miqu'te hearing. This was going to get a little unpleasant, but there was no other way. I went over to them, not even bothering to put down my equipment.

"Hey there, you two. I'm sorry to have overheard... your conversation... right now..."

My words trailed off at the end when I took in their mixed expressions of shock, reluctance and almost animosity. However, I decided to not dwell on it and just got my question out.

"Uhm, so I heard you talk about Foulques. Do you know any details of where he might be?" Or how bad of a shape he was in. Or if he really was dead already... I silenced my thoughts and watched their faces instead.

Their eyes darkened further and they exchanged a quick glance.

"Nothing concrete, I'm afraid. He was seen in Coerthas and no one knows if he's still alive."

Voyce just nodded and shrugged. "Sorry, Khuma'zi."

When Ywain entered the hall at that moment they quickly got up and volunteered for a long practice match, effectively avoiding any more of my questions. I watched them along with the other guild members that were around, but contrary to their usual behavior they were exceptionally focused today. No fooling around, not a stray glance to anyone else, let alone me. Ywain, naturally, was impressed with them today. The

good thing about it was that I abandoned my plan of confronting them again and opted for an alternative with a more likely chance of success: Ywain.

Later that day I got him in a quiet moment after I'd made sure that Voyce and Kimison were already gone. Ywain immediately looked up when he noticed me, his face expectant and curious. He usually had that look when I approached him, which really was not often outside of training.

I told him what I'd heard earlier and while he listened the curiosity got replaced by a stern look. He didn't interrupt me, though, and silently let me finish my request.

"I think they probably know where he might be, but they wouldn't tell me. Do you think you could talk to them in my stead?"

Ywain was silent for a moment longer, still looking concerned.

"Well... if you must know, I could try. But I really would prefer if you wouldn't concern yourself with him anymore. At all. He's dangerous, and nothing would come out of it anyway. And to be frank, I'm relieved he seems to stay away from us now."

My lips formed a thin, disappointed line, but my voice remained unchanged: quiet and betraying my eagerness a little more than I liked.

"I know. But I can't just leave him be and pretend I don't know. Especially if he really is injured and needs help. I couldn't live with myself if I abandoned him again."

Ywain sighed and nodded reluctantly. "It's not that I couldn't understand that... but still." He fell silent. Then he added: "I'll try and let you know."

He sounded pretty defeated, so I refrained from showing my immense relief and kept my face under control as best as I could. "Thank you."

That was another night I hardly slept at all. A part of that was that I did prefer to do activities at night and sleep during the day, but since it was the other way around for most people I tried to adjust myself for overall convenience. This particular night, though, I had a hard time keeping my thoughts in control and my body from jumping up and running to Coerthas. I fidgeted so much that I was covered in sweat hardly after getting into bed. I ran my hand through my hair, pulled at it and tried to calm myself by concentrating on my breathing.

In - out - in - what if he was already dead?

Calm down.

In - out - I should go right now and look for him. But that wouldn't do any good. I didn't even know where in Coerthas he was, or if he still was in that area anymore.

Calm down and get some sleep.

There was nothing I actually could do now, so I should rest while I still could. I had no idea what would happen in Coerthas and how quickly I could find him. But what if Ywain didn't get anything out of the lancers, either? If I waited here, just mulling over things, and Foulques died in the meantime?

My throat was dry and my heartbeat too fast. I gave up on sleep entirely.

I got up and, after changing into a clean, simple tunic, got myself some cold water from the river. I splashed my face with it after drinking a few sips and immediately felt a little better. But the concern wouldn't lessen. It probably wouldn't lessen no matter what I did now, though. I just had to wait for news from Ywain, that simply was all I could do for now. I picked up my lance from the grass and decided to walk the nightly woods. I'd just sleep outside if I somehow got calm enough for sleep.

I never did. But the clean, fresh air did help ease my mind a little.

* * *

Of course there was no way I was lucky enough to get the news right the next day. No, I had to wait for two entire suns. Those two suns went by agonizingly slow, and I was both glad and frustrated that my errands kept me away from the Lancer's Guild.

By sundown of the second day Ywain had sent a boy with a message to me. I went to meet Ywain as soon as I had finished all of my work for the day. He greeted me with his usual politeness, but with a troubled look that made me even more nervous. I hid my fidgeting as best as I could, but I was sure he still noticed.

"Khuma'zi, I have to tell you again that I'd rather keep you away from him. Please don't go after him."

His words sparked an immense hope within me. He had learned something about Foulques. I felt my pulse quicken.

Ywain looked at me pleadingly, but somehow still doubtfully. I could see my quiet words confirming his doubts.

"I have to know. At all costs."

Ywain nodded unhappily. "Well, then."

* * *

I didn't even wait for the morning to prepare for the trip. I sought out Qiah, my sister, who was still at work in the market and told her that I'd gotten enough info to go search for Foulques. She wasn't thrilled, but nodded when I told her I didn't know how long I'd be away. I restocked my inventory with some potions and affectionately patted her shoulder. She returned my smile, albeit a little sadly, and reminded me to be careful, just as she always did.

Once that was done I excused myself from work wherever it was possible. On my way to the Carpenter's Guild, which was my last destination for the day, I was already on the way in my mind. To my chagrin, however, Beatin was a little too happy to see me, since he had trouble getting enough lumbers for an important last-minute delivery, and today of all days I was the only one available who could finish the task in time. I did what I could to finish quickly and still do quality work. It took me most of the night, though, which made me so nervous that I had increasing trouble doing my work properly. I swore under my breath whenever I messed up, which was a couple more work steps than I usually did.

However, when the sun was about to rise into a clear sky I finally finished and handed over the lumbers to Beatin. While he did raise an eyebrow at the number of mistakes, which he wasn't used to seeing from me in that quantity, he still declared it acceptable and dismissed me.

I all but ran to Cingur's stables to get Kweh, my chocobo, and then took off to Coerthas by aetheryte.

Kapitel 3: Steel Vigil I

Camp Dragonhead was lying beneath a softly glittering, fresh blanket of snow, but I didn't have much of a mind for the beautiful scenery right then. Also, the cold immediately crept right into my bones even through the heavy cloak I wore above my armor. I shivered and cursed Foulques for getting stuck in this frozen land. As Ywain had told me Foulques was seen injured eastward of the camp, but that was all he had managed to get out of Voyce. I had to quickly find out if he had entered the camp or, if not, where he'd gone after that.

I went over to the House Fortemps guards stationed at the entrance to the camp and asked if they'd noticed someone like Foulques, but they didn't know anything. I asked several other people around the camp without success until I got to Norberttaux, an Elezen who oversaw a small crafting facility beside the bridge. He told me of a rumor he'd overheard. According to this, a Duskwight that fit my description was seen near the Steel Vigil just the day before yesterday. So chances were that Foulques was indeed still alive! He also pointed me towards a Midlander by the name of Belmont, who'd possibly know more details about that, as he was one of those who'd been out on a minor fight with dragons that day. I thanked him full of fresh hope and went looking for Belmont. I found him atop the bridge, obviously on watch duty this morning and kind of happy to get some break from his rather boring task. He confirmed the rumor and told me he'd seen that Duskwight just outside the Steel Vigil, which was located at the far northeast of the camp.

"We even tried to get him to go back with us after the fight was over, since, you know, he was obviously injured and all, but he wouldn't even acknowledge our presence, so we left him be. Didn't look particularly friendly anyway, that guy, who knows what he was up to. Brr, that damn weather is getting bad so fast today. Can't wait to get back inside before it gets any worse."

So Foulques, if it was indeed him, was injured, but alive. At least he had been that day. I nodded my thanks to Belmont and turned my eyes to the sky. The sun was hiding behind increasingly heavier clouds now, the only glitter on the snow stemmed from the fires around the camp. I shivered as a breeze needled by and, accompanied by a few snowflakes, left Belmont with a last thankful smile.

Summoning Kweh I turned north outside the camp and hoped to find Foulques in time. Kweh sensed my uneasiness and became more sensitive to the creatures we encountered. Luckily we managed to not get into fights with them on the way, but we didn't have as much luck with the weather. It was getting darker and darker from the layer of heavy clouds that by now continually released thick flakes of snow. By the time we approached the Steel Vigil I could hardly see three yalms around me, which made my heart sink. There wouldn't be any chance to find clear older foot prints.

The heavy snow wrapped my surroundings in eerie silence, and I slowed down Kweh to avoid running into any of the wild creatures that tended to surround the Vigil. I checked the snow around us for creature foot prints from time to time, but with this

heavy snowfall there was still the chance of a sudden attack. And not long after that we actually did run into a Redhorn Ogre that I noticed too late. I managed to kill him before he could do any serious damage to either of us, but one of his strikes hit my bag and destroyed the tiny flasks with the potions in them. I cursed. At least one of them was still intact when I cleared the bag afterwards. I hoped I wouldn't need it, but I'd have felt a lot better with a few more of them just in case.

We moved even more cautiously when we reached the ruins. It had gotten so dark that I was almost convinced the sun had already set, but it really couldn't have taken all that much time to get to the Vigil. I dismounted and let Kweh follow me around. She would alert me if anything tried to attack again.

Soon I stumbled across the body of a Downy Aegis that was already more than halfway buried in snow. It didn't seem too old, it still looked pretty intact. I couldn't make out how it had died without spending the time to unbury it, but from the amount of snow on it I guessed that it was dead longer than just for today. It also was hard to the touch, so it was at least partly frozen. Maybe it had fallen victim to the fight Belmont had told me about.

I moved around the outer ruins of the Vigil carefully, avoiding the still living Aegis and checking for anything that could hint at Foulques. So far I didn't have any luck. I did, however, find a couple more dead Aegis and some dragons of about the same size as well. The way they were positioned seemed to point to the entrance of the inner ruins. There were more bodies there, and my heart picked up speed. I checked for any creatures again before I jogged down the short pathway into the ruins.

More creature bodies, more Aegis than dragons now, and they all seemed similar to the first one I found. I wondered how many people had been involved in that attack, as the number of dead things here was nothing short of impressive. My breathing came in quick gasps, originating more from anticipation than physical exertion. I looked around, always keeping an ear on Kweh's position. I was glad she was such a well behaved bird, very dependable. She was alert, but calm.

I went to the left where more Aegis were lying in the snow, creating huge snowy piles. I listened for any sounds, strained my eyes to see anything that could be Foulques. But it was as silent as a grave. I swallowed. I could hear only my own breathing and the howling wind. I didn't want to attract any hostile creatures, so calling out was not an option.

I went around the dead Aegis in circles, but no sign of Foulques no matter how often I walked around them. Did he get buried by one of the bodies? That would be bad, as they were too heavy for me alone to move, even if they hadn't been frozen to the ground in the first place. I couldn't find any such clues, though.

I shivered. I was sweating and freezing at the same time. I hardly could feel my hands and feet anymore. I looked around me once more, but nothing had changed. It was still silent, no trace of Foulques was to be found anywhere. My pulse started to quicken in panic. Was he really not here anymore? Was it even Foulques that Belmont had seen? Or had he left the Vigil, was I too late? Was I maybe following the wrong

lead, did the dead dragons not have anything to do with his whereabouts at all? Or was I really too late and he was already...? No, not that. I simply refused to believe that.

As I mounted Kweh again to get another look around the Vigil something caught my eye. It was hard to see in the dark, but there, between the remains of two large walls that formed a strange narrow gap, was another pile of snow. Much tinier than the aevis ones, and now that I got a better look at it it seemed odd. The snow wasn't blown at the wall like one would anticipate it to, but instead formed a rather misplaced heap a little bit away from the wall. I hadn't noticed it earlier, as the aevis body in front of it had been blocking my view. It could be just a piece of stone underneath, but I was desperate. I left Kweh again and ran to the odd pile of snow.

And there it was. What I'd mistaken for stone from the distance was, in fact, a small opening in the snow. Another dark spot near it turned out to be the point of an armored shoe when I dug at it. Maybe...!

Shaking from both excitement and fear I started digging at the small hole, taking care not to do any damage to whatever I would find underneath. I sent a fervent, silent prayer to Menphina to not find another dead body, and to find who I was so desperately looking for. Chances were slim, though.

The snow had already begun to freeze under the fresh layer on top, but it crumpled away easily enough under my stiff fingers. A couple seconds later my heart jumped. The face I'd revealed belonged to Foulques. My eyes started to tear up a little.

My shaking increased even more, though, and it made it hard to check his throat for a pulse. I had to try more than one time before I was sure. It was barely noticeable, but it was there. He was still alive. I thanked Menphina with all my heart.

Now I had to be quick. I freed him as fast as I could, not caring about the frozen snow hurting my hands. There was no time to be mindful of that, and they were so cold that there wasn't much feeling left in them anyway.

As I progressed my worry increased. He was in bad shape. His armor was cracked and torn open in many places, dried blood coating it everywhere. I couldn't tell how much of that was his own, but I prepared for the worst. He needed a healer, and quickly. I did have my last potion, but with Foulques unconscious there was no way to get it into him. I hoped Kweh would be able to carry him.

I contemplated how to keep him warm on the way back to the camp, but I only had my cloak. He'd have to hold out with just this. The tips of his ears already didn't look too good from what I could tell, though. When I'd freed him from most of the snow I carefully, carefully uncurled his limbs. It was good that he had been under a layer of frozen snow, which most likely had kept some of his body heat trapped inside the small space. I quickly wrapped him in my cloak to preserve whatever warmth he still held.

Kweh came to me when I called her, but I had a hard time lifting Foulques high enough

to get him on her back. It made her nervous when I repeatedly swayed and stumbled under the weight, and she danced away a little every time. Foulques' size and my own half frozen body didn't help at all, not to mention all of his injuries. I wanted to cry from the frustration. There was no time for this!

I laid Foulques back on the ground and stood over him, a foot beside each of his legs, grabbed him under the arms and tried to lift him onto my shoulders for the third time when I heard him grunt. Carefully I sat him back again, still supporting him, and looked at his face. It was too dark to see any subtleties in his expression, but I could see that he was looking at me from under half lidded eyes. Thank you, Menphina, again, from the bottom of my heart!

"Foulques, can you hear me?" My voice was quiet, gentle, but I was sure he'd be able to hear me nonetheless. Miqu'te weren't the only ones with great hearing.

"...u...i"

He was so stiff and weak that I didn't really understand it, but I was guessing he was acknowledging me. My chest was overflowing with feelings, and I fervently thanked Menphina yet again. It was strange how often I got to the point of tears when it came to Foulques. But there was no time to dwell on that right now.

I positioned myself beside him and supported his torso with my leg to free my hands. His head lolled to the side and onto my shoulder, bumping against my own. I hoped he hadn't fallen unconscious again. From the few supplies I carried I hastily selected the potion. I struggled to uncork it with my frozen fingers, so I resorted to opening it with my teeth. Then I moved back a little bit, so I could lean Foulques at a lower angle against my shoulder and arm. A few icy drops from my wet hair fell onto his frozen cheek when I bent over him to get a better look. His eyes were closed again.

"Foulques, are you still there? Can you drink this? It's a potion."

He exhaled with a tiny bit more force, which I could only take as a confirmation considering his condition.

"It's nothing fancy, but it should restore you at least a little bit. It's my last one, though, so don't expect any wonders."

I set the tiny flask to his lips and, once he had managed to open it a crack, gently poured a little bit of the liquid into his mouth. I waited until he'd swallowed it, then poured another tiny amount. After a few minutes he had finished the potion, and I waited anxiously if it would make any difference. It didn't take long for him to open his eyes again.

He looked at me groggily and slightly unfocused, but still more lively than before.

"I feel ...ore ...ead than ...live. Can't m...ve." He was only whispering, but it was much, much better than before. I laid my palm at his icy cheek and pressed my forehead to his. A small smile formed on my lips as I whispered back to him.

"Believe me, you most likely are. But let's get you away from here or you'll really die."

I caught a strange glint in his eyes when I checked his face before moving, but I didn't feel quite serene enough to question it. He had to get out of the cold and his injuries addressed asap.

"I can't carry you back to the camp, so we have to get you onto the chocobo. Do you think you can help a little?"

His face got dark and he glared at me. "No... the cam...!"

"There's no other choice, it's the nearest place you can get warm again. And it's more likely to find a healer there than in the wilderness. You'll just die if you stay here, and I'm not having that."

He made a face and his eyes looked troubled, but he didn't look at me again for a few moments.

His eyes darted to Kweh, who was still standing nearby, watching us and the surroundings in turn. When he looked at me again I couldn't interpret his gaze. He was still glaring, but there was no strength behind it anymore.

"I'll try to get you up. Let me know if I'm hurting you."

Again I knelt over him and grabbed him in an awkward hug before trying to lift him. I had no idea if he tried to help at all, but it definitely wasn't easier one bit now that he was conscious again. I grunted with the effort, but it was no use. I had to set him back down again.

"Uh, sorry. You're not exactly lightweight for me."

His face still didn't show much reaction, but he held my gaze. "Wall." was all he said.

Oh. Nice. That would probably help indeed. "Okay, just a moment. Tell me if anything hurts."

I went behind him and grabbed him around the chest again, then dragged him to the wall with some effort. He grunted a little, but only shot me a weak glare when I started to fuss about it. Inwardly glad about this show of emotion I managed to sit him up against the wall, reversed my position again and lifted him. This time with more success, since I didn't have to hold his entire weight. It was still a slow process and I was getting even colder the more I sweated, but after some minutes he was leaning against the wall, standing. He was shaking badly and looked paler than before under his dark skin, so I quickly called Kweh to us, removed the saddle and held her reins while offering my shoulder to Foulques for support. Since he was now standing more or less on his own, it finally worked. I still had to hold on to Kweh when he leaned heavily against her, but she grudgingly supported his weight. I gently patted her neck and promised her a full basket of her favorite vegetables. She chirped

quietly, but still a little grumpily.

Foulques wasn't able to sit on his own, and Kweh wasn't able to carry both of us together, so he had to resign himself to just lie along her back. I carried her saddle and once more demanded of Foulques to tell me as soon as he started to hurt more than he already did. He just ignored my demand, which made me feel like an idiot, but I then concentrated on leading Kweh as quickly as she could move without Foulques falling off. I stayed beside them and kept a supporting hand on his back.

I didn't dare talking when we got out of the inner Vigil and I needed all my concentration to keep an eye out for any possible attackers, since the weather hadn't improved one bit since I'd arrived at the Vigil. It also seemed even darker than before, so it was hard to see anything at all. At least I could feel the faint warmth that I shared through my hand with Foulques, telling me that he was still alive.

Still, he must have fallen unconscious again at some point, because he didn't seem to notice when he was beginning to glide off of Kweh's back. I was quick enough to keep him from falling and, with some trouble, moved him back into a more secure position, but he wouldn't react when I called his name. We had to hurry.

Thankfully we didn't run into creatures on the way back, although we had to leave the path to avoid a winter wolf or an ogre more than one time. It made me worry, because it took that much longer to reach the camp. But finally we did.

Kapitel 4: Conjurer

This end of the camp was usually pretty deserted, and now was not an exception. I led Kweh to the right, where I knew from previous visits that usually there were a few vacant beds and a nice hearth fire available. I called out to a guard that was patrolling near the door.

"Excuse me, could you help me carry him inside? He needs to get out of the cold quickly or he's not going to make it!"

My voice sounded completely stressed out even in my own ears. At least the guard came without hesitation. Outsiders like us weren't very much loved around Coerthas, although it was a lot easier here in the Camp, where Lord Haurchefant was frequently and openly keeping ties with outsiders.

I pulled Foulques down Kweh's back carefully by the shoulders and held him up with my arms around his chest, while the guard grasped him around the thighs after a moment of hesitation. I had a feeling Foulques would very much hate being carried like this, but he was still out cold right now, so we'd get away with it.

We carried him into the building, which immediately called Lady Ninne's attention. She shot up and ran upstairs to notify the others of our arrival.

I was sweating even before we got to the stairs. This damn Elezen was heavier than he looked and the slightly warmer temperature of the building didn't help, either. I accidentally bumped the back of my foot against the first step, swaying slightly. The guard looked a little worried.

"You okay? Can you make it?"

"Yeah. The faster he's up there the better. I can still rest after that's done."

My smile was a little strained, but heartfelt. The guard nodded and we continued.

Then Foulques tensed in our grips, and the guard's face got very dark. He looked at Foulques, ice in his eyes.

"Want me to drop you right now, huh?"

Since I couldn't see his face I could only imagine that my previous assumption was true and Foulques, unable to move on his own and completely helpless within our grips, stared down the guard with as much venom as he was able to put into his glare. I could feel his increased heart rate and breathing where I held him, but it was harder to keep him safe in my grip when he was so tense. I took care to keep my voice calm except for the exertion, but it still sounded a little exasperated.

"Calm down, you idiot. We're almost there, just endure it for a bit longer."

Foulques must actually have listened to me, since he kind of stopped struggling, even though he was still as rigid as a metal rod in my grip. The guard's face was still tense, but he finished carrying Foulques upstairs without another complain. Thankfully he didn't follow his threat, either.

Old Meduil was waiting for us at the stairs and directed us to the beds. I chose the bed nearest to the wall in favor of at least a little privacy and hoped it didn't give off too much cold. The other beds were mostly unoccupied at the time, except for one. The guard nodded to me when I thanked him and quickly left us to reclaim his spot outside. Foulques had closed his eyes again and was looking pale. Hopefully we hadn't hurt him further, but judging from his tense expression he was still conscious. I turned to Meduil.

"I'm sorry for intruding, especially so suddenly, but we need a healer as soon as possible. Is there-"

She waved her hand dismissively at my words. "I can see that, son. Be quick and find the one that was treating this poor soul here just a couple of minutes before Lady Ninne came upstairs."

I looked at Foulques for a moment, then turned on my heels and sprinted downstairs and out the door. I caught the same guard that was helping us just a minute before.

"Sorry for troubling you again, but did you see the healer that's supposed to have just left?"

He still looked a little grumpy when he turned to me, but he pointed towards the other end of the camp. "I think they left this way, but I'm not sure if you'll still catch them."

I hastily thanked him and called for Kweh while I ran. Riding without a saddle felt pretty uncomfortable, but I shoved the thought aside. I'd also deal with putting Kweh's stuff away later, when everything else was taken care of. I looked around the camp for anyone that might be a healer. Near the main entrance I spotted a figure in white, a Miquo'te, and had Kweh go full speed. I watched them talk with a Hyur and called to them as soon as I was in hearing distance.

"Excuse me! Are you a healer?"

Her ears turned back to the direction of my call before she turned around with a surprised look on her angelic face. I returned the look slightly surprised myself: she was a Keeper of the Moon, as well. Slightly curled, white hair was flowing down her back, and her robe was nearly pure white as well. Now I noticed the staff she was carrying. A conjurer, and she looked every part of it.

"Yes, can I help you?" Her voice was very clear and showed the same astonishment I saw in her face before, but it was very pleasant. Her golden eyes regarded me with interest.

I nodded and dismounted. "I'd like to borrow your skills for my friend who's badly injured, if possible. Meduil sent me after you."

I motioned vaguely to where I came from, and she blinked in surprise. "Yes, of course."

Nodding to the Hyur in acknowledgment and goodbye, respectively, we excused ourselves and returned to the northern part of the camp. The healer nodded to my quick explanation about Foulques' injuries on the way. "That shouldn't be a problem, don't worry."

She smiled at me and my mind eased. She would help him.

"Oh, and of course I can pay you. I'm not asking you to heal him for free or anything."

Now she was laughing and shot me a big smile. "Oh, don't you worry about that!"

I wasn't sure how exactly to take that, but before I could ask we arrived at Foulques' bed and she immediately turned to him. Foulques seemed to have fallen asleep.

"You'll have to do something about his armor, though. It's probably safer to take it off before I heal him, just to avoid any accidents."

Foulques definitely wasn't aware, as he didn't show the slightest reaction to these words. Which was all for the better, in this case. I quickly got to work and removed his armor, hoping it wouldn't wake him. The healer helped move him when it was needed. Foulques didn't wear much under his armor apart from a sturdy, well worn shirt, so he was left in undergarments when I was done, his armor sitting in a pile at the foot of his bed. Maybe I could get the merchant below to repair all this before he woke up again.

Stripped of his armor he looked awful. Several deep slashes and even more messy bites and bruises were littering his body. He'd probably lost quite a bit of blood in that fight. Not all of his wounds seemed new, though, and I could make out a lot of scars where his flesh was still intact. The sight let me easily guess just how reckless he could be in his quest for strength and worthy opponents. Indeed, he'd gone overboard with this. My brows creased in worry, but I stepped back a bit and made space for the healer.

She in turn took a step forward and started her magic. It only took her a few heart beats, but she had to weave her spell a couple of times. I witnessed the many slashes and bites closing neatly on his skin, a few older scars blending a little more with his dark skin than before. She seemed adept at healing, and I felt incredibly relieved to have found someone skilled so quickly. Finally she nodded with a satisfied smile.

"All done. Let him sleep off the effects of the magic and he'll be as good as new the next time he wakes. Don't worry if he sleeps for one or two suns straight, it can happen."

I thanked her and asked for the payment. She laughed again and softly clapped me on

the shoulder twice. "I told you not to worry about it."

Her expression and tone softened. "I know how hard it is to lose a loved one, and healing him was no big deal. Now if you'll excuse me, I was on my way home."

She said another goodbye to Meduil and then she was gone. I should have asked for her name, at least.

Meduil passed me, shaking her head.

"You can't leave the man lying around naked in this cold, son. Don't forget about your comrade just because you've seen a pretty woman."

My cheeks reddened at her assumption, but there was no reason to argue. I picked up Foulques' armor while Meduil was already stacking blankets and my cloak on top of him.

"Is there anywhere I can get something else for him to wear? These will take some time to repair."

"Just try the merchant at the bridge if you're going to him anyway, or you could ask around the Elezen in the camp. There are a few here that should share his size and could spare a tunic for a while."

I nodded in thanks and went outside again with my bloody bundle. The merchant wasn't exactly what I'd had in mind. In fact, I'd hoped for a cheaper solution, but Meduil was right. I'd see if he did have something that I could afford with the gil I was carrying with me. I'd left most of my fortune in Gridania, and right now I didn't want to leave Foulques alone to retrieve it, not even by aetheryte. Delays had a tendency to appear in just the wrong places, after all...

I went out the door when a familiar voice called me. I stopped dead in my tracks.

"Khuma'zi! I didn't expect to see you again this soon! You're looking as good as ever!"

Lord Haurchefant somehow had spotted me immediately and jumped down the last few steps from the bridge's staircase before jogging in my direction. I went to meet him and returned his smile, although not quite as exuberantly. He just was something else entirely in that regard.

"A good day to you, Lord Haurchefant. I hope you've been as well as it looks to me."

"Oh, you're overdoing the politeness, Khuma'zi. Take it down a notch, will you?"

He was still grinning when he stopped in front of me. His arms twitched in what may or may not have been a desire for a hug, but he didn't follow through. My previous visits to Coerthas had proven that I usually needed a while to get used to his overly enthusiastic ways, so I was grateful for the restraint. I looked up at him, my own smile still in place. I felt tiny so close beside him, barely reaching his chest, but I should

probably get used to it if I made so many Elezen friends.

Then Lord Haurchefant's eyes fell to the messy armor in my grip. "What's that? That's not yours, is it?"

Lord Haurchefant was a little bit too intense for my tastes sometimes, but in general I couldn't help but feel happy around him. His concern for me was ever so obvious and so honest, and I hadn't yet met anyone else who'd shown their appreciation and loyalty so... unconditionally and with so much passion. I also was deeply impressed by his genuine desire to help the weak. You didn't find a lot of people who were as passionate about this as he was, especially not if they were in a more powerful position. Lord Haurchefant truly was very special in many regards.

"No, these are a friend's. He's upstairs resting, now that he's finally healed."

My relief about that fact must have shown, as Lord Haurchefant smiled warmly at me.

"That's good to hear, very good. I hope I can find the time to visit you and your friend later, so I can deliver my well wishes in person. In the meantime, please pass them along for me, will you? In any case, make sure to seek me out before you leave! I'd hate to find you gone without a proper farewell. And of course, I'd also be delighted anytime to see your splendid muscles in action, if you can spare some time. Ahh, the thought alone already makes me shiver with pleasure!"

He put a hand over his heart, eyes rolling back into his skull. My smile got a little bit strained and my cheeks hot, but he either didn't notice or he didn't care. He straightened again and winked at me, before leaving me to my errands with a „See you later!“. Still a little flustered I went to the merchant nearby, who greeted me with a very wide grin.

"Pretty fond of you, isn't he? He's a great guy."

"... he is."

Since I still could feel the heat on my cheeks, which, I decided, the merchant could interpret however he liked, I chose not to answer in more detail than that and just showed him my bundle.

"How long do you think you'd need to repair this?"

He carefully looked at the mess, then shrugged. "Well, that's a lot to do there... if you need it any sooner than two or three suns, I'd recommend you just get something else instead. Also, if anything more pressing comes up on my end it may take even longer."

I'd figured as much.

"I'm not sure if something new is an option, but I'll find out. In the meantime, how about just repairing the main piece and boots? I'll get back to you about the other parts, if that's okay."

He nodded. "Fine by me. Whatever you'd like, as long as you pay for the services." He winked at me and I felt oddly reminded of the wink I'd just received from Lord Haurchefant. Only that it honestly crept me out when the merchant did it.

I forced a smile on my face and retreated.

Kweh was still wandering around freely, so this was my next task. It was probably a good thing that she tended to be a bit standoff-ish to strangers, so instead of harassing the people she lingered in the quieter corners of the camp and was checking everything that seemed remotely edible. I picked up her saddle, which I'd left in the snow by the door, and led her to the stables. A stable boy showed us to an empty stall, but I politely turned down his offer to care for her. Cingur had taught me to not delegate this if possible, since it was an important part of both properly caring for the bird as well as of bonding. Kweh shook herself dry once she was inside, showering me in melted snow. It was a good thing that bird feathers were kept waterproof, much in contrast to my hair and clothes. I patted her back in goodbye after I fed her with vegetables, some grain and fresh water.

„See you later, girl.“

She only chirped distractedly at me, favoring her well deserved food. With a last fond glance I left the stables and went hunting for some clothes for Foulques.

Kapitel 5: Stick to Me

Back upstairs I almost collided with him. I'd heard him quarreling with the others already from the door, so I'd flown up the stairs two steps at a time. We both stopped short when I appeared around the corner. He was still wearing nothing but his undergarments, old and new scars plainly visible on his dark skin. A few feet behind him were Meduil and the other two, obviously trying to talk some sense into him. I glared at him.

"What are you doing here? You should be sleeping!"

"Where are my things?!"

I ignored his furious demeanor and pushed the bundle into his bare chest. It consisted of both the borrowed clothes as well as some parts of his armor.

"Here, you can wear this until your armor is repaired. I left some of it with the merchant below. I can bring him the rest later if you want."

He didn't move to take the clothes, he just stood there and stared at me with a strangely suspicious expression. The moment stretched awkwardly and my ears flicked backwards in confusion.

"What's wrong? Just take it and get dressed. Then I'll get us something to eat, since you're up anyway."

His stare was softened by confusion, but he slowly raised his hands to take the clothes I was still holding to his chest. I blinked at him, confused as to why he would be confused, but I quickly turned around when I was sure he wouldn't drop the bundle.

"Just stay put until I'm back.", I warned him.

The kitchen below was deserted, so I asked my way around the camp and shortly had found the main kitchens. I asked for something light that would warm up a recovering person and got two bowls of deliciously steaming soup, which I quickly took back to Foulques.

From the small side room I could see him sitting on his bed, his face slack from exhaustion, but with a dark look in his eyes. He looked too much like he forced himself to stay awake, which made my brows crease. At least he had dressed. I placed the bowls on the table. "Here, eat something."

Juline left with a small smile, taking Duchesnelt with her. I couldn't decide if they were fleeing our company or if they wanted to give us some privacy, but either way, it was probably more comfortable for everyone that way. I pushed Foulques' bowl to the seat nearest to the fire, and took a seat myself. The warmth of the fire was loosening up my muscles, and I suddenly felt completely exhausted.

"You look like shit."

I looked up at Foulques, who still had that strange dark and wary look to him. He really didn't look any livelier than I felt, though. I shrugged and felt the corner of my mouth rise a little.

"Just like you do. But I did get a completely different compliment not even a bell ago."

The soup was just short of a culinary masterpiece and since I hadn't eaten all day it immediately warmed me both physically and mentally. It was delicious. My fingers and toes started to tingle with warmth, just like the tail and ears.

Foulques kept staring at me between spoonfuls, waiting for an explanation of my earlier comment while he ate. I complied after another spoonful of my own.

"I met the man in charge of this place, Lord Haurchefant. I don't know if you know him. He told me I was looking good, although he obviously didn't account for my lack of sleep. Oh, and by the way, he's sending you well wishes. I almost forgot to tell you."

Foulques raised an eyebrow, but didn't comment. He continued his meal with a brooding look on his face.

We finished in silence. I leaned back in my chair and sighed, closing my eyes. I didn't feel like moving even an ilm. Even my tail hung lifeless from the chair. I was full and warm, although not yet completely dry again. And I was dead tired. I'd sleep right there in the chair, but that was hardly appropriate. With another sigh I forced myself to raise.

"I'll take these back to the kitchens. You can just go to sleep, you're needing it after that healing."

Foulques shot me a look, then grinned a little. "Forget it. I'll wait here and stay nice and warm. No chance I'm returning to that icicle bed."

I hesitated and glanced over to the sleeping Elezen in the other room. Other than him there was nobody here anymore, so... as long as Foulques wasn't picking fights with anyone... I shrugged and went to return the dishes.

When I came back Foulques was still in his chair, but he had fallen asleep on the table. The others were still below, even Meduil was not to be seen. I went over to him slowly, contemplating if I should wake him or let him sleep. He wouldn't get real rest in that position, but it *was* warmer than in the other rooms. I took my place from before and looked at him. I couldn't see half of his face, since his arm was in the way, but he looked fairly relaxed. I hadn't ever seen him like that before. There had always been some degree of tension in him, even back when we'd met for the second time in the East Shroud. From then on he'd gotten more tense every time, although it had never been directed at me. At least not until Alder Springs.

I sighed and leaned back, feeling the pain that memory brought me mirrored in my face. I didn't want to remember that. How broken and disappointed he had been. Not only with the guild, but even with me, and I hadn't had a clue until he'd told me. Foremost I didn't want to remember how close he had been to fall down that cliff. My hands balled into fists in my lap. That look in his eyes... my chest tightened painfully at the memory.

I opened my eyes again to chase it off, and jumped a little at the unexpected sight of Foulques sitting up and watching me. I hadn't heard him move.

"Did you have a nightmare?"

"Uh, no. I wasn't sleeping. Just some bad memories."

I couldn't suppress the heat that crept onto my cheeks, so I just looked the other way. Foulques didn't reply.

The silence quickly grew uncomfortable. I sighed and turned back to him, meeting his eyes only for a split second. Why was he still watching?

"So... how do you feel? Shouldn't you still be tired?"

"I am. I don't have any intention of staying here, though."

I stared at him.

"What? But where would you want to go now? Especially since your things are still with the merchant. And I left your lance in the Vigil, too. I was thinking of returning there tomorrow to retrieve it."

His brow creased.

"Then I'll have to go there first, obviously."

I sat up, leaned towards him and gripped the edge of the table.

"No no no, are you crazy? You'll freeze to death without proper clothing! You can't mean to go in just that tunic!"

The tunic and trousers I'd gotten him were actually not all that thin, but they were still not designed to keep you warm outside in that cold. Only the boots looked like they were up to it. And maybe my cloak would help a little, if he'd be willing to take it. Foulques' look darkened to a glare, but I interrupted him before he could say anything.

"And besides, what's wrong with just staying here for two or three suns? We can both get some rest, get great food, and stay in a safe and relatively warm place! And as soon as you're recovered and your armor is repaired, we can leave this place, get your

lance, and then we--"

I broke off and hesitated. I closed my mouth, looking down at the table.

"And then what? You're not planning to stick to me after that, do you?"

His voice was not loud, but it had a harsh tone that sent a needle through my chest. I didn't meet his eyes.

"No... actually--"

I hesitated again, but Foulques just waited. His eyes were hard when I met them.

"Actually, I was hoping you'd stick to me. At least for a while."

"Why would I do that?"

He still sounded angry, but at the same time genuinely curious. I looked at him again and felt completely helpless. He'd think me a total creep, there was no way he'd actually stay with me. I swallowed, but couldn't make myself speak. The tip of my tail danced around nervously, but other than that I didn't move. After a few moments he let out an exasperated sigh.

"Just spit it out."

My tail flicked to the side with a little more force, but I gathered all my courage and looked at him again.

"I said it before, in Alder Springs. I like you. I want to get to know you better. And I can't do that if we part ways again. And, well..."

I paused again and shot him a pained little smile, then dropped my eyes to the table again.

"... I'm actually also afraid what you'll do when I let you leave again just like that. The last two times we met weren't under all that great circumstances. I honestly don't want to experience that a third time."

It was silent for a while and I slowly sat down again. Then Foulques leaned back and sighed. His voice was even lower than mine had been.

"What is it with you? Why do you even concern yourself with me so much?"

I didn't know if he really expected an answer, but after a moment I tried.

"I don't now. Maybe it's because you constantly sought me out in Gridania. And, I don't know, you're so strong and you could accomplish so much. We could accomplish even more if we combined our skills!"

The second half my speech got more urgent and I held his eyes. Then I shrugged a little helplessly. Foulques didn't seem surprised. If anything, he looked grim and a little exasperated. Or probably just dead tired.

"What in the world do you think we could accomplish together?"

I shrugged. "I'm running around doing things for people all the time. For the higher-ups, for the common people, whoever needs help. Sometimes it's more diplomatic stuff, but many times I have to deal with all sorts of monsters. I thought if you came along for a time, we could learn skills and techniques from each other and possibly explore each other's idea of courage firsthand while we're at it. That had always bugged me right from the beginning."

He looked at me as if I'd lost my mind, so I quickly threw in another point.

"And well, it usually pays well enough to get by easily."

Foulques leaned forward with a heavy sigh and closed his eyes. He hid his face in his hands and shook his head slightly.

"You know..."

He fell silent again for a minute, and I felt horrible while I waited. Like I was awaiting my sentence. Breathing was suddenly a hard thing to do.

Then he sighed again and got up. "I need some sleep."

I only watched as he went to his bed with heavy steps. There was nothing I could do or say. I had to wait for him to make up his mind. But it still felt horrible to be left behind like that.

After a while I moved my eyes to the fire to give us both more privacy, but other than that I still felt too heavy to move. I didn't know for how long I sat there, but the fire had lost much of its strength when I became aware of it again, and some of the other beds were now occupied. They must have been really quiet. Maybe in consideration of their recovering comrade, but I was grateful nonetheless.

At some point Meduil came back, checked on the healed guy and disappeared in the room at the far back after a quiet "Good night". I wished her the same and decided to go to bed as well. Foulques should be fast asleep by now, and the recovering guy next to him hadn't moved much at all since our arrival. I fed the fire for the rest of the night before I left the small room.

Belatedly I realized that I hadn't thought of organizing any sleepwear for myself, but there was nothing to be done about that now. I removed my armor and carefully stacked it beside the wall. My sleeveless shirt and thin trousers did nothing to keep the cold away. I hoped no one would mind if I took the blanket from the vacant bed next to mine as well. I risked a last glance at Foulques. He had his back to the room and seemed to sleep. I crept under the blankets and curled myself into a tight ball,

hoping to keep what was left of the fire's warmth until I'd fallen asleep.

The next morning I woke late, and only to a slight commotion around the bed next to me. The Elezen that was occupying it apparently was conscious again, and Juline, Meduil and another guy were surrounding his bed. Judging from the delighted comments he was nearly back to his former shape. I remembered that the conjurer that had healed Foulques had also healed this guy, and he'd slept so soundly that he hadn't woken even once since we arrived there. Not even when Foulques had been quarreling with us.

Raising my eyes to the bed behind him I saw Foulques, still in the same position with his back to us. I hoped he'd been able to sleep. Maybe he'd be out of it the entire day as well.

Kapitel 6: Dangerous

The next morning I woke late and only to a slight commotion beside my bed. The Elezen that had slept so soundly through *our* commotion yesterday apparently was up and about again, which brought general joy through the entire room. I was happy for him, too, and I hoped Foulques would be in comparably good spirits as well once his condition was better.

The room was illuminated by hazy cool light, so it was time to get out of bed anyway. Despite that I was still tired and actually contemplated getting back to sleep, but there were things that needed my attention. First of all, there was Foulques' lance still in the Steel Vigil, and then I wanted to check how the repair of his armor was coming along. The earlier it was completed the better, and if I was lucky I could have the merchant do the rest of it as well after all. I took a deep breath to steel myself for the inevitable cold and folded back the blankets, swinging my legs over the side of the bed. Meduil and Juline were still joking and laughing with the awoken Elezen behind me.

Then I heard a gasp from the stairs and turned my attention. Lord Haurchefant was there, staring at me with wide eyes.

„*Splendid!*“

I shot up and retreated a step when he was suddenly over me, his hands hovering inches from my bare arms. I was so shocked that I didn't even manage to greet him. I felt all eyes in the room on us. My cheeks burned up.

„Lord Haurchefant! Good morning!“

Meduil remembered her manners immediately despite her apparent surprise and the others followed quickly. Lord Haurchefant found a vibrant smile for them and returned the greeting along with a few delighted words about the recovery of the Elezen, but didn't move away from me. On the contrary, he returned all of his attention to me right away. He was practically glowing.

„Look at these finely sculpted muscles, the *perfection* in which they are flowing and intertwining around your body! Ah, Khuma'zi, this is... exquisite! Truly exquisite!“

His hands were moving along my arms as he spoke, but never touching. I still couldn't speak and just stood there blushing, ears folded backwards and the tip of my tail between my knees.

„Such a fine way to start a day, I must say.“

His eyes glided over my shirt-covered chest and stomach appreciatively and I vaguely wondered if it really could be something all that special. After all, he himself and his soldiers surely kept themselves in equally good condition, right? He came another

step closer, taking my cool hand in his and gently covering it with his other hand. Strangely enough, the gesture chased off some of my uneasiness. I stared up into his serious eyes, feeling my ears relaxing a bit.

„You tempt me, Khuma'zi, showing me half of this and keeping the other half covered. Please, my friend, allow me to invite you to another practice match. My soldiers are undergoing endurance training later today, and it would tremendously please me to see you joining them.“

His clear blue eyes went very soft, his voice getting low.

„Or if you're uncomfortable with such an open display we could get sweaty and breathless all alone together somewhere more private.“

Despite myself I felt a grin starting to form on my lips. A second later I chuckled quietly at him. His words were so ambiguous, almost suggestive, yet he said them in all earnesty. Sometimes I wondered if he was even aware of that.

„My lord, please remember that I'm not alone here this time. I'd surely do you the favor, though, as long as the plans for the day allow it.“

His answering smile was pleased and gentle, but his eyes were sparkling with intense delight.

„Excellent. Then I hope it will work out favorably for us. In any case, would you join me for a late breakfast? I couldn't bear letting you out of my sight just yet, after what you'd shown me.“

He raised our hands a bit. „And I can see that you could use a place to thoroughly warm yourself at.“

I blinked and turned to look at Foulques' back. If he was still sleeping like he was supposed to, then I would... I tensed when I met his stare. He was sitting on the edge of his bed, face a mixture of disbelief and... outrage? Lord Haurchefant followed my gaze. I didn't look at him, but I could hear the very polite smile in his voice.

„Ah, of course I'd be delighted to expand the offer to your friend as well, if he likes.“

Foulques' expression got a wary undertone when his eyes moved to Lord Haurchefant, but he remained silent. He didn't look like he'd be happy to comply, so I quickly averted Lord Haurchefant's attention from him.

„Thank you for the offer, it would be a pleasure. Just let me get dressed and I'll meet you in a bit.“

Lord Haurchefant smiled and nodded, finally releasing my now warm hand.

„Well spoken, my friend. I'm awaiting you in my office.“

„He's completely crazy. Hard to imagine someone like this carries the title „Lord“ and any amount of power. What in the world made you take this nonsensical offer??“

Foulques stared at me, hands at his hips and completely unbelieving. The others had all left a while ago, presumably to either get some breakfast themselves or to start their duties. I coughed out a small laugh and continued dressing.

„What's nonsensical about an invitation to breakfast? And he's not crazy. Only a little overzealous when it comes to... certain things.“

„You call that *overzealous*? He almost jumped you right in front of us and practically invited you to his bed!“

Now it was my turn to stare at him in disbelief, my smile almost vanished. Almost.

„He did not. He just tends to word things in a very misunderstandable way if he gets excited. Believe me, he's a very honorable man, right to the core.“

Foulques still looked at me, not in the least convinced.

“I didn't know you were that self-delusional. You can't *not* see how obviously he's hitting on you. And I bet he means it.”

I returned his look with a frown and a slight head shake. Lord Haurchefant didn't mean it quite like that, I was sure of that. I didn't argue, though, and just let the matter go for now.

„So, how do you feel? I'm not sure if you're supposed to be up already... but you do look a lot better.“

He shrugged dismissively, averting his eyes after a moment.

„I'm just fine, don't worry about it.“

„Will you be joining us for breakfast, then? Lord Haurchefant can be a little awkward to deal with sometimes, but maybe you'll reconsider your opinion of him once you've seen his more serious sides.“

Foulques snorted, then straightened up and looked down at me while I still sat on my bed, putting on the last pieces of my armor. He gave off an incredibly arrogant aura. I blinked at him.

„Maybe I should. I can't imagine this man to have any seriousness in him, though.“

I smiled at him and nodded, but he just shook his head. He probably wouldn't enjoy this meal very much, at least not the company he'd be in, but I felt a lot better now that he had agreed to join. I was still afraid he'd just leave if I let him out of my sight,

as we hadn't have a chance yet to continue our discussion from the previous night.

Breakfast was... strained. Some of the people there were Wildwood Elezen, and the looks they gave Foulques were not exactly welcoming, which seemed to put most of the others on guard as well. The only one who absolutely didn't seem to care was, naturally, Lord Haurchefant. While he made sure that everyone knew I was a Warrior of Light, he didn't direct the attention of his soldiers to Foulques more than necessary. I was both grateful and chagrined by it, because he kept coaxing stories from me and used them to paint me as a warrior exemplar for his soldiers to learn a lesson from. I tried to look unfazed, but my ears felt hot. I felt Foulques stare when I talked about the encounters with Ifrit and Titan, but his face didn't betray much of his thoughts when I glanced back at him.

The story coaxing went on a little too long for my tastes, but I just resigned myself to it to humor Lord Haurchefant. And it did keep some of the attention away from Foulques, although there were still looks and some whispers. Foulques himself was ignoring them, not joining the conversation at all, and obviously taking advantage of the excellent food. He did, however, radiate tension the entire freaking time. Sitting directly at his side this drove me crazy, especially since my own nerves were on edge already from being the center of attention for so long. My tail frequently lashed from side to side, I just couldn't help it. At some point I couldn't bear it anymore and nudged Foulques' leg under the table, whispering a request to relax a bit, but it just made him whip around and grip my collar, pulling me into his face. My ears flipped back from surprise. He whispered his reply, but I was sure everyone else could hear exactly what he was saying in the sudden silence. Now talk about being the center of attention...

„Don't tell me what to do! You have no idea!“

I met his angry glare with a frown. Then I sighed and patted his arm in both an apology and as a request to be released. He was right. I shouldn't ask things of him that I wasn't able to do myself. The whole situation was very uncomfortable for both of us. I held up my hands.

„Sorry. I didn't mean to upset you.“

He released my collar with a glare and turned back. He didn't finish what was left on his plate, but luckily the meal was about to be finished anyway. I was still surprised at how much he had managed to eat.

Well, that certainly was not what I'd imagined. Now the meaningful stares and whispers had increased a lot, and as some of them were directed at Lord Haurchefant he couldn't quite ignore them anymore. Except that he did, at least until the official end of the meal.

When we were about to leave he called me back, taking me a little to the side and leaning in, so his quiet words couldn't be overheard. He looked worried.

„Are you sure about your choice of friends? I don't want to be judging, but he seems a little... difficult. Dangerous, even. I hope he won't cause you trouble.“

I nodded with a wry smile.

„I know. I'm sorry for the trouble. I think he's just a little overwhelmed with so many people around him, but... I trust him.“

Lord Haurchefant nodded hesitantly, not convinced, but also not wanting to doubt my judgement.

„If you say so. Just be careful, please. And let me know if you need any assistance. With anything.“

I smiled warmly at him, thanked him for his kindness and promised to do just that.

On the way back Foulques was still a little grumpy, but it got better as soon as we were back under the cloudy sky and away from people. It was still snowing, but only lightly right now. We visited the merchant and Foulques changed my order in that he wanted only the most important damage repaired instead of every torn detail. I feared this would put his departure that much more into reach, but held my tongue until we were halfway up the stairs to the barracks.

„What are you going to do?“

He looked back at me, towering even taller over me on the staircase.

„Huh? Nothing. It's just faster this way, and you're not going to have to pay as much. Also, I told you before that I'm not staying in this place.“

My heart sank.

„So you're really not willing to keep me company any longer?“

„I didn't say that. Now take your lance, we're leaving.“

„We're... what?“

Kapitel 7: Aegis

A couple of minutes later we were on the way to the Steel Vigil, even though Foulques still wore not much more than his borrowed clothes. My plea to find something in addition went unheeded, so I insisted he should take my cloak. At least I managed that much. A little later he had raised an eyebrow as I took Kweh from the stable, but it was just common sense. Not only did she need regular exercise just as we did, but she also had a few skills that came in handy during fights. Of course, riding was not an option with Foulques only on foot. Or so I thought.

As soon as we were out the gate he started trotting in what seemed a comfortable pace for him. However, my own legs were considerably shorter and I struggled to keep up, so after a while I decided to abandon courtesy in that regard. Foulques grinned at me triumphantly when I caught up to him, and I shot him a glare. Before long we reached our goal.

I halted Kweh and called out to Foulques before we entered the Vigil.

„Wait a minute. Something's off. Look at that.“

I pointed at the entrance to the inner Vigil, which from our viewpoint was barely visible between the ruins in front of it. There were a few more aegis there than usually and I could spot a couple of wolves as well. They had most likely been attracted by the abundant carrion everywhere. Foulques was completely unarmed and I wasn't sure I was able to defend us if all of these creatures came at us at once, even with Kweh's help.

„I know. It won't be a problem. They're either already too fat to move quickly or they're so busy gorging that they won't have much care for us. We just have to make sure not to get too close.“

„I don't think it's going to be that easy, Foulques. They're directly in front of the path leading inside.“

I unmounted and cued Kweh to follow me.

„At least let me go first, you're not even armed.“

Foulques grabbed my arm.

„No. I'm fairly sure I have quite a bit more experience with this. Stay close behind. Keep the lance at the ready and if I tell you to, just run.“

I gave him a flat look.

„That experience didn't prevent you from almost dying the last time you were here.“

„That was different.“

And with that, he went. I held my lance in a tight grip and swallowed, following him.

To my surprise, though, he was right. We managed to tiptoe around the creatures definitely not unnoticed, but unattacked. I let out a relieved sigh when we entered the inner Vigil. However, Foulques motioned me to a stop as I stepped beside him. There was a somewhat strained grin on his lips.

„Those two are different. You should only take them on one at a time.“

I couldn't discern much of a difference from the ones outside, so I questioned him with a look.

„Yes, they look almost identical to the Downies, but it's a different species. They're considerably stronger and even more aggressive. If we're approaching their food they'd probably rip us apart in not even a second.“

That was a bad thing, because they were, of course, feeding on the aevis that blocked the small space between the walls where I'd found Foulques. The lance we were about to retrieve was still in there.

„So we need a distraction.“

He nodded, his eyes not leaving the two aevis.

„And that distraction is going to be me.“

I grabbed his arm in outrage and hissed at him.

„No! You've just recovered! Have a care for your life, you idiot!“

He wasn't very impressed when he turned to me.

„What, do you have so little confidence in your skills? The faster you finish the first one off, the faster you can pull the second one from my back. It won't be able to land a hit every time if I run around fast enough. And that's the only way to keep it from attacking you as long as you're busy with the other one. Or do you have a better plan?“

I stared at him wordlessly for a while.

„We could wait for them to leave. Or come back later.“

„Oh please, you're not saying that in earnest. Don't tell me Ywain managed to turn you into a coward, after all.“

I slightly smacked his arm.

„That's not it, you idiot! I'm scared for *you*! What if-“

„Khuma'zi, stop motherhenning me already. It's insulting. I'll be just fine, and you'll be finishing them off in no time, then we can leave this place. I can't believe you're making so much fuss about some aevis when you've fought *primals* before.“

I stared at him for a moment longer, then turned to watch the two aevis that were still feeding on the carcass. Foulques was right. I needed to calm down and regain composure or I wouldn't be able to see this through with minimal damage. Letting go of his arm I took a deep breath and closed my eyes, calming the whirling, fuzzy energy within me into a strong and solid flame. When I was done I sought Foulques' eyes again and nodded. He returned the gesture.

„Good. Now. We'll have to approach them at the same time and divide their attention. While you're attacking the left one I'm going to use this here-“

He bent down and gathered a handful of fresh snow that he compressed into a hard ball.

“-on the other one, and as soon as I have him I'll run. Whatever you do, don't let yours get away.“

I nodded again. I was ready.

We moved quickly and, just like Foulques had planned, each of us managed to capture the attention of an aevis. Foulques lured the aevis away from me, so I could concentrate on attacking the second one while being left alone by the first. Kweh was assisting me by attacking as well, and healing me if I got hit. Still, I kept an ear at Foulques, and after a while I heard him gasp and fall. I shot him a glance and froze completely. My aevis immediately knocked me down hard, all air leaving my lungs, and I had a hard time getting air back in. It hurt, but my attention was immediately on Foulques on the ground again. The aevis was now attacking him unhindered, and with an abyss right behind him there was no way for him to escape. This couldn't be true. Not again.

Gasping I commanded Kweh to stop attacking the aevis and ran. Kweh and the other aevis at my heels it took only a few moments to reach them, but I'd be too late like this. Foulques had curled up to protect himself, but the aevis attacked relentlessly and with a force that pushed him closer to the abyss with every hit. My heart thundered in my chest and I gasped for air. I felt both cold and sweaty with fear, but I ran as fast as my legs would carry me. As soon as I knew I was close enough I threw my lance at the aevis, still running towards it. Upon getting hit it turned around with a furious cry, facing me. Kweh immediately started attacking it and I sprang forward and to the side to grab the lance that was still sticking in the aevis' neck. The other aevis had reached us as well and attacked my side, so I had to let go and escape a few fulms. I ran a half circle around both creatures and threw myself between them again when I saw a chance. I grabbed the shaft of the lance and with a wild cry I tugged it free, then used that same momentum to slip behind them.

I slipped on the frozen ground and landed on my side. The aevis were on me again immediately, but I managed to slice one of them across the chest scales. I got up and retreated a few steps, panting heavily. Now with both aevis on me I couldn't afford to switch my attention to Foulques, but I needed his help. I couldn't see him, I had no idea what condition he was in, but I blindly called to him. I didn't get an answer, but I saw an opening in one of the aevis when it bit at Kweh and thrust my lance into its neck. The other aevis took advantage and dealt me a hard blow that sent me flying a couple of fulms.

For the second time I got the wind knocked out of me and gasped. The good thing was that I landed near Foulques. I had only a second to get up and ready again, and I used it to also call out to Foulques again. He was staring at the aevis with wide eyes, frozen stiff by fear. There was a lot of blood on his tunic.

„Foulques, get up! *Get up!!* I have them both, get your lance! Now!! I can't- ugh!“

The aevis almost managed to bite my leg, and while I'd stopped it with the shaft of the lance the impact still pushed me backwards. For a moment I was clinging to the creature's muzzle, my heart almost stopping at how close its sharp teeth were to my belly. I forced a knee up at its jaw and luckily it shook me off instead of biting me in two halves.

„Foulques!!“

I wanted to throw something at him to force him out of his shock, but neither did I have something to throw other than my lance, nor did I have a chance to. Those aevis were a nightmare indeed. I didn't know how long I'd be able to withstand them with only Kweh's help. Adrenaline coursed through my entire body, filling me with hot strength. Still, I knew I wouldn't be able to make it alone.

„*Foulques, get moving already!*“

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 fulms, 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.

Kapitel 9: Jail

Just a little later we were well on our way. To my chagrin we were both on foot, Kweh just slightly behind me. Foulques had refused to use the aetheryte right under our noses, because of "all those people" and because he didn't "want to enter the city". I thought he was childish to refuse it, but he silenced me by telling me he wouldn't mind if I used it, but he would certainly not. So I just grumbled to myself and followed him southwards out of the camp.

The weather had improved from the day before. The temperatures were still freezing, but there was no fresh snow, and the clouds seemed to get lighter in some places. It was nice not needing to worry about getting caught in a snow storm. I was tired enough as it was. I tried to lighten my mood by talking to Foulques.

„You still don't like Lord Haurchefant very much, do you?“

Foulques huffed.

„He's just a creep.“

I'd heard that before, but not about Lord Haurchefant.

„You're aware that people do say that about you as well, don't you?“

He gave me a look, but rather than showing any signs of being offended he again had that strange arrogant aura around him.

„You're talking about the people from the guild. Well, it's no surprise they're uncomfortable around me. They don't understand what real courage is, and being faced with someone who does they can't help but cower.“

I stopped short and stared at him. I didn't believe he still talked like that after what happened in the last suns.

„I don't think that's quite true, you know.“

He turned around to me, a challenge in his suddenly hard eyes. But he remained silent, so I explained to him.

„I think you're missing something important there. Of course you can't gather courage if there's nothing threatening in the first place. On that point, I agree. I'm not sure how much you know about what's going on in the guild nowadays, but what Master Ywain is trying to teach is not simply to stop being scared in the face of danger. On the contrary. Being scared is important, because the feeling tells you to be careful. I mean, you don't want to die, do you?“

Foulques' look went even darker. Not expecting an answer I continued.

„So the thing about his idea of courage is that you actually need this fear. But you have to learn not to get consumed by it, or it will render you helpless. If you're getting overwhelmed by your fear it's much more likely that you're making fatal mistakes or that you even won't be able to move anymore.“

I still had a clear image of Foulques during the fight in the Steel Vigil, eyes wide and unable to move from his spot on the ground. His eyes and jaw set told me he was thinking of the same, so I made sure not to rub it into his face any more than that.

„Likewise, if you're suppressing your fear you'd likely end up making such mistakes as well, because you'd lose sense of what you're capable of. So you have to be aware of being afraid, but still keep a clear head. And I think that's what he means when he says courage comes from resolve and composure, and that a lancer doesn't know the meaning of fear. The latter's not meant to be taken quite literally, if you ask me.“

Foulques' expression had changed not all that much, but I thought it meant something that all he did was look tense and grumpy and just walked on, staring into the endless white in front of us. I knew that was as far as I could push it now, so I moved my feet again and left him some space to think it over.

When we reached the observatory, however, I broke the silence.

„Will you wait for a couple of minutes? I'd like to say another proper goodbye to someone.“

Foulques paused, brows furrowing. He didn't look happy and pondered my question for a moment, but finally he shrugged.

„If you must. But I'm going on ahead and wait outside in the woods. I'm sick of all these people everywhere.“

So he actually was willing to wait now instead of just ditching me? That was some improvement! I smiled at him and nodded.

„I'll be quick.“

I jogged off to find Ser Alberic in one of the buildings, throwing Foulques a last glance before I entered. He was already on the way southward, his wounds still causing him to move cautiously. He did look pretty stiff, but I couldn't tell if he was uncomfortable because of the people or if it was just the cold. Kweh was waiting near the entrance of the building when I entered it, but she seemed to watch Foulques go, ruffling her feathers.

Finding Ser Alberic didn't take long. He was shuffling some papers on his desk when I entered the room.

„Ser Alberic.“

He turned around, a smile already on his face when he recognized my voice.

„Ah, Khuma'zi, I didn't expect you back here already. How are you?“

„I'm fine, thank you. I'm actually already headed back to Gridania with someone I picked up in the area. He's waiting outside.“

„Oh, why didn't you just take him inside with you?“

I smiled. That's what I liked about Ser Alberic.

„I'd have, but he didn't want to. I don't want to make him wait for too long, as he's injured, but I wanted to at least visit you before we're leaving--“

We both turned to the window when we heard raised voices and the sounds of crossed blades from outside.

„What's going on?“

Ser Alberic went to the window, brows furrowed. I stepped beside him to get a look at what happened down there and groaned. It was Foulques, pointing his lance at someone. There was already a small group of people surrounding them, trying to de-escalate the situation. Whatever did Foulques get into this time? Couldn't I let him out of my sight for even a few minutes?

„Sorry, I need to go. That's him.“

I ran down the stairs and out onto the court, passing by Kweh, who was still waiting near the entrance and watching the commotion from a safe distance. Foulques stood straight, his back to me and lance still pointing at the small group of people. I could hear the smile in his words.

„What? You're not even up to a little fight with me? And here I thought you'd actually grown some back bone when I saw you fighting those dragons.“

Dragons? When did he have the chance to... oh. The attack in the Steel Vigil.

„But I should've known. You've always been a coward, haven't you? I'm sorry, but you won't have the choice to opt out of it this time. You know the reason well, don't you?“

His opponent didn't reply, only stared at him darkly and hesitantly. Presumably a Wildwood Elezen, his slicked back hair was of a very light ashen color, and his equally light eyes had an unpleasant expression in them. My first impression of him was... not too nice, and one of my ears folded back.

The guy was holding his own lance in front of him, but it was pointing to the sky now instead of at Foulques. So this was one of the lancers that were involved in the theft a few years back? Slowly it dawned on me what had brought Foulques into these

freezing lands in the first place. If he had been tracking this man... but even so, I had to stop Foulques. I reached him, grabbing his arm.

„What are you doing? Stop that!“

My voice was low, and while I was sure he'd heard me he immediately shook off my hand, not even looking at me. He took a step forward, readying his lance. The smile was still on his face.

„Get ready!“

Then he charged at the guy, and I got moving immediately. I couldn't outrun Foulques, so his opponent had to defend himself for a moment. The people around us retreated a few steps. Some were touching their weapons, but otherwise not moving. I figured they'd see if I could settle it before interfering.

Again, I grabbed Foulques by the arm, more forcefully this time and thus succeeding in interrupting him.

„Stop it!!“

He did look at me now, and his eyes were full of a wild fury. He pushed me away so forcefully that I stumbled backwards.

„Get lost!“

Before I could regain my balance he charged at the guy again, quickly landing a couple of hits that got him bleeding in several places. I groaned inwardly.

I ran to them, my own lance ready, and threw myself in the way of Foulques' next thrust. Evading the blade I blocked his lance with the shaft and thrust it upwards, so it couldn't harm anyone. I grabbed it and held on to it. Foulques' eyes chilled me to the bone.

„Get out of the way! That's one of the traitorous bastards from the guild!“

So my conclusion was right indeed. But still...

„No! Get a grip on yourself, you idiot! You're just going to get into trouble if you keep doing this!“

Even while I threw my words at him he danced to the side and twisted the lance free from my grip. His eyes were already locked on his target again, bloodlust overflowing. He'd kill him if I didn't stop him. Out of the corner of my vision I noticed Ser Alberic standing by the door, his brows furrowed in worry. I couldn't dwell on that, though.

I kept my place between Foulques and the other lancer, concentrating on warding off all of his attacks. But instead of calming him down it only made him more furious. He suddenly looked at me, his stare burning hot. With a pang I realized he felt betrayed

by my resistance. My heart sank. Completely beyond words Foulques let out a frustrated cry and attacked me full force, not holding back even a little. It was almost the same as in Alder Springs.

Only that we were surrounded by a few seasoned fighters this time, some of which probably matched his strength, or even surpassed it. But Foulques either didn't notice or he didn't care about it, because all of his attention was on me, focusing only on aiming the lance at my most vulnerable spots. I parried and evaded his attacks one after the other, but I couldn't bring myself to seriously point the lance at him for a second time. I hoped he'd give up after a while when I wouldn't engage him. At the same time, I worried about the others. It was only a matter of time until someone would decide to step in and do something about this fight, and as things were that most likely meant that Foulques would get hurt again.

„Just fight back and kill him! He's completely crazy! He doesn't deserve otherwise!!“

The voice cracked in fear. From it's position behind me I gathered that it must have been Foulques' original opponent. I ground my teeth, wanting to turn around and face him, but I couldn't afford to remove my attention from Foulques, whose attacks still came fast and strong, albeit a little sloppy due to his rage. From the way he moved I was fairly certain he paid his injury no mind at all.

In that moment, three Elezen came at Foulques from behind, and I quickly decided to let them subdue him since they hadn't drawn their weapons. Two of them grabbed an arm each and the third one put an arm around him in a choke-hold. Foulques growled when they got him and thrashed about, but from this close the lance wasn't of much use anymore. He didn't let go of it, though. He never did. One of the soldiers hit him in the stomach. Foulques gasped and would have tilted over if the guy behind him didn't hold him upright so forcefully. The sight let my heart hammer in my chest, even though I believed he hadn't gotten near his injury.

„Don't hurt him!“

Tucking away my own lance I was at Foulques' side immediately. His breath came in tiny gasps and he was squeezing his eyes shut in pain. The Elezen behind him gave me an irritated look as I grabbed his arm and tugged at it, but his voice was surprisingly calm.

„We'll deal with him, just don't get in the way.“

„No, please don't hurt him anymore. He's my friend, I'll manage this on-“

„Your *friend*?!“ This shriek came from the lancer behind us, but no one paid him any mind. The comment sparked some anger in me, though, and my ears flattened a bit. Otherwise my attention remained on the Elezen behind Foulques.

„I don't care if he's your friend. Apparently he needs to cool down a little, so we're giving him a good long chance to do so in a cell. Troublemakers won't be tolerated in this observatory, and you can bet your ass that this applies to you adventurers

tenfold.“

Oh no. Not this.

Foulques immediately tensed up and started struggling again. The Elezen behind him nodded to one of the others to take his lance from him. He didn't succeed, having to restrain him at the same time. Still standing right in front of him I grabbed Foulques' wrists gently, but firmly. His stare burned holes in my skull and he growled like a wild animal.

„Don't touch me, you bloody traitor!“

Since he couldn't move his arms or torso anymore, he resorted to kick me away from him and the Elezen around him roughly jerked him away. He probably wouldn't have succeeded anyway, as I managed to avoid his foot on my own, but I felt my own temper flaring for a moment. That impossible idiot! Sometimes I really wanted to slap some sense into him. Glaring at him I ground my teeth and swallowed back my anger. My words still came out rather rough, even if my voice was low.

„Don't fight them anymore, you'll only make it worse. Let me take care of that. Just bear with it for now. Please.“

I grabbed his lance and tugged slightly. Foulques didn't let go, still staring down at me with seething fury, showing his teeth. He still had trouble breathing, but he didn't back down. If he kept this up he'd pass out soon.

„Please, Foulques.“

My voice was almost down to a whisper, but I couldn't clear the rough edge it still had. I carefully met his eyes and forced myself to calm down. From the look in his eyes I almost thought he'd spit on me, but I was glad he didn't. My next words finally had a softer tone to them.

„Let me keep this for now. I'll give it back to you, I promise. Try to calm down a little. That's the only thing that'll help you right now.“

The guy holding him rolled his eyes.

„Enough of that, I don't have all day. Get moving. And you, take that damn lance already.“

He wasn't talking to me, but to a guard that was standing nearby. He all but ripped the weapon from Foulques' and my grasps, but before he could take it away I again grabbed it.

„Please let me take it. I promise I won't do anything that will get anyone in trouble.“

„I'm afraid I can't do that--“

„Oldaric, please give it to him. I'll take full responsibility.“

I turned around to Ser Alberic, who interfered for the first time. He looked at the guard firmly, but still with his usual goodnaturedness. The guard, however, hesitated and made no move to give up the lance just yet. His expression was conflicted and he broke the brief eye contact with Ser Alberic. I didn't know how their positions interacted or how hierarchy exactly worked in the observatory, but Oldaric was clearly struggling to find an appropriate answer to the seemingly simple request. Or rather, he looked like he was struggling to find the appropriate words for a refusal. Ser Alberic straightened, his expression changing.

“That is an order, Oldaric.”

Ser Alberic was no giant, especially compared to an Elezen, but even I could clearly feel the force of his unleashed authority. I'd hardly ever seen him like that before, but there was a reason this guy had been an Azure Dragoon and was now training new generations of Dragoons. No one would doubt it in this instant, and Oldaric certainly didn't. He gave in after a moment, but not happily. I guessed it wasn't exactly praise he'd be earning from his superiors today, but I quietly thanked both of them. Ser Alberic nodded, but his eyes told me that he expected me to not make this a mistake on his part. I returned his gaze firmly with a nod.

When I looked back to Foulques, the three guards had him almost to the building where the cells were located. The rigidity of his movements told me he was still screaming murder inside. I'd have to talk to the guards once Foulques was completely out of earshot. I waited a couple moments more once they had taken him inside. Oldaric was about to return to whatever he'd been doing before, but I called him back.

„Just a moment, please.“

He certainly didn't look happy, but he heard me out. Maybe he was still intimidated by Ser Alberic's presence. I motioned to the building with the cells.

„Please make sure there is no possibility for him to break out of his cell. There shouldn't be anyone else with him in there in any case, or he might try to take them hostage.“

I hesitated. I didn't want to make matters worse for Foulques, but I also couldn't risk the lives of other people. I pulled myself together.

„Be extremely careful around him. I'm not sure if he's even able to do it, but he might try to kill to get out of there. I'll talk to him later, maybe I can get through to him by then. And please, don't do anything to hurt him further if it can be avoided at all. It would only make him more aggressive.“

The guard looked almost disgusted, clearly not enjoying this sort of trouble anywhere near him. But he nodded curtly to my words before he took off.

„I'll let them know.“

I sighed. That was not what I wanted to deal with, myself. We could've been well on our way back home already.

„So that was your friend, yes?“

Ser Alberic sounded a little doubtful and a little worried. I couldn't blame him.

„He is. I know it didn't look like that.“

That reminded me. I looked around to find the lancer that had been involved in Foulques' betrayal all those years ago, but couldn't find him. He probably had gotten out of there as soon as he was certain Foulques was being safely arrested. I turned back to Ser Alberic.

„He met someone who betrayed him pretty bad in the past, and it completely tipped him off. I'm already trying to get him back on a more reasonable path, but I guess this will take a lot of time.“

Ser Alberic nodded contemplatively.

„Such things do take time indeed, and I do wish you luck with it. We'd appreciate it if he wouldn't cause any more trouble, though.“

„I'll try. Actually, I was planning to talk to the guy he was attacking, but he already disappeared. Do you know him, by any chance?“

To my relief, Ser Alberic nodded.

„I've seen him take part in practice around here, but not very often. His name is Cillien, I believe. You could try talking to the other lancers, they might know where he went.“

Again, I thanked him, and took off to look for this Cillien.

Kapitel 10: Cillien

I found some of the lancers and asked to see Cillien, but they were pretty reluctant to tell me anything. They obviously weren't completely sure if my intentions of settling this matter peacefully were actually true, but after a bit of talking they told me. I found Cillien in a small room in one of the buildings near the edge of the observatory. There were two others in the room with him, all three glaring at the door when I made myself known.

Upon recognizing my face Cillian slowly stood up, watching me warily.

"What do you want from me?"

He sounded gruff and hostile. So he was already on the defensive? Great.

"I'm sorry for intruding, but I'd like to talk to you for a moment. About Foulques."

"About him, yeah? Well, *I don't* like to, so you can just leave. I don't have anything to say to you."

My tail flicked.

"Then let me just ask this of you: please try to not cross his path. I don't want him getting a chance to hurt you, nor do I want you getting hurt."

Cillien's face changed to a curious mixture of a snarl and a smirk.

"Ohh, don't you? How *honorable* of you. I'll tell you something. I'm not planning to get out of my way to track him down, but if I meet him again I will see to it that he'll not be able to swing his spear around any longer. You can rest assured that he only took me by surprise earlier, or I would've done it already, and with pleasure."

His smile won over the snarl, but I knew he was nothing but full of hot air. Still, I kept my anger from my face as best as I could and contemplated my words for a moment. I couldn't keep my hands relaxed, though.

"Please don't, Cillien. I think we can agree that the path he's taken until now is not the best, but you and I both know that it was you and your friends who betrayed him in the end. I'm not asking you to apologize to him, but at least stay out of his way."

Cillien snorted at that.

"To the seven hells with you. I bet he's told you a heart wrenching story about how *he* was the *poor* guy who took all the blame all alone, but guess what? He *was*. And he deserved every minute of being jailed, bloody treacherous Duskwight that he is."

Cillians friends grinned at that and I took a moment to make sure my ears stayed

upright.

But I couldn't believe what I'd just heard. This guy actually had the nerves to dish up this blatant lie to me?

"If I had any say in the matter I'd see him executed yesterday rather than today, 'cause as we have seen again today he's a dangerous and lying liability. Just what you'd expect from the likes of him. Now leave this place at once, or I'll make you. If you can call this scum a friend you can't be any better yourself. You're all nothing but liars and bandits anyway, aren't you? No wonder you're running to each other for comfort, heh."

I swallowed a growl and suppressed the impulse of biting off the finger he pointed at me. I did, however, stare him down until he averted his eyes before turning to leave without any other word. I was fuming.

It was no wonder Foulques wanted to make him pay. After that encounter I was more than a little ready to do the same. But of course, that wouldn't do much good, so I took Kweh with me and left the observatory to go for a run in the icy woods until I was so miserable with cold that my anger got subdued. After that, I brought Kweh to the stables. I apologized to her for making her accompany me in this cold, but she was just happy to dig in when I supplied her with food and water. This time I stayed with her for most of the day, and decided to share her stall at night instead of asking for a bed somewhere. It was comfortable and warm enough.

The next two suns went by without any further incidents. I tried to talk to the guards and then their superiors about Foulques, but they were clearly irritated by my insistence of just letting him go. Talking to Foulques was like talking to a wall, so I kept my visits short.

Entering the prison the next day I greeted the guards and quietly asked if there had been anything out of the ordinary, but one of them shook his head. And again I asked them to let Foulques go. Surely he'd had enough time to calm down, it's been three suns, after all. With a sharp sigh the other one informed me that right now their authorities were below, negotiating his release. That dumbfounded me a bit.

"Negotiating?"

"There seems to be a condition he has to agree to, but they're at it for a while already. Doesn't look too well, I think."

The other guard unhappily followed the short conversation, only offering the barest of nods to that. I thanked them and quickly turned away to see what went on downstairs. Ghosting down the stairs I prepared myself for whatever would greet me below. At last I heard displeased voices, and slowly, quietly turned around the corner.

A small group of high ranking people were gathered in front of Foulques' cell. Some were shaking their heads, some only showed stiff faces.

"Look, we don't want to keep you here any longer than we already have, but we're not

going to release you if you're about to cause any more trouble. Leave this observatory at once and leave our people alone. Now and for as long as you live, and nobody will bother you anymore. Otherwise, we'll have to deal with you in a different fashion."

I was staying a little back, but close enough to glimpse into the small cell. Foulques was still alone in it, standing against the wall. He didn't answer them and kept his silence. Then he noticed me. As soon as he recognized me his eyes darkened even more and he turned his head, ignoring me. This made the others notice me, too, and they turned to me.

"So you've come. Just as well. You've been begging me to release him before, so I agreed to relieve him of his cell. Your friend here, however, doesn't seem able to just quietly leave our observatory. You can try your luck, maybe he'll listen to you. I've had enough for today, I'm going to prepare appropriate measures for this problem. Good day."

And with that, the gathered authorities shuffled out of the prison without any more acknowledgments. Well. At least they were giving me a chance, even though they obviously deemed it impossible for me to turn Foulques around. I was sure it wouldn't be easy, especially after my opposition to him, but I wasn't planning to let them do something to him just because getting that agreement out of him would be difficult to accomplish.

„Hi there. How are you?"

Unsurprisingly, I didn't get a reply. I stifled a sigh and got right to the point.

„You know, I do think their condition is reasonable, and I ask the same of you. Please, Foulques, don't go after Cillien anymore. Or anyone else, for that matter."

Here his eyes did darken yet again, and my voice got more urgent.

„I know he did something awful to you and you're rightfully angry at him, but that's no reason to kill him. There must be other ways for you to deal with this. I... talked to Cillien earlier, and well, he wasn't thrilled. In fact, he was a complete ass about this whole thing, but he won't cross your path on his own if he can help it. I'm sure he's actually scared shitless of you. So please, don't go after him."

I could see the muscles in Foulques' jaw tighten, but he still didn't reply.

„Promise me that, Foulques. Please. They won't let you out of here until you do, and you've heard what their idea to solve this problem is."

He was silently raging, his fingers digging into his crossed arms. But he still neither said a word nor did he look at me. His eyes tried to burn holes into the far wall. I waited for a while.

Nothing happened.

„Well, it's your decision. But I'd rather see you outside under the sky than another sun behind bars, or worse. And I'd like to get home soon myself. I'm sure you do, too.“

I waited some more. The frantic movement of his jaw muscles would have been fascinating to watch if I'd not been preoccupied with coming up with more persuasion ideas. I didn't really succeed, though. To someone like him freedom would probably be the most powerful incentive. I didn't know what else would be capable of achieving that goal if killing his foes was no option.

After a while he finally looked at me, if only for a very quick and very hateful glance. That caught my full attention immediately.

„Fine. I promise I won't kill that ugly bastard of a traitor.“

He sounded almost as if he gagged on the words, but I nodded. That was all I wanted to hear. I flew up the stairs to find the people that had left a bit earlier.

* * *

A little later we walked out of the observatory's gates. The clouds hung deep in the sky and had an ominous darkness to them that mirrored Foulques' still sour mood. He hadn't talked to me since he gave his promise, but again I was glad he hadn't just left me there and run off on his own. Granted, I hadn't even given him much chance to. Still, the angry silence ate at me. I hadn't tried to get him to talk nor had I said anything to him myself. It would've just made him even angrier.

I looked up at the brooding sky, completely trusting Kweh to alert me of any nearby attackers. She made small, unhappy noises from time to time, ruffling her feathers along with it. I guessed it had something to do with the weather, maybe there'd be a snowstorm soon. If we hurried, we could probably avoid it. It wasn't that far to the border now, the number of trees had already increased significantly. The sight was very comforting despite the deep snow that was still decorating them.

Right when I opened my mouth to tell him to hurry Foulques turned and went for the trees on our left. Automatically I followed him.

„Wait, where are you going? We should hurry, the weather's going to get bad.“

„I *noticed*, thank you. Now will you leave me alone for a bit of private business or would you like to follow me for that, as well?“

He still didn't look at me and his tone was icy. At least he finally said something. Then he shot me a glare from the corner of his eyes, still not directly looking at me. But I stopped, unwillingly. Why did it have to be *now*? We shouldn't stay here and wait for the storm to hit.

Kweh whined again. She was getting really anxious, dancing from foot to foot and just not keeping still at all. Again and again she looked at the sky behind us. I took her reins and petted her reassuringly, but it didn't do much to calm her down. I shivered;

the cold crept through me from just everywhere if I didn't move. We really should get out of here. A few first snowflakes fell from the sky, and soon after the wind picked up as well. It felt as if it blew right through my armor and down to my very bones. I dearly missed my cloak right now. I shivered again and looked into the trees where Foulques' footprints vanished, but still no sign of him. Just how long did he need to simply empty his bladder? I knew from undressing him before that his breeches weren't overly complicated to open. It really shouldn't take him that long.

I froze, both in- and outwardly. What if he wasn't doing that at all? It was such a perfect chance to ditch me and find Cillien again.

My heartbeat quickened, but I hesitated. Maybe I was just impatient because I wanted to be on the move again. Also, I probably shouldn't be assuming right away he'd ditch me just because he was taking a little longer. Maybe he'd reappear any moment.

But he didn't for another few shivers. They were coming increasingly faster now, though.

I decided to get moving in any case. The wind was getting even stronger and I'd just freeze if I kept standing there. Should I find him innocent of my wild accusation, he'd get angry again, but well, that wasn't anything new. And besides, we *really* should get out of here asap anyway. So there.

I mounted Kweh and followed his trail into the trees. I hoped there was no need to follow him very far, as the wind already started to erase his footprints.

A few heartbeats further along his trail the distance between each track suddenly grew. I cursed. That idiot really had ditched me, running in a wide half circle back to where we had just come from. And right into the direction of the snowstorm. I desperately wanted to hit something. Just why did I have to care for a person with such a moronic obsession? And why did this person have to have such a strong attraction for dangerous situations on top of that?

I nudged Kweh into a fast trot. The snow was getting denser, we needed to hurry. Kweh was certainly faster than Foulques, but his tracks would be completely erased soon, and although I was pretty sure whom he wanted to find, I didn't know where exactly that someone was located right now. And judging by how fast the weather was getting worse, there was the likely possibility of Foulques interrupting his hunt to seek shelter somewhere. I only hoped I'd find him before anything disastrous happened.

I'd lost his trail soon. It had just disappeared into the wide sea of snow that was blanketing the ground and everything else outside under the sky. I was completely drenched, my head wanted to split itself apart from the sharp wind and I could hardly see or hear anything in this snow anymore, let alone feel my body. And with both our destination as well as this area being rather unfamiliar to Kweh I couldn't even leave it to her to find the way. In fact, I had a hard time getting her to run around in that storm any longer, as she kept moving towards every tree, every rock that promised

shelter. I wasn't completely sure where we were, but I assumed the observatory wasn't too far away in front of us and slightly to the left.

Maybe I really should stop my search and wait for the storm to pass. I wasn't accomplishing anything like this, except maybe getting Kweh and me sick. It should be next to impossible that Foulques would actually find Cillien outside right now. No one in their right minds would be about in this weather, which indeed made me question my own state of mind for a second. I shoved the thought from my mind angrily.

I doubted Foulques had entered the observatory again, so he most likely was waiting somewhere for the weather to pass. I should do the same. I wasn't sure yet what exactly I'd do, but if I returned to the observatory alone I'd immediately put suspicion on Foulques. So that was out of the question for now.

I turned Kweh towards the rocks; she was more than willing to comply. We went along it for a while until I spotted what I'd hoped to find: the opening to a cave. I dismounted and took Kweh's reins. She was a bit nervous to enter such a place and needed some conviction, but after a couple of moments she followed me inside. It was a relief to get out of the biting wind and wetness. Kweh shuffled her feathers and shook herself dry. Even just a few fulms away from the entrance it was pitch black in there, so I had to rely on my sense of hearing and be very careful about placing my feet. The reflected sounds of our footsteps told me that this cave was pretty big, so I could keep us moving in circles near the entrance. After a while I could see a few shapes if I strained my eyes, so I picked up a little speed. It was still not enough to really keep me warm, but if I stopped I'd just get sick. I didn't know how long I went on walking in circles, but it felt like hours. The dull walking set my nerves on edge as much as it tired me out, so as soon as the light from the entrance got lighter and the howling of the wind lessened I led Kweh back outside.

It was still snowing, but this was nothing compared to before. I mounted Kweh again and scanned our surroundings for a minute before deciding to head northwards. This was the direction Foulques had originally taken, so I'd continue my search there for now.

For a while I saw nothing but a pristine blanket of snow wherever I looked. Only Kweh's footprints behind us were disturbing the smoothness and I didn't even see or hear any other creatures. But then I found a trail ahead of us that definitely didn't belong to any wildlife, cutting straight across our path to the northeast. I followed it and soon a second trail came into view, merging with the first one after a while. The snow was deep, but the distance between the individual tracks again hinted at a running speed. In two places the tracks were broken by a larger imprint and some smaller, straight marks beside it. It looked like someone had fallen, and the smaller marks most likely originated from something narrow. Like a blade, or a lance. It made me worry. I clung to the thin hope of finding Foulques before he would do something stupid, or maybe finding something entirely unrelated to him.

I did find him, though, and I was torn between despair and a dulling disappointment. He was standing calf deep in fresh snow, his back to me and the lance pointing to the ground. At his feet was Cillien, whose spilled blood was quickly freezing. He was dead.

„Why? Why did you do that?“

My question was no more than a whisper, but Foulques turned around to me, his somewhat peaceful expression quickly turning dark.

„What kind of question is that?“

„Now you've made a target of yourself again. If they catch you you'll end up in jail yet again, or even worse!“

„I won't. I'll just have to kill them first.“

He said those words utterly unagitated, as if he was talking about last year's weather. It shook me that he just didn't seem to care at all what he did or what was going to happen to him.

„But this way you'll only make more enemies! You can't kill half of Eorzea's population!“

He huffed dismissively, looking the other way, but didn't reply.

„Is that what you want for your life? Always having to be on the run, always in danger of getting arrested or killed? Do you really want to be the bad Duskwight that everyone looks at with condescending eyes?“

He whipped his head around, his eyes furiously burning holes in my skull.

„What difference does it make now? They already do!“

„But of course they do! What choice are you giving them?! Just look at what you've done in the last moons and years. You've went about the world and killed things, and then killed several people on top of that!“

He took a moment to reply, looking at me with a strange expression.

„Just what's wrong with you? Why can't you leave me alone already?“

„Because I think you're still a decent person, deep down, and I want you to remember that.“

His face turned almost disgusted, but he didn't object. I went on, my voice getting heated.

„Just think about what you told me in Alder Springs. You said you had to *work* not to forget your hatred. You probably would have just let it go if not for all the work you'd put in feeding your hatred, wouldn't you? Or think about your time in jail. I really don't know what it was like, but I imagine it was anything but easy. But you still endured it without fleeing or killing anybody, even if you wanted to at some point.“

He just stared at the snow darkly, obviously not about to say anything to the words I threw at him.

„Or that lesson with the Alpha Wolf you gave me. After I'd defeated it you told me by doing that I'd have helped the people make Gridania safer. And before all of that even, you felt so bad about the theft that you felt the need to turn yourself in. Even the way you usually talk.”

I gave him and myself a moment before I continued a little bit calmer.

“That, I believe, is your true self. And you should be able to return to that, at least to a certain degree.”

His knuckles turned white and he started to shake a little. He turned to me.

„What do you even know about me?! You're just spouting some nonsense you desperately want to believe in!”

„I don't think I am.”

Our eyes were locked, his full of hot rage and mine probably quite stubborn.

„Have you ever thought about what you want to do with your life since you came out of jail? Aside from your revenge, I mean. I bet not. But maybe you should. There's all kinds of possibilities for you, you just need to find out what's right for you. Please think about it for a moment. I mean, what did killing Cillien do for you? It doesn't change a thing from the past. And I can't imagine it honestly did make you feel good about yourself.”

A lopsided grin was forming on his lips, and he slowly straightened himself. Even from the distance we stood apart he managed to look down at me with triumph written all over his face.

„Heh. What if it did, though? I felt pretty damn nice until you started spouting all that crap.”

„I don't think it will last, Foulques, even if you do feel like that right now. You're by far not stupid enough to be permanently content with that. There has to be a different way to deal with that, something that lasts a little longer.”

„What the hells do you even *know*?! Someone like you doesn't have the tiniest idea how it is to--”

„I *know* I don't. Of course not. But you know what? When I look at you your unhappiness with life just screams at me. Are you even aware of how much you're stuck in the past?”

We just glared at each other for a moment, postures angry and my tail slightly lashing

from side to side. Foulques kept quiet, and I continued, raising my hands in a frustrated gesture.

„You don't have to *be* stuck in the past, you know. You can change that. Find something else to do, something that can give true meaning to your life. Something that will genuinely make you happy. At least try. I can see that you hate me for saying all those things and that you don't even want to hear them right now, but I honestly think it's worth it. You deserve better than what you're allowing yourself right now.“

I kept watching him waiting for an answer, but I didn't get one. Instead, Foulques turned his eyes to the ground, his whole attitude getting somewhat slack. I thought I could see the same confusion and loss for words that I saw back in Camp Dragonhead, when he had left me without answering my proposal about sticking together. Well, if he was actually willing to think it over I'd happily give him all the time he needed. However, there was something we needed to take care of, even if I got sick just thinking about it. I weakly gestured to the corpse at his feet.

„We need to do something about him. If someone finds him here they'll immediately know it was you.“

Foulques looked at me like I'd just lost my mind. I bristled.

„What? You're not eager to go back behind bars right away, are you? Then let's move him somewhere and bury him or something. And make sure you erase that blood in the snow as well.“

He still didn't reply, but at least he helped me put the corpse over Kweh's back and then buried the bloodied snow with enough fresh snow that it wouldn't be found immediately. The unfortunate thing was that we couldn't erase our footprints just that easily. We just had to hope that the weather would take care of that before anyone found the trail.

I was silently fuming the whole time we were on the move to dispose of the body, disgusted that Foulques' actions had made me take part in this. The right thing, of course, would have been to return to the Observatory and report the murder, but that would certainly not have resulted in Foulques happily returning home with me. I hated every second of it.

A couple of malms away we threw the body down into a deep crevice, where it fell into a pile of fresh snow that covered it almost completely. Maybe this would work. As soon as we were done I turned on my heels and stomped back towards the main path. I wanted nothing more than to leave this forsaken land of ice and bury all those painful memories where I never would find them again. With a fierceness that almost brought tears to my eyes I thought of my sister and my room in Gridania. I hoped this time there'd be nothing to delay us further.

In any case, something was missing, so I slowed my steps and then stopped

altogether. I could only hear two sets of footsteps in the snow, and that were Kweh's and my own. I firmly denied the possibility that Foulques would part ways now, but it still took me a moment to turn around. He was still standing at the crevice, looking down into it's depths. Since his back was to me and his posture didn't give anything away I had no idea what went through his head at that moment. Did he think about what we had just done? About Cillien? Or about the things I'd told him earlier? Or something else entirely? Whatever it was, I didn't want to interrupt his thoughts just then, because I got a feeling that it was something important for him. So I just waited, my shivering getting worse as the minutes ticked by.

Right as I wanted to call out to him, after all, he turned around, looking at me. I couldn't read his face, but his glowering, speculative eyes were locked to mine. I waited. He was silent for a moment longer, then he sighed.

„What are you still doing there?“

Stubbornly I shoved away the cold grip of disappointment. If he was accompanying me back to Gridania there was no need to feel disappointed. Stubbornness crept into my voice.

„I'm waiting for you to get moving so we can go home, obviously. And I'd hoped it would be just a little bit faster, because I'm freezing.“

„What makes you think I was planning to do that?“

„You promised.“

„And I just broke another promise to you, and in a very obvious way at that. You were an idiot for seriously believing that cheap excuse.“

He barked out a short laugh, a strange half grin appearing on his lips. It quickly disappeared again.

„No, I wasn't. I believed in you.“

„You can't be that stupid. You should've known better.“

I stared at him. *I should have known better?* For real?

„Wait a moment. You call me an idiot for trusting you when you still hold a grudge against the lancers because *they* didn't believe you all those years ago? You can't be serious.“

Another strange grin formed on his lips, but I wasn't sure if it was directed at me or not.

„Heh, you make it sound so stupid.“

I gave him a flat look, not sure if he was teasing me or if he actually meant that.

„That's because it *is* stupid. And now, would you please get moving already, I'm sick of this cold and I could use some *real* rest in a warmer environment.“

I stared at him, hands balled into slightly shaking fists that had everything to do with the temperatures as opposed to my temperament. He stared back, considering his next move, until he broke the eye contact and started moving in my direction. He passed me, ignoring me completely, and continued along the beaten path that led back to where we came from. I still stared at him, knitting my brows. Was that compliance or just rejection and coincidence? Either way, I followed him. It was high time we got back, even Kweh was clearly eager to go home.

To both my relief and chagrin the snowfall got heavier again. The fresh snow would cover our tracks, but we'd also get wet again. I hadn't even completely gotten dry again yet, not even in that cave. At least the cold was easier to bear if I was moving. Once I was sure Foulques walked in the I tuned out the uncomfortable weather as best as I could and kept thinking about the nice warm air of our destination and a hot meal. And a good long night -or day, preferably- of sleep.

The way back was very silent, and overall mostly unremarkable. Not a word was spoken, and most of the way Foulques kept a certain distance, not only physically. He didn't regard me at all, but I didn't mind. I was content to watch his back in front of me, knowing that we were headed for the border. Apart from being dead tired and miserable from the cold, and thus not too keen on keeping up any conversation anyway, I was still crossed about the murder, though. I wondered if it was even possible to convince him to not end lives so easily anymore, and especially out of such reasons as revenge.

When I looked up after a while it seemed like Foulques was getting even further away. I tried to quicken my steps, to catch up to him, but I couldn't shorten the distance between us at all. I called out to him, but somehow I couldn't even hear my own voice. Even Kweh's low cries beside me sounded far away. Then my sight began to blur. What was wrong?

Kapitel 11: Rhaya's Squirrel

When I opened my eyes I saw the familiar ceiling of my guest room in The Roost. Late afternoon sunlight filtered through the windows and I could hear the muffled sounds of everyday life from outside. The room itself was quiet and blissfully warm. Why was I back here already? And what happened to Foulques? What about Kweh? I sat up and felt a pounding headache assaulting me, making me dizzy. When I carefully squeezed my eyes shut I heard the door open.

„You're up! I thought you'd go on sleeping forever!“

Instantly recognizing the energetic voice of my sister I didn't bother opening my eyes again. She crossed the room and set something on the desk in front of the window. Probably water or tea for me. I concentrated on sitting very still on the mattress, so the dizziness could pass.

„You're still pale as chalk, 'Zi. Lay down and get some more rest.“

„What happened? I can't even remember leaving Coerthas.“

My voice sounded weak and rather raspy. Qiah huffed a little, and I could hear her set her arms akimbo.

„How many times did you ask me that already? You really don't remember anything? Wow. You've been pretty incoherent the last few suns, though. You've had the worst cold I've ever seen. Whatever did you *do* in Coerthas? That creepy Duskwright guy that brought you in didn't tell me anything.“

Creepy Duskwright guy? This could only be Foulques, couldn't it? The uneasiness at the memory was plain in her voice. So even my sister was uncomfortable around him... was I really the only one that saw more in him than the hatred he wore like an armor? But more importantly, he had actually brought me to my room? All the way from Coerthas? I had a hard time imagining this. I slightly opened an eye, looking at Qiah through this narrow slit. Thankfully it didn't worsen the headache any more.

„Where is he now?“

„How should I know? He just left after he carried you upstairs, and like I said, he didn't tell me anything. And I did ask him, you know.“

I could imagine that vividly. I gave her a long, suspicious look, and she averted her eyes, blushing.

„Well, yeah... there was a little commotion.“

„Qiah...“

Would she ever learn to keep her temperament in check? I shook my head with a small sigh. Immediately she got defensive, crossing her arms. Her eyes were angrily glued to the wall before they came back to meet mine.

„Of course I misunderstood! I mean, the way he came up that path with you carelessly flung over his shoulder didn't exactly look like he didn't mean any harm! And well, you know how there's a lot of Duskwight bandits, and his kinda dangerous appearance didn't help either.“

Well, that was true. And Foulques was indeed far from harmless. Still, just imagining Qiah confronting him made my stomach twist.

„So you yelled at him and he just ignored you?“

He had to have, since there was no sign of any harm done to her, at least as far as I could tell. Even if I honestly liked him, if he had done anything to her... I swallowed an involuntary growl.

Qiah shrugged, not noticing my distress. She looked more sullen than hurt in any way.

„Yeah, pretty much. He did get angry, but he just yelled back at me to shut up and tell him where your room was. Not the kind of company I'd enjoy, so I was relieved he left right away.“

Then she turned her bewildered eyes to me again, concern knitting her brows.

„Just what is it that you like about him, 'Zi? I mean, he's the one you went to save, right? The one you told me about?“

My eyes fell to my blanket and I indicated a shrug.

„I know he seems rough, and well, he is. Certainly. But that's not the real him. Under all that bitterness and hatred is an actually really nice person, and I think it can be unburied again with some encouragement.“

Qiah met my eyes with a doubtful look. I shrugged again.

„At least, I think it's an indication that he brought me back instead of just leaving me there to die in the snow.“

Qiah wasn't convinced.

„That's just common sense.“

„For some people, yes. But certainly not everyone.“

And I wasn't at all sure if it was common sense for Foulques to save people from dying or if he had just done it out of a certain attachment. The look she gave made me realize that my words were indeed not a compliment to Foulques, and I didn't

elaborate further. Qiah should've gotten my point already anyway.

“By the way, what happened to Kweh? Is she alright?”

„Oh, yeah, she's at Cingur's. Apparently she had followed you back on her own, at least I didn't see that guy touching her reins or anything.”

„Foulques.”

„Yeah, Foulques. Kweh was pretty flustered, though, and you know how Cingur is. When he heard her calls and our yells he came running and took her in as soon as he was convinced that that-- that Foulques hadn't done anything to you. Well, we all needed a bit conviction.”

'*We all*? I didn't like the sound of that. Also, Cingur would probably give me a long lecture about that. I knew it was because how much he cared for the birds, but I didn't look forward to it very much. I just hoped Kweh hadn't gotten sick as well. Since Qiah didn't mention anything she was probably fine, though. Those birds were amazingly weatherproof. However, this left another concern.

„Who else was there?”

Qiah blushed a little again, but her voice didn't show any embarrassment. It sounded a little too easygoing to my ears.

„Well... Mother Miounne was there, pretty alarmed when she recognized you, and a couple of bystanders that I didn't know. It was already past morning, you know. Very lively around here this time usually.”

The image made me groan. So many people had witnessed me being carried around like some dumb carrot sack. And Mother Miounne of all people. She'd be all over me for a while still, even if I'd be completely back in shape.

„Well, you should lie back down, I'll get you something to eat later. Oh, and drink something! It's peppermint tea. I'm going to be out for a while and keep people updated about you.”

I could hear the wickedly anticipating smile in her last sentence and only narrowly refrained from rolling my eyes in favor of my aching head. That girl liked talking way too much, and I didn't even want to think about whom she meant by “people”. Then again, I didn't have to bother to do all that talking myself, so I should probably be relieved. I just hoped she didn't add anything too far off the truth to her stories. Brushing off that thought I gave her a small smile.

“Thanks, Qiah.”

She returned it happily and nodded, then turned for the door. Once she had left I slowly got up and poured myself some tea. The sweet minty aroma instantly made me relax and I inhaled deeply. I loved it.

Sitting back on the bed I watched the steam rise from the cup and tried to remember the last days. How many suns did that even mean? Ah well, I'd just ask Qiah later. So I must have passed out on the way at some point, but for the life of me I couldn't remember feeling that bad. Sure, I'd been tired and cold and miserable and I *had* been still a little wet from all the snow. I could remember falling into kind of an automated walking after a while, since none of us had talked and it was snowing the entire time, so it probably had happened some time after that.

I sipped my tea and decided it didn't matter much. Maybe I could ask Foulques about it when I met him again. However, the first thing I had to do now was getting rid of the remnants of the cold, and after that there was another thing that I decided to do no matter what.

When I was back on my feet, which didn't take long due to the devoted efforts of my sister, I left the inn and, after checking on Kweh and getting my lecture from a pretty disappointed Cingur, I went to Old Gridania. On foot. After all that lying around using an aetheryte seemed wasteful, and I wanted to take my time and enjoy the nice and sunny day. Not a cloud was to be seen in the deep blue sky and the sunlight tingled comfortably on my skin.

My goal was the Conjuror's Guild. I figured that if I was able to use healing spells even a little I could save myself and others a lot of trouble. Especially if Foulques kept up that almost-getting-killed thing. Provided I did find him again... I hadn't seen him since Coerthas once. But no, I needed to keep my thoughts straight now if I wanted to learn something completely new. I needed to shut him out of my thoughts for a bit.

I stepped into the long tunnel that led to the Conjuror's Guild, not seeing much for a moment due to it's darkness compared to the blazing sun outside. There was someone leaving the guild, but I couldn't make out any more than that. And I didn't try to, I just walked on deeper inside.

„Ah! You're the adventurer from a while ago, if I'm not mistaken?“

The female voice seemed kind of familiar, but I couldn't place it right away. I stopped and looked at her, my eyes slowly adjusting to the darkness. Oh! It was the beautiful Keeper Mage that I'd met in Coerthas.

„Oh yes, I am. I didn't think we'd meet again here, and so soon at that. I hope you've been well.“

I smiled at her, and she returned the gesture. She really was pretty.

„I've been, thank you. So what are you doing in a place like this? Going to learn about the manipulation of the elements, by any chance?“

She laughed a bit at her half-joke, seeming a little bit nervous. Her tail tip slightly swished from side to side. Did she actually blush...?

„Indeed I hope to, yes. It would be much more convenient to not have to depend on other people all the time. Ah, I mean...”

I quickly held up my hands in defense and grinned at her, even though she didn't seem to be offended at all.

„Of course I'm incredibly thankful for your help, and I'd be happy to receive it again any time!”

Again she laughed, the clear sound of tiny silver bells. She curled a stray strand of her white hair around a finger and looked up at me. She wasn't all that much smaller than me, though, not even half a head. But it was nice not having to strain my neck to look up at someone for a change.

„Oh, I understand, don't worry! I'd be happy to help anytime! Actually, do you still have a bit of time right now? I know I promised there would be no payment for my help, but there's something urgent I'd like to ask of you, if I may...?”

I blinked at her in surprise, but nodded without a second thought. As much as I wanted to join the guild, I wasn't in so much hurry that I'd pass such a chance at returning the enormous favor.

„If I can I'll be happy to help! By the way, can I ask your name? We never introduced each other. I'm Khuma'zi.”

She definitely blushed this time, a rather cute expression of embarrassment on her face. She was still smiling, though, much as myself.

„Oh, uh, I'm sorry, just where are my manners? I'm Rhaya. Nice to meet you, Khuma'zi.”

She hesitated for a moment, before looking at me slightly unbelieving, still blushing. She had caught up with the suffix on my name.

“Forgive my bluntness, but are you really the ninth son in your family or was your mother just a little... liberal about naming you? I've heard a rumor about such a thing occurring in the Black Shroud, but nobody ever knew if it was true.”

Obviously Rhaya hadn't met Qiah yet, or anybody who knew her, or she would've known it was true. So I nodded, and her eyes widened quite a bit, lips slightly ajar.

„Yes, I am indeed the ninth son. My mother gave birth almost only to boys instead of girls. You can imagine how desperately she needed a daughter, though, so...”

„So this is actually true? Incredible...”

Rhaya shook her head in bafflement, still regarding me with surprise. Then we smiled at each other for a moment, and she continued.

„So about this favor... a good friend of mine has lost a pet a while ago and he said his little daughter cries every night because she misses it so much. And while he did set another adventurer on the task, that one still wasn't able to locate it. I was actually about to pass to him a hint I'd just gotten, but I can't find him. It's like he's completely vanished. Would you do me the favor and go after the pet instead? I beg you! “

She laid her hand on my arm and looked at me pleadingly.

A lost pet? That wouldn't be the first time I'd undertake such a task. I nodded. I guessed my visit to the Conjuror's Guild could to wait just a little bit longer.

„I'll do what I can to find it.“

Kapitel 12: Face-Off

The hint she'd gotten turned out to be not very helpful. I found nothing at all, not even distinct tracks. Even several suns later I was still searching the whole Black Shroud without even the slightest success. Just what kind of crazily evasive squirrel was this? It was supposed to be a tame pet! But maybe it had reverted back to a really feral lifestyle to be so hard to track. Or worse, it could have fallen victim to another creature. I desperately hoped that wasn't the case.

It was already past sundown and it was beginning to drizzle. Maybe I should head home for the day and get something to eat. I turned for Gridania. I'd had left Kweh in the stable for convenience the past few suns, but I should take her with me next time. She needed some exercise, even if it meant risking her destroying possible tracks.

When the familiar canopied pathway came into view I stopped short and turned southward, straining my ears and eyes. Someone was there.

„Sharp as ever, eh?“

The slightly ironic undertone would've made me roll my eyes if not for the relief, even happiness I felt at the voice. Still, my words came out rather accusing.

„Where have you been? I wanted to talk to you.“

Foulques didn't look impressed. He didn't even answer my question, just hopped off of a branch and ambled in my direction. He reminded me of a wild coeurl; strong, smooth movements, but ready to flee instantly should any danger arise.

„What are you up to? Running errands again?“

„Pretty much, but not very successfully. But let's go somewhere dry. You hungry?“

He blinked at me and kept silent, not sure what to answer.

„I'll treat you if you like. I'm starving and I haven't had a proper warm meal for a while, so let's find a nice place to eat.“

I looked at him, but he still seemed taken aback. I cocked my head, knitting my brows.

„Or if you don't want to enter the city I could just bring--“

„Er, no, it's okay. A warm meal somewhere dry would be great. If it's not too public a place.“

I nodded and turned towards the gates, Foulques followed quietly.

„You're not going to tell me what you've been doing since we came back? You do look

a lot better, though. How's your injury?"

He was wearing his usual battle outfit, which looked pretty much restored to its former state, and I couldn't discern anything that hinted at the injury he'd gotten in the Steel Vigil influencing him in any way anymore. Either he got himself healed in some way or he made sure nothing of it was showing in his movements.

„Don't worry about it. Just tell me what you wanted to talk about.“

„Oh, that. It's not all that important, but I've wondered...“

I watched the gate guards from the corner of my eyes as we approached. While they did keep a somewhat professional expression they clearly were suspicious of Foulques, faces tense and eyes locked onto him. I wondered if they would've denied him access to the city if he had been alone. Then again, he must have entered the city before without any company. Except if he had entered somewhere else than the gates...

Once we were behind the gate and out of earshot of the guards, Foulques threw me a glance, prompting me to continue. He seemed a little tense, always keeping an eye on his surroundings, but otherwise he was calm.

„I've wondered about the way back from Coerthas. Qiah didn't know any details, she just told me you brought me back.“

He threw another look, slightly irritated.

„There's nothing else to say on the matter. You were feverish and passed out even before the border, so I brought you back. Don't tell me you wanted to stay there and freeze to death.“

I coughed out a small laugh. A smile stayed on my face as I looked at him.

„No, I didn't. I really didn't. But thank you. I'm honestly happy you did that for me.“

He made a dismissive sound and went back to studying the surroundings a little too grumpily.

„Lets grab something to eat from the Carline Canopy and just take it up to my room. No one should bother us there. Except maybe my sister, but I think she's busy with work today.“

Foulques didn't reply, but I took his silence as agreement.

When we reached the inn I changed my attention to a waitress near the counter. She greeted me by name and with a smile, but it got unsure once she got aware of Foulques. My tail slightly flipped to the side.

When I asked her about taking our meals up to my room she seemed torn, eyeing Foulques and myself in turn.

„Usually we don't allow this, sir. But, well, I guess we could make an exception just this once.“

I had a strong suspicion she'd prefer the dangerous looking Duskwight out of the public room. She was not the only one eyeing him like that. I wondered how much of that was pure prejudice, or if any of those huffish glances were justified.

A glance at Foulques once the waitress had left confirmed my suspicion. Although outwardly he was amazingly calm the tense set of his jaws told me he was pretty uncomfortable the entire time we waited for our meals to be prepared. I'd figured he would ease up once we left the public, and well, he did. Kind of. But even so he still kept a strange tense air around him that seemed different from the uneasiness he had displayed in Coerthas. I couldn't help but ask about it after we'd finished eating in silence.

„Is something wrong? You've been taut as a bow since we went through the gate.“

He unglued his eyes from the window to look at me.

„Wrong? No. I'm just not very comfortable around so many people anymore, especially not *here*. You'd think you would've picked that up by now.“

I glared at him, but refrained from replying in the same wry tone. The corner of his mouth raised in a weak grin.

„That's not what I meant. There's something more to this, isn't it?“

„What are you talking about?“

I shrugged, gesturing vaguely at him.

„I don't know. Did something happen? You were different before. A lot more relaxed, I think.“

Foulques looked back to the window with a rather irritated expression and took a moment to find a reply.

„I just have some things on my mind right now. You don't need to concern yourself with any of it.“

I watched him a while longer, not sure how to react. He was so good at hiding his thoughts, it was hard to guess what he could mean by that. I carefully contemplated how to best continue the conversation; I didn't want him feeling intruded upon. I sat my empty bowl onto the desk, stacking the other one into it. Then I sat back on my bed. Foulques was still studying the drizzle on the window. It was turning into rain quickly.

„I'm sorry if I'm prying. I don't mean to. It's just that I--“

He silenced me with a sudden sharp look and stretched his long legs beside the desk. Then his expression changed and he regarded me with interest, although his voice didn't betray any of it.

„So, what is it you've been having trouble to accomplish?“

„Huh? You mean my errand?“

He nodded and I blinked at him. He'd asked that before. Why was this so important to him? Or was it just a means to keep up conversation? Or to keep me from asking about him? Should I just humor him?

„Nothing world-shaking. I'm just trying to find a pet which happens to be quite elusive.“

He raised an eyebrow.

„A pet? For whom?“

„Actually that's a funny coincidence. It's the Conjuror that healed you in Coerthas. I bumped into her in the Conjuror's Guild a couple of suns ago.“

I grinned at him, but he just stared at me, unimpressed. My grin faltered a little, and he crossed his arms over his chest.

„Tell me about it. What did she tell you, and why do you think didn't you succeed with it yet?“

I all but gawked at him. Was he honestly interested in this little errand? Or in Rhaya, possibly? That was probably more likely. But still, why? Did he want to help? He didn't look like he wanted to desperately thank her for her earlier help, though. I thought he should, by the way, but I didn't mention it.

He kept looking at me, waiting for an answer. I shook my head and decided to see where this went.

„Well, she told me the pet was not hers, but a friends, and that they originally had asked another adventurer to find it. But since that one wasn't available at the time she acquired a new hint she entrusted the task to me instead.“

„But you didn't find it either, obviously, even with a fresh hint.“

„I didn't. But what can I do? I just have to keep looking for it.“

„And you're doing that from sunrise to sundown every day until you find it?“

His voice was almost mocking now. I glared at him.

„Of course I do! How else would I be able to find it?“

I crossed my arms and looked at the window. Raindrops were splattering loudly at it now.

"Well, I have to admit that I probably wouldn't be able to keep it up forever. I'll just have to hope that I can find it before I have to leave for a more important task."

„I don't think you'll *ever* find it.“

„What? Why not?“

Leaning forward, Foulques pointed an accusing finger at me.

„Because she's scamming you, you idiot.“

„Huh? Why in the world would she do that? She's not like that. You haven't even met her, have you?“

„It just sounds a little too fishy to be true.“

„What's wrong with you? Just because something doesn't go smoothly doesn't mean it's automatically a scam. You're way too distrustful, Foulques.“

„I think *you're* way too *trustful*. But I'm not discussing that with you right now. Either believe it or not, you'll see the truth sooner or later anyway. Thanks for the meal.“

He got up and headed for the door. I was too conflicted to even say another word, so I just watched him go from the edge of my bed, a thousand thoughts in my head at once. Did he really believe that? Did he have so little trust in people that such a minor thing already would make him jump to such a conclusion? What if he was right, though? But Rhaya just wasn't like that. Nothing even hinted at such a thing. She had helped us without a second thought, without any sort of payment even. And what reason would she even have, considered it would be just like Foulques thought? He was overreacting, definitely. The door shut with a soft thud.

I should probably call him back before he left the building. The rain had gotten pretty strong while we'd eaten and there really was no need for him to get drenched. I wondered why he even had felt the need to leave so suddenly in the first place. Something was just off about him today.

I hurried down the stairs as silently as I could. Down in the hall I asked the waitress from before about Foulques and she told me he had left moments ago. I thanked her and ran outside, but couldn't see him anywhere. I ran to the Blue Badger Gate and outside through the Canopy, where I hesitated. From my position I had a good view of the nearby pathways, but over the rain I could neither hear nor see anything that hinted at where he had gone. I turned around to the guards, returning to the gate.

„Did the Duskwight I came with earlier pass through just now?“

They both looked a little uncomfortable and hesitated for a moment, but then gave

me an answer after all.

„He did, yes. Seemed to be in hurry, as well.“

„Where did he go?“

„I... didn't pay attention to that.“

Inwardly I groaned, but I thanked them. At least I could be sure he'd come this way, even if that was the most likely direction anyway. I jogged down the path again until it branched in three different directions. Which one to take, now? Or should I just leave him be, after all? Apparently he wasn't much inclined to stay, even in this rain. Then again, nothing good had ever happened whenever I'd left him be. At worst, he'd get irritated and send me away. I could deal with that.

Standing at the crossroads I strained my ears, closing my eyes for better concentration. Under the omnipresent sound of the rain the faint sounds of birds and other critters greeted my ears from all directions. Some rustling on the ground to the left of me. I flicked my ear to clear it of the tingle of water droplets and listened again. A bird called faintly in the distance. Behind me the tiptoeing of a very small critter. And then, straight ahead, something else entirely. The sound of metal clashing? It was a bit too far away to be certain. Maybe I should've brought my lance. I hadn't anticipated Foulques to get away so fast, though. Anyway, this was the only clue I'd gotten, so this was where I'd look first.

I wasn't disappointed. When I arrived at the scene, Foulques was surrounded by five people, mostly guild lancers. Voyce and Kimison, the two I'd talked to before I went to Coerthas, were among them. I recognized Nantain and Thaisie, a Wildwood Elezen pair, and a young Midlander Hyur that I'd seen in the guild from time to time. I didn't know his name, though.

The lancers held Foulques at spear point, and he was ready to fight as well. For the moment, though, no one moved. Quickly Kimison noticed my arrival.

“Khuma'zi?! What are *you* doing here?”

Calming my labored breathing I balled my fists and met his surprised look squarely, coming closer.

“That's what I should be asking, Kimison. What are you all trying to do?”

My question was met with silence, not because it was obvious what they were up to, but because my arrival made them hesitate. Foulques only watched, water dripping from his hair. The fabric of my shirt and pants already felt sticky where it wasn't protected by armor. Slowly I walked towards the group and entered the ring of lances. Voyce, who was nearest to me, gently pushed at me with the broad side of his blade to keep me from reaching Foulques.

“Stay out of this. You know what he's done, and now we'll make sure he's gonna pay

for it!"

He put more force into his push when I wouldn't budge, but I firmly planted my feet on the ground, readying myself. I grabbed his wet lance by the shaft, pulling it towards me with a firm yank and immediately pushing it out to him again to throw him off-balance. Balance was still one of his weak points, and he probably hadn't anticipated me moving against him. With another shove to the side I disarmed him and in the same movement rotated the lance so I could use it myself. Not that I really intended to use it, but I wasn't about to let them fight with Foulques and I needed something to back up my words just in case. Kimison's blade slightly quivered in my direction, not sure what to make of my move. I took place at Foulques' right so I wouldn't get in his way, facing the lancers at his back. He met my stern look for a short moment. He was waiting, still slightly surprised. He looked pretty calm despite his fighting stance, though, for which I was grateful. It gave me hope this wouldn't go the same road as his encounter with Cillien. I turned to the others.

"Just stop this, it's not going to change anything, even if you would succeed."

"What do you know?! He didn't kill *your* friend! *Your* family! *Your* lover! We're just not keeping silent about this any longer!!"

"And where would that lead? There's just going to be even more victims! I'm not going to watch you spill blood over something that won't even change a single thing!"

I looked at every one of them, Voyce, who was now standing a little outside of the ring, and Foulques included. Most of them weren't convinced, the looks I met were angry and hostile. Foulques just didn't look much impressed.

"The concept of revenge really is not very familiar to you, is it?"

I ignored his quiet, somewhat amused comment.

"All that's going to happen is that you're resorting to the very same actions you're hating him for!"

"Khuma'zi, why do you keep defending him? He's a murderer!!"

"And you actually want to become one yourself, Kimison?"

"That's different!! We're merely avenging the people that were dear to us!"

I almost rolled my eyes at that.

"And he's merely avenging the life he was robbed of! And besides, then what? Once you've killed him, someone's going to come after *you* to avenge *him*. And who will get injured in the process or even lose their life? I'm telling you, nothing at all will change. People will just keep dying!"

"Just back off! It's got nothing to do with you!"

It had a whole tonze to do with me, but that was not the point right now.

"I'm not going to back off, Kimison. Just stop it. I don't want this to turn into a fight. But if it does, I'll take on every one of you."

Again, I met each set of eyes. I also aimed a sharp look at Foulques, silently including him in that statement. He grimly narrowed his eyes at me. The others were silent, unsure of what to do. They knew that Foulques was strong from his previous interactions with the guild and with the Wood Wailers, and they also knew that I was strong. It's not that they weren't talented with a lance, but I was stronger than them, at least in a one-on-one match. We'd had enough chances to prove that over and over since I'd joined the guild. If I wouldn't take their side they'd have to face Foulques *and* me. After a few moments, Kimison lowered his lance, but kept his seething eyes mostly locked onto Foulques.

"Fine. We'll retreat for now. But know this isn't over yet."

The others were following his order slowly, hesitantly. Foulques and I remained ready to take action until they had bunched up around Kimison. When I threw Voyce his lance, he made a surprised sound and caught it with two hands. Foulques shook his head, not easing up his stance at all.

"You're an idiot."

I just threw him a quick glare from the corners of my eyes, then waited for the lancers to leave. Once they had their backs to us and were away a couple of yalms, Foulques relaxed, strapping the lance to his back and staring at me. Water dripped from his face.

"Why are you even here?"

"I just wanted to call you back, actually. I didn't want you to get wet needlessly, and I wanted to ask why you were so quick to leave in the first place."

He raised an eyebrow, disbelieving. He crossed his arms.

"Well, that's too late. And I told you, I just didn't want to stay there any longer. Now go home already."

"At least it's a good thing I followed you. Who knows what would've happened if I hadn't."

"Then there'd be a few more dead cowards if they'd kept this up."

I glared at him, balling my hands into fists; the base of my tail puffed up. I tugged at my wet hair in frustration.

"Yes, exactly! And maybe you'd have suffered a few cuts yourself on top of that!

What's

wrong with you all?! Can't you solve a problem without bloodspill?"

Foulques sighed, shaking his head.

"You're really an idiot. Sometimes you need to spill blood to solve a problem, and believe me, someone's blood *is* going to be spilled sooner or later. Besides, now you've made a couple of enemies out of your friends. That wasn't very wise either, don't you think?"

My hand fell back to my side lifelessly, my rage leaving me quickly.

"That couldn't be helped. I'm just glad no one was hurt."

"They're probably going to come after you."

I met his eyes, pondering this for a moment.

"We'll see. I hope it won't come to that."

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 Silvaire 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.

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 if 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?

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 Silvoire, 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 Silvaire 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 *Voyce'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. *Voyce* 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... "

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.

* * *

"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.

* * *

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.

* * *

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 Bhaldwyrn 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.

Kapitel 17: Khuma

I glanced at Qiah and mother through the open door. She was still all over her and Qiah looked everything but happy, but nothing was going out of hand yet. My heart squeezed painfully when I met Qiah's silent plea for rescue, but I forced myself to pass by with only a smile and headed for the nearby huts where my aunts lived. I'd join Qiah again later. Foulques followed silently.

The first person we spotted was one of aunt Tyo's daughters. She was sitting on the ground in front of her house and sorted through a basket of herbs to prepare them for drying when she noticed us.

"Ah, 'Zi! Welcome home, it's been a while! Wow, you're looking so grown up!"

She waved me closer with a happy grin that I returned.

"Hey, Jihli. I hope everyone has been well. Are the others home? I'd like to introduce a friend. And we brought fresh antelopes that will need some attention."

Jihli nodded and politely included Foulques in the gesture with a quick glance, but her smile got a little strained. It probably wasn't the best idea for me of all people to bring an outsider home, but there was nothing to be done about that. I wouldn't risk leaving Qiah here without a tangible means for her to escape and return to Gridania. Plus, I felt a proper introduction was the least Foulques deserved for accompanying us in the first place.

"Did Khuma agree to this?"

I shrugged.

"I don't know. She's already seen us, but didn't say anything."

She cocked her head a little and got up with a quiet 'hmmm', carefully dusting off her pants.

"Then we'll have to see if she'll object or not. I'll collect the others, but don't expect everyone to show up. And I think Khuma'a is planning to come back later with Masha, just so you know."

'A was here, as well? My lips tightened at that. I didn't get to dwell on it, however, as Jihli's mom Tyo was leaving her house at that moment, wiping her hands on a towel. She hurried towards us with a big bright smile.

"'Zi, welcome back!!"

She barely slowed down before catching me in a tight hug. I reciprocated automatically in the same manner, smiling.

"Oh, look at you, you've grown so much!"

Her eyes twinkled happily as she looked me over appraisingly. I laughed.

"I don't think I've gotten any taller, aunt Tyo."

"Maybe, but you look great! So mature, y'know. Like a real man. A good man!"

That made me laugh again, but this time more in fluster. She patted my back softly and released me.

"It's good to see you're doing great, aunt Tyo."

She set her arms akimbo and beamed. "But of course I am!"

Then she glanced at Foulques for the first time and, like Jihli, mellowed a bit.

"Well, you want to introduce your friend, right? If you'll allow me a word of caution, I don't think that's a good idea right now. And not only because your other aunt probably won't come if you bring company."

Jihli unobtrusively added with a little mischievous grin from behind her mother: "Oh, but I bet Masha'll seek you out once she's back."

Aunt Tyo and I answered this each with a weak grin. That sounded very much like Masha, alright. Aunt Tyo's brows creased worriedly, however, and she glanced at our house behind the trees, her voice suddenly low. I watched her with an already heavy heart. This wouldn't be good news.

"Khuma has been worried sick for Qiah, especially since she never received a letter or other news from her. She's said a couple of... well, concerning things regarding you. I'm not sure if she'll really do or say anything, but I'm fairly sure having a complete stranger in her house would be too much for her. Better don't push her too far. Especially since Khuma'a is here, too. Maybe just stay low for now and see how she reacts."

I sighed heavily, also glancing back in the direction of our house. What did 'concerning things' mean, exactly? Knowing aunt Tyo, she'd probably not elaborate if she didn't say it clearly in the first place. That left me with my second concern. I felt parched.

"Well. However it goes, I promised Qiah to take her back to Gridania after this. She wasn't even willing to come without that promise. I really don't want to pick any fights, but this is a promise I want to keep, unless Qiah changes her mind."

I shrugged a little helplessly. Aunt Tyo looked like she'd start to cry any moment, but then she closed her eyes and weakly shook her head, face grave.

"I feared it would come to that. I tried to talk to Khuma about Qiah before, but she wouldn't hear anything. I just hope we can sort this out."

I nodded weakly and threw another glance to where our house was. So we had to keep our heads low for now and just wait for Khuma to make up her mind.

Jihli stepped forward and gingerly patted my arm.

“Leave it to us for the time being, we won't let Qiah down. Maybe you can skin the antelopes in the meantime? I'll let you know later.”

I nodded to her with a small smile and a 'thanks', then we went back to the place where we left the gifts.

* * *

Skinning the antelopes was neither a difficult nor an unfamiliar task for either of us, but Foulques, sitting across from me on a log, was very silent at first. I didn't feel like talking at that moment, either, so I was content to work in silence and mull over what aunt Tyo had said and if they'd actually succeed in getting mother to release Qiah again. I couldn't shake the feeling that it wouldn't be that easy, and being stuck here skinning dead things didn't make my own position in negotiating Qiah's freedom very promising, either. I'd hoped to be of better use than that. For now, however, I'd wait for any news Jihli would bring.

I was only mildly surprised that Foulques started talking at some point. What was more of a surprise to me was the topic.

“So. What's up with your names? Why's everyone called the same in your family?”

I blinked at him for a moment and then, as I'd grasped what he was asking, slightly grinned before continuing my work.

“Oh no, it's a Keeper thing, nothing special. In a traditional Keeper of the Moon family the males inherit the first name from the mother in addition to her last name.”

“Ah, I see. It's just the males, then. And females get a unique first name.”

I nodded, only half paying attention to the antelope and my knife in front of me.

“Yeah, females only share the clan name with everyone else.”

“What do the differences mean, then? Your mother is 'Khuma', you're 'Khuma'zi' and then there's... Khuma'a, right?”

Again I nodded, but this time my answer was accompanied by a vague gesture of my soiled hand and knife. I ignored the bitter taste that 'A's name left in the back of my mind.

“Yes, Khuma'a is my oldest brother. We inherit the mother's first name and even though we don't get unique names per se there has to be some way to address

everyone distinctly, right? So all boys get a suffix indicating their order of birth. Girls don't count, though."

It was silent for a while save for the small sounds our knives made. My attention had completely gotten back to my antelope skin when Foulques stopped working and I felt his stare boring into my skull. His brows were knitted when I met his eyes. I blinked in surprise, but said nothing, as he obviously was about to speak.

"So you're basically telling me... you're getting numbered? Keeper of the Moon males get *numbered*?"

"Yeah, if you want to put it that way. Khuma'a is the first born son of Khuma, for example. I'm the ninth, so I'm Khuma'zi. It *is* unusual that there's so many males in one family, though."

He continued staring at me for a moment, then slowly a grin spread over his face. It didn't stay a grin. One corner of my own mouth lifted in return as Foulques first started to chuckle and soon the chuckle changed into a full blown laugh.

It was fascinating to see him like that, totally disregarding his environment, throwing his head backwards and laughing in full volume. I was sure everyone around the nearby houses could hear him, which did worry me a bit, but I didn't have the heart to try to stop him. This was something special. I grinned and shook my head at him.

"The first real laugh from you and it's about my name. I should've known."

"I can't believe it! I had no freaking idea! NUMBERED!!"

Foulques had dropped his knife at some point and was holding his belly, slightly soiling his armor, sometimes wiping tears from the corners of his eyes and smudging some antelope fat on his cheek in the process.

"That is SO STUPID! Sorry, but this cannot be real."

I was still grinning, my work momentarily forgotten as I watched him. Never had he shown himself so uncontrolled, so free of any tension. It was impossible not to be happy seeing him like that. His laughing fit was contagious. Chuckles were bubbling out of me as well now. He caught my eyes and shook his head. He managed to look at me halfway seriously again, but it didn't last for long.

"I can't believe it. Shall I call you 'Number Nine' from now on?"

I snorted, but my grin was still firmly in place.

"I'm really not sure if I don't like 'idiot' better."

He shook his head at me, still chuckling and lazily fishing for his lost knife.

"You're an idiot."

"Thanks."

I resumed my work, still grinning. This was probably not the last time he'd call me either of these things.

Two sets of quick footsteps announced the end of this small happy moment. When I looked up to see who it was all giddiness fled me. It was my brother, *of course*, and he was not happy. A worried Jihli followed behind him.

"Get up, we need to talk."

His voice was both ice and fire. He didn't even greet us. After that one sentence he only stood there hardly containing his rage and waiting for me to follow. The only acknowledgment Foulques got was a quick icy glance that he returned grimly. The smile was completely wiped off of his face, it was as if that moment of happiness had never even happened. I ground my teeth, stifled a sigh and carefully set my knife aside. After roughly wiping my hands on a large patch of moss at my feet I stood, meeting Foulques' eyes cautiously. I didn't like the contemplative frown on his face, so to prevent him from doing something stupid I slightly nodded to him and hoped he'd understand.

As soon as we were out of earshot 'A got into my face, backing me up against a large tree. It made my ears flatten and I stifled the growl that wanted to tell him off. Instead, I just waited for what he had to say. A little bit away Jihli was watching us, nervously tugging at one of her braids.

"You brought an outsider in? Have you lost your mind?!"

He didn't yell, but he didn't need to to let me know he wasn't pleased with the situation. I'd sort of hoped he wouldn't actually show up, but apparently such was my luck today.

Being firstborn he's always been mother's favorite and right hand with most of us younger brothers. She's always held his opinion in high regards; likely exactly *because* he was the very first of her many sons. There was not much disappointment in having one or maybe two boys, after all. It was the usual way Keeper of the Moon families were structured, usually more daughters than sons were born.

With him here it would be much harder to persuade mother to let go of Qiah, especially if he decided we weren't great company for her. Which, judging from his furious demeanor, unfortunately seemed to be the case. I collected myself as best as I could. I didn't expect the ease with which I managed this, compared to the last time he'd been scolding me. I used to think of him as much more intimidating.

"There was no choice. I brought him for safety's sake."

"What the hells 's that supposed to mean?"

I chose my answer very carefully.

"I'm talking about Qiah. She has to travel by foot and it's dangerous. You do have an idea what's going on in Eorzea right now, don't you?"

Granted, he probably didn't. He snorted.

"Don't give me any of that shit. She's safe here, you could've left that intruder somewhere far away from here. There was no need to bring him right into our home!"

Well, except there probably was. I slowly shook my head, carefully meeting his eyes and, again to my surprise, easily holding his piercing gaze. I had no trouble keeping my voice firm and collected. Maybe fighting a primal or two gives you a certain measure of self confidence. And Khuma'a certainly was far from a primal.

"It's no time for someone like her to travel alone. And there are things no one is safe from, even here."

We looked into each other's eyes for a moment longer, and after a while I saw his fury starting to crumble. Some kind of realization crept into his eyes and he actually retreated a little bit from his overpowering stance. That was a first.

A new kind of steps reached us at that moment. Behind 'A I could see Masha exchanging looks with Jihli, who seemed relieved by her appearance. Albeit in a quiet way, Masha was in good spirits like always; there wasn't much that succeeded to get her down. She reminded me of Rhaya in that regard, which gave an unwelcome pang to my heart. I shoved the feeling down and instead focused on the situation at hand. Despite everything, it was good seeing Masha again after all those years. A small warm smile appeared on my face. She returned it, then addressed my brother.

"Khuma'a', aunt Khuma wants to meet everyone at her place. Dinner's ready."

She allowed herself a look around us and seemed disappointed not to find what she was looking for. I guessed she had volunteered to inform us to get an early glimpse on Foulques, since she hadn't been there with us earlier. She'd always been a curious one.

I removed my back from the tree with a small sigh, forcing 'A to either step aside or get bumped into. He reluctantly decided to do the former, only barely avoiding the latter. I decidedly ignored him, but regarded the girls with a small nod.

"I'll go get Foulques."

When I was about to pass Masha she lightly touched my hand, and bit her lip as I looked at her questioningly. Her voice went quieter with every word.

"Zi, uhm... I'm afraid, you know... Khuma told me she wants you and your guest to finish hanging the meat first. She... said there wasn't enough room for everyone."

Not enough room for everyone?

So mother really wanted us out of the way. So much so that she'd exclude both of us from dinner?

That was a new intensity for sure.

I weakly nodded to Masha, not even managing a small smile for her anymore, fearing I wouldn't be able to keep my face under control if I moved even a single muscle. Her hand reluctantly slipped off of mine as I left them with a heavy weight in my chest and legs.

On the way back to Foulques I tried my best to get my hurt and disappointment under control, but as I approached him I found his eyes a little too knowing. I quickly averted my gaze, but I knew I wasn't fooling him, he seemed to look right through my attempted façade. I felt uncomfortably bare under this intense scrutiny and my tail quivered to the side.

I plopped down onto my log and gathered up my knife again, carefully avoiding Foulques' eyes and contemplating what, or if anything at all, to say.

Foulques, however, didn't let me choose.

"So? What are you going to do now?"

I made a face. Still staring at my hands, which now sank back from the antelope instead of continuing to skin it, *again*, I wondered if it even made a difference if I avoided him. He seemed to know anyway, as if he was able to peek into my soul directly.

The question was, how much of it had he actually been able to hear?

With a little bit of effort I reluctantly met his gaze. Then looked away again. I felt too vulnerable. Slowly I reached to my antelope again.

"What do you mean?"

"About your sister. You aren't going to let them keep you from meeting her again, are you?"

Now that caught my attention.

My knife dangled listlessly in my hand, my other hand fell back from the skin yet again. I looked at him for a long moment.

While I tried to come up with something to say, I watched a grin form on his face and his intense eyes twinkled mischievously. Oh no.

"You know what? You shouldn't even be playing along with this in the first place." Foulques got up from his half skinned antelope and stretched, reminding me again of a Coeurl.

"If they really think they can keep your sister to themselves against her will, they've failed a few basics as a family, don't you think? Plus, you brought me here to bring her back in the first place."

I felt the blood drain from my face quicker than I could find a reply as I watched him clean and tuck away his knife. My heartbeat sped up, hands starting to clean my own knife frantically.

"Wait, Foulques, wait a moment. Whatever you're thinking, stop it-"