

Cracking the Shell

Von elektroyu

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 Miqu'te 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.