

Cracking the Shell

Von elektroyu

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.

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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.

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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."

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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.