

Cracking the Shell

Von elektroyu

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.