

Cracking the Shell

Von elektroyu

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.

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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 hell'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-"