

Facing Taerar

© 2008 by Felora, Faquarl & Yagyu

Felora stepped into the main cave of Taugrek's Stand from the direction of the stables, sighing as she settled herself into a chair. Wrestling her kodo into his new armor had been no easy task. She lifted her gaze just long enough to see Faquarl opposite her, leaning against the wall of the cave.

"Felora."

She focused on him further. "Yes, sir?"

"I need to talk with you. A serious matter." After such words, his voice was still level as always. She arched an eyebrow at him.

"That dragon in Duskwood. Do you recall its name?"

She crossed her arms on the tabletop, leaning in his direction. "Taerar, sir."

Faquarl grinned at her. "About a month ago, a few others and myself went to kill him."

Felora leaned back in her chair, shocked. "And you wait until now to tell me?"

"Only because I knew you'd react like this," Faquarl said in a nonchalant tone. "We didn't kill him. Someone drew his attention too soon."

He pulled up the hem of his tunic, revealing a festering wound. "This is why I'm telling you now. The wound won't heal."

"For Therazane's sake!" Felora's eyes widened as she sprung from her chair, gaping at him. She strode over and yanked his tunic up further, leaning down in an attempt to get a closer look. Faquarl's brow wrinkled as he glanced down at her.

"No need to get crazy over it," he said. "It's a discovery about the dragon."

Felora looked up at him. "Why didn't you tend it sooner?"

"I did!" he exclaimed, wriggling a bit at her grip on his clothing. "Nothing I tried has worked, it just continues to fester."

Felora frowned at him. "You need to stop walking around thinking yourself invincible, sir. This could kill you."

She straightened and turned away from him, trying to mask the pain on her face. His voice carried to her ears from his position just behind her.

"Yes, it was perhaps a bit foolish, but now we know that he is far more dangerous than I first thought," Faquarl said with a grimace. "And better me than someone else."

Felora swallowed, a tremor beginning in her midsection as a terrible memory clouded her mind. Faquarl's experience with the dragon was far too similar to the horror that she had seen in the Dream. She shook her head and whirled to face Faquarl, searching his face. "And you think that I can help."

"Well, you were my last chance to fix this," he said, quickly adding with a wanton grin, "Last only because you tend to become an overemotional wreck."

Felora stared at him, saying nothing for a moment before finding her voice again. She was strangely calm against the maelstrom of thoughts in her head. "I'll do what I can, sir."

"Glad to hear it," Faquarl said wryly, "although it has become quite disgusting."

She raised an eyebrow at him. "What has been done in attempts to heal it?"

"Well, I've tried normal druidic healing, bandages, a vast array of elixirs and potions..."

Felora frowned. "What potions?"

"An assortment of healing potions," he replied, "as well as a few random ones from your private store."

She snorted at him. "Which I assume that you will be replacing at a later date."

He smiled at her. "I was hoping that they would be considered a gift."

She looked up at him and sighed, her brow softening.

"Your charms come to your rescue once again, sir." She glanced briefly into her herb pouch. "If you want to go and take a seat by the fire, I'll try what I can think of."

Felora took a shaky breath as Faquarl got up and headed toward the fire, calling back to her, "You know, I haven't tried searing it shut."

She didn't answer, trying vainly to think. She knew that all of the conventional means had been tried and were unsuccessful, and the thought made her stomach sink. She pushed her thoughts to the back of her mind, following Faquarl to the fireside and kneeling before him, setting her bags down at her left side. It appeared that it was time to try something unconventional.

"Are you in much pain, sir?" she asked.

Faquarl waved a hand at her. "Of course. But I've gotten past it. How does it look?"

Felora glared at him and sighed, her fear expressing itself as a barely-suppressed irritation - he was always such a martyr. She reached for the hem of his tunic and lifted it again, wrinkling her nose at the sight of the wound on his lower chest, which had begun to fester and ooze strongly. "It's well into an infection, sir."

Faquarl nodded. "It began to rot very quickly."

He broke into a sheepish grin at the horrified expression that came over her face. Felora leaned back and took a large oiled skin of water from the bag at her side, mumbling under her breath at his words. "Take your tunic off, sir, unless you want it very wet."

He proceeded to remove his pauldrons, cloak, and tunic, setting them off to the side to allow Felora a clear view of the wound. He grinned at her half-heartedly. "Try not to use anything that will sting."

Felora smiled at him, meeting his eyes.

"I'm afraid that you're past that point, sir. Anything that I put on that is going to sting. But I'll do my best." She set the skin of purified draenic water to warm over the fire as she turned again to peer at Faquarl's wound, biting her lip. "I just hope we're not too late to stop the infection."

"What do you think of just melting the skin together?" he asked.

Felora shifted her gaze from his chest to his face. "We can certainly try cauterizing it, sir. But I don't think that you want me to seal all of that infection in there."

"How deep is it now? I haven't checked it in a week."

She bit back an angry remark at his negligence and leaned in closer once more, running her fingertips lightly around the edges where his short, dark fur was beginning to become matted to the wound. "It's difficult to tell. I need to clean it before I can see anything."

"Oh, this will be fun," Faquarl said, sighing through his nose.

She looked up at him with a grimace and resisted the urge to chide him about the fact that it was a situation of his own making. Turning to search her pack, Felora found a few scraps of clean linen before pulling the water off of the fire, the skin nearly too hot to touch. Her worried eyes found Faquarl's. "Are you ready, sir?"

"As I'll ever be," he said slowly, and she watched his throat work in anticipation. Biting her lip, she opened the skin of water and poured it as quickly as possible over Faquarl's chest. He roared in pain and she grimaced further, ears pinned flat against her head as she hastily threw the empty waterskin aside and pressed a large piece of linen directly to the wound where it became soaked with pus and blood. Faquarl's eyes began to dilate in pain, and he muttered something through clenched teeth.

"H-how is it?"

Felora ignored his question, peeling the cloth off quickly and tossing it onto the fire, where it smoked with a sickly greenish hue. She reached for another skin of purified water, this one of a cooler temperature. She poured the water down his chest, where it flooded the wound before pooling in his lap. She soaked it up with another cloth and threw that one onto the fire as well before leaning back. "It's as clean as it will be, sir."

Faquarl moved to lie down, trying to catch his breath.

"Forgive me for not looking," he muttered. Felora looked down at him, worried. She leaned closer, her breath catching in her throat at the depth and severity of the gash that crossed his chest.

"It's not going to be easy, sir," she said.

"Take Yagy's axe and cut out the infected tissue," he said roughly, frowning at her hesitation. "Do it, Felora! And prepare for blood loss."

"Cursed if I'm going to use Yag's axe on you," Felora snorted, reaching into her bag to extract a slender blade. She then took small pouches of powdered icecap and firebloom and removed small amounts of each, sprinkling them liberally over the open wound in hopes that the combination would numb some of the pain. She glanced at Faquarl, whose eyes followed her movements slowly. "You'll thank me for that later, sir."

She heated the blade in the fire and placed an open palm on his shoulder, pressing her weight down as she began to carefully slice into the edges of the gash. Faquarl roared again, clenching his fists and trying his hardest not to move too much. Felora grit her teeth, removing inflamed skin and muscle to reveal the healthy pink beneath. No matter how careful she was, he would have quite a scar. She flicked the infected portion off of her knife and into the fire, pushing herself off of him and quickly staunching the bleeding with a thick square of wool. Faquarl began to mutter, losing himself in the pain. Felora frowned, throwing the used blade onto the fire and pulling a clean one from the pouch at her belt. Heating this one, she glanced worriedly at Faquarl before pressing the flat of the blade to the edge of his wound in an attempt to cauterize it. The skin bubbled but did not close. She jumped at the sound of Faquarl beginning to laugh.

"Too easy," he said thickly. "What must I do?"

"Be quiet," Felora snapped at him. "I can't think with you in my head."

"Voices in your head, too?" Faquarl rasped.

She sat back onto her hocks, scrubbing at her face with open palms, muttering under her breath, "Therazane, you help him often enough, surely you can help me too..." The sound of Faquarl's labored breathing was loud in her ears, and her pleas to the Earthmother were met with silence. Felora nearly groaned with frustration before remembering something. She quickly thrust a hand into her bag and pulled out a large glass vial, this one suffused with a pale green glow cast by the mote of life within. She looked down at her mentor.

"Alright, sir. I've got one shot at this. Try to keep your voices to yourself."

"It was the pain," he said, sounding somewhat more lucid. "Forget it."

She poured the contents of the vial into her palm and closed her eyes, gathering her healing magic about her and weaving it around the mote with the fingers of her free hand. Reaching out, she flooded the gash on Faquarl's chest with a burst of pure life energy in hopes that it would heal the wound and knit the gash closed with new skin. The mote faded and then vanished, and as she looked on, Faquarl began to writhe in pain.

"W-what did you do?" he ground out between clenched teeth, one hand clawing at his chest.

Felora felt panic finally beginning to overtake her. "I-I wasn't sure if it would work."

Faquarl gasped at the wound, his voice strained. "There is only one option left. I have to go into the Emerald Dream. Help me up, Fel."

For a moment, Felora found herself unable to breathe. She scrambled to stand on shaky legs and reached down to grasp his upper arm, helping him to a standing position.

"Sir, you can't. It will eat you alive..."

"Help me bandage this," Faquarl said, ignoring her last comment. "It's the only plausible solution now and my only hope for a cure."

Felora pulled a thick roll of bandages from her bag, glimpsing a familiar vial of red liquid tucked into the folds of the leather. She began to carefully wrap his chest with a heavy bandage

of netherweave, her eyes stinging. Tucking the tail end of the cloth under, she stepped back away from him, feeling helpless and useless at the same time. He turned to her.

"Felora. I'm going into the Dream. Make sure that I am not disturbed. With any luck, I should be back soon."

She stepped forward, frowning as her voice dropped to a whisper. "What if it comes true, sir? What if you don't come back?"

Faquarl met her gaze steadily. "If I don't come back, bury my body in Desolace."

Felora swallowed and nodded. "Yes, sir."

"Do not follow me, Felora."

She nodded once, unable to meet his eyes.

"You and Yagyu handle the Bhurkas."

"...yes, sir."

"I'll be back soon."

Faquarl walked further into the cave to his cot and lay down, making himself comfortable and focusing on reaching a deep sleep. The familiar feeling washed over him and his mind settled into a restful state. His breathing slowed and finally leveled. Felora still stood by the fire, staring off in the direction that he had gone.

A heavy steel blade fastened snugly to a hearty wooden stock makes for a deadly weapon. In the right hands, a flashing blade can cleave a night elf in two in a single stroke. Yagyu had always felt the most secure with a blade in his hand and the thought of death in the midst of a pile of bloody Alliance bodies only made him grin. Perhaps that was why, there in the darkness of the cave, he felt so uneasy. Watching Felora weave her druidic magic on Faquarl and hearing his roars of pain disturbed him in a way he didn't know how to cope with.

He sat up on his cot, facing the wall but with his ears directed towards the fire where Felora tended to the warlord's wound. He could only hear pieces of the conversation and even had he heard it all, he doubted he would have understood it anyway. He pulled his axe from the leather sheath and removed a dense sharpening stone and began to grind at the wicked bladed weapon. "How deep is it now? I haven't checked it in a week," he heard Faquarl say. That didn't sound good. The orc had been in enough battles to know that wounds that weren't treated properly following a fight were bigger killers than dwarven axes. His lip curled as he silently cursed Faquarl for being so stupid. But then, it wasn't really anger that he felt. It wasn't anger that twisted his guts around. It was a feeling of despair. He was helpless. Putting a finely honed edge on this Fel-steel axe wouldn't help Faquarl heal any quicker and it wouldn't give Felora the wisdom she needed to cure him. And yet, what else could he do?

"Cursed if I'm going to use Yag's axe on you," Felora's words drifted towards him through the cave. Inwardly, he grinned. Most didn't think so, but a trained eye could see the deftness of a finely-honed Orcish war axe. Silently he began his own personal ritual: sharpening and polishing his axe, something that would calm him like nothing else could. The motion of grinding stone on steel put Yagyu into a sort of reverie as he became entranced in the ceremony of sharpening the blade. He almost didn't hear the worry in Felora's murmurings, or the pain in Faquarl's labored breath. Slowly, he ran his finger along the blade's edge and as it began to draw blood, Yagyu knew that it was almost finished. He put down the stone and removed a damp cloth from his bag. Cut from the underarm of an Ashenvale night elf, the rag would complete the polishing of the axe, leaving the steel glowing brightly in the dimly lit shadows of Taugrek's Stand.

"You and Yagyu handle the Bhurkas." He caught Faquarl's strained words. "I'll be back soon."

There was nothing he could do to help the warlord. He was on his own now, and now it was time for Yag to make sure that all his work continued on as if he had only been asleep for an hour. This Yagyu vowed he would do. He would do it, or die trying.

"Ssssssquirm, cow..." A hissing voice echoed inside Faquarl's head as Felora was treating him.

"Get out of my head, serpent. Your constant mutterings are at their end. While our conversations have been enlightening, it is time for you to go." Faquarl communicated with the disembodied voice. For a month's time, a battle had waged between the two right inside the gruff druid's mind. And while Faquarl had maintained control of himself in public, the serpent was winning things privately.

"The girl can't help you - no one can! You and I will sssstay together for quite a while to come. It was quite admirable of you to finally tell them about me. Or at least about what I did to you." The voice crowed in triumph.

"Laugh while you can, snake. May I remind you that you have stopped nothing - I've kept up my daily life. The only thing you have done is make a mere scratch. Can't even kill me."

"Who says that I wanted to?" The voice laughed at him.

Faquarl tuned out the voice after he realized that it dulled his wits enough to say much to Felora - that, and the mote of life. The pain it brought was more severe than he could have ever anticipated. Something so pure felt as if it would rip his torso in two. This was the final straw; he knew what he had to do. The prospect of having a reason to return to the Dream made up his mind long before he went to Felora. Only common sense had kept him from going sooner.

"Felora. I'm going into the Dream. Make sure that I am not disturbed. With any luck, I should be back soon."

She argued with him, as was her way. He knew that she had seen him dead, but Faquarl planned on seeing that event for himself. He had to face Taerar again in the Dream. It was the only way.

"Silly, stupid cow - you couldn't even beat me in your world. How do you expect to do so in mine?"

"I wasn't aware that dragons owned any worlds, let alone planes of existence."

"Don't get witty. The fact remains that you have no chance in beating the Nightmare."

"My respect for your kin has dwindled since you have fallen to such magic. But perhaps it is just that the greens were too weak."

"I will enjoy tearing that tongue out. You speak far too much for your own good."

"Why, thank you. However, I do agree that our chats have become quite dull and I look forward to ending them soon."

In the physical world, Faquarl had fallen onto his cot to enter the Dream. The euphoria of emerging back into it was like nothing found on Azeroth. When he opened his eyes, the process was finished. He appeared to be inside one of the mountain peaks of Redridge - the cave had not yet been dug out. He began to focus hard. Powerful druids had the ability to shape the Dream as they willed, for its purpose was as a ground for druids and dragons alike to shape and learn from. As he did so, the rocks began to warp into a tunnel out into the mountainside.

"Ah, Redridge. Before Ragnaros and the Sundering. I don't even think that Blackrock has formed yet. It seems the Nightmare is stronger around where the night elves live. I don't see any of it here." Faquarl looked around him. Sharp red mountains were everywhere; it would take ages for him to get to Mulgore. He had to hasten things. Focusing once more, he shifted into a bird. Unlike the same shapeshifting in Azeroth, turning into creatures in the Dream was much harder. Druids had to lose themselves and reform their bodies as physical creatures inside the Dream.

As Faquarl flew toward Mulgore, he noticed that he no longer heard the voice in his head. This was a relief - he was quite intimidated by the dragon and had been unsure whether his bravado was good enough to throw the great creature off.

It had been days, and still he slept.

Felora shifted herself against the soft pack beneath her head, the stone floor of the cave proving even less comfortable than she had hoped. She sat up with a sigh, sleep eluding her. She glanced at Faquarl's resting form with a frown and snorted a bit. "You always make things look so easy."

The long silence that followed caused her vision to unfocus as her thoughts turned inward. She had led a patrol of the foothills only days earlier, and had been surprised at how smoothly things had gone without Faquarl's aid. She still felt in some ways that she wasn't ready to let go of him. Not that he had been hers to lose.

"Felora," Faquarl had asked after her at the close of the last Grin tournament.

"Sir?" She turned to him.

"You are becoming a druid equal to myself."

"Thank you, sir." She blushed.

"Perhaps it is time that you stepped out of my shadow and into your own light."

Even as Faquarl's words of encouragement and approval echoed in her ears, she continued to feel the thick knot of fear in the pit of her stomach. Fear for him - not that she would ever admit it to his face. He would say that she was being soft. She glanced down at the broad, dark scar that crossed the palm of her right hand. She had seen it, she hadn't been mistaken - Taerar had killed him.

Faquarl made a humming sound in his sleep, muttering something unintelligible. Felora sighed at him. "You should, sir, in the very least come back for Yagy and the others." The comment was more for herself than for him. She wondered if he could hear her in the Dream. She had been able to hear him during her own sojourn to that other world, but that experience had been in much less dire circumstances. His voice suddenly carried over to her from where he lay, slurred and low.

"Nightmare is...stronger...any...here."

Felora's throat was suddenly thick, her eyes stinging once again. She blinked rapidly and frowned down into her lap. A memory of the days prior entered her head.

"Well, you were my last chance to fix this," he had said, surprising her with a broad, uncharacteristic grin. "Last only because you tend to become an overemotional wreck."

He was right, after all. She would never be as strong as he was. She only hoped that he would find whatever it was that he sought. In the meantime, she would have to bottle her emotions and do her job. The Bhurkas were counting on her. Faquarl was counting on her. She stood, steadying herself against the wall and didn't look back as she stumbled out into the main room of the cave.

Time had passed. Faquarl had no idea how much time, but it had passed. Finding Mulgore was proving to be more of a task than he had anticipated. He had noticed that the world was becoming more...demented. He had seen green dragons in battle against things hard to describe. As an experienced druid, Faquarl was able to make small changes in the Dream. These creatures, however, seemed to be able to warp the landscape acres at a time. He flew

downward. The ground below him seemed familiar; he had been here, long ago. He perched in a tree and tried to remember. It came to him that this was the place in which he had met his old master, Naralex. The land was quite different, far more affected than it had once been.

He looked down further and saw what appeared to be two shades - Naralex and himself - sitting on the ground in an echo of their last conversation. The memory stung. Watching himself was unsettling, but Faquarl remained seated. The shades continued talking. They were not free thinking, Faquarl reminded himself, just a memory imprinted here by the Nightmare. Probably just awakened to cause me pain, he thought wryly. Launching himself from the branch, he flew up again toward Mulgore. Flying as fast as he could, he sighed in relief when he saw the uninhabited Thunder Bluff in the distance. A crackling noise resounded in his ears and a dark bolt of energy lashed him out of the sky. Faquarl plummeted toward the ground and into blackness. When he awoke moments later, he lay at the base of the Tauren city. Struggling to his feet, he walked a few steps until he saw a figure ahead of him. It was the troll shaman, Huizopotl.

"Hello, Pokes." Faquarl decided to just go with the flow; perhaps he could get an answer to what was happening. Pokes just stared at him with a twisted smile on his face. Faquarl took a few steps toward him, but Pokes vanished.

"Enjoying yourself?" Faquarl knew that voice well by now, but this time it had not come from his head. It was booming from behind him. He turned and saw the great green dragon Taerar before him. He took a step back, but something had caught his eye. All around him, Grin were appearing. These Grin, however, did not look like the comrades he knew.

"What's going on here?" he asked aloud.

"It is time that you learn why it is called the Nightmare." Taerar's voice resounded through the bones in his skull. "Your worst fear will be the end of you."

The color drained from Faquarl's face. He looked as the Grin gathered behind Gorfrunch. They looked as if they were heading to war. Then he saw a light shining behind him. He saw a cliff, and standing on top of it were several figures that he could not make out.

"I have grown fond of you," Taerar said. "I will give you a choice. Your Orcish friend is about to fight me. He will die. You may die with him. But before you do, I want you to look behind you again."

Faquarl turned and focused. His jaw dropped. The gathering people on the cliff wall were his tribesmen. The ones he had led to death so many years ago. Standing next to them was Naralex. He seemed corporeal, so unlike the shade Faquarl had seen earlier.

"Naralex is alive in the Dream. You may go back to him. He is captured in your world, but in the Dream he is free."

Faquarl's choice was between his new clan or his past; his mentors and brothers, or his allies. He stood helpless for a moment, torn. Just then, he felt something rub his right hand. He looked down and saw a bear. He recognized himself in his bear form. A large hawk flew onto his shoulder, and a svelte feline appeared to his left. These were his various shapeshifting forms. A treant shuffled toward him slowly, accompanied by a moonkin. He had become one with all of these things - not in his past, but with the Grin. His choice was suddenly made, and as he looked at the various creatures around him they seemed to have his same grim resolve. The battle began.

The Grin charged the dragon, as their trampling feet and battle cries tore through the air. The dragon took a deep breath and blew his green flame at them. Faquarl called down a tornado to disperse the flames. Yagyu ran to the beast's side and swung his axe into the muscled flesh. The drake roared and reared his spiked tail at the orc. The bear spirit charged Yagyu, knocking him down and taking the blow for him. Faquarl roared, feeling the bear's pain as if it were his own. The dragon's tail rose into the air to finish the bear off, but was soon tackled by a moonkin. The treant began tending to the bear until it could stand again. All three creatures dispersed before the tail swung hard onto the ground.

Orcish steel cutting into flesh could be heard. Faquarl got up and ran toward the beast himself. With every step, he called the earth to raise itself into a stairway leading to the dragon's head. He looked down and saw Belmont working with some gadget or another. Next to him was the feline, wearing the same exasperated countenance that Faquarl usually used around the rogue. Faquarl jumped from his high position, aiming to land on Taerar's back. The hawk dove toward the dragon's eyes, clawing at them with outstretched talons.

Chaos was erupting. Faquarl crawled up to the dragon's horns and held onto one for stability. He began slamming the top of Taerar's head with every ability he had. It was no use. He only stopped when he looked down to see Felora, standing far below and right in the dragon's path. Her hands swirled with druidic magic, but there was no time. Faquarl jumped down just as the beast swiped at her and dove into the path of Taerar's claws. Time seemed to stand still. He looked down at his middle and saw that he was impaled by the claw, which arched up from his chest like a great spear. He looked at Felora in disbelief and said the only thing that came to mind.

"...run..."

She looked as though she might fall to her knees then and there, but she did as she was told and Faquarl slid off of the dragon's claw and onto the ground. His vision started to swim as blood gushed from the wound in his chest. The dragon loomed over him, one massive claw raised to finish him off. Suddenly Taerar's body froze, as though he were listening for something that was not there.

"Ysera..." Taerar said with disgust. He leapt and flew off in a great rush of wind, leaving the group of battered Grin behind. Faquarl lay still, rasping for breath. The creatures that had come to him earlier surrounded him once more. The moonkin picked Faquarl up and held him aloft. The bear stepped heavily beneath him and allowed Faquarl to rest on his back. The hawk alighted on his shoulder and the feline began to whine, rubbing its head against Faquarl's leg. The treant came forward and removed the druid's tunic.

The treant met Faquarl's eyes in mutual understanding. The treant placed both hands over the two broad gashes on the tauren's torso - one from his first fight with Taerar, and the new one. A green light shone forth and both wounds began to mend. A smirk curled across Faquarl's face. He had done it. Dismounting the bear, he acknowledged each beast and they seemed to fade away. The Grin, too, had disappeared and the black landscape returned to the green-tinted Mulgore which it truly was.

Faquarl focused hard and then awoke.