

## The Fall of a Legend

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The scream died in Felora's throat.

Everything around her seemed to slow and she stood perfectly still, watching as an arrow, then another, pierced Faquarl's chest. Her warlord let out a deafening roar, which was suddenly choked back by a final missile as he stumbled and fell heavily to the ground. Her legs felt numb, as though she were wading through muddy water, but somehow she managed to come to where Faquarl lay still, eyes closed. Yalim was there next to him, somehow, and even her friend's presence did not calm her. Felora suddenly whimpered, her eyes wide with growing panic.

Therazane, please, she thought, I can't heal this. Yalim can't heal this...no one can heal this.

She glanced at Ashenrock, who had landed behind them and was looking about for another attack. Thankfully, none came.

"He's not breathing," she said, unable to manage anything more than a whisper.

Rock looked at Faquarl a moment.

"Take him through," he ordered. "We will not leave him behind."

As Rock shouldered the older tauren onto his back to carry him through the portal, Felora kept her eyes trained on the ground. A high, keening wail was threatening to come pouring from her mouth, and it took everything she had to hold it back.

There was no way that Felora could have carried Faquarl's body on her own. Ashenrock had kindly offered to make the journey with her. She had every intention of making sure that Faquarl's wishes as to where he would be buried were fulfilled, although the spot that she had in mind was perhaps not the one that he would have chosen. What remained of her mentor and friend lay securely wrapped in a linen shroud, fitted with a carefully carved wooden mask as was the Tauren custom. He had been gingerly placed astride Tamar's back and Felora was entirely prepared to walk beside her kodo on foot to Desolace.

An old memory claimed her then. The sounds of Faquarl's voice as he knelt in front of Tamar, one arm across the kodo's neck as he held the beast still so that Felora could file his horn down. He'd been kind to her that day, just before he had gone into the Emerald Dream.

She blinked back tears as Ashenrock approached, a sturdy staff in one hand and a full pack over his shoulder.

"Are you ready, Felora?"

She wanted with all of her heart to start screaming that she would never be ready, not to let go of him. But instead she simply nodded and moved to Tamar's head, grasping the reins in one hand and leading them out of Silvermoon.

"You're sure you want to go through with this?" Ashenrock's voice met her ears as they slowly descended the stairwell into Maraudon. He knew the answer; he just needed to hear her reassure herself. What she really wanted was to fall into the Emerald Dream and never wake again. But she had promised him.

"I'm sure," she answered quietly. "I owe him this."

The place was eerily quiet and it was surprising that the occupants of Maraudon let the two pass unchallenged. Ashenrock was relieved. He knew what a strain this was on Felora already. The last thing she needed was to have to fight her way through. He also didn't want anything to happen to the warlord's body on the way down. The old tauren was heavy, but on this day Ashenrock would not lose strength or resolve. He turned his attention to Felora. She moved through without saying a word and didn't dare look back. He very much hated to see her this way and would have done anything to relieve even a second of the pain that she was obviously in. Ashenrock's natural empathy could feel every bit of raw anger and sadness coming from her in waves. He had thought of nothing that would take that pain away and decided it better to simply be there for her, absorbing whatever of her emotions that he could. He had been further relieved when she had accepted his offer to help her - he couldn't have let her do this alone. He knew what Faquarl had meant to her.

Creatures peered out of the dark corners, studying them as they moved, no doubt terrified of the druids. Even the dryads in the depths of the cavern gave no alarm as they passed. Felora shuddered. Someone was watching over them, that much was clear to her. She and Ashenrock made their way slowly through the watery caverns, the elevation becoming steeper. Finally they stood before a broad chasm spanned by a land bridge, guarded by a pair of two very large, rocky golems. Felora stepped forward.

"Let us pass," she demanded.

The giants stirred, frowning. Felora waited, and when no reply came, she shifted easily into her ursine form and dispatched the nearest golem over the rocky ledge and into the water below. Ashenrock winced and weakened a bit when he felt the unbridled anger explode from her when she slammed into the beast. Just as she would have charged the second of the giants, a low hum began to reverberate through the cavern. Ashenrock looked around, cautiously, for the source of the noise.

The giant before Felora suddenly rumbled and stepped back. Beyond it, she could see the grassy platform that was the burial ground of Zaetar, jealously guarded by the round, stony form of the elemental Theradras. Returning to her tauren form, she stepped back to stand beside Ashenrock. He shrugged at her from beneath his burden and began walking down the rocky bridge. Felora followed warily. Ashenrock could feel pure, natural energy and was calmed. He sensed that no danger lay ahead. When they reached the elemental, her reaction was not one of blind rage as Felora would have expected. She looked up into the face of Therazane's daughter.

"Bring him," Theradras said before moving away.

Ashenrock came forward and lay the warlord's body directly beneath the massive pair of antlers in the center of Zaetar's burial mound. He leaned in close to the body and whispered something that Felora could not make out. He then rose, stood at attention, and saluted his fallen comrade. He turned, and with a lingering touch at Felora's shoulder, moved to follow the elemental to the edge of the grassy knoll. He waited and whispered a silent prayer.

Felora knelt in the grass before Faquarl, a scene that they had played out many times before. Another memory assaulted her, the sound of her mentor's voice making her cringe as it resounded in her head.

*I did what I had to, I've told you that. It was just time for me to move on. You need to understand that, Felora.*

The tears sprang unbidden to her eyes.

I'm going to miss you, sir, she thought. Things will never be the same. Never.

"Let him go, daughter." A feminine whisper at the edge of her mind, so soft that Felora didn't hear it at first. "Let him go."

"No!" Felora yelled. "I don't want -"

Her voice died suddenly, lost in a low and painful sob. She fell to both knees and curled in on herself. Ashenrock started to instinctively move toward her but was stopped cold by some unknown force. He heard a familiar voice say, "This pain is for her to bear alone, my son."

Reluctantly, he returned to his place.

"You know he was tired of the war," the voice continued to whisper in Felora's head. "He deserves this rest."

This will be forever, Felora thought. She still lay prone beside Faquarl's body. He isn't coming back.

"And he knew that. You knew it too," the voice chided her gently.

I never told him, she thought with a pang of remorse.

"He knew. He knows even now."

But I failed him, she thought with a fresh flood of tears. I wasn't there to protect him, Mother. He would be so ashamed of me right now.

"He is proud of you, Felora." Another deep voice came from behind her. Her senses were dulled from her grief and she hadn't noticed Ashenrock finally allow himself to approach.

"But I'm too soft," she said aloud, frowning as her voice cracked. "He said so himself."

"You care. Empathy is not an easy trait to have." Ashenrock winced inwardly even as he said the words. He could tell that Felora wasn't aware of who was speaking to her now. She was staring straight ahead, her violet eyes dark.

"It did nothing to save him," Felora said flatly, her voice catching.

"It was his time," Ashenrock said in a rational tone, nearly standing over her.

"But I wasn't ready," she sobbed, closing her eyes.

Ashenrock leaned down to scoop her from the ground.

"Come, Felora," he said. "Let us leave the warlord to his peace."

Felora sunk inward and let herself be carried from the cavern.