

Grasping at Faith

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Felora led Tamar's bulk into Stonard with a neutral glance to one of the many guards that stood watch beside the southern gate. Evening had filled the swamp with stillness; the courtyard was quiet but for the crackle of bonfires and the low whispers of grots that had not yet succumbed to sleep.

Since making Stonard their new home, the Grin had swiftly transformed the little rural outpost into a full-fledged military base, filling the inn with the cots and hammocks of the enlisted ranks and forcing those who had not yet proved themselves to sleep outside beneath the murky canopy of trees and sky. The clan had been forced to move so often in the past months that Felora was grateful for the little bastion of civilization that Stonard had offered them.

Pulling the gear from her kodo and letting him loose into the makeshift pen behind the inn, Felora set her saddle on one of the racks near the wall and wearily made her way into the building and mounted the staircase to the upper rooms. She settled herself onto her cot with a tiny sigh, her brow creased with her thoughts.

Several of her clanmates were in strife, and she had been nearly oblivious to their suffering, no thanks to her own selfish depression. After all these months, things still didn't feel right. They felt blurry, smeared. Faquarl's death had marked her in a way that even the Nightmare hadn't been able to, and she was finding the loneliness hard to shake off. Still, she couldn't help but feel that she was needed by her clan, to heal them not just physically but perhaps emotionally as well.

She was most concerned for Ashenrock, perhaps because she had seen neither hide nor hair of him in the last two weeks. He was busy, she knew; it was no easy task to lead this clan. But the Chieftain seemed increasingly distracted by something, and Felora was loathe to bother him, feeling that she might only get in the way. Yagyu seemed to have noticed it as well, but he too had been keeping to himself - Felora knew that she was not the only one to worry about her friends. Something felt wrong, and Felora was getting the sneaking suspicion that it had something to do with that mercenary warlock that kept creeping about. She frowned and bit her lip. Perhaps Gorfrunch's decision to allow mercenaries to work within the clan was turning out to be less than ideal.

What would Faquarl have done?

Felora grimaced at the thought. He certainly would have told her to get off of her haunches and take an assertive position in the whole ordeal. She leaned toward the doorway to her quarters and caught a glimpse of Ashenrock in the near center of his own room, holding the dagger that Gorfrunch had given him. His concentration was immediately evident, and Felora tilted her head in order to see better. Was the Chieftain thinking of walking a different path all together?

Yagyu walked past her doorway as if from nowhere, and Felora looked down quickly, suddenly feeling as though she had been eavesdropping on an unheard conversation. She turned and rose from the bed, stepping across to the little table which served as her altar. She carefully watered a tiny potted plant which set off to one side and struck a match to light the single white candle in its stone holder. Kneeling, she offered a silent prayer to Therazane, that She might offer strength and support to those who sought it.

She leaned back and her face twisted slightly in a little half smile. She only hoped that Ashenrock would find what he was looking for.

Ashenrock just couldn't get the full feel for the blade. He thrust it...then he swung with it...nothing felt comfortable. Suddenly an intense feeling of worry and sorrow wracked him; Ashenrock felt very sorry for himself. He quickly realized that these were not his own feelings, but the feelings of someone else. It almost felt as though someone was in his head.

As suddenly the feeling had come, it dissipated, and his head was clear again. So many odd things were taking place these days that he decided to let it go. He'd deal with it later if it happened again. His concentration had been lost so he returned the blade to its proper place and turned to leave his room. As he reached the door, he glanced across the threshold and noticed Felora in her quarters, kneeling before a small table with an assortment of objects scattered across the top, her head bowed. She didn't seem to notice him. He nearly continued to the stairs, but stopped himself. Perhaps Felora could help him sort out his jumbled feelings - he certainly had enough of them lately. He knocked lightly on the doorframe.

Felora jumped slightly and snapped her head up to look at him, the surprise evident on her face. Ashenrock immediately felt abashed - he had interrupted her. What if she had just wanted to be left alone? But she smiled at him genuinely and leapt to her feet, her soft voice reaching his ears.

"Chieftain! Is there something that I can help you with?"

Ashenrock smiled at the sight despite himself. While he certainly hadn't meant to sneak up on her, he was amused by the result.

"I didn't mean to startle you, Felora," he said. "I apologize if I was interrupting anything. I just wondered if you had a moment...my mind is a bit of a mess and I would greatly appreciate some insight."

Felora tilted her head slightly, a bit taken aback. "Of course, Rock. What did you have on your mind?"

She gestured to her cot with one hand. "Please, sit."

Ashenrock proceeded to sit squarely on the floor below Felora, who seemed to resign herself to sitting on the bed. Ashenrock didn't waste time or mince words.

"I value your opinions, Felora. That's why I asked you to be my Seer. I hide many feelings from the rest of the clan," he said, shaking his head slowly while looking at the floor. "I can't look weak in front of the troops...it wouldn't look too good." Felora nodded slowly in agreement while Rock continued. "I hope that you might be able to help me choose a path. You seem firmly planted in your beliefs as a druid. I, on the other hand, have grappled with my place in those beliefs. I've never been very comfortable with any of my roles. I was a competent healer, but I still had a taste for battle. I was a powerful feral druid, but I lost a lot of intellect with that path, and now...as a moonkin...I satisfy my tastes for battle and wisdom, but I lack some compassion that I once held with pride. I don't quite know where to go or what to do."

He sighed. "I see that my indecision doesn't sit well with some of the Grin. They look at me as if I'm mad. Poor Crunck doesn't know what to even call me these days. Now that Yagyu has returned, I don't want to make a bad impression on him. He's not sure about me already and I can tell that he wishes he had come back under Gorfrunch's leadership."

Ashenrock looked up at Felora with pain in his eyes. "On top of that, my brother grows more and more unstable by the day. His obsession with the Knights of Lordaeron...the dark magics they hold...it's unhealthy and I fear the worst for him." Ashenrock stood, obviously growing agitated by his own thoughts. "And here I am. The fearless leader of the Blacktooth Grin. If I can't solve my own issues...how am I to lead this clan?" He clenched his fists in rage and shot a glance at Felora, suddenly afraid that his insecurity would disappoint her. He furrowed his brow and sat back down. "I apologize...sometimes the emotions get a little more of me than I'd like."

It felt strange to Felora, looking down at the tauren who had become her superior. Ashenrock certainly didn't seem to mind, as the words spilled from him in a flood. She decided to let it go. She worried a bit that he had been able to see her concern for him, plain as day if anyone dared to look for it. She didn't think that he could read her thoughts, but part of her wondered if Therazane had sent him to her somehow.

She sat, listening, watching with her violet eyes the play of emotions over his face. She hadn't realized how many burdens her friend carried. She had known that the position he now found himself in brought its own problems, but Rock seemed to have buried himself so deeply that he could no longer find his way out. As he settled back down, Felora reached down a bit nervously to place a hand on his shoulder.

"There's no need to apologize, Rock. The Chieftain has the right to his emotions, just the same as anyone else."

Yes, he thought wryly. He even has emotions that are not always his own.

Felora bit her lip. She was used to being the one asking for advice, not giving it. But here sat a tauren that she considered one of her very dearest friends, trying to find his bearings in a clan that seemed to resent him for not being Gorfrunch. She knew that Ashenrock would need to find his center as a druid before he could grasp the strength he needed to make the Grin accept him.

"I think," she began haltingly, "that it is very easy for us, as tauren, to feel slightly out of place in this clan. The Blacktooth Grin has always held fast to very orcish ideals and beliefs. Yagyu and Grimnir are excellent examples of the product of those beliefs. Their loyalty and honor to their clan and their people are admirable.

"But that culture difference is something that can be very hard to break out of. I grapple with it even now," she said. "Druidry is something that ties me to the land just as it ties me to my people; you say that I am firm in my beliefs, but it has taken a long time for me to claim even the tenuous hold that I have on them now. The path that you choose to follow can shape your beliefs, of course. But there will always be parts of you that will not change. Your compassion, my friend, is one of these."

Felora glanced again at her altar, where the white candle still burned.

"I look at the druid path as a reflection of nature of Therazane herself. She has three faces, three facets, but they are still a part of her as a whole. Rock, I think that no matter which of her paths you choose to walk, your compassion and peace will follow you."

He gave her a questioning glance and she turned back to look at him. "Since Faquarl's death, I've had to start making my own inferences about the way of things. Here's hoping I'm not too far off."

Rock raised his eyebrows at the comment, turning the focus of the conversation away from himself and onto Felora.

"Did Faquarl make all of your decisions for you? Or were you allowed to think for yourself once in a while?" he asked, in a tone suggesting only a slight jest.

To her own surprise, Felora graced him with a half-smile. "Yes, at first."

Rock blinked at her honesty as she continued.

"When I first joined the Grin, Faquarl was one of the few people in this clan who could get me to say anything at all - mostly by getting me to argue with him. I was younger and naive, and it was very easy for me to look up to him and drink in all that he had to say. As time went by, he would sometimes ask my opinion of things, but I have never been particularly sure of myself. Even now, I am not always sure."

She glanced away. "Now that he is gone, I can no longer hide behind him - and I don't think that I need to. He cast a very large shadow, as you know."

He nodded and she met his eyes again.

"Everyone in this clan knows that I mourn Faquarl. He was my teacher, my comrade, and - despite his brusque manner - my friend."

She sighed. "My feelings for him were a bit transparent as well, I think, although no one ever said anything to me. It's no matter - he never returned them, and I never expected him to. They may have only been hero worship, after all."

Ashenrock nodded. "It's difficult to decipher one's feelings sometimes until it's already too late. I, too, considered Faquarl a friend - though unlike you I took many things he said with a grain of salt. We disagreed on many things, but I think we both could see that you are more than you think."

Rock stood up and stretched his legs a bit. "Perhaps that's my problem as well. I've never been very sure of myself...but at least I wasn't afraid to let my voice be heard."

He looked intently on Felora and tried to sound more like a friend than a father figure. He didn't want to be like Faquarl. "You are more than worthy to stand on your own two feet on this earth, Felora. Your potential has been evident since the day I met you...and I have been in awe of that."

Felora looked at Ashenrock with a bit of a grimace on her face. "I hope that your faith in me isn't misguided."

Rock looked at her and laughed. "You're doing it again. Have faith in yourself and let things fall on their own."

Now it was Felora's turn to laugh. "That's some pretty good advice..."

Rock realized where she was headed. The root of his problems were his uncertainty in his own ability. "Well done, Seer. See...you're solving problems and not even trying." He looked at Felora with some adoration. "Perhaps together we will be able to come to grips with who we are while at the same time leading this clan to greatness."

Felora smiled up at him. "You're already leading this clan to greatness, Rock. If I can help, you know that I will."

She reached out to take hold of one of his massive hands, in an effort to add some reassurance to her words. A tension suddenly floated in the air between them, expounded by a sudden tingling sensation in the back of her head. She drew a breath in slowly and the feeling passed, but she glanced at Rock to see a similar expression of surprise on his face which quickly disappeared. He squeezed her hand briefly before letting go and moving towards the doorway to her room.

"Thank you, Felora," he said genuinely.

She inclined her head with another smile, and he stepped across the threshold and disappeared, leaving her alone. Feeling oddly content, she returned to her altar. With a prayer of thanks to Therazane, she blew out the white candle.