

Bane was dead.

It was a concrete fact that he had to accept now – he'd even watched as the quasi-deity fell, cut through with a silver sword and razed with moonfire.

The quasi-deity he'd once believed so powerful – capable of allowing him to conquer an entire city and beyond.

Defeated by... them.

The prism bearers.

The pathetic little whelps that kept dragging him along on this journey like a dead horse they enjoyed beating with sticks.

And he was short one hand for it.

It wasn't *them* that had brought him back. No, Bane had done that with the help of Myrkul, so he'd heard, who had screwed his head back onto his neck and handed him over to the Dark One.

Who then made him his little toy.

His little puppet to get the Luskanites to turn against the Drow.

Enver could've done that easily enough without the inspiring words of Bane emerging from his lips. He'd done it in Baldur's Gate easily enough with the refugees and the Tieflings. Yet *here* Bane had doubted his skill? His prowess?

Because the adventurers had ruined their plan.

So somehow that was his fault.

And not Ketheric's, for failing to stop them.

Or Orin's, for not slaughtering them when they first stepped foot in the city – preferring to play and toy with them like a barn cat throwing a terrified mouse in the air.

But, even still - he could deal with the rest: the vampire with his honeyed words and perfect façade of luxury, the Gate's little prince that ran around playing pretend hero while *he* did actual work, even the Tiefling he thought he'd never see again.

But their leader is the one who made his blood boil.

*Amalica, of House Dryalis*, as she'd introduced herself to him once upon a time at *his* coronation.

Gortash blinked as he suddenly realized that he couldn't spot her amongst her ragtag companions, before hearing a voice behind him.

“Looking for *me*, I’d assume?”

His muscles tensed in surprise, before he turned his head to find the short-haired Drow - ruby eyes glancing down at him and a brief smiling tugging at the corners of her lips.

“Why would I look for *you*?” The former Tyrant spat back, “Awfully egotistical to assume as such. I know everyone else in this camp thinks highly of you, but I have no such favor for you.”

“That’s fine,” She sat down next to him as she gave her nonchalant answer, “You don’t need to like me to look for me.”

She looked over him as he tried to ignore her – focusing on repairs to his new prosthetic hand, fashioned from metals and parts they’d gathered from Bane’s makeshift foundry at Dragon Beach.

“That’s healed nicely,” The Drow remarked.

Enver just gave her a grunt in response.

*As nicely as a hand chopped off by Bane himself could heal, anyway.*

Of course the bastard would come for his right hand - the one that had worn the gauntlet of power, held the violet Netherstone that allowed him to command the Absolute.

Which now meant he was stuck *here*.

With a bunch of morons.

And a do-gooder Drow acting like she felt *sorry* for him.

Sure.

He’d believe that when Avernum froze over.

“What do you want?” He hissed, finally fed up with the impromptu visit and the calmness she exuded.

“I wanted to check on you,” Amalica explained simply, as if it were an obvious answer, “That wasn’t easy on any of us – and I can’t imagine it was any easier on you. Having been his Chosen and all.”

“He was a means to an end. There is nothing more to discuss about Bane.”

“You wouldn’t be this miserable about it if that’s all he was, and you know it.”

She was right, and it stung. Gortash had worshipped Bane - for almost nothing in return. Just the promise of glory. The promise of the Black Hand’s might spread across the Sword Coast, granting him ultimate power.

Now who would claim him when his day in the Crystal Spire finally came?

He knew the answer.

It made his stomach turn, and his marks on his back scream in agony.

“I know what that’s like, you know.”

Oh, *did* she?

With all of her friends, and her lover – the vampire whose lips dripped saccharine words at every opportunity? With her bright smile and disgustingly heroic aura?

She *understood*?

“Oh, yes, I’m sure you do,” Gortash spat back bitterly, “Look at all the *struggles* you’ve faced *all by yourself*.”

“You say it with such sarcasm, but it’s more than you think.”

“Please, *enlighten* me, then.”

The Drow sat back, propping herself with her arms behind her – before speaking, “Do you know anything of how Drow raise their children?”

“You’re supposed to be enlightening me.”

“I don’t want to spout off information you already know and bore you - thank you very much.”

A small mercy, Enver supposed.

Save the yammering on for the wizard. Or the old Harper.

“I know of their cruelty,” He remarked tersely, “My parents spoke of them on occasion.”

“How so?”

There was a pause.

“That doesn’t matter, does it? You asked what I knew - I provided it.”

*You little wretch! You’re lucky we give you a roof over your head – even the Drow wouldn’t take you!*

Luckily for him, she didn’t push her luck.

“Right. Of course,” Amalica almost seemed to be *looking* for something, however, as she continued, “If you know of our cruelty, you’ll also know, perhaps, that we are *intensely* matriarchal. Women are given almost all positions of power, and men are treated as nothing more than battlefield fodder, half-useful mages, or arm candy for the matrons.”

“And this has to do with your problems *how*? ”

“I’m getting there,” Her tone was terse, her eyes fixed straight ahead, “So color the nobility surprised when House Dryalis found its matron practically *begging* a man for something. The Archmage of Menzoberranzan - Minthara’s uncle, Gromph Baenre. *Pleading* with him to take me into Sorcere on account of my sorcery.”

Enver said nothing – biting back a comment as he half-heartedly listened to her.

“But it wasn’t because I was exceptionally talented, or had wanted to go myself. No, it was because they wanted to be *rid* of me. My Wild Surges were out of control, and none of their ‘punishments’ had worked. So the easiest solution was to simply be rid of me. And they couldn’t kill me - what a bad look *that* would be. Killing their firstborn daughter. A sign of weakness, no doubt.”

A wave of a dark hand.

“So they shipped me off to Sorcere to be... educated. Get my surges under control – or die in the process.”

She rolled up a sleeve, finally breaking her stare from the horizon line – and revealing patches of skin that had burnt and peeled away, leaving splotches of lighter toned skin on her ebony arm.

“But they’d certainly tried before that. Especially since we’d had access to the surface.”

“Drow are sensitive to sunlight,” The words pulled themselves out of Gortash, “I *was* surprised you hadn’t burned on the surface.”

“I used to.”

The words were enough of a condemnation for the former Tyrant. The implication was there. And so were the scars.

“Your struggle, while not the same as mine, was... familiar, in the worst way, Gortash,” Amalica yanked back down her sleeve, “Passed around problems that nobody wanted to solve until either we escaped or learned to hide it better.”

“...And you were the latter, I take it?”

A nod.

“I finished my time at Sorcere and the Archmages had taught me just about every way to keep myself in check. To be ‘good’. So I *was* good. I went to the clerical school, Arach-Tinilith, not long after - as I was always *supposed* to. As every noble female does.”

Amalica breathed for a moment, before continuing - the words feeling like lead coming off of her tongue.

“And then, when I emerged to the surface for my Blooding sometime later... I ran,” A dry chuckle, “And got tadpoled. But you know that story already.”

The sounds of the night filled the silence around them, the small buzzes of insects and the distant crackle of fire back in the midst of camp.

“And you never thought to bite back?”

Amalica’s ears pricked up as Gortash broke the tension ungracefully, brow furrowed, “You hold potent magic in your veins and yet – you *muzzled* yourself– For what? To what end?”

“For *survival*, Gortash,” The Drow exhaled, “Have you never made yourself small in the hopes no one would see you? In the hopes that you would be passed over for an easier to torment target?”

His back stung again.

If only there’d *been* another target.

For them.

For ~~Nicole~~.

For ~~Raphael~~.

Enver bit his tongue. He wouldn’t gratify her with a response. He was better than this line of questioning and he knew it.

“You’re not *alone*, is what I suppose I’m trying to tell you,” Amalica carried on when she didn’t receive a reply, “As trite as that might sound. I knew Lolth was a wicked goddess from the beginning, and yet I still felt lost without her. She was all I’d ever known. It’s all the Drow are ever taught to know. Now, I have Eilstraee, but I didn’t even know she *existed* until I came to the surface.”

She stood up, brushing dirt from her clothes and giving Enver Gortash one final look, “But you have options, Gortash. Don’t forget that.”

He said nothing in return as she walked off - after a brief pause of waiting to see if he’d finally open his mouth again.

He didn’t.

He just sat and *mired* in the familiarity of her words.

They ate at him - burning holes in his mind like lit tobacco with all the heat and fury of the Hells.

He had *options*. Sure he did.

So many gods would accept a half broken ex-Chosen of *Bane*.

His rage bubbled in his chest, his ire burning hotter by the second – how *dare* she tell him such things? Act as if *mercy* were the answer?

Act as if he would not be turning his blade to her neck the moment he was capable?

But in an instant, it all dissipated.

He would stay his hand. For now.

A glance down as he willed himself to focus on anything but the infuriating Drow for another few hours, and started tinkering with his hand once more - the mechanical one he'd crafted out of scrap and a prayer.

A prayer to who?

What god could have possibly answered him?

The first peeking rays of the sun over the horizon seemed like an answer.

But it wasn't an answer he was willing to accept.

How dare he only be answered *now*?

The Archduke of Baldur's Gate demanded a more prompt response. Forty some years too late was just not good enough.

So Enver Gortash packed up his tools, turned his back to the rising sun, and retreated into his tent.

The dawn could rise all it liked. But that didn't mean he had to look.

That didn't mean he had to face it and grapple with what the pleasant warmth tingling against his skin meant for him.

Meant for his ever approaching day in the Crystal Spire.

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