

THE BULETTE HUNT

Yazumin's lungs were on fire. Her fingers gripped at her breastplate as if they had any chance of piercing the steel and smothering the raging flame inside. Every whiff of air set it anew – and, unfortunately, she needed the air. She needed it like a dry throat desperate for a gulp of water. She needed it for her vision to become steadily less cloudy and her mind steadily more conscious.

As pain in her chest got calmer, she finally managed to regain control of the choking-like sounds that left her mouth. She finally sobered up enough to wipe away exhaustion tears running down her cheeks. At last, she composed herself enough to take the whole sight in.

The terrifying hole in the middle of the stone bridge, leading into even more terrifying underground tunnel drilled by the most terrifying claws that had torn through layers of soil and rock. Huge bluestalks with huge chunks of their caps bitten clean off by huge jaws. Crimson patterns of blood in places where they splashed out of her friends' veins. She was sitting in a scarlet puddle of her own, actually.

Her gaze fixed on a faint blue light lingering over the bridge's edge and Astarion's fingers attempting to grasp ethereal sphere in action equally as pointless as entertaining.

"Hello," he waved to her with pale smile appearing on his pale face. "Welcome back. There's no time for you to rest eternally just yet, I'm afraid."

"Did- did I-?"

"Yes, you died, my sweet. But don't feel too pathetic about it – so did the rest."

Yazumin nodded once and slowly. Then she took long breath in an attempt to calm her nerves down.

"I knew this would happen!" she lashed out the moment it proved unsuccessful. "I knew it, I told you about it and no one listened to me, you foolish, moronic, stupidest idiots I've ever-"

"Why are you screeching at me of all people?" Astarion looked downright offended. "I didn't even give a vote to push this hunting idea through, it was the others-"

"None of the others are alive to screech at!"

"And I vote for that to be the problem we focus on before this abomination comes back."

Yazumin's eyes grew twice its size and thrice its blackness in horror.

"You- you haven't even killed him?!"

"Oh dear! Why haven't you told me that I was supposed to single-handedly slaughter gargantuan landshark with my sharp wits and teeny-tiny daggers? It would have been immediately arranged!" he snarled, crossing arms on his chest. "The wizard, however, seemed rather confident he would Fireball it to ashes in one snap of his fingers. Naturally, he went down the first..."

Yazumin remembered prolonged echo of a scream Gale let out when force of bulette's leap pushed him down the chasm. She also remembered his desperate reminder outlining importance of bringing him back in less than two days, produced just before he ceased to be audible and the light bulb tied to his soul popped up on the bridge.

"Oh, damn it," she groaned. "We have to revive him before he explodes. Or whatever it is that orb does."

"That's what I was thinking," Astarion agreed politely. "Or... we can check if he's bluffing and that whole artifacts-consuming thing is just some rather peculiar fetish of his."

"I'm done taking risks for today," Yazumin stood up with difficulty, ready to bet her limbs were bent in places in which they definitely shouldn't be. She cast Healing Word and her bones started to cooperate with her tendons once again. "Ah... Much better. Now then. You can do the honours, Astarion."

Astarion had the audacity to raise an eyebrow.

"What honours?"

She shot him a glare marking him as the densest out of their entire idiotic bunch. Which was, to be entirely honest, a tad unfair. Shadowheart took the title for the day.

"Use the scroll. Of Revivify," Yazumin specified. Slowly. And clearly.

"I'm out of scrolls. Don't you have them?"

Yazumin barely blinked and Astarion was already pressing palm to his forehead and running it through his blood-embroidered hair in a gesture of utmost frustration.

"You don't have the scrolls?!"

"I- Let me check, maybe I do," She went through all her pockets, all her pouches, her entire backpack, then even her hood. "I don't."

"Oh gods," he groaned as if the magic bomb was set to explode in a span of two hours. Not two comfortingly long days. "That's what I get for losing my head over a pretty freckled face. I could be reasonable, save Gale first but you were just lying there, so sad and broken in such odd places-"

"No matter. Nothing happened. Nothing big," Yazumin declared, wheels in her tadpoled brain grinding against each other, hopefully ruffling the worm up in the process. "We just have to go back to the camp. With feather-light steps so the monster wouldn't sense us. Then Withers is going to make everything right."

"Ugh. So we're just going to let the dogsitter rip us off again?"

"Shush. We're going. We're doing this. Ready?"

He looked downright smacked when being shushed - but miraculously refrained from brooding.

“Hm! Of course I’m ready! I’m not the one who died, you know?”

Yazumin pushed her hair back and put on face-covering hood – in which she looked quite alluringly mysterious – while her eyes drew invisible line leading from their camp hidden between stone walls, through the boulders, rifts and zurkhwoods’ caps, all the way to the faint light keeping Gale’s spirit clawed to his body.

“Wait,” she choked on air, realising. “Where’s Shadowheart’s?”

Their gazes met, filled with silent horror.

And then they heard it – weak whimpering of someone bleeding to death. Far, far, *far* down.

They leaned over the edge of the bridge in one hasty step, more hearing than seeing the outline of a warrior coughing up blood in the darkness so thick it posed a challenge even for Darkvision. Yazumin sent Healing Word down and when it reached the silhouette, its breathing calmed down with a relief. After a few audible puffs of air in and out, they finally heard Shadowheart’s voice - and terrifyingly small dot of Light revealed terrifyingly small figure of the cleric standing on the terrifyingly narrow ledge.

“Such luck,” Echo of her bitter notion reached Yazumin’s ears, making all the terror she felt immediately evaporate.

“Luck?!” she shouted down the abyss. “We’ll see about that! Down there, you have all the time in the world to get your bloody sleep and agonize over your own damn stupidity, you godsdamned bulette-hunter!”

“I don’t,” Shadowheart was unfazed, wiping blood off her eyelids. “Because you’re going to get me out of here right now.”

“Get you- How?!”

“Yazumin, are you- cast Fly on me for example!”

“Genial! But I would have to stand next to you to do that!”

“What? Now, that’s just stupid! But alright, you can get down here if you so insist.”

Yazumin didn’t really have a reasonable rebuttal to that idea. There was only throat-tightening fear she felt when she imagined – and that was easier than ever – something going horribly, horribly, *horribly* wrong. Like landing at the bottom of the impenetrable gloom next to Gale slowly melting through all the layers of Material Plane.

“Maybe I’ll cast Fly on you, Astarion, and then-”

“What? Forget it, I’m not flying anywhere!” he protested with admirable disregard for being considered a coward. “Besides, I have a much better idea. Shadowheart, why don’t you kill yourself? It would be so much more convenient! Just take one long step to your left and our unsuspectingly helpful skeleton pal is going to bring you back with a snap of his phalanges.”

“I would rather...” Shadowheart thought for a second. “...live.”

“Well, that’s your choice. But honestly – what kind of living is that?”

“Gale could figure something out,” Yazumin cut in. “Unfortunately, he is currently... unavailable. Don’t you happen to have some revivifying scroll on you?”

Shadowheart was looking up at them with fists placed on her hips.

“As a matter of fact, I do,” she said. “Get me out of here and I’ll make Gale available again.”

“We need him to get *you* out, silly. Throw the scroll to us.”

“Have you finally lost your mind? Even if I was able to throw it that high, what if you screw up and don’t catch it? These things are not exactly cheap, you know.”

“I know,” Yazumin groaned, crossing her legs and rubbing her hood’s temple to come up with solution that didn’t require her to fly down the chasm and risk another thing going horribly, horribly, *horribly* wrong.

And then she found it.

“Oh, I know! Lae’zel is going to get you out!”

It was too far to make Shadowheart’s expression out but Astarion’s giggle was certainly fitting.

“Killing yourself doesn’t sound like such a bad idea now, hm?” he laughed down the abyss.

“Couldn’t it be anyone else?” Shadowheart scoffed.

“Someone in your position cannot be picky,” Yazumin stood up putting fists on her hips too, quite satisfied with her plan. “Lae’zel will do anything at the mere mention of her being a coward, and she will actually do it right. She’s strong and jumpy and solid and-”

“And you’re drooling,” Astarion filled in with an amused smirk.

“You would be, too, if you saw her talents up close,” she bit back, unabashed. “Come now, my unfortunate comrade. We have damsels in distress to rescue and, luckily, mighty heroine to do it for us.”

And Astarion followed her after delightfully carefree see-you-later waved to the tense figure standing in the circle of light peering out of wide open jaws of darkness.

They treaded quickly, with steps light as mist, not daring to exchange a word, focused on sending as few bulette-alarming vibrations as possible. They managed to make it onto the cliff separating them from the campsite entrance - and that was when the tremor pierced the ground and the roar tore through the air, making them rush to the campsite without any regard for caution.

Quite a lavish feast was already being prepared in there – at their sight, Wyll froze in place with brand new set of spoons to distribute, Lae’zel with six bottles of wine cradled in her arms, Karlach with honey-scented candles lit up and Scratch with Potion of Healing in his fangs, ready to lay it down on Yazumin’s ruined tent. They all stared at them charging in, soaked with blood and chased by the impossible not to recognize sound of doom.

“You haven’t killed this thing yet?” Karlach gasped with worry darkening her blazing eyes.

“Important news is it hasn’t killed us,” Astarion noted. “Entirely. Yet.”

“We need your help, Lae’zel,” Yazumin managed through her ragged breath.

“*Chk!*” was the reaction. “Of course you do! If Shadowheart had one tactical cell in her body, I would have came in the front line and Crèche K’liir’s crest would already be carved into-”

“It’s not about the killing, it’s about rescuing.”

Lae’zel eyebrows furrowed in aversion to the concept.

“Rescuing who?”

“Gale,” Yazumin’s answer was immediate. “But also Shadowheart in the process.”

Judging by the way her features smoothed, this could be one of the more pleasant days Lae’zel had to spend in Faerûn.

“And why would I rescue her? I keep telling you her presence among us is more trouble than it’s worth.”

“She requested for you,” Astarion announced. “Specifically.”

“Requested?” Lae’zel’s nose wrinkled as if she could smell a lie. “For *me*?”

“Well,” Astarion’s circled to her a step closer, turning his back towards her and covering his lips in conspiratorial whisper that was destined to send shiver down any spine present in its earshot. “*Begged* would be the most accurate expression. But I took an oath that I’d never tell.”

It was undoubtedly the most pleasant day Lae’zel had to spend in Faerûn. Her arms dropped to the sides, ready to grab a weapon, completely forgetting about wine bottles – thankfully, Wyll and Karlach remembered, falling to their knees to catch them midair, only one shattering in violet puddle, splashing on Astarion’s favourite shoes.

They took Karlach along in – unfortunately, very probable – case something went really, really *really* wrong, and they made their way back to the circle of light drawn on pitch-black canvas of the chasm. There were no roars, no shakes, no incidents and everything went almost just as rehearsed.

When Yazumin explained their plan with Fly spell, Lae'zel scoffed at them for wasting her time and when Astarion gently suggested she might be too scared to do the job, she didn't even wait for Fly to be cast – she simply whooshed down the abyss, made Shadowheart let out echoing yelp when throwing her over her shoulder, and jumped back up to land on their level with a firm thump.

All of this happened before they could even kneel at the edge of the stone bridge to see what was exactly happening.

At least they got to see Shadowheart embarrassed when her feet touched the ground and her hands proceeded to smooth the unwanted lines that could supposedly appear on steel armor. Lae'zel's own foot tapped on the ground, waiting for profuse stream of gratitude.

“Well. Good to be back,” Shadowheart said bluntly before making mature decision to just get it over with. “Apparently thanks to you, Lae'zel.”

“Apparently and factually,” Lae'zel answered with her foot working with feverish enthusiasm. “Do try to be more effective during your next grand escapade, though.”

“Ah-ah, no time for that,” As much as fun it would be to hear Shadowheart's retort, Yazumin had to remember about poor dead Gale and presumably poor dead Sword Coast if they don't hurry up. “Now give me the scroll.”

Shadowheart's face went from rosy to bleached in a flutter of eyelids.

“Of Revivify,” Yazumin specified, now addressing the idiot of the day correctly. “You said you had it.”

“I lied,” was the shameless answer.

Rhythm of Lae'zel's foot harmonized with the throbbing anger in Yazumin's skull.

“What?! Why?!”

“Gods know how long you would force me to sit there, in darkness, without food, worrying about the dead instead of the living.”

“Our dead can literally explode!”

“In the span of two days, right? We have plenty of time.”

“We have just been to the camp! We could have asked Withers already but we've been trying to save coin because-” she couldn't think clearly with the thumping getting louder and the vibrations reaching her own feet. “Lae'zel, stop it if you don't want to lure-”

But it was too late and gigantic jaw pierced through the ground with a bone-shaking growl, pushing them on the sides, desperately holding for the cliff's edges and reaching for their weapons - toothpicks compared to blades crowning bulette's wide-open mouth.

When Wyll saw them back in the camp again, he knew better than to ask. Scratch also placed his head between his paws, too terrified to make eye contact.

They didn't do too bad. Karlach especially. She charged monster axe-first, as was her way, raging and pitying poor bastard who cried out as she sliced through his soft stomach and hard backside. Then he pushed her with his tail and... Well, there were two Soul Echoes floating over blood-stained rock right now. When Lae'zel shrieked something vengeful in her distinct language, the monster shot her a glare and just drilled back into the ground, uncaring about the sword thrown behind him. If she had time to cast Speak with Animals, Yazumin was certain she would hear him giggle.

So now they spread to replenish their strength and sharpen their weapons while Yazumin was standing in front of Withers who was as unbothered by their misadventures as always.

"Fate spins along as it should. Dost thou require?"

"Yes," Yazumin cut in, exhaustion making her voice blunt and breathy. "Two resurrections for Gale and Karlach, please."

"This is the price of..."

"Yes, yes, a moment, please..."

She took out all of her pouches, gathering all the coin necessary, counting it one by one. Suddenly, far too early, there was nothing more to count.

Not letting panic overflow her senses, she calmly sauntered over to the most promising tent.

"Astarion," she inquired casually. "Do you happen to have some gold to borrow?"

His face rose from the wet cloth he used to scrap droplets of blood off his face.

"No," he answered with venomous sweetness. "I don't. Why?"

"Because I need it. Gale and Karlach need it, as a matter of fact. Therefore – we all need it."

"Your concern for our survival, my darling Yazumin, is the reason why we put you in charge of our finances. So tell me now – to where did all our life-saving gold take off?"

"I was actually hoping you would reveal it to me. And don't even dare to pretend you know nothing about my pouch getting suspiciously lighter every time you're the one helping me out with shopping!"

Shimmer of annoyance in his eyes was at least replaced with amusement.

“It’s for the practice. And emergencies such as today,” he murmured, reaching for the standing mirror on his improvised nightstand. He peeled off the glass part and pulled out his own pouch, clearly revelling in the way Yazumin's jaw dropped in indignation at his insolence. “How much do you need from me, darling?”

“About... 353 pieces.”

His smile evaporated without a trace

“If I had this kind of money, I wouldn’t be sleeping in the dirt and bathing in the bog! What in sweet Hells have you spent all our gold on?! Sunmelons and shovels?!”

“On *adventuring equipment*! Such as this fetching tiara on your forehead over which you almost fainted on the spot!”

“You mean this *circler*? This old thing we got back in the forest? I thought we bounced back since then! Or maybe you just haven’t heard about that splendid novelty in the world of adventuring equipment? It’s called *Scrolls of Revivify* and rumour has it they are quickly becoming rather useful items for people with death breathing at their necks with every step they take. Another rumour has it they are no such novelty, they are crucial part of *adventuring equipment*, we’re completely out of them and – therefore – *POSITIVELY DOOMED*!”

Yazumin was under no obligation to stand there and listen to his voice reaching heights soon to be audible only for poor Scratch.

“Guys,” she turned around and approached the campfire, “Friends. Would you be so kind as to contribute financially to bringing Gale and Karlach back?”

Their eyes – previously half-lidded with lack of much needed rest – grew as wide as six full moons.

“You’re in charge of our-“

“I know! I must have been robbed! Please, tell me you pickpocket me from time to time and have small fortune stashed away.”

They looked at each other before shaking their heads.

“Fuck!”

“But it’s not like Withers actually needs money, right?”, Wyll rose to walk up to their camp’s immortal guardian. “Withers!... Lord... Withers...! We’re at the brink of bankruptcy but also world-wide destruction, threatening not only us but half of the population living here. Would you be so inclined as to make an exception when it comes to payment this time? Just this once. You have my word.”

“The price of balance is as clear as it ever was.”

“Maybe you want something else instead of money?” Yazumin pleaded. “Maybe a book or a weapon or a mug or a-”

“No,” Withers answered. “The price hath stayeth the same since the beginning of thine travels and the same it shall remain. For the future, I advise thee to secure-”

He turned around suddenly. They all saw Astarion emerge out of thin air, his spell of Invisibility broken and swift arm quickly retreating to rest on his hip.

“Hast thou just tryeth to rob me?”

“No,” Astarion spat out, not even making an effort to sound believable. “But it’s hardly a robbery if you take from a corpse. Why do you even need this money? It’s kind of too late for you to make retirement plans, I’m afraid.”

There was a whoosh of air and a crunch of old bones. Withers turned around again, this time back to Wyll – his face tense in horror – and Yazumin – her fingers around the hilt of a dagger stuck between skeleton’s ribs.

“Hast thou just tryeth to kill me?”

Yazumin could swear there was shadow of a chuckle in his centuries-old voice.

“No,” she tried. “But that thing in your back cannot be comfortable. I can get it out, you know. For a little favor.”

He just pulled the dagger out, his bones not even crumbling at the edges, and held it in front of her nose.

“Dost thou wish to do it again? Or thou hast more sensible solution in mind?”

Yazumin took the dagger back, fondling it between her fingers. Considering.

“Go for the eye sockets!” Astarion urged.

“Oh, forget it!”, Wyll circled back to the campfire with hands knotted together behind his back. They all gathered around him, sensing a man with a plan. “We’ll go to the vendors to sell our loot like civilized people. This Society of Brilliance merchant seems-”

“Oh, no, we can’t go to him,” Yazumin protested at once.

“Why not?”

Lae’zel’s and Yazumin’s gazes crossed in millions of unspoken regrets.

“We had a... situation. He may not be too thrilled to see me.”

“Alright...” Wyll was not the one for giving up. “Then he will see one of us or you in another form!”

“That could work if he didn’t have mind flayer reading through our thoughts for a bodyguard.”

“Then perhaps we shall get rid of him?” Lae’zel had an idea.

“Yes! First the bulette, then the mind flayer, then perhaps the bulette again! It’s not like we want to survive to see another day, right?”

Lae’zel ran out of ideas.

“What about the dwarf lady?” Wyll suggested, “You know, the grumpy one, smelling of champignons?”

“We had a *situation* with her, too,” Shadowheart spoke up. “Yazumin here dangled noblestalk in front of this lady’s nose just to feed it to me.”

Astarion chuckled viciously, sitting on the chest, putting one of his long legs over the other.

“Yazumin, aren’t we keeping you around just because you could sweet-talk a viper into a hug? Or was it one-hit wonder kind of performance?”

Oh, Yazumin didn’t like his choice of words. She didn’t like his tone too. She didn’t like him at all today.

“Would you just SHUT IT?!”

The force of her scream made her bend in half – and there were more yells just burning to come out. But when she saw Astarion’s eyes open wide, ready to duel, delighted to stumble upon the edge of her patience, she straightened herself back up with a sigh.

“We’ll try with the champignon lady. Whether she likes us or not, she seems to mean business. And at least I haven’t shoved a knife at her throat.”

“You-“ Shadowheart rose one finger as in an inquiry. “You shoved a knife at the throat of this man from Society of Brilliance?”

“You shut it, too,” Lae’zel snarled. “I thought you crave bulette’s blood, not stories of irrelevant battles.”

“*Battles?* With mushroom pickers?”

“That may actually beat any spin we put on the tale of this bulette hunt of ours,” Astarion’s dreamy voice was a little hastened, like he wanted to blurt out everything he planned before an attempt to be silenced again. “I have a feeling the rather raunchy ending might have been prematurely revealed to me – but I do love this kind of stories when you know the conclusion, yet you just ache to learn how it came to be!”

“There are dead people lying in the pit, Astarion,” Wyll reminded soberly before Yazumin pushed through the white fog of fury interfering with her search for words that would properly shut them all up.

Astarion looked at Wyll as if he spoke in Infernal.

“Ah, yes,” he noted, leaning his chin on his hand in defeat. “They might want to hear it too.”

They decided to leave Wyll in the camp, ordering him to call on Mizora if things went really, really, *really* bad and departed once again, this time sneaking into the Myconids Colony and Bonecloak’s Apothecary stand set up there. There were no *situations* on their way there, not even a roar, and Yazumin dared to think with a shy glimmer of hope they wounded the beast badly enough to buy themselves all the time needed to travel to Grymforge and out of the Underdark in one piece.

When they approached Derryth Bonecloak, she was sitting on the wooden stool in front of the cave filled with Baelen Bonecloak’s snoring. She was covered with fluffy blanket and lazily swirling her feet in the basin of steaming hot water. Yazumin felt the pang of jealousy in her chest before she saw woman’s puffy eyelids and ruffled hair – she was clearly brutally torn away from a peaceful slumber. Yazumin felt the pull of understanding.

“Aren’t you a sight,” Bonecloak scoffed. “Where in the Hells have you found enough virgin blood for all of you to bathe in?”

Astarion’s suck-up laughter was, of course, the loudest.

“We’ve come to dabble in the trade a bit,” Yazumin smiled as pleasantly as she could.

Derryth didn’t bother.

“At this hour? Our stock’s not even out yet and it would be simply cruel to make me wake Baelen up.”

“There’s no need for that, actually, since we would like to be the ones trading goods for coin today. Some really good goods at that!”

Woman’s eyes sparked up with touch of cruelty she has just been spared.

“Well, let me be the judge.”

Yazumin sat down, unclasping her backpack filled to the brim.

“This chalice, for example, is made of pure silver, carved with the images of an ancient battle between druids and werewolves. Every sip taken from this goblet is going to taste as satisfying as blood drank from a bested foe’s skull. Please, don’t be coy – you can touch. See how it fits your hand, so deserving of a proper accessory.”

Derryth took the chalice with close to no interest.

“Pretty thing,” she said, tossing it behind her back. “1 gold piece.”

Yazumin huffed, feeling her companions tensing behind her. She reached into the backpack again.

“Now, this is the helmet we found in the liar of a hag. True, powerful, undisputable hag! This find is one-of-a-kind, unmatched, irreplaceable, utmost dependable. Have a look.”

“Sturdy. 1 gold piece.”

“Surely, it’s worth more than that?”

“True. 1 extra shiny gold piece.”

She should have used Disguise Self. Or Shadowheart should have. Or they all should have.

“Alright,” she was not about to give up. “Now, this scroll – giving us anything less than 50 would be a robbery! It’s Scroll of Mage Armour, invaluable during your travels, whether you stumble upon a beast lurking in the shadows or field full of bibberbangs. And we have four of them!”

“What a treat! 1 gold piece each!”

“Gluttonous leech,” Lae’zel ground through gritted teeth, not helping their case in the slightest.

“What would you want of us for 400 gold pieces?” Shadowheart intervened.

“I don’t know. Maybe noblestalk if you happen upon it next season?”

Shadowheart groaned, muttering to herself something about not even wanting to eat it. Yazumin’s brow hurt from all the furrowing.

“Listen. We apologise for the noblestalk situation but we’re also in terrible need here, at our wits’ end after a terrible day. Or night. No matter. Anyway, we need the money desperately and we’re extremely polite to refrain from just beating it out of you. You may simply give us a fair deal or let your blood mix in with the mess bulette’s already left on our armours. It really makes us no difference.”

Bonecloak’s interest seemed to be piqued at last.

“You slaughtered the bulette?”

Yazumin proceeded to calculate quickly if it was the time to attempt deception – but at this moment faraway roar rolled through the air, making some of the hibernating myconids tremble.

That was the second time they ever saw Bonecloak smiling – first one was a few days earlier, just before Yazumin put noblestalk back in her pocket.

“We wounded him badly,” she settled on an answer she already regretted. “And we’re going to finish him soon.”

“That would be the deed worthy of 400 pieces,” Derryth said, relaxing with her feet in the basin. “I could finally get some sleep. Can’t stand this moaning anymore. Bloody mating season... Better finish him off before he finds some beast that would actually want him.”

Yazumin almost choked at the thought of two bulettes. And then even more bulettes. She shook the images out of her mind before they could develop in far too terrifying directions.

“A fair price,” Lae’zel said when they made their way out of the colony’s safety.

“Hardly,” Shadowheart sighed and Yazumin couldn’t agree more. “Especially if you count our fragile lives in. But it doesn’t seem like we have much choice. Unless we want to pawn off all our treasures, 1 gold piece each.”

“It would take much more than two days,” Yazumin had to admit. “So... I guess... Bulette hunt it is.”

“Revenge at last!” Lae’zel’s nostrils flared, filled with stench of blood.

“Sleep at last!” Shadowheart accompanied.

“Gale and Karlach back at last,” Yazumin sighed with shadow of hope everything was going to go right this time.

“Or let’s get Karlach and get out of Gale’s blast radius as quickly as possible,” Astarion suggested. “Then we could spend the rest of the reward on something actually useful.”

“Like what? Another tiara?”

“*Circlet*, my dear, but if you really want to spoil me that much...”

She didn’t and they carried on, bracing themselves for the inevitable.

It maybe didn’t seem like the best idea to go back to the stone bridge that turned out to be the passageway to their demise – but at least they knew what to expect there. They scooted behind pile of boulders and got to preparing a plan – which turned out to be pretty simple, to be honest. Lure the bulette in, kill him, collect the reward, get Gale and Karlach back. Lae’zel dove into the logistics of the precise attacks they were planning to use, waving her sword around while commanding them what to do. Yazumin memorized her part – yet she found her attention slipping every time she thought about what they were about to do again. What they were about to attempt for the third time. What they had to do not to let any of them die.

“Understood?” They all nodded when Lae’zel asked. “Then take your positions.”

They all spread out to surround the bridge as best as they could while avoiding standing near the cliff’s edge. Yazumin climbed onto young zurkhwood with half of its cap ripped out and took lute in her hands. Her throat tightened so hard she could barely breathe.

When Lae'zel swung her sword at the edge of the rift that bulette left last time, nothing happened. They felt no tremble and heard no sound. Lae'zel struck for the second time – yet there was nothing.

She proceeded to strike the ground one by one, steel meeting the rock with a shriek that was louder than Yazumin's gnashing teeth, and so difficult to withstand they all winced, Astarion's hands rising to cover his ears.

Bulette jumped at them out of the wall – and, of course, it was the wall behind Yazumin's back. She couldn't hear it but she probably squealed when open-wide jaws shot right at her, and she did her best to push the monstrosity away with Thunderwave. She merely toppled him slightly to the side, his force making her fly to the ground – but she managed to land on her back between two blue Soul Echoes, somehow still alive. The beast got immediately distracted by menacing arrow piercing his underbelly, giant sword slashing through his mouth and blazing of Sacred Flame that kept missing constantly – but had to be at least confusing.

While their movements seemed to happen in pacing almost too fast for Yazumin's eyes to catch, she seemed to be rising to her feet at a snail's pace. When she finally did, she realized she dropped her lute and had to get back down again – and during all this time the beast whined in pain, trying to scurry away, getting immediately scolded by punishing strikes of Lae'zel, tortured by splashes of acid shot by Astarion and blinded by aura of Shadowheart's flimsy evocation cantrip.

Well, Yazumin also had her part to play in the slaughter of the dreadful bulette – quite literally. When it became clear the monster was not going anywhere, she tugged on the lute's strings in that one, Mystra-pleasing accord, and Cloud of Daggers circled around landshark's body, scratching in a particularly mean way at every piece of soft flesh it could reach, eliciting quite worrying – but also quite satisfying – pained cry out of him.

When it looked like the bulette was going to make powerful, suicidal (but what if not?!) leap, when Yazumin healed Lae'zel's crushed ribs and when Astarion was shouting at Shadowheart to finally fucking hit something, she finally did – and Bulette got on both of his feet, scorching in agonizing radiance. Lae'zel raised her sword with a triumphant curse and Yazumin's eyes grew wide when she realized just the sheer size of the thing that was dying in front of them, tumbling forward, straight at Astarion backing off dangerously close to the edge, too focused on covering his nose from unmistakable stench of burning flesh.

What an opportunity! What a chance! He was such a pain for this entire time - and how *pained* he's going to be when she will be the one to save his life!

Yazumin sprinted forward as if she was about to tackle Astarion to the ground, even though it was enough to sharply pull at his arm to move him away from dying bulette's trajectory. But at the moment she did just that, shooting him a smug grin, just before his shock could morph into annoyance, monster's body hit the ground. The rock cracked under Yazumin's boots, making them slip off the edge.

Before she could even let out a proper yelp, it turned into a scream getting more and more echoey as she kept falling further and further down into the darkness.