

BLAKE RUDDING

CHAPTER 11

A RAGING TOAD

AURELIA

Everyone dreams of ruling, but they never mention the endless bureaucracy that comes with power. It's a major reason I often fantasize about torching this entire empire I've built, running away with my beloved, and living a carefree life akin to forest nymphs or, better yet, dryads, surrounded by countless felines in some secluded paradise. But no, I want only the best for my love, so I'm determined to make this empire thrive, expand, and cement a power so formidable that not even the gods can ever tear us apart again.

The last of my countless meetings was finally drawing to an end. Vampires squabbled over their new vegan diets, and I couldn't help but concede that the blood crops couldn't compare to the real thing. However, turning vampires into vegans might just be the most entertainingly cruel thing I've ever orchestrated. Despite the grumbles, this age-old diet, a relic from before our races' convergence, offers us a fresh avenue to grow, build, and amass allies. Yet, this did little to quell the ceaseless complaints from my fellow creatures of the night, and oh, how they whined.

Since implementing the new diet, I've had to execute no fewer than twenty revolters who've attempted to see me dead. You'd think that publicly executing them—draining them of their blood (yes, a bit hypocritical, but hey, perks of ruling) before ripping their spines out and turning them to dust in front of the coven—would deter further dissent. Yet, it appears vampires have short memories when it comes to backstabbing and botched assassination attempts. In fact, they found the entire spectacle entertaining, a sentiment I won't lie, I shared.

That was the thing with my kind; we reveled in the suffering of others, perhaps that's why we constantly plotted behind one another's backs. In any case, all that mattered was power, and I wielded enough of it that most feared me, while those outside of my race were beginning to adore me. It was quite a conflicting sentiment, one that I believe only increased the attempts on my life. Oh well, it just meant I had victims to feed on, a treat from those horrid crops I was forcing the others to subsist on.

I rose from my seat, ready to leave the gathering, done with the whining for the night, eager to return to my beloved, when suddenly, all hell broke loose.

A sniveling excuse for a vampire, one of the turned, burst into the chamber where the elders had gathered, his face etched with panic. "Troll!" he screamed before collapsing in a twisted heap, succumbing to a pathetic faint.

Another younger vampire stepped in behind him, rolling her eyes at the sight before bowing her head. “My Lady, a flaming barbarian toad of some unknown origin has appeared in the courtyard. The current guards are struggling to subdue it.”

I sighed and followed the young vampire toward the intrusion. The castle boasted several courtyards, so initially, I didn’t think much of it—until I realized which courtyard we were heading to. “Blake,” I gasped, urgency fueling my steps. With a sudden burst of speed, I dashed forward, the blast of air from my rapid movement sending the youngling crashing into the wall as I surged ahead.

Whipping around a few corridors, I caught sight of it: a wave of flames licking at the guards stationed outside the courtyard doorway, struggling against the unseen intruder. My worry for my love, for Blake, intensified, although I knew she was powerful. Yet, the sight of the flames heightened my anxiety. I sped past the guards, who ceased their futile assault upon noticing me, swiftly stepping aside to clear my path.

Upon entering the courtyard, I halted, my gaze fixating on the toad creature, my head tilting in confusion. Simultaneously, my vampiric senses scanned the area, desperately searching for any sign of my love, yet she was nowhere to be seen. However, my confusion stemmed from recognizing this foe. Its body was red and plump, a massive brute; it wore a shoulder guard and a loincloth, as most barbarians preferred, allowing the most skin contact with the air for mana absorption. In its hand, it held a massive battle axe alight with flame. It wasn’t a flame toad but a barbarian type with a flaming weapon. However, I knew this creature. The barbarian before me was unmistakably one of the floor bosses from the dungeon ruins of the Grotto of the Betrayed, which utterly baffled me. *What was a dungeon boss doing here?*

Rage built up within me as I couldn’t sense my beloved. I confronted the raging boss monster, who looked down on me as if I were mere filth beneath its toes—an amusing thought, considering I regarded it as the pathetic refuse it was.

The toad unleashed a massive croak and swung its flaming axe at me. It wasn’t even a challenge. I sidestepped effortlessly, allowing the axe to pass like a gentle breeze, its blade embedding into the stone floor. With a slight backhanded tap to its abdomen, the barbarian flew backward, rolling across the ground. At the same time, its weapon remained lodged beside me.

My eyes flicked to the weapon, and I shook my head at the toad in disgust. I picked up the weapon, the creature pausing as it staggered to its feet, bewilderment dawning upon it as I tossed its weapon back. The metal of the flaming axe rattled across the stone before it, challenging the creature to pick it up again.

The dungeon boss didn’t hesitate, seizing the weapon and lunging at me with it held high. I almost laughed as the axe came crashing down, only to be halted by my open palm, the blade stopping dead as a shockwave from the impact reverberated through the surroundings. The gasps of the watching guards were audible—I smiled at that. Demonstrating sheer, overwhelming power was a surefire way to cement control over one’s subjects. With that in mind, I kicked out, my dress flashing more leg than intended, as my foot connected with the toad, sending it flying back to crash

into the same crater that had claimed my love's elven champion earlier. I stifled a chuckle, glancing at the axe still in my grasp before flinging it back at the toad again in challenge.

Like most dungeon bosses, the mindless brute accepted the challenge without hesitation or fear. It retrieved the axe once more and lunged at me, but my demonstration had reached its end. With a burst of speed so swift that the onlooking guards couldn't even comprehend, I reappeared on the other side of the creature, facing away from it. The toad staggered a few steps forward in the direction where I had previously been standing before collapsing, its throat savagely torn out.

That's when I sensed something in the corner, and my heart surged with excitement. I spun around to face a small black blob of tendrils creeping out. My excitement turned to concern when I noticed the blob's injuries, scorch marks covering its entire form, before realization dawned on me. I leaned down, extending my hands, carefully scooped it up, yet knowing this wasn't my love.

"Oh, Phantasia, what happened to you? Where's my love?" I whispered, my eyes scanning the surroundings for any sign of Blake.

The little pudding trembled, a sight I interpreted as pain and distress. Fighting back tears born from the fear of what might have befallen Blake, I gently set Phantasia down on the corpse, allowing her to consume and rebuild the mass she likely lost due to the flame enchantments on the battle axe.

My gaze hardened as I looked up at the guards, their expressions a mix of awe and stunned silence. My cold eyes then shifted to the assembly of nobles and opportunists among the coven, who had begun to congregate now that the danger was over. Disdain and fear intermingled, fueling my growing rage. Questions raced through my mind: What had transpired? Where had this dungeon boss come from, and most importantly, where was Blake?

I pointed at one of the guards, singling him out. "Find me that useless paladin," I hissed, then turned to another and added, "Search the castle for any more intruders."

"At once," they bellowed in unison before bolting, well aware that I was in a mood to dismember someone.

The rest of the vampires, who had been gawking, knew better than to linger. They, too, faded away into the shadows. However, knowing those backstabbers, I was certain a few lingered around for a bit of gossip, though they were smart enough to try and hide it. In the meantime, I paced back and forth as Phantasia slowly consumed the corpse. As I waited for Anlyth to be fetched, I struggled to maintain my self-control to prevent myself from ripping the elf's head from her shoulders. I was aware that my love harbored a dungeon core within her, indicating that death wasn't the end, nor would it ever be. With that in mind, I took several deep breaths, but it did little to soothe me. I had wanted to give her a safe haven, a place she could call home at my side, and within my walls, she was... she had been slain, or so it seemed. That was unacceptable; it could not be allowed to happen ever again.

After a few tense moments, Anlyth entered the courtyard, her posture cautious. She was afraid of me, which was good.

“What happened here?” she stammered, her gaze briefly shifting to the toad’s corpse on the ground.

That millisecond she diverted her eyes from me was a mistake. In a flash, I crossed the courtyard, and by the time she redirected her gaze to where I had previously been standing, I was right before her, my piercing stare filled with rage. She stumbled backward, her hand instinctively moving as if to summon her sword and shield with magic, but she hesitated, wisely choosing not to complete the action, knowing well that any aggressive move might result in her losing her arms.

“What happened was, the one you’re supposed to protect was attacked while you weren’t here,” I stated, restraining my urge to scream, yet my tone retained its icy edge.

“Forgive me, but I assumed she was safe within your walls,” Anlyth responded. At those words, my rage faltered; she was indeed correct. Within the confines of my castle, the core of the empire I had constructed for her, she had faced an assault, and there was a possibility she had been killed, all while I was ensconced upon my throne. My shoulders slumped, and I averted my gaze from the elf, weighed down by a sudden sense of shame.

However, I froze when I noticed two jiggle slimes that had previously escaped my attention, which was odd. My senses should have detected them, but I was certain they hadn’t just materialized. I approached the fist-sized gelatinous cubes, my head tilting curiously.

“What’s going on?” I whispered.

“Ah, greetings,” one of the slime cubes said. “Do you know how we got here?” it inquired.

I was about to pose my own questions when the second cube abruptly cried out, “Kill me!”