

BLAKE RUDDING

CHAPTER 7

EYE OF THE TIGER

“Well, that was interesting,” I murmured into Aurelia’s shoulder, my gaze following her subjects as they hurried out of the throne room. Their movements quickened by a palpable fear of me, avoiding my gaze as they scattered.

“You were a bit ruthless at the start, wouldn’t you say?” Aurelia remarked, her voice maintaining an oddly even tone.

I pulled back, slightly taken aback. “Wait? Are you mad at me?” I inquired, a tinge of nervousness coloring my voice.

Her warm and infectious laughter echoed through the grand, silent chamber, smoothly dissolving any remnants of tension. “Oh, never,” she reassured me with a soft smile, her eyes sparkling with amusement. “I found it quite entertaining, truth be told. It’s indeed rewarding to establish our dominance over those bottom feeders,” she declared, her smile broadening as she relished the memory of our—or rather, my—murderous display. “However,” her tone shifted, becoming more thoughtful, “my day is packed with several more meetings, and I have a feeling you wouldn’t find them particularly enjoyable—especially since they’re occasions where violence isn’t exactly the best solution, and frankly, there are some attendees I’d prefer to keep alive,” she quipped with a playful grin. “What would you prefer to engage in while I’m tied up with these commitments?” she asked, genuinely interested in how I’d spend the time.

A slight frown formed on my lips, my mind momentarily indulging in less... diplomatic fantasies involving a mattress, tentacles, and an utterly bare-assed Aurelia. Shaking off that amazing daydream and refocusing on a more immediate and pragmatic option, I answered, “Is there somewhere I can train? I’ve picked up some new skills that I desperately need to master. Plus, a sparring session with Von Von would do me some good. Though, I don’t know if I feel like getting my ass kicked by here... again,” though, I muttered that last part under my breath.

“Hmmm... I believe she’s currently in one of the training courtyards,” Aurelia mused, a hint of... something lacing her words. “Why don’t I escort you there before I proceed to my next engagement?” she suggested, her voice carrying a dangerous undertone at some hidden meaning.

I just nodded, my curiosity piqued but not enough to press her. Pushing myself up from our ridiculously comfy throne, I let Phantasia flow back into my dress's hem, blending in so smoothly it was like she'd been part of the fabric all along.

Aurelia's gaze lingered on the space Phantasia had occupied, then drifted across the expansive chamber to the remnants of her old throne, now just shattered splinters of wood. "It seems I'll need to commission a new throne for the times your little companion isn't here," she quipped, her voice playful yet filled with the warmth of shared understanding.

"Sooorrrrrry," I offered a sheepish smile on my lips.

"Oh, no. I hated that thing," Aurelia responded with a dismissive wave of her hand, leaning in for a soft, fleeting kiss before pulling away. "Now, come on, let's head to the courtyard," she said, her tone light and inviting as she gestured for me to follow.

The path to the courtyard was surprisingly short, just a couple of corridors away from the throne room. Okay, maybe they felt a tad longer than I'd mentally noted, but the stroll was still pretty pleasant. I got a kick out of the apprehensive looks from the vampires we passed—those quick, scared glances they threw my way before scuttling off. *Awe, I love that look.* They seemed pretty keen on putting as much space between us as possible. However, just as we were about to reach the courtyard door, something unexpected happened.

"Would you please wait here, my love?" Aurelia whispered into my ear, her voice a soft murmur. "I'll be just a second."

The chill of her breath against my ear nearly melted me on the spot, and I found myself nodding in response, utterly smitten. She flashed me a gentle smile, then pushed the door open. Through the brief moment before the door swung shut, I caught a glimpse of Von Von, her movements graceful and precise, a sword in hand, embodying the essence of a long-lost samurai. She paused, her eyes flicking between Aurelia and me before I was cut off from the scene, the door closing with a soft click.

I stood there, the hallway now silent around me, for what felt like an eternity but was more like three minutes when suddenly, the ground beneath me shuddered violently. It wasn't just the castle; it felt like the entire mountain quaked beneath us. I remembered the tremors of a past earthquake I'd experienced in my last life—a seven-point-something on the Richter scale—but this felt more intense, more profound. I braced myself, half expecting the ancient dark stone around me to crumble.

What the fuck is happening?

I don't know.

Did someone set off a nuke?

Maybe?

But then, as quickly as it had begun, the shaking ceased. The door swung open again, and Aurelia emerged with a serene smile, kissing my cheek softly. Her whisper, “Have fun, my love,” sent a thrill through me as she strolled away, her departure marked by an effortless, carefree sway of her hips that my eyes followed.

As I took a moment to glance into the courtyard, I saw Vonya extracting herself from the aftermath of what looked like a miniature disaster. She was amidst a cascade of rubble, pulling herself out of a crater in the stone wall, her movements shaky as she attempted to regain her footing. My previous sparring sessions with Von Von almost always ended in decisive defeat. To say she had bested me “nine point nine nine nine out of ten times” wouldn’t be an exaggeration; her skill was freaking scary—well, not too scary, I mean, I’m not scared of her. It’s not like she’s a badass at my two biggest weaknesses or anything. *Pfft...*

Yet, there she was, looking as though she had just been steamrolled by a train which, for good measure, decided to reverse over her before combusting in a spectacular, chemical-fueled inferno. This sight of Vonya, so disoriented and battered, was so incongruous with the warrior I knew that it left me momentarily stunned. My gaze flickered back to Aurelia, catching a final glimpse of her perfect form as she turned a corner and vanished from sight, her departure marked by a carefree sway that contrasted starkly with the chaos within the courtyard.

“What did you say?” I said with the most naughty, childlike tone.

Vonya, still regaining her balance, shot me a glare that could curdle milk. The blonde-haired elf was clearly in no mood to recount what had happened, and despite my best efforts to coax and tease the story out of her, she remained tight-lipped—or should I say fat-lipped and black-eyed? Yet, the unspoken understanding hanging heavily between us couldn’t have been clearer: Aurelia was an absolute force of nature—intimidating, awe-inspiring, and, yeah, undeniably sexy as fuck! Well, I doubted Von Von thought those last bits, but I certainly did.

I decided it was best to leave my glaring champion alone. Instead, I went to sit on the opposite side of the courtyard. I folded my leg beneath me and closed my eyes, contemplating the skills I needed to focus on.

Oh! Oh! Training time! Queue up the '80s montage music!

Seriously, Dream?

Well—yeah! It’s the eye of the t—

Umm, yeah—no!

Ugh, you’re no fun.

Mastering the Weak Fire Ward skill was high on my list. If I could harness it without the system, perhaps I could strip away the ‘weak’ label and unlock its fuller potential—full-fire immunity. *Fuck’ya!* But there was also Phantasmal Mist, a skill intriguing in its current capabilities yet nebulous in its full extent. It toyed with the psyche, projecting phantoms or preying on hidden fears linked to past traumas. The precise mechanics were elusive, underscoring the need for its prioritization in my training regimen.

Seeing Sophia’s spirits had unlocked a realm of possibilities. Could I refine Phantasmal Mist to conjure something equally potent, like actual spirit warriors? Embarking on such a quest would require a radical reimagining of my understanding of the skill, a shift so profound it’s akin to redefining my entire perception of reality. Typically, this kind of paradigm transformation would necessitate a hint of madness, a willingness to teeter on the brink of mental chasms without the comforting tether of logic... which, upon introspection, seems surprisingly within my wheelhouse. No comment on that.

Yet, amidst these lofty ruminations, there lay a more tangible task: finishing the construction of my skeleton. This endeavor, while not as exhilarating as redefining skill boundaries or conceptualizing mystical innovations, was fundamental. Establishing a robust framework was imperative before delving into the expansive capabilities of my powers. Currently, all I had completed was the bones for a single hand, and I’m quite certain I didn’t get all the correct bones in place. Therefore, the decision was clear; I needed a solid base, and crafting a skeleton was undeniably that—arguably the most concrete foundation conceivable.

With these considerations in mind, I began focusing on Astral Graviton. What, did you actually think I’d prioritize having a set of bones over mastering the ability to defy gravity? Clearly, you don’t know me well. Because, let’s be real—I want to fucking fly! Seriously, lightning magic and the ability to soar through the skies are my top desires—well, that and eating Aurelia’s ass—I just hadn’t realized that flight was an option until Astral Graviton came into play.

I found myself happily rocking from side to side with my eyes closed, focusing intently on my skills, or more precisely, on one particular skill. Just as I was about to mentally engage with it, I heard a voice calling out to me.

“Blake, oh my god. Why do you look like you’re wearing ‘80s spandex right now? And you even managed to give yourself a headband,” I squinted my eyes open to see Sophia, a normal-looking human, her face barely containing her laughter.

“Sush, I’m in my training montage zone,” I grumbled at Sophia, shooting a glare before closing my eyes once again. “Go bug Von Von. Ask her what happened earlier,” I added, a hint of a grin tugging at my lips.

“What? What happened?” Sophia called out, her curiosity piqued.

“Nothing,” Vonya yelled back, her tone carrying a sharp edge.

I took a deep breath, more for comfort than necessity, because, let's face it, I don't actually need to breathe. Pulling up the system commands in my mind, I focused intently on the one I wanted to select, envisioning myself being lighter than air, flying—no, soaring—high above the ground. Unable to contain my excitement, I activated [**ASTRAL GRAVITON**].

Gravity immediately bent and warped around me, through me, and, more alarmingly, onto me. Seriously, it bore down upon me! For the second time that day, the castle shook as I was smashed into a paste with a deafening explosion, courtesy of gravity overwhelming me. Sophia yelped in surprise. As for Vonya, well, I couldn't ascertain much as I found myself liquified across the courtyard—partly where I had been sitting, but mostly elsewhere, including splattered across the walls. It took me a few hours to pull myself back together—not because it was difficult, but because I needed time to contemplate what went wrong. And you know what my conclusion was? The fuck if I know.

However, astonishingly, amid the chaos lay a skeletal hand, crafted from my Web of Whispers magic, completely unscathed. Despite my initial reluctance to acknowledge it, the resilience of my robust silk creation, which withstood the relentless assault of gravity without a single mark, led to an epiphany. Perhaps, just perhaps, focusing on building my foundation first was the prudent course of action. That said, I spent the rest of the day nonchalantly enduring Sophia's repeated gasps as I was continually squashed into a fine paste. What? The foundation can wait until tomorrow—I really, really want to fly!