

BLAKE RUDDING

CHAPTER 12

INTO DARKNESS

With a gooey yawn that emerged as a little squeak, accompanied by a wide, sticky stretch, I reignited my orange eyes only to find myself as a tiny blob of tar. You'd think I'd be accustomed to waking up like this by now, and... huh, you'd be correct. Shrugging off my situation, I focused on figuring out where I had respawned.

I was in a massive, dark chamber, the only illumination being the dull orange glow from my eyes, which I swept around like flashlights. On the far side, I noticed shattered wood splintered into pieces, and in the center, a headless corpse lay with parts of its body slowly caving in on itself, turning to ash as if smoldering from within.

Oh, hey, it's the vampire we killed! We're in Aurelia's throne room.

No shit, Dream.

Ugh, looks like we're out of sync, you're a bitch again. It was nice while it lasted, though.

Hey!

Shaking my head at myself—or rather, the notion of it, given my current lack of a head—I oozed my way over to the smoldering corpse. I was fairly certain the vampire wasn't actually aflame, just slowly disintegrating into ash... which should be perfectly safe to devour, right?

I always detest being this pathetically small. It just makes me feel... well, insignificant, and yes, pathetically so. Yet, I wasn't about to ignore the hunk of meat conveniently available, especially considering its apparent expiration timer. Not that rotting meat bothers me much, but ash doesn't quite offer the same nutritional value, I'd wager. So, at a snail's pace, I made my way over to the corpse. And like any self-respecting tar monster, I extended into tendrils. Though let's be real, it isn't as horrifying as it might sound, given my, ahem, diminutive size. Picture a ball of black snot trying to engulf an elephant. That might be a stretch, but you get the gist, right?

After a few minutes, I finished my meal, gaining enough mass to morph into a somewhat human shape. However, it wasn't quite my former self. Now standing, still cloaked in my dark, gooey essence, I found myself in a body resembling that of a five-year-old. Clearly, there had been far less of the vampire left than I initially anticipated. Grumbling, I decided against leaving the throne room to find Aurelia while in this form. The thought of her seeing me like some child-sized gothic doll was not particularly appealing.

Closing my eyes, I focused on my silk, specifically the Web of Whispers, not aiming for the shell I adored, but targeting the creation of bones instead. I stretched myself thin, elevating to my desired

height, even needing to hollow out certain sections as the bones interwove within me. This process lasted a few prolonged moments until I finally reopened my eyes.

Glancing down at my body, I experienced a bizarre blend of pride and resignation. I had shed the childlike form, now resembling something more like an Instagram model—an unmistakable skeleton with mere hints of flesh. It brought back dark memories from high school. If I had learned one thing back then, it would always be to eat and disregard others' unrealistic beauty standards. That being said, I sighed at the sight of my bony, breastless chest. With another long sigh, I used my more flexible silk skill, Silk Webbing, to sculpt my face, adding enough silk padding to avoid looking gaunt. Ideally, more 'pudding' would have been perfect to round out my features, but resources were scarce over the skeletal frame I'd crafted. Besides, I needed to reserve a bit for my hair, though I wasn't too sure about the pixie cut.

Grumbling to myself, my bony ass and I stormed out of the throne room, heading back to the courtyard where some fat asshole had managed to sneak-attack me to death while my eyes were closed. Much to my surprise—or to everyone else's—the corridors were filled with vampires who quickly scurried out of my way as though I were the Grim Reaper. More accurately, her granddaughter, but they were blissfully unaware of that. Well, actually, the explanation of my family tree felt more confusing than a hillbilly family reunion that I didn't even fully understand, so let's just ignore that for now. Disregarding the gawking stares, I proceeded to the door leading into the courtyard, only to be taken aback by what I encountered.

Bones were scattered everywhere—my bad—and amidst the sea of silk bones lay a red-skinned corpse, half-devoured by my black blob of an adorable pet, Phantasia. Redirecting my gaze back to her meal, a flicker of recognition crossed my mind. *Big, red, toad-like—oh, shit!*

“That's the first dungeon boss I ever fought,” I gasped in confusion.

Glancing over, I noticed my champion standing with her arms crossed, visibly upset about something. Whatever was bothering her didn't catch my interest. Instead, my attention drifted to Aurelia's perfect backside as she bent over to inspect two little square blobs.

“Hi'ya,” I called out as I shuffled over to Phantasia, eager to join in on the meal.

“Blake!” Aurelia exclaimed, turning toward me before pausing.

I guessed I looked like a mess in my current state. Oh well, I'd be fixing that soon enough. Regardless, I stopped over the toad's corpse, letting my flesh fall off as the bones clattered to the ground. I then spread over the toad, dissolving into it as I feasted alongside Phantasia, who appeared quite content with herself.

OLIN

In the courtyard, seemingly forgotten, stood a lich trapped within the corpse of a ratkin. Olin had done much for his lady over the decades, yet since his return, she had scarcely acknowledged him in any meaningful way. Not that he sought such attention, but a simple recognition or a friendly

hello would be nice. Since his arrival, he had shadowed his mistress throughout the castle, from the throne room to the various meetings she attended, always there, steadfastly behind her, yet unnoticed. Even over yesterday's screams of passion that rattled the castle, he had stood vigilant outside her chamber doors, ever the protective presence. It was as though she had completely forgotten about him, now wholly engrossed with her parasite—or beloved, as she seemed so infatuated with.

A moment of glee and panic seized him upon discovering that the holder of his phylactery had been slain. His concern wasn't for Blake's wellbeing—she was a detestable monster. His anxiety stemmed from the fact that she harbored his soul within a phylactery concealed inside her. Upon confirming the destruction of her body, he had meticulously scoured the courtyard, desperately seeking the phylactery. Yet, it remained elusive, fueling his frustration. Consequently, he lingered at the periphery, yearning for any form of recognition from his mistress—a directive, a command, or any acknowledgment.

To his dismay, the loathsome woman had resurrected once more, shambling into the courtyard, appearing even more undead than himself, with scarcely any flesh clinging to her bones. At least she acknowledged his mistress before dissolving into a horrific mass atop the toad's corpse.

With a sigh, Olin roamed off, not wanting anything to do with that vile woman, much less have her in his sight. He wandered around the castle in a huff, a stranger among the vampires. None recognized him, and none were aware that Olin had once been a vampire himself, before Lord Demidicus, in a fit of rage, ripped out his soul and transformed him into a pathetic ghoul. In his failure, the worst part was that he had inadvertently achieved something far greater than what his lord had commanded: he had summoned Aurelia's new soul, a soul far more powerful than what Demidicus had desired. Did the ancient vampire acknowledge his mistake and alleviate Olin's suffering? No!

He disregarded the occasional gazes and sneers from the vampire underlings. To him, they were insignificant, especially now that he had become a lich. Yet, this elevated status held little value when his phylactery was in another's possession, effectively reducing him to a slave in all but name. Engulfed in his despair, Olin wandered aimlessly, delving deeper into the castle's recesses. He eventually found himself in the hidden chamber where Aurelia's husband had made his escape. That vampire was one Olin had genuinely respected, someone he wished his mistress would have accepted instead of Blake.

There, he ran his rodent-like fingers along the rim of the archway that stood solitary in the chamber's center. The so-called experts on such magical gates had failed to decipher its secrets, let alone reactivate it. It was a travesty that many vampires were inept in their understanding of magic, showing little interest in learning, opting instead to indulge in the pleasures of flesh and blood while constantly scheming behind each other's backs.

If his mistress was too preoccupied with her beloved to recognize all he had done for her, then he would find a new purpose for his time and efforts. The archway before him seemed like the perfect project. Days and nights melded together as he labored alone; the chamber remained undisturbed, its mysteries long abandoned by others, but not by Olin. He persisted in his task, unburdened by

the needs of sleep, sustenance, or repose. Time blurred—was it a week, a month? He couldn't ascertain. Finally, with a brilliant flare, the gate activated. Yet, something was amiss. The expected vibrant hues typical of magical portals were missing; there were no swirls of pink or blue indicative of raw magic. Instead, there was only an impenetrable void of darkness.

Portals were fraught with danger; mishandling them could twist time and space in unimaginable ways. While a soul traveling to its own past was impossible, venturing into the past of another realm was not beyond the realm of possibility. Nonetheless, Olin had his doubts about this specific occurrence and remained uncertain about the gate's destination. Curiosity surged within him as he peered into the void, contemplating his next move. The thought of being forsaken gnawed at him, and, driven by a desire to delve into the unknown, he decided to step through the portal. In the worst-case scenario, he anticipated merely catching a glimpse of the other side before the strings connecting his body to his phylactery were snapped.

The magic of the portal enveloped him as he stepped through, sending a chill throughout his being. Contrary to his expectations, his body's tether to his soul didn't snap. Instead, he found himself within a dark cavern. An awkward step forward led him to stub his toe against a round object, sending a shiver through his body. Glancing down, a sphere rolled across the ground, and recognition dawned upon him.

“My phylactery?” Olin whispered in awe.

Lifting his gaze from the most precious object he could have found, he froze at the sight before him.

YOU HAVE ENTERED THE MARSHCRYPT GROTTO DUNGEON!!
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After that day, Olin vanished into the darkness, never to be seen again.