

Damnit damnit DAMNIT.

The radio crackled with activity as reports came in from two other corners of the Deadlands. People were yelling something about attacks, ambushes, and countermeasures.

Rob couldn't spare the mental focus to pay attention to any of it. He was too busy dodging the Blight and its minions. The hulking, abominable creature was bounding forth with jarring speed, clearing a dozen feet in each long stride. Around it, the faceless children advanced just as quickly, seeming to almost glide along the grass with light steps that sent them bolting forward.

Stay calm, he told himself. Don't get overwhelmed. Take them out one at a time. Look for an openi—

A sword came inches from biting into his side. Rob grit his teeth, concentrating as he skirted between an unending whirlwind of blades, axes, spears, and daggers, pushing his reaction time and Quick Thinking to the limit. The Blight-children were wielding a variety of weapons – effortlessly, despite some being bigger than their bodies. While none of the individual kiddos were *that* strong, their numbers and unnatural speed made them a collective problem that he couldn't ignore.

Especially when their leader was taking advantage of the chaos they sowed. The Blighted abomination lashed out, its arm extending into a glowing red scythe-whip with deceptively far reach. Rob sucked in his gut and leaped back to avoid the strike from carving out his torso. Having failed to harvest his organs, the scythe settled for harvesting grass instead, shearing away a huge swath of green in an instant.

The grass didn't even have time to drift downwards before it was blown aside by the abomination's charge. Its red-rimmed teeth were bared, lightless eyes aiming a gaze of unfiltered *yearning* at Rob. **"STOP MOVING!"** it howled, in a scratchy, guttural voice. **"COME TO ME! GIVE ME BLOODSHED! LET OUR ESSENCE DANCE WITH CARNAGE!"**

Don't threaten me with a good time. Rob wanted nothing more than to meet its challenge head-on. This was the kind of fight he *thrived* in. His hand itched with Purge Corruption energy, instincts urging him to dash into the fray, guns blazing.

Instead, with two reasons in mind, he continued his retreat. One reason was because of a system notification that kept popping up: **Sense Illusion has failed.** Even if the enemies in front of him didn't seem that dangerous, relatively speaking, he couldn't be sure that they were what he was *actually* seeing.

The second and more important reason was the Elf hanging onto his back. Duran's grip was tight as a vice, holding on as if his life depended on it – which it did. Leaving the man to his own devices wasn't an option. There were just too many enemies; even if Rob killed them as fast as he could, one would likely slip through and shank the unprotected Elder. This impromptu piggyback ride was the main thing keeping him alive right now.

Unfortunately, escorting Duran had saddled Rob with a massive handicap. The Human's standard M.O. in a fight was to bust onto the front lines, laugh off any attacks that hit him, start blowing things up, and reign supreme among the destruction. That...wasn't quite an option here. Any attack that hit Rob had a good chance at striking Duran as well. Dauntless Reprisal could reflect one blow, but that helped a lot less against thirteen persistent enemies.

Rob and Duran's close proximity also sealed away most of the BERSERKER's Skillset. Riardin Special? Potential for friendly fire. Rampage? Maybe during an emergency, but the abrupt movement might cause whiplash. Flames of Vengeance? Not unless he wanted to remember the smell of deep-fried Duran for the rest of his nightmares. *Living Bomb?*

Yeeeeeah.

To win this fight with zero casualties, Rob would need to rely solely on his natural agility and Purge Corruption. While that wasn't an impossible task, it was turning out to be more difficult than he'd anticipated. So much of his fighting style had been built around not having to care if he took damage. Now he was forced to completely adjust his pace, hesitant to even draw near one of the Blights lest they stab through his chest *and* his passenger's at the same time.

"Back line," Duran hurriedly whispered. Rob shifted his gaze to see that one of the faceless Blight-children had switched its sword out for a spear. The sound of cracking bones echoed as it contorted its

body. It kept on contorting, twisting, winding up like a living spring – before finally launching the spear in an absurdly fast throw.

Rob was so perturbed by the sight – and distracted by the dozen other enemies hounding at his heels – that he barely managed to duck. The glowing red spear rocketed over his and Duran's heads, momentarily deafening them. They were given no time to recover, as another spear appeared in the Blight-child's hand, then another, the creature's body twisting and *cracking* as it wound up for Round 2.

In that moment, Rob's focus was split in all different directions. He was eyeing the Blight-child's new projectiles, trying not to get surrounded by the other children, dodging the hulking abomination's sweeping whipstrikes, searching for potential openings that would be safe to exploit, and cognizant of Elder Duran's slowly failing grip. His mental stack had just about reached its limit.

So when Step of the Wind's Dexterity buff faded, he neglected to notice for a quarter-second longer than usual.

That quarter-second was the first domino to fall. Rob leaped to the side to reposition himself, but now that Step of the Wind's boost was gone, his maneuver brought him several inches short of where he assumed he'd be. One of the Blight-children was still in range. It hacked at his back – at Duran – and only a last-moment turn made the strike hit Rob's leg instead. The blade, wielded by a small child with noodles for arms, effortlessly carved into Rob's system-enhanced limb, stopping when it clashed against bone.

Muted giggles resounded across the field, emanating from faces without mouths.

More dominos fell. Rob escaped the Blight-child's follow-up attack, but his wounded leg made his dash just a hair slower. The next spear sent his way clipped his shoulder, and other children moved to surround him, like silent mannequins on the hunt for prey. Escaping *that* put him too close to the abomination, which immediately seized the opportunity, stretching out its flesh-whip farther than ever before.

I'm getting cornered.

The realization was like a trigger activating inside Rob's mind. Time slowed to a crawl. The Blights were frozen mid-lunge, and his thoughts began racing a mile a minute. That single instant stretched on into eternity, letting him calmly assess the situation. He hadn't felt this in-the-moment since he'd watched a Harpy Amalgamation nearly kill Orn'tol.

While Quick Thinking was partially responsible, the Skill hadn't randomly upgraded or anything of the sort. No, rather than an ability granted from on high, this was merely a latent aspect of humanity. Something endemic to all living things that were aware of the fragility of existence. An adrenaline rush flooded through him, the kind that only surfaced when his loved ones were in mortal peril, honing his awareness to a razor-sharp point.

Distantly, Rob noted that if he could do this at will, there would be no need for more Perception. That wasn't how his mind functioned, though. He'd faced death on too many occasions to care much when the reaper asked *him* for another dance. But when it asked someone like Duran?

No. That wasn't **allowed**.

Reset the fight. In one-one-hundredth of a second, he formed his plan.

1. Activate Like the Wind to refresh Step of the Wound's cooldown. Consumes 5% of HP as a cost.
2. Activate Step of the Wind to regain Dexterity boost.
3. Purge the Corruption seeping into his body from the Blight's attacks.
4. Activate Dauntless Reprisal. Reflect the hulking abomination's attack. Use the Skill effect to heal.
5. Use hands to brace Duran against his back. Reduce chance of whiplash.
6. Repeated Rampage backwards.

Simple. Now: act.

His body and mind moved in perfect harmony. Rob activated his Skills so swiftly that the only thing preventing him from using them all at once was an inherent restriction within the system – one that he hadn't known existed until this very moment. It was as if the laws of reality were telling him to take a chill pill. Despite that laughable constraint, he fired off his Skill in exceedingly rapid succession, like a machine gun burst of thoughts.

An outside observer wouldn't have been able to tell what happened. One second, Rob was cornered. The next, he wasn't. Several Blights were left reeling in his wake, the abomination still in the middle of finishing its attack when reflected damage split its head open like an overripe melon.

"We must...what?" Duran's warning ended before it began, the Elder belatedly realizing that they were out of danger. "I must have blinked."

"Mmhmm," Rob mumbled. "Bought some time." His words were short and clipped, the adrenaline hampering any mental tasks not immediately related to survival. "MP at half. Can't Rampage much more. Need new plan."

Elder Duran loosened his grip. If Rob hadn't been bracing him, the man would have fallen off entirely. "Then I suggest you put me down and fight at your fullest," Duran said. "We are both well-aware that this battle would already be over if I weren't an albatross hanging from your beck – quite literally, in this case."

Rob couldn't deny that. While he still didn't trust his own senses, he was mostly confident that this Blight and its helpers were on the weaker side. More comparable to The Village's three-sentence messenger than the overpowering monstrosities he'd fought in Dhalerune Mines and Merfolk territory. With Elder Duran safely out of the way, Living Bomb and Purge Corruption would have cleaned up the lot of them with relative ease.

Except there was no 'safely', here. It would only take one – just *one* of the wretched Blight-children going after Duran while Rob was busy massacring its brothers and sisters. Which *would* happen. The abomination itself had expressed an interest in devouring the Elder's knowledge; to his children, a defenseless, ailing old man would be like a juicy piñata practically begging to be sliced open.

We're both well-aware of all that, too. Duran was essentially giving the go-ahead to sacrifice him in order to ensure victory.

"I don't understand," Rob flatly stated.

"You see, if I can—"

Curling his fingers, he lightly rapped the Elder's head. "I don't understand how someone that smart could ever believe I'd play along. Think of a better plan."

A deep sigh exhaled past his ear. "Then increase the distance between yourself and the Blight," Duran said. "I will need time to adequately explain a concept I have in mind."

Rob took off at a full sprint, leaving the Blight's demented daycare center behind. They soon followed in hot pursuit, the abomination's cries of "**SUCCOR!**" drowning out the soft rustling of a dozen faceless children gliding across the field. Every now and then, Rob would look back, noting that while the Blights weren't catching up to him, he wasn't outpacing them, either. The tree that stood at the center of the field also never seemed to grow smaller in his vision.

Figures, he thought, with a grimace. Elysium's beautiful, boundless stretches of grass were yet another lie. This place was no different than a cage. A cage *match*, even, like two rabid dogs pit against each other. It wouldn't end until one side had torn their foe to shreds.

"As you've undoubtedly recognized," Elder Duran started, "none of what you see is real. The Blight's form, although grotesque, is not its true visage. These children are not children. This field is no field."

"I know. Doesn't help much when Illusion Resistance keeps fucking failing."

Duran paused. "I am loath to recommend that you injure yourself, but...didn't you come to your senses by stabbing your palm earlier?"

"Sort of," Rob replied, shrugging. "While it broke me out of a minor trance, it still didn't let me see past all *this* nonsense. I don't think pain alone is going to be enough."

"That wound on your flank wasn't sufficient? If I may be so crass, it was quite the grisly sight to behold."

Rob frowned. "I didn't get hit—"

He winced as his torso abruptly split open. It was like a massive, invisible meat cleaver had sheared straight through the left side of his body. Blood and intestines poured out in a torrent, as if pushed by an internal force.

Then, before Rob even had time to activate Lifesurge, the wound twitched. A moment later, his blood and guts rushed back into his body. The gaping wound immediately closed itself up, leaving nary a scar behind. No healing Skills required.

What the flying... "Did you see that?" Rob asked, his voice wavering.

"See what?" Duran answered. After a second of silence, Rob could feel the Elder's muscles tense. "Oh dear. We are viewing two fundamentally different battles, aren't we?"

"Apparently." A quick glance at his torso showed zero injuries. Not even his clothes were ripped.

"When you told me about that hit I presumably took, I think reality – *my* reality, at least – tried to course-correct. It 'remembered' that I got hurt, then 'remembered' that I would've healed with Dauntless Reprisal anyway."

Duran gasped with a sharp intake of breath. "That! That is the solution. It corresponds with my prior hypothesis. We lack sufficient evidence to prove it beyond reasonable doubt, yet—"

"Doesn't matter," Rob interrupted. "I'll take any ideas you've got." *It's better than trying to figure this out on my own while the children of the corn hurl spears at me.*

"Very well. To begin, what I'm about to say is strictly conjecture—"

"Blights chasing us. Gimme the short version, please."

Duran almost huffed at being interrupted twice in a row, but in this instance, he sorely recognized the importance of haste. "We have become untethered from reality. You received an identical notification, yes? To prevail, we must tether ourselves once more."

He paused. "I make it sound simple, yet I've never witnessed a system notification of this nature before, nor do I truly understand what it *means* to be 'untethered'. Nevertheless, we must proceed based on our best estimations of what that appellation represents."

Sensing an impending tangent, Rob decided to nudge Duran back on track. "So what did you have in mind?"

"Aside from reversing the passage of time and allocating far more stat points into Mind and Perception?" A smirk adorned the Elder's voice. "I intend to employ trickery. Brute strength will not avail us here – we must overcome the Deadlands through cleverness and guile. For example; our perception of reality still holds sway here, and although it can be surprisingly difficult for a person to perceive *themselves*, retaining each other in our minds' eyes should do nicely. Direct physical contact will also help facilitate our corporeal actualization."

The idea was a bit high-concept for Rob to wrap his head around while in the middle of dodging spears and flesh-whips, but he mostly got it. Basically, part of why he hadn't fully succumbed to the Deadlands' influence was because of Duran's presence. The same went for Rob's presence sheltering Duran. They acted as filters for one another, preventing the Blight from taking over merely by adding more eyes and ears that could observe a phenomenon and call bullshit.

He didn't want to think about how things might have played out if the Blight succeeded in its attempt to isolate him. Initially, Elysium's sweeping fields of nostalgic green grass had left him speechless and awestruck. Without Duran around to help ground him afterwards...

But he was, Rob affirmed. *No point in tormenting myself with hypotheticals*. "So we can overcome the Deadlands and re-tether ourselves to reality by concentrating on each other?" he asked.

"If the process were that straightforward, we would have already broken free. While observation reigns supreme in the realm of the conceptual, our will is not the only one molding the Deadlands."

Right. The Blight was here too – and it was *their* home turf. As a reminder, Rob was suddenly forced to sidestep a spear, then an axe, then a flesh-scythe that threatened to bisect him from the waist down. He

was tempted to ask Duran how he'd perceived that exchange...then wisely decided against it. No reason to turn a successful dodge into a glancing hit because his perception of reality had been outvoted.

"You mentioned that we'd need cleverness and guile," Rob began, slowly. "I've heard a lot of cleverness, but where's the guile? Cheating is more up my alley than theorycrafting."

"You have indulged in crafting theories upon many an occasion, Rob."

"Yeah, so I can cheat better."

Duran chuckled. Carefully, as to not throw them off-balance, he leaned forward and clasped his hands around Rob's ears. "Deactivate Heightened Senses, " the Elder instructed, "and then close your eyes. Your mind produces its interpretation of the world through an influx of sensations. By depriving the Deadlands of those sensations, I predict that we can seize control of our own selves."

It couldn't hurt to try. Rob shut his eyelids tight, deactivated Heightened Senses, and emptied his thoughts. With his sight and hearing obstructed, everything...

Stayed roughly the same. Something in the back of his head *twinged*, but other than that, Elysium appeared unchanged. He could still feel grass bending below his footsteps, he could still hear the Blight's war cries, muffled though they were, and he could still feel sunlight beating down on his closed eyelids.

Yet there *had* been a twinge. Brief, fleeting – and proof that Duran's hypothesis held water.

It just didn't go far enough.

"Okay," Rob said, gently moving Elder Duran's hands away from his ears. "So. Don't be alarmed at what I'm about to do."

"Ah." Duran shifted nervously on Rob's back. "Out of curiosity, has that sort of warning ever actually set someone at ease?"

"I'm hoping it will one day."

Now quit procrastinating and get it over with, he told himself, sending an unimpressed glare at his own trembling hands. *You've done worse shit to yourself. Don't start having an 'episode' for no goddamn reason.*

Breathe in, breathe out. The trembling stilled by a hair.

It would have to do. Gathering his courage, Rob summoned a knife from Spatial Storage and deactivated Regeneration. He raised the small blade high.

To Elder Duran's credit, the man barely let out a gasp as Human blood splattered across the front of his traveling garments.

Six swift motions. *Stab, stab*. Left eye, right eye. *Shunk, shunk*. Left eardrum, right eardrum. *Slice, slice*. Left foot sole, right foot sole.

It was done. He could no longer see, his eyes popped like jam-filled balloons. He could no longer hear, his eardrums mangled by history's deepest Q-tip cleaning. And while he could still run, leaving bloody footprints in his wake, the pain in his feet was obscuring the softness of grass underneath.

All that remained was the caress of sunlight on his face. As Rob prepared to skin himself, he paused. The sun was...had it always felt so...cold? No, that wasn't the right word. *Lifeless*. Like the difference between a bright summer day and the pragmatic utility of a store-bought lightbulb. There was light here, he could tell, yet it was artificially created for the singular purpose of illumination. No plants could possibly flourish under the auspices of a lifeless sun.

And the smell – dear god, the smell. How had he not noticed it? Before, there'd been almost nothing; just the subtle aroma of fresh, healthy grass. Now, he was being assaulted by an odor so vile that Rob almost carved out his nose to complete the set of self-inflicted impairments. It was the smell of pure rot, decay, and pestilence, all combined into something horrifically unforgettable.

Like he was standing atop a pile of rotting corpses.

This place...

Illusion Resistance has succeeded!

...Is no Elysium.

Rob's physical sensations overlapped with his logical knowledge, at long last allowing him to *believe* that statement, thoroughly and utterly.

In the depths of his mind, a sound blared like the screeching of rusted trumpets. Everything twinged, then DISTORTED, then collapsed back into place. Rob narrowly managed to keep his legs moving – and the Blight off his tail – as his brain underwent a factory reset.

When he eventually came to, he was still blind and deaf, but an equally important Sense had returned to him.

Rob's breath caught in his throat as he felt rather than saw the Blight chasing behind him. There was Corruption *everywhere* in the air, so thick that it nearly caused him to gag – yet even then, Sense Corruption was able to pick out that grotesque abomination, its aura shining like searchlights in fog. Rob could feel the beast's presence...and its shape.

The children were gone. More accurately, they'd never existed at all. In their place was a single, enormous, many-limbed creature, scuttling forward with increasing speed. Rob could feel the shape of one limb as it transformed into a whip-scythe, lashing out to strike at his flank. He could feel the shape of another limb as it created a chitinous spear, detached itself, then shot forth like a bullet of piercing Corruption.

From the beginning, there had only ever been one enemy.

And with that knowledge...the way forward was clear.

"Sorry about this," Rob said. "Make sure to tuck and roll." Without slowing his pace, he promptly pulled Duran off his back, activated Bulk Up, then activated the Anklet of Moderate Brawn for good measure. The Elder *may* have been protesting at this point, but alas, Rob literally couldn't hear him, which made for an ironclad alibi.

One baseball-throw later, and Duran was sailing through the air, his arms pinwheeling with indignation. Rob chuckled at the image – using his imagination, what with the blindness. His sole regret was that he couldn't see Elder Duran's outraged glare. It would've been an all-timer for the mental scrapbook.

Manhandling a sickly centenarian probably wasn't his finest moment, but Rob knew better than to wallow in guilt. Even with Duran's weakened body, he was still an Elatran with Vitality-boosted durability; this much wouldn't seriously harm him. And while the man might grouse about his treatment later, calculated yeeting was legitimately the quickest method to remove low-Dexterity fighters from danger. Same as when Malika and Diplomacy were ambushed in The Village.

Its comedic value was just a side bonus.

His objective completed, Rob whirled around to face the oncoming Blight. The monster didn't seem to realize that its death warrant had been signed. Unbidden, Rob's grin widened into a vicious smile, and a manic peal of laughter burst from his chest. Triumphant adrenaline coursed through his veins once again, the kind of pure *thrill* that was unique to flipping the hierarchy of predator and prey on its head.

Not running anymore. Purge Corruption energy pulsed around his body, forming a halo of cleansing might. *All you had on me was a hostage and mind fuckery. Now?*

His thrill reached a fever pitch, like thunder roaring inside his ruined ears. *Now the Heartkiller comes to play.*

Rob surged forward, timing his leap with a Rampage cast, his feet leaving indentations in the ground. The Blight immediately reversed course, scuttling backwards as it finally understood the extent of how deeply it had fucked up.

Several months ago, that would have been enough to secure its escape, but Rob was currently Level 92 with 105 Dexterity. Fleet of Foot added another 10 Dexterity when he was sprinting. Battle Fever further increased his stats as time went on, and thanks to Like the Wind, Step of the Wind's speed buff was permanently active.

The Blight's unnatural mobility couldn't keep pace with all of that combined. Bit-by-bit, an average-sized Human closed in on a towering monstrosity, Purging energy resonating from his hands. Like a mouse chasing after a cat...albeit a mouse armed with a bazooka and cackling far too gleefully.

Corruption flared within the Blight's massive frame. In an act of desperation, it fashioned numerous projectiles out its fleshy appendages, spears and arrows and throwing axes. *Aimed at Duran, no doubt, Rob mused. Wants to distract me.*

No problem. He cast a series of repeated Rampages, zipping through the air in all directions, knocking the flesh-spears away before they came close to finding their target. Child's play, really. He'd only been scared for Duran earlier because he thought they were dealing with multiple enemies – and because he couldn't trust his own senses. Without those handicaps, this Blight, this overwhelming force of nature, this eldritch abomination from beyond the veil...

Was nothing new.

I killed the Blight of Dhalerune Mines when I was 40 Levels lower. Rob sidestepped a flurry of spiked appendages that erupted from the ground. I killed the Corrupted Leviathan not long after. A miasma of Corruption fog enveloped him, easily rebuffed by a shield of Purging energy. I killed a Leader empowered with Blight juju in single combat. Rob ducked below a scythe-whip meant to take his head off – which wouldn't have slowed him down, regardless. I regularly piss off the Dragon Queen and get away with it. And you, weak Blight? You runt among the litter? You're no more than a speedbump.

His fury boiled over, threatening to erupt. *A speedbump that tried to hurt Duran. I'll eat your FUCKING HEART FOR THAT.*

Rob collided with the Blight like a wrecking ball of murderous intent. Hints of static flashed through his mind as he let loose Purge Corruption, incinerating huge chunks of tainted flesh. The beast's oversized, gigantic body rapidly burnt away, as if it was a lit wax candle in fast-forward.

And then it detonated. That was the only way Rob could describe what he Sensed. The Blight's extremities separated in an odd mixture of concussive pressure and Corruption – and for once, the explosion wasn't Rob's doing. The creature had done this to itself.

After a couple seconds of baffled pondering, he figured out why. Much like how lizards would sever their own tail to escape predators, the Blight had forcibly removed the parts of its body that were being invaded by Purging energy.

The results seemed...mixed. It wasn't dead yet, so mission accomplished there, but the vast majority of its frame was gone. What remained was pitifully dragging itself along the ground, resembling the Adventurer Amalgamation that Rob put out of its misery.

That sight had inspired pity. This sight...less so.

"Was it worth the wait?" Rob stalked towards the crippled Blight, each footstep like a note of inevitability. "All those centuries of napping – just to get cooked in seconds by a guy who'd never even held a sword until recently?"

Its laughter resounded in his mind. ***"This victory is meaningless. We are awake."***

"Your siblings, maybe." Rob stopped in front of the Blight's misshapen head. He cast down a cold gaze, fingers clenched, hand glowing with a Purging aura. *"You're just dead."*

His fist descended.

Reached Level 93!

5 Stat Points Gained!

Berserker Level Increased! 92 → 93

Reached Level 94!

5 Stat Points Gained!

Berserker Level Increased! 93 → 94

Even a weak Blight afforded a wealth of Experience. Rob exulted in the moment, suffused with righteous fervor over this act of unambiguous good, relishing his increased strength—

Leveling High's containment has reduced from 85% to 80%!

Oh.

Hmm.

Rob reread the system notifications, glancing between the one that declared Level 94 and the one that warned of 80% containment.

...Eh, worth it.

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Changes:

Level 92 → 94

Leveling High Containment 85% → 80%