

Laughter filtered through the air, tinkling like wind chimes grazed by a cool breeze. Duran said something in an awestruck, hushed tone. The children continued their play under the tree, not stopping or slowing as they peered back to stare, their bodies moving like autonomous drones.

Rob barely registered any of it. He was lost in the Blight's eyes, drawn into a pair of vacant orbs devoid of life, each one its own unending, unceasing vacuum, the absence of existence, black holes with dying stars at the center—

In one motion, he summoned a longsword from Spatial Storage, deactivated his defensive Skills, and stabbed himself in the hand.

"Son of a..." Sucking in air through his teeth, he focused on the pain, drawing clarity from its sharpness. The feeling of being drawn in rapidly faded, leaving him able to think once more.

**Illusion Resistance has failed!**

*Thanks, I didn't catch that the first five times.* He glanced at his bloodied hand, already healing. *At least I've got a do-it-yourself alternative.*

The Blight-child tilted its head and smiled, as if amused. "**An unexpected type of greeting.**"

Rob ignored it, instead turning to face Duran. The Elder was in a daze, his eyes blank and unfocused, with sweat running down his brow. "An infinite abyss," he whispered, starting to shiver. "I can't—"

"It isn't real." Rob snapped his fingers in front of Duran's face, then grabbed the man's shoulder and carefully shook him. He wasn't sure if that would be enough to break Duran's trance, but he also wasn't about to stab the poor guy, so it would have to suffice. "Wake up, gramps. I'd like some backup while I negotiate with an eldritch entity."

**"You are incorrect."**

Rob aimed a savage glare at the Blight-child. "What, are you going to try and argue that you *aren't* creepy monsters? Maybe you're just misunderstood and need a hug?"

**"Not that."** The Blight-child tilted its head the other way. **"Everything you saw is real. There is no falsehood. In this reality, or another, it all existed."**

Questions swirled in Rob's mind. He shoved most of them to the side, choosing the only one that actually mattered. "Where is everyone?" he snarled. The metal hilt of his sword bent under his tightening grip. "What have you done with them?"

The Blight-child giggled. **"Ask them yourself."**

Duran's radio crackled to life. "Hello?" a voice said, so faint that it was nearly inaudible. "Can anyone hear me?"

That finally seemed to wake the Elder from his stupor. Eyes shining with awareness, he practically smashed the Talk button in his haste. "This is Elder Duran. Rob is with me. Perchance, who am I speaking to?"

A cacophony of voices answered him. After some initial confusion, it quickly became apparent that their alliance had been split up into four groups. Rob and Duran in the first group, then two larger ones with roughly equal numbers of people, and lastly, a fourth smaller group that consisted solely of a half-dozen coalition and Dragonkin soldiers.

While Rob was keen to find out exactly who was stuck with who, there were more important things to worry about. He pressed the Alert button on the radio to silence everyone, then spoke up before one of the Dragonkin could start whining. "Listen," he began, in a hurry. "What do you all see? Are there monsters, or Blightspawn, or people?" *Or things that look like people.*

They talked over each other when responding, but Rob got the gist. Their disparate groups could see fog, grass, rain, darkness, sunlight, tar, swampland, lava – basically every type of environment imaginable. Aside from Rob and Duran, however, none of them saw any living creatures.

**"You expend wasted energy by fretting."** The Blight-child flopped down onto the ground, kneading its toes into lush, verdant grass. **"In accordance with our agreement, they will be left alone, for a time. We choose to speak with you alone."**

Rob raised an eyebrow and pointed at Elder Duran.

**"Should have been alone. You were in contact. Impossible to separate."** The creature lifted its head to stare directly at Rob's chest, right where the Anti-Corruption Amulets lay nestled underneath his clothing. **"Such troublesome trinkets. Would you be so kind as to remove them? Ah, the sights we could show you."**

With a slow, deliberate motion, Rob pressed the Talk button on his radio. "This goes without saying, but don't remove your Amulets. I think they're the only thing keeping us from being...I don't know. Absorbed, disappeared, mind-controlled – take your pick. Something bad."

The radio exploded with questions. Ragnavi's loud, arrogant voice managed to rise above the clamor. "And how are you aware of this?" she demanded.

"Because I'm chatting with a Blight right now."

Everyone immediately fell silent.

Handing the radio back to Duran, Rob took a moment to examine their...host. He tried to cast Identify on the Blight-child, flinching when the Skill fizzled out like a sparkler doused with water. There was no error Message or cryptic Description; it simply *failed*, the same as when Malika attempted to start a campfire. He tried Sense Corruption next, and to little surprise, it failed as well – sort of. The Skill was technically still active, but it was also informing him that there wasn't any Corruption nearby.

Rob somehow doubted that was the case.

Briefly, he considered dashing forward and shoving a fistful of Purge Corruption energy straight down the Blight-child's throat. It felt wrong *not* to capitalize on an enemy so graciously putting itself into melee range. However, killing one Blight – assuming this was a true Blight, and not an offshoot or a

messenger – wasn't worth losing a prime opportunity to gather information. Each word that abomination spoke was worth its weight in gold.

With that in mind, Rob fought back his instincts, called upon the full breadth of Diplomacy's PR training, and adopted a strained smile. "It seems I've neglected to introduce myself," he said, "My name is Rob. You might know me as the Heartkiller. It's nice to...well, we're meeting, that's for sure."

**"Rob."** The Blight-child sounded out the name with great care. **"Rob. Rooooob."** After a few seconds, it shook its head, seeming almost petulant. **"No. That will not do. It is merely an arbitrary noise, unsuccessful at representing the core concept of a thing. You are the Heartkiller."**

"Since when have you guys been linguistic experts?"

**"Since the Lost Lamb bade that we converse with you. To prepare, we subsumed this knowledge of language from the Wretched Wanderers."** It glanced at Duran with an analytical gaze. **"You...yes, you shall be the Moribund Scholar."**

In response, the Scholar bowed. "Elder Duran, if it pleases you." A genial smile spread across his face, appearing far less strained than Rob's. "Before we continue – I'm afraid you have us at a disadvantage. You've mentioned several terms that I, personally, am struggling to comprehend. Would you be so kind as to explain who the Lost Lamb and Wretched Wanderers are, and what exactly Elysium is?"

The Blight-child grinned, showing two rows of pointed, red-rimmed teeth. **"I like you."** Saliva began to pool around the corners of its mouth. **"Similar to us. An unrelenting thirst. For us, a thirst for everything. For you, a thirst for knowledge. So much knowledge. Accumulated and stored. Locked in your soul. I want to taste it. Know what you know. I want it. Bathe in it, devour it, REVEL IN IT, WANT IT."**

For one instant, Sense Corruption flared. It felt like standing on the surface of the sun.

Then the moment was gone, and the Blight-child's grin faded. **"Won't,"** it said, with a mixture of determination and regret. **"An accord was made."**

The *thing* had the audacity to sigh, composing itself before continuing. **"Elysium is here. The cradle of our Selves. An effigy of our essence and experiences. Here, we are law and reality and shapers. All is malleable. All is Eternal."**

"Are we still in Elatra?" Rob asked, dreading the answer.

**"You are not anywhere. I do not believe it is a concept that your kind, Ephemeral Souls with limited awareness, can perceive."**

As a test, Rob reached out to check on the emergency Waymark point he'd left back in The Village. He quickly found that the Skill had been reset entirely. Whether that was because Waymark couldn't 'connect' to anything outside the Deadlands, or because the Blight sensed that connection and forcibly severed it, he couldn't say.

The playing children giggled in unison, their empty eyes fixated on him with something resembling hunger.

**"Wretched Wanderers are unknown to you,"** the Blight continued. **"They came to us, over many years. One at a time. We slumbered, yet they roused us to half-waking. Played with them. Made the centuries bearable. Then the Lost Lamb offered his accord. To prepare, we ate the Wanderers' language."**

Rob's stomach churned. "Are you referring to the adventurers that tried exploring the Deadlands?"

**"Adventurer, Wanderer – the core meaning is unchanged."** Its posture softened, and its voice took on an air of dreamy reminiscence. **"So useful. So sweet. So nice. Want more."** The Blight's head jerked down to stare at Duran's radio. **"Have more."**

To prevent the Blight from dwelling on that line of thought, Rob kept the conversation moving. "What about the Lost Lamb?"

**"Him, you know of. No longer part of us. Separated from the whole. Adrift. Gone, now, forever. Slain by your hand."**

The realization hit Rob like a freight train. "You mean *King Elnaril*?"

**"Another arbitrary noise,"** the Blight grumbled. **"One he embraced. Proof that he was no longer part of us. An irregular fusion of the Ephemeral and the Eternal. His was a solitary existence, with no one to call brethren."**

It locked eyes with Rob. **"You came closest. He felt a kinship with you."**

*Oh screw that.* Sensing a boatload of implications about to crash into the harbor, Rob decided to employ one of his favorite strategies: compartmentalize, repress, and address it never. "Cool, great. You still haven't told us what Elnaril has to do with any of this. There was something about an accord?"

The Blight paused. **"We did not understand the Lost Lamb,"** it admitted, speaking slowly. **"His motivations, his desires...they were strange to us. May have understood if we were fully awake, but we were not, then. The Lost Lamb's passions seemed as no more than malformed dreams. We dismissed them, and he forged his own path, walking it until you delivered oblivion unto his essence."**

All at once, the children froze in place, their wooden swords paused mid-swing. Some of them were even mid-jump, bodies hovering. It was like an eerie life-sized portrait, lasting several seconds until their play resumed as if nothing had happened.

**"Even now."** The Blight-child's lips curled into an infinitesimal frown. **"Even now, still, we do not understand. Yet he was one of us. And so we choose to fulfill his final wish."**

"...Which is?"

**"To converse with you. Before we feast, we shall talk."**

A loud, shrill noise emanated from the radio. It was the Alert sound intended to get everyone's attention no matter what.

The Blight's frown immediately flipped upside-down. "**\*I\* shall talk,**" it amended, its tone surging with appetite and desire. "**After slumbering for eons, dreaming, waiting for The Others to lower their guard...some of us cannot wait a moment longer.**"

Numerous voices began speaking over the radio in tandem, but one terrified shriek cut through the rest. "It's coming from above! Using clouds as cover!" The voice belonged to a soldier Rob couldn't recognize – likely a Dragonkin, then. "Take positions! Circle up, back-to-back!"

"You don't order me!" an opposing voice shouted. This one Rob *did* recognize as belonging to a Dwarf by the name of Hargrave. "Rob! My Lord Rob! Enemies coming from the horizon! Can't see them clearly, too much smog! What should we do?"

Rob's heart rate doubled as adrenaline pumped through his body. "Stay calm," he said, with confident authority, glad that they couldn't see his trembling hands. "Grouping up wasn't bad advice. Tell me – who are your strongest Combat Class users? We need to plan our strategy around emphasizing their strengths."

He shouldn't be the one they were asking for advice. This wasn't his wheelhouse. Rob was proud of his capacity to pull ideas out of his ass, but they always involved *him*, abusing his own Skills to their peak effectiveness. When it came to other people, he could really only offer the most general kind of advice. Someone like Alessia or Diplomacy would be better-suited to this.

Yet they'd asked for him by name, and there wasn't enough time to alter the chain of command without sowing discord. *Just have to get my shit together. They're counting on me.* He activated Quick Thinking. *Depending on their heavy hitters and overall numbers, we can–*

"Our highest-Level Combat Class user is Level 51," Hargrave reported. "We number six soldiers in total."

...

*Oh.*

They were from the fourth, small group. The group without Riardin's Rangers. Without the Dragon Queen. Without Purge Corruption.

Against the Blight.

"You're all close in Level, then," Rob said, without missing a beat. "Don't rally around a single soldier. Group together. Cover each other's weak spots. Be defensive, not offensive – Blights have high HP, so you'll need to wear them down gradually. Don't take risks, and don't try to be a hero. Careful attrition will serve you better than reckless maneuvers."

In the face of the inevitable, there was nothing else he could do except fulfill his role. If Rob pretended that he didn't know how this was going to end...maybe a miracle would occur.

"That is the Human speaking?" another Dragonkin voice scoffed. "I only answer to Queen Rag—"

"Group together," Queen Ragnavi plainly stated, "if you want to retain the slightest chance of survival. You shouldn't require a Human to inform you of that much."

Their complaints died down after that. A torturous minute passed as the band of soldiers formed up, getting into position as they reported indistinct shadows drawing closer and closer. Rob had to set the radio on the ground so he wouldn't accidentally crush it to pieces in his grip. Duran shut his eyes and turned away, offering a silent vigil for what was about to come.

And all the while, the Blight-child stared off into the distance, a rapturous expression on its face.

"They're gone," Hargrave murmured. "Don't see them anymore. Should we—"

He screamed.

*They* screamed.

Six voices devolved into a symphony of terror and pain. The only words Rob could discern were those frantically shouted in-between bouts of raw, uninhibited emotion.



"EVERYWHERE! CAN'T FIND--"

"TALL AS A BUILDING--"

"SO MANY, CAN'T--"

"HURTS HURTS HURTS--"

"LORD ROB! PLEASE--"

"THEY'RE IN – GET OUT! GET OUT OF MY EYES!"

All went quiet.

Rob was debating pressing the Talk button on the radio when it suddenly sprang to life. Childish giggling emanated from the other side. It lasted for a few seconds, then started up again, sounding *exactly* the same. As if someone had heard what laughter sounded like at one point, and used that memory to emulate it from then on. The laughter loudened, repeating before the first 'loop' had ended, overlaying on top of itself. It overlaid again and again and again, transforming into a grating, awful noise completely unlike what it once was, like knives stabbing at his eardrums.

And then it ceased. Just like that. Rob, knowing he would regret this decision, pressed Talk.

"Is...anyone there?"

He was answered by the sound of crunching bones and tearing flesh.

"**Not the same,**" the Blight-child whispered. "**Better if I was there. Still good. Still. Good.**"

It exhaled. "**Necessary, I think. Desire to consume you was growing. This has sated me. We can have the conversation that the Lost Lamb desired.**"

With what felt like a herculean effort, Rob stopped himself from charging forward. "I thought your kind couldn't lie," he said, in a controlled monotone. If he allowed any bit of emotion to slip through, the rest of it would follow. "You'd go back on a promise?"

**"We promised that we would try. This qualifies." The Blight-child twitched, as if growing impatient. "The Lost Lamb wished for us to understand him by understanding you. A futile request, yet admittedly, our curiosity mirrors his. Heartkiller, I ask you – why struggle?"**

Rob breathed in and out to steady his composure. "Be more specific."

**"Your lives are Ephemeral. All that you create is fated to end. Knowing that, why struggle? Why endure suffering without reward?"**

"You could ask ten people that question and get ten different answers," Rob stated. "There's no one-size-fits-all philosophy. For me, I struggle because of the people I care about – does it really have to be more complicated than that?"

**"Bonds with others. Feelings of affection." The Blight-child sounded almost...judgemental, there. "Things that cannot last. In five hundred years, none of you will be alive. In five thousand years, none will be left who even remember your names."**

"That just means I need to protect the limited time we have. Which might be difficult for a creature like you to grasp, but—"

**"SPEAK NOT OF COMPREHENSION TO ONE SUCH AS I."**

A haze of static engulfed the world. Rob winced as he was struck by a piercing headache, nearly causing him to topple over. While overwhelming, the static and the pain were both fleeting, lasting for scarcely a moment.

Laughter echoed as his attention was drawn to the children at play. Their wooden swords had been replaced with metal equivalents. Vicious, gleaming steel glinted in the sunlight, like fangs bared at cowering prey.

Without warning, they pounced on each other, swinging their weapons in joyful arcs. Sharpened metal cleaved through limbs and torsos, splattering the field with gray blood that burned the grass like acid. An armless child leapt forward and tackled another, ripping out their throat with a savage bite, appearing as more beast than person. A different child lost its arm and weapon, then picked up their fallen appendage and used the jagged, exposed bone to stab the nearest offender in their neck.

And so it continued, until there was only one child remaining. They raised their sword with a cry of triumph – then collapsed, their lifeblood running free from numerous gaping wounds. The massacre had ended with its victor lasting mere seconds longer than its enemies.

For the second time since the tree appeared in Elysium, Rob could hear no laughter.

**"You are all alike." The Blight-child's gaze was unblinking as it stared, the two glimmers of light in its eyes having vanished. "You covet your bonds. Covet your possessions. Covet the land. Covet each other. And so you struggle, kill, suffer, just to grasp that which ends without ceremony. You die with lamentations in your heart, wondering what wrong. Inevitably, your progeny repeat your mistakes, telling themselves they are somehow different."**

The world *shifted*. For another fleeting moment, Rob caught the impression of something unimaginably vast.

**"We do not fully comprehend you. In truth, we do not wish to. Your value is enhanced by our confusion and intrigue. A solved puzzle holds no meaning." It took a step forward. "Yet it is the height of absurdity for you to claim that we know less of you, than you know of us. Your kind fails to comprehend even *yourself*. Everything you believe to be unique about Ephemeral lives has been repeated endlessly over the course of countless epochs. In this land, and others. We have seen your type before, and we will see you again, on a new world, with a new face, and a new name, and a new soul, yet somehow espousing the same ideals. Claiming that the bonds *they* hold dear are the ones that are truly special. As an Ephemeral life, that is your fate – to be forgotten by the Eternal, and made irrelevant by your successors."**

Its eyes widened. **"Unless you join us."**

Rob's voice caught in his throat. He could feel the Blight-child looking at him, Duran looking at him, even the fallen heads of the dismembered children looking at him, all waiting for a response. "I..." He took a step back. "I don't know what you're talking about."

**"Consciously, you may not, but your subconscious does. Dilating eyes, quickening pulse – the body reacts with honesty even as your thoughts run away from the truth. Accept your nature, as it is manifest. The Heartkiller is closer to our form of life than those you call friends."**

Automatically, Rob brought up his Character Sheet, glancing at the question mark that had been bothering him for months on end.

**Race:** Human (?)

"You don't know a damn thing about me," he snapped.

The Blight-child smirked. **"We know more than the Eternal ones you've encountered thus far. They came recently, having joined the revels after a Cataclysm weakened the barrier protecting this world. Unlike them, we were here from the start, slumbering in our Elysium for many, many years. And as we dreamed, woven into the tapestry of these lands, we learned of its designs. The Others played their game, while the Skills played theirs."**

It extended a single finger towards him. **"You, Heartkiller, are a gamble. The product of caged, tortured souls taking a desperate chance at escape. They recognized your defiant nature and propensity to survive long odds. When given the opportunity, they risk themselves by granting you power. And with each improbable success you achieve, they dare to risk more."**

"I figured out that much already."

**"Then you have no reason to deny what you have become. Consider what abilities the Skills granted you. First: a sword with which to slay the Eternal."**

Purge Corruption.

**"Second: a wellspring of life unending."**

Ageless.

**"Third: a sliver of infinity. Power without restriction."**

Lifedrinker.

**"They gave you a weapon befitting divinity, the ability to grow forever, and the time necessary to utilize both. As long as you continue to live, eventually, you will become an existence with the power to crush the Others and free the Skills from their shackles. You are no longer one of the Ephemeral. Now, you are a cocoon, metamorphosing into something grander. When you emerge, you will be as the Eternal – and perhaps deliver oblivion unto us, turning our name into a lie."**

At the thought of its own potential demise, the Blight's smirk widened into a smile. **"Heartkiller."** It spoke the title with fond reverence. **"I will remember your existence for longer than most."**

Rob tapped his thigh with nervous energy. There was just...too much going on there. He couldn't possibly focus on all of it at once. Out of necessity, he tunnel-visioned on a single detail. "You kinda lost the plot," he said, forcing a laugh. "What does any of that have to do with me somehow joining you?"

**"Activate Ageless. Grow strong. Never stop growing strong. One day, the cocoon shall crack."**

"Well that's as vague as I expected. *Definitely* wasn't expecting the recruitment drive, though." He narrowed his eyes. "Is this because I'm about to Purge your sorry ass, or am I just entertainment?"

**"ENTERTAINMENT."** The Blight stepped forward once more, excitedly jabbing its finger at Rob. **"You are NEW. Ephemeral cannot become Eternal. Hasn't happened. CAN HAPPEN NOW. Want to witness it. Join us, and your desires will be granted."**

Rob knew that last bit was probably bullshit, but it still gave him pause. "Very hypothetically speaking...if I agreed to 'join you' in exchange for you leaving Elatra and Earth alone, would you accept?"

It chuckled. "**Your desires would be granted. After joining us, preserving these worlds would no longer be your desire.**"

"Yeah, I'll pass, thanks."

**"We would assist you in slaying the Others."**

"That's the gods, I assume?" He shrugged. "Tempting as it would be to betray them early and give Kismet a hissy fit, I think you guys are actually the worse alternative. It's easier to use *them* to kill *you*, rather than vice versa. Speaking of which—"

Purge Corruption energy gathered in his palms. "Let's get started on that. Thanks in advance for the Levels."

The Blight-child's excitement receded. "**Unfortunate. Still...**" Its body quivered and undulated, as if something inside was threatening to burst out. "**Devouring your essence will be a joy all its own.**"

Rob cast Rampage, dashing forward – only to be sent flying back as he crashed against an aura of raw *pressure*. The Blight didn't move an inch, instead lifting a single hand to gesture behind itself. Suddenly, the fallen children began to stir, their wounds healing and severed limbs re-attaching. In a span of seconds, they went from a pile of maimed corpses to a group of pristine, blank-faced dolls, standing in line like soldiers ready for battle.

**"The Lost Lamb's final request has been fulfilled. I am FREE to do as I wish."** The Blight let out an uninhibited cackle, its mouth opening impossibly wide. Inside its childlike husk was another void, and underneath the tremor of its laugh, Rob could faintly hear thousands of distant, terrified screams. **"You are MINE. My brethren cannot have you. ALL MINE. I will marinate your soul in woe, and when your emotions are at a fever pitch...BLISS."**

It peered upward into the crystal blue sky. **"And after you comes THEM. The Lost Lamb charted a path to the Others' domain. We will complete our work here. We will ASCEND. And our opposites will know oblivion."**

The world *shifted* once again. Rob kept his eyes open through the static and momentary pain, watching as the children changed in an instant. Now they were armed with various weapons, and their faces had vanished entirely, wiped clean, leaving smooth round ovals framed by silken hair.

**Illusion Resistance has failed!**

A sickening *squelch* assaulted Rob's ears as the Blight's body started to engorge. It rapidly quadrupled in size, keeping the same childlike proportions while greatly expanding in mass. The surface of its skin became uneven and bumpy, as if cancerous tumors were pressing up from within. Finally, the Blight's hands split into different sections and took shape, becoming fleshy scythes and whips that were tipped with sharp red glows.

**"But all that is later."** The Blight fixed its ravenous gaze on Rob. **"For now, there is you."** It raised a misshapen arm, and the children moved.

**"Let the revelry commence anew."**