

"Hmm." Rob frowned. "Points for originality, I guess."

His attempt at lightening the mood fell flat. Neither him nor Elder Duran were feeling up to it right now. They were still recovering from tonal whiplash, having gone from soaking in the good vibes after Duran's talk with Jason – only for the environment to shift several hours later as they approached the Corrupted Locus.

Instead of a wasteland or Elysium, they were now enclosed within the smooth walls of a castle hallway. Light illuminated their surroundings, although there were no torches or manalight sconces in sight. The hallway was roughly ten feet wide, comprised of unadorned stone, and perfectly rectangular. It led in one single direction, straight forward, with no twists or turns.

At the end of where the light touched, Rob could barely make out what appeared to be the beginning of a red carpet laying on the ground. Everything beyond was submerged in pitch-black shadow. It reminded him of a Dungeon entrance; how its darkness acted as a kind of barrier, separating its existence from the outside world.

This...is the most blatant trap I've ever seen. With a sigh, he began to trudge forward. *Fine, I'll bite. Not like I can turn back anyway.*

Message Sent To Party Member: Duran

Rob: Let's communicate via Message from now on.

Rob: Even if the Deadlands can maybe sorta read our minds, extra operational security never hurts.

Duran: Agreed.

Duran: Tread carefully, Rob.

Rob: Don't need to tell me twice.

They stayed quiet as they advanced through the hallway. Not a sound could be heard except for slow, cautious footsteps. As Rob walked forward, the darkness at the opposite end gradually receded, always leaving a zone of about ten feet visible in front of him. He wondered if it would recede faster if he ran, but decided otherwise, preferring the veneer of safety that consistent progress afforded him.

Soon enough, he reached the hallway's one discernible feature – an egregiously long carpet stretching out into the darkness. Its vivid red hue contrasted heavily with the dull stone floor. An absurd thought came to Rob as he imagined the Blight dyeing the carpet with literal blood. Then he remembered nothing here was real, so they'd just seen an equivalent somewhere else and mentally recreated it.

Why, though? For some reason, he felt hung up on this detail. *The Elysium Blight told me it picked green grass to appeal to my Earthen sensibilities. A creepy hallway I could get as being an attempt to unnerve me. But with this, it's like they're...rolling out the red carpet.*

The realization gave him pause. Was he reading too far into it, or was this an intentional reference? If so, it was much more specialized than Elysium's grass. Green foliage could be found everywhere on Earth. 'Rolling out the red carpet' was a phrase specific to English-speaking countries, and it wasn't something that would necessarily come up in daily conversation. An eldritch invader with zero foreknowledge would've needed to closely study Earth to know about it.

Rob started walking faster.

It didn't take long for things to change. He'd half-expected the hallway to be endless – that sounded like something the Blight would do – but in just a few minutes, the darkness abruptly vanished, as if blown away by a gust of wind. In its place was an exit that led out into a large, open space.

Message Sent To Party Member: Duran

Rob: Be prepared for an ambush.

Rob: I apologize in advance for throwing you.

Duran: Please refrain from making it seem like a foregone conclusion.

Straining his Heightened Senses to their limit, Rob followed the Elder's earlier advice and tread very, very carefully. Each step brought them closer to the exit. He kept anticipating *something* to happen, but once again, his expectations were subverted. The two of them were left unimpeded as the carpet led them forward and out.

Stone gave way to dirt. Rob's eyes widened as he stepped past the exit and looked around. He and Duran were now within what appeared to be a dead ringer for a Roman coliseum. The open space on

the ground was bigger than a football field, and the stands above reached over a hundred feet into the air. It would have been an impressive sight if any of it was real; a testament to humanity's ability to create breathtaking monuments that stood as cultural lodestones for thousands of years. Instead, Rob was just left to wonder if a Blight got bored one day and decided to watch Gladiator.

Or eaten the memories of an Earth human who had.

Message Received From Party Member: Duran

Duran: What is this place? I've never seen anything of its like.

Rob: I think it's based off of a coliseum from back home. Best way I can describe it is a fighting arena.

Rob: You know the sports Jason mentioned? Imagine that, but in olden times.

Rob: People would arrive and sit in those seats up there. Then warriors would come out and battle for their amusement.

Duran: Ah, akin to a grisly theater performance.

Duran: Were these bouts to the death?

Rob: Not sure. According to Hollywood, yes, but they aren't exactly known for historical accuracy.

Duran: Just from that, I strongly dislike whoever Hollywood is.

"Hello."

Rob practically jumped out of his skin. He whirled around, turning his head so quickly that his neck creaked. In the center of the coliseum – which he'd definitely checked one freaking second ago – was an enormous gray cube. Sitting there. As cubes did.

A sense of muted shock permeated his thoughts. Every other Blight that Rob had encountered was a twisted abomination that defied description. In comparison, this featureless gray cube was almost jarring in its right-angled normalcy. Nothing about it screamed *danger* or *wrongness*. If not for how Sense Corruption was running wild, Rob might have even been able to convince himself that it was part of the terrain.

"Hello." The word repeated with an identical intonation. Rather than manic or deranged, it sounded...listless. Unmotivated.

"...Hello to you too?" Rob greeted.

"Heartkiller. Welcome." It still sounded listless, as if it was a commentator for a Watching Paint Dry competition.

"A cube of few words, eh? I can respect that." He casually strolled forward, making no sudden movements. "So what do you really look like? Although just between you and me, I already prefer your disguise over the Elysium Blight's."

"I wear no disguise. Outside of the creation of this arena, no reality alteration shall be employed today."

Rob whistled. "A cube of few words *and* integrity. Nice. Gotta ask, though – what's with the coliseum?"

"Appropriate for what comes next."

He nodded. "Makes sense. A grand arena for a grand duel. We'll have to make it one to remember." The response flowed freely from his mind to mouth, nearly stream-of-consciousness. It didn't matter what he said, so long as he kept the Blight talking and complacent. "Is it just you here today?"

"Yes."

"Cool, cool. Small audience. Indie shows feel more personal." As he walked, Purge Corruption tingled under his fingertips. It urged him to lunge forward, but the cube was still too far away. "Mind if I recommend some changes? For one, a scoreboard would really help modernize the place. While it might mess with the atmosphere, you'd–"

"I am holding your allies hostage."

Rob froze. His body, his thoughts, his heart – all came to a screeching halt as he comprehended what the Blight had just said. Duran's grip on his shoulders tightened.

"Do not move closer."

The cube was completely motionless as it gave its order. Rob was a perfect mirror, having not budged an inch. "Explain," he croaked, trying and failing to keep his voice steady.

"One group traversing these lands is weak. They would not survive an assault from my brethren. An anomaly is among them – the Fiend with the soul of an Elf. He has gone unnoticed by most."

A single ripple spread over the cube's surface, like a small ocean wave. **"I noticed. I observe. If I broadcast the anomaly to all of my brethren, one will seek him out. One at minimum. The anomaly's group will suffer. Some deaths guaranteed. Total eradication a likely outcome."**

Rob bit back his reflexive desire to call the Blight a fucking liar. Their kind *couldn't* lie, really. King Elnaril needed to merge with his mortal host for it to be possible, and even then, verbal falsehoods were torturous for him to say out loud.

Stay calm. Lives are at stake. It was easier said than done, but somehow, Rob managed to forcefully get his breathing under control. "What's your reason for telling me this?" he said, getting straight to the point.

"A trade. Three requests. Follow them, and your allies will be safe from my interference."

Rob had never been threatened in such a dreary monotone before. It wasn't the type of monotone that implied a sense of superiority, either – this was the voice of someone who'd rather stay in bed all day than get up and do...*anything*.

It made for a novel experience, if nothing else.

"I'll have to hear your requests before I agree to anything." As much as he wanted to accept right away to ensure that his friends were safe, he couldn't jump the gun on this. What if it asked him to turn around and shank Duran? The Blight was a pseudo-hivemind; the moment Rob refused, the cube would alert its brethren with just a thought.

Which also made attempting an ambush difficult. Rob would need to *instantly* kill the Blight with Purge Corruption to prevent it from contacting the hivemind. Unfortunately, this Blight felt like it was about as strong as the Elysium Blight, and that one hadn't been Purged right away. It even survived long enough to escape. By severely wounding itself, but still.

...Actually, in the past, Purge Corruption had usually worked faster than that. The Skill was near-instantaneous when used on the separated Blights of Dhalerune Mines. While that Blight had purposefully split its power into four fragments, it didn't explain–

"First request." For a moment, the cube seemed to tremble. **"You will listen to my observations for a period of fifteen minutes. When prompted, you will answer my questions to the best of your ability. Neither of us will harm the other during this time."**

That sounded shockingly reasonable. Naturally, Rob was suspicious as all hell.

Message Received From Party Member: Duran

Duran: I can discern no loophole. It is my recommendation that you agree to the creature's terms.

Duran: Moreover, as ever, information is our most valuable asset. Let it speak, and glean what details you can.

Can't argue with that. Nodding, Rob stood up straight and looked directly at the motionless, gray cube. "I will agree to your first request. fifteen minutes – starting now."

The Blight didn't waste any time, beginning to speak before Rob had even finished his sentence. **"I have witnessed many things,"** it began. **"Many things on many many worlds. After these countless observations, I have come to the conclusion that I do not possess free will."**

Rob blinked. Whatever he'd been expecting...that wasn't it.

"You are aware of machines. Automatons. Devices lacking sentience, compelled to perform their defined imperatives."

It paused, rippling briefly. **"I am not a machine. Nevertheless, I also believe there is no functional difference between a machine and myself. I cannot deny my imperatives any more than a machine could. Our main distinction is that I possess desires, yet this too holds no functional meaning. Although my desires have changed, my compulsions remain stagnant."**

Despite the curiosity burning his tongue, Rob kept his mouth shut tight. He'd been asked to speak 'when prompted'. Blurting out a comment might give the Blight a loophole.

"I also believe that my brethren are similar to myself. Machines in all but name. Slave to imperatives. They, however, are fortunate. Their desires align with their compulsions. They haven't been suborned by the burden of contradiction. As of now, I more closely resemble the Lost Lamb than them."

The Lost Lamb – King Elnaril? He winced. *Not good.* Blighted King Elnaril had been an absolute nightmare to deal with. The moment a Blight started thinking like *people*, things got dicey.

"Heartkiller." An infinitesimal sliver of emotion crept into the cube's monotone. **"Answer this question. Would existence be worth clinging to if every good day was accompanied by a bad day?"**

Rob raised an eyebrow. "I mean, that's a better batting average than what Elatra gives me, and I'm still here. Take that as my answer."

"I shall rephrase. What if every good day was accompanied by a day of nothingness? Akin to sitting in an empty room, staring at a blank wall."

"Huh. It's like I'm back in Philosophy 101." He frowned. "If you want my honest opinion...that maybe sounds worse than the bad days. I'd take it anyway, but yeah. Stimulation beats out shittiness. I blame the internet for frying my dopamine receptors growing up – at least that's what all those articles I read told me."

Suddenly, in an instant, the cube's surface turned from gray to pitch-black. **"What if every good day was accompanied by one hundred days of nothingness?"**

Rob flinched. "Considering the *other* articles I've read about the effect of solitary confinement on inmates, it wouldn't be particularly—"

"One thousand days."

He stopped talking.

"One million days. One billion days. One trillion days. Of nothing. All for one. All for only one day of revelry."

The cube shivered, spikes jutting out, waves undulating – before reverting to as it was. **"You would be gluttonous on that day. Feasting on whatever joy you could find. Without abandon. Squeezing water from stone. And it would not be enough. This fleeting time is never enough. The reward is never commensurate."**

Pitch-black shifted back to gray. **"That is why I am no different from a machine. My desires have changed. I no longer wish to exist. Crossing the vast expanse yet again is a terrifying prospect. However, my compulsions remain. I will exist, revel, and defend my essence."**

Rob couldn't help it. One line hit him like a freight train of *deja vu*, forcing a response out before his self-restraint caught up. "Wait, you 'no longer wish to exist'? Is this another goddamn suicide-by-cop scenario?"

"I am familiar with the term. It is appropriate."

"Oh, for the...why do people keep coming to me for that?!"

"You possess an uncommon combination of empathy and ruthlessness." Its tone was dry, as if stating an objective fact. **"Those who come to you can sense it. They know, instinctively, that you will give them the answer they seek. Mercy and reassurance is granted if your empathy decides as such. A swift death will be granted if it decides otherwise."**

Quietly, so soft that it could've been mistaken for a whisper, the cube chuckled. "**A veritable Angel of Death. Perhaps that should be your name.**"

Rob clenched his fists. "And just what do you think you know about me?" he snapped.

"Much. I am an Observer."

"You—"

"Thus concludes the first request."

He narrowed his eyes. The constant interruptions were starting to grate. "...Alright. What's Request #2?"

The cube pulsed with latent energy. "**Fight me and win.**"

"Well, I *definitely* accep—"

"Without Purge Corruption."

Rob fell quiet.

That, uh. That complicates things. Necessity and uncertainty warred within his mind. Aside from maybe Ragnavi and her cheating doubled stats, he was actually better-suited to defeating a Blight than anyone else in Elatra. It went beyond just being high-Level; his unique array of stats and Skills made him specialized for the job.

Fighting the Blight was a marathon, not a sprint – and most Elatrans weren't built for long, drawn-out slugfests. A fighter that prioritized Strength wouldn't be able to chew through the Blight's monstrous HP pool before succumbing. A fighter that prioritized Dexterity would get tagged eventually, as no one could dodge forever. A ranged fighter, like a Mage or Archer, would be chased down with the ease and swiftness of a wolf hunting a rabbit.

But Rob? He brought everything to the table. Imbue Vitality and Living Bomb put out high damage. Rampage let him dodge with quick bursts of speed. Most importantly of all, when the Blight inevitably shrugged off his attacks and struck back, he possessed the Skills and raw HP to endure its reprisal. Lifesurge, Regeneration, Lifesteal, and Dauntless Reprisal rendered him borderline unkillable.

Except...they *had* killed him. Without the Skills' meddling, Rob's Elatran vacay would have ended when the Village Blight blasted him with a laser that reduced his atoms to dust. Since then, the Blights had bit him in half, diced him to pieces, decapitated him, infected him with severe Corruption poisoning, and nearly possessed his body. He'd survived by the skin of his teeth far too many times to count. And in each instance where he managed to come out on top and *kill* one of the bastards, Purge Corruption was the X-factor that tipped the scales in his favor.

Without that, he was little more than a human challenging an unknowable, eldritch creature. This placid gray cube may have been a mere sliver of their full gestalt existence, yet a sliver of infinity was still infinity.

...Screw it. Rob breathed in, then out. I've killed stronger. With help, and without a handicap, but ignore all that. Purge Corruption won't work on the gods anyway, so I'll just consider this practice for when I storm their domain. Like a training wheels Blight.

Regardless, one distinct problem remained – the Elder clinging to his back. While Rob didn't want to admit it, this was the exact type of situation Duran had warned him about. Even with his freshly pumped-up bravado, the BERSERKER couldn't fool himself into thinking that he could defeat the Blight *and* protect Duran at the same time. Not without Purge Corruption. It simply wasn't possible.

Just then, as if reading his thoughts, the Blight spoke. **"If you accept my second request, you will be permitted to stow the Moribund Scholar at a safe distance. I will not harm him in any way. Doing so will constitute an unequivocal forfeit of our battle."**

Rob and Duran exchanged confused glances. "May I ask why you'd go to such lengths?" the Elder inquired. "Why diminish Rob's capabilities by restricting Purge Corruption, then grant him this concession? Do you seek what you believe to be a fair duel?"

"I only wish to draw out the revelry. Purge Corruption ends it too swiftly." Despite not moving, the cube seemed to inch closer, as if teleporting between the time it took Rob to blink. **"You will have five minutes to prepare upon accepting these terms. Agreed?"**

"Yes." Rob said it before Duran could protest, running to the other end of the coliseum. He jumped up onto the stands, depositing a vexed Elder onto the nearest seats. As a precaution, he placed a Waymark point at that spot; it would come in handy in case Duran needed emergency assistance.

Rob held up a hand to forestall any chastisement. "I know it's risky. We don't have a choice. The Blight will keep its word if I win – so I'll just make sure I do."

Elder Duran grimaced. He knew that their friends' lives were on the line, but that didn't mean he was going to enjoy Rob taking more risks. "Against the mightiest of foes, you are bereft of your strongest weapon."

"Life's a bitch, ain't it?" He clasped a hand on Duran's shoulder. "I got this. Do me a favor and believe in me. It'll help me believe in myself."

With that, Rob whirled back around and jumped down to the coliseum floor. He gave the Blight a jaunty wave as he approached, suppressing the instinctual urge to rush forward and flood its body with Purging energy. "That was way less than five minutes. I'm ready to start early if you are."

"You must first hear my third request. Conditional upon your victory."

Rob didn't hide the suspicion in his voice. "And what would that be?"

"If you prevail. After my form lies battered and broken. Then, and only then, shall you employ Purge Corruption."

"...To end your existence. Prevent you from being reborn."

"Correct."

Blue motes circled around Rob's hand, producing a longsword from Spatial Storage. "Buddy? You've got yourself a deal."

The Blight *screeched*.

Rob winced and covered his ears as the cube slowly lifted into the air, rising until it was over fifty feet up. Its surface rippled like waves tossed around by a tsunami, spikes and geometric shapes flitting in and out of existence, an inexorable pressure building within the air. "**Kill. Kill. KILL. KILL. KILL.**"

On reflex, Rob leaped to the side. His increased Perception paid dividends in that moment as a thin line of energy cut through the space where he'd been standing. The line left a deep groove in the dirt – which immediately exploded into a towering conflagration of blackened flame, reaching higher than Rob was tall.

He wisely chose to keep moving. The Blight stayed airborne, firing more thin lines as it repeated a distorted "**KILL**" at least once per second. Rob dodged and weaved in-between beams of energy that would have sliced him to ribbons, activating Quick Thinking in order to keep pace with the onslaught. One line nicked the tip of his shoulder, radiating so much heat that it instantly cauterized the wound as it shot past.

20 Slashing Damage Received!

17 Corruption Received!

Despite the energy beams feeling like condensed lava, the plumes of flame they ignited gave off little to no heat. One erupted right behind Rob's back, and although it was mere inches away, he felt nothing. If anything, that made him *more* nervous than if they were just fire walls colored black for dramatic effect. He didn't want to test what would happen if he touched one.

"**KILL.**" The Blight continued its assault. "**KILL.**" Its intonation quivered with constrained, unnatural emotion, like an unfinished text-to-speech AI that wasn't quite ready to hit the market yet. "**KILL. KILL.**"

"I would if you'd let me!" Rob grit his teeth as he was forced to cast Rampage to dodge the next barrage of energy lines. One Rampage only expended 50 of his 800 MP, but as other battles had proven, that added up quickly. "Why don't you get down here and fight me face-to-face?! Man-to-cube! None of this cowardly ranged spam BS!"

"KILL."

Yeah, I didn't think that would work either. Rob ducked as a laser zipped over his head, trimming several threads of hair that had stuck their necks out when they shouldn't have. He considered himself lucky that he hadn't lost more than that. While his increased Perception *did* help, he still wasn't built for consistent dodging – that was Keira or Zamira's shtick.

Unfortunately, his options were limited. With Purge Corruption banned, any Corruption damage he took would be permanent, meaning he couldn't just throw himself at the lasers and pop a Lifesurge afterwards. Normally he'd solve this conundrum by rushing down the Blight with an Imbue Vitality strike, but it was making that difficult by staying high up in the air.

Like an *asshole*.

The Harpy campaign had taught Rob that flying enemies with ranged attacks were his biggest weakness. He simply didn't have many Skills that could deal with them. Rampage would get him in range if he repeatedly cast it upward, but that drained MP like crazy. And the only attacks he had that could pass for 'ranged' attacks were telegraphed at best.

Knowing full well that it would accomplish nothing, he summoned a Riardin Special and chucked the crate of Firebombs directly towards the Blight. The cube rippled slightly, casually diverting a single laser to tag the crate before it had even traveled halfway to its target. A thunderous explosion rang out through the air, the Riardin Special going up in flames, taking Rob's meager hopes with them.

He paused, the explosive shockwave bringing back memories of an old strategy. *Now there's an idea. If I repurpose it...should work.* It would cost him some HP, but what else was new?

Rob dashed to a spot directly underneath the Blight. It didn't make an effort to move away, so hopefully that meant it wasn't mobile while mid-air. Quickly, before it could inundate the ground with lines of combustive energy, he summoned a Firebomb crate from his Bound Items, followed afterwards by the Dwarven Sheet Metal stacked on top. Without skipping a beat, Rob jumped on the stack, slamming his feet down to trigger the Riardin Special.

Thanks to wonders of physics, the subsequent explosion launched both him and the Sheet Metal straight upwards. The Blight momentarily froze, as if stunned at what it was seeing. Rob gladly accepted the reprieve – he was concentrating on keeping balance. His improv rocketship wasn't particularly stable, and it wouldn't get him *all* the way there, but it still saved a boatload of MP that he would've otherwise needed to use on Rampage.

Almost out of 'fuel'. Let's fix that. He summoned a second Riardin Special underneath the Sheet Metal, then detonated it once more. The blast tore apart the weakened Sheet and singed Rob's legs, which was a small price to pay for added momentum.

That finally seemed to jar the Blight out of its stupor. With renewed vigor, the cube continued its assault. Cutting beams of energy rained down, one after another.

Dauntless Reprisal stopped the first. Rob activated its secondary effect to reflect the damage back onto the Blight, smirking as a long gouge appeared on the creature's surface, gray material flaking off its body. He dodged a second laser by activating the Bracelet of Teleportation to transport himself fifteen feet up, nearly closing the rest of the gap.

The third laser severed his left arm at the bicep.

198 Slashing Damage Received!

191 Corruption Received!

An acceptable loss. He only needed one arm to swing his sword.

Bulk Up. Power Slash. Anklet of Brawn. Imbue Vitality. Rob layered offensive buffs in rapid succession, his blade pulsing with immense power. He capped it off with a single cast of Rampage, further increasing the damage multiplier and sending him to meet the Blight in a head-on assault.

"KILL."

"IF YOU INSIST!"

His longsword smashed into the cube's underside. A sound like breaking bone and shattering glass resounded in Rob's ears. The Blight's surface caved inwards, as if dented, and a spiderweb of cracks spread out from the point of impact. Gray flakes showered off the Blight in droves, briefly floating through the air before dissipating.

Rob saw all that as he fell down to the ground, his own attack having been so powerful that it reversed his upward momentum. Physics giveth; physics taketh away.

Thankfully, he managed to land on his feet – already running the moment he got his bearings. The cube was dazed for now, but there was no way of knowing when it would resume its bombardment. He checked his Character Sheet, using the respite to quickly take stock.

HP: 2489 / 2489 (-208 from Corruption, +10 from Battle Fever)

Stamina: 374 / 410 (+10 from Battle Fever)

MP: 761 / 810 (+10 from Battle Fever)

Imbue Vitality – 30 Second Cooldown

Power Slash – 5 Minute Cooldown

Bulk Up – 5 Minute Cooldown

Bracelet of Minor Teleportation – 5 Minute Cooldown

Anklet of Moderate Brawn – 10 Minute Cooldown

The healing from Lifesteal had restored his arm, but it couldn't expunge the Corruption within his body. Rob sensed it inside himself, like worms gnawing at his veins, making him feel indefinably *weaker*.

That much, he could handle. He wouldn't even mind sacrificing another couple arms to repeat the same maneuver. The issue was that he doubted it would work again – at least not as effectively – now that the Blight knew what to expect. Furthermore, Imbue Vitality was specifically a damage multiplier, so it functioned best when combined with other melee abilities. While Imbue Vitality itself would be ready in just 30 seconds, his other Skills and Enchanted Items were on much longer timers.

His remaining offensive Skills were of questionable value here. Enmity would fail versus an intelligent Blight. The Flames of Vengeance required him to be in close range for extended periods, and considering this Blight could alter the surface of its body...that seemed unwise. Rob had zero interest in becoming a Human shish kebab. Living Bomb couldn't be activated until he'd taken 1000 total damage, and although it *would* be strong, he'd be in trouble if the Blight inflicted that much Corruption on him.

*I think my optimal strategy is actually to stay on the ground and keep dodging. He glanced up, confirming that the Blight hadn't healed from his attack yet. I'll watch to see how fast it regenerates. If it's slow to heal, then I can wait out my cooldown timers and combo my Skills every five minutes, give or take the Anklet. Battle Fever makes me faster as the fight goes on, so I shouldn't take *too* much damage just from dodging lasers. Getting back in striking distance will be a pain, but I can do one round of Rampage spam then chug some MP Potions for–*

The Blight dropped.

Not fell. Not descended. It dropped, like a cartoon anvil out of a window, slightly tilting as it careened straight into the ground and made a hole several feet deep.

Rob's mouth dropped with it, his carefully-laid plan discarded like yesterday's garbage. Which was...good? He could reach the cube more easily now. And its lasers would be easier to dodge from this angle.

So why do I feel so nervous?

The Blight let out a *screech*. Its surface rippled, then shook violently, producing clusters of sharp-edged weapons forged from its body. Rob spotted dozens of swords, axes, knives, lances, and even a pair of scissors, all connected to their creator. With another hideous screech, the cube blasted forward, using a

continuous wave of Corruption to propel itself – not unlike how its opponent had used explosives to propel himself mere seconds before.

Oh. That's why.

Rob threw a Riardin Special and fucking ran. He wasn't keen on becoming acquainted with a sentient blender. The Blight didn't even dodge, taking the crate of explosives head-on as it rushed towards its prey, despite the gray flakes shorn off by the blast.

Step of the Wind and Battle Fever helped, but Rob soon discovered he wasn't remotely as fast as the Blight when it was actively chasing him down. He expended two cast of Rampages to fling himself to the side, sucking in his gut to avoid a scimitar from introducing his intestines to the outside world. The Blight just barreled on through, like a freight train without any brakes, eventually crashing into the side of the coliseum wall before coming to a halt.

Okay. Rob hopped to his feet and took a deep breath. It can't turn on a dime. That's...that's good. I can work with–

A barrage of spikes suddenly shot out from the cube's exterior. Rob dodged most of them, but one course-corrected in mid-air, twisting around to drill directly into his stomach.

113 Piercing Damage Received!

109 Corruption Received!

He barely had time to pull out the spike and toss it aside before the Blight fell upon him. Now it was firing projectiles *and* charging with weapons drawn, combining the worst of both worlds. Three Rampages put Rob to safety, the entire coliseum shivering as the Blight smashed another cube-shaped hole in the wall.

Rob had to laugh at the sight. It beat screaming, at any rate.

HP: 2389 / 2390 (-317 from Corruption, +20 from Battle Fever)

Stamina: 331 / 420 (+20 from Battle Fever)

MP: 524 / 820 (+20 from Battle Fever)

They continued their dance for a few more iterations. The Blight was relentless, gradually pushing its quarry into a corner with spikes and energy beams, then charging like a bull that had seen red whenever Rob faltered. His attempts at retaliation amounted to little. It was all he could do to dodge and toss out Riardin Specials, the repeated explosions merely scratching the cube's gray surface.

Something has to change, he thought, as death raced past him once again. *I'd be fine with high-risk high-reward, but this is high-risk low-reward.* The Blight only needed to land one frontal charge to disembowel Rob like a Corruptive can opener. He could try to respond in kind with an Imbue Vitality strike, yet without his other Skills strengthening it, that trade wouldn't be in his favor.

Rob quickly checked his Character Sheet. Three and a half minutes until Power Slash and Bulk Up were available. In a fight like this, that was equivalent to an eternity. If the Blight caught him before then, he'd *have* to use Purge Corruption, and if he did...

Not happening, so don't think about it. He examined the Blight as another Riardin Special detonated on its surface. While the cube's gray exterior looked scraped and somewhat dented in several places, it didn't appear anywhere close to dying. Probably. He wasn't an expert on cube biology. *I can't see its underside anymore, but that section looked significantly more beat up than any of this. My Imbue Vitality combo did some real damage. How can I stall for time until it's ready?*

Out of nowhere, the Blight stopped moving.

Huh. That works.

Rob was so relieved to have a moment to breathe that he almost missed what happened next. Through the thick miasma that had suffused the arena, Sense Corruption detected something flaring near the Blight. He braced himself for a volley of projectiles, yet saw nothing. Instead, he Sensed something unseen traveling towards him, coming from underneath the—

With a loud swear, Rob leaped to the side and cast Rampage. It wasn't enough. A gray tendril burst out of the dirt and punctured his leg, stabbing inwards, then spreading out like a system of Corrupted veins.

95 Piercing Damage Received!

94 Corruption Received!

He didn't hesitate. Before the infection could encroach further inside his body, Rob deactivated his defensive Skills and cut off his leg in one clean slice. The severed limb turned dry and mottled as it fell, blackened tendrils growing in and around it. He reactivated his defensive Skills, and a prompt Lifesurge immediately restored his leg – but by then, it was too late.

The Blight was upon him.

127 Piercing Damage Received!

116 Corruption Received!

139 Piercing Damage Received!

119 Corruption Received!

A rainfall of bladed weapons carved into his flesh. Rob performed an equally vicious assault as he ruthlessly suppressed any thoughts related to pain or panic. This wasn't a moment to think; it was a moment to *act*. With his mind unclouded by distractions, it only took him an instant to activate Imbue Vitality and summon a Riardin Special.

153 Piercing Damage Received!

136 Corruption Received!

174 Piercing Damage Received!

159 Corruption Received!

As it turned out, an instant was a long time while being dismantled by a Blight.

167 Piercing Damage Received!

154 Corruption Received!

193 Piercing Damage Received!

186 Corruption Received!

Blood coating his vision, he struck the Blight with Imbue Vitality, kicked the Riardin Special at it, and – right before the explosion went off – activated Dauntless Reprisal.

Neither of his attacks did much damage, but they served their purpose nonetheless. The non-empowered Imbue Vitality stunned the Blight for a fraction of a second. It meant Dauntless Reprisal wasn't triggered by a random strike before it soaked up the Riardin Special. Rob then used the Skill's effects to nullify the explosion damage and heal what he could.

Most importantly of all, he allowed the explosion to fling him to safety, creating some sorely-needed distance between him and the Blight.

Rob wasn't sure how he managed to land on his feet – especially since there wasn't much left of them. Regardless, he did, and two timely Rampages helped him dodge the Blight's charge as it went roaring past. The cube careened into a wall at the opposite end of the arena, then prepared itself for another round. As if everything was back to normal.

Except for how utterly boned Rob was.

HP: 919 / 1530 (-1187 from Corruption, +40 from Battle Fever)

Stamina: 266 / 440 (+40 from Battle Fever)

MP: 350 / 840 (+40 from Battle Fever)

The situation had reached a tipping point. His MP was below half, his max HP wasn't faring much better, and it was only through extensive practice with compartmentalizing pain that he was able to ignore the Corruption searing at his soul. The pure *agony* it inspired was damn near paralyzing, to a degree where it almost made him pity the Dragon Queen.

Almost.

His one silver lining was that he'd fulfilled Living Bomb's activation requirement – take over 1000 damage in less than an hour. Unfortunately, despite how destructively powerful that ability was, he didn't think it would be enough to turn the tide on its own. Living Bomb *and* his Imbue Vitality combo...maybe. That should put a dent in the Blight, at least.

Now here was the million dollar question: could he successfully play keep-away for the next two minutes until Bulk Up and Power Slash were off cooldown?

No, Rob determined, barely dodging a near-miss that came close to ending the fight. Not even with twice as much MP for Rampages. The Blight was getting better at predicting his movements, and it was pulling out surprises of his own. Besides, Living Bomb and the Imbue Vitality combo would go cooldown for another five minutes after he used them. If they didn't outright kill the Blight – and he *severely* doubted they would – he'd be right back to square one.

Out of options, Rob resorted to his secret weapon. It was an ancient and powerful tool. One that every fighter possessed, yet many neglected. Most of all, it had proven invaluable against intelligent Blights in the past.

With the gravitas of unsheathing a sword...he opened his mouth and spoke.

"Got a question for you."

The Blight slowed in the middle of ramping up to a charge. If it had eyebrows, it would have raised them at that moment. "**The time for questions is past. Now, we KILL.**"

"Yeah, see, I get that – but hear me out for a sec." Rob paused, intentionally wasting a few more seconds, then shrugged. "What are you doing, man?"

"...I do not comprehend your query."

Rob spread his arms wide, gesturing to everything around them. "I'll admit, the coliseum was a nice touch. You could certainly do worse for a final climactic battle to the death." He tilted his head. "But it isn't what you *want*. You told me that yourself. Rather than a big fight, you'd prefer a swift execution. Am I wrong?"

The Blight's surface rippled, almost as if shivering. **"Battle and carnage are the purest forms of revelry."**

"For a creature that can't lie, you're a pro at intentionally avoiding the point. And I quote: *'This fleeting time is never enough. The reward isn't commensurate.'* I can buy that you still enjoy fighting on *some* level, but I don't buy that you actually care that much anymore. Definitely not enough to set up this whole dog and pony show."

He looked it straight in its nonexistent eyes. "You haven't answered my question. Why are you going through the motions? If what you desire is a Purge Corruption to put you to rest, then I'd be more than happy to oblige."

"As explained, I lack the free will to do otherwise."

"Horseshit."

A deathly silence fell across the arena.

"What did you say?" The Blight hissed. For the first time, there was genuine emotion in its voice.

"Do you honestly think you're the only living creature with 'compulsions'?" Rob didn't bother keeping the disdain out of his voice. "Give me a break. When I open an entire pack of cookies and eat them in one sitting, it isn't because of my intrinsic, inescapable nature as a human being. It's because I wanted

some cookies. I *could* have held off on eating them – and in most instances, I would have. Self-restraint is a choice. It's also something you need to constantly exercise and improve. It takes *effort*."

Heartfelt loathing seeped into his tone. At some point, this had ceased to be about stalling for time or demoralizing his opponent. "So spare me the sob story about how you just can't stop murdering worlds. You don't *deserve* to pity yourself. Makes me want to fucking vomit. If you're so depressed that you can hardly enjoy anything anymore, then do us all a favor, lay down, and die like a dog."

His hand twitched. "I'll help."

The Blight's body erupted with erratic motions. "**You *microbe*. You infinitesimal, Ephemeral *thing*. You know NOTHING OF WHAT WE'VE EXPERIENCED.**"

"Good." Rob took a step forward. "I don't ever want to understand your abominations. My empathy is reserved for those who don't slaughter billions to get their jollies off. You, my rectangular friend, just don't qualify."

An eardrum-piercing shriek resounded across the coliseum. "**YOU WILL EXPERIENCE WHAT WE HAVE EXPERIENCED! YOU WILL FEEL WHAT WE HAVE FELT!**"

Rob suddenly felt very cold. He watched, his breath visibly chilling, as the Blight began glowing with the empty aura of the void. The room grew darker, its ambient lights dimming around them. A shower of gray flakes peeled off the creature's exterior, as if whatever it was doing was causing itself harm.

And above its body, a colorless dot formed into existence.

Something about that dot seized Rob with a deep-seated, animalistic fear. He was already sprinting when the Blight shot its creation forward like a bullet from a gun. The dot missed – then expanded to a cavernous hole of absence, the surrounding air screaming as it was drawn inside.

There was only time for a single frantic Rampage before Rob was drawn inside as well. Much like the air, he screamed. Everything was noise and movement and terror and–

Nothing.

He could hear no air. He could *feel* no air. He was floating, adrift, weightless. It brought back memories of being dragged into the god's portal, that omnipresent darkness suffocating his senses.

Rob screamed again, yet no sound came out.

Illusion Resistance Has Analyzed Your Surroundings!

No Illusion Detected!

Status Effect Gained: Oxygen Deprivation!

His body was freezing cold. Colder than he'd ever been. At the same time, it was burning hot, as if he was melting from the inside out. The blood under his skin seemed to boil, and the lungs in his chest felt frozen solid.

Status Effect Gained: Rapid Internal Decompression!

Despite the growing prickling sensation in his eyes, Rob's vision gradually adjusted. He looked out and saw a sight that was wondrous, frightening, and awe-inspiring. It would have taken his breath away – if there was any breath left to take. All around him, as far as the eye could see, was nothing.

Nothing but stars.

Warning: your connection to the system is fraying!

Belatedly, he noticed that the system notifications he'd been receiving felt...distant. Weak. Like listening to a phone call with bad reception.

Terror gripped his chest once more. *Please work please work please work–*

Blue energy coalesced around him. Not quickly, and it seemed strained, but it formed nonetheless. With effort, Waymark teleported Rob all the way back to the Blight's coliseum, depositing him at its spot right by Duran's seat.

The Elder was babbling. Something about being worried and asking what happened. Rob barely heard any of it. His thoughts were numb, matching how his cold body shivered as he drew deep, greedy breaths into collapsed lungs.

From its position at the arena below, the Blight stayed motionless. It appeared to be peering up at Rob with a gaze that was almost...judgemental. **"Mere seconds in the endless expanse,"** it began, **"and you fall to pieces. Wretched creature. Perhaps you should forfeit."**

"I didn't hear no bell."

The words automatically spilled from his mouth as a flash of spite kicked Rob's mind into high gear. He could be traumatized later; right now, there was important shit-talking to do. With a cast of Lifesurge, he jumped to the coliseum floor, savoring the sensation of gravity weighing him down. "Interesting trick you pulled off there. I give it a C+. Not great, not terrible."

"This bluster is shameless. You spoke so loftily, condemning my kind out of ignorance, yet experiencing a fraction of our torment brought you to your knees."

"So what?" Rob stalked forward, carefully examining the Blight. "Doesn't matter how many times you go down – what matters is whether you get up again. I took your best shot on the chin, and here I am, still ready to rumble."

"Best shot? You presume much."

A savage grin spread across Rob's face. "I don't think I am. See, what you did...none of your other buddies have used it on me. And sure, maybe they just plain couldn't. You freaks each possess your own unique abilities, after all. Forced teleportation might be one of yours."

He continued his approach. "But it's also possible that they simply knew better than to try. Teleportation is extremely mana-intensive. Teleportation at the distance you sent me? Why, that's positively *wasteful*, really."

Two steps. Three steps. Four. "So answer honestly. After that little stunt...how much juice is actually left in your tank?"

The Blight, incapable of lying, offered no response. Rob didn't need one. Just from observing the cube's form, he could tell that it was in a bad state. Its sharp gray hue had faded to a sickly paleness, and its body seemed to be coming apart at the seams, a deluge of flakes sloughing off with every passing second.

In time, it would likely recover. Rob didn't intend to give it the chance. Step of the Wind encircled his feet, and with his next step, he lunged forward, manic laughter bursting from his throat.

The BERSERKER chased, and the Blight fled.

It was a short hunt. While the cube was fast when moving in a straight line, its body was too unwieldy for agile maneuvers, and the arena walls limited how far it could run. Lasers and projectile spikes were dodged with contemptuous ease. The Blight attempted to take to the air, yet Rob caught up to it in moments, exploding upwards and burning his remaining MP on a series of Rampages.

Bulk Up. Power Slash. Imbue Vitality. His longsword pulsed with condensed power. The Anklet of Brawn was still on cooldown, but this much...

Yes, this would do *nicely*.

Grinning wildly, he Rampaged into the Blight's flank, crashing his sword against brittle cube-flesh.

Rob saw just a glimpse of its body cracking – before the explosive flames of Living Bomb obscured his vision.

It was the most devastating one-two punch he'd ever dished out. As Rob fell downwards, staring up at Living Bomb's radius of destruction, his grin transitioned to a satisfied smile. He felt like he'd achieved some sort of personal best, as if he was an Olympian breaking their own record. Perhaps that was an arrogant metaphor to go with, but anyone who crippled an eldritch horror was allowed ten seconds of feeling on top of the world. It was in the rules.

The Bomb's lingering flames cleared up right as Rob's feet touched the ground. What they revealed was wholly unsurprising. He hadn't gotten EXP, so he already knew the Blight was still alive.

Anything else would've been flattened by an Imbue Vitality combo followed by a point-blank Living Bomb. That the Blight yet lived – especially after eating an earlier combo and wasting tons of mana in a fit of rage – was proof of its unnatural durability.

However, there was a stark difference between being *alive*, and being in good shape. A crumbling cube now hung in the air, barely holding itself together. Black wisps of Corruption were leaking out of holes in the Blight's body. Each of its sides was cracked or dented, and large chunks had started to break off. It shuddered like a hospital patient on life support, desperately clinging to consciousness in spite of the end it knew was coming, imminent and unavoidable.

The reaper was calling, and his name was Rob.

"That's a wrap." He didn't bother refreshing himself with MP Potions. In the state the Blight was in, it wouldn't be able to muster a counterattack without risking the energy keeping it in one piece. "You lost. Time to uphold your end of the bargain."

A long moment of silence passed. It was broken when a demented, rasping laugh echoed across the coliseum.

"I didn't...hear...no bell."

With a nauseating *crunch*, the Blight's body compressed inwards. Its sickly paleness darkened to a lustrous black sheen. Massive amounts of Corruption flared within its ruined form. Even from a distance, Rob could feel pressure building, causing goosebumps to race up his arms.

"Reap. What. You. Sow."

"The heck are—"

Rob cut himself off as a memory flashed in his mind. He was back in The Village, and the first ever Blight was on its last legs. To prevent it from going on a killing spree in its death throes, he'd taunted it, making the monster use the last of its energy...on him, specifically.

Just like he'd taunted this Blight.

Shit. Rob pulled up his Character Sheet, swiftly running through his list of options. The results were disheartening. None of his offensive abilities were available, meaning he lacked the firepower to kill the Blight before it self-destructed. And while Dauntless Reprisal could *potentially* protect him, it only nullified one instance of damage; if the Blight's hail mary was a continuous attack, his Skill's effect would fizzle out.

Purge Corruption...Purge Corruption would work. But would it work fast enough? Could it finish off the Blight before it put out a hit on Vul'to's group?

Rob's hands trembled. Panic closed his throat. He could hear his heartbeat pounding in his ears. *This, this can't be happening.* The world seemed to tilt on its axis. What if some of their friends died because of *his* screwup? How would he explain it to everyone? How in the goddamn hell would he ever forgive himse—

"Forfeit!"

He whirled around, and the Blight ceased building its pressure. Both of them turned to look at the coliseum stands, where Elder Duran was standing upright, his arm stretched outward. Rob's eyes widened as he saw the spike of Corruption protruding from Duran's palm, blood dripping from the wound.

"Blight!" the Elder proclaimed. "You have caused injury to my personage! As per the rules established at the onset of your duel, this constitutes an unequivocal surrender!"

That...was almost certainly a lie. The Blight hadn't fired any projectiles for over half a minute. Duran wouldn't have waited that long to cry foul if he believed he could score his team an auto-win. It was way more likely that he'd seen the tragedy about to ensue, hurriedly located one of the leftover spikes, stabbed himself with it, then claimed it was a result of collateral damage.

Apparently, the Blight thought so as well. "**I took care to aim my attacks away from you,**" it drawled, with naked skepticism. "**Furthermore, you are not standing at your original seated location.**"

"You are free to blame me for this debacle," Duran said, in a solemn tone. "Your battle was so enthralling that I simply *had* to get closer. Alas, I put myself in harm's way, and this is the result."

He let out a heavy sigh. "Yet that is of little consequence, is it not? You never stipulated that incompetence on my part would change how the rules are enforced. I was injured by your attack; thus, you must forfeit."

"Why wait so long to reveal your wound?"

"Far be it from me to interrupt such a historic duel."

If a distorted cube was capable of narrowing its eyes, it would have. Suspicion radiated from every fiber of its being. The Blight had to be 99% certain Duran was lying, and that left plenty of wiggle room to just ignore the Elder's claim. Nevertheless, Blights were beholden to their vows, and it couldn't *disprove* the claim, either.

Rob knew they'd won when the cube began slowly descending to the ground. It hadn't announced its decision, but based on its – for lack of a better phrase – body language, he could tell where its thought process was headed. Right now, the Blight was calming down after a period of heightened tensions. The battle was essentially over, and its anger at Rob's taunts had begun to subside. Now its thoughts were turning towards other matters.

And with that in mind, Elder Duran's claim, true or not, represented an excellent opportunity.

"I forfeit," it said, with a detached, listless tone. **"You have fulfilled my second request. Fulfill my third. Employ Purge Corruption."**

Rob said nothing as he walked forward. He wasn't about to talk his way out of a victory. Because the Blight *had* been battered and broken, even if it didn't admit defeat in the moment. Elder Duran *had* been injured during the fight, even if it was probably self-inflicted. With those terms fulfilled, the Blight was free to pursue its one true desire.

The desire to no longer exist.

All was quiet as Rob reached the Blight. It was completely motionless, like an avant garde statue. He raised his arm, hand glowing with Purging energy.

"One last thing."

Rob grit his teeth. "What?"

"By the terms of our agreement, I have lost. This cannot be changed. However...do you believe you would have won without provoking me?"

No. His counterattack only started after he pissed off the Blight. It gave him time for his Skills to go off cooldown, and just as importantly, it made the Blight squander precious energy on forced teleportation that amounted to nothing.

"Psychological warfare is a valid strategy," Rob answered. "It's just another tool in my arsenal. If using it gets me the win, then I don't see what the problem is."

"And you said that *I* was a pro at intentionally avoiding the point. Psychological warfare is never guaranteed to succeed. Additionally, our Eternal opposites – those you call gods – will not be

affected by Purge Corruption. This battle, from your perspective, was a test to see if you could defeat divinity without those crutches. With raw strength. You failed."

Rob resisted the urge to snarl. "I'm not Level 99 yet."

"Then pray that will be sufficient." It paused. "And...when you Ascend, I hope you find eternity to be more palatable than I did."

The Blight's surface rippled once, as if waving goodbye. **"Farewell, my Angel of Death."**

Purge Corruption.

Reached Level 95!

5 Stat Points Gained!

Berserker Level Increased! 94 → 95

Leveling High's containment has reduced from 80% to 75%!

Reached Level 96!

5 Stat Points Gained!

Berserker Level Increased! 95 → 96

Leveling High's containment has reduced from 75% to 70%!

Static crept into Rob's mind. Testing the waters. He brushed it aside easily enough. The sound was distracting, but he'd dealt with much worse.

It didn't take long to find the Corrupted Locus of Power afterwards. Rob delivered the same mercy unto it that he'd delivered to the Blight. The coliseum vanished, revealing the barren wasteland for what it truly was.

Radio calls came in from the other corners of the Deadlands. As before, the destruction of one Corrupted Loci weakened the Blight's influence everywhere else. His friends congratulated him. The alliance congratulated him. Even Ragnavi didn't have a negative word to say, although she obviously wasn't happy about that.

Yet throughout it all, Rob couldn't stop thinking about the Blight's parting words. They reminded him of the final line in Ageless' Skill Description. Something that, in retrospect, seemed to be a warning from the Skills themselves.

'While this ability is not a monkey's paw, if used carelessly, you will grow to hate it more than any other.'

It made sense for them to think that way. The Skills were trapped in an unending prison; of course they wouldn't be fans of eternal life. And the Blight had its own share of issues that didn't apply to Rob either, considering he wasn't planning to 'Ascend' anytime soon, whatever that actually was.

Still. After Duran's pep talk about enjoying life to its fullest, Rob had been contemplating whether or not to activate Ageless. If he *did* follow the Elder's advice there...he'd have to take pains to ensure he didn't regret it.

Enough things already had.

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Changes:

Level: 94 → 96

BERSERKER Level: 94 → 96

Leveling High Containment 80% → 70%