

A Blight in the Field

The Daystar was rising on what Kosub was sure would be another peaceful day. He sat outside and relaxed for a moment, breathing in the calm before checking his crops. The sun had already begun to warm the air, the rich smell of dirt and wheat triggering old memories. He silently thanked Blessed Grain for his fresh start and pulled himself to his feet.

Kosub was no natural at farming, but the last year had been full of lessons. Blessed Grain had put great effort into teaching him the trade. As local goddess of the fields, she had quite the wealth of crop raising knowledge. Kosub and the five other surviving plains sailors had come to her a year ago, and she took them in with open arms. He was happy to learn a peaceful way to live. Years of fighting had left him and the others exhausted of violence.

The ground shifted slightly as he walked, damp soil giving way to his weight. The wind altered, and a strange scent came to his nose. His mind was on the verge of recalling the meaning of the fragrance when a shout brought him back to the present.

Borth called a bit louder, not sure he had been heard the first time. "Kosub!"

Kosub turned, and began walking towards the visitor. "What brings you here so early?"

Borth's face twisted with concern. "It's Blessed Grain. Something's terribly wrong."

The noise was incredible from the moment he opened the door. Villagers moved, talked, shouted, filled every inch of the gathering hall with noise. Kosub pressed through the crowd to stand with the other plains sailors.

Kosub nodded to the group once they noticed him. "Borth filled me in. Has anything happened yet?"

The village elder's holler drowned out the response. "Quiet everyone! It'll take more than panic to fix this trouble."

The din settled quickly, and the elder gave a slight nod in satisfaction. "Come on up here, dear, and tell them what you told me."

A young girl stepped up by the elder and addressed the gathered village. Even near the front of the room, Kosub had to strain to hear her. "When I took her daily offering to the shrine, it was all wrong. A black sludge was on all of it, and then she appeared. I - I was so afraid."

The elder set a hand on her shoulder before she came to tears. “She ran back here and warned me. When I went to check for myself, Blessed Grain ran me off. Told me it would take a lot more than her daily bit to buy her kindness. She was sick. Some kind of black blight covering parts of her.”

The murmur rose again, the villagers unable to keep quiet in light of the disturbing news. The former plains sailors turned inward, just like every other group in the hall. Kosub frowned as he waited for one of them to talk first.

None of them had an idea worth stating before the elder spoke once more. “I figure some sort of impressive offering might give her the power she needs to shake it off. I’ve heard of this sort of thing happening with other harvest gods around here, and that’s what worked for other villages. Hopefully it’ll be enough for us.” The elder looked out at the crowd, every member in silence as their minds raced over their possessions, searching for something powerful enough to save a goddess.

Kosub instantly remembered his prized possession from his old life, and met eyes with the elder. Clearly the elder was thinking the same thing. He waited a few moments, and once it became clear that no one else could think of anything worthwhile, he stepped forward. “I have something back at my farm. I’ll go get it and take it to her myself.”

The dirt was stubborn, locked in place by the roots of the stalks he had just cut. Before he began, he was worried the spot would be hard to locate. Once he got there he knew his efforts would be rewarded on the first try, the grains had grown unnaturally fast and large. The power from his buried artifact had bled into the soil and nourished the plants. Kosub smiled as he dug, excited to see his old weapon given new life.

The winds shifted, and his smile vanished. The smell from that morning came back to his nose, and with his mind already on the past he was able to place it with ease. Rot.

Not just any rot was moving through his field. There was a hint to it that was beyond mere dissolving flesh, there was a taint that came from Deathlord essence. Kosub looked up, and saw something moving slowly through the stalks of grain. He couldn’t see what it was, but he had no interest in letting it get to him while he only had a shovel in his hands. Her redoubled his efforts, and stabbed at the dirt furiously.

A groan drifted to him through the sea of grain, and he knew what he would be facing shortly: one of the walking dead, a zombie. He breathed a sigh of relief that it wasn’t something more horrifying, then remembered that his weapon was still deep under the dirt.

Mote by mote, he got closer to the artifact. Step by step, the zombie pushed through the grain towards him. He glanced up, and saw the rotting form moving beyond the stalks. A black sludge started to appear on the stalks, and spread from one to the next. He stopped wasting his focus and was rewarded with the clang of metal against metal. Kosub dropped to his knees and started scraping the dirt away from the artifact. A bit of yellow metal came into sight, and a grin broke out on his face.

He grabbed the hilt, and ripped the daiklave free from the ground. He looked up just in time to see an arm swinging down at him full force. Kosub swung the yellow jade up to block, but was only able to get his own arm into the swing's path. The sound of bones shattering reached his ear before the pain registered in his arm. He collapsed under the pain, and his blade dropped down beside him.

Another groan sounded above him, and through the blur he could see a mostly rotted man, covered in a black sludge. He forced his good arm to grab the daiklave and rolled out of the way of another incoming blow. A few moments of focus and the blade would have been light as a feather in his hand. Unfortunately, Kosub wasn't able to focus with a shattered arm, so his weaker hand was all he had to wield the heavy blade.

The zombie shambled towards him, and he tightened his grip on the hilt. Black crept into the edges of his sight, and he knew one swing was all he would have. It moved closer and closer to his range, and he tensed his muscles. The zombie's arm went up, and the darkness raced to cover his entire field of vision. His target came into range, and he put every ounce of his strength into the swing. Before he could see if it connected, the darkness took over, and Kosub was unconscious.

Step by step, Kosub dragged himself to the shrine, his yellow jade daiklave cutting through the dirt behind him. Darkness swirled at the edges of his sight, but the pain had receded to a terrible throbbing and he was able to stay focused. He followed the curve of the path, and the shrine finally came into vision.

A few more steps that felt like miles, and he was able to drop to his knees and set the blade on the offering stone. He closed his eyes, and intoned a prayer to Blessed Grain. "For you, harvest queen. A gift to mend your wounds and heal your sickness."

"Pick up your weapon, child." Kosub's eyes opened, and Blessed Grain stood above him, gesturing to the daiklave. No hint of the blight was on her, and Kosub blinked to make sure he wasn't simply imagining it. "The madness left me when you felled that abomination in the fields. Whatever it was spreading is gone now."

He picked up the sword and used it as a crutch to pull himself to his feet. He bowed before her. "Sorry I took so long to get here, goddess. I was a little inconvenienced."

Blessed Grain smiled at him, a pitying look in her eyes. "If you think that was an inconvenience, you have some rough times ahead of you. Patch yourself up and head for Nexus. A quicksilver bird wanted me to let you know that your old captain has returned."

Filled with excitement, Kosub found his second wind and stood up straight and proud. "Thank you, goddess. I'll do just that."

He turned to walk off, and Blessed Grain's voice caused him to pause and turn back. "Be careful plains sailor, and wish your captain well. Hopefully your captain will be everything he once was, and your ship will sail the lands of the Hundred Kingdoms again."

Kosub smiled, nodded, and continued on his way.