

Rob couldn't bring himself to care that Leveling High's containment was being eroded by the Deadlands. It *sucked*, sure, but there were bigger issues to worry about right now. Compared to his immediate safety, being separated from the rest of the alliance, and...basically everything related to the Deadlands, Leveling High ranked pretty low on the totem pole.

Besides – simple math implied that it wouldn't be an issue for much longer. Leveling High's influence was strongest during Level-ups, and that would cease to be a factor after Rob reached 99. He just needed the containment to last until then. 80% was a solid buffer; even if the containment reduced by 15% each Level-up, he'd be fine.

Unless there were complications–

Nope! Rob grappled his paranoia and covered its mouth with duct tape. *None of that. Got shit to take care of. Save the theorizing for later.*

He exhaled, still unable to hear the sound as it left his throat. Rob briefly considered using Lifesurge to heal his eyes and ears, then quickly decided against it, much for the same reason that he'd chosen to deactivate Lifesteal prior to Purging the Blight. He didn't want his senses restored quite yet. Not until he could be sure that he would experience the *true* Deadlands, rather than the saccharine Elysium it so lovingly offered him.

With that decision made, Rob moved on to the next item on the docket: placating a grumpy Elder who'd been tossed like a ragdoll. He turned around, using Sense Corruption to detect where Duran had fallen. The Elder was thankfully Corruption-free, owing to the Amulets – which actually made it exceedingly easy to pick him out. His presence was like an Elf-shaped hole in the noxious fog that surrounded them.

Smiling, Rob cupped his hands around his mouth. "Duraaaaaan! You doing okay? I can't hear you, so wave your hands or something!"

From his position sprawled on the ground, Elder Duran raised a single arm and gave Rob a terse wave. His chest appeared to be rhythmically moving up and down. Either he was chuckling or hyperventilating, and the latter didn't fit his relaxed posture. *I wish I could see if he's injured*, Rob

thought, *but I still shouldn't heal my eyes yet. Would be nice if I could check his HP on...the Party Screen...*

A dim lightbulb went off inside his head. *Wait, shit, I can form a Party with him!* Rob almost smacked himself for not thinking of it sooner. System info like the Party Screen could be viewed internally, without light or even eyes required. And with his previous Party disbanded due to the Deadlands transporting him out of range, there was plenty of room for more members. It'd also be extra insurance for Duran, as anyone in Rob's Party was granted a diluted version of his defensive and regenerative Skills.

Rob spent a good few seconds getting excited over the idea – then promptly remembered that inviting someone to a Party required line-of-sight.

This time, he did smack himself.

Alright. Pros and cons. If I restore my senses to invite Duran, the Deadlands might force its version of reality on me. If I don't, communicating will be a pain in the ass, and Duran might be put in more danger.

In the end, it was no choice at all. He could always maim himself again if necessary. Eyes and ears were a renewable resource.

There was only one Duran.

Lifesurge. Rob's awareness flooded with information as his sight and sound returned. He caught a flicker of a barren, desolate wasteland – before it was overwritten by gorgeous green fields. The sunlight warmed, no longer feeling lifeless on his skin. He could hear Duran mumbling to himself in the distance.

Lastly, the fetid aroma that had assailed his nostrils receded, and in its place, he could smell fresh grass. Even his Skills believed the Deadlands' lies, Sense Corruption now informing Rob that there was none of it around for miles, the air entirely free of defilement.

Illusion Resistance has failed!

After a moment of disappointment, Rob accepted the tradeoff for what it was, immediately looking at Duran and sending the Elder a Party invite. He'd expected this much. It would only become a problem if poking out his eyes and ears didn't work a second time.

And if for whatever reason, it didn't...that would be fine too. Elysium may have hijacked his senses, but it hadn't erased the knowledge of what he'd already Sensed. There was one lead that Rob had yet to follow up on – something he was *definitely* looking forward to trying.

"Well met," Duran cheerfully said. His gaze twinkled with mischief. "I see the great Lord Rob has deigned to rejuvenate himself. Your visage is much enhanced by having all its parts in place. Alas, perhaps someone with your indomitable power, consummate reputation, and overflowing coffers would have benefited from the limited perspective of a more mortal man."

Rob snorted. "Okay, I know you're doing a bit, but I still have to object to the 'overflowing coffers' thing. Save that for when I've gotten paid *once*, at least."

"I neglected to mention your superior intellect," the Elder continued, nodding sagely. "Indeed, only a man of towering genius would have forgotten to negotiate his own wages for nearly half a year."

"So...you're annoyed that I threw you. In my defense – you were surprisingly aerodynamic. Think you set a new record."

Duran chuckled. "Oh, not to worry. You made the correct tactical decision. I merely reserve the right to a sliver of petulance. My ego demands no less."

At once, his expression froze, as if he'd suddenly remembered why they were having this conversation in the first place. "Did it work?" Elder Duran hurriedly asked. "Has Elysium's veil been torn asunder?"

"It *was*," Rob answered. "Came back when I healed myself. Before that, though? Removing my senses worked like charm. Helped me kill the Blight – and now I've got a plan for what to do next."

Relief alighted within Duran's eyes, albeit relief tinged with reproach. "Then I did not encourage you to mutilate yourself to *no* advantage," he muttered, averting his gaze.

Rob sat down in front of him, noting the splatter of Human blood staining Duran's shirt. "Don't you start," he said, putting on a lighthearted grin to set the Elder at ease. "That was a 100% Rob-original idea. Only someone with a *towering intellect* could've thought of it, so let me take credit, yeah? You hardly told me to pull out a knife and get stabbin'."

"And yet I would not stop you from doing the same once again, if the results would be beneficial to our cause." Duran stared past Rob's shoulder, his gaze lost in reminiscence. "You may have forgotten, but soon after you arrived at The Village, you suggested repeatedly injuring yourself in order to strengthen your defensive Skills. I disabused you of the notion. Chastised you, even, for contemplating such a self-destructive mentality. The fact that the system wouldn't have allowed it anyway was secondary to my concerns for your happiness."

He matched Rob's grin with one that was far more wry. "I wonder. What would the Duran of the past think if he were to look at us now?"

Rob took a few seconds to seriously consider his answer before replying. "He'd probably be slightly disappointed. But if you took the Rob and Duran of the past and put them in our position...they'd be dead. Even if they had the same Levels and Skills."

"True enough. I suppose I mustn't blame myself for adapting to changing circumstances."

Elder Duran let out a long breath of air, as if that would expel the stress from his body. Apparently, it did, his face brightening. "Don't mind my ramblings. In truth – I am proud of you, Rob. Thank you for doing everything you could to save my life. While there's not much of it left regardless, I dare say this mind of mine still has value to offer."

Hearing Duran say that he was *proud* of him inspired a beacon of warm, fuzzy feelings to ignite in Rob's chest. It was so abrupt and pleasant that he didn't actually know how to handle it. Was he supposed to thank Duran? Play off the compliment like a generic cool guy? Killing eldritch

abominations was one thing; expressing genuine emotions was a minefield far more fraught with danger.

He was saved from his embarrassment by the sound of the radio – safely nestled in Duran's coat pocket – crackling to life. "Don't press the button so hard," a voice hissed. "You'll break it! Just...ugh. If anyone can hear me, please respond."

"Keira?" In a flash, Rob snatched the radio and pressed Talk. "It's me. Duran and I survived. What happened on your end?"

As it turned out, casualties were much less dire than he might've anticipated. They were lucky; aside from the fourth smaller group of six ill-fated soldiers, the Deadlands had split up their alliance in a way that afforded each sub-team a fighting chance. After some discussion to figure out who'd ended up with who, Rob wrote down a list.

Group 1: Rob, Duran (a.k.a. The Dynamic Duo)

Group 2: Vul'to, Meyneth, Diplomacy, Sylpeiros, all the coalition soldiers, a couple Dragonkin soldiers (a.k.a. Team Rally Around The Soul Guardian)

Group 3: Keira, Orn'tol, Zamira, Malika, Faelynn, Alessia, the Dragon Queen, most of the Dragonkin soldiers (a.k.a. A Bunch Of Unlucky People Putting Up With Ragnavi's Shit)

He kept the unofficial team names to himself.

Group 1 had actually been hit the hardest. They were the only ones assaulted by a legitimate, fully-grown Blight – one eager to tango with the Heartkiller. Groups 2 and 3 had instead been targeted by waves of powerful Blightspawn. Still dangerous, but way more manageable.

Group 3 survived by virtue of being stacked with powerhouses. It contained five out of the eight members of Riardin's Rangers, and if that wasn't already enough, good ole' Ragnavi was there too. The Dragon Queen made sure to arrogantly inform Rob that she'd been imperative in keeping deaths to a minimum; a claim that none of Riardin's Rangers were able to deny, despite how he could hear them practically gnashing their teeth through the radio.

In a way, Rob felt almost...gratified? Kinda. He didn't like that Ragnavi was getting EXP, but at least she was justifying her place in their alliance. Until now she'd basically just caused headaches. It meant he wouldn't have to regret not assassinating her at The Village.

Group 2 was in a tougher spot. Only Vul'to, Meyneth, and Seneschal Sylpeiros were holding down the fort there. While they had more soldiers in total, one member of Riardin's Rangers was worth a dozen elite soldiers, especially when it came to fighting Blightspawn. And unlike Group 1 or 2, they lacked a major anchor like Rob or Ragnavi.

They made up for it thanks to Vul'to's Soul Guardian abilities. He couldn't Purge Corruption, but his Soul Shield was vital in keeping the Blightspawn at bay. It let them adopt a careful, defensive strategy, which proved highly effective against the mindless hordes.

Overall, the after-action report left Rob simultaneously relieved and concerned. Although he was elated to learn that his friends were okay, their battles could have turned out much worse – and probably *should* have. Vul'to's group in particular would've been hard-pressed to combat an actual Blight.

Are the Blights not taking us seriously? he wondered. *Do they really care about only me, and no one else?*

Or...

"The Lost Lamb charted a path to the Others' domain," the Elysium Blight had stated. "We will complete our work here. We will ASCEND. And our opposites will know oblivion."

Or were they simply preoccupied with an all-important task?

Rob relayed his thoughts to the rest of the alliance. He'd barely finished speaking when Ragnavi's voice immediately cut in. "We can ruminate on the Blight's intentions later," she said. "Right now, there is a more urgent matter to attend to. Many of my soldiers received Corruption wounds over the course of the battle. As per our agreement, you shall expunge any traces of this...*filth* from their bodies."

Her tone grew loftier, bordering on condescending, as if addressing a defeated enemy with her hand wrapped around his neck. "You shall also remove another portion of the Corruption within me. Consider it due recompense for services rendered. Without my aid, several of your Party members would have perished at the Blight's twisted hands."

There was a long pause as Rob stared at the radio in disbelief. Slowly, he pressed Talk. "How?"

"While they may be moderately competent fighters, your Party was hopelessly outnumbered by creatures spawned from the very pits of the Deadlands. I—"

"No, I get that," Rob clarified. "You protected my friends. It was all so you could gain leverage over me, but you still did it. I won't argue that fact."

In truth, he'd been trying to think of a way to thank Ragnavi that wouldn't cause bile to rise to the top of his throat. That was a Leader-ly thing to do, right? Making nice with someone who you were planning to kill in the near future? It's definitely what Diplomacy would've suggested, anyway.

Until about five seconds ago. All notions of polite fakeness had gone out the window with Ragnavi's absurd demand. "You want me to remove a bit of your Corruption?" Rob continued. "Okay. *How?*"

"With your Skill," Ragnavi said, sounding wary and confused. "Unless you somehow lost the ability to purge Corruption when the Deadlands took you?"

I don't...does she seriously not get it? Even for the Dragon Queen, who seemed prone to whims and fixations, this was bizarrely one-track minded. "I have no idea where you are," Rob stated, scratching his head. "Can't Purge anything until our teams meet up again. Like, were you expecting me to have a Sense Dragon Queen ability or something?"

He hesitated, remembering some of his more esoteric Skills. "Fair point if you did, but regardless, I doubt that the Deadlands dropped us off just around the corner from each other. It could take days or weeks of traveling to rendezvous."

A deafening silence emanated from the radio. It lasted so long that Rob started to wonder if they'd lost connection. Eventually, the device lit up with the sound of with Ragnavi's voice, her words laced with an undercurrent of tension. "Is it possible for you to channel Purge Corruption through our radios?" she asked.

Rob held back a jab about boomers not knowing how technology worked. "No. Only touch contact works."

"But..." Desperation seeped into her tone. "I *need* it."

He didn't know what to say to that.

Mercifully, when the radio activated again, a different person was speaking. "Nothing to be done," Seneschal Sylpeiros grunted. "I incurred a degree of Corruption damage as well, yet if I must wait for it to be cleansed, then I will. Our scattered provisions are a more pressing concern. Do we have the food and Amulets necessary to complete this journey?"

Rob did. Items in Spatial Storage weren't affected by ambient Corruption, so he was essentially carrying around a fully-stocked pantry for him and Duran to partake of. Which...was also part of the problem. The alliance had been counting on Spatial Storage to offset their lack of a dedicated supply train. Although they hadn't wished for it, one dynamic duo was now hogging the food meant for dozens of other people.

After some cross-referencing and math, they determined that Group 2 and Group 3 would be fine in the short term. When the alliance was split apart, some of their food ended up being sent to each group. Some, not all, as a good chunk was straight-up missing.

Likely stolen by the Deadlands, Rob mused. *Mortal food must be a novelty. Even the shit kind.* He imagined a Blight happily snacking on soldier field rations, then took his finger off the Talk button so people wouldn't hear him giggling in the middle of life-or-death preparations.

"It seems that our goal is clear," Sylpeiros said. "We must safeguard the supplies we still possess, and strive to regroup as quickly as possible."

"With that in mind," Alessia chimed in, "what are the chances that the Deadlands will divide our number once more? Our current groups would already struggle against a dedicated assault from just *one* fully-grown Blight. If their aim is simply to isolate us, then they may have won the moment we set foot on this forsaken soil."

In lieu of Ragnavi, Elder Alessia had taken charge of Group #3. The Dragon Queen apparently walked off in a daze soon after Sylpeiros started speaking. Rob didn't know why, nor did he care. He wasn't about to question a reprieve from his blood pressure rising at the sound of her voice.

Duran prodded his arm. With that, Rob realized that he was starting to get lost in thought. "The Deadlands can't just do anything it wants," he hastily added. "Otherwise everyone would be alone and easy pickings right now."

Alessia hummed with disapproval. "I find it difficult to be comforted by vague limitations. The headsman's axe may be swinging slowly, and the edge of its blade may be chipped, but we will perish all the same when it at last reaches flesh. Rather than hoping the Deadlands cannot repeat its...trick, we should endeavor to block the axe before it lops off our heads."

Don't say it. Don't be a smartass. "Actually, I—"

"Yes," Alessia sighed, her breath crackling through the radio. "I am aware you can survive decapitation. That only makes my analogy more apt – as despite your group consisting of just two people, you are in the least danger of us all."

Duran leaned over. "Elder Duran speaking," he began. "This is merely conjecture, but my theories proved adequately useful when Rob was doing battle with a Blight. I believe that there are precautions we can take to prevent the Deadlands from altering our state of being."

He launched into an explanation of what exactly being untethered from reality entailed. Afterwards, he segued into how Rob used sensory deprivation to slay the Elysium Blight. None of the other alliance members were willing or able to replicate that tactic, so they settled on more reasonable measures.

Retaining physical contact was the biggest thing – that would hinder the Blights' attempt to separate them again. For now they would travel in close proximity, with connecting ropes linking them together, and sleeping shoulder-to-shoulder at night. They were also instructed to hold strong, unchanging mental images of each other in their minds for as long and often as possible.

Thankfully, all of that *should* be easier for the larger groups. Rob and Duran would have to sleep in shifts. Both of them losing consciousness in a place where perception and willpower molded reality seemed...ill-advised.

"One potential problem," Alessia interjected. "The Dragon Queen will balk at slumbering shoulder-to-shoulder with *commoners*. She was already forlorn when we abandoned her miniature palace of a tent."

Sylpeiros scoffed. "And what of it? Let her sleep alone. If she vanishes overnight, then she'll just have herself to blame. Saves us the—"

He cut himself off mid-sentence with a sound that Rob could only describe as petulant. A moment later, a different voice took his place. "This is Belria speaking," said Diplomacy.

"You *elbowed me aside!*" Sylpeiros squawked, his voice sounding muted and distant.

"It's fine, I outrank you. So – Alessia. I get that your group needs Ragnavi as a combat lynchpin. If Queenie starts complaining, send her my way. I'll help her see reason."

"Thank you, Belria," Alessia said, with evident gratitude. "And my thanks to you as well, Duran. How did you decipher the nature of the Deadlands so quickly? Has this phenomenon manifested elsewhere in Elatra?"

A brief flicker of pride passed over Duran's expression. "To my knowledge, it has not. However, I once read a philosophical treatise written by someone who advocated the usage of widespread Mind Magic to fashion a utopia. In his words, there was no appreciable difference between our baseline reality and a perfect illusion – as long as said illusion was never broken. He recommended that we inflict severe Mind Magic upon unhappy people to 'rescue them from a mental purgatory of their own making'."

Duran tapped his chin, as if reminiscing. "The writer was a raving madman, of course, but the sheer uniqueness of his viewpoints gave them purchase in my memories. Today, when we were caught by the Deadlands and told in no uncertain terms that our reality had become untethered, I was reminded of that very same madman....and the countermeasures I'd devised in case someone of his like came to power." He smiled. "Go digging through the muck of discourse, and you'll sometimes unearth pearls of wisdom."

"That's all well and good," Sylpeiros tersely said, his patience running thin, "but we have yet to determine what our next course of action should be. If the Deadlands are truly warped beyond our comprehension, then I doubt we'll be able to regroup simply by picking the right directions and marching. We likely can't escape back to Elven territory, either. What is there to do besides wandering aimlessly as supplies dwindle?"

At that, Rob hopped to his feet. "I'm going to try something," he told them, "and I want you to pay close attention to your surroundings while I do it."

"Try what?"

He shook his head. "It's better if you don't know the details. Your perception might influence the results. You'll be the control variable in this experiment."

None of them knew what a control variable was, and they said as much, but Rob was already walking. Soft grass crunched beneath his feet as he approached the only visible landmark in sight: the tree at the center of Elysium.

It somehow seemed larger than before. He examined it from top-to-bottom, finding not a blemish in sight. Despite the intense combat that had taken place nearby, the tree's boughs stood tall and unyielding, like a monolith of green.

Grand. Impressive. Awe-inspiring. All words that came to mind – and each one, a lie. This wasn't a tree, no more than the grass beneath his feet was really grass.

Rob summoned a familiar knife into his hand. After several seconds of contemplation, he unsummoned it. Crippling his senses shouldn't be necessary for what came next. Even if Elysium was fooling his eyes and ears, its hold wasn't so strong that it could outright erase knowledge from his mind.

And he still remembered what he'd Sensed during the brief period where Sense Corruption was working.

Even without direct confirmation, there'd been clues. He'd witnessed the Blight-children frolicking here, as if this specific location was a place of revelry and joy. And while that sight was a product of Elysium's influence...he didn't believe the sentiment itself was a falsehood. This tree was clearly an object of importance – and what could possibly be so important to an existence like the Blight?

There was only one answer to that.

Rob stepped forward, raised his arm, and plunged it into the Corrupted Locus of Power.

It was like plunging his arm into a vat of lava. His flesh nearly melted, its material components breaking down under a nexus of pure entropy. Only a combination of Purge Corruption shielding and his defensive Skills kept him in one piece.

Teeth bared, he pumped Purging energy into the Locus, watching as Blue light illuminated the field. He may as well have tried knocking down a brick wall with a feather. The Loci that he'd purified up until now had been Corrupted for a scant few months at worst, but *this* Locus had been a part of the Deadlands for hundreds and thousands of years. There was no seed of Corruption for him to root out and destroy; the entire thing was a vessel of decay now, its fundamental nature irrevocably altered.

As he pushed out more and more Purging energy, watching the Blue light swallowed by an endless abyss, Rob could already tell that this Locus was a lost cause. It was completely unlike the other areas he'd cleansed. The Village would recover, Fiendland would recover, Dhalerune Mines would recover – but the Deadlands would be Dead forevermore. Even if he expunged every last atom of its Corruption, no life would flourish here.

Fine, Rob thought, with grim determination. *They named me Heartkiller for a reason*. He couldn't be this place's savior. No one could.

Purge Corruption Level has Increased! Level 5 (MAX) → Level 6 (MAX+)

So he'd just have to be its executioner.

Rob's Purge Corruption energy ceased searching for a single seed of Corruption to uproot. As if reaching an understanding, it recognized the Locus as something to be eradicated, thoroughly and utterly. His Purging energy rapidly spread out, like a virus multiplying inside an organism, attacking it from within.

The Locus' immune system struck back. Flesh bubbled and skin peeled as Blue light mingled with the nothingness of the void, battling for supremacy. Sweat ran down Rob's brow. He was locked in place, his body a conduit for the incredible amount of energy flowing through him. The air *creaked* with the sound of scraping rusted metal. Each second that passed felt like he'd run a marathon wearing lead shoes. Blood wept from his eyes. Pressure built in his lungs, then in his soul.

And not once, for even a single moment, did he consider backing down.

There was a thunderous clap of inverted noise. Indescribable to anyone who wasn't there to hear it. The Corrupted Locus collapsed inwards, overwhelmed by Purging Blue, crumpling under an inexorable tsunami of intent. Like Elatra itself was taking vengeance upon the plague that had marred it for so very long. In the distance, something screamed.

With a quiet death rattle, the Locus disappeared.

Rob sagged like a marionette with its strings cut. Sighing with relief, he fell to the ground – the *hard* ground. Elysium's verdant field of grass had vanished, supplanted by a hollow stretch of barren soil.

Absently, he ran his hand across the ground, finding dirt that was so dry it felt closer to sand. The sun was cold and lifeless once more, and a noxious stench was invading his nostrils. Finally, the tree was gone along with the Locus of Power. In their place was...nothing. Just empty air.

This was the *true* Deadlands. In all its glory.

Rob grinned as the radio crackled to life. People from the other groups were babbling, going on about the air rippling, changing, and how the environment seemed marginally less oppressive than before. A few even claimed that they could see the same barren wasteland that Rob was in right now, their fanciful landscapes having melted away like a wet oil painting.

It was just as he'd hoped. The Deadlands was less of a geographical area and more of a tangible representation of the Blight's will. And the Blight, luckily enough, was a shared consciousness. While this Locus of Power he'd destroyed represented merely one corner of the Deadlands, everything here was intertwined. Its demise meant the Blight's influence had weakened everywhere else.

Purge Corruption coming in clutch again, he marveled. I should check its description now that it leveled up. Was kinda busy earlier.

Crystal Bearer Tier 3 Ability: Purge Corruption (LV 6) (MAX+)

Prerequisite: Attune to ~~twelve~~ nine Loci of Power. Come face-to-face with a Locus of Power beyond salvation.

Description: Grants you the ability to remove a significant amount of Corruption from yourself or others. Drains after being used. Fully recharges over the course of 24 hours.

MAX+ Effect: Focus your energy stores to annihilate a permanently Corrupted Locus. IRRADIATE THE CANCER FROM THESE LANDS. Effect can be used once per day. Requires at least 50% of your maximum Purge Corruption energy stores to succeed.

Rob stared at the plus sign appended to 'MAX'. MAX was supposed to indicate the final version of something, and yet here they were. Was that an indication of the Skills breaking their own preconceived limitations, pushing Crystal Bearer to even further heights...or did they just kinda suck at naming things? He wouldn't know unless he spoke with them, and that wasn't an option most of the time. If their ability to influence Elatra was anything like the gods, then communicating with the mortal realms was draining.

Well, I guess the distinction doesn't really matter. Purge Corruption isn't actually stronger than before. My energy stores didn't increase. I'm just using an old favorite in a fun new way. If the Skills want to label it as MAX+ anyway, then sure. Enjoying a flair for the dramatics probably helps keep them sane.

"Here's an idea," Diplomacy said, their insistent tone cutting through everyone's excited chattering. "We chalked up our compasses failing to Corruption interference, but what if it was because of the Blight directly screwing with us? And now that Rob killed one of their hearts..."

The radio fell silent. Rob and Duran exchanged a glance, then immediately dove into the Elder's traveling bag. It might not work. Even after annihilating the Locus of Power, the surrounding air was still saturated with ambient Corruption – it wouldn't disperse for god knows how many years. If that truly *was* the cause, they were shit out of luck.

Still, they had to try. Duran beamed as he retrieved a compass from his pack, the only one he'd been carrying. Rob mirrored the smile with one of his own.

And then froze, his eyes fixated on the small little device.

Wait a second. As Duran fiddled with the compass, Rob reached into Spatial Storage and produced an Enchanted item that he hadn't thought about for weeks.

Name: Compass of Corruptive Tracking

Description: This Enchanted Item always points to the nearest Dungeon. Its range is limitless. It cannot be broken or damaged outside of exceptional means. Holding it slightly accentuates the taste of sugar.

He wanted to chastise himself for neglecting it until now, but even aside from how his mind was being *mildly* tampered with, the Enchanted Compass wouldn't have been very useful for navigation.

Dungeons weren't stable landmarks. Plus, given the scope of the alliance's mission, getting sidetracked wasn't an option. The Blight ruled the Deadlands, and the Loci empowered it – those were his primary targets. Any Dungeons could be dealt with later after the bigger fish were fried.

That was what his logical reasoning told him, at any rate. His instincts guided his gaze to follow the Enchanted Compass, its needle pointing stubbornly towards a place out in the distance.

It's just the nearest Dungeon, he thought. Doesn't mean anything. There could be a hundred of them around here. The needle will probably start pointing somewhere else if I walk for half a day.

But...

"We will complete our work here," the Elysium Blight had said. "We will ASCEND."

"Fragments of the Blight formed the template of Dungeons," Kismet had told him, months ago. "In Earth terms: Artificial Intelligence. The Blight's nature matched the core purpose of Dungeons."

Hmm.

Duran sidled up next to Rob, holding the non-enchanted compass in-hand. "West," he stated, comparing the needles. "Your Enchanted Item points west. Assuming that we can ascribe geographical relevance to anything here...it implies that a Dungeon lies deeper within the center of the Deadlands."

That was the last push Rob needed to make a choice. He picked up the radio and pressed Talk. "Hear me out," he began. "This is a hunch. I don't know *exactly* what's brewing, but it's *something*."

It was easy to convince them to follow the Enchanted Compass' lead – mostly because it was the only lead they had, really. Wasn't much else to try outside of wandering in random directions. And even if the Dungeon turned out to be a red herring, it still provided a convenient rendezvous point for them to regroup.

"There is but one small problem," Sylpeiros commented, in a dry tone. "That Enchanted Item is unique. We don't possess an equivalent, and our normal compasses are unreliable at best. Without proper direction, we are doomed to be lost in ever-changing, illusory environments."

Everyone fell quiet as they mulled over how to solve the issue. Inspiration came from an unexpected source – a lone Dragonkin soldier, mumbling in the background of Group #3's radio. "This isn't how they told us it would go," she grouched.

"How so?" Rob asked, before he could stop himself. "Did Ragnavi promise you glory and adventure? Maybe a nice souvenir to bring home?"

"I meant the *gods*," the soldier snapped back. "You heard their Edict. We all did. Remember it like it was yesterday. They said: '*We shall provide support from afar. Go, and fight knowing that our grace will guide your path*'."

She let out an exasperated noise. "So where's the support, yeah? Where's the guiding grace? We've been thrown into a nightmare with nothing to show for it. Now two of my friends are dead, and...and Tylrud's *teeth* will their screams haunt my sleep."

"...Mine too," said another voice – an Elf, this time. "Thought it couldn't get worse after the Harpy Amalgamations. Hah. Fucking idiot, I was. Should've told Learra how I felt about her...before..."

"I should've hung up my goddamn sword," a second Dragonkin hissed. "Promised my husband this would be my last campaign. Now I'll never see him again, and that *harlot* across the street will pounce on his grief the second he receives news."

Gradually, with building momentum, their sentiment was shared by rank-and-file soldiers from all races. Even the coalition veterans who'd known to expect Blight fuckery couldn't help but voice their dissatisfaction with the gods' management. Their complaints grew progressively louder, overtaking Sylpeiros' and Alessia's halfhearted attempts to calm them down.

Rob stared at the radio with a sense of understated shock. This wasn't just idle grumbling – he could hear real resentment in the soldiers' words. The kind that, if left unchecked, could lead to outright mutiny. It wouldn't take much for resentment towards distant, faceless gods to be transferred to the people in charge of the alliance. The gods were out-of-sight, while the people were in yelling range.

It probably wouldn't have gotten this bad if they were all still together in one cohesive group. That way the soldiers could've rallied around their Leaders, as Elatrans tended to do. But Rob was separated from them, Ragnavi was currently off sulking in a corner somewhere, and the other high-Level Combat Class users were split up as well. A crumbling chain of command invariably led to crumbling morale.

The worst part was...what could Rob say to their complaints? It wasn't like the soldiers were *wrong*. Their patron deities had manipulated them. Under different circumstances, he would've used this as a springboard towards forming an anti-god squad, with these soldiers as its first recruits. Right now, he was far more concerned with keeping the alliance stable so they could survive the next 24 hours.

That was when Rob got an idea. An awful idea. A wonderful, awful idea.

"You know, I think you're right."

Although he didn't raise his voice, his declaration immediately silenced the clamor. It was, presumably, *not* what they'd anticipated him to say. Duran raised both eyebrows, and it was only his implicit trust in Rob that kept him from intervening.

That trust was tested as the Human's mouth curled into an evil grin. "It's weird, isn't it?" he continued. "The gods know how much of a threat the Blight is. I understand if they can't come down and fight – woould be nice, though – but all they've done is send a single Edict. That's just not good enough. Especially after promising to *guide our path*."

He peered straight up. "If they aren't full of shit, now would be the time to prove it."

Eight seconds passed. Rob was counting.

On the ninth second, a ball of incandescent light sprang into existence, high above the skies. It hovered out towards the west, exactly in the direction that the Enchanted Compass was pointing. The light was so startlingly bright that it would easily be visible for many miles, like a sun of divine brilliance.

Casually, Rob lifted his radio and pressed Talk. "Well would you look at that," he said, to a gobsmacked alliance. "I'm assuming you guys can see that from wherever you are?" They stuttered their confirmations. "Then we have our waypoint. Follow that, and we'll meet up before you know it."

He bit back a smug cackle. This was...close to perfect. The only downside was that he'd teed up the gods to perform an act of divine intervention, letting them put their money where their mouth was. It had undoubtedly renewed the soldiers' faith in them.

Yet it was well-worth bullying the gods into expending precious Influence. From what Rob knew, their capacity to affect Elatra was derived from a coveted, limited resource. Until now, they'd used it sparingly, opting for relatively small actions that would cause disproportionately large effects – such as speaking with mortals, sending items to Elatra, or opening brief portals. Each of those actions drained varying degrees of Influence.

And something like that mini-sun? Oh you *bet* it would be draining Influence. A lot of it, constantly. While that didn't matter right this second, Rob was playing the long game, weakening the gods by making them spend energy. The less they held, the easier they'd be to kill down the road.

Pushing them to create this sun was no different than slicing their arteries and bleeding them dry.

*Of course, if you *hadn't* created it, the alliance implodes, Rob thought. My Party is amazing, but they'd be hard-pressed to survive the Deadlands without at least a little backup. It was either guide our path, or watch as the last hope against the Blight fizzled out prematurely.*

Internally, he imagined himself giving two thumbs-up and a taunting smirk. *Thanks for the assist, Kismet.*

A sudden sense of frustration flared within his mind, belonging not to him, but to an external force. It vanished just as quickly.

Things proceeded smoothly once the rest of the alliance eventually calmed down. The soldiers' morale had skyrocketed, and while Rob's crew knew better than to assume the gods were benevolent besties, it

was still a relief to have a clear path forward. Ragnavi barely even argued when she returned from her stroll – a beacon in the sky was impossible to ignore.

Before setting off, Rob took one last look at his surroundings. It didn't take long. Between the desiccated soil, lifeless sun, and total lack of landmarks, the true Deadlands was honestly kind of...dull. Like a colorless desert without the sweltering heat to give it some character. Maybe a Blight could've spiced things up, but otherwise, there just wasn't much of note to see.

He still engraved the sight upon his memories. When he and Duran traveled away from this area and entered another Corrupted Loci's domain, the Deadlands' illusions would likely re-assert themselves. Elysium might return, or perhaps a different vista could take form. Either way, there was a good chance that the dreary wasteland laid out before him would be replaced by something with more personality.

And Rob didn't want to forget this dreariness. It was the future that awaited if he failed.

There was no greater proof of that than Elysium itself. Even when the Blight had been *trying* to create something, the best it could do was copy Earth, as creation was fundamentally opposed to their very nature. Birds flew, fish swam, and the Blights ruined. Their appetite for endless consumption would never be satisfied. If they prevailed here, they would spread, and eat, and kill, and spread, rampaging across two worlds until all that remained was the landscape Rob now saw.

An empty, depleted nothing.

Alright. Rob drew in a deep breath, held it, then exhaled. *That's one Blight and one Locus down. How bad could the rest be? We got this.*

It was a simple affirmation, but it lessened the weight on his shoulders, reminding him the victory was within their grasp. The Deadlands had tried to strike first blood – and missed. Now it was time for a well-earned counteroffensive.

Motioning for Duran to follow, he raised his Compass and took his first step towards the end.

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Changes:

Purge Corruption Level 5 (MAX) → Level 6 (MAX+)

Current Status of the Alliance:

Group 1: Rob, Duran

Group 2: Vul'to, Meyneth, Diplomacy, Sylpeiros, all the coalition soldiers, a couple Dragonkin soldiers (minor casualties)

Group 3: Keira, Orn'tol, Zamira, Malika, Faelynn, Alessia, the Dragon Queen, most of the Dragonkin soldiers (minor casualties)

Group 4: Six soldiers (all deceased)