

The Enchanted Compass hadn't budged an inch. For five days, its needle continued to stubbornly point west – directly towards where the gods' beacon hung in the sky.

Those two waypoints were the main things keeping hope alive.

Logically, Rob knew he was making progress. Unless the Deadlands was subtle enough to teleport people back without them realizing, then moving his feet in one direction had to take him *somewhere*. And Kismet probably would've let him know if he was going about this in the wrong way.

Emotionally...the Deadlands didn't make it easy to stay confident. With no consistent landmarks to speak of, even a guided march felt like aimless wandering. He would go to sleep surrounded by a barren landscape, then wake up in Elysium once more, only for the scenery to have shifted back to the wasteland by noon. Elder Duran reported seeing the same imbalance, as if the Deadlands couldn't decide whether it wanted to be a desolate reality or a pleasant illusion.

Increasing his stats barely seemed to help. Not that 10 Perception and 5 Mind were very much in the grand scheme of things, but he was admittedly used to instant gratification – at least when it came to allocating stat points. Boosting Vitality had always increased his Max HP while also strengthening numerous key Skills. Conversely, investing into Perception and Mind felt like housekeeping. It was just something that he needed to do so that his brain wouldn't melt and leak out of his ears.

However, there was one detail that was helping bolster morale. Rob had noticed that Elysium was attempting to assert itself more often as the days passed by, as if its influence was getting stronger. Which implied that he was leaving behind the destroyed Locus' broken zone of control, and stepping into an area governed by a different Corrupted Locus. His marching was *actually* leading him somewhere.

He'd never been so happy to waltz into Mindfuck Central, but hey, progress was progress.

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The seventh day of travel brought – to their legitimate surprise – good news. Multiple pieces of good news, even! That was practically a record.

It started in the morning, when Vul'to excitedly radioed in to tell them all about his latest and greatest Soul Guardian ability. That revelation had lifted a massive weight off of Rob's shoulders. His soul's time limit was a rather...*problematic* detail, one that he'd shoved to the back of his head and tried not to think about. Like a homework assignment he was content to procrastinate – until the due date ambushed him and slit his throat. Learning that Soul Repair could outright fix the issue for him was a godsend.

Well, maybe not a *godsend*. That word hit different nowadays. 'Skillsend' didn't have the same ring to it, though.

Rob just needed to make sure he reached Level 99 before Soul Repair was necessary – which was where the second piece of good news came in. Soon after his talk with Vul'to ended, he finally began to sense a Corrupted Locus in the distance. It felt similar to how he'd tracked down the Loci of Power in Fiend territory, but from even farther away, somehow. His range of detection had seemingly increased. As that was a discrepancy which worked in his favor, Rob was more than happy to chalk it up to Deadlands weirdness and call it a day.

Based on what he could sense, they would arrive at the Corrupted Locus in around two days. A Blight would likely be guarding it. That was a two-for-the-price-of-one deal; killing Blights would raise his Level, and expunging Corrupted Loci would weaken their stranglehold on the Deadlands.

Rob grinned. He loved when the universe let him indulge in his favorite hobbies.

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It was the ninth day of travel. The Corrupted Locus was within walking distance. Several hours, give or take.

Rob found himself stuck in a mire. Not one conjured by the Deadlands, oh, heavens no. That would have been merciful. This mire consisted of good ole' fashioned social awkwardness, and no amount of Purge Corruption was fixing *that*.

Nor was it possible to escape from, as the source of his troubles was currently sitting on his shoulders. Elder Duran had been riding piggyback for most of the trip. Rob didn't mind, and there wasn't any reason to have an ailing old man waste his energy. Before today, the two of them had passed the time by engaging in spirited conversation, something that the both of them highly appreciated.

Now, they were silent. All because of the dumbest debate in the history of mankind.

Freaking self-sacrificing grandpa, Rob grimaced. Leave him behind to fight the Blight? Like hell I'm doing that. I can make it work, even with a handicap.

Elder Duran had posited that, with the Deadlands weakening, he should be safe to stay at a distance while Rob felled the Blight. Rob had then pointed out that splitting up in horror movies always ended poorly. The Elder countered by saying that not having him ride piggyback would drastically increase Rob's battle options. Rob insisted that he could throw Duran again if the situation called for it, which was much safer than leaving him behind to get picked off by an ambush.

They went back-and-forth for a time, their arguments transitioning from sensible to outlandish, until it became exceedingly clear that neither was willing to risk the other. Which was inherently nonsensical – they were in the Deadlands, *everything* held risk – yet also expected. When it came to protecting the people they cared for, rational reasoning typically played second fiddle to emotion.

Worst of all, Rob knew he had absolutely zero right to be annoyed with Elder Duran for acting self-sacrificial. The pot calling the kettle black wouldn't have begun to describe that.

"So," Duran sighed, eventually breaking the silence. "You are committed to going into battle with me atop your shoulders? As if you were some baseborn steed?"

Rob rolled his eyes. "You're trying to make me upset. It won't work."

"...I could poke you in the eyes and push off."

"Now you're just being petty."

Duran let out a deeper sigh this time, one full of tightly-wound anxiety. "I...am worried for you, Rob. That is all. Your well-being means the world to me. There is no guarantee that this next Blight will be as manageable as the last, and if it used my presence as a tool to harm you, I'm not certain I could ever forgive myself."

"Took the words right out of my mouth," Rob muttered, the levity having fled from his voice.

Despite everything, Duran chuckled. "You know, I was warned of a situation such as this. They told me: Never put two stubborn fools on a mission together. They'll spend so much time trying to outdo each others' heroics that both will jump into an early grave with cries of '*Save Yourself!*' on their lips. Without heartless minds to steady the course, you risk an avoidable – albeit grandiose – failure."

Rob suppressed a smile. "Can't say they were wrong. Who'd you hear that from?"

"My commanding spymaster."

The admission nearly caused Rob to stumble, as if it was a rock abruptly dropped in his path. "Wait," he sputtered. "You had a spymaster? You were a *spy*? Like, cloak and dagger stuff?"

Duran paused. When he spoke again, he sounded almost embarrassed. "I was, yes. Some two hundred years ago. Infiltrated enemy nations on multiple occasions. Harpy territory, mostly, but Dragonkin and Dwarven territories as well."

After a couple seconds, Rob managed to pick his jaw up from off the floor. "Why didn't you mention this before?"

"I swore an oath to secrecy. Only my spymaster knew of my identity. Not even Seneschal Sylpeiros himself is aware; that is how many layers of obfuscation we hid under." He shrugged. "Barely seems important now, though. My spymaster died in the Cataclysm, and I've infiltrated the one place in Elatra that man was never meant to tread. If he could see me now, he'd have *words* – few of them complimentary."

A distant memory sprang up in Rob's mind. When they'd been in Harpy territory, gradually marching towards the capital, Duran single-handedly pacified one settlement by going in and talking with its mayor. The Elder implied that he'd met up with an old flame...yet what if it was a former contact from his espionage days?

What if it was *both*?

"I can't believe you've been holding out on me," Rob marveled. "Come on! Give me a story of intrigue and backstabbing! You're alive, so that would spoil how it ends, but still."

Duran sagged. "If it's alright with you, I shall decline that request." He hesitated, nearly seeming to end the conversation there, before pressing on. "In truth? While those times were rife with excitement, and while I truly did my utmost to assist Elven territory, I have also come to feel a measure of regret towards the past. People were hurt as a result of my actions – not all of them fully deserving. That is another thing my spymaster warned me of. He said that as the years went by, I would start to question myself more and more...and that one day, I would stop and ask whether any of it was worth it."

The mood whiplash slapped Rob in the face, putting him off-balance. "Was it?" he asked, his voice moving faster than his thoughts.

"Overall? Mostly. I took part in more good experiences than bad, and my accomplishments were deserving of pride. However, out of respect for the people who I could've done better by, I would prefer not to enshrine that period of my life as if it was just glory-filled halcyon days. You understand."

Rob did. He wasn't old and wrinkled himself, but the Harpy war campaign alone counted for a lot of added years. *The Grand Overseers will probably commission a play about it, he imagined. They'll craft a tale of a small diplomatic procession going on to storm the capital city and depose a Blighted King. The innocent people who died along the way? Swept into the background. Then the Fiend children will run up to me, sparkles in their eyes, and ask me all about – damnit.* "I'm sorry if I brought up bad memories."

"Think nothing of it." He could hear the smile in Duran's tone. "It gladdens me to see you haven't yet lost your adventurer's spirit. And as I said, those days were hardly a parade of misery and mistakes."

When I wasn't availing myself of a territory's secrets, I took the time to speak with its citizens and learn of its culture."

The Elder sat up straighter, his vigor returning. "My line of work introduced me to a wealth of ideas and concepts that I'd never dreamed of before. Although I didn't know it then, that is when I first began walking the path of a scholar. Why, I could have spent years perusing the archives of just one city. If only..."

He suddenly went quiet. Duran stayed silent for a full minute, sinking into contemplation, as if choosing his next words with great care. Anticipation built in Rob's chest – was the Elder going to divulge a riveting spy thriller after all?

Sadly, his expectations were dashed upon the rocks of reality. "Rob," Duran said, drawing out the name. "I have a question."

Uh oh. Those words combined with that tone rarely preceded a fun conversation. "Yeah?"

"The Elysium Blight mentioned a Skill titled Ageless. Do you possess it?"

Rob sucked in air through his teeth. "Right. Well. Was kinda hoping that detail slipped past you."

"It said: '*Ageless. A wellspring of life unending*'. Even amongst the cavalcade of vague information that the Blight shared, I did not fail to notice that." Elder Duran kept his voice neutral. "This isn't meant to be an interrogation. And yes, I recognize the irony in claiming that mere moments after admitting to being a former spy. I simply wish to know why you've hidden this Skill from us."

"How do you know I've hidden it from *everyone*?" Rob said, stalling for time. "Riardin's Rangers can keep a secret."

"Seven of you can. Malika, however..." Duran trailed off, offering no further argument.

Got me there. He massaged his temples. *I should just get this over with. Can't misdirect him forever, especially when we're on a roadtrip with virtually no distractions around.* "Okay, so, I have a Skill called Ageless. It doesn't matter."

"It matters a great deal. While I presume the ability does not render you impervious to harm, as you wouldn't have neglected to mention that much, it *does* sound as if it bestows immortality."

Rob shuffled uncomfortably. "It would if I had it activated."

There was a pause.

"You don't..." Duran seemed at a loss for words. "May I ask why?"

"It won't prevent my soul from degrading, if you're wondering about that. Had a talk with Hauz."

The Elder let out an honest-to-god *harrumph*. "Hauz, the Soul Surgeon? *That's* who you've told?"

Rob raised an eyebrow. "Not a fan?"

"He is insufferable. That he is also competent only serves to highlight how little time anyone would willingly spend with him in a non-professional setting."

"That's half of why I told him, honestly. I don't super care what he thinks of me. Makes him a good sounding board. The other half is that he's my *doctor* – you'd be chastising me if I **hadn't** informed him of something with the potential to alter my body and soul."

"A fair point," Duran grumbled. "So. Ageless cannot forestall your soul's degradation. While that is a pity, it fails to explain why you haven't activated the Skill regardless. Immortality is perhaps the most coveted treasure in all of society. Many people would give anything and everything to obtain it."

Intimately aware that he was speaking to a centenarian with scarce few years left, Rob tried to phrase his reasoning in a way that wouldn't make him sound like an ass. "I just don't want to live forever. I'd outlast the people I care about, and that sounds...miserable, really."

"Ah." Immediately, the Elder's tone went from mystified to understanding. "That aspect would trouble me as well. Although I must implore you to reconsider your decision, it is one I can at least comprehend."

Rob sighed. "Been thinking of toggling it on and off," he muttered. "That way I won't outlive Riardin's Rangers. *Would* outlive my parents and Jason, though."

"I'd certainly hope you outlive your parents. That is the natural order of things."

"I know, I know. Look, it's...I'm not great at connecting with people, okay? Before Elatra it was just my folks and the one close friend who put up with me. Only reason you guys bothered is because we got forced into proximity. I'm like a fungus that grew on you."

Duran smacked the side of his head.

"Hey! What—"

"Be kind to yourself," the Elder stated, in a tone that brooked no argument. "That is an order."

"But—"

"An. Order. By denigrating yourself, you denigrate the trust and love that others have placed in you."

Rob's protests died in his mouth. What could he possibly say to that?

"Take away your Levels," Duran continued. "Take away your Skills. Take away your status as Leader. Do all that, and you, Rob, would still have far more to offer than you let yourself believe. There are few men as compassionate or loyal as you. I doubt I will fully convince you in the span of a single conversation, yet know this: do not be afraid to reach out to others. Some might disappoint you, but eventually, you will find those who can forge a true connection with."

His voice softened. "And even people who you are unable to connect with can still offer valuable perspectives. Everyone has a unique way of interpreting the world around them. Like each life story is a precious gem, waiting to be uncovered. If I had more time, that's what I would do. Talk to people, read accounts, *learn*. I could spend a thousand years traveling Elatra and never grow tired of it."

He laid a hand on Rob's shoulder. "That is all I wish for you. To enjoy life to its fullest."

A mixture of warmth, gratitude, and heartache pierced Rob's chest. "Thank you," he mumbled. "I promise to be nicer to myself. And...hey, you're already traveling the world right now, you know? The Deadlands is uncharted territory! You'll be able to pen Elatra's first-ever account of it."

"I suppose." Duran peered around at their surroundings. "Although, honestly? I find it difficult to derive interest from this place. Its most awe-inspiring sights are the product of false illusions. Once we've expunged the Corrupted Loci, naught will be left but dry, arid soil."

Hearing the sullen note in his voice sent Rob's thoughts into overdrive. There had to be some way he could raise Duran's spirits. Especially after everything the Elder just said.

"Say," Rob began, an idea dawning on him. "How would you like to speak with a human from Earth?"

"Am I not currently?"

"I mean a human who's on Earth *right now*. You remember how I got a Skill that lets me contact my friend back home?"

Duran tensed up. "Cross-dimensional communication," he whispered.

"Yup," Rob said, with a nod. "You can't speak to him directly, but I can relay your messages back and forth." He grinned. "What do you say? Jason is a bonafide Earthling who knows tons of stuff I don't. I'm sure he'd jump at the chance to chat with you."

Rob could *feel* the Elder vibrating with excitement. After a couple seconds, though, it gradually subsided, like a balloon that had sprung a leak. "I shouldn't", Duran said, putting on a mask of stoicism.

"Your capacity to speak with your friend is limited, correct? I am well-aware of how strongly you desire to converse with him. It would be uncouth for me to monopolize—"

"Too late, contacting him."

He ignored Duran's sputtering as Dimensional Message activated. *"Jasooooon! You busy?"*

<"I'm in a meeting with top military officials, so no. What's up?">

"I've got an Elf scholar on the line who loves learning stuff about Earth. He's a great guy and could use some cheering up. Mind indulging his curiosity for a while?"

<"One sec.">

Fifteen seconds passed.

<"Alright,"> Jason said, sounding mildly out of breath. *<"I'm ready now. Had to excuse myself from the meeting.">*

"They were okay with that?"

<"Not sure. I dove out a window, and the rushing air made it hard to hear what they were saying.">
His voice swelled with enthusiasm. *<"So who's the elf? What does he want to talk about? What's his name?">*

"It's Duran, and..." Rob paused, then looked back over his shoulder. "Jason is asking what you want to talk about."

The Elder's eyes widened. "This is all happening so quickly!"

"Yeah, I think he'd be okay with pretty much anything. History, trivia, personal interests, you name it."

<"Sounds good to me."> Jason adjusted his voice, sounding a bit less cocky. It was the inflection he used when meeting someone new; not quite a 'job interview' voice, but toned down so that people could feel at ease. <"It's nice to meet you, Duran. Thanks for keeping an eye on Rob – I know he can be a handful.">

Rob did his best to copy Jason's way of speaking, repeating the words verbatim. In response, Duran sat up straight, putting on his game face. "A pleasure to meet you as well, Jason of Earth. I must confess that I am unprepared for this conversation, and hope that you do not take umbrage with the influx of questions that may ensue."

<"Nah, don't worry. It's cool that you want to learn about Earth. What do you want to know first?">

"To start...what are some common cultural traits on Earth?"

<"Say what?">

"Your culture," Duran repeated, patiently but excitedly. "I've heard Rob's perspective, but he is just one man. What is life like there? What are *your* traditions? What defines you outside of the necessities for survival? Tell me of some little things humans do; the unimportant trivialities."

<"That's a tough question to answer. The thing is, I think the dumb shit we do – the stuff that doesn't really matter – is also what matters the most.">

Duran paused. "Would you care to elaborate?"

<"If you ask me, the random crap we do for fun is what makes being alive worthwhile. The more meaningless something is, the more **special** it actually is, yeah?">

Jason stopped for a moment to put his thoughts in order. <"Let's say you wake up early to draw a painting. You're planning to sell it, because, can't eat without money. Even if you take pride in the end result, it's going to be overshadowed by that motivation of not wanting to starve. But if you were painting for zero benefit, doing it just for the sake of creating art...well, that says a lot more about you, doesn't it?">

Elder Duran tapped his chin, as if deciphering an ancient text. "I'm not sure I agree with that philosophy. An endeavor is not denigrated by the success it brings."

"No, that's not what I meant. Success is rad. It's just...when everything goes to hell, and you don't even know why you should bother getting up the next day...it's that thought of 'Yeah! I get to do fun shit this weekend!' that'll keep you going. Even right now with all these monsters running around – shit, especially right now – that still holds true.">

Rob could see the gears turning in Duran's head. There was somewhat of a culture clash going on there. While Elatrans did have some hobbies, their entertainment industry was miles behind Earth's, and more of their mental space was devoted to long-term survival. The existence of Classes and Class Levels also made them hard-wired to associate their job with their personal identity. Hobbies existed, but hobbyists not as much, except perhaps among the exceedingly wealthy.

"Your claims almost seem irrational," the Elder began, "yet there is a connecting thought that gives it a strange believability. Especially when delivered with such overflowing confidence."

Rob chuckled. "That's usually what talking to Jason feels like."

"Excellent," Duran beamed. "I find it invigorating. Jason – can you give examples of these meaningless actions that mean so much to Earth humans?"

<"Oh, totally. People have all sorts of interests. There's listening to music, reading books, playing games, spending time with their friends...the list goes on.">

"And what of you, Jason of Earth? Do you have anything like that?"

<"Sports."> It was an immediate response. <"Tennis, for me. It's a...how do I phrase this...physical activity where we compete against each other under specific rulesets. Sometimes you win money, but that's rare. Most games are just for fun and bragging rights.">

Duran's gears started turning again. Rob knew why. While hobbies in Elatra were less common than on Earth, that trend went even further with organized sports, which essentially didn't exist. Combat Class users were partly to blame for that – Levels meant that the illusion of equal competition was impossible. No one could get hyped over a Level 25 dunking on a Level 18.

The rest of the blame fell to time management. Why make your soldiers play sports when they could be training, hunting monsters, or expunging Dungeons? Keira had made some attempts to get a boxing league started after Rob told her of it, but that just wouldn't be possible until the world was at peace once more.

"A physical competition with no reward..." Duran trailed off, letting his words hang for a moment. "And from what you said earlier, that lack of compensation is what turns a meaningless activity into something meaningful?"

<"Exactly!"> Rob had trouble mimicking Jason's excited tone, but he did his best. <"The world isn't in danger when you're playing a match. Regardless of whether you win or lose, no one is going to die. You're just a couple of idiots working themselves to the bone to win a game. But there's something beautiful about that, you know? Watching people who wake up, eat, and breathe all for the sake of a single activity, battling it out...you really feel like you're seeing their lives clash on the court.">

"Does that boost of morale help you survive the Blight invasion plaguing Earth?"

<"It used to."> For a moment, Jason sounded wistful. <"Been a bit busy. Can't wait until I get back on the court, especially since I've got those superpowers now. Still think Nadal is beating me, but hey, gotta love the game.">

Duran appeared taken aback. "You think a normal Earth human would be able to defeat someone with Levels?"

<"Look, all I'm saying is that if we sent the Blight to the French Open and had it play Rafael Nadal, he's clearing up this apocalypse in three straight sets.">

The Elder looked to Rob for confirmation, who shook his head with poorly-suppressed amusement. He'd been expecting Jason to speak about practical things like technology or daily life, but in retrospect, this made more sense. Distracting someone with ramblings so that they didn't have time to feel depressed was a Jason classic.

<"Am I confusing you?"> the man himself suddenly asked.

"To a degree," Duran admitted. "Some of the finer details yet elude me. I was hoping to ask more regarding—"

<"That's awesome!"> Jason exclaimed. <"Isn't being confused just the greatest?">

Elder Duran froze with muted shock. "You think so as well?"

<"Listen man, I could talk your ear off for hours about Earth's accomplishments. How we've burned rocks into the shape of birds that fly through the sky. How we've tamed wild animals, or about how we fight death every day with modern medicine. But all of those things are **consequences**, not causes. Can you guess what drives us invent new things?">

"A thirst for discovery," Duran answered, his eyes twinkling with delight.

<"Hell yeah!"> Jason shouted so loud that Rob wished he could move an invisible cell phone away from his ear. <"It's part of human nature. When we don't know something, we get curious. To satisfy that curiosity, we experiment. If you want to know more about humanity, know this – we do a bunch of weird shit over here.">

He paused. <"Does that make you want to find out more?">

"Extraordinarily so." The Elder was grinning from ear to ear. "Truly, you are a people after my own heart. If only we had the time for a thousand more questions."

<"Ah, don't stress over it, elf man."> Even through interdimensional communication, Rob could tell Jason was physically waving off the idea that there wasn't time. <"A picture says a thousand words, so

visiting Earth in-person should answer all those questions for you. You should hop on over whenever I drag Rob back here.">

Duran closed his eyes. For a moment, Rob saw the shadow of the Elder's morality weigh heavy on him. "That may not be possible. I—"

<"Of course it's possible.">

"...How?"

*<"No idea,"> Jason replied, with a verbal shrug. <"Maybe you guys figure out a way, maybe we figure out a way. Doesn't matter. The only thing that you should be thinking about is whether you *want* it or not. Details can come later.">*

For the first time, a sliver of frustration crept into Duran's voice. "And how can you be so certain?"

<"Isn't it obvious?"> There weren't any hidden intentions or irony behind Jason's words. He truly believed there was no need to elaborate. When he continued, his voice was filled with so much confidence it seemed less like a boast, and more like he was telling someone that the sky was blue. <"Both of our sides have done the impossible again and again. Nothing's stopping us at this point. I'm going to get Rob back here – that's not up for debate. So why not grab you too while I'm at it?">

Duran opened and closed his mouth several times. Eventually, he found the wherewithal to respond. "That...does sound rather nice."

<"Then it's a date!"> Jason smiled through his words. <"We'll teach you tennis, show you lots of human inventions, then music, theater, books – all of that! It'll be great!"

"I..."

<"You didn't say no, so I'm taking that as a yes.">

Jason briefly stopped talking. When he returned, his jovial tone was tempered with annoyance.

<"Sorry to bail, but I gotta go make sure Earth doesn't get wrecked. Want to make sure you have a good first impression when you visit. There's this cyborg dolphin blightspawn thing we apparently need to take care of and – yeah signing off now. It was nice meeting you, elf dude!">

Duran slowly nodded. "Likewise, Jason of Earth. Hearing your perspective on life was a pleasure. Truly and honestly."

Dimensional Message faded. Elder Duran fell quiet. Rob said nothing, letting the Elf sort out his thoughts.

After a long time, Duran finally spoke up. "The dimension mages," he began, choosing his words with care. "Did they inform you of how long it would take to create a functioning portal to Earth?"

"A few months to a few years." Rob kept his tone neutral. "They've got a portal big enough to send a letter, so that's a great start. Now it's just a matter of widening it so people can fit through."

Duran clenched his fists, then released them. "I think...I think that once we've expunged the Deadlands...I will begin researching methods to extend my lifespan. After all – it would be rude to refuse such a kind invitation."

The Elder locked eyes with Rob. "As severe Corruption poisoning was what left me in this weakened state, Purge Corruption may be the key to reversing its damages. Will you assist me in this endeavor?"

"Like you had to ask." Rob grinned, then raised his hand, palm facing out. "You're gonna love the Earth Grand Tour. It's all expenses paid."

Duran's smile filled with warmth as he completed the high-five. "I look forward to it with bated breath."

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Changes:

Perception +10

Mind +5

Illusion Resistance: 1 → 2 (from increasing Perception and Mind)