

"Remove the beacon," Fames demanded.

"No," Kismet replied.

There was a brief, awkward silence as Fames was caught off-guard. He seemingly hadn't been expecting such a brusque dismissal. "*Consider* removing the beacon," he hazarded.

"No."

"Is...is that all you have to say?"

"I dislike wasting words on even a good day. Speaking with you is always wasted words, and today is hardly a good day."

Kismet turned away from the flare of outrage his response inspired, peering back into the scrying portal. *Their travel is proceeding apace*, he thought, watching the mortal alliance make their way through the Deadlands. *Consistent. Quick. Perhaps not quick enough. Food largest concern. Could transport some to them, but would need approval regarding—*

"Our Influence is being drained!" Fames practically screeched. "Vital energy, worth more than the suns and the stars – *wasted* just to assist those transient fireflies, those suckling *leeches*. How are you not filled to bursting with rage over our reserves waning?"

With no small amount of irritation, Kismet closed the scrying portal. "We held a vote," he plainly stated. "This was the course we chose."

"*We* chose nothing. Vivacity abstained, Odium provided no reasoning, and Iram has been terrified of rousing your ire. It was a farce of a vote, and you know that well. "

*You're right about that much.* When Rob directly appealed to the divine planes for a beacon to guide his path, it had prompted an emergency meeting. Nine seconds on the mortal planes, and far longer in Kismet's realm. After a fierce debate, they came to a choice by way of democracy, each mind sharing equal weight in their final decision.

In theory. In practice, Kismet's faction had nearly been guaranteed to prevail from the start. Vivacity would have voted against the beacon under normal circumstances, but ever since her ill-fated attempt at kidnapping Jason, she'd grown wary of her own judgement. That left five votes, with one being Kismet himself, and another being guaranteed to support him.

He glanced at Fames, who was currently sequestered in his own little corner of the divine realms. Like a forlorn child sent to dinner without supper. *This would be less painful for you if you'd just admitted your mistake*, Kismet mused. Rob's Level 99 ??? Skill couldn't remain a secret forever. Eventually, the news would reveal itself, and everyone would know that Fames was responsible.

In the meantime, though, Kismet was plenty happy to use the knowledge as blackmail – no, as leverage. 'Blackmail' sounded so...*barbaric*. It wasn't his fault if Fames interpreted certain implied words in an unfavorable manner.

With those two votes locked in, Kismet had required just one vote from either Malid, Fames, or Odium. Majority approval would allow him to tap into their well of communal Influence and forge the beacon. Fames was a hypocrite who frittered energy to give Dwarven territory nuclear weapons, while also complaining when resources were used elsewhere, so his support was unlikely. Kismet anticipated needing to convince Malid instead.

Only for Odium to swiftly vote in favor with a single spoken 'Aye'. One word to cast his ballot, and zero words to justify himself.

*What is it like, I wonder?* Kismet's gaze drifted towards Odium. In the eyes of someone that he should rightfully call kin, Kismet found crystal-clear reflections of simplicity. No doubt. No hesitation. Just pools of wrathful hatred, waiting for their next opportunity to inflict suffering upon the undeserving.

Out of everyone who resided in the divine planes, Odium was the closest to embodying the spirit of the *#\$@&@#()\*\$*. And while that unnerved Kismet – although he'd never admit as much out loud – it also sparked a flicker of jealousy within him. Odium had voted for the beacon solely because it would put the mortal alliance on a collision course with further violence. That was all. Concerns regarding Influence or reputation were distant in comparison.

It seemed...enviable, almost. To always know your intent. To always have a purpose. To not need to plan or fret or entertain the insipid grumbling of your peers. To possess a mind unclouded by complications.

Maybe next time, Kismet would try it. For now...

"We die without the beacon." He didn't bother raising his voice or projecting his mana. Words would suffice here. "Rob's alliance would be unable to find the Grand Dungeon otherwise. We only know its location because he weakened the Deadlands by excising a Corrupted Locus, and that's *with* our benefit of scrying. Without guidance, those morals would flounder, untethered from natural laws, wandering in infinite circles as the #\*\$&@#()\*\$ slowly closed its maw upon them."

He conjured an image of a basic double-sided scale. "Two paths lay before us. The first is the path we currently walk; one of necessary sacrifice." A heavy weight landed on the left side of the scale, tilting it dramatically. "We burn Influence to assist Rob. This beacon won't be the last of our expenditures, I assure you. In the end, he slays the #\*\$&@#()\*\$, and then we take our time sweeping the rest of the board aside."

An utterly colossal weight landed on the right side of the scale, completely shifting its balance away from the left side. "Or we could choose the path of guaranteed demise. Bereft of our assistance, Rob falls. The #\*\$&@#()\*\$ finish their ascension inside the Grand Dungeon. They use the route charted by King Elnaril to pierce into the divine realms. We are devoured. Our existence concludes as a result of hubris and error."

He dismissed the image with a shrug. "Should I devise a clearer example, or—"

"I KNOW!" Fames spat. "I know. But...at this rate, we won't have enough of our reserves left to enjoy the world after this one. Can you imagine? So much time...and then..."

An involuntary shudder swept through him. "Do you not feel *anything* at the notion of wasting the next world? In order to replenish ourselves, we will need to absorb all it has to offer. No games or enjoyment – just satiation."

Kismet imagined what it would be like to double the usual length of their isolation. The thought nearly made him snuff out the beacon right then and there. Unbridled panic almost crept into his tone, but he managed to keep it at a level that merely sounded like vague dissatisfaction. "It will be painful, true. Torturous. Even so...we shall endure. The abyss is a cavernous monster, yet however vast it may be, it is worth crossing for these fleeting moments of color."

He paused for emphasis. "Unless you disagree?"

"Never." Fames drew himself up. "And I'm offended that you'd suggest otherwise. If anyone here was to surrender to the abyss, we all believed *you* would be the first, Kismet."

*...A fair point. He had been rather listless before Rob arrived. The Human's antics managed to pull Kismet out of his long ennui, filling the world with vibrance and uncertainty once more. Rob was still a destabilizing element that needed to perish for the sake of the divine realm's goals, but credit must be given where credit was due.*

*Perhaps I should enshrine him. Preserved, like fossilized amber. Kismet laughed openly. Yes. I can think of no greater honor. In that form, he can be his purest, most absolute self. Eternally hurting, eternally struggling – and destined to fail at the end.*

*Which Skill should he become, I wonder?*

Fames narrowed his eyes at Kismet's laughter. "I'm glad you can derive *some* amusement from our predicament," he drawled, his voice dripping with sarcasm. "If you won't remove the beacon, then put your efforts towards finding an alternative solution. How goes your research into Purge Corruption? If we can replicate it, the Human's cooperation will be unnecessary."

Kismet's mirth evaporated as he was reminded of his progress – and lack thereof. "You will be informed when I have positive developments to share."

For a moment, Fames seemed about ready to jump on that point, wanting to drive it in like a knife through cracked armor. Then he just...sagged, the fight going out of him. "Is it really so difficult?" he

whispered. "I am aware that I speak from a place of ignorance on this matter. You were chief among us when it came to fabricating the system. If you say it is impossible, I have no choice but to believe you."

He sighed. "Just tell me – how? We made the Skills what they are. Even the rarest gems of mortal souls are nothing compared to our existence. Why can't we reproduce something of their creation?"

Faced with that degree of honesty, Kismet could only speak candidly in return. "If I knew the answer to that," he murmured, "then the problem would already be solved."

Purge Corruption. Out of all the ways that the Skills had empowered Rob or interfered with Elatra...this was the one anomaly that Kismet could not explain. It wasn't unique just for its capacity to slay the *#\$%&@#()\*\$*. Rather, it was unique for its capacity to slay them *without recourse*. Rob could lay his hand on a creature from beyond the stars, channel energy into them, rend their existence asunder, and come out no worse for the wear.

If Kismet or any of his brethren had attempted the same, they would have achieved a mutual destruction at best.

At first, he'd assumed that the Skills were tapping into some hitherto undiscovered wellspring of power. Variant mana from a hidden pocket dimension, for instance. It was an implausible explanation, but at least it would have accounted for why Purge Corruption's mana was anathema to the *#\$%&@#()\*\$* – and why the ability had arisen seemingly out of nowhere.

Examining it in closer detail quickly debunked that hypothesis. From what Kismet could surmise, Purge Corruption employed the same type of mana as Elatra, the system, and the divine. Rob's Sub-Class was somehow creating that energy within a makeshift internal Locus, then transmuting it into a form that was lethal to Corruption. Accomplishing what the gods themselves had never been able.

As if mocking them.

Kismet took nothing for granted after that. He observed. He experimented. He learned. Yet despite watching Rob cleanse Corruption on numerous occasions, Kismet simply couldn't replicate the effect. It went against the foundational core of what the *#\$%&@#()\*\$* and the divine *were*. As opposites,

neither was meant to come into contact with the other. Water doused fire, and fire boiled water into steam. The same principle applied.

Which was a quaint way of framing how the *#\*\$#@&@#()\*\$* could permanently and gleefully end Kismet's existence. The fact that it would be a mutual destruction mattered naught to them. Those *abominations* would return, eventually. Entropy was the natural course of the universe, and it inevitably gave rise to more which embodied its essence. Kismet doubted that his kind would be so fortunate.

Knowing that, he had forced himself to accept that something like Purge Corruption might be beyond his reach. The very nature of the divine made such an ability unfeasible. And while mortal souls were specks, infinitesimal in the grand scheme of things, their differences opened certain doors that were barred to divinity. It helped that the Skills were the most radiant souls among their kind – given millennia of preparation, Kismet could envision them inventing a wonder such as Purge Corruption.

That explained the 'how.' It only necessitated that he shred his pride, but it was an explanation nonetheless.

Yet it did not explain the all-important *why*.

The *#\*\$#@&@#()\*\$* had been dormant for thousands of years prior to resurfacing. Why bother creating an ability to slay them? If anything, Kismet would have assumed that the Skills would be cheering those *things* on, rooting for them to pillage the divine realms, topple the system, and end their torment. Aiding the fight against them seemed like a case of mistaken priorities.

Initially, Kismet thought they'd crafted Purge Corruption as a boon for Rob – their chosen champion. That soft-hearted fool was bound to repeatedly clash with the *#\*\$#@&@#()\*\$* in defense of other mortals, and the Skills would be in dire straits if his soul was consumed. But after Kismet's attempts to recreate the ability, and after realizing how complex a task that would entail, he no longer believed it was intended specifically for Rob.

The Human had come to Elatra a mere ten months ago. Purge Corruption could only be a result of many lifetimes of preparation. That wasn't Kismet's pride speaking; it was truth. The Skills must have been planning the ability for centuries upon centuries, and Rob just so happened to be its recipient.

Kismet dearly wished to know their full reasoning. Alas, the one time he'd bother to ask them, he couldn't hear their answer over the cacophony of pained screaming.

He conjured his scrying portal once more. Within it he saw a confluence of opposing wills, all set to meet on the field of battle. Rob's Party, the Dragon Queen, the *abhorrences*...to borrow Earth's vernacular, it would soon become a twenty-car pileup, everyone crashing into each other at full speed.

Yet it was the unseen faction that worried Kismet the most. The Skills were well-aware that this was their one chance at escape. If they failed here, the divine would hamstring them for eternity. Purge Corruption wasn't the only seed of rebellion they must have sowed – there would be others, still waiting to bear fruit. For them to set themselves free, it would require no less than committing the sum totality of resources they'd prepared over countless years.

And while that was a pittance compared to the gods' wealth of Influence...Kismet had already witnessed too many things he would have previously labeled as impossible. When resources were scarce, ingenuity and desperation made for excellent substitutes.

He wasn't looking forward to whatever scheme the Skills unveiled next.

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Vul'to stared at his Character Sheet. One line stuck out to him, seeming to resonate with urgency.

**Class:** Soul Guardian (LV 74)

It was time to make a decision.

Night had fallen – or what approximated night in the Deadlands. Vul'to was laying shoulder-to-shoulder with Meyneth and Diplomacy, their limbs connected with rope, the three attempting to grasp a modicum of slumber. It was easier said than done. While their sleeping arrangements weren't unduly uncomfortable, their surroundings were incredibly ill-suited to the concept of relaxation.

Nothing here felt natural or normal. Sights would shift before their eyes, going from beautiful fields to barren wastelands in the blink of an eye. The sun no longer set, perpetually trapped at its zenith, emitting a pale sickly glow that barely illuminated the ground at Vul'to's feet. Even that faint dimness would fade as the hours passed by each day, the sun's light sapped of its vitality. Only the brilliance of the Gods' Beacon kept their alliance from being entirely submerged in crushing, omnipresent darkness.

Then the sun would brighten, signifying morning, and the cycle would begin anew. Six days of this had stretched Vul'to's nerves to their breaking point. He couldn't help but wonder what might happen if the sun failed to brighten next morning, leaving them with just the Beacon left to guide their way. Would that be enough to protect them from the Deadlands' encroachment?

For some, it already wasn't.

Two people had disappeared thus far. One Dwarf, and one Dragonkin. Neither of them had done anything wrong. They'd followed Duran's advice to the letter, making sure to stay close, sleep shoulder-to-shoulder, keep the ropes attached, and retain strong images of each other in their minds.

It didn't matter. They were there when everyone went to sleep, and gone by the time the night lookouts came to change places.

That incident roused a much greater fear than the potential of being slain by Blightspawn. Vul'to's group had actually managed to avoid further combat casualties, even when an entity as strong as the Village Messenger appeared three days prior. Seneschal Sylpeiros proved his worth there as a veteran of centuries, leading their disparate members into something resembling a cohesive whole. Watching the Dragonkin soldiers begrudgingly fall in line had been quite the cathartic sight to behold.

The mindless Blightspawn hordes that arose every now and then were also less of an issue than Vul'to anticipated. They'd killed several soldiers during the surprise of the first day, but that was when his group was still gaining its bearings. Ambushes were expected, routine occurrences now, and the Blightspawn didn't have an answer to Soul Shield backed up by Level 70+ fighters. The soldiers almost seemed to appreciate when more of the creatures appeared; it gave them momentary purpose, and a tangible enemy they could defeat, as opposed to passively enduring a suffocating darkness.



If a fully-grown Blight reared its head, then yes, that would be cause for panic. But for now, their battles were successful, their Corruption wounds were minimal, and their supplies were...adequate. Rationing had temporarily solved that last problem, at least. It was the Deadlands itself that remained their most dangerous foe. There was nothing else they could do to prevent themselves from vanishing, never to return.

Or worse – if they *did* return.

A shiver swept through Vul'to's body as he remembered what had transpired earlier that day. His group had been trudging along, keeping an eye out for Blightspawn, hopefully making good time. That was when a figure emerged from the fog. They'd all immediately drawn their weapons, conditioned to expect shrieking abominations to come charging forth.

*"Hold!" The Dwarf held up both their hands, eyes wide. "Hold! In Titan's name, hold your damn weapons! It's only me!"*

*That did little to ease their tensions. The group stared at the lost Dwarf with undisguised suspicion, which he picked up on straight away. "Calm yourselves," he said, adopting a fragile grin. "I'm not some monster wearing the skin of an ally. Don't let this place rattle your mind – it seeks to turn us against one another."*

*"Don't move." Sylpeiros ordered. He didn't relax his battle stance by even a fraction, ready to spring forward and gore the Dwarf at a moment's notice. "Where were you?"*

*"I've half a mind to ask you the same thing. Was walking along when everyone suddenly...just...wasn't there anymore. Ropes cut, tracks erased. The shock nearly stopped my heart then and there. Wandered around shouting for five or so minutes, and then you popped in front of me like a pack of specters."*

*Vul'to's stomach clenched at the mention of 'walking along'. The Dwarf had disappeared when they were camped for the night. Sylpeiros seemed to share the sentiment, his grip on his spear tightening. "What day of travel is it?" he asked next.*

*"Just the second day," the Dwarf replied, in a wary tone. "Why?"*

*It was the sixth day of travel, and he'd disappeared on the third.*

*All color drained from the Dwarf's face as their silence answered his question. "Am I missing time?" he whispered, so quietly that it would've been imperceptible without Heightened Senses.*

*"Yes." Seneschal Sylpeiros hesitated, then sighed. "You...may be compromised. Possibly. Ascertaining the truth will have to wait until we reunite with Rob. His ability of Sense Corruption can—"*

*"Kill me."*

*The plea was dropped at their feet like a crate of Firebombs. Muted gasps rang out as the Dwarf hardened his gaze. "Kill me," he repeated. "I cannot be trusted."*

*"That's drastic," Vul'to hurriedly blurted out. "We can still—"*

*"I was gone for too long. Days, apparently. My memory of that time is missing. If the Deadlands tampered with my body and soul..."*

*He trailed off, appearing to gather his resolve. "This same affliction is what struck down Stonewarden Grant. The Blight infected his thoughts, and it nearly led to a war between our nation and Fiend territory. His only recourse was to allow Lord Rob to slay him, for a Corrupted Leader is worse for his people than any Blight could ever be."*

*A bitter chuckle escaped the Dwarf's lips. "I am no Leader, but I \*am\* in a position to sabotage you. Maybe if you bound and tied me, kept watch...no, there's no guarantee that'll work. The safest thing is to cut out the infection before it can fester."*

*Vul'to's mouth felt dry as a desert. While there was a distinct possibility that this Dwarf had been infected – he wouldn't be the first – his guiding motivation was based on falsehood. Stonewarden Grant hadn't been infected or possessed; he was simply a man who capitulated to his own grief and hatred. Diplomacy then spun a cover story to keep peace with the Dwarves, telling them that the Stonewarden was a noble man who'd sacrificed himself after sustaining Corrupting injuries from the Blight.*

*And this soldier wished to emulate that nonexistent sacrifice.*

*"We can't be sure," Vul'to said, almost plaintively. "The Blight has not aimed its full attention at us, and the Deadlands is a mysterious place. You could have vanished for the sake of vanishing. Nothing else."*

*The Dwarf smiled, seeming encouraged that a high-leveled Combat Class user would show distress over his well-being. "Much appreciated, Lord Fiend, but my mind is set. This is the safest choice for us all. If it's too heavy a burden to bear, I can handle the task myself."*

That would have been far too cruel. In an instant, Sylpeiros granted him a swift, painless death. The other Dwarves then gave him a short burial and funeral service, speaking prayers to guide his soul to Titan's Hallowed Halls.

Afterwards, their group silently pressed on. Seneschal Sylpeiros didn't meet anyone's eyes for the rest of the day.

Vul'to didn't want something like that to happen again. It was why he was now looking at 'Soul Guardian' on his Character sheet, sensing the power that resided within.

The longer he spent in the Deadlands, the more that *constrained* feeling had worsened, as if a new Class Skill was right at the tip of his fingers. He'd kept expecting to learn it at practically any moment, but one final push seemed to be missing.

After an extended period of rumination, inspiration struck. He recalled two conversations he'd had in the past – one with Malika, and the other with Rob.

*"Your mana signature is part Elf, and part Fiend," the young Archmage had said, "but it also has a third signature specifically for your Soul Guardian abilities. That isn't how Classes function, Vul'to. They don't possess their own reserve of power or mana. And your Soul Guardian energy feels...new. It comes from the Class itself."*

Unlike other Classes, which drew power from the system, the power he felt surging inside was an intrinsic aspect of Soul Guardian. Similar in some ways to Rob's internal energy stores of Purge Corruption.

And on the subject of Rob...

*"Not to look a gift horse in the mouth," the Human had said, "but it's strange. Your first Soul Guardian Skill blocked Corruption. The second sealed away Leveling High. I can't Sense any Corruption within Leveling High, so that can't be the common element. Is it really just that Soul Guardian has a vague 'guarding your soul' motif, or is there something else to it?"*

They'd never been able to ascertain a consistent 'theme' behind Vul'to's abilities. Nothing definitive, at any rate. Rob's best guess was that the Skills themselves were imparting whatever abilities they thought necessary to advance their goals.

Yet Rob had also made a separate hypothesis – that the Skills were improvising more than they let on. Improvisation such as, for example, hastily constructing a new Class for an Elven soul transplanted into a Fiend's body. How could they have possibly had the time to carefully choose and develop relevant abilities?

The answer was that they hadn't. Soul Guardian's wellspring of power was derived *not* from the system, but from the Class itself. Vul'to's abilities weren't pre-ordained.

He was shaping them himself.

When viewed in that light, the two abilities he'd learned thus far made perfect sense. They both came about as a result of severe and immediate *\*need\**. *'I need to protect us from Corruption'*, and later, *'I need to stop Leveling High from overtaking Rob'*. In each case, Soul Guardian was ready to forge a new Skill at that moment in time, and so it responded to his urgency.

It also bespoke of great trust. A self-evolving Class, one with its own internal energy source, must have taken significant resources to implement. The Skills not only trusted Vul'to with that investment – they trusted him to use and develop his Class wisely.

He would do his utmost to respond in kind.

Vul'to thought hard about the present situation. He considered every detail, every threat. What, right now, more than anything else, did his alliance *need*?

In that instant, a rough idea took shape.

**Name: Soul Burst**

He pulled back before it could fully form, halting his Class expansion in its tracks. Although there was no Description yet, Vul'to could tell that this would be an offensive Skill. Something to strike at their enemies and lay them low.

It just didn't fit. Vul'to was no Soul Warrior – he was a Soul *Guardian*. He'd chosen his Class for one purpose, and one purpose alone: to protect the people he cared for. Slaying foes had always been a mere byproduct of that. Any offensive Skill he managed to create would be a pale imitation of what Rob already possessed.

Purge Corruption was their Party's sword. Vul'to *needed* to focus on being their shield.

**Name: Soul Barrier**

He paused his Class expansion once again. This Skill, he knew, would be an upgraded form of Soul Shield. Larger, longer-lasting, and with heightened durability. Simple, yet effective.

While that felt like a strong contender, he would still perform his due diligence before committing. It was worth noting that his group hadn't overly struggled with the Blightspawn they'd encountered, so an upgrade to Soul Shield might go wasted. The Deadlands absconding with allies was much more worrisome.

**Name: Soul Shackle**

A rather ominous name, but all it seemed to do was keep nearby souls tethered to Vul'to, preventing them from leaving his radius via any means – including forced teleportation. With this, he could guarantee his group's safety. And when the alliance eventually regrouped, that safety would extend to everyone.

Vul'to almost allowed the Skill to form. He knew he should. Lives would be saved if he did. He *\*knew\** he should...

Yet a different *need* sprang to the forefront, violently shoving all other thoughts aside.

**Name: Soul Effigy**

An intense pang of longing pierced Vul'to's chest.

This Skill would create a new physical body. Identical to his old Elven body in every way. Then, it would transplant his soul into that newly-forged flesh, essentially reversing the day when his soul was put into Krazan's body as an act of desperation.

It wouldn't benefit the alliance whatsoever. Vul'to was accustomed to fighting in his Fiend body. If anything, the enhanced strength inherent to all Fiends made him more effective of a combatant than he was before. The alliance did not *need* this Skill.

But Vul'to did.

He lifted his arm to stare at it. Ashen-gray skin. Retractable claws. Toned musculature.

It wasn't him. It wasn't him. It wasn't wasn't *wasn't* him. No matter how many months passed, it would never be him. No matter who he saw in the mirror each morning, it would *NEVER* be him.

*I am an Elf*, he declared, terrified that the thought might one day ring false.

Vul'to's looming sense of disquiet was only amplified by the sliver of hope he'd been forced to quell. Months ago, Hauz the Soul Surgeon had offered him an alternative. It was possible that they could use

the Clay of Life – the amorphous substance that grew Diplomacy's new body – to recreate Vul'to's Elven form, then transfer his soul.

However, the process carried risks. His odds of dying in Soul Surgery were high. Knowing that, Vul'to had chosen to make peace with his Fiend body, taking solace in how he could use it to help protect his friends.

Soul Effigy, though? Even without a Description, he could feel how it was designed to ameliorate those flaws in the procedure. This Skill was guaranteed to succeed, and at no risk to himself.

Temptation beckoned. It was seductive, enticing, as if calling him with the sweetest song in the world. Vul'to could feel the Skill's power *aching* to be used. To give him the thing he wanted most in life.

*...The thing I want most in life.*

He stopped short. Vul'to examined that thought, repeating it in his mind, as if testing it out. The view of his Fiendish arm was still in sight. With just one push, he could be rid of it forever.

A few seconds later, he chuckled to himself. *I suppose I'm hopeless.* Vul'to lowered his arm, a wry grin spreading across his face. He sorely wished to be an Elf again; that certainly hadn't changed. But when he'd imagined that it was the thing he wanted *most*...well, that was one thought that definitely rang false. He'd known his most earnest desire since the moment he picked up a shield.

To ensure that the people he cared for were happy, safe, and free – that was what he strove for in life.

And right now, there was one person above all others that he was concerned for. More than the soldiers who feared for tomorrow; even more than the friends resting by his side. Because despite the dangers they were in, he was confident that everyone here could get through this journey alive. Regardless of what the Deadlands threw at them, they would persevere. He'd make sure of it.

That one person, however, worried him to the point of apoplexy. *If I'm hopeless*, Vul'to mused, *then I should invent a new term to describe him.* What word was there for someone who caused no shortage of headaches, yet could always be trusted to help solve a problem? Someone who fought tooth and nail

to protect their own life, then would gamble it immediately to rescue an unnamed innocent from peril? Someone who championed a world that was not his own – after it had done its utmost to despise him?

It was almost funny, in a grim, ironic sort of way. That person possessed enough Vitality for ten Combat Class users. He could be chopped to pieces and come out with little worse than mild annoyance. Out of everyone involved in this conflict, Vul'to should have been more confident in *his* survival than anyone.

But he wasn't. Neither were the other members of Riardin's Rangers. They'd spoken in private, unanimously agreeing that this was an ongoing dilemma...and that they didn't know how to solve it. Unlike an enemy to slay or a trial to overcome, this wasn't an issue with a clearly-defined solution.

On some days it barely even felt like an issue at all. *That* person could be a veritable force of nature; his sword felling opponents on the battlefield and his tongue wreaking havoc during negotiations, both equally sharp. It would've been far too easy for everyone to stick their heads in the ground and pretend that he was invincible.

Then Vul'to would peer closer and see how there were permanent lines etched under *his* eyes. How his hands twitched at random. How his gaze blanked out when he thought no one was watching. How he suppressed his pain as an afterthought. How he seemed to have forgotten the concept of what it meant to be in danger. How he treated himself as a tool to be exploited in the most efficient way possible.

Numerous details, some small, some large. Too many to ignore. When Vul'to considered all those things at once, he couldn't shake the insistent, unassailable feeling that...

That *he* was running towards an early end.

An urgent sense of purpose welled up within. Vul'to didn't hold back this time, instead spurring it onward. *Give me what I need*, he commanded. *Let me ease his burdens before they crush him. Let him live to set foot on his home world once again.*

*Please.*



*Help me save Rob.*

### **Soul Guardian Ability Learned!**

**Name:** Soul Repair (MAX)

**Prerequisite:** Reach a resolution.

**Description:** Fully repairs any and all damage to a given soul. This includes recent injuries, long-term afflictions, and underlying structural deficiencies. This Skill can be used once per year.

WARNING: If the soul in question is highly unstable, it may be determined that the only way to prevent collapse will be to set it in permanent stasis. In this case, the soul will be repaired, then locked in place. The owner of this soul will no longer be able to gain Levels, upgrade Skills, or learn new Skills. Unintended side effects may also occur.

The *constrained* sensation faded from Vul'to's Class, indicating that its task was complete, and that it wouldn't be able to create a new Skill for quite some time.

Myriad emotions whirled in his mind as he read Soul Repair's Description. He hadn't hesitated before committing to it, which...was probably rash, but seemed to have worked out in his favor nonetheless.

It wasn't a perfect Skill. Nothing that Soul Guardian created would be. As much as Vul'to would've appreciated the ability to snap his fingers and erase the Blight from existence, no Class was remotely that powerful.

With that said, even the Skill's drawbacks were manageable. Only being usable once a year was irrelevant when Vul'to had just one intended target. Restricting further Levels and Skill growth *would* have been abhorrent...for anyone except Rob, who would be reaching max Level fairly soon. There'd be no quandary if they used it after he reached 99. The line about 'unintended side effects' was more troublesome, yet still acceptable considering the boon Soul Repair proffered.

Hauz had stated that Rob's soul could only persist for two months at most before collapsing. Time was difficult to track in the Deadlands, but from what Vul'to could surmise, their alliance left Harpy territory roughly a month ago. That meant Rob had a maximum of one month remaining until his soul failed – and that was without the Deadlands potentially quickening its instability.

It was an eventuality they couldn't have prevented no matter how powerful their Party grew. And now...it was solved. Just like that. When their alliance regrouped, and Vul'to got in range to use Soul Repair, Rob's existence would no longer be on a timer.

Some of the tension in his chest uncoiled. This hardly fixed *every* problem, but it was certainly a step in the right direction. One less point of failure for the Deadlands to prod at. An esoteric solution for an esoteric predicament.

As Vul'to laid there, wishing it was morning so he could grab a radio and tell Rob the good news, a thought occurred to him. In truth, Soul Repair's 'Warning' section was rather unusual. Skills didn't typically go that far to warn the users of potential drawbacks. Was that *the* Skills, speaking to him directly? Ensuring that he didn't haphazardly stunt Rob's growth? Vul'to glanced again at the ability's Description, checking to see if he'd missed anything.

His breath caught in his throat. Two words had been appended to the end of the Description.

*'Thank you.'*

Warmth blooming inside, Vul'to's lips curled into a smile. *You are most welcome.* While he'd already believed that he'd made the right choice...

It was heartening to know that others were looking out for Rob as well.

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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, increasing over time)

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)

Changes:

Vul'to

Level 76 → 77

Learned: Soul Repair

Meyneth

Level 77 → 78

Sylpeiros

Level 81 → 82