

Insight

The closer he got to the thing that was drawing him in, the more he realized that the area he was heading to was... strange. The Empire's lands were mostly desert, towns built on stone ridges, inside oasis-es, on the riverbanks. A desert wasn't all sand, there was life here, but... what he had seen was a land tamed by the Empire. Roads were everywhere, connecting the now abandoned or destroyed towns and castles. It was... civilization's touch, apparent everywhere. Watchtowers. Fortresses. Walls. Trenches.

Ryun had noticed the pattern, it was all designed as a killing field, one turned toward the core. The Empire had been expecting the attack from the North. Even their Wall which had held the dome monsters for years had been made in mind with the war with the Settled Territories. They had never gotten to use them as they had been intended. The war came from the opposite side.

But this place, this area was... untouched. He could sense pretty far, and he knew about the oasis long before he could see it. And the single living thing inside of it. He approached carefully and as silently as possible. Still, he was certain that the monster somehow knew he was coming despite it not moving since Ryun had first detected it.

The oasis wasn't massive like some that he had seen before that spanned entire territories. No, this one was the size of a small, tightly packed village perhaps. Palm trees and other plants filled the area with life, a small lake took the most of the area's center, but Ryun's attention was on something else. At the edge of the lake was a stone platform, rock formations grew out of the ground surrounding it and on top of the tallest rock were two fruit trees, twined together, wrapping around each other towering above the oasis, at least ten stories high. Each tree had one fruit only and below them was a monster.

It was... large. A long sinuous tail and body were wrapped around the twined tree trunks, with the upper half of its body laying on top where the two tree trunks separated into two distinct canopies forming a V shape at the

base. Its front limbs were on top the two trunks and its head rested on the hands.

It had only the two limbs, and the rest was a body and a tail—that made it a lindwrum, in the same family as wyrms, wyverns, drakes and dragons. Covered in scales and long spikes growing out of its spine, two horns on its head, curved to the side then down and forward. It was powerful, that much he was certain about. He twisted the ring on his finger, the one that he had taken off Zenker, and he removed the filters on his interface.

Jikharuud: Eyes of Insight (Tier 18)

Strength	10290
Dexterity	10287
Vitality	15982
Endurance	16879
Intelligence	28902
Wisdom	29024

<i>Capabilities</i>	<i>Effects</i>
Flame of Laqruid	Exhale the flame of your ancestor's soulfire. Deals damage equal to 9x your intelligence, 9x your wisdom and 9x your strength. If you have entered the Legacy of Laqruid , the final damage is increased by 5x.
Scales of Laqruid	The power of your bloodline endures. Improve the endurance of your scales by up to 90x your endurance based on your will. If you have entered the Legacy of Laqruid , the final effect is increased by 5x.
Claws of Insight	Execute a clawed strike through your target's defenses. Deals 9x your strength and 9x your dexterity as damage. The damage

	is doubled if you had used True Insight on them.
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<i>Perks</i>	<i>Effects</i>
Eyes of True Insight	Gaze into the souls of all you lay your eyes on. You can see their deepest parts and gain great insight into who and what they are. You will know the true name of any being that has one. You will understand all the parts that make them who they are. Bypasses protections, but doesn't reveal any power screens.
Legacy of Laqruud	Call upon the blood of the one who started your line. His might infuses you for the next 15 minutes, increasing your size by 2x, you gain +25% to all stats, your wounds rapidly regenerate for the first five seconds after they had been inflicted, your senses are improved by 25%, all piercing and slashing damage you deal is increased by 25%, your capabilities have no cooldown.
Blood of Jikharuud	You have gained great power and recognition. Your blood sings the story of your life. It imbues all that you do and your body with your willpower.

Zenker's ring gave him a lot of insight into monsters, more than he had ever seen before. Especially on a monster of this rarity and tier. A part of Ryun was cautious, this monster was powerful and could kill him. Its raw stats were greater than his, and while Ryun might be able to match it, he wasn't looking for a fight. He was here for a different reason.

He entered the oasis through the air, without touching the ground. Immediately he realized the true nature of it, as soon as he entered. The oasis was a wild dungeon. That surprised him, but it explained the monster sitting in the tree with its eyes closed. Why the Empire hadn't conquered it, that was the question now. He looked around, but so no other monsters even with his eyes. Some monsters might be able to fool his sense, but there were very few things capable of fooling both his sense and his eyes. So, no hidden enemies that he could detect, no traps that he could see. Just an oasis, water and plants. And the rock with an eternal rarity monster on the 18th tier wrapped around a tree with two fruits. Strange and intriguing.

As Ryun approached, the monster stirred, and then it opened its eyes to look straight at him.

"A visitor? A survivor? No, the Empire is now gone, and..." The lindwrum said in a deep voice that carried across the oasis, the tone was slow and almost... tired. But there was something in that gaze. He couldn't see it, to his eyes the monster was just Essence, a sculpture molded out of it, the eyes were blank orbs. And yet, he could feel that gaze. "You are not from the Empire, the agreement does not apply. If you've come to kill me, I will not give you a hard fight. I am already on the way out of this world."

Ryun tilted his head, he had met talking monsters before, some had just screamed at him and wanted only to kill him. Others had talked, were almost apologetic in their manner, but they too had fought against him. He did not feel like this monster wanted to fight him.

"What agreement?" Ryun asked.

The lindwrum raised his head with a weariness and lethargy that spoke of great pain or tiredness, but Ryun saw no wounds on the monster. "Haaa..." the monster exhaled. "One last time then. How did you come to be here if you do not know?"

Ryun debated speaking or not for a moment, but then decided that there was no reason not to. "I can sense your death coming."

The lindwrum tilted his head and narrowed his eyes. Then Ryun felt something go over him, a sensation that was... not unpleasant, but certainly intrusive. "Ah... I see."

It was its perk, he realized. The monster had just seen who and what Ryun was. Ryun had never really bothered much with secrets and deception, so he wasn't bothered that the monster had used something like that on him. What bothered him was what it had seen.

"Your perk," Ryun said slowly.

The lindwrum glanced at Ryun's hand and the rings on his fingers, then back up. "Yes, echo of True Death. It is... Haha," the lindwrum chuckled. "I have lived for a long time, and I have never believed in destiny. Coincidence or destiny revealed? I remember the stories I heard when I was a young wrumling slithering in my sire's blood. They used you to scare naughty children—be good, or the Reaper will come and hunt you. Be good, or the Scythe will walk in your shadows. And then we grew up, and knew that you are who we all must eventually meet. The only choice granted to us was to either go quietly into the Scythe's embrace or run and feel the Reaper's fangs on our throats. No matter, it is... I am grateful, that my end will be witnessed by someone who comes from the same place."

It had seen something in Ryun, an insight it seemed. "I am not the Aspect of True Death, they are gone," Ryun told it.

"Foolishness, you do not understand yourself child, I... no, you are here, you are not of the Empire but an exception can be made. For the last reading I will ever do. The last questions I will ever ask. Rules should be observed, there is power in such things. Let us start from the beginning, then;" the lindwrum raised its head, pushed itself upright in the tree, even though it was obviously hard for it. "You have come to me without knowledge and without wisdom. A Cultivator, an Aspect, a Child, not of the Empire and unbound. Still, I shall grant you what all others who had come here had gotten. Insight into who you are, and a question at the end. As per the agreement made with the Erakael Sand-worn, Duty-burdened, Survivor, Deluded, Leader of the abandoned and exiled, the Unwilling Emperor of the Sands, He Who Walked With Burden. Tell me, who comes before Jikharuud the Eyes of Insight? He who was born in the 936th brood of the line of Laquud the Wisdom of an Age, in a universe that no longer is."

Ryun blinked, that was formal, and he said Erakael's name. The agreement that it—he, had mentioned. This was a dungeon, but a dungeon

with a single monster. Erakael had made a deal instead of fighting and killing the monster, and they had set up an agreement for something. Ryun walked forward, creating steps until he was closer to the monster. Then, he shaped a circular plate-like platform and took a sit with his legs crossed.

“I am Ryun Nacht,” he said simply.

“You are not, not only,” Jikharuud said. “That is a name of a child born in a world that is ash and dust. We will get to who you are. Tell me, which one are you? Reaper or Scythe?”

Ryun considered the question for a moment. The echo of the Reaper was gone, he was sure, yet this monster seemed to think... “Reaper.”

“Yes, I see, the Wolf of the End, and you say you are not the True Death,” Jikharuud said. “I see what you are; many things and one. Ask if and what you want to know.”

Ryun remained silent for a moment, thinking and then he asked. “What is this agreement that you had with the Empire?”

“That is not the right question, but I shall answer. Long ago, we agreed for no death and blood spilled. I betrayed that for which I was sent here while keeping the letter of the pact for which I retained my life, I traded an easy existence in return for my insight. They come to my home to learn who they are, to break through the blocks or gain understanding. Some come to affirm what they already believe about themselves, and often leave more broken than they were. Others come seeking to improve, to fix their flaws. And they come for the reward of this dungeon.”

“Why were you sent here?” Ryun asked.

“For the same reason all others like me are sent to places like these. To spill blood and earn favor for our kind, to be an obstacle and a worthy challenge, to gain a second chance for our people. The first dome was opened and the leader killed, and so finally I pay the price for ignoring the spirit of the pact. I am dying a true death, because I have not fulfilled my part of the deal.”

“The dome? What does that have to do with it?” Ryun asked.

“Even if I wanted to say, I cannot. The others of my kind are less... kind than I am. They would’ve fulfilled their parts, and my kind will see life again. To speak more would violate the old pact fully and that I will not break.”

Ryun remembered his talks with the yeti king, with the molten king and even the leshy. All had said something along the same lines as Jikharuud. Ryun had had an idea about what they were talking for a long time now. The races that were now monsters had once been denizens of a different universe, like how Earth was. They had been given the Framework as well, but they had not been chosen, had not been deemed worthy of the Infinite Realm. Some were turned into monsters. But... perhaps their people had a chance to join the Infinite Realm too, if they fulfilled whatever pact they made.

Finally Ryun decided that he didn't want to push this being on it. Instead, he asked a different question. "Who am I?"

"The right question. I have names for you, things that I see, and I have insight. You are who once was Ryun Nacht, you are **He Who Is Feared, He Who Is Underestimated, He Who Reaches Beyond, and He Who Fears Himself. The Liar and The Mad.** You are **Echo of True Death and Wolf of the End and Harbinger of the Final End, The Witness of the Journey's End,** the half of one whole that once was and always will be, a law of all things. You are **He Who Sees and He Who Knows.** You are **Loved and Loving, Honest and Deceiving, Enduring and Broken, Arrogant Above All.**"

"That, doesn't tell me much that I didn't already know."

"That was the names, now comes insight."

"I can see who you are, the soul and heart of you, the facade and the flesh beneath," Jikharuud said. "You have no True Name. You are too young and unknowing. You are pieces of influences and traits that change still. Cultivation is the path to knowing oneself and so in time you will learn it or not if you do not advance. They will fear you for you do not fear the same things as they, they will underestimate you for you do not care for the same things as they. You reach beyond what they know and you fear what you could do, so you set yourself apart. Isolated and alone, even among others. You lie to them and you lie to yourself, you fear the monster you once were and fool yourself into accepting. You are true death, the heir to that which cannot be created here but exists. Set on the **Path** by the schemer and deal holder, how he plays with us all... Did he see what you could do? Do you see? How he cleans up past mistakes by nudging and showing wool before one's

eyes. You see and you don't, you know and you don't. You love and are loved and fear it. You hide your deceptions behind honesty. The pieces of you that were broken endure. You do not see clearly, for you are arrogant above all and think that you know better. It is worse because you are often right, and do know better."

Ryun didn't answer, he took Jikharuud's insight in. He didn't understand all of it, but he did think on it. He somehow felt that the part of what the monster did was done, and that he shouldn't ask anything else. "Thank you for your insight," Ryun said to him.

Jikharuud inclined his large head, and Ryun saw him have a hard time raising it back up.

"Now we come to the end," Jikharuud said. "Many have come here before me, and all had left with one more thing, the last question. Above me are two fruits, you may choose one to take, which will it be?" He paused and tilted his head as Ryun glanced above at the two fruits. He could see the Essence inside of them, filled to the brim with power and... blood? "That was the agreement at least, but... I will not live for long, and without me they will not grow again. So, you may have them both. One of them will purify and improve all aspects of your body, forge it with the blood of my ancestor—it will change you to something more, if you survive that is, increase your physical attributes and sharpen your soul's connection to it. The other is for your mind, it will grant you insight that I can see. Allow you to face yourself and learn the truth of you. These trees originally grew in the field where Laqruid—the one who sired my line—died. They hold the power of my kinds blood, and it is not for those who are weak of mind or body. Few survive them, I was told. One of the Empire once came here to learn and study the tree, I believe that he had made his own version of the trees. Be very careful if you use mine."

Ryun nodded his head. "Thank you."

"It is time," he said slowly. "Will you do me this last favor?"

"What?" Ryun asked.

"The old ones of my home always met their ends with your previous selves guiding them. I will not run, Reaper, but still. Give me the feel of your fangs on my neck."

The great lindwrum lowered his head, as if giving his neck to him. Ryun didn't hesitate. He would need to think a lot on all that he had heard here. But one thing he knew now, the story of a lindwrum turned monster, who made deals and kept the letter of them. The story of his life, and now the end witnessed. He did not feel sudden true death, only the ones that were... accepted and assured.

He activated his **Wolf of the End** form and approached on steps made out of the Void. The lindwrum's eye met Ryun's.

"Thank you," he said as Ryun activated his aura, filling the oasis with red.

He opened his mouth and then closed it around Jikharuud's neck. The blood spilled down his throat, and he felt the life leave the lindwrum.

Notifications filled his mind and flashed in the corner of his eye.

Oasis of Insight	First to clear the Oasis of Insight Dungeon	+2% to all stats, 50 000 Greater Essence
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