**Earth**

**Algonquin Park Dungeon, Ontario**

**August 15, 2019**

**10:30 EDT**

“It’s a lot mustier than the other dungeon.”

“I noticed that,” I replied, looking up at Anja when I had finished securing my second shield. “Must be less airflow so the air can’t circulate as well.”

“No, I mean it’s musty, like there is a lot of mold in the air, not that the air is stale.”

“Anything to worry about, Ben?”

“Nah. It takes a much higher level dungeon to pose any sort of respiratory threat. At this level it might be a sign of some sort of infected wildlife...it’s too early to tell, though.”

“Alright then. Before we start, I just need to bring something up. It didn’t matter earlier, but now that we’re fighting things at or above our level, we need to watch who gets the killing blow. Mason, Sonja and I all have Siphoning Strike, so we should be the ones finishing enemies off. Now if something is about to attack us from behind or anything like that and you can finish it off before it does, then go ahead.”

“I don’t think we’ll have to worry about that for long,” Ben replied. “With hindsight and all that, Siphoning Strike, Siphoning Shot and Insight probably weren’t the best skills to pair together.”

“Meh, might as well take advantage while we can,” Mason said. “If we can increase the strength of the ability just a little, it’ll be worth it.”

“True, and you can always turn Insight off later on if you guys want to just spend a day or two leveling the abilities.”

“Wait, we can turn it off?” I asked. “I didn’t know that.”

“Yup,” Ben said, taking his phone out. “Insight is one of the only abilities that you can disable, probably so people can group up with their friends rather than have to leave them behind. I only found out when I was looking at my skills yesterday.”

When he was done talking, he turned his phone around so we could see it. Beside Insight, there was a slider that was currently in the ‘On’ position.

“Huh. Is there any limit to how often you can turn it on and off?”

“Yeah, that’s the only downside. If you want to disable it, you’ll need to wait a full seven days to be able to turn it on again.”

“I see. Maybe we’ll be able to work something out when our training starts up where we have it disabled every other week to level up our abilities a bit, rather than just rushing through everyone. Are we all ready?”

“Hell yeah!,” Mason exclaimed. “I’ve got a bet to win!”  
  
-----

**Somewhere in the Sagittarius Dwarf Galaxy**

**The Indomitables Flagship - Nira’s Revenge**

**02:35 SET (10:35 EDT)**

**August 16, 12610 (August 15, 2019)**

“...final count is twenty-one ships with captains or command crews who report to Dhir,” Esriro said. “Total breakdown is nine destroyers, five cruisers, five battlecruisers, one battleship, and one dreadnought.”

“Just when I thought it couldn’t get any worse. Which dreadnought?’

“The Harbinger.”

“Damn it!,” he shouted, throwing his empty mug, smashing it against the wall.

“It’s not all bad news. In fact, it’s better than expected, actually. Twelve of the ships, including The Harbinger, were all commissioned in the last fifteen years or so. The captains and bridge crew in those twelve ships were moved up when the new ships were finished, and I know something they don’t.”

“What’s that?” he asked, pacing back and forth behind his desk.

“We invested a lot of money into all of those ships, and while I was in Pygmaean space, I met with Oya Warvyn. She designed all the ships, with my input. I wanted some additional security in place, so I had her people add some things. You know that we keep DNA records and other information for all employees. With a quick transmission to those twelve ships, we can lockdown the ships, shutting them out of all systems and have all the traitors teleported to the brigs on each ship. In a matter of minutes we can take back control of those ships.”

“What about the other nine?”

“That’s the bad news. Five destroyers, three cruisers and the battleship that make up those nine are older ships that don’t have those added security measures. As soon as we make a move, they’ll know and try to jump away. There are two ways we can deal with them; a simultaneous attack on all nine ships by the entire fleet, or use nine destroyers to take out the bridges before they can react and put up their shields. The problem with the latter is having to tow the ships or transport all the crew members to other ships when it’s over with.”

“You’re confident you can get nine destroyers in position to take out the bridges?”

“Yes,” Esriro replied with a nod. “Abi has finished vetting everyone, and I’ve picked out nine of our newer destroyers, the ones with upgraded shrouds. They’ll be able to move in close without detection and get their shots off. You need to decide if we tow the ships to Pygmaean space or scuttle them after transferring crews over to other ships.”

“The latter isn’t an option. It will take too long to transfer everyone and their belongings, and I want to be gone within six hours. Coordinate with nine of our battleships to take them under tractor beam as soon as the bridge on each ship has been destroyed.”

“You got it. What do you want done with the prisoners on the other twelve ships?”

“Cuff them with inhibitors and transfer them over here. You’ll head up the interrogations.”

“Alright, I’ll go get started on this. I think we’ll be ready to execute everything in approximately three hours.”

Xigios nodded and Esriro left his ready room. After a moment, he got up and grabbed a bottle of Scyftan ale from the fridge, opened it, and then sat back down.

*‘It’s going to be a very long day,’* he thought to himself.

-----

**The Moon**

**Spectre Moon Base**

**August 15, 2019**

**10:50 EDT**

[...three thousand, seven hundred thirty-three traitors were discovered. Only twenty-one ships were compromised, though only nine of those need to be dealt with, since the other twelve are newer and have better security measures. In approximately three hours, there will be a coordinated strike by shrouded destroyers on those nine ships. They will be taking out the bridge on each ship, and then tow them the rest of the way to Pygmaean space and the Warvyn shipyards,] Abi said.

[What security measures are you talking about on those twelve ships?] Tich asked.

[Esriro Dryth is a very paranoid individual, and as such had security measures included while the ships were being built by Warvyn Industries. Chief among them is the ability to lock in on a person and teleport them around the ship. As soon as she gives the go ahead, the traitors aboard those twelve ships will be teleported to the brig, outfitted with inhibitor cuffs and then transported over to The Indomitables flagship, Nira’s Revenge. Esriro will interrogate the prisoners and then execute them.]

[Very good,] Gabriel said. [What do you think their chances are of succeeding without any complications?]

[Esriro is very meticulous, so I would say very high. Their ships can’t maintain shrouds and shields at the same time, and they’re currently operating under shroud, which makes it very easy to destroy the bridges on the nine ships; five destroyers, three cruisers and one battleship. A single low-yield missile will be fired from only kilometers away with just enough power to destroy the bridge on each ship but nothing else. Blast doors leading to the bridge on each ship will also be sealed to help contain the damage and prevent any escape by the bridge crew.]

[She seems quite capable. What about the traitors on the remaining ships?] Tich asked.

[Xigios has ordered them to be arrested as soon as the destroyers are given the signal to attack. They will be interrogated and then placed in stasis, unless we would like something different to be done.]

[Executing them would probably be better, but if Xigios and Esriro are confident that none of them will be able to get a signal off then stasis is fine. Once they get to Pygmaean space, I want them all transferred to the government. They’ll get everything out of them and then either execute them or release them, depending on their guilt,] Thomas said.

[I will forward that to them right away,] Abi said. [Will there be anything else?]

[Not right now, Abi. Thanks for keeping us apprised.]

[No problem. I’ll let you know when everything is taken care of in a little over three hours,] she replied before ending the connection.

“Well, that is better news than expected,” Tich said. “Without those security measures, they probably would have had to disable or destroy some of their best ships.”

“Over thirty-seven hundred is more than we were expecting, but they seem to be spread out throughout the fleet. It could have been quite a bit worse if they were concentrated over a few ships,” Gabriel replied.

“It’s understandable, though. It’s a lot easier to turn one person here and there than it is to do the same on a large scale while in a small place like a ship. Try to turn the wrong person, and everything backfires. It definitely makes it easier to round them all up, though,” Thomas said.

“True,” Gabriel agreed, his attention being drawn over to one of the monitors where Jonathan and his friends were dealing with a variety of very large and infected rodents. As Jonathan charged in, he saw a large porcupine with foam around its mouth and fungus growing on its head. When Jonathan got close, it turned around and then launched its quills like hundreds of small arrows. Before the quills could impact with him, they were deflected by the telltale glow of a Mana Shield.

“How are they doing?” Thomas asked when he looked over to see what Gabriel was looking at.

“I believe they’ve already leveled twice and they’ve only been going for twenty minutes or so. This is only the fourth chamber.”

Thomas laughed. “Legendary Insight sure would have been nice when I was his age. I wasn’t rich, and nor were my parents. It took a lot of grinding for me to reach my current level before going into business. I haven’t leveled up in thousands of years.”

“Well perhaps when everything is dealt with you can give it another shot,” Gabriel replied, looking over at him. “What level did you reach, anyways?”

“Two hundred seventy-seven. I wasn’t good at making friends when I was younger, so I had to do everything on my own. Eventually I got bored of it, but I always thought that if I was a part of a team I would have still been clearing dungeons to this day. There was a massive dungeon discovered recently in Confederation space, you know. If what I’ve been hearing is accurate, the level range is seventeen hundred sixty-one to seventeen hundred seventy, with an unknown level of floors. The Confederation doesn’t send in teams like we do to rank dungeons, but apparently no one has passed the hundredth floor so far, and the bosses are incredibly tough. It’s not uncommon that a team comes out with less people than it went in with.”

“Over seventeen hundred?” Gabriel asked in shock. “I think the highest Spectre is level eleven hundred. I can’t imagine how powerful someone must be if they’re that high level.”

“You and the rest of the Spectres would probably be at that level or higher by now, Gabriel,” Tich said. “The Spectres have been stagnant for far too long. When we left Scyftan space, the Spectres were the ‘cream of the crop’ to use a human expression. By now, you and the others have been left in the dust.”

“I agree, but there isn’t much we can do about it right now,” Gabriel replied. “The highest level dungeon on Earth is the one in the Amazon, and it is too low level for any of us. Occasionally someone will go in to try to gain some power through skills and perks they don’t yet have, but it’s rare that someone gets something they need.”

“There are a lot of high level dungeons in Pygmaean space. I suggest allowing a couple hundred of the newer Spectres to go along with the dragons when they’re taken to Mezotis 3 and 4. Abi will be making a detour anyways, so after the dragons are dropped off, the Spectres can be dropped off there. If they’re smart about it, they can probably level up a few hundred times by the time we’re ready to move.”

“That’s a good idea. They’re not needed here right now, anyways. I’ll think about it.”

“Well, if you give it the go ahead, I’m sure I can get Ercan to loan us some small five man shuttles that they can use for the duration. They’ll essentially be mobile homes and make it easier to go from planet to planet. They won’t be able to level up on one planet alone, after all,” Thomas said.

-----

**Earth**

**Algonquin Park Dungeon, Ontario**

**August 15, 2019**

**11:15 EDT**

We had cleared five chambers up to this point, and were now on our way to the sixth. So far, each of them contained mutated and infected rodents native to the area. Other than the surprise from the porcupines that could fire off their quills, which Mason learned about first hand, and them being many times their normal size, none of them were really a threat.

“Damn this is fast,” Mason said while putting his phone away. “We’re leveling every two chambers or so, and got almost six hundred experience from this one alone.”

“It’s going to start slowing down pretty quickly, though. Not only is the required experience starting to increase quite a bit, but we’re also getting less and less experience. I don’t think we’ll be getting much, if any experience by the time we get to the fourth or fifth floor,” Ben explained. “I think we should move on to another dungeon as soon as we kill the boss on the fifth floor”

I paused to think for a moment before responding, “Get our loot and get out, I agree. It will also let us continue to power up Siphoning Strike and Siphoning Shot.”

Before we could continue our conversation, we arrived at the next chamber. Like the others, it was pitch black, so we each charged up our light globes and tossed them around the room. As they flew through the air, we were able to see what we were up against. There were three raccoons, two porcupines, and a big long, animal that reminded me of a weasel or a marten.

“What is that new one?” Sonja asked.

“I’m pretty sure it’s a fisher,” Ben answered. “At that size, it’s probably as dangerous, if not more so than a large cat. I remember reading something about them somewhere. I can’t remember where, but I do know that they have a very strong bite force, and have been known to take down adult lynxes. At that size, it could probably kill a lion or a tiger quite easily.”

“Alright, same plan as before. I’ll charge in and force the porcupines to fire off their quills, and then we’ll clean everything else up,” I said channeling mana through all four of my weapons.

I activated Mana Shield and then started running in. As soon as I crossed a certain threshold, all six of the animals started running towards me. Just as the fisher and raccoons got close, I Blinked forward and appeared behind both of the porcupines. Right on queue, they stood on their hind legs and launched all of their quills right at me. We found out that they grow back pretty quickly if not taken care of, so I immediately thrust both of my spears forward, impaling each of them through the back. It wasn’t enough to kill them, but it signaled the others to enter the fight.

The raccoons and the fisher turned when I was no longer in front of them, and were quickly closing in on me. Before they could get close, Mason used Whirling Leap to appear behind them, followed by a Cleave and a Siphoning Strike on one of the raccoons, finally killing it. He quickly picked another raccoon and gestured with his left hand causing an Earth Spike to rise up out of the ground, impaling it through the midsection. It wasn’t enough to kill it, but it kept it off my back while Sonja helped me out with the two porcupines.

I was about to pull my spears free when I looked up and saw the fisher was closing in, leaping when it got within ten feet or so. I immediately braced myself and raised my Mana Shield to absorb some of the impact while keeping my vision clear. Just before the fisher reached me, an arrow flew by lodging itself in the ground under the fisher. Electricity poured out of the end of the arrow and quickly coiled around the fisher, which began thrashing around trying to free itself from its bonds.

I saw one of the porcupines being peppered by flaming arrow after flaming arrow, being shot at speeds that shouldn’t be possible, but thanks to Rapid Fire, it was. I ripped both of my spears free and then thrust forward at the porcupine that Sonja wasn’t firing at. Earlier I had found out that I can use different abilities with different weapons, so the thrust with my left spear was Barbed Spear, while the one with my right was Siphoning Strike. Both of those still weren’t enough to finish it off, but Anja used Shadowstep to teleport beside me, followed by a Backstab, which finally finished it off.

I looked around to see that everything was dead, except for the fisher that was still thrashing around. None of us wanted to mess with it, so we encircled it and each used our best damage-dealing abilities. When the last attack connected, the fisher let out a cry and then promptly collapsed, soon absorbed by the dungeon.

“It seems like it definitely had a lot of health,” Ben said. “It took Sonja’s Triple Shot to finish it off, and before that we must have done over one thousand damage to it.”

“It definitely looked pretty intimidating while it was running at me with its mouth open. I do not want to be on the receiving end of one of its bites. Thanks for stopping it, Sonja.”

“No problem. You should have seen it when my arrow lodged in the ground behind it,” she said with a laugh. “One second it was flying towards you, and the next it was yanked backwards, crashing into the ground.”

Chuckling, I said, “I’ll have to take your word for it. Let's pick everything up, assign our attribute points and then continue on.”

Over the next fifteen minutes or so, we cleared out two more chambers before finally arriving at the first somewhat well-lit chamber we had come across so far. The light was thanks to some sort of glowing mushrooms around the periphery of the chamber, and we ended up throwing our light globes to see a bit better. When they landed, we saw three even larger versions of the animals we had been fighting to reach this chamber. Around each of them was also four of their smaller counterparts.

“We don’t know how this is going to play out, so be careful,” I told everyone. “It might only be one group at a time or it could be a mix. Ready?”

When everyone said they were ready, we walked just inside the chamber, which caused the three larger to all stand up and look in our direction. After a few seconds of watching us, the large raccoon called out, signalling the four smaller ones to charge towards us. Before they even got close, Ben, Anja and Sonja were all firing off spells and arrows, trying to take down one or two.

Unfortunately all four were still coming, if injured, so Mason and I closed the distance. He used Dash to get there before I did, and then used Seismic Shove to knock them away. The two less-injured raccoons recovered faster, so Mason and I each took one. I impaled it with both spears, using Barbed Spear followed by Siphoning Strike, and then threw in a Shield Bash for good measure. It wasn’t enough to finish it off, but as soon as Mason was done dealing with his, he finished mine off with a Gash followed quickly by his own Siphoning Strike.

While Mason and I dealt with ours, the twins split up and each focused their attention on one of the injured raccoons, while Ben supported everyone with Aura of Flame. Since Ben and the twins injured them so much during the charge, they were finished off at roughly the same time as the other two.

As always, there was very little rest between waves. The large porcupine called out next, and the four smaller porcupines that were lying around it sprang up and began running towards us. I stepped forward a little while Mason and Ben stood side by side and activated their own Mana Shields to provide a wall the twins could hide behind. The quills had failed to penetrate our armor so far, but that didn’t mean we were safe. Our helmets didn’t provide us with full protection, and a quill could easily find a weak spot.

When the porcupines were within ten feet, I used Blink to get behind them once again, which caused all of them to immediately stop and fire off all the quills. I had a feeling my Mana Shield wouldn’t stand up to four porcupines each firing off hundreds of quills, so I also held my shields out, one on top of the other to cover the entirety of my body.

I was able to see some quills flying past me with my peripheral vision, and soon after I felt the impacts of quills on both of my shields. When the impacts stopped, I lowered both my shields and saw a small pile of quills at my feet. All the porcupines were still looking away from me, so I thrust forward with both my spears, keeping them stationary while my friends dealt with the other two.

It took them less than ten seconds to deal with them before turning their attention to the remaining two, thanks to the ridiculous amount of damage Mason is able to do with his attacks. Or Sonja, for that matter. Mason focused on the one I used Barbed Spear on, since he would do more damage to it via Gash, while the twins focused on the other one. In less than ten more seconds, all of the porcupines were being absorbed by the dungeon, and the massive fisher called out next.

“Sonja, take care of one with Lightning Tether, please.”

“You got it,” she said as an arrow flew past me. It impacted the stone floor and dug in a few inches before electricity quickly formed and began coiling around one of the fishers, effectively taking it out of the fight. That left only three, which would make it easier to deal with them.

“Ben, I want you in a support role for this one. Keep up Aura of Flame as much as you can. Girls, Mason and I will take the left and the middle one, so you two take the one on the right. You wanna get us started, Mace?”

He nodded and used Whirling Leap, dealing a fair amount of damage to all three of them, and then followed it up with a Seismic Shove. While the fishers were regaining their bearings after being sent tumbling, I Blinked forward and thrust with both spears once more. The fisher was a lot stronger than both the porcupines and raccoons, so I had to put away my shields and grab hold of each spear with two arms, to help keep it stationary. I really needed to get myself some additional attacks, as I was currently quite limited in what I could do.

It took longer for the fishers to be dealt with than the other animals, but not overly long. I quickly had some help with the fisher that was gnawing on one of my spears, trying to free itself. Once it was dealt with, we all turned our attention to the one that was thrashing all over the floor and finished it off. That left the three larger versions of our foes, who all called out simultaneously and began running towards us.

“Sonja, tether…” I said. Before I could finish, an arrow landed on front of the fisher, and electricity began coiling around it. The fisher grunted in pain, but otherwise didn’t seem affected very much. Bearing down, it continued running forward, and we were all surprised when the tether snapped, with the electricity dissipating.

“Shit…Mason, I want you to deal with the porcupine this time while I see if I can handle the fisher. You should be able to absorb the impact of the quills with your Mana Shield, just make sure to cover your face, just to make sure. Girls, you two should be able to deal with the raccoon. As soon as it’s dead, help out Mason,” I shouted as the the three animals got closer.

When they were within range, Mason activated his Mana Shield and then used Whirling Leap to get behind the porcupine. The raccoon and fisher ignored him and continued forward. I activated Mana Shield as I ran forward, and saw shards of ice and flaming arrows fly past me, impacting the raccoon.

As soon as the fisher was within twenty feet of me, I activated Precognition and stopped channeling my mana into my spears, quickly putting them back in their holsters. With Precognition, I was able to see the fisher leap forward, and I began stepping to the side as soon as I saw it tensing up to jump at me. It started harmlessly flying past me, while I was already winding up. Before it was past me, I unleashed a punch with both of my right arms, impacting it in the mid-section. It yelped in pain and I felt a few ribs break before it crashed into the ground.

It wasted no time getting up and faced me once more, growling, before it launched itself at me, again. This time I channeled mana into my shields, activating them, and then used Shield Bash. It connected with the fisher in mid air, stunning it, but not stopping it from colliding with my Mana Shield, which held strong. While it was stunned, I took both spears out of their holsters, using both Barbed Spear and Siphoning Strike to do as much damage as I could. This one was a lot bigger than the other fishers I had contended with, and I didn’t put much hope in keeping it stationary for long.

I took a quick second to check the situation around the room. The girls had already dealt with the raccoon and were now helping Mason with the porcupine which meant it wouldn’t be long before I had some help. My attention was drawn back to the fisher when one of my spears was jerked forward, but I was able to keep ahold of it, barely. It was back on its feet and was trying to pull itself free, but wasn’t having any luck doing so. The fisher was bleeding pretty heavily thanks to Barbed Spear, so it was getting weaker by the second. As soon as I felt the cooldown was up, I pulled myself forward and used Shield Bash again to stun it again.

Putting my armored foot on the fisher, I pushed off while pulling my spears out of it with a sickening squelch. Before it could recover, I used both Barbed Spear and Siphoning Strike once more, dealing more damage to it. Shortly after the stun ended I saw three flaming arrows impact the fisher’s flank, one after another, followed by a couple of shards of ice. The killing blow was Mason using Gash after he used Whirling Leap to close the distance.

I put away my weapons while watching the fisher be absorbed by the dungeon before noticing the objects left behind. There was the usual Mana Gem, and the white color of a tier E Skill Gem. I bent down to grab both items before looking up and seeing my friends doing the same. We had killed fifteen animals in this chamber, so there were a bunch of Mana Crystal Shards to pick up as well.

When everything was gathered, we met back in the middle of the room, with Mason holding open the bag containing all the Mana Gems and shards we had gathered so far today. Everyone deposited what they were holding before Sonja handed me another tier E Skill Gem, giving us a total of two.

“Two Skill Gems, not bad,” Ben said. “I think it’s a fifty-fifty chance to get one from floor bosses, now, and we were lucky there were three.”

“We also leveled up two times in this room!” Mason said happily while assigning his new attribute points. “That puts us up to level fourteen.”

“It’s also going to slow us down a lot,” Ben replied. “The stuff we’re fighting down here will increase in level every two to three floors. Now that we’re four levels higher than the stuff we’ll be facing on the second floor, we’ll only be getting twenty percent of the experience. I also realized that my plan earlier about going to another dungeon at level fifteen won’t work, unless we want to try to fight stuff five levels higher. If we clear to the tenth floor here, it should get us to level nineteen or so, and then we can move on.”

“It would also guarantee us at least two pieces of armor too, right?” I asked. “We got the common bracers and rare ring from Jihm.”

“We’re guaranteed four pieces of armor, actually. At this level, we’ll always get at least one rare and then a common piece.”

“Meh, let's continue to the tenth floor then, rather than stopping on the fifth. But first, the Skill Gems. You ready?”