

### Eclipse 3: Confronting a God

#### C: Echo – feat. Cazador (Pacifist) – Second Encounter

Just like every other moment in this fever dream, Cazador was left mentally reeling as he waited for the Shadowbeasts to make a move. His fur bristled down his spine, fingers flexing as the air around his hands rippled from the flare of heat coming from them, and the Shadowbeasts seemingly mirrored the movement in their rage.

Neither side moves, Caz's feet planted firmly on the ground and the hordes of shadows circling him, both waiting to see who would attack first. Caz's fighting days taught him to never attack first, but he knew that he was on borrowed time...but he could wait for now, take in more information to at least try to make it out alive.

The towering form of Echo pulls back to the pillar, coiling tighter around it. Caz likened it to his son's infant grip on his favorite toy, possessive and protective to keep the family's pet Qumot from chewing yet another prized possession to smithereens.

He blinks as he realizes that this was exactly what Echo was doing: protecting, as if Cazador was going to take what last little bit of light they had. If they were openly hostile, they would have attacked by now and not just put up a wall to keep out someone who admittedly had been sent to stop them under any means necessary. Sure, Cazador had managed to avoid killing Mare, but who is to say that he would keep up the streak? He was tired, damn it, and he wanted to go home and hope that he was not going to have to suffer through another transformation any time soon. He couldn't believe it, but he was starting to feel *bad* for the creatures.

After some mental gymnastics he decided...to hell with it. He took a deep breath and relaxed his hands, the waves of heat dissipating quickly in the strange forest, and holds his hands up to show that he was not a threat. His ears were still pinned back as far as they could go from how utterly ridiculous this was, but the night was already full of surprises. At first, he didn't think it was going to work and he just might have to fend off an attack from a rather feal-looking creature just outside his periphery, but after a long moment they retreated into the darkness with heads low. He took a tentative step closer towards the central point of the forest, ears swiveling to make sure he wasn't the victim of an ambush.

The closer he comes to the light, the more he gets a sense of *where* he is. He got the distinct impression that this place was mostly untouched by others, if touched at all. He didn't know how to process the idea of him perhaps being the first person to step foot into this forest at *any* point – and honestly the idea didn't sit well with him because there certainly had to have been much more worthy people to get here than him. Caz was a non-believing hulk of meat who trusted little in anything beyond his own abilities, and now here he was in some alter world walking through the remnants of hope and betterment for all. Perhaps he was only worthy now that it was destroyed.

As the hulking Echo watched his approach, Cazador couldn't help but feel anxious from the sheer size of it. This was the perfect time for an unexpected attack, and there'd be nothing that he could do to stop it from happening. Looking up at the blank face of the dead god as if challenging it he places his hand on the glowing surface that the god exposed to him.

The images of a lush and beautiful growing grove play in his mind as he stares at Echo. It was overwhelmingly sad to think about how the forest was once alive like that, something that was centuries old and cared for lovingly, extensions of the god that loomed above him. This was a once-living representation of the god's hopes and dreams, and it was taken from them suddenly by someone who they previously trusted. It was...overwhelmingly sad. He let

out a shuddering sigh, looking down towards the tree and away from Echo as he brushes his thumb over the bark with such uncharacteristic fondness.

He couldn't help but feel for both Lapsus and Echo. Echo was the victim in this, obviously, but with how Echo's being was changed after their death like this reminded him of his own explosive change when his mutation manifested; turning the building he was in into a fiery inferno that he still couldn't bring himself to think about for long, lest he suffer from endless guilt from the collateral damage that he caused. He likened himself to Lapsus in a way, taking the hopes and dreams of others by destroying everything around him, though he hoped his reasoning for doing so was better than what Lapsus did. Did Lapsus feel guilt for killing their compatriots? Could they feel guilt? Was there a point to trying to rationalize and justify the thoughts and feelings of Gods that died eons ago? Probably not.

Caz is shaken from his melancholic thoughts by Echo gently taking his hand in theirs. It seemed calmer in a way, as if touching the tree settled it. He wasn't going to pretend to understand how, but it even looked like the Shadowbeasts that always stayed just outside of the light had lessened. Perhaps they just wanted some way to ease their pain and somehow his presence granted them some reprieve.

Cazador sighs wearily. He really hoped that this would allow him to go home to his family soon.