

Act II - Present

The darkness that was surrounding them was as total as the entrance to the dungeon closed behind them. And then, a point of light shone in the distance ahead. Griss led their group toward the light, and quickly they exited the long and dark tunnel. They stepped into the light, and Zach saw the first floor of the dungeon for the first time. It was a large cavern, with a tall ceiling and the roaring sound of crashing water. There was light enough to see, and as Zach and the others approached the edge of a small plateau he could see that the light that came from the vegetation glowed with bluish light. It looked like an entire ecosystem existed inside the cavern that was the size of a smaller town. He could see monsters moving about, near the edges of the waterfall, along the river that passed through the middle of the cavern and around pools on the other side of the cavern. The vegetation looked to be mostly plants that had long and wide leaves that gave off light, with vines crawling along the walls and stalagmites.

“It’s a swarm configuration,” Griss’ voice turned Zach’s attention away from the cavern.

Griss had explained that there were several ways that the first floor could be configured, the terrain was always slightly different, but it was always a cavern. But the monsters inside could change, both the type as well as strength and amount of them inside. There could be less monsters, but their power could be greater, or it could be a swarm configuration. Which meant more monsters of lesser strength. The first floor had monsters that were anywhere from level 20 to level 40, and usually between Early and Peak Mortal Realm. Griss had had them train for all configurations, but the swarm one was the one that was going to provide them some difficulty. In small numbers the monsters down there weren’t a threat, but in large groups they could pose a threat. None of them was focused on dealing area damage, aside from perhaps Nyathulla.

“We got two choices now,” Griss started. “We can attempt to clear the entire floor, trying to defeat all the bosses and gathering all the loot. Or we can go straight for the exit, fighting only the monsters in our way. It will

minimize the risks of us getting overwhelmed by too many monster packs at once, but we will be losing out on Essence and rewards.”

“How much Essence and rewards are we talking about here?” Edima, the minotaur, asked.

“Substantial amount actually, the swarm configuration gives the most Essence of them all. Individually, the monsters are weak and give less Essence, but it adds up. Although the rewards aren’t as good as in the other configurations, there should still be three bosses hidden somewhere in the dungeon.” Griss answered.

Zach knew that dungeon diving was about more than just getting Essence. It was about loot. People could get rich from a lucky reward drop, or get powerful equipment that would serve them for years. But dungeons are also dangerous. From what Griss explained most dungeons have a high kill rate, more than half of the teams that enter a dungeon never come out, depending on the type of dungeon of course. The Abyssal Deep had somewhat better odds, but that was because of the wardens controlling who had access. Still, two out of every ten teams that enter suffer losses, and the deeper one went the more that number rose.

“I vote for a full clear,” Zach voiced his opinion. All of them had much to gain from this dive, they were all planning on leveling to their evolution, and gaining enough Essence to have some left over. They had all emptied their storage spaces in preparation. Zach, had to rent a vault room in the Citadel to store all of his stuff since his storage ring was so much larger than that of everyone else.

“Me too,” Xallar said as they tucked an errant lock of brown hair behind their pointed ears, with Nyathulla and Edima agreeing a moment later.

Griss nodded his head. “I suggest that we go slowly, take our time to clear the monsters,” he glanced down the ledge, looking at the floor of the cavern and the moving shapes down there. “Those appear to be Taka, not a smart monster, but they can be dangerous if they manage to pull someone down to the ground. Their jaws have incredible strength so don’t let them grab hold.”

They were already familiar with most of the monsters that the Abyssal Deep liked to throw at people. The Taka were monster versions of an animal

from the Drake homeworld. Most monsters in the Infinite Realm were based on the wildlife from the old worlds, although there were many that were unfamiliar to all races.

They made a rough plan, since no plan would survive the contact with the monsters, and then headed down. They followed the winding path around the edge of the cavern walls, that lead them down to the ground floor. Zach noticed that there were numerous caves all along the cavern sides, leading into side rooms. As they got closer to the ground, he realized that the vegetation was a lot larger than it looked from above, there were large glowing leaves that were almost twice as tall as he was. And there was a lot more color down there. Blue was the most prevalent, but there were flowers and plants that were glowing with almost every color imaginable.

They were moving in formation, with Griss holding his shield up and his large mace in the other hand being in front. Edima was on his left, a few steps behind, her large hammer held in both of her hands. Zach was on Griss' right, with Mistral pointed to the ground and held in both of his hands. Behind them came Nyathulla and Xallar.

Nyathulla held a large staff in her hands that decreased the cast time of her abilities, while Xallar held a small wand in one hand and wore light armor that had potions strapped all over it on belts that crisscrossed their torso.

Their main path was a Class, which was a healing one. But their Path was an alchemy one, so they had things that could help in a fight. Mostly they focused on healing concoctions and things that could distract monsters or buy them time, since they weren't a combat specialist.

"Ambush," Zach whispered as the wind brought soft rustling of leaves to his ears as they reached the bottom, but everyone was already prepared. Griss' training had made sure that all of them understood that they couldn't drop their guard for a single moment in a dungeon.

Xallar and Nyathulla walked closer as Zach and Edima moved back so that the two were surrounded by the rest of them. And then, as they walked along a path surrounded by plants, monster's leapt from their hiding places.

Cavern Taka (LVL 25-Early Mortal)

Taka, looked much like overgrown lizards, except that they were covered with colorful fur and double the size of the largest alligator from Earth. Griss pushed his shield forward and a wave of force his the first Taka, sending it flying back through the plants. Zach turned his focus on the monsters attacking from his side.

There were three of them, and Zach dashed forward his Qi moving through him in an instant and **{Calm Before the Storm}** filled him and then he pushed his Qi further turning the first technique into his second and **{Charged Focus}** settled into him. He used **[White Wing]** and surged forward next to the closest monster. His sword, glowing with a white light that covered it in a shape of a small wing, soared. A flurry of attacks, each hitting a weak spot that his skill **|Weakness Sense|** showed him. In a moment, the monster was cut to ribbons and blood sprayed in every direction. He used **|Greater Evade|** and his body jerked to the side, rolling and gaining distance. He pointed one hand up and **[Light Chains]** caught one of the monsters, while the other jumped forward.

Zach pirouetted to the side and then cut from bellow, Mistral stabbed into the monster's side and opened up its stomach as he cut upward. Without waiting for the monster to fall, Zach dashed forward at the third monster trying to break his chains. It roared at him as the chains almost cracked, and Zach smashed the pommel of his sword on top of the monster's head, disorienting it. Then, he pulled out his dagger from his lower back and snapped forward with his **|Greater Strike|**. The dagger punched through the monster's skull, and he felt the familiar sensation of Essence passing through, but just as quickly as it came it was gone. Zach's technique kept his mind from wandering into the past and he turned around. Looking at his teammates.

Xallar stood next to Nyathulla as she held one Taka in her prison ability, while a barrage of violet bolts smashed into another. Edima raised her hammer and smashed down in a burst of speed, pulverizing the head of a monster. At the front, Griss was the only one who still had monsters

attacking him, but he was a defender and he was keeping five of the monsters occupied. Zach focused and pulled Mistral back, he activated the sword's ability and charged it. He could feel the air around him move toward the sword, compressing and sharpening. And then he swiped forward, sending an arc of wind like a blade flying forward. It caught a monster mid-leap, as it was trying to jump on Griss' back. The wind blade cut through it as if it was nothing, splitting the monster in half. The blade continued on into the foliage cutting leaves and then hitting the sixth monster hiding there with some kind of stealth, the monster that had been his original target. Zach had seen it because his **{Charged Focus}** allowed him to see through stealth effects. Then, another barrage of violet bolts flew from Nyathulla's direction, hitting another monster near Griss. Zach used his **[Winged Leap]** and crossed the distance, falling on top of one of the monsters and stabbing Mistral through its back.

Edima charged forward her armored form hitting the last monster in the side and sending it rolling across the ground. The wounded monster tried to get up on its feet, but violet bars of energy snapped in place around it. The monster jumped and was thrown back with a blast of energy. Nyathulla pointed her staff and a wave of energy started leaving the trapped monster. The violet wave reached her staff twined around as it moved down the staff's length and entered Nyathulla, and her body started glowing with a violet light. Then, as the wave drained everything, the monster inside the prison toppled to the ground, and Nyathulla activated her perk.

Griss, Edima, and Zach all jumped back near Nyathulla as she raised her hand to the sky. Then, eight pillars of violet light exploded around them inside the foliage, followed by the dying screams of the hidden monsters. Her perk allowed her to drain the energy from a monster, and then unleash an attack on every being of the same type in a radius around her. In this case, the Taka monsters. With the monsters killed, Zach glanced at the amount Essence that he had gained. It wasn't much, even with the number of monsters that they had killed, and what he gained from the dagger wasn't that much either. But this was only the first encounter they had, and the monsters had all been low-leveled. He was glad that the dagger worked on monsters, he had assumed that it would, since its description said that it

would work on any living thing, but he had never had the chance to test it out on a monster. By the time they had obtained it, all the monsters on Earth were gone.

Zach looked around, looking for a chest. But there was no chest with loot anywhere around. Zach knew that not every encounter here would give one.

Edima had a small gash on top of her head, and Xallar placed their hand over it, using an ability that made their hand glow and then closed the small wound in less than a second.

“That was good for our first encounter with the monsters,” Griss commented.

“Yes,” Zach commented, while he kept his eyes open and looking around, his technique still active. He wasn’t about to let his guard down, they were in the dungeon now.

“We should continue on, I’m sure that nearby monsters will start converging here. We need to lead them on as much as possible, and deal with them quickly in smaller packs,” Griss added, and everyone agreed. They gathered and headed deeper into the strange forest made out of glowing leaves.

Almost three hours later, they had cleared their way through most of the dungeon. The first floor wasn’t really a challenge for them, since most of the monsters were too low level for them. So they used them as a way to train their group dynamic more. They still took care not to engage more of the monsters than was prudent, since they could get dangerous in larger numbers. They were clearing everything, and had found quite a bit of loot. Most of it was low level stuff, weapons and armor that wouldn’t really help them much, but they would sell it and split the profits. Zach had earned almost one and a half thousand Greater Essence, but they had killed around a hundred of monsters. He had taken the opportunity to practice his killing blows with his dagger and his **|Greater Strike|** to prepare for when they reached lower floors and encountered monsters that had a higher level than

them. He was planning on finishing his skill quest and advancing the skill, but also getting as much Essence as he could with his dagger.

It had taken him a bit, but he realized that he had a great tool that could help him grow, and he shouldn't allow what had happened in the past to hinder him now. The Infinite Realm was an incredible place, filled with wonder, but also tragedy and monsters. And it was now his home, he had a place to call his own. Something that he hadn't had in a long time. And he was going to do everything in his power to survive in this place.

Their group reached a large clearing that led into a pitch dark cave. They had defeated two bosses, both had been a larger version of the monsters they had encountered in the cavern. One was an **Alpha Cavern Taka** that had been level thirty five and had a small pack of eight fighting with it, and the other a group of six giant bats with another alpha. None had really posed much threat, but that was to be expected. It was too bad that they couldn't skip floors, but on the other hand even this was an opportunity. They had gained Essence as well as gear that they could sell, so it wasn't like it was a waste.

"Where is it?" Edima asked as they entered the clearing.

They were yet to fight the last boss.

"It should be defending the cave entrance, be alert," Griss said as they moved in formation.

Zach kept his technique **{Charger Focus}** up and was looking around, trying to see if there was a monster hiding somewhere. They reached the center of the clearing, a flat rocky ground without any foliage. And then a plume of water erupted out of the pool nearby, and a monster the size of a truck exploded out of it. A bright blue sinuous shape, landed nearby and spat something at them. Griss raised his shield and a wall extended out of his shield, a dome that protected them as the dark liquid splashed over it and dropped to the ground hissing.

"Acid, be careful," Griss called.

Zach saw the monster in full then. It looked like a snake that had legs, large claws peeked out of webbed fingers and a muscular frame coiled as the monster opened its mouth and hissed at them with its forked tongue, showing its long fangs.

**Mature Everak (LVL 39-Peak
Mortal)**

It being uncommon meant that it had some extra abilities, so all of them knew to be even more careful. Zach wasn't familiar with this type of enemy, but Griss had coached them on tactics for different type of enemies. They already knew what to do. Their team split up, with Griss staying in the middle with Xallar and Nyathulla who immediately raised her staff and used her prison power. Bars of violet light fell down on the boss as Zach and Edima moved opposite each other to flank it.

It smashed into the bars trying to break through, unsuccessfully. Then, it hissed and sent another blast of acid flying at Zach. With the **|Greater Evade|** he got out of the way, Mistral pulled back and **Razor Wind** charging. Nyathulla sent her **Arcane Barrage** at the monster and it smashed into its head, breaking the scales on its head and drawing blood. Zach let a wind blade fly and it passed by the bars, cutting into the monster's side and opening up a long gash that let blood spill onto the floor.

The prison ran out, and the monster roared, then leapt forward. Edima used her charge ability, and her form surged forward. Her hammer smashing into the monster's side and sending it to the ground rolling in Zach's direction.

His Qi moved through his body and into his arms, then into his sword. **[Winged Leap]** brought him close to the monster and then he stabbed forward cutting into the monster's shoulder and twisting, pushing the blade into the floor and pinning the large monster there. It tried to twist and get out, but Griss charged forward and smashed his shield into its nose, stunning it. Zach drew his dagger and then with a **|Greater Strike|** stabbed it into the back of its head. The monster twitched, and then died, its Essence flowing into Zach.

"That is that I guess," Edima said as she put her hammer on her shoulder.

Zach nodded, the other boss's had been a bigger challenge since they both had minion monsters around them. This was a single boss monster, and

against five people all who were much higher level than it, it stood no chance. It hadn't even managed to use its powers.

They could've killed it even faster, Zach himself could've done it. But they were using the opportunity to train some more.

Griss walked over toward a large chest that had appeared. They had cleared the entire floor of monsters, and this was the final loot for this floor. Zach walked over and looked in once Griss opened it.

"Potions and an armor set," Griss said.

"What kind of potions?" Xallar chimed in as they walked up.

"Stamina and mind rejuvenation," Griss said.

"And the armor?" Edima asked.

"Everak set, it would probably be useful for someone around level thirty to forty maybe," Griss answered. "It is a good enough set, we can probably sell it well. There is no shortage of people wanting to secure quality gear for their children when they are just starting out."

They gathered the gear and headed toward the cave opening. Once they got close, Zach saw the glowing symbols, and realized that nestled in the darkness of the cave was another door.

"Onward to the next floor," Griss said, and all of them got into position and readied their weapons. The first floor had been an easy one, just a prelude of what was to come. But the more they climbed, the more dangerous it was going to become. The doors opened as they got closer, and they stepped into the darkness toward the second floor.