

Dragon Hunt

Zach and Naha sat in the room at their inn, going over their gear. They had changed their equipment a lot over the years. Zach had an entirely new armor, not a set, but unique pieces that were a lot more powerful than what he used to have. He had even had some of the pieces upgraded and painted green so that it at least looked the same. He looked over his chest piece, a half-plate that was made out of bone of a powerful monster.

Behemoth Breastplate	+170 to Strength +170 to Endurance The Behemoth Breastplate allows you to mitigate 15% of all incoming physical damage. Equip, repair.
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It was the best piece of armor that he had, the damage mitigation was something that helped him a lot. He had perks that did the same, but any little thing helped. His endurance and vitality were his lowest stats, he usually relied on not getting hit. But it was always good to have some extra protection.

The few other pieces of equipment that he had were his bracers and boots.

Force Strike Bracers	+50 Intelligence The Force Striker Bracers allows you to release a wave of force that is equal in power to the 50% of the last attack that hit you.
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Slow Fall Boots	+50 to dexterity
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	The Slow Fall Boots allow you to slow your falling speed by 50% once every three hours.
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Overall, those two items weren't that strong, but with all of his other powers they were quite good. He had a custom cloak made which allowed him to use his wind powers to move through the air. It wasn't really flying, but it was added mobility.

Gerisa's Cloak of Dexterity	+25 to dexterity Reinforced cloak with attachments for arms.
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It wasn't the best thing around. But it was crafted to his specifications. He could attach the hooks on his arms to it and one to his waist, which then allowed him to glide pretty well. And it hadn't cost him much, since he didn't need anything really special added to it.

He still had his ring of privacy and had upgraded a scanning ring. His Soul Weapon was his main offensive focus, and the rest he filled up with his perks. He didn't like relying on items too much, but he did understand that they could be powerful additions to anyone's build.

Naha had gotten a lot of gear too, more than he did. Her cloak was new, and it was her best item. He saw it draped over in the corner of the room.

Greater Cloak of Deep Shadow	+200 to dexterity +150 to intelligence This cloak brings shadow wherever its wearer goes. In shadows helps the wearer blend in more deeply and keeps the wearer hidden from all powers that are lower or equal to tier three, in the light
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	it can obscure the wearer's features. Equip, repair.
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It fit well with her build, and it helped her execute her powers. She couldn't use it when she shifted into a monster form, of course, but all of her equipment had the equip added to it—which had cost them quite a lot— but it was necessary for someone who changed shape like she did. They were looking into getting some items that could change shape with her. She had told him that there were items sets that could even change into armor for monster forms, though they were rare.

So far only her awakened weapon could change with her.

They packed their food and water supplies, which were probably the most important part, since they didn't know how long they would be without contact with civilization or if they would even have the chance to hunt and look for food and water. They also had a few new items, some that they had purchased based on Adventurer Basthec's suggestion. Throwing potions that produced horrid odors that could stun monsters with a sensitive sense of smell, more healing potions, a few bombs too. Their plan was to ambush and trap the monster, then have Zach deal most of the damage to it so that he could get his last quest requirement done.

That meant that they also had custom made traps, a few small arrays, and one formation plate. It had cost them a big chunk of their collective funds, but Zach hoped that it was going to be worth it.

Finally, they finished with all of their checks.

"You ready for tomorrow?" Naha asked.

"Yes," Zach answered. "I've been waiting for this for too long."

"Just remember that we don't take unnecessary risks. We can always find another dragon."

Zach nodded his head and smiled. "Of course."

They went to bed. They had to meet Basthec and the rest of the team early tomorrow.

It took them several weeks to reach the territory where the reports of a dragon sighting were from. It was deep in the inner parts of the Island, a wild territory that while claimed wasn't developed. There was one small outpost on its border, and a single barely maintained road leading through it. There used to be two dungeons in the territory, one wild which had been conquered a long time ago, and one respawning one. From Zach's understanding, that dungeon was destroyed more than a hundred years ago in a rare conflict on the island. A scheduling error had led to an adventuring team from the Adventurer's Guild clashing with a team hailing from a sect. The Cultivators hadn't taken the error well at all. And when the Adventurers had been granted priority, they had... disagreed vehemently. In short, they had destroyed the dungeon, which from what Zach had heard was extremely hard. There were spatial barriers around spawning dungeons that prevent the outside world from interacting with the inside. Without the income that came with a respawning dungeon, the territory had been all but abandoned.

Now, it was a wild and overgrown forest and mountains. The only part that is even remotely connected with civilization was the small road that was seldom used by caravans passing through.

The day after they had arrived at the outpost, Zach and his team left for their first scouting trip. Aside from Naha and Adventurer Basthec Fusescorch, they had two more members. Both were recommended by Basthec, control specialists, Varia Jevera and Kethasi Ikor. Varia was a kreaturean, with a build geared toward slowing her opponents down and inflicting draining debuffs. Kethasi was a minotaur, and he relied on stunning his opponents and inflicting debuffs that made the targets suffer penalties for movement.

With Naha and his high damage, and Basthec's survivability and overall durability, they had a pretty solid team.

For their first outing, they just made their way down the road, taking in the lay of the land.

"Something isn't quite right here," Basthec said after an hour of walking.

They were surrounded by trees, the blue leaves swaying gently in the breeze. The only sound that Zach could hear was the rustling of the trees and the whistling of the wind.

“You sense something?” Zach asked as he bent his knees slightly and readied himself to change his hand into a blade. He looked around, his eyes piercing the darkness of the forest surrounding them. He saw nothing in there but an occasional falling leaf.

“No,” Basthec said slowly, his hand raising to the medallion hanging from his neck. “And that is a problem.”

“What do you mean?” Naha asked.

“There are no monsters anywhere near us,” Basthec said.

“Are you sure?” Kethasi asked as Varia her pale brown exoskeleton plates shifting as she knelt and placed a hand on the ground. “Maybe you just can’t sense them.”

“He is right,” Varia said after a moment. “I can’t feel anything either.”

“This territory isn’t regulated,” Kethasi added. “There should be monsters all over it.”

Basthec tilted his head, as if he was listening for something. Then, he turned his eyes to the sky. “Not if there is something big driving them all away.”

Varia and Kethasi exchanged looks. “A big monster coming in means that the monsters get more organized, not that they disappear.”

“Usually, yes,” Basthec said. “In most cases, if a powerful monster came into a territory and it was territorial enough it would just become a territory leader, in extreme cases it would start a swarm.”

He paused for a moment, his eyes still on the sky. “In rare cases, a monster is... abnormal. It doesn’t suffer other monsters to live around it. Its territorial instincts make it hunt other monsters down excessively.”

“You think that is what happened here?” Zach asked.

“Don’t know yet, we need to cover more ground,” Basthec said, and then he motioned for them to follow.

They continued their trek down the road.

A while later, Basthec spoke, filling the silence again.

“Did you know that dragons are ones of the monster types that are present in every races mythology, but that hadn’t really existed,” the drake said.

Zach blinked at that. “No, I hadn’t known that.”

“Yes, it is quite interesting,” Basthec continued. “Of course, each race has slightly different ideas about who and what they were. For my people, they were gods, the creators of everything. For karura they were the evil incarnate, the opposite of their Ranheda and Aegos.”

“They existed in my people’s history too,” Naha chimed in. “They were usually depicted as the old and wise guides, that came to my people in the times of great need.”

“There are many people that studied the histories of the old worlds, trying to divine some message or secret from the clues left over by the Framework,” Varia added.

Zach wondered what all of that meant, there were many secrets in reality, things that they probably were never going to figure out.

The conversation didn’t continue, but somehow Zach felt like everyone was thinking the same thing. Wondering what dragons were and why they had existed in every races myths.

By the time night came, they saw no signs of other monsters. They made camp just off the road, in the silence surrounding them. All of them were on edge, the lack of monsters made them even more twitchy than adventurers usually were. There was something... alien, about the lack of monsters. Zach couldn’t remember a time when he was traveling through the wilderness without being attacked by monsters. It had become a way of life, a natural occurrence.

The five of them sat around a small campfire in silence.

It was Naha who broke the quiet.

“This territory’s monsters, they were supposed to be between tier eight and ten, wolves and krachkans, both pack monsters. Not easy to take down by a single opponent,” Naha commented.

Zach nodded his head. Individually those monsters weren’t powerful, but they were deadly in packs. They had done their research on the monsters in this territory, they had prepared to fight them. The wolves were a pretty nasty variant called the *hungering wolf*. They ran in larger than usual packs, a thousand to several thousand monsters. That was a nightmare to deal with, especially since their hunting parties were also larger. A single adventuring team getting caught unaware by a hunting party of several dozen wolves at tier 8 or 10? It rarely ended up well for the adventurers, even some who had high tiers of power and who were platinum rated or higher. This variant was known for never stopping once they had a scent of prey, they would fight to the last pack member, they were relentless.

The krachkans were monsters based on the animals of the minotaur homeworld. Terrible creatures that looked like a cross between a panther and a rhinoceros. They were the size of horses, with two horns pointing forward and thick skin that was hard to penetrate. Usually, they were solitary and extremely territorial, they defended their territory against all intruders. And they were extremely agile climbers, stealthy too, despite their size. The variant in this territory was the *cloaking krachkans*, and they could change the color of their skin making them blend into their surroundings. Despite them being extremely tough, they also hit hard, their horns were designed for dealing a lot of damage quickly, killing their prey with a single hit.

Those were not the monsters that would’ve been taken out lightly by anyone.

“I know,” Basthec said slowly. “A wyvern would’ve had a difficult time driving out these monsters. Average wyverns are tough and powerful, but taking out an entire wolf pack? Or driving out the krachkans? Unless it was extremely geared toward detecting stealthed opponents it would’ve had issues against them.”

“Are we sure that there are no monsters around?” Varia asked as she tapped the bracelet around her wrist. All of them wore the exact same bracelet. It was one thing that Basthec insisted on as they prepared for the

hunt. It was supposed to mask their presence from monsters. A necessity if they were going to ambush and trap the dragon.

“I am certain,” Basthec said. “Even if they couldn’t detect us, the wolves would’ve been patrolling, or we would’ve seen some sign of monsters. But I saw nothing, no tracks or waste, nothing at all. It was as if there hadn’t been monsters around this territory for months.”

Zach admittedly didn’t know much about this side of monster hunting, but even he could see that something wasn’t right. They were putting a lot of faith on being prepared for the hunt, of ambushing the monster. They didn’t know how powerful it was, but everything could die to a trap, or at least be weakened by it.

“What does this mean for the mission?” Kethasi asked.

The two new additions to the mission were a lot more reserved than Basthec. Zach didn’t know much about them; they hadn’t really exchanged anything more than the basic pleasantries. Zach just knew that they were adventurers that weren’t affiliated with any group. They were of course part of the Adventurers Guild, but they hadn’t joined any of the smaller factions that had risen up in the last few years. It was why they were basically working as freelancers. Their original team had fallen apart as one half joined one side and the rest another. At least that was what Basthec had told them, Zach didn’t want to intrude.

“It means that we need to be more careful,” Basthec said. “We’ll look for the signs of the dragon and then we will see from there.”

“This could mean that the monster is stronger than we thought,” Varia said.

“You were told that a tier fourteen qualified team had gone missing here. The monster was always going to be strong, and this mission dangerous. Every mission where you hunted an unknown monster is dangerous,” Basthec told them.

Zach agreed with him completely. They had to be very careful. The rest of the team nodded their heads, whether they understood or not Zach didn’t know, he hoped that they did. After a quick dinner, they set up a watch rotation and went to sleep.

“What is it?” Naha asked as Basthec came to a stop and knelt in a large clearing in the middle of the forest.

Zach walked over and looked over the man’s shoulder. He saw what the drake was looking at, just as he responded.

“Blood, old though,” Basthec said. “There are old tracks, a krachkan tracks, but they stop here. Something swooped down and carried the monster off.”

“So, there is a dragon,” Varia said.

“These tracks... it was a male, mature krachkan. They are big and heavy. I don’t see any struggle and the blood... it’s too little. Something took it into the air whole in a single swoop. It has to be big.”

“Dragons usually are,” Zach said.

Basthec grimaced and shook his head. “If it was a dragon that grabbed this monster, it was both large and extremely powerful. So little blood means that it didn’t kill the monster immediately, it ripped it into the air without the krachkan being able to do anything.”

“So, a strong dragon,” Varia said. “Nothing that we didn’t already know.”

“Perhaps,” Basthec said then stood up and looked around. “Something that big need to have a big lair.”

“Any ideas where?” Zach asked. He was surprised to see Basthec act so... composed. His usual boastful personality changed to someone driven and focused when on the hunt itself.

“Not the forest, it is too tightly packed,” Basthec said as he turned his head to the East. “The mountain.”

There was a single mountain nearby that Zach could see. He knew that there was a mountain range near the border of the territory, but this mountain was almost in the center of it.

Basthec pointed at it and spoke. “I think that we have our direction.”

It took them a full day to reach the mountain, and they spent most of the next day looking for clues which they did find. With each one that they encountered, Basthec grew more and more concerned.

“Things don’t add up,” he whispered as they climbed the mountain. The clues they found were mostly just drops of blood, that probably fell when the dragon transported its prey back to its lair. It all pointed to the mountain, and they had spotted a plateau near the peak, which looked like it had a large cave entrance.

“What do you mean?” Zach whispered back to the drake.

“There are too few signs of the dragon. They are smart beasts, but there is too little evidence of its existence, it is almost as if... No, that’s... no,” he shook his head.

Zach was about to ask him what he was thinking when they finally reached the plateau.

The cave entrance was immediately evident. It was massive, large enough for a commercial airplane to fit, if perhaps tightly. Basthec motioned for everyone to be quiet and careful, then he pulled out an item out of his storage that looked like a wand. He pointed it inside and then turned around. “It’s empty, the dragon isn’t in there,” Basthec said. “Come, we should investigate, there might be clues about the type inside. And we should see what kind of a trap we can make inside. But be quiet, we don’t know when the dragon might return.”

Slowly they made their way inside. The opening and the corridor were large and winding down and curving to the side. Quickly they were too far deep for the light to penetrate but Zach could still see everything with his eyes. Naha too didn’t have an issue; the others didn’t show any signs of not being able to see.

Basthec lead the way, and then they reached a sharp turn. As soon as he turned around the corner he stopped and froze in his tracks.

“Oh no, this isn’t a lair,” Basthec whispered.

“What is it?” Zach whispered back as he came behind him and looked. Immediately he saw what Basthec meant, the cavern was massive, and at the end of it everything glittered.

“This is a hoard of an Elder Dragon,” Basthec said as they looked at the items and glowing stones that filled the floor from wall to wall.

Then they heard a terrifying roar that echoed through the cave from behind them.

Basthec closed his eyes and spoke. “We are so fucked.”