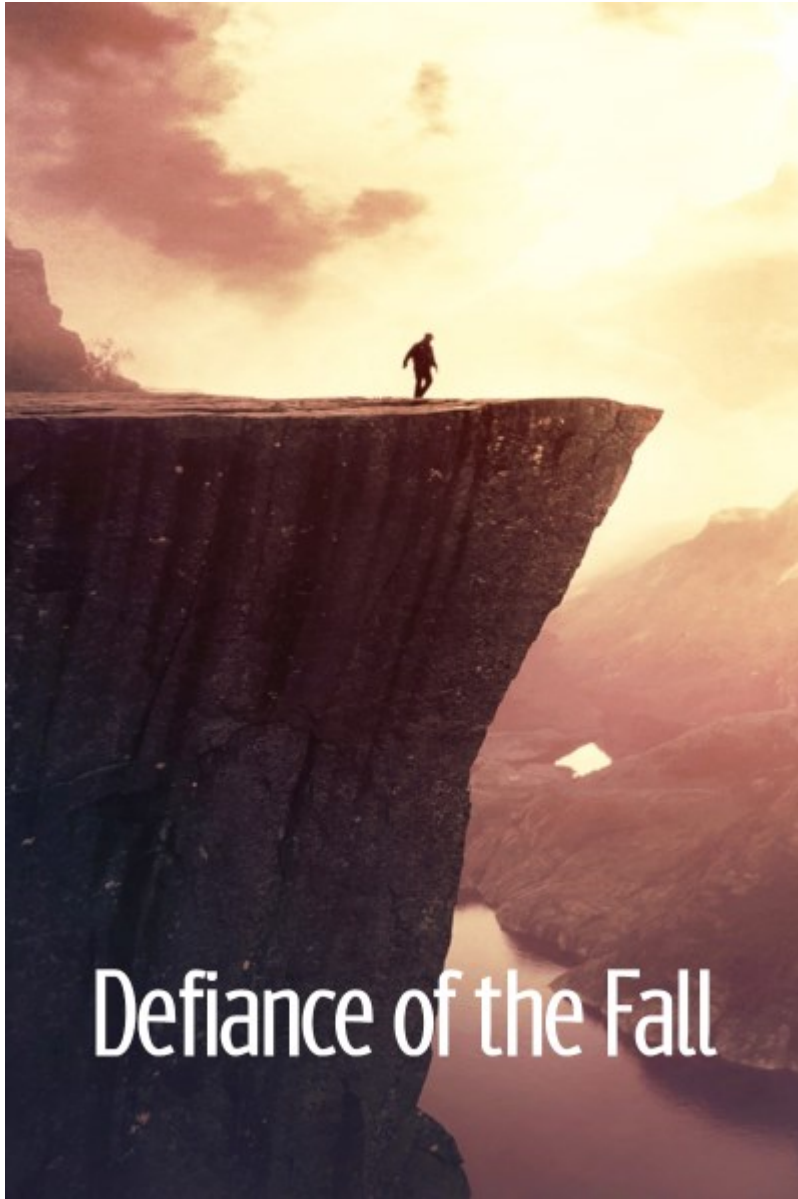


# **Defiance of the Fall Book 1**

**by TheFirstDefier**



Defiance of the Fall

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# Prologue - Welcome to the Multi-Verse, v.2

Information was power. It could both be the sword with which you impale your enemy, or the sword you impale yourself upon. That was what was going through Zac's head as he walked through the woods with a small hatchet in his hand, his face glowing with a sheen of perspiration and irritation.

He was still unsure of how a short mention about spending time in his family's cabin as a child turned into him being tasked with bringing firewood back to the campsite? He pushed some intrusive shrubbery out of the way, as he ventured further into the woods. Maybe his friends were laughing it up as they stayed by the fire in their cozy chairs with a few beers, while he was living the age-old scenario of man versus nature.

He swung his hatchet and chopped off a small twig, but immediately saw that it would make terrible firewood from how fresh it was. What the hell did he know about gathering firewood anyhow? It had always been his dad getting it for their cabin, and Zac was pretty sure that he had actually bought them rather than cutting down trees.

It was a sweltering day in May, with high humidity even though not a cloud was in sight, probably from yesterday's drizzle. This, along with it being spring, made Zac seriously doubt whether any of these trees made for a decent fire if chopped down. The humidity and moisture in the wood would turn the campsite into an inferno of tear-inducing smoke at the first lick of fire. If it even was possible to light the fire at all.

Besides, this whole area was part of a nature reserve, and he was not really sure if there were legal ramifications to cutting anything

down. Still, he trudged on, dragging his now sticky hair out of his face as he surveyed the surroundings.

For exactly what, Zac still didn't know. He was still half-hoping to run into a neatly stacked pile of firewood secured under a tarp, left behind by some more adroit forester. Zac had been walking around aimlessly now for 15 minutes, and he wasn't really cut out for this so he could really use the backup.

Which is sort of ironic, as his appearance would usually indicate someone who has a good command of the great outdoors. Standing at 5'11 with a set of broad shoulders, sporting a flannel shirt with the arms rolled up to his elbows, he at least somewhat looked the part. But the slightly too even beard, the pudge at his belly, and the lack of wiry muscles coming from manual labor were signs of a far more sedentary lifestyle.

He was actually just a marketing consultant who jumped onto the bandwagon and got the slightly grizzly look as it seemed pretty popular at the moment. And it did actually pay dividends, as this trip was arranged with his new girlfriend Hannah and three of her friends.

Truth be told, had it not been for the heat and the humidity, he wouldn't really have minded this solo trip into the woods. It was always a weird situation, being a new addition to a group that has years of history together. To figure out the dynamics and personalities of everyone, while keeping up with conversations where half the content are inside jokes and stories from before you were in the picture.

Of course, they mostly seemed like decent people. David was open and cheerful, and the trip would likely have lost much of its energy had he not been there. Unfortunately, David's interests diverged with his, him being into Soccer and Hockey and Zac into video games and art. This made it a bit harder to find things to talk about during the long trip up into the woods. But he's still a guy one wouldn't mind having a beer with.

David's girlfriend Izzie was a harder pill to swallow, with her unceasing grandstanding about whatever issue she could insert into the conversation, be it veganism, environmental conservation or social issues. Of course, Zac generally agreed with her points of view, but it did get tiring to be constantly preached to.

*'It's ironic,'* he thought, *'it's often the kids of the elite who gets like this.'* He had heard from Hannah that Izzie's father was some sort of manager at a hedge fund, and her mother was a Partner at some high-end law firm. Apparently, a complete lack of supervision and unlimited funds leaves one with a surplus of energy that needs to be directed somewhere. And in her case, it was usually a crusade against 'The Man' and the corporate machine. Still, it was hard to stay annoyed forever with her, as her bubbling energy was somewhat infectious.

Which leaves Tyler. Or *The Snake* as Zac renamed him in his head. He seems like a charismatic enough guy and has those annoyingly clean-cut good looks. Had he been in a movie he'd be cast as the good looking jerk the heroine was dating before she found her true love. Which was somewhat his situation here. Not that Tyler and Hannah had been a couple, but most people had probably expected them to sooner or later get together as they hung out a lot with David and Izzie in some sort of faux-double date. Zac was not overly surprised with the hidden hostility he'd gotten from Tyler since the day they first met two months back. *'Tyler probably felt that I sabotaged the grand plan of the universe when I came along and inserted myself into Hannah's, and by extension his, life.'* Zac thought with a snicker.

"Maybe I should get back after all..." he mumbled, a slight unease at the situation lingering, adding to his general irritation of being stuck in the woods waving around a hatchet like an idiot. He wasn't really a jealous guy, but also not a huge fan of leaving his girlfriend with a vulture circling around. And it's not like he would magically produce some firewood by walking around in this forest any longer. He adjusted his grip of the axe, and once again readjusted the bangs

which by now were a walnut mess of wax and sweat and started veering back towards camp.

He had trekked in somewhat of a semi-circle and should return back to the vicinity of the camp, or at least the road they took to get here if he just kept veering right. After walking along for another 5 minutes, battling the constant threat of shrubbery and mosquitoes, Zac came up to a small clearing.

Insidious shrubbery and intrusive twigs gave way to rustling grass and patches of bloodroot and cardinals. Somehow it felt like an oasis, with a noticeable lack of things to scratch him, and the sounds of wildlife felt somewhat subdued. *'Not a bad place for a camp, should we decide to move it a bit further into the woods'* he mused as he walked into the center of the glade, taking a last look around before turning toward the direction of his camp.

But as he prepared to leave, all sounds suddenly stopped without notice, turning to an almost deafening form of silence he hadn't really ever felt before. Just a breath later, the world was darkness.

**[Initiating System...]**

**[Welcome to the Multi-Verse.]**

.....

# Chapter 1 - Roll For Survival, v.2

**[Initiating System...]**

**[Welcome to the Multi-Verse.]**

A cold, detached voice echoed in Zac's ears. *'Or in my head?'* he thought while looking around confused. Nothing in his life had prepared him for his current circumstances, and he for a second thought there was an extreme solar eclipse happening. All that greeted his eyes was complete and utter darkness. The only thing visible was himself, as if there was an invisible source of light shining just on him, leaving the rest of the world in black.

"Heatstroke..?" he muttered hesitantly even though this didn't feel like some heat-induced delirium. But before he could further analyze these baffling events the monotone voice interrupted his train of thought.

**[Planet 'Earth' scanning complete. Class F mass, class F energy.]**

**[Adjusting...]**

**[Due to insufficient energy and size planet 'Earth' will be merged with additional planets drafted for initiation. New values: Class D mass, Class D energy. Topography readjusted. Spawn points randomized based by cohorts. Wildlife upgraded due to insufficient challenge. Link to the Multi-verse system activated]**

"What?? Hello?" he shouted, or at least he thought he did, as the utter blackness seemed like a natural dampener, quenching all



sound. But the voice seemed unaware or uncaring of his calls.

This was starting to feel less like some extremely elaborate practical joke, or a heatstroke, as everything felt just too real. Zac pinched himself and the sting told him he hadn't passed out either.

Trying to glean any meaning from the ramblings from the odd voice only made him more confused as well. It spoke about Earth, but also used some terms that felt like it came out of a sci-fi movie or a video game. However, the voice gave Zac no opportunity to figure the situation out, as it heedlessly droned on.

**[Initiating Incursions. Spawning Herald-]**

**[ERROR! Herald occupying same space as you! Adjusting...]**

A more blaring version of the same mechanical voice interrupted itself.

The ominous voice and the message quickly accelerated Zac's heartbeat, and he got a sinking feeling. This was all too real in its craziness, and if this was real he was in deep shit. He was told he occupied the same space as some herald, and no matter how he looked at it, it couldn't be anything good.

Erring on the side of caution, he jumped to the side to avoid whatever would happen, but it was as though he was in space. He made the motions of movement but still was stationary at his spot.

**[Merge unfeasible. Protocol SL-34572 initiated.]**

"Phew." At least he wouldn't be turned into a half-human half herald, whatever that was. But the fact that the voice seemed to be ready to mash him together with another being was extremely unsettling, and unease was quickly turning into panic.

Zac mentally tried to force himself to awaken, and when that didn't work he even slapped himself hard in the face. But nothing worked

as he was still stuck in the darkness.

**[Roll for survival. Due to massive power-gap between Herald Ur'Khaz and you, odds heavily in his favor.]**

"SHIT!" Zac screamed, or rather squeaked. The panic was now full-blown, and adrenaline was coursing through his veins. "WHAT THE HELL IS GOING ON??"

But again the only thing greeting his inquiries was utter silence until there was a break in the darkness. Seemingly from nowhere, a screen popped up in front of him, hovering silently.

The window looked like something taken out of an old video game, blue with white edges and text. The surreal situation made him blank out a few seconds before registering what the screen actually said.

**Ur'Khaz**      1-100 000 ROLL

**Zachary Atwood**    1-100    ROLL

It looked just like a prompt from a video game, and the familiarity actually calmed him down for a second until he read what it said and realized the implications. At that point the panic came back in full swing, threatening on evolving into hysteria.

It looked like the window was a prompt for rolls between him and this Herald, but instead of loot, they rolled for their survival. And the roll ranges were clearly skewed in his opponent's favor, giving Zac abysmal odds for actually surviving.

"Hello? This isn't funny anymore, let me out!" He screamed, grasping at some last straws that this was all some insane experiment. But the reality of the situation was starting to set in. Zac just stared

numbly at the screen in front of him for a few seconds as if to comprehend what he was seeing.

"This is crazy. Wanting me to gamble with these odds? Why the hell would I roll?" Zac muttered. But the second he said 'roll' the screen changed, and the numbers next to his name started to rapidly change.

**[Protocol SL-34572 accepted by participant. Rolling...]**

"No no no wait wait, stop, let's figure out a different solution!" he shouted, waving his arms in a panicked attempt to stop the proceedings. But no matter what he did, the numbers kept spinning. It was as though they were rapidly counting down his remainder of time on earth.

Panic was slowly turning into rage in Zac's mind over the messed up situation he was in. Rage over the complete and utter lack of answers. Rage over the obviously paltry assessment of him by the voice, seeing the obvious disparity in treatment between him and this Ur'Khaz guy. Rage over the scammy way the voice started the roll, as though it looked for a loophole to proceed.

With a red tint that suffused his otherwise blue eyes, Zac roared and smashed the hovering screen in an effort to vent his fraying emotions. The screen, however, did not acquiesce to his feelings and shatter in a million pieces, but rather only flickered slightly.

Unheeding of any attempts at a physical catharsis, the numbers once again flickered slightly, and the spinning started to slow down until it stopped at a final number. Almost as an afterthought it also added an infuriating line instead of the roll-button.

**Ur'Khaz**      1-100 000      **ROLL**

**Zachary Atwood**      98      Re-Rolls unavailable

Something about the re-roll message just sucked the energy out of him. It really wasn't a bad roll, if it was in a game he'd definitely have won the loot he thought with a morbid sense of humor. But he was quite aware that this was no game by this point.

He still held out some hope that he was still lying in the woods with a massive heatstroke. But if that was true he most likely was a goner as well. So either he was about to be killed by the sun, or by a video-game god. Neither was an ending he had expected nor hoped for. He didn't know whether to laugh or cry so his face settled on a sickly grin as he blankly stared ahead.

Of course, all hope wasn't lost as the other individual hadn't rolled yet. But it didn't really feel like it mattered when the game was rigged. He once again took a glance at the screen, and his eyes lingered for a second on the roll range of the other entity.

The smile slowly shrank away from his face. A sigh escaped his mouth like a deflating balloon, and he closed his eyes and slumped down to a sitting position. All of Zac's strength and energy were wrung out by the situation and the rollercoaster of emotions. Left was only a bleak sense of despair, realizing that this was it. Dead alone in the woods, never being able to say goodbye to his family loved ones.

Zac had no epiphanies or huge regrets at the end of his life, except that he wished he had been closer and better to his family. His mind drifted to memories of his past as a solace and escape from the insanity he was experiencing.

Hazy memories of his mother hugging him, her long brown locks cascading around him in her embrace. His dad giving him a quiet smile as he opens the door of their apartment to head to work, his eyes sad and tired but full of love. Spending most of his youth plastered in front of the computer, largely ignoring his smaller sibling. College years drowned in alcohol and partying. First day at his job,

and the humbling realization how ill-prepared for adult life he was even after 17 years of school and university.

**[Protocol SL-34572 accepted by Herald. Rolling...]**

The monotone voice one again droned, like an executioner giving final rites.

**[Congratulations!]**

Zac didn't bother with the voice anymore, and memories flashed past in his mind one by one. Friends, family, and events both happy and sad. Not the most exciting of lives, but it was his...

Wait, what, congratulations? His eyes snapped open and refocused on the monitor.

Ur'Khaz 91 Rerolls Unavailable

Zachary Atwood 98 Rerolls Unavailable

Stunned, he stared blankly at the screen until the voice interrupted his lack of thought.

**[Protocol results in the continued existence of Zachary Atwood. Ur'Khaz vanquished. Resuming standard protocols.]**

A nauseating explosion of light, color, and sound took over, disorienting him and turned his insides to mush. His body suddenly felt like it was on fire, tearing and scorching him all over. The last things he saw before passing out was the small clearing he disappeared from, and a huge red pillar reaching toward the sky.

## Chapter 2 - A New World, v.2

Zac slowly woke up, groggy and disoriented, finding himself face-first on the ground. Spitting out a few blades of grass and dusting himself off, he scrambled up and surveyed the surroundings, his body still aching from whatever happened to him before. The glade looked the same with the few rocks and flowers, surrounded by stout leafy trees and dense shrubbery.

His first reaction was that luckily he had just passed out from the heat or exhaustion and woke up. There were some things that gave Zac the foreboding feeling that what happened was more than just a heat-induced dream. First was the fact that he was currently staring up at two suns, only one them being the familiar yellow.

He thought he was seeing double for a second, but shaking himself awake had no effect on what he saw. The sun was accompanied by a little brother. He felt something was a bit off with the original one as well though, seeming larger or more intense than he remembered. The other sun was far a far smaller star that shone in a piercing aquamarine. It hovered close to the other celestial body and seemed to orbit it like a satellite.

The other unsettling sight was the *pillar*. A huge vortex of light and energy reached up towards the sky in the distance, like a grisly red claw reaching up from the ground. It pulsated in an eerie red glow that could only be called demonic. It looked that it was quite some distance away, but it was hard to tell. This pillar was the last thing Zac had seen before passing out, and it greeted him as he woke up as well.

A bestial roar snapped him out of his thoughts, refocusing him at the situation at hand.

"Hannah..." he muttered, a glint of determination in his eyes as he threw all these inexplicable events to the back of his mind. If this was all real, he needed to get back to the camp immediately. It seemed the crazy events he recently experienced was all real, he realized after looking around. The emotionless voice in the darkness said something about making the wildlife more dangerous to 'improve the challenge'. The roar he just heard could be a freaking tiger or bear for all he knew, which meant the others were in danger.

For a second he was even afraid that the others would jump in the car in a panic, and leave him stranded here with whatever was roaring. Even though he didn't know what was going on burning anxiety was already consuming him and urging him to action. Not daring to wait any longer he took off in a sprint toward the direction of the camp, unheeding of the unfamiliar sounds all around him or the prickly greenery aiming to slow him down.

The surroundings blurred around him as he thundered on through the forest like a runaway train. It was as though he had gotten ten shots of adrenaline, his legs pushing him forward at a breakneck pace. Something was off, as he felt that he was running even faster than Olympian athletes, and in a complicated forest terrain at that.

The previously somewhat weighty axe in his hand seemed weightless and tore through any branch trying to impede his way with pinpoint accuracy. Zac had never felt as strong or fast as he did right now. The voice said it upgraded wildlife, did his speed and power mean he was considered a part of that? He didn't know whether to be happy with his improved physique, or whether to be pissed off the mysterious voice considered him an animal.

Finally, a few minutes after his mad dash started he recognized a large boulder which a tree had somehow split and grown through, telling him the camp was just a few hundred meters away.

Readjusting the grip of his hatchet he changed his course and ran straight toward the camp. Suddenly another of the otherworldly roars echoed through the forest, this time far closer than the others he

tuned out on his way here. Panic turning into even greater speed he barreled into the camp, a look of frenzy and fear on his face. Greeting him was the familiar sight of the camp; the grey range rover, the two small tents, and the few camping chairs were strewn about.

What immediately garnered his attention wasn't this though, rather the monster rifling through one of the coolers. Its size was that of Great Dane, but this was where the similarities ended and it was an unholy mix of flesh and bone. The beast looked that it had been skinned then let out in the woods again, being an amalgamation of red and white. It sported a thick trunk of a torso with rippling muscles extending down to six stubby legs, each leg ending with a paw reminding Zac more of a bird of prey than a woodland creature.

Two of the pairs aligned at the front of the torso with the last at the back. Each paw adorned with four ghastly claws with three in the front and one in the back, with the front set of claws seeming slightly larger than the other two pairs. Its head felt overly large for its body, with a broad base but a long snout, enabling an impossibly large maw. The mouth reminded him of a crocodile's if a crocodile possessed three rows of teeth. The eyes were small and beady, and had a shine the same color as the vortex he saw earlier.

The power of the maw was readily apparent, as it was currently biting through a can of beans like it was nothing, swallowing the metal and contents alike. The strange sight made Zac stop right in his tracks, unable to compute these turns of events. Suddenly he wished that it had been a tiger that was roaring in the distance earlier since that seemed preferable to the monstrosity in front of him.

The beast perked up before Zac could do anything, spotting him standing mutely across the camp. With an enraged roar it bolted straight towards him with a speed belying its stocky appearance. Shocked, Zac barely had time to react as the beast was upon him. Taking an unstable step back, he swung the hatchet horizontally with all the power he could muster. With his shaky stance there was no



real power behind the blow, but it managed to strike at the beast's neck leaving an ugly gash and pushing the demon aside.

Zac was once again reminded of how he somehow had become a superhuman, as even a crappy swing like that had contained enough power to throw off a large beast. However, the front paws of the monster were latched on to him, and with the combined momentum of Zac's strike and its own, the claws drew a deep gash on his midriff and left leg. Large wounds were ripped open and blood immediately started pouring out.

A pain Zac never had experienced before exploded in his mind, clouding his vision and threatening to incapacitate him completely. Any thoughts of combating the monster head-on with his new strength flew completely out the window, and instead, an intense desire of escape emerged. He shook his head to clear his mind, but with small effect.

*'What the hell do I do? Do I run?'* His eyes searched frantically around for a way to get out of this situation, primal survival instincts he didn't know he possessed kicking in. The beast had fallen over from the surprising power of the swing but was already clambering back up to its feet.

"Guys! Are you here? Help!" He shouted toward the camper hoping for backup, but only silence met his pleas. Did the others flee into the forest to get away from this monster? Out of ideas, Zac hobbled a few steps toward the forest as well, his left leg now burning and not properly listening to his commands.

But before any plans could form the beast was barreling towards him, maw in an open snarl, seemingly unheeding of the small stream of blood trickling down its torso to its stumpy legs. This time Zac was slightly more prepared, putting weight on his right leg and jumping out of the way. He heard a snarl and felt a gust of wind sweeping by him, before he unceremoniously landed in a pile 3 meters away. Quickly scrambling to his feet he saw the monster had barreled past his original position, continuing on for 20 meters.

Zac realized the monster had high speed but low maneuverability and started to frantically figure out a way to use this to his advantage. With a determination he didn't know he had, Zac abandoned all thoughts of fleeing and returned toward where he came from when running through the forest.

"This better work..." he mumbled while ambling as fast as his pain-wracked body could muster.

## Chapter 3 - Battle Tactics, v.2

Zac took a quick glance behind him and noticed the Demonling following, as he started calling it in his head. It wasn't dissuaded at all from continuing its pursuit, though it looked slightly disoriented from the previous charge. Or perhaps the still bleeding gash on the neck was starting to show some effect. Its speed was somewhat slowed, but it was still quickly catching up to him.

No longer being able to afford to care about adages such as not putting weight on a hurt leg he ignored the pain and started charging towards the split boulder he passed earlier. His wounds split open even further and his left leg was now completely dyed red. The pain was excruciating as he ran, but the fear of death kept him pushing forward.

He was pretty sure that this was his only shot, as the short run managed to up his pain to a terrifying level, and he was starting to get woozy from the blood loss. And who knows what poisons or pathogens a demon dog has on its claws. Zac could only pray that his new super-powers included super-white blood cells as well.

Finally arriving at his goal, he heaved a few raspy breaths and turned around toward the monster, now roughly 40 meters away from him. Seeing that its prey had stopped moving, it hesitated slightly and stopped. The demonling slightly growled and hissed in a register that sounded much too low for something that size.

Zac was afraid it would wait for his wounds to worsen his condition even further, or even gather reinforcements. If that happened his small chance of survival would be completely extinguished. He needed to end this fight quickly in any case, as the pulsating wounds on his legs reminded him that time was limited, with or without back-up.

"COME GET IT PIECE OF SHIT DOG!" he roared, inwardly cursing his lacking cursing ability. He then picked up a small rock and flung it with all force he could muster at the Demonling. It drew a great arc as it zoomed through the air and missed spectacularly by a few meters. Luckily, it seemed the demon dog needed almost no encouragement for mayhem and slaughter, and with a great roar, it started barreling straight towards him again.

"Come on, come on..." he whispered, once again readjusting the grip on his hatchet. This was it, do or die now. When the monster was just three meters away from him he once again dove to the side with all his might. This time the monster was somewhat ready for it and managed to swipe him at his calf. It didn't seem as deep as his last gashes but still burned like hell.

The momentum of the Demonling pushed it forward straight into the cleft of the split boulder. The space was barely wide enough for it to get in, and it got stuck when the second set of legs reached the edge of the rock. The collision caused a massive thump and gravel and rocks chippings flew about, accompanied by an enraged, but pained, snarl.

Zac knew he couldn't hesitate, and quickly scrambled to his feet. The pain was staggering, but the coursing adrenaline in his system kept him going. This was the small window he created for himself and if this didn't work he had no other recourse.

Mentally praying to long lost gods of lumberjacking he took a two-hand grip on the hatchet and swung with all its might at the lower end of the monster's spine. Hopefully, the anatomy of hell spawns was somewhat similar to normal animals, where a cut on the spine would cut important nerves, and maybe even nick an artery.

The axe hit true and severed the spine, and even dug a bit further. A great spurt of blood and a pained yelp accompanied it. The thick hind legs completely gave out and it thumped down into the ground. But while the Demonling was temporarily stuck, it was no sitting duck. It thrashed wildly from the strike, and one of the remaining four

legs managed to hit Zac squarely in the stomach. He was thrown backwards and lost grip of the handle of the axe.

He hit the ground with a thud, losing all air in his lungs. He didn't dare take account of his steadily worsening wounds though, and immediately got back up on his feet. The world spun for a second as he scrambled up, but he forced himself to stay awake.

The sight meeting him seemed even more positive than he had dared hope. Both its hind legs uselessly slumped down, and dark red blood was quickly pooling beneath the beast. The wound he had managed to create on the beast must have actually cut a couple of veins, as blood unceasingly poured out of it back wound in far larger quantities compared to the shallow wound on its neck.

There was still some fight left in the monster, however, and it was still trying to excavate itself from the rock with some minor success. It also desperately unceasingly roared, perhaps hoping for some of its brethren arriving.

Not wanting to wait for that to happen, Zac gingerly stepped forward, gripping the axe and with a speedy tug ripping it out of the lower back of the monster. This time he also stepped back a bit in the event of further thrashing. This time however only a weak snarl accompanied the action. Blood started gushing out even faster through the open wound, and it looked doubtful if the monster would survive even left unattended.

Not daring to take any risks, Zac stepped forward, and with a baseball swing planted the axe in the torso, hoping to hit vital organs and the lungs. A sickening thud sounded and more blood streamed out. The beast barely moved anymore, and just weak whimpers could be heard. Zac didn't dare stop and kept swinging the hatchet over and over until he himself fell to the ground heaving.

His body felt a burst of warmth, likely caused by the strenuous activity, and by now the whole left side of the monster was a maze of grisly wounds. Its movements had come to a complete stop, and no

more roars or whimpers escaped its maw. The head was still inside between the two halves of the boulder, along with its front two paws. The arms were mangled from the reckless charge into the rock and the subsequent desperate attempts to rip itself free.

While Zac had no idea about the resilience or tricks of a Demonling, it looked deader than dead. He arduously sat up and caught his breath. Slowly calming down, he was reminded of the stark reality. He was hurt. Really hurt. By now he looked like a homicidal maniac, almost covered in blood from head to toe, and it was impossible to tell which was his and which was the monster's.

It already seemed impossible he was still alive with the amount of blood he had lost, and if nothing was done he definitely would not make it to tomorrow. He slowly got up on his feet and started stuttering back towards the camp. He thought about shouting for help again but immediately discarded the idea. He didn't want to lure another monster to the camp by mistake, as he didn't have the power to go through another battle.

Last time the trip between the boulder and the camp took half a minute. This time he ambled forward for what felt like an eternity until he once again came upon the ransacked and chaotic campsite. The camper was still standing next to the car but was now dented in places. The cooler they had brought over was knocked over, the water and beers spilled around.

Not having the energy to care about the mess, he moved toward the camper whose door was wide open. With some foresight, they had actually brought a decent first aid kit with them when traveling. He felt he should probably get to a hospital, but unless someone drove him he would probably not make it. At least he could disinfect, tape, and bandage the wounds, performing some basic field triage on himself. That would hopefully allow him to return to civilization to get properly patched up.

For the first time since he came back, Zac realized there were no blood or body parts in the camp. Though he hadn't dared think about

it at the time, he subconsciously had believed the Demonling killed the others.

If they had been attacked there should have been some blood at least, as Zac had little confidence in the four being able to fend off that beast and flee. The axe in his possession had been the only real tool that could be used as a weapon in the camp, apart from some small kitchen knives. And even with that, he had only survived with great luck and some quick thinking. His improved physique had helped immensely, but that alone would not have been enough against that monstrosity. That beast had been both faster and stronger than a bear, and unless the three had gotten the same type of strengthening as him they would just be food rather than an adversary for it.

He surreptitiously glanced around as he neared the camper. The car stood empty, and no sound came out of the camper either.

"Guys, are you there? Hannah?" he croaked in a subdued voice, still scared a scream would attract more monsters.

But silence was the only thing that met his question.

## Chapter 4 - Alone, v.2

Zac had an ominous feeling and prepared to look around in the vicinity for tracks or signs of where his friends had gone. However, a dizzy spell reminded him of the most pressing issue. Almost falling, he went to the car and brought out the small green box with the first aid kit from the trunk.

He then limped to the camper whose door was standing ajar and hesitantly went in. The interior was completely empty as well, with no signs of either friend or foe. Scared that the smell of blood would attract more monsters he firmly closed the camper's door. Luckily it was one of the few spots which hadn't been dented by the demonling's rampage. Zac finally slouched down on the sofa, not caring that the blood would stain the fabric.

He put the box on the small dining table and opened it, and first grabbed the small bottle of surgical spirit. By this time his face was drenched in sweat from the pain and his hands were already shaking. Putting all the things he needed next to him, he started to prepare for his treatment.

Slowly and gingerly he took off shirt and pants. Luckily the blood was still wet and hadn't had time to coagulate and stick to his wounds. Still, the pain was a hundred times worse than ripping off a Band-Aid as he removed the clothing.

The claws of the beast had raked a long gash on his waist, and three additional but slightly smaller on his left thigh. There was finally the last wound on right calf. While the wounds looked ghastly, it actually did not seem as bad as he feared. The cuts seemed clean and straight, and the bleeding had somehow almost stopped by now, turning into a slow trickle. He could only hope that it meant that he was getting better, and not that he was running out of blood.



Knowing what came next he almost whimpered when grabbing a water bottle and a gauze swab. He carefully poured the water over the wound at his waist to clean out the blood and dirt, and the agony almost made him pass out. Gritting his teeth and blinking away the tears falling from his eyes, he then grabbed the alcoholic solution and poured some in the wound as well. The wound didn't look inflamed, but he didn't dare skip this part, even though it felt like he was being ripped in two from the alcohol.

His face was like a beet by now, sweat pouring down and veins throbbing out on his forehead. Finally, he took some surgical tape and taped the wound together, and then wrapped some bandages a few rounds around his waist.

The first part done, Zac just sat panting for a while. He closed his eyes and a wave of exhaustion hit him like a truck, almost making him pass out then and there. However, there were still wounds to treat so he roused himself again with some difficulty.

Zac did the same procedures on his legs, and by the time he was done his face had gone from red to a ghastly white. His hands were shaking so bad that he could barely grip the water bottle when he downed the last of its contents in a few big gulps. He was so weak he barely managed to make it to the back of the bed in the back, and as soon as he hit the pillow he passed out even though the suns still stood high in the sky.

It was still shining brightly through the window when Zac woke up. Was there no longer any night now that there was an additional sun up in the sky? He stretched a bit and found out that while far from healed, he did feel much better than he did before. His bandages were red with blood but not wet, so the bleeding seemed to have stopped. He also didn't feel that intense pulsing agony anymore, and it was replaced by a lesser throbbing pain.

He still had problems keeping weight on his left leg through, and almost fell when moving toward the fridge. The second thing he

noticed when waking up, beside his wounds improving, was a fiendish hunger as if he hadn't eaten for weeks.

He ambled to the fridge and found out it didn't work anymore, and some food was already starting to spoil. The monster had probably broken something while creating the various dents in the mobile home. He picked up a few sausages they prepared yesterday before they ran out of firewood, and a couple of slices of bread. Then Zac finally relaxed with a bottle of water after he virtually had inhaled the food like a starving ghost.

The others still hadn't returned. Zac was afraid they either were dead or had fled without looking back. Both scenarios were grim and the possibility of the second left a sour taste in his mouth. He took out his phone from his pocket, but it was mangled and bloodied beyond redemption, likely from one of his tumbles.

Luckily they had prepared an emergency phone in the camper in case something went wrong, and he opened a cupboard and took it out. The phone was in working order but it got no reception. This was weird as they had a decent signal yesterday. Even if they were camping and enjoying the wildness they wouldn't stop at a spot with no reception, as no one was ready to go a whole day without surfing on their smartphones.

He also noticed from the time that three whole days, not one, had passed since the world went mad. He truly had blacked out hard after tending his wounds. The date only further reduced the chances of his travel mates and Hannah coming back. At least it also probably meant that the monsters kept to their territories and didn't wander around as much as he feared. He wasn't sure he would be able to handle another of those demon dogs at the moment, even with knowing their weaknesses from the last fight.

With food settled and not having any pressing issues he started to take account of what had happened, and what to do from here. The absurdity of the situation finally hit him and Zac spaced out with glazed eyes, unsure of how to proceed from here.

A distant roar brought him back to reality. This was no time to slack off, he was by no means safe at the moment. He was in the middle of the forest surrounded by crazy monsters, and that glowing pillar still shone in the distance, reminding him that more monsters might come.

Perhaps the pillar was a portal to hell or something similar, and demons could keep flooding through from their infernal plane. Or was this an alien invasion? The monsters could be something like Zergs in a popular computer game he played back in the day.

Then he finally remembered the weird robotic voice he heard earlier, and the confusing things it said before it started its crooked gambling scheme that almost cost him his life.

"Welcome to the multi-verse..." he mumbled. If the TV-shows and comic books he had devoured throughout the years were any indicators, a Multi-verse was a connection between multiple planets, galaxies and even dimensions.

If the voice was to be believed, Earth had been introduced to some larger system, and due to this, there were suddenly demons roaming the forests. But that didn't mean that only demons were around. What about other monsters or races? Would he suddenly meet elves jumping around in the trees, shooting arrows at him with pinpoint accuracy?

The voice also said it initiated incursions. It seemed reasonable that the huge pillar in the distance was the incursion, which would mean he probably wasn't too far off with his demon portal theory. And when it spawned in the forest, the demons came with it.

But that meant that the monsters wouldn't necessarily spawn next to it, as one was already in the camp when he came back. It was hard to tell the distance to the huge pillar, but it should take hours on foot to get there. And something called a herald spawned right on top of Zac, resulting in the largest emotional roller-coaster in his life.

Finally, he had gotten stronger for some reason with all these changes. Both his speed and power saw noticeable improvements from whatever the weird voice did. It almost felt like he had gotten a power-up like in some video game, which made sense after having seen the floating windows in the dark dimension. He still didn't understand why the prompts were designed to look like some old-school RPG. Was it his mind desperately trying to make sense of an insane situation and adjusted reality for him?

Fantasy monsters, magical portals, and game-like elements. If some parts of the world were turned into an RPG, did other elements get introduced as well? At least there was no health bar, and the demon had no description or text above its head either. In fact, the only time he had seen any true game elements was when he was in the black space the voice brought him to.

He tried to notice anything in the periphery of his vision, but it was nothing there apart from the vision of the now somewhat bloody and grimy trailer. Tyler's parents would probably be pretty pissed off when they saw the state of their camper he thought with a smirk.

If they're even still alive, he then realized somberly. If the world was turned to shit at his location, what about the rest of the planet? Would it be safer, or even more messed up? What about his home town?

Thoughts of his father and younger sister surfaced, and a sense of urgency appeared. If this was a global problem, nowhere was safe. Zac had no idea what was going on, but he would have to figure that out on the way.

He needed to get back home.

# Chapter 5 - Stranded

Driven by a newfound sense of purpose, Zac immediately started packing a backpack with food which wouldn't spoil easily and some other necessities, and then immediately made a beeline for the SUV. It was a slow shuffle where every step felt like walking on fire could be called a beeline.

He opened the door, relieved that no one had been paranoid enough to lock the car in the middle of nowhere. The electric keys were lying on the driver's seat. With no time to spare, he placed the backpack on the front passenger seat and pressed the button to start the car. A spectacular absence of sound greeted him. The car had no reaction, even after pressing the key increasingly hard accompanied by angry swearing. The focused power of his will had no impact either, the dashboard unlit and the motor didn't give as much as a whimper in response.

So the car was broken as well. Or not broken, rather out of batteries he surmised after noticing a black smartphone being plugged into the outlet in the car. The car had been on when the world turned to shit, and by now the batteries had died out. *Freaking Tyler.*

It was a weird feeling walking back to the camper with his backpack. He felt somehow robbed of his momentum. If the car battery was broken he was pretty much stuck in the middle of nowhere, at least for now. Either he had to somehow fix the car with his non-existing knowledge of cars or he had to get back to the nearest town by foot, which was about 80 kilometers away.

Eighty kilometers would take the better part of a day when conditions were good, but with hurt legs and monsters likely lurking in the woods it was suicide. There was no way he would try that with his current condition. His only option was to wait where he was in order

to heal up, and maybe someone would even come and rescue him. Like the military or the police.

To be honest, he didn't hold high hopes of a rescue. First of all, no one really knew he was here, and even if someone did he was afraid that these changes would have disrupted law and order to the point they couldn't be bothered about a single straggler stuck deep in a demon forest.

He would have to save himself, and for that he needed to recover and figure out a way to get back to civilization.

"If this stupid system could help out a little and tell me what to do, that would be great." Zac mumbled, lost as what to do from now.

### **Active Quests:**

- 1. Unlimited Potential (Normal): Reach level 25. Reward: Unlock class system. (16/25)**

### **Dynamic Quests:**

- 1. Demon Slayer I (Normal): Kill 10 denizens with demonic alignment. Reward: +1 All Stats when fighting enemies of demonic alignment. (2/10)**
- 2. Off with their heads (Unique): Kill the four heralds and the general of incursion within 3 months. Reward: 10 E-Grade Nexus Crystals, E-Grade equipment, unique building depending on performance. (1/5)**
- 3. Incursion Master (Unique): Close or conquer incursion and protect base from denizens of other alignments for 3 months. Reward: 5 E-Grade Nexus Crystals, outpost upgraded to town, status upgraded to Lord. (0/3)**

A screen flashed in his view just like when he was transported to the blackness earlier. Zac froze for a second before even registering what was happening. So there was more to this system and multi-verse as he suspected.

The screen slowly hovered in front of him and even moved with him when he turned his head and looked around.

It seemed the system could give out quests which would grant different advantages and power-ups. What Zac first took note of was that there were two types of quests, active quests, and dynamic quests. From looking at the contents it seemed that active quests were normal quests that you either automatically got or got from quest givers or something.

Wait, would there spawn NPC's around the world with yellow exclamation points above their heads giving out quests? Zac's gut feeling said no.

The other type of quest was dynamic quests. All the quests were related to the demons and the red pillar. By now he was pretty certain the red pillar in the distance was, in fact, the Incursion mentioned by the system.

He also noticed that there were some rarity or difficulty in front of each quest. He currently had two types, Normal and unique. Normal was pretty straight forward, and seemed like normal grinding quests in video games, "kill x number of y..." or "collect 10 ores", which would reward some experience and gold.

In this case, there was no gold, but the unique quests did reward him with something called Nexus Crystals, which might be a currency. The other rewards were a bit more unclear.

The Class System he could somewhat guess what it would mean. He would probably get to choose warrior, magician (if magic was now real, which actually felt like a very real possibility) or something, and get buffs pertinent to that class.

The demon-slaying quest's reward was also somewhat straight forward, although +1 stats did not seem very strong. However, it said Demon slayer I, meaning there might be follow-ups. What if he killed

a thousand demons, would he get +100 all stats against demons? He would be a one-man army by then.

The last rewards he had no idea of what they meant. Upgrade outpost to town? What outpost? And why would he want a town in the middle of nowhere surrounded by monsters? As that quest somehow seemed the hardest to complete, he felt there was something more to it, but couldn't figure out what. As for the benefits of being a Lord of Monstertown or a unique building, he did not have the slightest idea.

"Why is there no explanations of things?" Zac grumbled. "There should be a tutorial or something."

**[User does not qualify for teleportation to tutorial protocol. Please explore the system of the multi-verse yourself.]** A robotic voice echoed in his head.

"WHAT?" Zac shouted "Why can't I get the tutorial? Teleport me right now!"

**[By accepting Protocol SL-34572, user automatically declined standardized initiation protocol in favor of lottery opportunity.]**

"OPPORTUNITY? PLAYING A RIGGED GAME IS AN OPPORTUNITY?!" Zac screamed, forgetting he was surrounded by who knows how many beasts. This shitty system actually not only almost got him killed but also skipped a teleportation to a safe-zone, which sounded a lot better than a demon-infested forest.

**[Affirmative. Please explore the system of the multi-verse yourself.]** The voice dully responded, and once again went quiet.

Zac fumed but realized he would get no more help from the cosmic douchebag robot. With a few deep breaths, he once again calmed down and realized the implication of what the robot said.



He himself had missed the opportunity to get to the safe-zone, but what about others. Unless it was voluntary, then almost everyone should have been teleported to wherever those safe-zones were, barring any extremely unlucky instances like his.

**[Protocol SL-34572 is a lottery opportunity. Congratulations user.]** The system responded as if reading his mind.

"Well fuck you too."

Once again calming down, he thought of his fellow campers. Hannah and the others might actually still be safe, teleported away somewhere before this forest turned insane. That would explain the lack of blood and mangled body parts at the campsite.

It also meant that his family hopefully still was alive. While not optimal, a safe-zone sounded pretty swell compared to his surroundings. He was still worried though, and wanted to get to them as soon as possible. Both his father and little sister were out there somewhere, and he was afraid the apocalyptic events would lower the inhibitions of less scrupulous people. While his sister was an avid martial arts practitioner, he wasn't confident that would hold up against perverts with guns and other weapons.

Refocusing his thoughts, he realized something he had just glossed over from the quests. The normal quest had a progression of (16/25). Did this mean that there was actually such a thing as levels, and he was level 16? What did that mean?

# Chapter 6 - Born for Carnage

There was only one way to find out. The quest panel appeared when he asked what he was supposed to do, maybe there were other panels as well?

"Menu." Zac said into the air somewhat embarrassed, feeling like those LARP'ers he had once seen running around in the park once. Nothing happened, and Zac felt he could almost hear the system snicker at him. Not discouraged, he continued to search for some other panels or menus.

"Status."

This time it worked, and a new bar replaced the one with the quests.

**Name**            **Zachary Atwood**

**Level**            **16**

**Race**             **Human**

**Alignment**   **Human (Earth)**

**Titles**            **Born For Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer**

**Strength**       **31**

**Dexterity 25**

**Endurance 27**

**Vitality 27**

**Intelligence 29**

**Wisdom 29**

**Luck 44**

**Free Stats 30**

**Nexus  
Coins 5100**

The status screen did indeed look somewhat like what he expected, with levels and stats. There were a few points he did not really understand though. The first was the alignment. Did it need to be specified that it was humans on earth that he was aligned with? Were there actually humans on other planets or in other dimensions?

He was surprised how much like a game the rest of the screen was. While there didn't seem to be such a thing as HP or mana, stats did exist. He didn't have any framework of what the numbers meant though, apart from higher obviously being better. Ironically he saw

that his highest stat actually was luck, even though he felt very much out of luck.

Strength seemed pretty straight forward, while the other stats might mean different things. Dexterity likely had something to do with movement and reaction speeds. Endurance and vitality both meant survivability, though he wasn't sure the difference. He was pretty sure that his stats were higher than a normal human though, maybe from his level. He couldn't explain his superhuman recuperation otherwise. While he still felt pretty banged up, he should be lying on a bed dying now with the wounds he sustained, not walking around.

Intelligence and wisdom should increase mental faculties. If the world actually had magic and wizards now, these stats would probably make them cast spells better. Finally he had 30 free stats. Quick count showed that he had gained 2 points per level up, if he started at level 1. He held off of trying to allocate any points though, as he still had no idea what he was doing.

The titles, to be honest, sounded pretty bad-ass. They didn't however really feel like something that describe him too well. He neither felt like he was born for carnage or overpowered from the last encounter with the Demonling.

"Titles." Zac said, hoping for some explanation of the titles and what they meant.

Just as he hoped, a new screen popped up with an explanation.

**Born for Carnage: First to kill a monster in world. All stats +10%.**

**Ultimate Reaper: First to kill a boss ranked entity solo in world. All stats +5, All stats +10%.**

**Luck of the Draw: Successful in cheating death in an endeavor against all odds. Luck +5, Luck +20%.**

**Giantsbane: Solo kill enemy 5 levels or more above you. All stats +1.**

**Disciple of David: Solo kill enemy 10 levels or more above you. All stats +2.**

**Overpowered: Solo kill enemy 25 levels or more above you. All stats +3.**

**Slayer of Leviathans: Solo kill enemy 50 levels or more above you. All stats +5, All Stats +10%.**

**Adventurer: Reach level 10. Rewards: Strength +1, Endurance +1, Intelligence +1.**

"Amazing..." Zac whispered. Titles were far more important than just sounding cool. From looking at his status page, he realized that most of his stats came from his titles, rather than being strong on his own.

This also gave him a few very important realizations. Almost all titles came from killing things, meaning that the system probably did not wish for a peaceful and harmonious world. It wanted a world of conflict, where people became stronger by walking over the corpses of their enemies.

That didn't bode well for humanity. If the system incentivized killing, who knows if some people would go crazy and start massacre people for strength instead of monsters. Who's to say that there were no titles for killing humans?

He once again realized the urgent need to meet up with his family, before some maniac starts cutting people down in an attempt to power-level.

The second important point was that there were different types of titles. The first type was the Adventurer title. This was probably a title most people would gain. He did not know how hard it was to gain

levels, but seeing as he was already level 16 after three days it should not take too long. Therefore the rewards was not too exciting.

The second type was struggling to complete tasks that were extremely hard. Zac had a slew of rewards for killing monsters at higher level than him. He was a bit confused at first, while it almost killed him, it did not feel like killing the Demonling warranted all these titles. It did not feel like a boss or some monster that was more than 50 levels above himself if he could kill it with some dumb luck, a well-placed rock, and a lumber-axe. The only thing he could imagine was that the system gave him the kill credit for out-rolling the unlucky Herald and awarded him with the titles.

These rewards were a lot stronger, and gave him all stat boosts which likely increased his all-around powers. The most difficult titles even gave multiplier bonuses to his stats. Those bonuses would only get stronger and stronger the higher his level went, and the more stats he accumulated.

Having those kinds of titles would almost ensure he would be stronger than an opponent at the same level, unless the opponent also had some hidden means.

He now realized what the system meant when it said that the lottery was an opportunity. All odds were stacked against him, but if he survived he would not only gain a bunch of experience, but also amazing titles which would benefit him forever.

**[Protocol SL-34572 is a lottery opportunity. Congratulations user.]** The robot voice once again droned, this time with a tinge of satisfaction discernable in the tone.

"Still fuck you." Zac muttered back, pretty sure he would have declined even if presented the opportunity again. It was only dumb luck he sat here today instead of being vaporized by the system.

Finally there were the first kill titles. It seemed that being the first in the world to accomplish certain deeds would give a powerful title as

well. Most likely no one else on this planet would be able to gain the Born for Carnage or Ultimate Reaper titles as he took them.

From these facts he could somewhat imagine how the world would develop. Everyone would soon realize the possibility of becoming stronger and breaking the limits of the human body. The importance of titles would also soon be public knowledge, at the latest as soon as people started reaching level 10. Maybe the tutorial in the safe-zones had already explained everything.

Those who were willing to take large risks and survive would gain strong titles which would make them even stronger, enabling them to level faster and gain even more titles. Some would become elites, being far more powerful than normal people.

Maybe some would keep their humanity and help the average citizens, but many would probably become tyrants, domineering everyone with sheer power.

The world had turned into a place where power was paramount. And if he wanted to protect his friends and family he would have to become one of the elites himself. Luckily he had a pretty substantial head start. Zac was pretty sure that high level titles were not easy to obtain, so very few, if any knew about the amazing power they could bring.

Finally below the stat points was something called Nexus coins, and he had 5100 of them for some reason. If he were to compare the menu to an RPG, then the Nexus Coins would be the in-game currency.

"Nexus Coins." Zac said, hoping to get an explanations similar to the titles, but nothing happened.

"Coins. Currency. Shop. Store" He continued, searching for a correct keyword. But still there was no response.

"System, are you there?" He grumbled up to the heavens. "Can you come and explain the menu for me real quick? Such as the Nexus Coins and stats?"

**[By accepting Protocol SL-34572, user automatically declined standardized initiation protocol in favor of lottery opportunity. Please explore the system of the multi-verse yourself. Good Bye.]** The system soullessly responded in a mechanical almost word-for-word repeat of what it said earlier. After this the system didn't respond to Zac no matter what he asked or how he extolled, as though the system earlier somehow was here, but now had left.

After a while Zac gave up and refocused on the task at hand. He would have to keep his head start going, and keep pushing forward and get more benefits in this new world. He also thought about classes. Perhaps the class system was similar, where some classes were better than others, and some might even be exclusive ones. Finally there were the mentions of towns and becoming a Lord. While not something Zac was planning on focusing on now, it seemed that it was something extremely beneficial, seeing how hard it was to attain.

A plan was starting to form in his head of how to get out of this situation and head back to his family.

First he needed his weapon.



# Chapter 7 - Outpost

It had been 4 hours since Zac woke up after getting hurt. Even after moving around for hours his wounds were just dully throbbing and he once again was amazed by the efficacy of his constitution. If his Endurance and vitality grew to 100, would he be able to regrow limbs?

He had spent the last hours discreetly surveying the surroundings to come up with a solution to being stranded in the woods. He had made some discoveries during this time, some more shocking than others.

The first thing Zac had done after figuring out the basics of the system was head back to the scene of the fight to retrieve his axe.

When he arrived at the boulder the monster was still there, and by then a putrid smell had started to emanate from the carcass. This meant that the system would not remove bodies like in a game, what was dead was dead. After looking around the body, even somewhat moving it to look beneath it also hadn't dropped any items such as gold or equipment.

He still didn't know if that was just bad luck or whether the system was not that convenient and just wouldn't hand items to you in that manner. Perhaps you would have to make do with what already existed, or whether there were chests strewn around the world.

Just judging from the smell and how the beast looked like when alive it would not be serviceable to eat, even if fresh. The axe lay next to the body, blood caked all over the shaft and the head. Luckily it hadn't been corroded or rusted yet, and after a good cleaning the axe was almost as good as new, albeit slightly dulled.

The next realization he made on the way back to the camp. Since the world in a sense had turned into a game he thought maybe there was some sort of equipment system. But when saying things like "Equip", "Equipment" and "Inspect" gave no response to the system he surmised that there probably was no such thing. An axe was just an axe. Maybe there would be magic gear in the future, but at least for now he had no means to distinguish it. He felt that he had missed something though, as one of his quests would reward him with something called "E-Grade equipment", whatever that was.

However he still was no closer completing that quest now than he was back then. One thing at the time.

The next discovery was that will and determination does not a mechanic make. After popping the hood of the car he had blankly stared at the engine for a few minutes, hoping something obvious and easily solved would present itself. But he had to simply face reality that he would not be able to drive back, at least not with that car. The battery was well and truly dead.

But the most disturbing discoveries came after. Since discarding the car seemed the only option Zac had started scouting the road back to see if it was possible to traverse or whether it was teeming with monsters.

He stealthily moved along the road they came from, keeping to trees and bushes, axe at the ready and maintaining a constant vigil for any sign of danger. If he kept this pace going back the trip would likely take a week, and he didn't cherish the thought of sleeping out in the open.

But before he got further than around a kilometer the road abruptly stopped, and dense forests gave way to a cliff with a drop of roughly 5 meters. The road, heck the whole ground, was simply gone.

The view that instead greeted him was a panoramic view of an *ocean*. At least he thought it was, as he could see no land in sight, and he was still too sore to climb down and test whether it was

freshwater or saltwater. He guessed it was salt-water though from the smell in the air. In either case it was mind boggling as the camp site was hundreds of kilometers away from any body of water of that size.

Finally he remembered some words the system said in the start which he had completely glossed over in his panic. It said it had merged the planet with others and had been somehow randomized. Just how powerful was the system in the end, to grab multiple planets out in space and mashing them together without him noticing anything.

That thought was almost scarier than the immediate threat of the demons.

This also made him realize that most of his plans of going back home and finding his family likely had to be scrapped. If the system could drop an ocean in the middle of the country, his family might be on the other side of the planet for all he knew.

Which brought us back to now. Zac had mutely trudged back to camp, this time with far less vigil than before. Still it seemed that there were, at least for the moment, no threats in the immediate vicinity.

He now sat in one of the camping chairs, at a loss of what to do. He was emotionally and physically wrung out after the day and the sense of purpose he had before had largely vanished. He was still anxious to find his family and friends, but now he didn't even know how to begin looking for them. Were they even together after the teleportations and reshuffling of the world?

For all he knew he was actually on an island, rather than next to a large body of water. Then he would be well and truly stuck in some sort of nightmare-like castaway situation. At least he had a camper which was lucky, as he had no real idea how to build a serviceable shelter. He regretted bloodying it up now though, but hindsight is 20/20.

He knew that finding anyone he knew would likely be a far-off venture now, and he had to focus on surviving this demon forest first. He had already discarded trying to swim towards where the nearest city was before the apocalypse, as he had no idea of how large the water was or even more importantly, what was lurking in the water. If there were demon dogs in the forest, why not demon sharks in the water? No thanks. He had to put some faith in the fact that the system wasn't a complete maniac and had put some checks and balances in the tutorial zones which would keep his family safe.

He once again opened his status page and quest page to see whether there was something he had missed earlier which could help him with his current situation. After a while he gleaned a clue from his quests.

**Incursion Master (Unique): Close or conquer incursion and protect base from denizens of other alignments for 3 months. Reward: 5 E-Grade Nexus Crystals, outpost upgraded to town, status upgraded to Lord. (0/3)**

There were references to some sort of base building in two of his quests, and it seemed important, almost like the main quest of the area.

"Outpost." Zac said, hoping for some sort of prompt which could guide him further.

**[Requirements met to create Incursion outpost. Create now?]**

This time he heard no robotic voice, only a prompt showed up, still looking like an old RPG window.

So there was a function like this. Once again a tinge of rage flared up at the system for its chronic inability to properly explain what was possible. How many other things did he not know about due to the system not teleporting him to a tutorial village?

Zac didn't immediately answer the prompt, leaving it hovering. He was unsure whether this was the correct choice. Was creating an outpost a onetime thing? Would it make him even more stuck to this area? Would it make a loud noise, attracting curious beasts?

Then again he wasn't sure if he had much of a choice. It either was creating an outposts and hoping that it would somehow help with his situation, or essentially going out into the woods and grind for levels by killing demons, and hope that he would get strong enough to leave that way, before getting himself killed. Seeing as his state was pretty pathetic after just one encounter it didn't feel like an option. What if he met a pack of the demon dogs instead of a lone scavenger?

Gritting his teeth he decided he just had to go with the flow this time, and decisively said "Yes."

He stood up, eyes fixed at his surroundings, waiting for something to happen. Maybe a medieval town would sprout up around him? At least some rudimentary battlements? He was hunkered down with axe at the ready, ready to flee at a moment's notice. But the only thing greeting him was the vision of a lush forest, and the sounds of birds and insects.

Confused, Zac sighed was getting ready to try some different commands to create his outpost when a voice suddenly appeared from behind him.

"What are you doing?"

## Chapter 8 - Abby the Eye

"What are you doing?" a pleasant, decidedly female voice sounded from right behind him.

Zac, whose nerves already were frayed from the past days' events shrieked in a higher than desirable octave and jumped forward away from the sound before registering the words. Somewhat embarrassed he turned around while stuttering "Sorry about tha.." before once more shrieking and falling back after seeing the stranger. His fight-or-flight instincts also failed spectacularly, as he dropped the axe while falling.

What had entered his sight was not a beautiful female, as the voice had indicated. His dream of at least having a pretty girl to share this harrowing experience with died out as fast as it had flashed to life. In front of him was a floating eye, larger than his torso.

At least he assumed it was an eye. It looked as though a part of the cosmos had been taken and put into an eyeball. The pupil was a black hole, seemingly sucking Zac's soul in as he was looking at it. The monster had no iris, but rather a slowly rotating cosmic cloud, looking like it was slowly being absorbed into the pupil in the middle.

The sclera was not white as with a human, but a black studded with shining lights. It looked like the stars in the night sky. Surrounding the eye was a purplish-tinted skin and eyelid. It however had no mouth, making Zac confused how it could make any sounds.

It was beautiful and harrowing at once, and certainly not what Zac expected after hearing the pleasant voice.

"Rude." the eye muttered. "I am lucky enough to get an assignment at a newly initiated world, and I get to work with this rube. By the way, you smell."

Zac was still sputtering, unable to fully register what was going on. Unsure of whether to run, get the axe, or bow down to his new ocular overlord he compromised by simply staring dumbly with mouth ajar at the eye.

"Oh well. It makes sense that there were no Stargazers on your planet before the initiation, human. We usually only appear where the system sends us. My real name is a bit tricky for you to say with vocal cords but sounds something like Veth-Abarak. I am here to assist you in your endeavors regarding your outpost. You are welcome." the eye continued, somehow making a haughty expression with only the help of an eyelid. "I am sure you have some questions, though the tutorial should have explained most of what you can do."

"Um... Hello, my name is Zac... Err, Zachary Atwood. What do you mean assist me? And how are you talking without a mouth?" Zac responded, still having some problem adjusting to the situation. The eye, or Stargazer as it called itself, gave a long-suffering sigh, already seeming to have labeled Zac as a mental invalid.

"Did you not listen to the Pixies during the tutorial? I am the assistant assigned to you when you assigned this... Trailer? Why did you choose a trailer? Anyway, when you chose this trailer to be your outpost when assaulting the Incursion. I will help with answers regarding the choices you make, to get the ball rolling so to say. As for how I talk, magic of course." The Stargazer answered, a flash of what looked like cosmic mist grandly surrounding herself to accentuate her powers.

"What choices? And no I didn't listen to any Pixies or fairies because the stupid system never sent me to any tutorial. It left me in this crazy demon forest 3 days ago while it teleported my friends away." Zac responded, starting to feel a bit peeved by being looked down on by a floating eyeball.

"Oh, you didn't go to the tutorial. I guess tha... THREE DAYS? This world was initiated only three days ago? Don't you mean months?"

The Stargazer started shaking, the pupil shrinking to a... well, not needlepoint, but from a basketball to a baseball in size. "Stop joking with me, how would you be able to create an outpost only after three days, even if you skipped the month-long tutorial?" Veth-Abarak shook and hovered closer to Zac's face, the grand mist surrounding it disappearing.

Zac, who had somehow starting to get acclimatized to talking to this odd being, sighed and briefly explained his experience starting when the world turned dark. The eyeball seemed harmless enough and appeared to be on his side. Furthermore, he really needed someone to talk to, both to unload and to make sense of the situation.

"Oh wow, I got assigned to a Defier. I guess I have some good karma after all! No returning in defeat for Abby!" The Stargazer suddenly seemed quite a bit more amiable, virtually shaking with excitement. It almost felt like the monster would start rubbing itself on him if it wasn't that he was still generally caked in grime.

"What's a Defier? It doesn't sound great. And wait, Abby? Wasn't your name Veth-something?" Zac questioned, seeming to get more and more confused the more the Stargazer spoke.

"Now now, don't be so formal. Just call me Abby." Abby answered. Gone was the slightly haughty tone, replaced with the mild pleasant tone from the beginning. "And I guess some explanations are in order. As you have figured out some people of your world have been moved to tutorial towns after your world was integrated into the multi-verse. However, some people have some sort of deficiency where they can't naturally absorb cosmic energy and the system deem them worthless. It doesn't bother with these people and leave them where they are. These people mostly die sooner or later as they are essentially defenseless at the beginning as the system generally vastly increase the danger of the surroundings."

"And these are the Defiers?" Zac interrupted a bit anxious "Is it genetic? Do you think my family is stuck somewhere as well?"



"It's not genetic as far as I know, and no they aren't the Defiers. These people are generally called mortals. Please let me finish, we have limited time. As far as research shows, it is random who can take in cosmic energy and who can't. However, in worlds with lower class energy mortals are more common. The higher the energy, the more common it is to be able to absorb the energy. On B rank planets and above almost everyone can absorb cosmic energy naturally."

"When I was in that black space the system said Earth had class F energy, and after the merge class D." Zac chimed in hoping for some additional information.

"Well, class F is the lowest of the low. I doubt there were people who could fly or use magic before the merge, right?" Zac nodded affirmatively. Abby shook her eye and continued "From what I've heard only 5-10% of the population turn out to be cultivators in an F-energy world. And most of those people are younger, as their minds haven't turned too rigid yet. Of course, this is for you humans. The Multi-verse consists of myriad races and civilizations and many races have natural advantages compared to you humans, who are notoriously average."

"Cultivators are what they call those who can naturally draw the cosmic energies into themselves by the way. Cultivators can be divided further into many types depending on class and skills, but that's for later. D-class energy is pretty good for a new world, most are E classed. So to recap, the world is populated by mortals and cultivators. This might mean your family is safe for now."

"Lucky how? It sounds pretty bad to me that my family are probably stranded somewhere with monsters spawning just like me, but without the Titles." Zac questioned testily.

"Well, if they all are mortals they haven't been split up. They are probably together in the city you lived in. Also, even if they are mortals there is strength in numbers. Even if the monsters are normally impossible to kill one on one, they should be able to kill the

easier monsters using teamwork. And while they can't just get continuously stronger through cultivating, they still get stronger from killing monsters and leveling up like you did." Abby explained patiently. While not completely comforting, what she said did make some sense to Zac. He could only hope his family was being careful and safe right now.

"Anyway, that brings us to Defiers like you. In extremely rare cases a mortal gains power far above what's expected, either through luck, talent or hard work. There is no strict definition of them, rather a 'You know it when you see it'-attitude. The name comes from the fact that the System essentially has deemed you trash but you defy the system and fate and become strong. Your situation is extreme even for Defiers, I mean a Herald spawning on top of you and you survive? Stealing a bunch of exclusive titles? Crazy. I think it has only happened a few thousand times in the multi-verse." Abby seemed to get excited just thinking about it, happily bouncing up and down in the air.

"So it's not that rare? There might be even more on earth?" Zac interjected.

Abby rolled her eye in response. "I think you misunderstand Zac. A few thousand times in the multi-verse. Oh right, you missed the tutorial. Suffice to say the multi-verse is almost infinite, with endless worlds with life on them, most far larger and more populated than your earth. It has existed for at least hundreds of millions of years. And during all that time it has only happened a few thousand times. Which makes you an aberrant even among Defiers. You, and by extension me, have truly hit the jackpot. "

"So how does it help me?" Zac asked. "I understand that I have a leg up on others with all these strong titles, but I still can't absorb that cosmic energy you mentioned. What is that, anyway?"

"Cosmic energy is the building block of the multi-verse. It is energy, it is magic, and it is life. It is everything. You couldn't really see the effects of it earlier as your world had so little of it, but you will soon

see the effects of it on everything around you." Abby said, almost having a reverent tone mentioning it.

"See how?"

"Some things in nature will be unable to take in the stronger energy and die out. But many things will be like the cultivators, naturally absorbing the energy. Essentially, things will grow big. Both the beasts and nature itself. Many things will also change in unpredictable ways. A tree might gain the properties of metal and be almost unbreakable, a mouse might grow wings and fly, or suddenly be able to spit thunder. It's quite spectacular." She explained.

"Not being able to cultivate will impede you somewhat, but not as much as you think. You have a massive advantage in the form of titles, strength and your newly created outpost. In any case, there are so many things to go over, but unfortunately, we are running out of time." Abby realized she had gone off on somewhat of a tangent, seeming a bit embarrassed.

"I will be summoned back in 10 minutes."

# Chapter 9 - Forced to Fight

Zac was gobsmacked.

"You're not here to help out permanently?" He inquired hesitantly. While it took some time getting used to talking to an eyeball, he was pretty unwilling to be stranded alone in the forest again. Besides, there were so many things he still didn't understand about what was happening.

"Unfortunately, no. The system only summons an administrator such as myself for a short while when creating an outpost. Also, we only get summoned the first year after initiation. Something like an add-on Tutorial. But we got a bit side-tracked here, and need to hurry up with your outpost." Abby explained, seeming a bit embarrassed she got sidetracked from her duty.

"Outposts will evolve into full-fledged towns if you complete certain missions. The difference between a system-sanctioned town and a normal mortal town is that the city leader of a system-sanctioned town can use the system to summon buildings, tax the population and connect to other city leaders for example. The difference between an outpost and a town is that an outpost is temporary. Either you manage to turn it into a town by completing your quest, or the incursion over there will stabilize and turn to a town owned by the invading general. By then A LOT more demons will spawn, and unless you're already dead you will likely die then, titles or not."

Zac nodded, a better picture of forming in his head. Remembering the 3-month deadline in his quests he realized that what Abby described would happen in roughly 3 months. Still, there were some things he was unsure about.

"But do I really need to care about creating an outpost? My goal is to find my family, I can just leave before the demons arrive."

That question managed to elicit a full-body eye-roll from the eyeball.

"And go where? Couldn't go to the tutorial town so you can't learn skills or choose classes, making you quite weak compared to what you should be. There are monsters everywhere so you aren't safe anywhere. An outpost can help you get stronger through its facilities, and having a town would be the most effective way to look for your family, compared to manually looking everywhere like a vagabond. Besides, being the first to create a town has amazing benefits, just like with the titles. The system likes the people in the forefront." Abby one more went into lecturing mode.

"And if that's not enough, I can also tell you that the system hates cowards. You only get one shot at creating your outpost, if you fail the system deems you unworthy to be a Lord in the future. If you not just fail, but even abandon the mission, the system will also punish you. It would range from crippling you to outright killing you depending on how bad it judges your performance."

"WHAT?" Zac shouted aghast. "You mean I must complete this quest and kill all the other boss demons or the system might kill me?" The little goodwill Zac had been building towards the system during Abby's explanations were thoroughly erased.

"Well yes. So I suggest you improve your outpost as much as possible in order to have a chance at survival." Abby nonchalantly explained, as if risking life and limb fighting demons was completely normal.

"Well shit. So what do you suggest I build? " Zac hoped to get some guidance in order to create a good foundation for the outpost.

"I'm sorry I am not allowed to guide your choices of buildings, building a proper base properly is also a test from the system. I am only allowed to provide information. The system doesn't want to give too much direction or tips to newly initiated civilizations, as it wants to test their ingenuity. "

"Yeah, the system is a real asshole, isn't he?" Zac muttered. Abby's pupil enlarged and looked around nervously. Apparently speaking ill of the system seemed like some sort of blasphemy, which Zac guessed made sense as the system essentially was a god. Maybe speaking ill of a being that could spawn portals which puked out demons was a bad idea after all he reflected and vowed to try to keep a lid on his mouth.

"Err... Anyway. If you imagine the words 'Outpost base' a menu will appear with your options. Most of the options are unavailable at the start, but more and more gets unlocked as your outpost grows into a town and further. You use the Nexus coins you have to buy the upgrades, and you can get more coins from various sources. Nexus coins are the official currency of the multi-verse, and the only one used when trading with the system." Abby said, seemingly eager to change the subject.

This answered the question Zac had about the coins in his status screen. He still wasn't sure why he had 5100 of them though.

"Wait, is there some connection between Nexus Coins and Nexus Crystals?" Zac asked, remembering the rewards from his quests.

"Not really. Nexus Crystals are a cultivation resource in the multi-verse. Both cultivators and mortals can absorb cosmic energy from them. The higher grade the more energy it contains, and the faster you can absorb it."

"Well at this time I would normally have time to answer some specific questions about the different buildings, but we're out of time. Good luck Zac. If you somehow survive this remember me when you create your town!" It seemed the time for the outpost tutorial was coming to an end. Abby seemed to hesitate a bit but then apparently came to a decision.

"You... You should really try to complete the quests within a month, or at least within two months. That would..." She didn't get any further before a heavy pressure suddenly bore down on the camp.

Abby's pupil dilated and red squirming veins appeared all over the eye. And suddenly she was gone.

Zac wasn't sure, but it didn't feel like this was how she was supposed to disappear, as she appeared completely without him noticing. He had been able to sense something that could almost be anger in the pressure that descended. Had Abby been punished for what she said at the end?

"Complete the quests within a month..." he mumbled, trying to glean any hidden meaning. Something obviously happened because of those sentences. If the system punished her for lying it could only mean Abby wanted him to run to his death like an idiot. But if it was for unduly helping it might be an important clue to help him stay alive. That meant something likely happened to the world or the incursion after a month had progressed. Something that was bad for him.

He just couldn't figure out why the Stargazer would just help him like that, even risking the wrath of the system, as she had already explained it didn't like her giving undue guidance. Zac couldn't figure out any real reason for that yet, and could only put it aside for now. Instead, he followed her instructions and mentally thought '*Outpost base*'.

Suddenly a new window popped up in front of him. But while it still had the blue background and white borders, it rather reminded him of a web store than an old school RPG game. There were multiple categories of buildings and add-ons to choose from to the left and a seemingly unending number of products in the main window.

Zac took a bottle of now tepid water from the cooler the demonling had been rummaging through earlier and retreated to the camper. The suns were starting to set, which was a relief to Zac, as it proved that at least the daily cycles remained in the world, giving some normalcy.

Unheeding of the bloody mess inside, he cracked open a tin of beans from the cupboard. Luckily they had stocked the camper well before the trip, as they had planned to spend a week on the road, and most of it was non-perishables. He still had food and water for at least two weeks unless he gorged himself.

He sat down at the small dinner-area, and while slowly eating his beans he started mentally browsing through the shop. Zac noticed that the prices were denominated in Nexus coins, which he had 10100 of now. He had gained 5000 coins during the day, likely from creating the outpost.

If he was going to survive in this new world, it seemed the first step was getting the most out of this outpost of his.



# Chapter 10 - Preparation

Zac woke up the next morning feeling sore, but his wounds had obviously healed even further. It no longer pained him overly to put weight on his wounded leg, and he could actually turn his midriff without a blazing pain erupting.

The smell in the camper was getting pretty bad though, and he knew he had to do something about it if this was going to be his base for the foreseeable future. He gathered the bloody bed sheets he had fallen asleep on when he passed out from his wounds and put them in a garbage bag. He didn't dare throw it outside yet though, afraid the smell of blood would attract beasts. With some detergent he spent another 30 minutes cleaning most of the blood away, making the trailer go from looking like the site of a vampire orgy to a serial killer hideout. The blood had badly stained multiple places, especially around the dining area, and it wasn't something he'd be able to fix in the short run. At least it smelled a lot better now.

Finally, he decided to waste some water for a quick shower in the trailer bathroom, even though the water was limited. After some intensive scrubbing away the blood caked all over him, the filth was mostly rinsed away. He stepped out of the shower and donned another set of clothes, feeling like a new man. When showering he had also noticed that he seemed to have actually gotten more in shape, with most of this gut gone and his muscles seeming, if not bigger, then harder and more compact than before. It seemed that the stats had some effect on his physical appearance as well. Hopefully, an increase in intelligence wouldn't make his head larger and larger though.

After a quick breakfast, he was finally ready to head out according to plans he had made yesterday after browsing through the shop. There were a dizzying array of possibilities to choose from when building an outpost, even when most of the options were disabled.

Many of them he could understand or at least somewhat intuit the purpose for using a lifetime of playing video games. There were buildings such as an inn, blacksmith, different types of stores, bank and so on. Most of these required a town though. There was also something he was extremely keen on getting, the teleporter. If he built that he might be able to actually teleport to his hometown in one go.

There was one confusing aspect of the buildings though, which was that there were often hundreds of versions of most of the buildings, especially the commercial ones. Even though they seemed to fill the same function they were of different design and some minor differences in the description. After a while he could only surmise that the different choices represented different factions or planets. It seemed that creating a store wouldn't actually create some NPC-style beings, but rather move people here from other planets or intergalactic corporations.

There was also a huge amount of supporting buildings that could improve the offense, defense or improve the town in other manners. There seemed to even be some sort of training facility that seemed to be able to slowly improve stat points without leveling. If possible Zac would have gone on a shopping spree, but he quickly realized the harsh reality that roughly 10 000 Nexus Coins would only be able to buy a few of the most basic buildings.

He had formulated a plan yesterday after browsing through his options for hours but needed to explore some more before actually spending the few coins he had.

Zac had seen a hill the day he had been forced to go out to gather firewood, and he planned to scale it to get a better lay of the land. Donned in a fresh set of clothing and his trusty hatchet he once again set out into the woods.

Soon he had walked up the hill, hunkered over to not be spotted by any potential threats. Luckily the hill was filled with lush bushes and even a tall tree at the top, making for some simple protection.

Unfortunately the hill wasn't tall enough to give a complete overview of the surroundings as it turned out, with the crowns of larger trees still obscured the distance inland. Still, he could see his trailer and further on the ocean.

Still, he wanted to see whether he was actually on an island, or if the system had teleported any type of civilization in the vicinity. It would be a bit insane if he lived as a transient mountain man in the trailer if a town was just a few kilometers away.

He swung the axe and embedded it slightly in the tree, and then started climbing it for a better vantage. Zac once again marveled at the improvement of his constitution from his increase in stats. He felt like a gibbon, almost effortlessly dragging himself upwards along the branches with his arms, something that would have been an impossible work-out in the past.

Soon he was almost at the crown of the tree, afraid to continue up any further as the branches seemed inadequate to support his weight. A quick glance around unfortunately realized his fears. It very much seemed that he was on an island without any civilization in sight. However he couldn't be completely sure, as there was actually a mountain off in the distance. It wasn't gargantuan, but still large enough to solidly block any visibility of what was beyond. It looked quite odd to have a steep mountain right next to the ocean, but Zac guessed that was what happened when the system pressed the randomizer for a world. The good news that there was land in sight in the distance, though it looked like a few scattered islands, rather than a solid land-mass.

The island (as Zac decided to call it until proven wrong) he was on was huge, and he couldn't properly assess the size. He and his trailer were on the far edge of it, while the ever-shining red beam of light was almost on the opposite side, in a vale halfway between the center of the island and the mountain. He guessed that the reason why he still only had encountered one of the demon dogs was that they mainly spawned scattered around the incursion itself.

Zac didn't have time to analyze the situation any further, as a branch in the periphery of his sight suddenly exploded into movement and instantly was upon him. Before he had time to adapt to the situation, a brown snake had wrapped itself a few loops around his torso, leaving only the arm he used to hold onto the tree for leverage free. The snake seemed to be over 3 meters long and slightly thicker than his arm.

He immediately felt an intense pressure on his chest, the air leaving his lungs and wounds on his side screaming in protest. Zac strained until his face was red with exertion, but was unable to free his trapped arm at all. The snake had him in a vise, and even with his improved strength he could not get free. Its head slowly rose up towards his, a hiss escaping from its maws.

By now all air had been squeezed out of Zac's lungs, his consciousness starting to get fuzzy and lights flickered in his sight. Zac knew he was running out of time, it was time for a Hail Mary action. He suddenly let go of the tree with his free hand, grabbed the head of the constrictor and bashed it with all the force he could muster into the tree trunk. The slam obviously had an effect on the snake, as it slightly released him from its grip. With newfound strength from a ragged breath, he slammed the snake's head twice again into the tree with even more fervor.

However, just as Zac was feeling jubilant about escaping death's grasp he felt the branch he stood on give way, and both he and the still entwined snake came crashing down.

# Chapter 11 - Upgrades

Zac woke up with a jerk, which caused a pained groan to escape from his mouth. There was not a single part of his body that didn't feel battered and broken. A quick look around showed that he was halfway down the hill, his whole body full of scratches. The snake lay lifelessly a few meters away from him, seemingly having uncoupled from him somewhere during the tumble downhill.

Not daring to take any chances due to negligence again, he ignored the screaming protests of his body and dragged himself towards the snake. There was a rock roughly the size of a head on the way which he ripped out of the ground. Finally he arrived in front of the beast, and with a snarl grabbed the stone with both hands and slammed with all power he could gather right in the forehead of the snake. The long body convulsed slightly but seemed not to react further than that. Zac wasn't done however, and with guttural grunts from deep within his throat he kept slamming the stone down again and again, each time eliciting a wet thud. After a few hits the body's death throes stopped, but Zac kept going until the bloodied stone finally slipped out of his hands. By then the head and neck was only a mess of broken flesh and brain matter.

The grunts gave way to sobs as Zac collapsed next to the headless snakes, his whole body shaking. He had messed up, that had been way too close. Not finding any more demons the last two days had made him complacent, barely looking around for threats. The Stargazer had even warned him just yesterday about the world changing due to absorbing cosmic energy, but he hadn't even reflected on what that meant. There shouldn't have been snakes of this size in the woods where he was, but the energy in the world had not only increased its size and strength but made it more aggressive. Had that been a venomous snake instead of a constrictor he would be a bloated corpse by now.

He finally understood that there was simply no such thing as safety in the wild, and he had to start taking things more seriously. Not even the last near-death experience had really woken him up, as the stats and quests made him subconsciously consider it all a game. But this was life and death, and he had to treat it as such.

Zac shakily got on his legs and started to make his way to the top of the hill again. His hatchet was still left in the tree, and he refused to go anywhere without it again. It felt like he had been hit by a truck but he could only grit his teeth and trudge on.

At the crest there were fallen leaves and broken bloodied branches all over the floor. Luckily it seemed that the snake had taken the brunt of the damage from the fall, otherwise, he might not even have survived just from the height. He didn't want to linger at such an exposed location, so he quickly ripped the axe out of the tree and made his way back down the hill.

When he reached the snake once again he hesitated for a few seconds, but then gripped the reptile and wired it around his torso a few turns then put the end up on his shoulder. He had to think like a survivor now, and the snake might both give food and its scales could be fashioned into some sort of protection.

Any other exploration would have to wait, he needed to get back to base. On the way back he walked with much higher care, trying to avoid stepping on twigs and staying close to the trees for shelter. However the only sounds from the forest were the sleepy rustling of the trees, only occasionally interrupted by a distant roar. After another 15 minutes, he was finally back in the camp.

He had planned to go over his strategy for the town once more but currently felt intensely unsafe right now, and decided to not drag things out any longer. He brought up the base building interface and bought an **[F-Grade Small Scale Illusion Array]** for 2000 Nexus Coins. Suddenly as if it had always been there a small wooden box appeared in front of him. Zac opened the box and inside were 8 intricately carved wooden poles. They were each roughly 30 cm long

and 3 cm thick, in a glossy black coating. One end was sharpened down into a needlepoint while the other was completely flat. The carvings were in a golden hue, and it seemed the carvings were depictions of intricate fractals rather than words or pictures.

When Zac picked up the poles suddenly 8 small yellow pillars lit up around the camp. He wasn't surprised at this as the shop had mentioned the usage method. When holding the poles, or flags as the system had called them for some reason, the system would guide him where to place them. As soon as all the flags had been placed the formation would activate. There also was a cheaper alternative of the same array, but it wouldn't have the guidance system, leaving the user to figure out correct placement according to energy-flows and ley-lines. Zac quickly placed down the flags according to instruction, and suddenly a translucent dome shimmered into being around the small camp-site. It initially looked like uneven glass, distorting the outside, but soon turned invisible. Not sure if it had any effect, he walked outside of the camp and took a look.

What met his gaze was just a normal-looking forest, albeit slightly denser than around it. The trailer, campfire, and car were completely gone. Even the bloody smell from the snake was removed, replaced with only the fresh earthy smell of the forest. There were some thorny bushes between the trees looking almost like a natural wall, which would hopefully encourage nearby enemies to walk around the camp rather than straight through.

That was the disadvantage of the illusion array, and why it was so cheap compared to many other defensive options. Anyone could simply walk through it if they desired as it provided no stopping power. As soon as someone knew where to look or just was passing by it simply had no value. Also, it didn't work on stronger individuals, as they could sense something was wrong with the cosmic energy in the area. However, it was a cost-effective alternative right now which left Zac with more coins for other buildings. Later he would see if he could get some physical bushes transplanted at the edge of camp to

dissuade any roving animal or monster from taking a path through the camp even further.

Zac was not done with that though and he made another purchase which spawned a box similar to the first one, but slightly larger. Inside were 12 poles, this time white but still engraved in gold. They were slightly larger than the illusion flags and had a different fractal engraved, but obviously they had the same purpose – to create an array. It was the **[F-Grade Small Scale Mother-Daughter Gathering Array]** and cost Zac a whopping 7500 Nexus coins, almost cleaning him out. The gathering arrays for sale in the shop was designed to gather cosmic energy from the void and increase the density of it within its borders. This would improve the cultivation speed of the cultivators, and was likely a must for any town of repute in the multi-verse. This normally was of no use to Zac, as he wasn't a cultivator and instead had to kill monsters to gain levels. However, the array he had bought had a special function which was highly desirable to Zac. The Mother-Daughter in its name referred to the fact that it actually was two arrays.

One of them was the normal gathering array, which was referred to as the mother array. The other array was actually a necklace which looked a bit like a small ship's wheel from a medieval ship attached to a silver chain. The unique function of the Mother-Daughter Gathering Array was that most of the energy that the mother-array gathered did not increase the density of cosmic energy within the array, but was actually transferred to the daughter-array.

As long as Zac wore the amulet and was within 50 kilometers from the mother-array, cosmic energy would continuously be transferred to the amulet, and from the amulet into Zac. In other words, the array essentially turned him into a cultivator who continuously drew energy into himself, as long as he was on the island.

The downside of this type of array was that the gathering efficiency was far lower compared to a similar F-Grade Gathering array, which would result in a far more sparse concentration of cosmic energy in a town. However, this didn't matter to Zac as he had no citizens that he



needed to take into account, at least not for now. He quickly followed the instructions and placed the 12 flags around the camp.

This was Zac's main plan to have a chance to get strong enough to survive against the incursion. He had no experience of combat from his earlier life and needed to gain power from stats and levels to simply be able to overpower his enemies, at least he gained some actual combat experience.

There were more things Zac wanted to buy, but he simply had run out of coins. Finally, Zac Took a look at his status screen once more and saw that even though it had been a harrowing experience, killing the snake had not given him another level.

Name	Zachary Atwood
Level	16
Race	Human
Alignment	Human (Earth)
Titles	Born For Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer
Strength	31
Dexterity	25
Endurance	27

Vitality 27

Intelligence 29

Wisdom 29

Luck 44

Free  
Points 30

Nexus  
Coins 600

After checking out the menu he looked down on his battered and bruised body and felt embarrassed with himself. He had 30 stat points he still hadn't allocated. If he had done that this morning he might not have been in such a precarious situation as he was.

It was time to upgrade.

## Chapter 12 - The Warrior-Route

Initially Zac had wanted to hold out on spending his points until he understood the class system better, maybe even waiting to allocate until level 25. He now realized that such thinking was naïve. He needed every advantage he could get the coming months if he wanted to survive. He was supposed to kill 3 more Heralds somehow but had almost died *twice* to low tier monster at the edge of the island.

Still, he didn't just want to do anything hasty, so he donned the amulet and sat down in a camping chair. Immediately he felt a warm pulse from the amulet, which entered his chest and spread through his body. Almost his whole torso and large sections of his body were purple from being first strangled and then falling down a tree. It seemed however that the amulet actually slowly alleviated his symptoms. Abby the eye had said that cosmic energy was *life*, so it made sense though that it would not only help with his cultivation.

When choosing stats one needed to plan for the long term, to make sure it was suitable to his class. The problem was that he had no idea how the class system worked. Could he even decide on a class himself, or whether it would be just assigned to him?

"System...? Are you there" Zac once again tried to get some information out of System, but was met with silence. "Can you tell me about stat points?" He entreated, trying hard to hide the rancor he was feeling against this unfeeling overlord.

With a lack of answers he could only make educated guesses and hope that any bad choices wouldn't haunt him in the future. If it was a video game he would likely dump all the points in the main stat of a class, such as strength for warrior and dexterity for a ranger. The difference was that in a game he could respawn if dying, whereas here it was game over for real.

If he could choose Zac would have preferred to be a mage. Then he could just stand safely in the distance throwing fireballs on unsuspecting monsters until they were burnt to a cinder. Yet he didn't dare go this route. He had no idea if he would be able to use magic even if he got a class, or how to progress in such skills.

He also skipped ranger-type classes, simply as he had no such weapon. His eyes swept to the hatchet lying down next to his leg. Even after his recent battles it looked almost as good as new. Luckily they had bought a fancier model, being a solid piece of metal with a plastic grip. If the handle had been made of wood it might have snapped by now.

"I guess it's the warrior-route..." Zac muttered and sighed. From the experiences since last week he was plenty reluctant to go choose this class type, but he saw no different option as of yet. Maybe the system would prepare other options he hadn't thought of yet when he reached 25.

Zac brought up and decisively spent his 30 free points. First, he placed 10 points in strength. In both fights so far he had been physically weaker, and he needed a boost in that department. What good was his hatchet if he couldn't give more than flesh wounds on his targets? He then spent 5 points in dexterity in somewhat of a test to see what improved. 5 Points also went into endurance. He would be moving and fighting a lot across the island, and he needed a sturdy constitution.

Finally he put 10 points in vitality. Vitality wouldn't help killing monsters directly, but he felt that it would help indirectly. He simply was in no condition to fight right now. With increased vitality and the amulet he should heal plenty faster compared to before. Secondly, he would be running around and fighting a lot the coming months. He couldn't take a few days off after every fight to nurse his wounds, or he'd likely never be able to clean out all demons before the three-month deadline. He also felt that a high vitality would help him in the future no matter which class he got, while strength and dexterity felt a bit more specialized.

Zac felt that Wisdom and intelligence were likely the staples of the mage route. Getting an increase in either wouldn't hurt, but he couldn't justify spending points there when there were more tangible improvements that the other stats could provide. He felt the same about luck. His high luck had likely helped him survive so far. It was thanks to a lucky roll that he was still standing here today. But Zac did not want to rely on luck to survive. Even if he somehow fell ass-backward into victory 9 times out of 10, he'd still die the tenth time due to lack of proper foundations. Luck was intangible and he couldn't even fathom what benefits he would get from putting points into that stat. It would have to wait until someone explained it to him.

With the points spent he closed down the screen. Suddenly a surge of warmth far stronger compared to what the amulet provided spread through his body. It felt like his every cell was vibrating with life, greedily absorbing the warmth and improving. He was shocked to see his various wounds were healing at a visible rate, and it felt like he could punch a hole through a mountain. This feeling of strength was quite addicting. Soon the warmth faded though, and the feeling of immortality disappeared with it. The wounds stopped healing at an accelerated speed. Still, Zac felt a good deal better, with a good deal of the bruising and smaller cuts completely gone.

There still was some time left of the day, so after a quick meal he turned his attention to the snake carcass. After a few tries with a kitchen knives he knew the scaled leather was quite resilient to cuts and would make good protection. He brought a few knives from the camper and his hatchet and dragged the carcass some distance away from the camp, and then started skinning it.

He cut along the softer belly, and after 20 minutes he had cut all along the length of the carcass, ruining a knife on the hard scales while doing so. His forearms were burning with strain after the workout. He had ruined most of the meat along the way unfortunately, and it didn't seem that there'd be much left over to eat.

After that he dragged the skin off from the carcass, and finally scraped as much of the left-over flesh as possible off from the skin

with his hatchet. From here he was not quite sure what to do. He had no idea of methods to cure leather. He was an office worker before the end of the world, and he was a few generations too young for these types of things to be considered common knowledge. Zac knew he had read somewhere that urine could be used somehow, but he was not about to experiment with that.

He put the skin aside and dug a hole which he pushed the now mangled carcass into, and filled it with soil. He didn't want anything to head this direction, even though he was some ways away from the camp.

Zac picked up the skin and made his way back to camp. The skin needed to dry out, so he placed it across the hood of the car, leaving both ends hanging down at the sides. He placed two large rocks down on both ends in order to keep it stretched and stop it from shrinking overnight. He had no idea if he was supposed to do something else, and could only leave it like that over the night and hope that it would work out.

It was starting to get darker, so he decided he was done exploring for the day. He was still feeling beat up even with the rapid healing as well. He took 30 minutes to clean up the camp-site and take stock of his things. Normally he wouldn't go through his friends' belongings but these were desperate times. Unfortunately there was nothing of value except some extra changes of clothes and some daily necessities.

With the last of the sunlight Zac found a long fallen branch near the campsite with the thickness of about 3 to 5 centimeters which was about 6 meters long. With a few quick swings with his hatchet he cut off roughly 2.5 meters where the branch was the most straight. Then with his improved strength he quickly sharpened one edge into a sharp point, turning it into a makeshift spear. It was likely too malleable to be able to stop anything large like the demonling in its tracks without breaking. However it could hopefully keep some monsters at length if needed. His hatchet was a good weapon, but

its length was quite short. It was hard to use while keeping himself out of harm's way.

Zac finally sat down in the trailer for a meal, quietly staring out the window and seeing the ever-present red pillar. Had it not been for the incursion he might have been able to forget how messed up the world had become for a second.

Life had thrown things at him the last days he couldn't even have imagined, and it would only get crazier.

Tomorrow he would have to go hunting demons.

# Chapter 13 - On the Hunt

Zac crept through the woods, slowly making his way more inland. He was hefting hatchet in one hand and his improvised spear in the right. He had found a camouflaged shirt in David's bag which he had donned which would hopefully help him blend in a bit. He had planned to make some makeshift bracers and shin guards from some of the snakeskin this morning. Unfortunately it was still a bit grimy, so he had to leave it for another day at least to properly dry out. He still wore the amulet of the gathering array underneath his shirt, which continuously imbued him with more cosmic energy. He had a black backpack on his back filled with a bottle of water and a small batch of medical supplies.

He had actually gained a level without noticing while he was asleep from the amulet. It was still hard for him to know how much the amulet was gathering for him, or how much experience killing other monsters gave. There was no experience bar or notifications of experience gain anywhere in the system that could give him a frame of reference. Hopefully he would learn more about it from today's excursions. The two free points he had he had split between strength and vitality. When he allocated the points he had felt the energy rushing into his cells again, albeit far weaker when compared to when he allocated 30 points.

The goal of today was simple. He needed to kill monsters. Almost a week had passed since the world was integrated into the multiverse, and in reality he had accomplished very little so far.

He didn't dare make a beeline for the incursion just yet. He was afraid that there would be monsters there that he still couldn't handle, such as the Heralds themselves. Instead, he was walking around the edges of the island while steadily making his way inland. He had been walking for roughly 30 minutes now and still hadn't seen any monsters. He had seen some animals though. Most were



the same as before the change, but some obviously had evolved from cosmic energy. For example he's seen a squirrel as large as a golden retriever. Luckily it seemed very docile, and it immediately escaped into the tree crowns after noticing him.

Finally he heard the familiar menacing growl from ahead. Zac was afraid he had been spotted, and immediately hunkered down behind a bush. There was no charging demonling heading his way fortunately, so he crept forward again. While hiding behind a tree he finally saw the beast 30 meters in the distance. It was the same sort of demon as he had fought before, a 6 legged monstrosity of oversized muscle and maw. This one seemed a bit leaner than the first he had fought, but he couldn't be sure. It seemed like it was lazing about in the sun in a small clearing. There was a small animal carcass next to it, so it appeared that it recently had a meal and was now resting.

Zac had made battle plans based on his first experience fighting these monsters, and now it was time to use them. He inched towards a sturdy tree that was at the end of the clearing, leaving only open field between the tree and the demon. He placed down his spear two meters away from the trunk and picked up a small rock. By now his heart was racing, his hands almost shaking from a buildup of adrenaline.

"Calm down, calm down..." he whispered under his breath, nerves taut but with a glint of determination in his eyes. He had no choice, he had to push forward, for both his sake and his family's.

With a deep steadying breath he walked in front of the tree, making him stand in full view for the demon. The demonling immediately noticed him and stood up into an aggressive posture. Wasting no time Zac immediately chucked the stone with full force, and he managed to hit its torso which elicited a pained yelp.

Clearly the taunt worked well as the demon roared and barreled toward him like a runaway train. Zac held his position until last

minute before lunging two meters to the side. The demonling zoomed past him and with a tremendous force head-butted the tree.

This was essentially the same tactic he had used on the first demon. The demons were powerful but seemed quite stupid, so he surmised the same tactic would work again. Now, handy boulders wouldn't be everywhere, but he was in a forest full of thick tree-trunks. This time he had help from being ready and having improved stats. Zac therefore managed to jump out of the way without either taking damage or falling over this time.

Knowing that time was of the essence Zac wasted no time and immediately was upon the beast. With a fierce overhead swing he severed the spine at the lower back. With his improved Strength it felt like cutting through dry wood, and he easily embedded the whole 15 cm axe head in the beast. With a tug he ripped it out of the body, and with it came a spurt of blood. He had planned on also doing the same at the neck of the beast, but the demonling was immediately woken up from the intense pain. With a pained roar it tried to turn and catch Zac with its huge maw. Luckily its maneuverability was already bad with all working legs. Now it was even slower with the two hind legs listlessly hanging backward.

Zac didn't want to take any chances, as a nasty swipe of the beast could easily make him bleed out in minutes. With a few seconds to spare until the demonling could turn he slashed a few deep bloody gashes on its side. Both blood and viscera immediately started pooling beneath it. By now the fight was essentially over, and Zac hurriedly backed off and picked up his spear he had placed down before the fight.

He planned to poke a few holes in the monster to bleed it out faster. However, reality is often disappointing. On the first stab he only made a flesh wound before the spear started to bend rather than push in further. On the second stab the demon snapped the spear in two by moving its head with surprising alacrity. The forward momentum of the stab almost made Zac fall right into the eagerly waiting rows of teeth of the beast. Luckily, he barely managed to get

out of the way with a push of his left leg which made him fall to the right of the beast. Still the beast managed to get in a swipe on his left arm which left a shallow, but long gash.

Ignoring the burning pain Zac quickly scrambled to his feet and got out of the way. But it seemed that the escape was unnecessary, as the demonling had collapsed after the swipe. The grass beneath it was completely stained red, and a large chunk of intestines was hanging outside its body. It was seemingly completely out of steam, weakly growling between shallow rapid breaths.

Ideally, Zac would have preferred to wait it out and let it slowly bleed to death, but the monster's roars had been quite loud. He had no interest in sticking around in case there was backup on the way. He had to be calculative at times to avoid unnecessary risks, but sometimes he had to be decisive as well. Gripping the hatchet in a bloody hand he slowly circled out of sight of the monster. Then with a few quick steps forward swung down with force right behind the middle legs, cutting deep into what he presumed was lungs. The demon tried to rouse a retaliation but was completely out of power, resulting only in a feeble wave of a paw.

Zac repeated an identical slash on the other side, which should mean that both its lungs were punctured. Given that the demon's physique was somewhat similar to a normal mammal's, of course. The demon barely responded to the second swing apart from shaking with pain or death throes. Zac wasted no time and with one final swing cut right into its neck.

With one final spasm, the monster passed. He knew this without having to check as he suddenly felt the familiar warmth of cosmic energy entering his body.

A quick look around the corpse once again showed no sort of loot spawning or dropping. This made Zac more certain of the fact that there was no such thing as a loot system with the System.

With a last look at the surroundings for anything he might have missed, he once again receded into the cover of the forest. The hunt was not over.

# Chapter 14 - Zombie Hound

Zac sat on a rock with a bottle of water in hand. He had just finished bandaging up his arm from the swipe of the demon and was now taking a quick breather. The fight had gone far better than his expectation, but he wouldn't let himself get complacent.

Not wanting to fill his stomach with too much water and later cramping up he took a few small sips then put the bottle back. Checking that everything was in order he once again set out into the jungle, continuing his path of gradually moving inland. He did not bother remaking a spear for now, at least until he found some far stronger wood. Abby had talked about trees taking properties of metal, and he desperately hoped he could find a tree like that.

It was not long before he ran into another demon dog. This one was slowly moving around, almost looking like a scout or like it was patrolling. He quickly decided on the place of the battle after a quick look around the surroundings. From there it proceeded much like the last fight. A rock was thrown to taunt the beast and it almost knocked itself out cold on a boulder. This time Zac instead swung down his hatchet on the spine between the two sets of frontal legs. He strove to incapacitate two sets of legs and only leave the front-most legs in working order.

This was as close to the head as he dared attack at the moment though, as he had seen how fast the demonling had swung its head to snap his spear in two. He was somewhat certain that the demon was like a crocodile in that regard; if something entered the maw, it would not leave.

The attack proved far more effective than he could have imagined. The blade fell down right between two vertebrae and continued almost unimpeded into the torso of the beast. Zac saw his opportunity and twisted while he tugged out the axe towards the

side. He hoped to wreak as much havoc as possible in the demon's insides, destroying both lungs and heart. The axe was quickly completely ripped out of the chest, and a great gout of blood followed it and sprayed all over Zac.

The forceful tug swept Zac off his feet and he fell backward into the grass. He quickly got up to his feet axe at the ready, but soon realized it was unnecessary. The demon was lying on the ground listlessly. Blood was pouring out of the wound like a waterfall. After a shudder it stopped moving, and Zac felt the now familiar warmth once again enter him.

Zac realized he must have hit the heart of the beast. There seemed to be no other possible explanation to the copious amounts of blood that had streamed out of the wound. Seeing as how he wasn't even out of breath from the fight, he immediately left and continued to look for more prey.

Zac's day continued like this, and by evening he had killed roughly 20 demonlings with varied amount of success. He still had not leveled up to level 18, but he could somehow sense that he was close. After every kill during the day some of the cosmic energy had entered his body. And if his body could be considered a container, it felt as though the container was starting to get full. Zac guessed that the moment he felt "full" from the cosmic energy was the moment he leveled up.

Zac stood and overlooked the aftermath of his last victory. He had gained a few new wounds, but nothing threatening. This latest fight had been the most dangerous one so far, simply because he had fought two demonlings at the same time. The second one had burst through the vegetation while he was already fighting the first one.

Luckily the beasts were truly clumsy, and with dodging around the natural environment he managed to mostly keep out of harm's way until he could bleed them out. Zac hypothesized that the natural environment of these beasts likely had no greenery, and very little

obstructions. The monsters simply seemed completely unaccustomed to fighting in this type of terrain.

Zac was about to leave when he suddenly heard a twig snap behind him. Taking no chances he lunged to his right. He just heard the sound of wind while falling, but suddenly his left shoulder exploded in pain. Ignoring the pain for now he got to his feet and finally got a good look at his assailant.

It was a demon, but a different type from the ones he had fought so far. If the demon dogs so far had been depending on brawn, this one clearly leaned toward agility. Measuring up to his navel, the beast somewhat looked like an oversized greyhound dog. If the dog had turned into a zombie. Just like the other demon it looked almost like it had been skinned. There were some differences with a greyhound though, such as the head with the oversized maw. The three rows of sharp teeth were clearly showing as the monster silently growled toward him. It had no fur, and instead had a thin red skin with the wiry muscles clearly showing beneath. This beast also only had the customary 4 legs, compared with the 6 legs of the other demons.

Its paws were also larger than a normal dog's, and Zac could clearly see large sinister claws sticking out of them. The sinewy tail seemed overly long even for a monster of this size, slowly swaying behind it.

Finally he noticed that one of the front paws was bloodied, dyeing the grass red. That explained the burning pain on his shoulder. He had no time to come up with any fancy strategies at the moment and could only fall back on his go-to method for dealing with demons. He slowly repositioned himself so that he once again would have his back to a tree. He had immediately discarded the idea to run away. With its lithe build and long legs it obviously was built for speed, and he had no delusions of being able to shake it off. Hopefully the high speed would help come in handy for him when it slammed into the tree behind.

Suddenly the hound shot toward him. Zac knew it would be fast but it looked like the like it flew across the ground. The 30-meter distance

between them was erased in seconds, and Zac barely had the time to jump out of the way to let the hound slam into the tree.

Just as the monster was about to slam into the tree trunk it swung its long tail. This somehow changed the direction of its momentum. Instead of slamming into the tree it actually used the trunk as purchase with its legs to push itself forward toward Zac's falling figure. Even before he had hit the ground from jumping away, the beast was upon him.

Zac swung the hatchet while midair, but the beast was too close for the blade to hit its head. He managed to punch the jawline with the haft of the axe though, stopping the maw from chomping down on his head.

Zac landed with his back on the ground, and the hound fell on him. All air was knocked out of his lungs, and he could taste the iron of blood in his mouth. He was face to face with the beast, its acrid breath filling his nose.

Zac desperately held the head at bay with his left arm, swinging the hatchet with his other. Dismayed Zac saw that he couldn't generate enough strength to create more than flesh wounds from this awkward position. The beast struggled to reach him with its maws, meanwhile clawing on Zac's chest. Each swipe ripped straight through his shirt and left a bloody gash on his torso.

This stalemate could not last, he would be cut to ribbons if he didn't do something. He swung the beast to the side and slammed it into the ground on his left, giving a brief moment of respite. He didn't dare hesitate and immediately swung his axe in a broad arc. His body screamed in protest but he could only grit his teeth.

The axe howled and swung down toward the demon hound.



# Chapter 15 - Desperation

The axe swung down and with a thud sunk into the side of the hound. The hound tried to get up, but Zac still had his left hand clamped on its throat, keeping it down. A few more swings in quick succession and the beast was dead as well. He felt the warm cosmic force enter him again. This time it felt like he gained almost twice the amount compared to the demonlings. This was also the final amount he needed to gain a level, bringing him to level 18.

Zac was a bit shaky after the encounter, but a day's worth of bloodshed and risking his life had steeled his nerves somewhat. He immediately left the site of the battle, not bothering with the three carcasses lying there. He needed to find somewhere to bandage himself.

While walking he allocated the two points into dexterity and vitality. Zac felt that by now his strength was enough to seriously hurt the monsters he had encountered with a few swings, and speed would likely help him more than more strength. He still put a point into vitality as he kept getting hurt more and more.

Finally he found a secluded spot and quickly drank a few mouthfuls of water and patched himself up. Zac was bruised and battered, and completely unwilling to fight any more today. He had also run out of gauze after patching up his chest. The demon hound had carved a maze of scratches on his chest. The wounds were not deep, but together they had bled quite a bit. Luckily his high vitality seemed particularly effective against these type of smaller wounds. He sensed that the bleeding had already almost stopped, and scabs had started to form over the wounds. It seemed that he would be all fixed up in a day or two.

From the fight he also realized that the amulet from the gathering array was quite sturdy. The hound had clawed both the little wheel

and the string multiple times, and not a scratch could be seen on it. It seemed that a stronger force than some dog claws would be needed to damage it. For a brief moment he imagined decking himself in hundreds of amulets, making him near-invulnerable.

Of course that wasn't realistic. But it showed that there were probably many sturdy materials in the multi-verse that could be made into extremely strong defensive gear. He put the stray thoughts out of his head and started his return trek.

On his way back he walked in an even more surreptitious manner, stealthily making his way back toward the base. He was forced to kill one more demonling which had accidentally found him while bounding through the forest. He had seen a few more demons but chose to ignore them. It was getting late and the suns were slowly setting. This made his vision limited and the forest was gaining a sinister feel to it. Zac decided that even if he wanted the extra cosmic energy, he should get back to camp. If another of the demon hounds ambushed him while fighting the demonlings he might be hard pressed to fight them off.

He simply was too tired and wounded, and vision was getting worse. He had accomplished what he set out to do today, and he couldn't get greedy.

As he passed one of the sites of his previous battles, he suddenly noticed movement by the corpse of the demon. Zac immediately stopped moving and hid behind a tree to scout out the scene.

At first he thought he saw a child standing by the carcass, but soon discarded that thought. The thing was roughly as large as a six or seven year old child, but it was clearly a new type of demon. The thing looked like an imp from old fairy tales. It was completely naked except a loincloth. It had a purplish skin full of scars and what looked almost be tumors, giving it a sickly look. It almost seemed like it was suffering from radiation poisoning. On its back was a set of bat wings with a span of roughly a meter per wing.

Zac was unsure if the wings were actually serviceable as the imp had a stocky build with a fat stomach. It had no hair and seemingly no ears. He couldn't make out any facial features as it was currently looking down and poking the corpse of the demonling. It seemed like it was examining the wounds and trying to figure out what had happened.

That was not good news for Zac. It was one thing if the island was full of deadly but dumb beasts. He could deal with that as long as he went out killing every day killing some at the time. But if there were smarter enemies who could team up he might start meet more and more organized resistance on the island. They might even send out search parties to look for him. The island was quite large, but a concerted effort would sooner or later flush him out of hiding.

He wanted to stay under the radar for a while longer. If the corpses were left alone hopefully the local wildlife would eat it. Then it would look like the beasts were killed in a fight with other beasts, rather from a few swings of an axe. His plans of slowly grinding levels and gaining battle experience would be over if this thing flew back and reported to its superiors.

There was only one solution, he had to kill it.

Luckily it did not look overly powerful with its small stature and scrawny arms. One good swing with the hatchet and it would be decapitated.

Zac did not want to take any chances however, and decided on a surprise attack. He slowly circled around and closed in on the imp from behind. He kept a careful watch for its reactions but it seemed absorbed in examining the corpse.

A snap was heard from beneath Zac's foot when he was only 5 meters away from the imp. The failing light had caused him to not notice a fallen twig lying in his path. He froze for a millisecond but then immediately charged at the imp with all speed he could muster.

The imp's preservation skills were impressive. As soon as it heard the sound behind it, it jumped over the carcass of the beast while letting out a high pitched screech. It managed to turn around midair with its wings and Zac saw its face. It had four pitch black eyes. One set was placed like a human's, and the other set were placed slightly more apart up on its forehead. It had no nose except two holes, and its mouth was a small circle full of sharp teeth. From the few flaps of its wings it seemed like it was unable to fly, but able to elongate its jump considerably.

Zac desperately tried to catch up, afraid it would be able to get away. The imp did some obscure gestures with its hands while floating away, as Zac was closing in on it and the carcass of the beast. Suddenly a purplish-black flame erupted on the imp's hand, and it somehow threw it straight towards Zac's head.

Zac barely had time to position his head out of the way, but a part of the sinister flame managed to land on his shoulder. Any plan of killing the imp flew out of the window, as Zac's mind turned white in a blinding explosion of pain. The black flame was far more dangerous than normal fire, and it seemed it that somehow managed to burn his *soul*. The pain on his singed flesh was nothing compared to that pain.

Zac was completely dazed by the pain and fell over the demonling carcass instead of jumping over it. The imp landed a few meters away, still screeching at him. After a few second of observation it once again started to summon a flame with its mysterious hand gestures.

With a shake of his head Zac managed to clear his sight. Unknowingly to him his eyes were completely red and tears were streaming down. As soon as he got back up on his feet he had to immediately jump out of the way from another of those black insidious flame balls. It missed him and fell upon the corpse of the demon instead. The fire caused the corpse to visibly shrink, as though all moisture was burned instead of the flesh.

He once again charged toward the imp but it simply kept jumping backwards. Its wings helped it gain momentum, and it was even slightly faster than Zac. It even had time to occasionally turn around to make sure it didn't run into anything.

The imp was essentially kiting him, throwing out a fireball every few seconds. The closer Zac got to it the harder it was to dodge. After a minute he had been hit another 3 times by the when he got close. The first time it barely grazed his arm so it was not too bad. If you could call the pain of getting stabbed a hundred times not too bad. The second hit him in the gut, which almost made him double over and puke his guts out from the agony. The final one hit his leg.

That hit had made him unable to keep chasing the imp. He could barely put any weight on the leg, it felt like it had been paralyzed. The pain was so bad he almost swung his hatchet to chop it off. He knew that he would not be able to dodge anymore when it threw its next fireball.

In a last desperate attempt to survive, he hurled his hatchet with all strength he could muster straight at the chest of the flying demon.

# Chapter 16 - Choices

Zac was on his knees, panting heavily. His clothes were a completely burned and bloodied mess. All around him were signs of the imp's rampage, with pockets completely drained and devoid of life. Zac realized that the fire of the imp did not burn like a normal fire, rather it burned life-force or cosmic energy. His burns looked like all moisture had been drained from his skin and it now had a pallid grey color. It was like those parts of his body was like that of a desiccated corpse's.

The corpse of the imp was lying against a tree roughly 10 meters away from him, the axe still firmly planted in its chest. The constitution of the monster was quite frail, and it had died immediately when the axe hit.

As soon as the monster had died, it seemed as though the source of the fires had been removed. The fires had quickly extinguished, the marks left behind the only proof they had existed at all. Had it not quickly dissipated then the fire would have completely destroyed him. Maybe not his body, but all his life-force.

Zac was nauseated and on the brink of passing out, but he somehow summoned power he did not know he had and got up on his feet. He shuffled over to the imp and yanked out the axe. He had no energy to look through the corpse, and simply continued his way back home.

He was almost delirious by this point and was barely able to keep his bearings. Luckily he was quite close to edge of the island now, and almost on the opposite side of the pillar. The monsters were pretty scarce this far out still, and he didn't encounter any more demons that night.

With the last strength in his body he managed to stumble back into his camp. As soon as he saw the familiar sight of the metallic camper his legs simply gave out. He fell down onto the ground and let the sweet darkness embrace him.

It was midday the following day when Zac woke up again. Body was stiff and he sported a splitting headache. It was as if he had been drinking until passing out last day. He spit out some gravel he had got in his mouth and slowly got up.

After a quick check-up it seemed that most of the wounds were in decent shape. None of the scratches and tears from the demons were still bleeding. Some of the more shallow wounds were just a white line today. A few of the worse wounds would have to stay in bandage for at least another day though.

The spots where the black fire had burned him yesterday were still a bit grey and shrunken, but had gotten noticeably better. He felt that the headache he had likely came from these wounds. The fire yesterday must have had some magic properties that damaged in other ways than just burning. He shuddered when he remembered the pain from those blasts.

He prepared some breakfast and sat down in a camping chair to go over yesterday's results. He brought up the status window with a thought to go over the gains.

Name Zachary Atwood

Level 18

Race Human

Alignment Human (Earth)

Titles Born For Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I

Strength 46

Dexterity 33

Endurance	34
Vitality	43
Intelligence	29
Wisdom	29
Luck	44
Free Points	0
Nexus Coins	3 370

He had gained almost 3000 Nexus Coins with just one day of fighting, which seemed quite good. If he based the gains on the amount of cosmic energy he got from the different monsters he could somewhat guess how much each kill gave him. He would say that he had gained roughly 100 for each demon dog he had killed, and between half as much and double that from the demon hound. The largest amount was rewarded from killing the imp. He still remembered that burst of energy even though he was almost delirious. If he hadn't gotten that extra energy boost after the fight he might not have made it home.

Still, the amount gained yesterday was far short of most of the buildings he had seen in the town building interface. It made sense, as building a whole town was usually not done by the efforts of only one person. If he had a few hundred people who came together and gathered Nexus Coins the amount gathered would be massive, even if the other people were far weaker than himself. There simply was power in numbers.

The thought gave him a sense of urgency. It was undeniable that he had likely gotten a quite impressive head start compared to most people, even though he was not too happy with his current situation. But if some great leader emerged in a tutorial village and created a large force he might lose his head start. Abby had mentioned that the system liked those that stood in forefront. If someone was going



to get titles and other advantages from building a town first, then it should be him.

It might be better for humanity if some country leader or military general got that head start. But it was the apocalypse, and he had his goals. He needed to be a bit selfish in that regard, and couldn't just give away opportunities to others and hope they would use them for good.

He also noticed that he had a new title, Demon Slayer I. It was from the quest he had received in the beginning, which had told him to kill 10 demons. The title gave him 1+ all stats when fighting enemies of demonic alignment. However, he didn't quite understand how the title worked. He should have activated that title somewhere mid-day, but he had felt nothing different when fighting afterward. Zac thought that the 1 stat point perhaps was too low a number for him to notice anything.

He was somewhat surprised that he hadn't received any sort of follow-up quest, along the lines of "Kill 100 Demons". The line behind the title indicated that it should be possible to upgrade it, but he hadn't been given any indication of how. Zac guessed he had to add it to the ever-increasing list of things he did not know.

After looking over the status page he opened the building interface. There were two things that Zac wanted to build, and they cost 3000 Nexus crystals each.

The first was called a **[F-Grade Nexus Node]** and looked like a large hovering crystal from the description. Its function was to access certain aspects of the System. Nexus Nodes seemed to have more functions depending on how high grade it was, with F being the lowest. The Node was the worst of the bunch in other words. But it gave access to two functions that Zac was extremely interested in. It gave access to the class system, and sold basic skills.

The other was another array, namely the **[F-Grade Small Scale Gravity Array]**. This was an array meant for strengthening oneself

as he saw it. The subject of training was something he had mulled over from the start. Even before allocating the first 30 points he had gotten he had noticed that his stats were skewed.

When he counted backwards from his titles and the points he had allocated he had found out that his base stats differed quite a bit. Before the effect of the system he had 7 strength, 3 dexterity, 4 endurance, 5 vitality, 5 intelligence and 6 wisdom.

He assumed the normal stats were around 1-10 for most humans, as he was somewhat average before the System arrived. He wasn't particularly smart, and not extremely athletic. He worked out at a gym 3 times a week which would explain the strength. But he was not limber at all, and he rarely did cardio. Therefore he had lower dexterity and endurance. Vitality and intelligence seemed harder to train, as they seemed more of an inborn quality.

Since the stats differed and seemed to be affected by his actions before the System arrived, he assumed that he might be able to improve his base stats from training as well. He probably would not be able to improve infinitely, but every extra stat point counted.

That's where the gravity array would come in. It would affect the gravity in a zone, and could increase the gravity up to 10 times. At this point he had 46 strength and was likely stronger than any human that had ever lived on earth. Without this kind of array Zac didn't think he would be able to exhaust himself. He could do push-ups all day without breaking a sweat at the moment.

If he added the array to the camp he could potentially improve multiple stats, at least Strength and Endurance as they seemed most linked with the constitution of his physique.

Unfortunately the descriptions for the buildings were quite short, and both options came with a risk. He had no idea how skills worked and what they would cost. Buying a Nexus Node might be a complete waste of coins at this stage when every advantage was important.

On the other hand he didn't know if the plan for training even worked with the system.

After some hesitation he finally turned his eyes towards the array.

# Chapter 17 - Eye of Discernment

Zac sat in front of the camp fire, and with a blank silent stare he slowly rotated a spit placed above it. The suns were setting over his small outpost, and the surroundings had a subdued silence. On the spit was the leg of a rabbit he had caught earlier today. The rabbit had actually grown to the size of a human, so the meat would last for a while.

Tomorrow would mark the 29<sup>th</sup> day since the world changed. If Hannah or even his family were to see him now they likely would likely barely recognize him.

The once neat beard of his was now an uneven mess. There even was one patch almost completely missing after a Barghest's claw had cut his face during a particularly intense melee. His hair was even worse, now a mess of uneven cuts. During one of his fights he had gotten hair in his eyes, and the distraction had caused him to almost get disemboweled. He had fought the Gwyllgi half-blinded while using one hand to hold his innards in place. After the fight he had simply taken his hatchet to his head and cut off as much hair as he could without scalping himself.

He had run out of shirts last week, and now used a mix of torn rags to cover himself. Underneath those rags was some makeshift protection he had made from leather he had cured. He had begun by making some bracers for his legs and arms, and a basic heart protector out of the snake skin he had dried over his car. Over time he had found another snake and even a crocodile on a shore, and had turned those into leather as well.

Now he was decked from feet up to a throat protector in pieces of leather, all tied together with strings or sinew. It was an extremely

shoddy work, making his whole body looked like a piecemeal patchwork of different animal body parts. It also took almost 30 minutes to take on and off, as there were quite a few knots he had to tie to get it to stay on during a whole day.

Most days he couldn't be bothered as he had been out hunting the whole day, and simply fell asleep while still wearing the gear. The combination of high endurance and vitality seemed to protect him from any shaping or bruises from the coarse leather anyway.

All in all he looked like a completely insane hobo and would likely be arrested if he arrived in a real city, based on his appearance alone. Zac couldn't be bothered about that though, as almost a month of living on the edge of death had given him a far more utilitarian mindset.

Zac cracked his neck, nowadays barely being bothered by the constant 10 times gravity field that enveloped the whole camp. After his first day of grinding he had bought the **[F-Grade Small Scale Gravity Array]** and placed it at a corner of the camp. It had actually proven effective, and he had incorporated a workout in high gravity into his daily schedule. Soon after he even slept in high gravity, and by now he always had the array cranked to the max over the whole camp.

Its effect had been above his expectations. He had gained a whole 5 strength, 2 dexterity, 6 endurance, and 2 vitality from just training his body. His endurance had increased the quickest, rising up 6 points in just two weeks. He had calculated that he had 4 base endurance before the system earlier, and now it was 10. However after it reached 10 it stopped increasing at all. He saw a similar effect on his strength. He gained 3 points quite quickly, bringing his base strength to 10. After that he still had gotten two points, but those points took an extreme effort.

He had also gained dexterity and vitality, but he guessed that those points actually came from combat rather than the array. Getting hurt

over and over had improved his vitality slower, and dodging an endless amount of beasts had improved his dexterity.

Zac guessed that the reason for his quick improvements wasn't only the array. There now was a large amount of cosmic energy in the air, and it felt like just breathing it in slowly improved his health. He suspected that humans would slowly grow healthier in this atmosphere, provided that they didn't get killed of course. A quick look at his status showed that his stats had improved quite a bit over the last weeks.

**Name**        **Zachary Atwood**

**Level**        **23**

**Race**         **Human**

**Alignment** **Human (Earth)**

**Titles**        **Born For Carnage,  
Ultimate Reaper, Luck of  
the Draw, Giantsbane,  
Disciple of David,  
Overpowered, Slayer of  
Leviathans, Adventurer,  
Demon Slayer I**

**Strength**    **59**

**Dexterity**    **39**

**Endurance 42**

**Vitality 48**

**Intelligence 29**

**Wisdom 29**

**Luck 44**

**Free Points 0**

**Nexus  
Coins 5 562**

Unfortunately he had not reached his goal even with his gathering array and frenzied carnage across the island. He had hoped to get to level 25 and get a class before the month was over. The advice of the Stargazer still lingered in his head. She had told him to finish the quest of conquering the incursion within a month. He still hadn't found any clues as to what would happen after the month passed, and he hoped he wouldn't have to find out.

Gaining levels had proven harder and harder over time, and he had finally reached level 23 today after 4 days of relentless killing. He had even used almost all his points and spent a whopping 75 000 Nexus Coins on upgrading his Mother-Daughter Gathering Array to E-grade. This upgrade had substantially increased the amount of cosmic energy he absorbed daily through his amulet.

It was clear to Zac however that the most effective method of getting stronger was to actually battle and kill enemies. If he would split up the cosmic energy he absorbed daily it would be a 90/10 split, and that was with the E-grade array. If he compared with his old F-grade array it would be 95/5 or even lower. Grinding monster and absorbing their energy was simply far more effective, at least with his resources.

It did however make him think about the elite of the multi-verse. He had made over a hundred thousand Nexus Coins just by grinding low level monsters around the first month. Abby had said that the multi-verse was hundreds of millions year old. There were surely some extremely wealthy individuals and organizations. What if they gave every child an A-grade, or even S-grade array from birth? They would be higher level than him before even learning to talk.

Those things were too far away from him though, he needed to focus on the present. Even though he hadn't reached his goal of getting a class, he still planned to try finishing the quest the following two days.

Zac carved a chunk of meat from the rabbit leg and stuck it to a fork. He then walked over to the Nexus Node while gnawing the gamey meat. Zac looked at the list of available things on it daily hoping for something new to pop up every day since the day he bought it. He knew he would be disappointed once again. The skills available were too expensive for him, and the inventory hadn't changed so far.

The only skill that was in his price range was called [**Eye of Discernment**]. And he had already bought it for the price of 20 000 Nexus Coins. When he had bought it a stream of energy had entered his head, and new information suddenly formed like an ingrained memory. It was the manual for the skill.

The purchase had taught him a bit about how skills worked with the System. Having a skill did not mean you could simply use it as you wanted. For a skill to work he needed to actually move the cosmic energy built up in his body towards his eyes. From there he had to



imprint the image of a specific fractal on his eyes. The fractal was the same type of pattern that were on the array flags he had bought earlier.

Zac had tried furiously to move the energy around in his body for days. He had felt that his cells were imbued with this extra power, but he had a hard time actually doing anything with it. Finally after days of trying he had found a solution.

While sitting in the gravity array he had imagined a separate set of veins spread all through his body like his circulatory system. In these veins only cosmic energy flowed. He was surprised that it actually worked, and a stream of his cosmic energy slowly started traveling along the paths he had imagined.

It took a few days more to learn to keep the circulation going even when not actively focusing on it. Finally he tried gathering cosmic energy on his eyes to imprint the fractal of the skill. This part went smoother than expected, as he had an extremely precise design in his memory thanks to the Nexus Node.

As soon as he wanted to use the skill he only needed to focus a small amount of cosmic energy to flow into the fractals on his eyes, and it would activate immediately.

Zac was quite glad that the System did not require people to shout out the skill's name like a lunatic.

The **[Eye of Discernment]** was a basic eye skill that essentially worked like an identify- or spy-skill from a video game. It let Zac glean some basic information on certain things.

It was this skill that had let him know that the stocky 6-legged demons he had fought ad nauseam the last month was actually called a Barghest, and the zombie-looking greyhound monster was a Gwyllgi.

The imps were actually just called Lower Imps, and they had taught him another valuable lesson when using the **[Eye of Discernment]** on them. Even though he had used it from the cover of some bushes the imp had felt the skill being used on it. It reacted by immediately throwing a fireball at the bush he was hiding in, leading to another desperate fight.

The memory of that fireball still filled him with some trepidation as he stared into the fire, slowly finishing his meal.

# Chapter 18 - Cosmic Energy

Actually, apart from teaching him the names of his different enemies, the most important thing the skill had taught him was something completely different.

Zac had thought that the stats represented a static change in his prowess, and to a certain degree he was right. He was far stronger now compared to before thanks to the stats. But there was more to it. Learning to circulate his cosmic energy had opened up a whole new world for him.

At first he had simply focused on learning the skill. But afterwards he had started experimenting with the cosmic energy in his body, and had come to some astonishing conclusions. He could actually force more cosmic energy into different parts of his body, strengthening them. For example he could force energy into his arm and back muscles when swinging his hatchet, which resulted in a far more powerful swing.

Forcing energy into his legs would increase his speed and he had even managed to imbue his skin for a while, making it more durable. There were many different venues to utilize it, and he likely only had figured out a few. The strengthening wasn't limitless, however. It acted as a multiplier on his base stats, but the multiplier was limited. After some experimentation he had realized he could output almost twice his normal power while circulating his energy into a specific part of his body.

He had gone above this amount once, which had resulted in being incapacitated for days. He had tried increasing the amount of energy in his arms too much in order to perform a particularly mighty swing. His muscles couldn't withstand that much cosmic energy forced into them, and ruptured into a fountain of blood. It reminded him of a

balloon. If he blew too much air into it, it would pop. Same with his body and cosmic energy.

The experiment had left him lying weakly in base for three days, only being able to train with the amulet and the gravity array for some minor gains.

The second conclusion was that his usage of cosmic energy was limited. The more he circulated his energy and empowered himself, the more drained he would feel. When empowering himself to the limit he only lasted a few minutes before he was completely spent.

The energy used in empowerment was consumed, and he would need to gather more from the environment in order to get back into fighting condition. His amulet helped him recover faster. But when the amulet focused on replenishing consumed cosmic energy, it did not actually work towards increasing his level.

In other words using empowered strikes or skills would slow his leveling speed, as some of the cosmic energy gained would be used on replenishment. So it was a trade-off between long term gains and short-term burst of power.

The final realization was that his method likely was extremely cost-ineffective. When he used his identification skill, the cosmic energy entered the fractals that somehow existed in his eyes. The fractal both enabled using the specific skill, but also made usage of cosmic energy more effectively.

Far less energy was wasted when the energy was focused with the fractal. If cosmic energy could be considered a raw material like crude oil, then the fractal refined it into something better and more efficient.

Zac guessed a combat-oriented skill would work in the same way. He would gain new fractals which he could use to waste less cosmic energy while fighting, and also gain a higher power than simply channeling raw cosmic energy into his arms. Unfortunately even the

cheapest of the options cost 150 000 Nexus coins, which was far out of his current price range.

Zac finished his meal, and scooped up a glass of water from the pit where he had placed a water gathering array. The bottled water he and his friends had brought had ran out two weeks ago, and the closest fresh water was close to the incursion. Luckily the System had a cheap solution, namely the **[Small Scale Water gathering Array]**, which slowly gathered moisture from the air to create a roughly ten liters of drinking water per day.

For the first time in weeks he turned off the gravity array when he went to sleep. He needed to be completely rested, as tomorrow he would assail a Herald.

Zac had wrestled with himself whether to actually go through with it or not the last few days. At times he felt it would be safer for him to simply grind for a few more weeks, get a class and skill before going after the big bosses.

He had however noticed a very worrying trend over the last few days. The beasts in the forest were getting more powerful. The demon hounds were getting even faster, and the barghest were getting stronger. He had actually seen one charge straight through a tree. The barghests had been completely incapable of such a feat just a week ago.

This made him form a hypothesis. The beasts were slowly getting stronger, and maybe they would gain a power spike once each month. That was what the Abby the eye was indirectly warning him about.

He didn't think that the Incursion summoned stronger demons, but rather that they were strong from the start, but was somehow restricted. That was because he didn't actually get more cosmic energy or Nexus Coins from killing the empowered beasts compared to the old weaker ones.

It made him once again think about how the system seemed to operate. It rewarded people who dared take risks and strove to improve. That was shown through the title system, and also Abby's comments.

Perhaps this was a gift from the system. If someone dared leave the tutorial village to kill magical monsters at incursions they'd be rewarded with the cosmic energy and Nexus Coin that generally was given out by far stronger beasts. Like an XP-boost from a MMORPG game.

Or perhaps the demons simply weren't adapted to Earth's atmosphere. He always imagined in his head that these beasts came from some lava world full of fire and brimstone. He really had no idea which was correct, but his days in solitude allowed him to conjure endless theories.

Furthermore, with risk also comes reward. What Abby meant with her last comment might be related to the quest.

**[Off with their heads (Unique): Kill the four heralds and the general of incursion within 3 months. Reward: 10 E-Grade Nexus Crystals, E-Grade equipment, unique building depending on performance. (1/5)]**

The last reward was a unique building depending on performance. He guessed that the better performance the higher ranked the building he would receive was. He was by now well aware both how powerful some buildings were, but also how extremely expensive they were. He had scoured through the registry for weeks after all.

Getting a good grade might greatly help him later, provided that he actually survived this ordeal.

So it was with a mix of self-preservation and greed he had grit his teeth and finally decided to assail the first of the Heralds tomorrow, even if he wasn't at the power level he'd like. The last few days he

had scouted his target out, and he thought he had a fighting chance after observing it.

He woke up with the dawn of light the next day, and after his preparations he immediately set out. He had limited time until his self-imposed time limit. Depending on how the fight went, he might try to kill a second Herald today as well.

He walked through the forest with practiced ease, avoiding twigs and roots while still keeping a high tempo. The forest had changed considerably during the past weeks. It had grown extremely lush, gaining almost a primordial unsullied air. The trees had grown more robust, and the undergrowth was varied with both bushes, vines and a medley of flowers.

He did not know where they had come from, but it seemed that there were far more critters and other animals as well roaming both the forest floor and up in the crowns. However it always was quiet around his camp lately, as if the animals instinctively avoided his domain.

Zac made a beeline towards the western central area from the southern edge where his camp was located. During his excursions in the past weeks he had actually found the second herald, while last two still eluded him. He guessed that one of them resided in the mountains though, as it seemed that each Herald lorded over a cardinal direction of the Incursion. He hadn't ventured into the mountain as of yet, as he had his hands full grinding monsters closer to home.

The unlucky Herald Zac had obliterated with a lucky roll had been in the southern part of the island. Zac had occupied the domain of the herald in a sense. That had explained why there were relatively fewer demons close to his base, as it was far from the lairs of the three remaining Heralds.

# Chapter 19 - Vul

Even though Zac moved like a specter through the woods he couldn't always avoid fights. A barghest was lying hidden behind a few bushes, and noticed Zac before he could reroute around it.

It immediately got up and without hesitation charged upon him.

Zac was completely unfazed by the oncoming beast, and circulated a small amount of cosmic energy through his body down to his legs. With a quick step he avoided the beast at the last second, giving it no time to adjust. He then followed up with a vicious swing down the throat of the passing beast. The barghest would have been decapitated had it not been for the limited size of Zac's hatchet.

Instead he tore a huge gash that severed both muscles and jugulars from the top and then continued until exiting down on the bottom, resulting in the head barely staying on.

The demon continued for a few meters before collapsing with a thud. Zac continued on while going over the state of the axe. By now he had killed hundreds of barghests and the recent fight barely registered in his mind, even with the power-up of the beast. Even if the barghests had become stronger, they still were the most common and stupid of the monsters on the island.

The empowered Gwyllgi that focused on speed were far more annoying to deal with. He still had a hard time dealing with them without getting a cut somewhere.

When looking over the hatchet he couldn't help feeling a sour lump in his throat. The axe was in a state of disrepair with scratches all over. The head had become a full two centimeters shorter from repeated sharpening against rocks. Zac knew the only reason the weapon still somewhat held together was that it was made from a



solid piece of steel. Still, the shaft had started to bend, showing the strain it had been put under.

The combination of Zac's superhuman strength and the hardness of demon bones had slowly warped the metal. He was quite worried, as he did not know what he'd do when his weapon finally broke. He would be able to buy a shop and hopefully get a weapon that way when he finally upgraded the outpost to a town. But until then there simply seemed to be no weapons on the island.

Zac sighed and continued on his way.

He barely used any energy during the fight, only enhancing himself for a few seconds. With the help of the gathering array he would be topped off again within a minute.

Zac kept stalking through the woods like death incarnate. Anything that was foolish enough to attack him was quickly ended with a swing.

He had initially been afraid that his daily excursions would be found out by the demons, but after a few days of observation he was quite content knowing he was safe as long as he did not hunt too close to the Heralds.

Every day new monsters would appear in the woods, likely summoned through the Incursion. More astonishingly, the demons killed each other far more than Zac killed them. He had lost count of the times that he had found a demon hunkered over a corpse of the same race, feasting on its carcass. There seemed to be simply no familiar affection between the demons. That Zac was responsible for a small part of the deaths seemingly went by completely unnoticed.

Finally he arrived at the area where he had spotted the Herald earlier. He immediately became more alert of his surroundings, not wanting to create a stir with his target so close. He soon found the target, and it wasn't hard to notice.

The Herald was huge.

### **[Vul, Level 45]**

That was all the information that the **[Eye of Discernment]** gave him. Either his mastery over the skill was too low to show more information, or the skill was simply too basic.

It at least showed that its level was over twenty levels higher than his. He did not know whether Vul was its name or its race. His skill had only showed the race when fighting the random beasts in the forest, but here it also showed a level. The system somehow made a distinction between this herald and the other demons.

He was leaning towards the theory that Vul was a name, because the monster clearly looked a lot like a barghest. If a Barghest had been supercharged. Instead of three pairs of legs it had four, with the additional being positioned closer to the hind legs.

*'Does that mean that it's a spider rather than an insect...'* Zac mused with a dark sense of humor while looking over the beast.

Vul was also far larger than its Barghest brethren. If a normal barghest could reach up to Zac's chest with its head then this monster was a full head taller than him. It was even larger than a bear, and from its oversized muscles looked that the bear would rather be prey than a competitor.

Just like the normal demon dogs it had an oversized head with an abyssal maw, with three rows of sinister fangs lining it. With its size the monster could easily fit both Zac's head and torso in its mouth for a quick bite. The paws which looked like talon had the same three long claws attached, but on Vul they were as long as small kitchen knives.

It seemed to be the alpha of the barghest pack, although it didn't seem very interested in anything except lazing about and eating.

Zac had observed the monster from a distance a few times the last week, and had also realized that it not only was larger, but it was also a bit smarter. Certainly, it was still a meathead, but he had noticed some burgeoning intelligence from its actions. It luckily didn't seem overly alert, as Zac had used the **[Eye of Discernment]** on it without any reaction.

Perhaps only magically inclined beings such as the imps could actually notice being screened by the skill.

He knew his customary method of killing a demon dog would not work with this monster, it simply was too large a risk. He had gotten swiped almost countless times the last month, each time having a new wound to show for it. A similar swipe from this monstrosity could instantly end him if unlucky, and he was not ready to take that chance.

He slowly eased back into the vegetation after ascertaining the Herald's position. Taking down a beast like this would take some strategy.

Zac slowly made his way a few hundred meters away where his final piece of the puzzle lay hidden. Luckily Vul mostly stayed in the same area except for when it went on patrols in random directions.

He finally reached his destination, a particularly lush bush that had a thick leafy crown that was roughly the same height as Zac himself. After glancing around he gingerly made his way into the bush.

Inside there were four trunks of trees, each roughly three meters long and almost as thick as his thigh. One end of the tree was sharpened into a point. They looked as if they were made to form a palisade, but the real purpose was monster hunting.

The spear he had used the first time he hunted broke on the first demon, so he had learned his lesson.

During his weeks of fighting he had found a type of tree which had a dark trunk but white-grey veins. He hadn't recognized it and had tried to cut down a branch with a swing of his hatchet, and to his surprise he found that the tree was extremely dense and hard.

Cutting down the trees to make the four supersized spears had tired him out even with his superior physique.

He gingerly dug roughly half a meter deep holes with some distance from each other, then placed the wooden stakes into them at a slanted angle. He had placed them so that the spear tips were hidden within the bush at roughly 150 to 180 centimeter height. Finally he covered the holes and placed down secondary smaller stumps beneath the stakes, so that they wouldn't tip over from their own weight before they could be used.

This was the only trap he could figure out that could help in his fight against the huge beast. The only other idea he had come up with was to dig a pitfall. But he did not have the tools for the massive undertaking of digging a pit large enough to trap and kill a monster the size of a large minivan.

He took one more glance at the bush to inspect his work. He would only get one shot at this and didn't want anything to give it away before it was too late.

Satisfied with his work, he finally turned towards the Herald and started walking.

# Chapter 20 - Fighting the Herald

Zac had slowly inched his way back toward the Herald. It was currently lying on a rock, and it was actually eating a Gwyllgi it had caught somewhere.

All eight of its legs except the front pair were lying in the same side, exposing its back toward Zac. He was currently crouching behind a tree only five meters away from the huge barghest. He barely dared to breathe in fear of being exposed too early. He couldn't get any closer without entering an open area and getting completely exposed.

Zac's heart was beating furiously, and his hands were nervously shaking. It was one thing to make plans and preparation, but a completely different thing to actually turn those plans into action. Now that he was this close it was as though he could sense a primal pressure emanating from the beast.

He knew he couldn't wait any longer, as this was a golden opportunity. The beast was feeding and was distracted. If he kept waiting he would miss his chance, and also tire himself out by stressing and fretting.

Zac soundlessly got to his feet and circulated cosmic energy through his body. Wasting no time he pumped his leg full of energy, and shot toward the exposed Herald like a bullet. His hatchet fell with an empowered swing, striking down at the lower spine of the beast. He was hoping to use the same tactic as he had in the beginning of killer Vul's smaller brethren.

The axe sunk into the back of the beast, but it felt like he had tried to chop through reinforced steel when he reached the bone of the spine. His plan had failed, as it ended up as only a flesh wound. His

right arm ached from the impact, but he quickly adapted and swung down and created a deep gash down along its side.

He planned to strike its belly as well and hopefully damage some organs, but a thundering roar interrupted him. The Herald had finally reacted, and with a jerk pushed back with all its legs, forcing its whole body toward Zac.

The monster's back slammed into Zac like a truck and he flew a few meters backwards, and he spit out a mouthful of blood.

As he got up, so did the Herald. Suddenly they stood facing each other and a low growl emitted from the beast's mouth. Its wound was bleeding freely, but didn't seem that it had incapacitated it at all.

Rage was burning in the beast's beady eyes, and it let out another tremendous roar that seemed to cause the very air to vibrate.

Zac wasted no time, and immediately ran into the forest. He wanted to make use of the complicated terrain to keep the large lumbering beast at bay. He kept infusing his body with energy, not daring to let up. The sounds of loud thuds and branches breaking from behind proved that the herald was hot on his heels.

Zac was dismayed to find out that the terrain didn't seem to impair Vul even through its huge size and stocky build. It was far more nimble than the barghest, even though it seemed even bulkier than its smaller brethren. Finally he tried to use another tried and true trick, and ran straight towards a thick maple. He could hear that the beast was ever closing in on him, and now only were a few meters away from him.

This was a test of sorts against the herald, to see if it would fall for this simple trick. He had his doubts about it after observing it, and didn't want to blow his best shot for killing it. He therefore held off on running straight towards his pikes.

He waited until the last minute until finally jumping to the side and dodged the tree. He turned around mid-air, hoping to take advantage of the beast knocking itself out.

Unfortunately for Zac, a herald was appointed a leader for a reason. Zac's suspicions about the herald's superior intellect proved true as he saw the beast's reactions.

Noticing the incoming tree, the Herald stopped in his tracks with his front legs, while he sidestepped away from Zac's direction with the hind legs. Its front legs carved a deep groove for a few meters before it stopped, while it changed angle to point toward Zac. This resulted in the beast still moving towards the tree, but it instead slammed into it with its shoulders rather than its head.

Due to the breaking the slam seemed to enrage the beast further rather than hurt it. It hadn't lost much time from the slam, and now Zac was in a precarious situation.

The beast immediately jumped towards him, its huge jaws trying to rip him in two from his chest.

Flustered Zac rolled on the ground down in between the beast's leg, hoping to gain access to the more vulnerable belly. He knew now he needed to thoroughly enrage the beast so that it would blindly charge through the bushes and into his palisade. He was now in an awkward position in between the front legs, and could only rely on cosmic energy to generate force in his swings.

He slammed the hatchet up into the torso of the beast a few times, hoping to puncture a lung. It was effective, as a stream of blood showered him, and the monster elicited a painful yelp. He only had time for a few swings though, as he suddenly was slammed on his left side by a kick. Zac flew away once again like a ragdoll, and this time he felt that he had broken at least a rib as breathing felt like getting stabbed.

He could only grit his teeth and circulate more cosmic energy to keep his injuries in check. He was already starting to run dangerously low, and fatigue was starting to set in.

He kept running toward his trap, but still afraid to run into it. The beast was enraged, but it still hadn't lost its reasoning completely, and Zac was afraid that it would notice the trap. Then he would be well and truly screwed.

He needed at least one more effective assault.

The Herald was soon upon him again, this time swiping with its front paw, hoping to catch Zac in its claws. Zac could only frantically dodge and jump out of the direction. He tried to get a swing in every now and then to hurt its legs, but it largely proved ineffective. He had hit true a few times, but only some flesh wounds were created.

Zac once more tried a riposte after dodging a swing, but this time a large head closed in with extreme speed. The Herald tried to chomp off his arm during his swing.

Zac quickly retracted his arm, and it was almost too late. The maws closed a fraction of a second too late, allowing Zac's arm to disengage. His hatchet wasn't as lucky however, and the monster chomped down on the head. A crunch was heard and when Vul opened its maw again to try to take another bite the axe was released.

The already worn axe was now completely deformed, and had essentially turned into a stick with scrap metal on top. The edge was gone and instead it more resembled a mace now with some random sharp edges.

A flame of rage ignited in Zac's eyes when he saw his trusty companion being completely ruined by the Herald, and he completely forgot about safety. With a roar he stopped backing away, and instead forced most of his remaining cosmic energy into his right arm and legs. With a desperate lunge he jumped straight for the



Herald, surprising it for a split second. That was all he needed as Zac plunged the Scrap weapon into the left eye of the beast.

The demon forcefully jerked backward from the pain, for a second standing only on its back legs, reaching an impressive 3-4 meters in height. Pained yelps quickly transitioned into roars of blazing fury, and Vul stomped down towards Zac, trying to flatten him like a pancake.

Zac had no time to care about his beloved hatchet being stuck in the eye of the monster, and started a mad dash away from the beast. He saw that the monster was completely and utterly raving with anger and pain right now, so this was his chance.

He focused the last of his energy in maximizing his speed as he dashed the last distance toward the trap. The Herald was hot in pursuit, not caring about anything anymore, completely smashing through any smaller rocks or trees that was in its path.

Finally he reached the bushes where the poles were hidden, and by now the huge beast was right in his heels. Zac could even feel the heat from its maw. Zac simply dove through the bushes headfirst, making sure to keep a height below that of the placed spears in order to not skewer himself.

It was with great relief Zac could sense that the Herald thundered straight into the bushes right behind him, intending to simply rip through it.

As Zac landed on the ground he felt a huge impact behind him which caused the ground to tremble.

One of the trees had struck the Herald straight in its chest, entering at least a meter and impaling it where it stood.

The beast shuddered and let out a miserable roar which echoed in the surroundings. Blood was flowing out of its mouth like a waterfall, drenching both Zac and the surroundings. It immediately started

wildly thrashing around, unheeding of its wounds. The contraption couldn't take the weight and almost immediately collapsed.

Even if it was almost blinded and bleeding out, the Herald wouldn't go quietly, as it incessantly wailed and thrashed about. One of the swings hit Zac square on his left arm, punching him down in the ground before he could get out of the way. A loud crack could be heard, and Zac almost passed out from the pain.

It followed up with a few frantic swipes with its claws, which rent long gashes all along his back while he helplessly lay on his stomach beneath the impaled beast.

Luckily for Zac the thrashing didn't continue for too long, as a huge amount of cosmic energy entered him. Some helped replenish a small part of his severely depleted reserves, while most worked toward leveling him up.

The surroundings felt extremely quiet after the sounds of battle had subsided. He lay panting on the ground, and couldn't help smile with bloodied teeth. He'd done it.

But just as Zac felt elated over his victory, a responding roar echoed in the distance. And then another, and suddenly the forest was filled with a cacophony of bestial roars.

Backup was coming.

# Chapter 21 - Hurt

Zac only knew pain as he pushed forward through the forest, not even knowing if he went in the right direction. From all directions he could hear roars from different beasts closing in. His consciousness was hazy, and he only moved on instinct by now. He had been fleeing for a while since being forced to run from the roars in the forest. He had only had time to yank the mangled hatchet out of the Herald's eye socket before using the little cosmic energy he had to speed away.

A crash was heard to his left and a barghest bounded toward him to intercept his flight. He intuitively tried to dodge but his feet did not listen to his commands, and he fell over. It was lucky too for Zac as the demon dog flew straight over his fallen form.

Zac numbly got to his feet and continued on. Soon the barghest had managed to run around and came toward him again. The scant cosmic energy in Zac's body circulated as he suddenly turned toward the demonling and with a growl swung his mangled hatchet down in a mighty overhead arc.

The strike hit clean on the beast's forehead, slamming the maw closed and its head into the ground. The power was so strong that its thick cranium cracked and both blood and brain matter covered the axe. The beast was stopped right in its track and lay on the ground convulsing

Zac had no time to finish off the beast as a movement in his periphery made him instinctively swing outward. The axe head hit a dark shape and elicited a pained yelp. It was a Gwyllgi which had planned to take advantage of the fight and strike a finishing blow at his head. Unfortunately for the hound, this had happened dozens of times by now and a response had been engraved in Zac's subconscious by now.

The Gwyllgi fell down, likely with a few broken ribs from the impact of the axe. It had hit the beast with its blunt side, but with Zac's power and cosmic energy such a strike was still lethal if positioned correctly. Zac wasted no time and finished it off with another swing down on its head.

The physical exertion worsened his wounds even more, and he suddenly puked out a mouth of blood with chunks of something else.

But he didn't stop. Zac drugged on almost like a zombie, felling any foolish oncoming beasts in an eye-for-an-eye type of disregard for his own body.

After either a few minutes or a few hours the onslaught of demons had ended, a familiar sight jolted his almost dormant consciousness awake. It was a large oak standing solitary in a glade, with an assortment of flowers strewn across the ground. The sight gave almost a spiritual impression, like the oak was a spirit tree of some woodland elves.

And more importantly, this tree actually represented salvation for Zac. He shakily put his axe into his belt, and started to slowly climb the tree. His left arm didn't quite respond, and he had to arduously move upwards with his right arm and legs. On a normal day he could be at the top of the tree in seconds, but now it felt like climbing a mountain.

He had completely run out of cosmic energy, and it felt like each cell in his body had been completely wrung out. Every movement was powered by force of will rather than anything else.

Finally he was roughly five meters above the ground, and crawled up on what looked like a plateau. It was three sturdy branches that grew in a close proximity in a row, with the middle branch grew slightly lower. They had together had formed almost an enclosure. Along the branches there were vines wired to make walls and flooring, and finally some cut of branches full of leafy growth had been placed around to insulate and hide the enclosure.

It was one of the many camps Zac had created over the last few weeks. Every time he found a tree, a cave, or some other natural formation that could be turned into a secluded resting stop he had stopped and turned it into a camp.

One never knew when one had to hide from beasts or wouldn't be able to get back to camp, so he had prepared these as a precaution.

Zac slumped down on the blanket of leaves that were placed on the middle branch and dragged out a bottle of water placed next to the trunk. It had been placed by him there when building the hideout. He greedily drank half the bottle before the pain in his ribs simply stopped him from continuing. Finally he could take it no longer, and drowsily closed his eyes and passed out.

He spent the next few days stuck in the tree. For the most part he had slept, as he had problems staying awake when he was so utterly drained of cosmic energy. His amulet helped, but it seemed it would take a few days for him to recharge.

Even though he had survived, it did not feel like a victory anymore. The glorious feeling from right after the kill was long gone. He was incapacitated from pain and blood loss, and even with his high vitality it would take time to heal. His left arm was broken and possibly a few ribs as well, and the large gashes that crossed his whole back felt inflamed. Every time he moved different parts of his body screamed in protest, and he could only helplessly stay in the tree.

It was first after three days that he felt strong enough to get ready to head down. He could actually move his arm somewhat, but he wouldn't try putting any force on it yet.

By now he was ravenously hungry, and couldn't wait to get back to his camp. He hadn't left any food in the small tree hideout, and had actually resorted to eating leaves and acorns the last two days. He had no idea if it was poisonous, but it felt like he had no options. Since his body had gotten stronger from the system he also had to

eat a lot more compared to before. That's why the food he and his friends had prepared had run out in only one week instead of two.

It was with a tinge of bitterness he prepared to get back. The three day convalescence unfortunately meant that he had failed in his goal, as the deadline of finishing within a month passed yesterday.

He still had two more heralds to kill, and also the general which he still hadn't seen. He could only hope that he had been paranoid, and that nothing bad had happened now that a month had passed. He was however quite disappointed that he might have missed out on some extremely powerful building awarded for a quick completion of the quest.

Zac guessed that he would find out during the coming days, and it was no point to ruminate over it now.

He slowly got down from the tree after making sure no beasts were in the vicinity and started making his way back towards his camp.

Zac tried to glean if anything had changed on the island since the deadline had passed, but he could find no indication of that happening. The two suns still shone in the sky, and the malevolent pillar of energy from the incursion still glared in the distance. It did seem to have intensified somewhat, but Zac wasn't sure if it wasn't just his imagination.

The oak he had stayed in the last days were close to the edge of the island, in the western direction, and it would take a some hours to get back to his camp.

This time he walked carefully as he felt he was in no condition to fight any demons. Especially not if they had gotten empowered even further.

His axe was for all intents and purposes now simply a blunt weapon after the herald had slammed down on it. Killing monsters now would

require a higher energy expenditure than before as he couldn't simply bleed them out with a quick swing.

So it was with great care Zac made his way through the familiar forests until he suddenly heard rustle in the bushes ahead.

He immediately crouched down and hid behind a tree and some bushes while trying to see what lay ahead. After a quick glance he almost instinctively got up and shouted out to get attention, as what he saw was three people slowly making their way through the forest.

Luckily he managed to stop himself in time as he noticed a jarring discrepancy; the people had horns.

## Chapter 22 - Scouts

Azzun walked through the forest with his two companions, irritably swatting branches and flies away. It was his first time off-world, and the change in climate was jarring. He missed the soothing monochromatic environment of his clan. Now the only reminder of the familiar red was the incursion in the distance.

Of course they knew that being able to invade a newly integrated world was a great opportunity. The House of Arh'Rezak had celebrated for 10 days and sacrificed 10 000 slaves for luck when they had found out that they had actually managed to get a slot. They were only a medium sized clan in their sector, but this opportunity meant a chance to grow to a large clan. Maybe they could even gain enough resources to overthrow the regional Lord.

Everyone knew that that The Ruthless Heavens mainly opened up the passageways to introduce a challenge to the indigenous inhabitants of the planets. The Ruthless Heavens wanted to test if the original inhabitants were worthy to stay alive, and whether any powerhouses would emerge among them. That was why it let invaders through, but imposed limits on how strong they could be. The challenge needed to be hard, but possible to overcome.

Of course, most powers in the multi-verse was more than happy to be treated as a test by the System. The potential gain of both rare treasures and new domains to own far outweighed the potential sacrifice of some of their young and their untalented. It worked as a great training ground for their young elite, providing both an opportunity to lead, battle and gain precious resources.

The elders of the clan were even more ecstatic then they learned that the world had been given a D-rank classification. It was no secret that when the system integrated new worlds the huge influx of energy could create all sorts of rare and invaluable treasures all over



the fresh worlds. The higher grade the new world was, the more treasures would appear. A fresh D-class planet wasn't top tier, but at least it was above average.

It usually wouldn't be the turn of some middling clan to get access to this type of smorgasbord. Normally some arch-daemon would have nudged the heavens and snatched it from them, but luckily the Great War was reaching a white-hot intensity. All the real powerhouses had their hands full, and couldn't focus on this matter even though the potential gain was great.

Azzun had grown up hearing stories of how even lowly imps and thralls had managed to turn into arch daemons after entering a fresh world. They had found some treasure or natural oddity that had helped them shed their lowly heritage and emerge as a powerhouse in their galaxy.

Of course, Azzun knew that even if some treasure was discovered, it wasn't his turn to enjoy it. They would all enter the greedy hands of their general. Even though the general couldn't be considered a top talent of their clan, he had managed to snag this great opportunity. He guessed it helped to have a Great Daemon as a great grandfather, who spoiled him rotten.

The old daemon had forcefully elected his only great grandson, Ogras Arh'Rezak to lead the incursion. Azzun and the rest had discovered his incompetence even before entering the new world.

Afraid that there would be a strong resistance on this world, and that losses of their forces would reflect badly on him, he had simply unleashed beast hordes to kill everything around the incursion for the first month. He had chosen four evolved beasts to lead their packs, and simply let them run loose without any supervision from a Beast Master or Tamer.

Even many of the elders had disapproved of such cowardice, but the great daemon quashed any dissent.

He only dared to enter when the first limiter was loosened. Everyone had been shocked to discover that both Ur'Khaz and Vul were dead when they finally arrived.

While neither were particularly strong, both were elites who had been chosen among the thousands of beasts to be leaders of the beast packs they sent through to clear the area. They were almost at the limit of what The Ruthless Heavens would allow to pass through the incursion, and it had cost the clan a fortune to send them through. They had been heavily nurtured and given many supplements to increase their physiques. After the restrictions lifted they would be like kings in a newly initiated world.

Ogras immediately further cemented his erratic leadership upon noticing this fact. He had simply called the Heralds trash for dying so easily, and was more focused on the construction of his palace than finding out the reason for their demise.

He had simply sent out a few scout parties, Azzun's group included, in order to gain information about the surroundings. Getting the order felt almost like a death sentence the unlucky scouts. If something in this forest could kill their alpha-beasts, how would they survive? They were only level 30 to 35 with common classes, the weakest of the army that had arrived.

However, they had no choice but to comply with the order. The hierarchy and rules were extremely strict. Both they and their families would have a miserable ending if that happened. They could only bitterly nod their heads and try to stay alive. He could only hope to garner some type of merit during their invasion, which would allow him and his family to live a bit more comfortably in the clan.

The blast of different colors around him felt stressful and disorienting, and even though they had been briefed on this type of terrain it was hard to adapt. They were in a constant state of unease, as they had no idea what might jump out from the bushes at any moment.

As if summoned by his thoughts, Azzun heard a subdued rustle, followed by a wet thud and grunt. He immediately drew his weapon and turned around, only to see one of his companions topple over with a crushed skull.

Their assailant was already mid-swing toward his other companion, and she was killed before he managed to even react.

The attacker was a walking horror, completely red and covered in blood. Its body looked like a maze of crudely sewn together body parts and Azzun first thought was that the attacker was an Abomination or Ghoul from the Undead Hordes. If the world they attacked had an empire of the undead, their invasion would be a nightmare. There were few enemy factions in the multi-verse that were more annoying to battle than the undead.

He quickly discarded the idea when he noticed that the patchwork was actually an extremely rudimentary armor rather than its actual skin, and realized he was battling some manner of barbarian warrior.

He didn't have time to analyze the situation further, as the man attacked with a swing of his odd weapon. Azzun quickly lifted his war-axe to intercept the swing, but quickly regretted it when their weapons clashed.

Horrified he realized the monstrous power that was contained in the swing, and he quickly circulated his cosmic energy and activated his defensive skill. An earthen layer quickly covered his arms and torso, and stabilized him. Thanks to his quick reactions he didn't break his arms, but the force still threw him down on the ground, and his defensive skill shattered.

Disoriented and hurting he threw a wide swing towards his enemy, but only hit air. He tried to get back on his feet and meet his attacker. He didn't get far however, before he felt a sharp pain in the back of his head, and then everything turned black.

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Zac stood panting over the unconscious demon, a sheen of perspiration covering his face. The sweat came from pain rather than exertion, as his charge had opened up some of his wounds. He finally dared to use his skill on the demon, which showed **[Azzun, Level 33]**.

Luckily these demons didn't seem very strong even if they were higher leveled. He started to go through their bodies, and looted anything that seemed useful. He ended up carrying two sets of gear, and had two backpacks slung over his back.

He ignored the protests of his ribs, and then dragged the two looted corpses into the bushes and hid them there. He was too tired to bury them, and he didn't want to linger here too long. Hopefully some beast would sniff them out and eat them before their compatriots found them.

Zac was somewhat surprised with how calm he was with his actions. These three were clearly sentient beings, to the point that Zac had mistaken them for humans for a second. Still he had butchered them without any mercy or hesitation. He had been slaughtering nonstop for a month, but those had generally been beasts with the exception of the imps.

He had thought that he still would have some trepidation when dealing with humanoid beings but it seemed that something deep and primal had changed in him during the last month. He was harder and colder compared to before, and he felt that he likely wouldn't be able to go back to what he was.

Just as the world had changed, so had he.

# Chapter 23 - Do you Understand My words?

Zac sighed and slung the unconscious Azzun over his shoulder, and the action caused him to whimper in pain. He would have preferred to drag him, but he didn't want to leave a trail straight to his campsite.

He wasn't far away from home now, and slowly walked the last bit. When he was a hundred meters away from the camp, he stopped and put his captive down. After making sure that the demon was still unconscious but alive he got a few vines and tied him up. Then he slowly made a circle around the camp, looking for any sign that there had been foot traffic in the vicinity.

A drawback of the illusion array was that he had no idea if 10 demons were waiting inside his camp without him seeing it, so he wanted to make sure that his surroundings were undisturbed. He couldn't find any signs of anyone having walked through here lately, so he quietly skulked towards the camp, and took a peek inside illusion array.

Luckily the camp was undisturbed, so Zac went back and got his demon, and then walked back into the safety of the illusion array.

Finally back he let out a long sigh that had felt lodged in his chest for the past few days. A growl from his stomach reminded him he had only eaten nuts and leaves in the last days and he quickly went over to his car and snatched a handful of dried meat he had hung on a line between the trailer and SUV.

He sat down in his camper chair with a grimace, and started devour the meat while staring at his new captive.

He truly looked exotic, with a skin that was tinted in a greyish-red. The skin looked coarse and almost like a cross between scales and normal human skin. Red tattoos which reminded Zac of the fractals from the skills and arrays adorned his upper arms.

He was donned in a formfitting leather armor, which seemed to be made for an agile fighter or scout, rather than a dogfighter. It had vambraces inlaid with a metal plate which covered his forearms, but left the upper arms bare.

The chest plate was formed by a woven mesh of leather strips which seemed both pliable and durable. He had on a belt where he had kept his weapons until Zac stole them, and a pair of dark grey leather pants.

It wasn't only the craftsmanship that was far superior in the gear, the materials were as well. When zac tried to cut through the leather with one of his kitchen knives he couldn't even make a scratch, even after applying pressure. Zac assumed the leather came from some strong beast on the demon's home planet.

Oddly neither this demon nor the others wore any shoes, but after an inspection it made some sense. The demon's feet looked like a slimmer version of the barghest's taloned paws, with three sharp claws in the front.

Finally the pair of horns that had warned him from approaching them. They were a blood red color, and looked like an artist's rendition of fire. They started in his upper forehead, and was bent backwards along his skull. It looked like tongues of fire were reaching upwards along the horn.

It did not seem that they used them for goring enemies, rather it looked largely ornamental.

The demon was still out cold, so Zac took the opportunity to go over his status window while getting another helping of dried meat.

**Name**        **Zachary Atwood**

**Level**        **25**

**Race**         **Human**

**Alignment** **Human (Earth)**

**Titles**        **Born For Carnage,  
Ultimate Reaper, Luck  
of the Draw,  
Giantsbane, Disciple  
of David,  
Overpowered, Slayer  
of Leviathans,  
Adventurer, Demon  
Slayer I**

**Strength**    **59**

**Dexterity**   **39**

**Endurance** **42**

**Vitality**     **48**

**Intelligence** **29**

**Wisdom 29**

**Luck 44**

**Free Points 4**

**Nexus  
Coins 14030**

**Active Quests:**

- 1. Unlimited Potential (Normal): Reach level 25. Reward: Unlock class system. (25/25) [COMPLETE]**

**Dynamic Quests:**

- 2. Off with their heads (Unique): Kill the four heralds and the general of incursion within 3 months. Reward: 10 E-Grade Nexus Crystals, E-Grade equipment, unique building depending on performance. (2/5)**
- 3. Incursion Master (Unique): Close or conquer incursion and protect base from denizens of other alignments for 3 months. Reward: 5 E-Grade Nexus Crystals, outpost upgraded to town, status upgraded to Lord. (0/3)**

Zac had gained two levels from killing the Herald and the other monsters while escaping. From how thick the cosmic energy felt, he wasn't far from gaining another level either.

He also noticed that he had gained roughly 8000 Nexus coins from his attack on the Herald, and the subsequent escape. His quests had also been updated, with the quest called Unlimited Potential showed **[COMPLETE]** at the end. His demon slayer quest had just



disappeared after completing, but Zac guessed that this quest remained as he still hadn't chosen a class.

Zac immediately placed 4 points into strength. He had noticed during the last month that each additional point in a stat had a greater effect than the earlier points. It was like the gains were exponential. This had made him feel that specialization was more highly rewarded compared to putting points in every stat.

Besides, with his large amount of titles all his stats were quite high in any case, affording him the opportunity to go deep in a specific attribute.

Since then he had put all his points from level ups into strength, unless he felt that some other stats was truly lacking. He thought about placing some more points in vitality due to his condition, but discarded that idea after a brief hesitation.

He was extremely eager to choose a Class, but barely managed to contain himself. The reason was the unconscious captive in front of him.

Zac had already stumbled along for a long time, using guesstimation to guide his choices. He was hoping to use Azzun to get some answers about the system and many other things before he did something irrevocable to himself. He didn't even dare to touch the Nexus Node, as he was afraid some class change process would start that couldn't be stopped.

Zac felt a lot better after having finished his meal. With a grunt he got back to his feet, and filled a bottle with water from the water array.

He walked over to the demon and poured the contents over his face, resulting in the demon sputtering and waking up.

Azzun had a look of shock and horror on his face as he woke up to the sight of Zac, who still hadn't bothered to change or remove the blood that was caked all over him.

"So uh... I guess I am sorry about your friends. Do you understand my words?" Zac said with a coarse voice. He realized that those were essentially the first words he had spoken in weeks. In the beginning he had muttered and mumbled things to himself, but soon he had grown accustomed to the silence.

Zac didn't know if it was because of what he said, but the demon snarled and desperately tried to get himself free from the vines. Zac sighed and brandished his hatchet, and with a grunt he slammed it straight next to the tied up demon. It produced a loud thud, and a small crater was formed. Had he swung just a decimeter to his right then one of Azzun's leg would have been mutilated by now.

The demon immediately stilled, as it perhaps remembered the ending of his two companions thanks to the hatchet.

"Do you understand my words?" Zac repeated. He wasn't really expecting the demon to actually speak his language, but rather that the system provided some translation feature. Language would be a pretty large issue if the system connected endless amounts of worlds.

The demon simply stared at him, then suddenly closed his eyes.

"Hello?" Zac prodded once again, unsure what the demon was planning. Suddenly Zac could sense how the cosmic energy in the surroundings started to move toward them, and the demon's body started to shake.

Zac got a sinking feeling in his chest, and didn't dare hesitate. He immediately swung his hatchet down on the skull of the demon, crushing it like he had done with the other two.

The body slumped down, and blood gushed out of his nose. Zac got a confirmation that the demon was dead from the influx of cosmic energy, but the uneasy feeling did not disappear. Suddenly the body started expanding, and Zac's eyes went wide with alarm.

He barely managed to throw himself away and down on the ground, before the corpse exploded with a tremendous bang.

Zac slowly got up on his knees, disoriented and ears ringing. Somehow the demon seemed to have made the energy in his body go haywire and he actually had exploded like a bomb. The camp was in chaos, with the windows of the car having cracks all over, the closest had completely shattered. Things were thrown around haphazardly and there even was an indent on the exterior wall of the camper.

Luckily he had killed the demon in time, or he might have been able to gather even more energy and created a far more deadly explosion, wiping out both him and the camp.

*'These demons are going to be a pain.'* Zac thought with a grimace while looking at the mess.

## Chapter 24 - Class

Zac was slowly moving through the forest. Since the demon blew himself up he had been stealthily roving around the vicinity of the camp. The illusion array blocked sound to a certain degree, but he was afraid that the explosion would have bled through the protection and alerted other demons.

However, he had been moving around the camp in expanding circles for two hours now, and had seen no sight of any more of the demons. While he had been scouting he'd also taken the time to properly bury the two other demons. It wasn't to properly honor the dead, but rather to avoid the bodies getting discovered.

Finally satisfied that he had caught a lucky break and still wasn't found out, he returned to the camp.

He spent some time cleaning up the camp. Some of the loot from the demons unfortunately been destroyed by the explosion. He hadn't expected his captive to go nuclear as soon as he woke up, so Zac had simply thrown the gear down in a pile not far from him.

The bags seemed to have contained some vials which Zac supposed were either healing tinctures or poisons. The bags were still whole, but the vials had cracked. Inside was a mess of the different mixtures glass shards, and Zac certainly didn't want to rummage through it now.

The male's leather armor was ruined, but the female demon's suit underneath seemed intact. But most important was the weapon that Azzun had been carrying.

It was a one handed battle axe. It was much longer than his hatchet, reaching roughly 80cm. The head was single-headed, but with a sharp spike sticking out on the other side, perhaps for balance. The

edge itself was a half-moon over 30 cm long. Zac tried the edge with his thumb, and was surprised to see that he immediately started bleeding.

It was hard for a normal kitchen knife to cut his skin now without some effort, which showed just how deadly his new weapon was.

The handle was black and it appeared that it had some fractals carved onto them. However these fractals somehow seemed far more rudimentary compared to the ones on the array flags. Finally a strip of some unknown beast hide had been used to create a handle.

This clearly was a weapon for war, rather than a tool as his hatchet. If he had this thing during his fight with the Herald he might even have been able to kill it off with the initial charge.

Zac tried using **[Eye of Discernment]** on the weapon as the axe seemed to be somewhat related to the system with the pattern on the handle. However, it gave no response. Either the skill couldn't show information about items, or items didn't work like that. He had a feeling it was a problem with the skill, as it was by far the cheapest skill that Nexus Coins could buy. It would be odd if it was too versatile.

Apart from this, he had scrounged up a hooked sword, a couple of knives and various bracers and shin guards. There might be something else in the bags, but he would wait until the mess dried out. He didn't really care for the sword and left it to the side, but was delighted with the small knives. They were small and straight with edges on both sides of the blade, giving them excellent balance. He felt they were used for throwing and battle rather than skinning animals and the like.

They would be a great addition to his arsenal, as he was sorely lacking any ranged attack. Every time he wanted to kill an imp he had to hurl his axe on it or a bunch of rocks. But this would be a deadly alternative which didn't force him to throw away his main weapon. He already practiced throwing rocks and the axe for some

time every day, and swapping to daggers shouldn't be too large an adjustment.

After going through the gear he finally couldn't wait any longer, and approached the Nexus Node. It was time for him to get a class, no matter if it was the right choice or not. He pressed his palm against the smooth surface of the crystal, and mentally tried to access the class system.

A new box appeared in his vision with multiple rows.

### **[Top 5 Class choices]**

**[Warrior – F Grade, Common. Fledgling combatant. Proficient with melee weaponry. Upgradeable.]**

**[Acolyte – F Grade, Common. Fledgling wielder of the elements. Initial proficiency with elemental magic. Upgradeable.]**

**[Marine – F Grade, Uncommon. Lowest Ranked naval combatant. Proficient with battles at sea. Upgradeable.]**

**[Demon Hunter – F Grade, Uncommon. Having dedicated his life for the eradication of the Demonic Race, the Demon Hunter has attained a high proficiency in locating and eradicating anything of demonic nature. Upgradeable.]**

**[Hatchetman – F Grade, Rare. Their army is an endless forest and I'm the lumberjack. Upgradeable.]**

**[Random F-Grade Class. 92.9% Common. 5.0% Uncommon. 2.0% Rare. 0.1% Epic. Roll the dice.]**

That was all the information Zac could get out of the system. He tried to get a more in depth explanation with mental commands such as "Details" and "Info", but the short excerpt was all he could go on.

The first thing he noticed that classes did not seem equal. All five choices did have the same grade, F- Grade, so it seemed everyone

started at the same grade. They did however have different rarities, ranging from common to rare in his case.

He did not know how large a difference there was between the rarities, but he could only assume that a higher rarity class would be stronger than a low rarity one.

The second thing he noticed that all the classes were upgradeable. That likely meant that he could get stronger classes in the future, but they would be based on the class he chose now. It might be secondary classes or it might be possible to change classes, but he had no information about this. He therefore had to make the choice under the assumption that his choice would influence his future trajectory to a large degree.

The third was that the available choices seemed to be at least partly based on his accomplishments.

The marine class was likely available because he was situated near an ocean. The Demon Hunter class came from killing demonic creatures non-stop since the System arrived.

He was not sure about the Hatchetman class, but he had used a lumberjack's hatchet for almost all his kills, so he assumed it might be based on that. But it was a combat class going by the description, rather than a woodworking class.

The last choice was a gamble. Even an Epic class was available, albeit only at a 0.1% chance. His luck stat might influence those odds, but it was unclear how. If each luck point increased his chance to get the Epic class by 1 point he wouldn't hesitate. He would roll the dice in a heartbeat. But he doubted it would be that easy, so he felt no need to use this option.

He already had a rare and two uncommon classes to choose from, so he had no reason to gamble. Besides, there might be classes that didn't help him in combat. What if he got a Rare Painter class from

gambling? While it might be nice learning a new skill, it would not help him on the island.

He would therefore definitely choose one of the available classes.

First he eliminated Warrior. It seemed quite basic, and it felt like most other choices were better. Next he eliminated both Marine and Demon Hunter. He didn't like the prospect of limited boosts. He had no aspirations to live out the rest of the life on the high seas, so a water-centric class did not make sense to him.

He also didn't want to spend his life hunting demons. The Demon Hunter class might very well be the strongest class for him right now, as there still were demons infesting the whole island. However, either he or the demons would be gone in two months, so it didn't make sense to pick this class either.

Abby had told him that the Multi-verse consisted of myriad classes. This meant that it wasn't like hell's gates had opened and the universe was being invaded by demons. They were just one of many potential enemies in the vast multi-verse. So even if he survived, he did not know if there were any other demons on Earth apart from in this particular incursion. Wouldn't that mean he essentially crippled himself by choosing a class that could only help him for the first few months?

Finally, it was an uncommon class. While it was better compared to the warrior and acolyte class, it was worse than the Rare class.

That left Acolyte and Hatchetman. Truth be told, he felt that Acolyte was the most intriguing. He did like the prospect of mastering the elements and firing fireballs and lightning bolts at his surroundings.

However, he felt there were drawbacks as well. For one he had no idea if he actually was able to learn spells just from getting the class. What if the basic spells normally were something you got in the tutorial? Also, he had invested most of his stats so far into physical attributes, which might be wasted on this class.



The only reason he could imagine he got this kind of class to choose was that he had gotten quite a bit of intelligence and wisdom from his titles. But he almost drooled at the aspect of upgrading the class until he became a grand magus, who could burn the sky with a sweep of his hand.

But most importantly it was only a common class. It felt like it was something that almost anyone could get in the future. Getting a common class when he had rare classes to choose from felt like wasting the advantage that his past month had provided him.

The system rewarded the brave and intrepid. The rare class seemed to be the rewards for risking his life every day against the demons.

Of course, Hatchetman sounded a bit stupid, to be honest. The connotation of the word from his professional career was anything but positive, but he felt that it had a somewhat different meaning here.

It seemed that it somehow referred to being a warrior lumberjack from the description. While not exciting, it did, however, check out a few of his boxes. The class probably would be very beneficial if he used his newly acquired axe in battle.

Out of all the choices, it also seemed to be the most tailored for his battle style. It also was the only Rare choice. He did not know how much better each rarity was compared to the one before, but perhaps the difference would be even greater compared to the conditional boost the Demon Hunter class would give against his current enemies.

The drawback was that he couldn't quite imagine what the upgrade path would be. Next upgrade was a... stronger lumberjack? A walking sawmill? A corporate shark doing hostile takeovers and selling companies for scraps?

So one of the choices seemed to be able to help him less now. But it might end up with him becoming a great wizard. He had always

played mage classes when playing games, so this was quite enticing. It was however only a common class.

The other choice seemed to be more suited to his stats and direct power, but lead into an unknown future.

After a long hesitation he finally said good bye to the dream of arcane dominance, and chose the box marked **[Hatchetman]**.

# Chapter 25 - Stronger

A strong surge of cosmic energy inundated Zac's whole body. It felt like his whole being was purified and reshaped. Instinctively he felt an enormous fractal imprinting itself and covered his whole being. However, most parts of the fractal was indistinct and blurred.

He also felt the powerful rush into his cells which indicated the improvement of his stats. Zac was completely oblivious of his surroundings as he was drowning in the sensations. Unfortunately the feeling didn't last long, and he soon came down from his rush.

From a first look he didn't feel that different, apart from his condition had improved significantly. It felt like his wounds had largely healed, even his broken arm.

But when he opened his status page he was shocked. His stats had made a great leap.

**Name**            **Zachary Atwood**

**Level**           **25**

**Class**           **Hatchetman (F)**

**Race**            **Human (F)**

**Alignment**   **Human (Earth)**

**Titles**      **Born for Carnage, Ultimate  
Reaper, Luck of the Draw,  
Giantsbane, Disciple of David,  
Overpowered, Slayer of  
Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon  
Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified  
Being, Trailblazer**

**Strength**    **92**

**Dexterity**   **48**

**Endurance** **51**

**Vitality**     **57**

**Intelligence** **38**

**Wisdom**      **38**

**Luck**          **54**

**Free Points** **0**

**Nexus  
Coins**          **14690**

All his stats had gained a jump of 9 points, except strength which had increased a whopping 28. As he had noticed that every stat point gave a larger increase in improvement compared to the one before, he knew he likely had doubled his actual physical power from the increase in strength.

He noticed that his class was added in a row, with F denoting the grade of the class. He was surprised to notice that his Race had also gotten graded, as it was blank before. He was excited at the prospect that he could actually evolve his race somehow.

Hopefully it meant that his power would rise, rather than growing a tail or a third eye though.

He had gained three new titles from getting a class as well. Zac focused on them to get a description

**[Full of Class: Reach level 25 and attain a Class. All stats +1]**

**[Rarified Being: Attain a Class graded as Rare. All stats +1]**

**[Trailblazer: First to gain a Class in world. All stats: +5]**

That explained where the all-around improvements to his stats came from. The first two titles were things that anyone could attain. However the Trailblazer title was another title that only he would get on Earth.

Zac felt a comforting from what that title represented. He still managed to keep his lead, even over the "chosen" cultivators who got help in the beginner villages. Even if he was deemed trash by the System and left to rot to this island, he had defied fate so far and was still on top.

He had to admit that the feeling of power was somewhat addicting. Finding his family was still his priority, but he also craved the feeling of becoming stronger and stronger. He lived for the moment after

every battle where he absorbed the cosmic energy, and having the pure unadulterated force of life course through his veins.

He had started to think more and more about where the limits of strength lay. By now he could punch a large rock and it would shatter, and only one month had passed. How powerful would he be in a year? A decade? Just thinking about it made him excited. Of course, he would never let himself forget that to get there in one piece he would have to walk through an ocean of blood.

He didn't linger on the subject as he was anxious to look through his other changes. He thought "Class" and a new window appeared

**[Class: Hatchetman, Grade-F, Rare]**

**Strength +10, +10%.**

**Level: +3 strength, +1 endurance, +1 free point per level.**

**Skills:**

**Axe Mastery (LOCKED)**

**Chop (LOCKED)**

**Forester's Constitution (LOCKED)**

Followed that were rows of blocked out information. At least that showed where the large strength boost came from. The +3 strength per level didn't seem to be retroactive, otherwise he'd have almost twice the strength by now. But it showed that every level from now would give a much larger boost compared to before.

Zac was annoyed to see that he actually didn't get any skills for free as he had hoped. There were 3 skills listed that seemed somewhat intuitive. Axe Mastery and Chop seemed offensive, and Forester's Constitution was defensive. At least he hoped Chop was an offensive skill, and not a woodworking skill.

He didn't quite understand how "Chop" would be better than what he had been doing before, but he guessed he would find out. It seemed that he couldn't get any information about the skills until he unlocked them.

The next problem was how to unlock the skills. Soon he found the method in the quest tab. It showed a new category, which was class quests. Each skill needed a quest to be completed.

**Axe Mastery (Class): Mastery is born through battle. Fell 1000 enemies. (0/1000)**

**Chop (Class): First chop Wood. Then their bodies. (0/10 000)**

**Forester's Constitution (Class): Fight in the forests, be one with nature. (0/30)**

None of the quests seemed very hard to accomplish. The Axe Mastery made no distinction of the strength of the enemies, and with his improved physique he could grind it out in a week or two if he just focused on slaying barghests.

The chop quest seemed to take time rather than being hard, but if he changed his daily work-out routine to chop wood it would be done sooner or later. Chopping wood was a great work-out anyways.

The last quest seemed either extremely easy or rather hard. Just 30 fights and it would be done. The whole island was a large forest so finishing it seemed to be the easiest of the three. It depended on what be one with nature meant. If it was just some random words, great.

If he actually had to somehow merge with nature, or become a tree-hugger it felt far more annoying.

Finally it seemed that he found out everything that he could for now. He had entered the outpost shop as well, but it seemed nothing new was added from gaining a class.

There were a few new skills added at the Node, but they were prohibitively expensive, with the cheapest being 500 000 Nexus Coins.

All in all it had been a fruitful day. He was disappointed that the demon had self-destructed rather than answering questions. There were so many things he needed to know. To be fair, Zac would likely have killed him after questioning the demon in any case. That the demon chose making a last ditch effort to bring Zac with him to hell was a logical choice.

Luckily the gear he gained and the strengthening made the sting less severe. He still looked positively insane from the blood and broken gear, and didn't want to put on the gear while looking like this. He left the camp to patrol the vicinity for a while, and then went back.

This would likely be a new addition to the daily routine. The humanoid demons seemed far more organized compared to the dumb beasts that had come through the incursion first.

Satisfied that there were no enemies nearby, he moved water from the water array into the tanker's reservoir. Finally he ripped the patchwork armor off, and took the first good shower in over a week. It was a risky move, but the grime and blood was making even him crazy, and he needed to get it off. He brought his new axe with him into the bathroom in case he was ambushed while in there.

It took half an hour to scrub the layers of dirt and blood off himself before stepping out of the shower.

Even cleaned up he could barely recognize himself in the mirror. His whole body had undergone a metamorphosis during the last month. Almost all of the fat was gone, leaving only a thin layer covering his muscular frame.

His physique looked *hard*. His muscles were compact and wiry rather than big and swollen like a body builder's. He thought he



actually might be smaller now compared to when he worked out at the gym.

Of course he knew that an explosive power was contained in these muscles, and that they were so dense that maybe not even a bullet would penetrate them by now. All over his body were scars of varying size and severity. His tactic of boosting his vitality and taking blows for landing killing strikes had been effective, but it had left an undeniable mark.

He looked down on his rough and calloused hands. It was hard to believe what these hands had done the last weeks. Once he had actually ripped the jaws of a Gwyllgi straight apart when he had dropped his hatchet.

Zac sighed and put on one of his last whole t-shirts and undergarments. He didn't want to use his rags together with his new gear.

Unfortunately the chest pieces of both the males' leather armors had been blasted to shreds so he could only put on the female's armor. He didn't worry about it too much though, as he had a strong suspicion that there would be many more demons in the woods that could supply new gear.

To get adjusted to his new weapon he dragged over a thick log. He reactivated his gravity array, and started cutting the log into firewood, working out and working on his quest simultaneously. It was already late, and he would not go out hunting anymore today. As he was methodically swinging his axe a trace of anticipation could be seen on his face.

For the first time since the world changed, he looked forward to go out and test his might.

# Chapter 26 - Demons

Zac woke up early the next day. He had slept outside with axe in hand and geared up, just in case of a nightly raid. He once again set out to scout the vicinity, but nothing seemed to have moved through there during the night.

Zac wasted no time, and set out towards the direction of his fight against the herald. He wanted to scout out the situation before proceeding toward the next Herald.

He still wanted to complete the quests as quickly as possible, but the new enemies had proved that something had changed on the island. Zac wanted to scout the situation out until he knew what that change meant, and decided to start from where he had fought Vul.

After walking for a while he ran into a barghest. A creepy smile appeared on Zac's face, and he brandished the axe.

The beast was aggressive as ever at least, as it mindlessly charged at him. Zac sidestepped to let it run into a tree behind him just to gauge its power.

He was surprised to see that it didn't actually just charge in to the tree as before, it instead bit into it and ripped a good chunk out of the wood out almost impossibly fast. Of course, it still couldn't stop its momentum, and still hit the tree square with its now closed maw.

Zac wasted no time and with a swing completely decapitated the demon. He felt almost no resistance when cutting through the spine of the demonling, and the axe continued down with such ease that he almost cut into his own leg before he could stop the descent. He knew the axe was extraordinarily sharp since yesterday, but he was still shocked how easy it went through..

As he continued on he wouldn't avoid any beasts anymore, rather he'd go out of his way to kill them if he found them. He looked forward to getting the Axe Mastery skill, and wouldn't miss an opportunity to work on his 1000 kill goal.

He had been annoyed when he had noticed that only the Axe Mastery quest progressed from kills, not the Forester's Constitution quest. He would have to figure out what was missing later. He also confirmed that the Chop quest did not progress from battling, even though it mentioned chopping bodies.

As he was advancing he noticed that the beasts had indeed improved. They were stronger, faster, and more impressively they seemed smarter. It was as if a limiter had reduced all stats, including intelligence. Then it had been lifting gradually during the last week of the month, and as the last day passed the limit had been ripped off completely.

Overall he gauged that the beasts' stats had improved by roughly 50% since four days ago. The danger improved more than that though, as they had started doing feints and use tactics while attacking compared to before. The barghest were of course still dum-dums, but not to the point that they'd mindlessly charge into a wall anymore.

The rewards for killing the beasts hadn't been improved with their improved performance. It seemed that Zac truly had gotten a bargain when hunting during the first month. Zac snickered as he imagined the cultivators in the beginner villages hunting rabbits and boars around the edge of the village for a mere 2-3 Nexus Coins a piece, like in some RPG.

The increase in strength didn't bother him when it came to the fodder demons that was peppered through the island. They had improved, but so had he. Even the empowered demons were defenseless against his new weapon. It felt like proper gear actually had a greater effect compared to attaining a class.

Of course, the effect of a class would show over time rather than immediately it seemed. Also the immediate effect on him was not too large, as he already had such high stats from his titles. If someone with only the basic stats got this class with accompanying titles, it'd likely been a pretty large boost to him.

As he killed another demon with a lazy swing he felt the familiar burst of cosmic energy that came with a level up. He was delighted to see that he did get his class stat points in addition to his two free points, rather than instead of. So every level he now got 7 points instead of two.

He paused a second to go over how to allocate his points again. He had thought about it a bit yesterday, and had come up with a plan. As his class seemed to focus on Strength and Endurance, so Zac would do the same with his free points.

He felt that the skills and class itself might somehow synergize with these stats, so getting them as high as possible would be a good option. Even if he was wrong it would be ok, as both these stats was strong on him in any case.

If vitality helped him heal up after getting wounded, then endurance would protect him from getting wounded. Endurance didn't only help with his stamina, it also toughened his body up. Now that he had a high enough vitality that he wouldn't die from ordinary wounds, he could focus on endurance to make him even harder to kill.

The other option he had considered was to put the put the points in dexterity, making him quicker. However, for most of the fights so far speed had not been an issue or limiting factor for him, so he decided to hold off on that for now.

Furthermore, among the skills that was added to the Nexus Node after he got his class was one that he felt might be able to substitute the need for Dexterity. It was called **[Steps of Gaia]** and cost 575 000 Nexus Coins. It was a huge amount of coins, far more than he had gathered in total.

But it seemed to fit him perfectly. It was a movement-type skill, which he assumed would help him move quicker. It would both help him charge at enemies faster, and also allow him to easier dodge attacks. It also seemed to be connected to the earth and nature, same as his class, so he felt there might be synergy along the road.

He therefore had decided to start saving up for the skill. He believed that it shouldn't take too long to get the necessary coins, as his speed of killing beasts had improved significantly with his gear and higher stats.

Finally he decided to put 1 point in strength and 2 in Endurance and kept going. A while later he reached the area where he fought the Herald. The aftermath of from the battle was evident, with crushed trees and rocks all over. He still hadn't run into any humanoids, and the forest was largely like it was before.

Zac slowly crept toward the spot where the Herald had fallen, alert of his surroundings. He was surprised to find that the carcass had been removed from the spot, as had the poles he had planted.

He could only guess that they had been moved back to the base. He wasn't sure as he hadn't seen it, but he assumed that the base were either right at the incursion, or in the mountains. If it was closer to the other sides he felt that he should have run into more of the humanoids by now.

Unless there only were a scant few of the humanoid demons, of course. But Zac's intuition told him that he wouldn't be that lucky. The System had screwed him over pretty consistently, and he saw no reason that it would stop anytime soon.

He stopped for a while to decide what to do now. He hadn't really accomplished anything so far, except for killing some demons. He didn't need to ponder for long however, as he suddenly heard subdued voices in the distance.

Zac properly hid himself inside a few bushes as the voices drew closer. He was disappointed to find out that he couldn't understand the words. So much for a universal translation system.

It was a surprisingly smooth and melodic language, specked with vowels flowing like a river. He had assumed that the language of demons would be harsh and perhaps even guttural.

*'Wait, is that racism?'* a stray thought entered his mind, making him lose focus before setting his sight on the approaching party.

The party looked somewhat similar to the one he had killed earlier, except that this party was comprised of four individuals rather than three.

There were 3 males and one female. The two males looked like a mix of rangers and warriors, dressed in leather armors and wielding a sword each. The female walked in front and seemed to be the lookout, as she was carefully scouting the surroundings and had a bow slung on her back.

The final man was unarmed but seemed to be a leader, or at least of higher status. The quality of his gear seemed to be a notch above the others, such as a chest plate made of the same black metal as his axe handle. It was engraved in the same manner as the handle as well, but more intricate.

Zac had a feeling that these engravings had some sort of effect, like magically imbuing the gear with sharpness or defense. He had found no ways to use the engravings so far though, and hoped he might get an idea from the unarmed man.

Another reason Zac surmised the well-equipped man was of higher status than the other was that he could sense a formless pressure emanating from him. It felt like he was looking at a dangerous beast rather than an unarmed man.

While Zac was well hidden he decided to slowly recede further into the brushes. This party seemed both deadlier and more alert compared to the last one.

His actions were in vain however, as the female suddenly grabbed her bow and an arrow in a fluid motion and without hesitation fired it straight in the direction of Zac.

Zac tried to get out of the way, but there was no time as the arrow slammed straight into his side.

## Chapter 27 - One Against Many

Zac almost lost his breakfast as the arrowhead slammed straight into his gut. It punched through the wired leather armor and continued into his body. Luckily most of the force had been spent going through the armor, and with Zac's high endurance it only proceeded two centimeters before stopping.

This kind of wound wouldn't really faze Zac anymore after constantly getting hurt from his fights. However, he still hesitated for a second after ripping the arrow out. Fight or flee? He hadn't prepared to challenge the party like this.

However, he soon discarded any thought of fleeing. He didn't like the prospect of having another arrow slam into him, this time in the back of his head while running for his life. The ranger seemed to have some detection skill, as she could spot and shoot him while he was hidden in bushes a few hundred meters away. He needed to kill the archer at least before fleeing.

He threw the arrow away and pulled out one of his smaller knives from its sheath. Zac wasted no time and threw it straight at the archer, and it flew with at least the same velocity as the arrow that had hit him.

The female demon seemed to have been prepared, and with an almost impossible nimbleness jumped out of the way and proceeded up into a tree like a forest elf. She moved like a specter and in just a few seconds she was gone from his vision among the leaves

Zac tsked in annoyance, and charged at the party while trying to use trees as a cover from the archer. The force of his steps made deep indents in the ground as he charged forth like a runaway bull. The three remaining demons were obviously ready for the fight, as they spread out intending to encircle him.



Zac could sense that all of them were using some skill, as he could feel the cosmic energy react to their bodies. An illusory red gas started floating around one of the combatants, giving him a more sinister feel. The other underling pointed down on the ground, but Zac couldn't see anything happening.

Zac couldn't see anything happening with the leader either, but the sense of danger increased substantially.

As Zac was furiously approaching he quickly used **[Eye of Discernment]** on the trio, and got some basic information about his enemies.

**[Metisis, Level 38]**

**[Gormer, Level 39]**

They were roughly 5 levels higher compared to the last party he had attacked. That meant that they should have at least 15-20 higher stat points including the bonus stats from their classes, compared to the last group of demonss.

He was also surprised to notice that the third man, the unarmed one, had somehow resisted his skill. There was only a blur above his head. This made Zac even more wary of him. He had even managed to identify the herald Vul, who was far higher level compared to himself.

Zac furiously circulated cosmic energy in his body, and ran straight toward the weakest enemy, Metisis. When he was just over 50 meters away from them an arrow came whizzing down from the tree tops. This time Zac was prepared and slammed it away with the broad side of his axe head.

The force of this arrow was far higher than the hastily one she had shot before. When the axe and arrow collided he was actually pushed back a bit, his feet making a grove in the ground. Luckily the

axe was apparently made from excellent materials, and wasn't damaged one bit.

Zac pushed ahead once again, the last 50 meter distance gone in just a few seconds.

Just as he was a few meters away from his target, he pushed all the cosmic energy he could into his right leg. He instantly kicked off with all the power he could, and shot like a bullet straight at the other demon, Gormer. The force of the push created an explosion in the ground, even leaving a small crater.

They had not expected the speed that a 98 strength powered push could give, and Gormer barely managed to lift his hooked sword before Zac chopped horizontally with all the strength he could muster.

The axe moved like a lightning, but when it entered the weird gaseous substance it felt like he was trying to push through water. A good part of the momentum was somehow sapped out of the strike, and his force couldn't properly come to bear.

Zac wouldn't let this opportunity go though, and with a growl redoubled his efforts, and the axe continued on and slammed into the demon right under his left arm. The leather armor could afford almost no resistance against the sharp edge of Zac's axe as it embedded itself firmly in his chest. He couldn't push it clean through though, as the weird strength sapping effect seemed to be even stronger within the body of the demon.

Zac immediately ripped his axe out which produced a tremendous sprout of blood. He planned to turn around to meet the other two demons head on next. He didn't believe he'd get a second chance for a surprise attack like this.

But before he could do anything, he suddenly felt something ensnare his feet and he completely lost his footing. Zac fell headfirst on top of the collapsed dying demon. Gormer seemed intent on revenge even

with one foot in the grave, as he weakly held on to Zac to keep him from fleeing.

While Zac struggled to get free he took a quick glance down at his legs. They were ensnared by a handful of purplish wiggling roots, which somehow seemed alive. They seemed to be a skill or magic that came from the other demon underling.

Perhaps they had planned to ensnare him when he got closer, and then attack him from three directions, securing an easy kill. Unfortunately for them Zac had preceded them with his lightning fast blitz.

Zac had no time to analyze it any further, as the leader had moved to position close to him. Shockingly he no longer was unarmed, but hefted a monstrous great sword that was almost as long as he was, and over 20cm wide.

He had mocking eyes and a sneer as he lifted the sword above his head. Zac could once again feel the movement of cosmic energy, and knew that the leader was using a skill. Dark arcs of power spread from his arms into the large blade.

The dying demon's strength was no match for Zac, and he frantically ripped himself free from his grip. But he only managed to get himself up to his knees when the large blade started falling down on him. It was poised to cleave him in two unless he did something.

Zac pushed his power to the limit and gripped his axe with both hands and swung upward with all his might, hoping to intercept the sword.

With a tremendous clangor that echoed through the vicinity the axe and the great sword connected. The force actually created a shockwave that blasted outwards.

Zac was slammed down into the ground again from the force creating a small crater. Even with his superhuman stats he couldn't

handle the power of the sword. Luckily for him he at least managed to get the leader demon off-kilt and change the trajectory of the strike. It actually slammed down in the gut of the dying Demon. The might was so strong that the torso of the underling veritably exploded, instantly killing him. That wiped the smirk of the leaders face and seemed to enrage him instead.

Meanwhile, the dark lightning from the demon's skill passed into Zac's axe when they collided, and burrowed into his arm. A blazing pain ran through his whole body, and his muscles spasmed uncontrollably.

That was actually the only reason Zac survived, as a great spasm jerked his head some distance away. Another arrow slammed down right where his head had been before.

This arrow was different than the other, with a jagged arrowhead and being pitch black. It whizzed down with a great force and actually completely embedded itself into the ground, right down to the feathers. The extreme penetrating power was evident from that shot, likely from a skill.

It was only thanks to being bombed with black fireballs by the imps that Zac was able to retain consciousness. He pushed the pain away with all the resilience he could garner, and with a quick swing cut through the roots that ensnared his feet. The roots were far sturdier than they looked, and it felt like he cut through steel wire rather than wood.

Still it was no match for his power and the sharpness of his axe, and he was free in no time. He rolled a way as quickly as possible, trying to gain some distance before the leader swung down again.

He got to his feet just as another batch of roots closed in on him. This time they came as a swarm from the ground under the other demon. Zac whirled his axe back and forth in a frenzied manner and cut them down as they came, stopping their advance after a while.

The battle reached a short lull as Zac stood panting, while facing the two Demons. He tried to survey the treetops but couldn't locate the female archer. Her existence was like an annoying fly in the periphery that made him unable to fully concentrate. Even worse, this fly could kill him with one strike if he wasn't careful.

Fighting one against many truly was a pain in the ass.

## Chapter 28 - Melee

Zac was a bit unsure of how to proceed. He knew that one should maintain the initiative in a battle, but he didn't want to just charge over like a stupid barghest.

His enemies made the choice for him. The leader started advancing on him, anger smoldering in his eyes. Both his hands gripped the great sword, which was angled down toward the ground.

The other man was stationary, but mumbling something in their own language.

Zac could only put his game face on. He was still hurting all over from the dark lightning, but he pretended he was fine. With his axe in his hand he got ready for round two.

Zac really didn't want to meet the great sword straight on. The leader seemed to have roughly the same level of strength as he did, and even if he managed to parry the strike, he was afraid that he would be shocked again from the skill. He would have to fight around it somehow.

Luckily a weapon of that size was unwieldy, and the trajectories would hopefully be telegraphed.

Zac took out a second knife, leaving him with only one remaining. He launched it at the weaker enemy, and started to rush forward.

The demon deflected the knife with a couple of roots even though the force from Zac's throw was immense. The demon obviously was some sort of earth- or tree-mage, and the roots were far sturdier than something coming from a normal tree.

The demon was interrupted in his chanting though, which was Zac's main goal. If he actually had managed to hurt him, all the better.

Wasting no time he rushed toward him, trying to avoid the leader and his great sword. The great sword whizzed in a wide upwards arc, seemingly trying to cut Zac's in two.

Zac pushed forward with his legs and jumped forward into a roll to avoid the swing, but somehow the leader changed trajectory mid swing, and still managed to nick Zac in the side. The cut drew blood but wasn't too deep, and fortunately the black lightning didn't emerge again. It seemed the leader couldn't continuously use the skill.

Zac ignored the pain and quickly got on his feet and charged at the underling. The leader was right behind him, so he quickly swung his axe downward, hoping for a quick kill.

A thick group of roots shot up in front of the demon, and meshed together into a wooden shield to intercept the swing. Zac's stats were overpowering though, and he slammed through the roots easily. Wood chippings flew everywhere like small projectiles from the strike. Unfortunately for Zac, the brief pause in the swing had allowed the demon to reposition and he could avoid the swing.

Zac felt an intense danger from behind and he didn't dare hesitate. He jumped forward and crashed into the underling instead of swinging his axe again, pushing them both a few meters away and bringing both of them to the ground. As he jumped forward he felt the wind move right above where his head had been, from a swing of the leader.

The demon spit out a mouth of blood from the impact, but managed to wheeze a few words. A handful of vines shot out of the ground and stabbed into Zac's chest and legs, trying to bore further into him.

The pain was excruciating but he could only ignore it and hope that his endurance was enough to protect his innards from the roots. With a roar he slammed down the axe. With his overbearing power he completely destroyed the head of the demon, and even created a crater where the axe head hit the ground.

From jumping over until killing him had taken less than a second, giving the leader no time to stop him.

The roots that the demon had summoned didn't disappear, but they seemed to have stopped moving.

As Zac was jumping away from the body, another arrow soundlessly hit his leg, completely punching through it. The sharpness must have been extraordinary as it didn't seem to slow down at all even with Zac's high defense.

Zac Screamed in pain, but could only ignore it for now. The leader was upon him with another swing that almost ended him.

Zac was prepared for the swing as they drew huge wide arcs. He lunged forward after dodging in order to get in closer as the swing had passed. It seemed that the demon had ample battle experience though, and kneed Zac right in the face as he got close. The knee was imbued with the dark lightning, and this time it zapped Zac straight in the head.

Getting a knee in the face was bad, getting electrocuted in the head by demon lightning was worse. The power of the leader was huge, and Zac was flung away from the strike. The impact nearly broke his neck, and Zac was blinded by the pain.

But he roared and charged in again as he landed. Another arrow whizzed down, but Zac managed to hunker down so it only ripped a flesh wound on his back. He needed to turn the fight into a close combat brawl, which would render the great sword useless. It would also hopefully stop the intermittent arrows from coming, as the ranger would be hesitant to hit her leader.

He decided to meet the great sword head on in order to get in close. The demon had just used the lightning attack, and hopefully he needed to wait or charge it up again. The axe and great sword met again in a stupendous clash. The trees in the vicinity actually was



actually moving slightly from the even stronger shockwave, and an incoming arrow was pushed away before even coming close.

When Zac was standing he could better utilize his strength, and this time he wasn't pushed away. Shock was evident in the demon's eyes, and he tried to create some distance. But Zac wouldn't let him so he pushed forward and he grabbed the leader's legs, and they both fell over with a thump.

Zac wanted a repeat of his last kill, and swung down his axe. However, he was still a bit fuzzy from the shock, and in the heat of the moment accidentally next to the leader's head.

Zac refocused and started another swing, but the leader was fighting back. He punched Zac straight in the face and tried to push him away. The fist had the force of a wrecking ball, and a loud thud echoed out.

Zac got even groggier, but his constitution was no joke so he could endure it. He also had been swinging an axe constantly the last month, and muscle memory helped him. The half-moon edge swooped down toward the demon with superhuman force. As he had been pushed away he couldn't reach the head, and instead aimed for the heart.

Zac noticed a surge of cosmic energy entering the armor from the demon mid-swing, and the runes on the chest plate lit up. The wheels were already in motion, so Zac could only bear down and hope for the best.

Just as the edge was about to slam into the armor, a golden sheen enveloped the leader. The axe hit the barrier, and it felt like he had slammed axe into himself rather than his enemy. The armor had somehow redirected the force back toward himself, and he flew up in the air from the rebound.

He slammed down right next to the demon, arms and legs akimbo. The demon quickly whipped out a dagger and tried plunge it in Zac's

lungs just as he landed. He managed to barely edge away in time, but the dagger still drew a nasty gash along his ribs.

The demon kept stabbing down at Zac, trying to turn him into a sieve. The second stab hit straight into his arm making Zac scream out. He tried to push down the demon again and wrestle the knife out of his hands with his own free hand, but the demon's strength was at least equal to his.

In a last desperate attempt, he could only pray his constitution wouldn't fail him. He let go of the demon's hand holding the dagger, and intercepted the hand that was holding back his axe.

The demon immediately plunged the dagger into his gut, once more unleashing the black lightning. The blazing pain once again erupted in Zac's body, but by now he had somewhat acclimatized to the attack.

He ignored the spasms in his gut, and ripped away the demon's hand and finally managed to swing his weapon down full force at the demon's neck.

A loud bang was heard as the axe slammed into the ground, creating a large crack. A second, smaller impact was heard as the demon's decapitated head fell down onto the ground a few meters away.

Another arrow whizzed down from a nearby tree toward his head. But Zac had expected this, and dodged the attack. The ranger had shot a steady stream of arrows at him during the melee, most at least grazing him. Luckily he had been in such close proximity to the demons during the fight that she had only dared aim at his extremities.

He finally saw where the arrows came from, and as all the other demons were dead he finally managed focus and locate the elusive ranger. He spotted her up in a tree not far away from the fights.

With a steely gaze that spoke of death he got on his feet and started running towards her.

## Chapter 29 - Incriptions

Zac was kneeling next to the body of the female ranger, panting with exhaustion.

The hunt luckily had ended quite quickly. She had immediately tried to run when Zac started approaching, jumping from one tree to another. Her speed up among the branches had actually been slightly higher compared to his own down on the ground.

She likely was a Dexterity based class. She even had the time to shoot a few arrows while fleeing. Zac was fully focused on keeping up, so could only manage to deflect the projectiles if they headed straight toward his head or chest. That was because he simply held his axe right in front of his throat, moving it slightly upwards or downwards to intercept the arrows.

Suddenly, as she had tried to jump to a branch on another tree, Zac had used a sneak attack with his last dagger. As she was mid-air he flung it with full force, punching a hole in her back.

She didn't immediately die from the attack, but she did fall down from the tree tops. And before she managed to get back on her feet, Zac was upon her. He ended the fight with a swing without any words. He didn't want another suicide bombing incident on his hands, after all.

It was lucky as well, because if that dagger didn't hit, he'd likely have been forced to flee instead. He didn't want to try throwing his axe, as it was his most important tool for survival on the island. Then the enemy would have a detailed description of him and his power.

He grabbed her bag and found some cloths he assumed were for bandages. After a quick sniff to make sure that it wasn't actually doused in some chemical or the like he used it to bandage himself up. His whole body had holes punched in it, from everything between

arrows and roots, and the bandage was only enough to treat the worst ones.

He was still bleeding, but it seemed that the wounds hadn't hit any major arteries or organs. By now normal puncture wounds usually stopped bleeding by their own after a few hours. He could still tentatively put weight on the leg, but he wouldn't run a marathon. His whole body felt like he had been used as a punching bag, mainly from the black lightning of the leader.

Unfortunately the ranger's bow had snapped when she fell down from the tree, so he didn't bother taking it with him as he planned to leave.

He did take the quiver and remaining arrows though, as they had survived the fall. He also skipped taking the armor, as his axe had destroyed the whole thing.

After dragging the body into some thick bushes, he turned back toward the location of the fight with the others. After slowly waking back for a bit he was there.

A barghest had found its way to the corpses from somewhere, but surprisingly it didn't eat the corpses. Zac had seen those demons eat everything, including members of their own race before, so it was interested that this barghest only dared to sniff and growl anxiously at the corpses.

It reinforced Zac's suspicion that these demons were not wild animals, rather beasts reared by the humanoids. They were a good tool to use as a meat shield to weaken and tire the enemy. Of course, they didn't seem to work too well in the complicated terrain of the island. Zac edged to the beast and killed it with one strike as it was distracted by the bodies.

He didn't bother with it anymore and walked over to the leader. He was most excited about the gear on him, and it was largely intact. The fractals had protected the demon from Zac's strike on the chest,

and the finishing blow had been on his head, which kept all the gear in good working order.

Zac, who was getting more and more adroit in undressing corpses, nimbly loosened the clasps and buckles, and dragged the chest plate from him. He also gingerly touched the great sword, afraid that he would get zapped again.

Fortunately there was no charge left it seemed, and he picked up. The sword was actually lighter than he expected. Of course, he was a bit unsure of his current strength, so making exact measurements was hard.

He carefully looked through the weapon for some hidden function. The leader clearly had been unarmed one second, and in the next holding this monstrosity. It must have come from somewhere.

Zac suspected the sword might be able to grow and shrink at command, and it simply was too small for him to notice before. Or the sword might be able to turn invisible.

After a quick rundown he couldn't figure it out, and he did not want to delay too long here in case reinforcements arrived. He quickly stripped all remaining items from the leader, including a pouch, a few runed bracelets, and the large knife.

He put all of it inside a backpack, then proceeded to do the same with the other two fighters. He left their weapons and armors though, as he simply was overburdened as is. Just bringing back the sword would be arduous with his battered body.

Finally he dragged the bodies away and looked over the battlefield. A discerning eye would quickly notice that a battle took place here, but Zac couldn't be too bothered anymore. This was the second scouting party he had killed, besides a herald and a throng of demons.

The humanoids would have to be crazy to not know that someone was hunting them by now. They had seen the trap used to kill the herald, so they knew it wasn't a beast either.

He wasn't too sure why they weren't scouring the island for him. He guessed they either had limited resources or was preoccupied with something else. Who knew, maybe there actually was a city with humans hidden in the mountains that waged war on the demons.

He put the axe into his belt and hefted the great sword over his shoulder and turned back. He had been out for half the day, and either had to turn back soon or sleep in one of his hideouts.

He decided to head back, as the fight had given him some insights about the inscribed items that he wanted to try out in a safe environment.

Zac started heading back, heading a slightly altered path. Even if he was hurt it wasn't to the point that he couldn't hunt some demon dogs on the way back. The worst part was his leg, and luckily the demons always came running so he didn't have to chase them.

He soon ran into one and with a swing of the great sword completely split the barghest in two. The sword continued with its momentum and slammed into a tree, cutting clean through it.

The power was great, but it felt too unwieldy for jungle warfare. More importantly, Zac noticed that killing the barghest with the sword didn't improve his quest for axe mastery. On second thought he felt it made sense that the kills had to be made with an axe to complete an axe mastery quest.

As he continued on he had to continuously swap weapons every time he ran into a demon.

Finally he arrived at his camp as the suns were starting to set. After the customary sweep he entered the camp. He threw some lumber into the fire pit and lit a small fire, and got some more dried meat. He

was starting to run low so he'd have to hunt something edible tomorrow as well.

His wounds had actually turned a lot better during his hike back, as he hadn't sustained any new wounds from the lesser demons.

A quick glance at his status screen showed that he had gained roughly 10 000 Nexus coins in one day. It made sense, as he had more than doubled the speed of killing barghest with his upgrades. Furthermore, the demons seemed to give out roughly a thousand Nexus Coins each.

Zac was somewhat surprised to find out that he actually had gained nexus coins and cosmic energy from the demon that the leader accidentally killed. He had somewhat felt the rush of energy during the fight, but at the time had been preoccupied with getting zapped by demon lightning.

He also felt that he almost had gained half a level from the intense fights. Risking your life really was the most effective way of getting stronger with the system.

His Axe mastery had progressed as well, currently showing a (69/1000) progress. Most of the kills had been barghest while traveling, with a few of the more agile Gwyllgi peppered in every now and then. Zac felt that if he put his mind to it then he could kill roughly 100 lower demons a day, which would allow him to complete the quest in another 10 days.

He decided to put the 10 days as a deadline. He would also match the quest for Chop, so he'd chop a thousand times a day. Zac figured it'd take somewhere around two hours per day to get it done. He had no real idea as of yet what to do with the last skill, as it still showed 0/30.

He turned his gaze toward the day's pile of loot after being finished with his meal. He had gained a whole new set of gear and a sundry of miscellaneous items in the backpacks. At the battle site he hadn't



had time to properly go through everything so he planned to do so now.

The two underlings had had small leather bags that were attached to their belts on their back. In them were nothing of value. It held some gauze, flint, a whetstone, a small knife that seemed to not be for battle and a small water bottle. It felt like it was some basic ordinance.

Both the bottles had some very rudimentary inscriptions on them so Zac wondered if they had some special function. He poured the water out, but was surprised that the small bottle held far more water than it should.

It took almost two minutes for all the water to pour out. Zac was amazed that some inscriptions could do something magical like this. He felt no cosmic energy movements around the bottles, and it looked normal when he peered inside.

The magic bottle gave him a new idea about the sudden appearance of the giant sword. If a bottle could somehow store large amount of water, then it wasn't impossible that the leader had some similar gear that could store items.

# Chapter 30 - Experimentation

Zac eagerly filtered out all the gear that had belonged to the leader and started to go through them. His first guess was the inscribed bracelets as they were the only things except the sword and chest plate that had fractals engraved.

He looked over them multiple times, and tried pressing different parts of the bracelets, but nothing happened. He tried putting them on and focusing on them, but there still was no response. He could only helplessly put them aside for now, and continue to look through the other gear.

Zac picked up the pouch and opened it up. Strangely the insides were pitch black and he couldn't see anything. His heartbeat sped up and he felt that he had found the jackpot.

He first took one of the small knives and plunged it halfway into the darkness, then pulled it out. There was no damage on it at all as far as Zac could tell. He planned to do the same with his finger, but as soon as he barely put it into the darkness he felt a burning sting.

His fingertip had been singed clean off, and blood dripped down over the pouch. Maybe flesh couldn't enter he surmised. So he tried the same with a piece of dried meat, but this time it reacted like the knife.

*'Maybe it's live things...'* Zac thought. He had no critter to try this theory out though, so it would have to wait.

The next task was how to activate the pouch. He had noticed some hints when he had fought earlier. When he had slammed his axe into the chest of the leader, he had felt that cosmic energy had entered the armor from the demon.

Zac had always only circulated the energy internally, and wasn't sure how he'd push it outside. He tried circulating some energy into his fingers, then tried to push it out from the tip. The only result was that the concentration of energy got too high at the fingertips, and they started rupturing.

He tried many different things for a few hours until he finally gave up. Zac guessed that there was an inherent problem with how he handled the energy. He had followed an image of a circulatory system of his blood when he had started bending cosmic energy to his will. Of course he hadn't imagined it to have outlets where it could flow out.

He started mulling over how to improve his system. He tried imagining a hole at his palm where he could let cosmic energy flow out.

But as he changed his energy circulation a blazing pain erupted in his hand and it looked that a bloody stigmata had appeared where he had imagined his exit.

A cold sheen of perspiration appeared on Zac's forehead from the pain and he had a sinking feeling. Just a small change like this and the pain had been this bad. If he wanted to improve the system on his whole body, how bad would it hurt?

He knew that the circulatory system he had devised in no way was an optimal method of using cosmic energy, it was just something he had whipped together. He had planned on getting some skill or method for it later when he had the opportunity. But he hadn't imagined that the pain would be this bad.

He was even more dismayed when he noticed that the hole he had created in his hand was continuously leaking cosmic energy and draining him of power.

Zac could only reluctantly change his circulation pattern back, bringing forth another wave of torment.

He sat for a full thirty minutes feeling lost at what to do. He was afraid that he had somehow crippled his future prospects. The more he thought about it the more he felt that it was extremely important to be able to project energy. The skills the demons had used all had projected energy in different ways. The mysterious mist, the black arcs of lightning and the root control. They all relied on manipulating cosmic energy outside of the body.

If he was stuck with this defective system where all the energy was stuck inside his body, would he even be able to use the skills he got in the future?

He needed to find a way to rectify this, even if he had to take the torture of rewriting his pathing. However, the hole he had made didn't work, and even if it did he was hesitant to use that method anymore. He didn't want to haphazardly get himself deeper and deeper in the hole by making a crappy patch-work circulation method.

He went over to the Nexus Node once more to scour through the skills, in case one of them actually was a circulation skill or something similar. Of course, he subconsciously knew that wasn't the case, he had looked those skills over many times by now, and knew there were no such thing there.

The skills available generally could be categorized into offensive, defensive, movement and support as far as he could tell. The **[Eye of Discernment]** would fall into the support skill.

But as he moved his hand away from the crystal he suddenly froze, struck with a realization. All things connected to the system had one thing in common; the fractals. He still had no idea how to make sense of them, but they were present on the array flags, the weapons, and even the skills used them.

And it just so happened, he knew a pattern that was the exact size of his body. It was the fractal pattern that he had seen when he chose his class. Many details of it was muddled at the time, but the parts he could make out made a full circuit.

When he got the idea he couldn't let it go. The more he thought it over, the more it made sense. He could still remember the pattern clearly, and it flowed through every part of his body. It was a far more complicated system compared to the one he had devised himself, but he saw no reason that it wouldn't work.

As for the parts that were hazy and blurred, they might show themselves at a later point when he leveled up or completed quests. At which point Zac could use the new information to improve on the existing pattern.

The only problem was the massive undertaking to change the circulation. Just adding and removing a small hole in his hand had felt like putting the palm in an imp's fire. He wasn't even sure he'd survive such an undertaking.

But at the same time he didn't dare wait. When he first devised the energy circulation he made some small revisions quickly after. At that time he hadn't felt any pain whatsoever, and assumed that the circulation pattern was just a mental aid for using cosmic energy.

Zac was afraid that it might mean that the pattern gets harder and harder to change, as though it was fusing with his very being. It was still possible for him to change it, but judging from the pain it might be impossible soon.

Zac was no stranger to pain by now, and wasted no time. Ideally he would have wanted to wait until all his wounds were healed, but he had a sense of urgency. He started with his left hand to try if it even was viable to reform the patterns.

A blazing pain far worse than when he opened the hole engulfed his hand. It felt like his whole arm was dipped in burning acid. His whole body was covered in sweat in just seconds, and his eyes were completely bloodshot. Still he pushed through, and kept imagining his crude system in his hand slowly transforming into the fractal he was given by the Hatchetman class.

After what felt like an eternity the transformation was done. His hand was a mess, almost looking as if it had been pushed down into a blender. But where there once was a simple pathway for cosmic energy, now was a sophisticated pattern that had substituted it.

Zac tried moving his fingers, and while it hurt it seemed there was no permanent damage. He then tried to circulate cosmic energy through his arm and into his rewritten pathways.

It was a weird feeling. He had thought his circulation had been smooth all this while. But after pushing the energy into his hand it felt like the energy came from cramped pipes in his arms into the open ocean in his hand. The level of smoothness of handling the energy was incomparable.

Zac knew he had guessed correctly by now. The class change had provided him with a complete pattern to utilize his cosmic energy. It would likely tie in with his skills as well he reckoned.

He also knew what that meant, and with a shudder started converting the rest of his body.

# Chapter 31 - Infusion

The suns were starting to rise over the small campsite.

Zac sat naked, except a pair of ragged underpants, in a cross-legged position by the now died out fire. The ground all around him was red with his blood. There was not one spot on Zac's body that wasn't damaged and bloody.

He had relentlessly continued to improve his circulation pattern the whole night, and he was almost completed by now. It had felt like he had been thrown into hell and had been tortured for an eternity. He had wanted to stop so many times, but had summoned a willpower he didn't know he had to keep going.

Of course, that didn't mean that he had stoically endured the pain like some battle-hardened warrior. Luckily there had been no one around to see him scream himself hoarse, roll around on the ground and cry until snot ran down his face.

Right now only the part around his brain remained to be changed. In the class pattern it was a dense web of fractals that covered his whole head.

Zac hadn't stopped due to changing his mind, but the pain in his head had made him pass out for a few minutes after he tried it the first time. He was currently steadying himself for another try.

He shakily got up and snatched all the remaining dried meat he had left over. He felt severely drained, and needed some energy before trying again. He also filled his water bottle from his array and poured it over himself to clean away some of the blood. The sting of cold water over his countless cuts jolted him properly awake.

Finally he sat down again to complete the fractal. He was afraid if he didn't complete it now he wouldn't dare to sit down and do it in the

future. The pain was to the point of creating a mental scar, and he needed to do it immediately to get it done.

He started changing the pattern a small bit at a time, afraid that he'd pass out again if he improved too large a chunk in one go. Still, the pain was barely within the realm he could tolerate. It felt like a spike was stabbed through his eye right into his head, and then started grinding around in there for good measure.

Zac arduously pressed on, tears flowing like a waterfall. Finally after an hour the last piece was changed, and the fractal was whole and connected. Zac suddenly puked out a mouthful of blood, but immediately after felt very refreshed.

He still had an acute bloodloss and was hurting all over, but his body still felt lighter and better. He tried circulating some cosmic energy and was chocked at the improvement. To compare it with before it felt like previously he had breathed and blinked manually when pushing cosmic energy through his body, and now it was an automatic and natural process.

It was if the energy knew what he wanted to do, and followed his will automatically. It also seemed that he absorbed energy from the surroundings faster, and not by a small margin. It wouldn't help with his level, but it would help him to heal and restore his energy reserves faster.

Finally done with the fractal he closed eyes and had a dreamless sleep.

Zac woke up again roughly three hours later. While he felt drained and still hurting, he didn't bleed anymore. With his improved stats he only needed to sleep a few hours a day to feel rested, and he had no problems skipping sleep entirely for a night or two. The combination of high endurance and vitality showed its value once again.

He had initially planned on scouting out the actual incursion today, but decided against it. He wanted to be in optimal condition for



whatever waited for him at the end of the rainbow. He needed to find something to eat as well, and it felt safer to grind out some lower beasts while he was incapacitated.

His wounds from yesterday's battle had also improved significantly, with only the leg still smarting.

There was one thing he had to do before setting out though. An important reason why he had tortured himself during the night was the inscribed gear.

Zac was relieved to notice that he could project energy easily now from his upgrade. He couldn't actually see the cosmic energy with his eyes, but he could sense it. It was a weird feeling, it was as though he had gotten a new sense since starting using cosmic energy, and with his upgraded pathways the sense only seemed stronger. The cosmic energy was floating like an invisible mist above his hand that projected it, not showing any signs of dissipating.

His first goal was to check the pouch, as it contained the most mystery for him. He picked up the small pouch and carefully infused some energy into it. He was shocked to notice that the pouch actually suddenly absorbed all the dried blood on his hand.

He didn't have time to think it over though, as he suddenly saw a large space in his mind. The space was roughly 3 by 3 meters, and was filled with an assortment of items.

There was another sword inside, also with inscriptions. But this one had a far more normal size compared to its monstrous brother. There were some random tools, a water bottle and a flagon made in silver in one corner. The flagon seemed to have similar fractals as the water bottle, albeit a bit more intricate.

There was also a large reserve of luxurious dishes and fruits in another corner.

More surprisingly there was an actual table, a parasol, a rug, and two ornate chair in the space. Zac dumbly stared at the furniture, not knowing how to react. Was the demon invading another world, or was he out on a picnic?

He didn't dare take any of the food, as he had no idea whether the food demons ate was edible for humans. While it looked perfectly normal, who knew if they used cyanide as a spice?

The final items in the corner were a few books and a small pile of crystals. Each crystal was uniform in shape and roughly the size of his palm. He couldn't understand the language in the books at all, and could only put them aside for now.

The crystals were more interesting, and he tried mentally extract it from the pouch. Suddenly the crystal appeared next to the pouch. Zac grabbed it in the air and started to examine it. It wasn't translucent, but rather a milky white, and cool to the touch. It seemed to emit a faint white light as well.

More interestingly, Zac could feel that the small stone was packed with cosmic energy. It was as if his senses were telling him that he wasn't holding a small shiny crystal, but a shining sun of energy.

He remembered that his quests had something called Nexus Crystals as a reward for completing, and guessed he was holding one right now. More impressively he had roughly 100 of them in his pouch.

Of course, Zac knew that there was a distinct possibility that this was an F-Grade Nexus Crystal, rather than an E-Grade crystal like the ones that the quests rewarded. It would be odd if he got 100 crystals from just one enemy, if he only got 10 for conquering a whole incursion by himself.

He tried absorbing some energy from the crystal, and a pure stream of energy quickly entered his body and energized him. His slightly depleted body was quickly energized, and he was happy to notice

that the absorption continued even after his body was "satiated". That meant that absorbing the crystals would work toward gaining levels, and not only be a tool for recuperating after a draining battle.

Zac sat and absorbed the crystal for roughly 30 minutes before he stopped. After scrutinizing the crystal it seemed that he had absorbed roughly a quarter of the stored energy. So completely absorbing it would take roughly two hours. Furthermore, absorbing just one crystal seemed equivalent of killing roughly 10 barghests and absorbing their energy.

That meant if he only sat down and used these stones to cultivate it would actually be more effective compared to running all over the island killing demon dogs with all his might.

Of course, he wouldn't get any Nexus Coins, but still.

These crystals would be a huge asset for him. There were always time he couldn't be killing beasts. Like when cooking, chopping wood and even moving between the demons while out hunting. If he could keep absorbing these crystals during all this down-time he could double his leveling speed.

Next he walked over to the great sword and tried infusing it with cosmic power as well. However, it was as though the energy was blocked when trying to enter, which stumped Zac. After a brief hesitation he cut his finger and dripped a few drops of blood on the runes before trying again. He had remembered the pouch absorbing his blood, and could only try the same method again.

This time he felt no resistance, as the blood was absorbed into the sword. Information once again entered his mind, this time the usage of the sword. It seemed that the sword could increase and decrease its weight, albeit the effect was quite limited. That might have explained why he slammed into the ground so helplessly in the first clash between him and the leader, he might have maximized the weight for the overhead swing.

Next he did the same procedure on his axe. Infusing it with energy had no earth-shattering effect. It had a weak auto-repair and sharpen feature. As long as he infused some cosmic energy into it, it would gradually fix nicks in the edge and re-sharpen.

It didn't improve the lethality, but it was convenient for him who didn't have proper facilities for weapons maintenance.

He finally turned to his last inscribed gear, and with the same procedure tried to activate the bracers he had nabbed from the leader. To his surprise, nothing happened when he tried activating them.

## Chapter 32 - Vanity

Zac tried everything he could think of to activate the bracers, and by the end they were completely drenched in his blood. Still, there simply was no response from the items. They might just as well have been normal iron hoops.

Struck with realization Zac had an odd expression as he turned his eyes toward the almost comically large sword. Then he summoned the furniture out of the pouch. They had an elaborate ostentatious design, and the two chairs almost felt like thrones.

The bracers were fake. That was the most likely answer he could come up with. The demon had wanted to look impressive, bringing luxurious furniture and foods, a heroic great sword and a dashing breast plate. Perhaps he had wanted to give an even more extravagant impression, so he equipped himself with these fake bracers.

*'The female archer was a beauty...'* Zac reflected wryly. Had this demon tried to turn the scouting mission into a courtship outing?

That would explain why he never used the bracers during the battle, even when they were in a bloody dogfight.

It seemed crazy to Zac that the demon would be so indifferent to the dangers of invading an unknown world, but he also knew he himself was an anomaly. He both had the highest level in the world and a bunch of titles, making him extremely strong for only one month having passed since the integration into the multi-verse.

Had a normal human, or even a group of humans, met the demon they'd likely have been easily butchered. The demon leader hadn't expected that his life was in jeopardy on this seemingly deserted island.

Zac didn't expect that the demons would underestimate him for long though. Killing Vul could be explained with him tricking it into killing itself on the poles. But now 7 demons had died in a short while, a few of which were pretty strong.

He left the furniture where it was, as they were pretty good-looking after all. He also needed to free up some space in his new pouch in any case.

As half the day had already passed, he hurriedly set out. He was mostly decked in the demon leader's gear now, not including the great sword of course.

He was starting to get quite hungry, and needed to find some prey. Luckily for him it seemed that the thick energy in the atmosphere was great for the animal population.

The native animals grew much faster, and bigger, compared to before. From what he had seen in his hunts some were already stronger than the barghest, and used them as prey. Most didn't seem to be quite there yet though.

It was a bit troubling though for the world in general. The animals seemed to grow strong faster than humans did. Either they were more suited for absorbing cosmic energy, or the System helped them somehow.

Not long ago he killed a human-sized rabbit. Would he have to fight a train-sized snake in the future?

He soon found a small critter while walking, and tried throwing it into his pouch after catching it. He was surprised to see that it didn't work, nothing happened as he tried to put the struggling squirrel inside.

Zac could only surmise that putting living beings inside didn't work. He was a bit confused why the critter didn't get zapped like the tip of his finger, but it didn't feel like an important distinction.

There was no need to kill the critter, as the demon had stored both beverage and food inside the pouch with no problems.

When he was a good distance away from the camp he found a hole created from a fallen tree. He threw in all the food and drink the demon had stored, and also the two bracers. He was pretty sure they were fake, but he didn't want to keep them in the camp on the off-chance their function was tracking their location. Like a revenge-killing tool.

He wasn't worried about running out of food on the island, as it was teeming with wildlife, and many trees were bearing fruit as well. He filled the pit quickly after throwing it all in, and with his strength he was as efficient as an excavator.

With the unnecessary things in the pouch thrown away, he continued on his journey. He was still hurting from both the fight and the conversion, so he simply killed barghest at the outskirts of the island.

He also managed to find a supersized boar that would last him a good while, even with his enhanced appetite. He was surprised to see that the animal actually gave some nexus coins and experience now. However, he only gained a miniscule amount of energy, and only 21 Nexus coins.

It also gave progress on his Axe Mastery class. It seemed that something had changed lately with the beasts. The boar was quite a bit stronger than a normal human, but it wasn't quite at the level of a barghest. It also didn't seem too much stronger compared to the snake he had killed a month ago, yet the snake had given no currency for the kill. Neither had any other animal he had killed for leather or food.

Perhaps something had changed with the passage of the first month for the animal kingdom, just as it had with the incursion. Zac didn't mind, as it only meant that there were more targets to practice on now.

It was a marvelous feeling fighting with his new and improved circulation pathways. Being able to use magic items and project cosmic energy wasn't the only benefit. His powers hadn't really increased, as there still was the limit of how much cosmic energy his muscles could take in. But the energy flowed far more smoothly through his body, making it effortless to switch between attack, defense and movement seamlessly.

He also seemed to use up less energy while fighting, as somehow the new pathways were more efficient. He wasn't too surprised from that, as he had surmised that his usage before had been inefficient since the start. He had noticed how much energy was wasted pushing it into his muscles, compared to using his skill **[Eye of Discernment]**.

Higher efficiency meant he'd fare better in a protracted battle. Maybe he wouldn't have been so haggard after killing Vul if he had this level of endurance.

He kept killing demons and animals for the rest of the day, only returning to camp when the suns had practically set. His pouch was full of various large beasts he had killed. He thought he might as well stock up on dried meat in case something happened.

He also wanted to try just leaving some slabs of meat in the pouch, just to see how well they kept.

The fruits that the demon had kept in the pouch before were things he had never seen before, meaning it should have brought them from his home planet. They still looked pristine as though they were just plucked, so Zac hoped that the pouch would also work like a portable freezer.

That would come in handy in case of the weather changing. The weather had been great since the world changed, with only a smattering of clouds in the sky every now and then.



It seemed the trees didn't suffer from the lack of rain. On the contrary, the forest had kept growing and mutating at an astonishing rate. Zac assumed it had to do with the cosmic energy in the atmosphere. It might work as a substitute for both sunshine and water for all he knew.

The island felt tropical by now, like the island was a primordial forgotten vestige at the edge of the world, where dinosaurs and other prehistorical beasts could be found.

That meant that there might come a tropical rain season. Zac really didn't hope that was the case, seeing as everything got bigger and more extreme since the integration into the multi-verse. What would a torrential downpour powered by cosmic energy look like?

It took the better part of the night to skin and clean the beasts. He simply threw the skins on top of the car, not really bothered whether they dried properly or not. He didn't really have any use for skins anymore, as the pouch and better armors kept him covered.

He was somewhat disappointed to see that he was unable to absorb cosmic energy from a Nexus Stones while doing other tasks. He first tried putting it in a pocket while he was cleaning a carcass, but he couldn't sense the stone when he did.

Having it in one of his hands was too unwieldy, and slowed down his progress on the meat considerably. Finally, he stuffed the crystal in his mouth, hoping the contact to his body would make it possible to absorb the energy without occupying a hand.

The only result from that was that he almost choked himself to death on the energy rock. After a few more experiments he could conclude that he only could absorb cosmic energy from one crystal at the time and that he had to completely focus on the absorption for it to work. As soon as he tried to multi-task while absorbing a crystal the absorption simply would stop.

Disappointed, he could only put aside the crystal and keep it for a later date. He was planning on saving some of them in any case, as he wanted to give them to his father and sister when they met again. They were nifty, but only of limited use for him. But for people of lower levels, they'd be a great tool.

If they could be used to help his family protect themselves better it was worth saving, even if it meant slowing down his own leveling speed slightly.

# Chapter 33 - Infection

Zac awoke at the dawn of light, and after preparing an assortment of tools in his pouch he set out. Today he would properly gather intelligence. His wounds were largely better now, just a bit red and sore.

He made a beeline for the incursion this time, heading straight toward the center of the island. Large parts would be uncharted territory for him here, as he had stayed somewhat at the outer edge since the start.

He had a theory that there should be a fourth kind of beast somewhere on the island that he still hadn't seen.

There were four heralds, and at least one herald was a pack leader of its race, the barghest. But he had only encountered imps and the Gwyllgi apart from the hunkering demonlings.

There should be a fourth type of beast as well somewhere based on this, and Zac guessed that they either were located around the incursion or had moved their territory into the mountain.

Zac kept a rapid pace, moving at a speed that could be considered a sprint for a normal human. Still he made no sound as he passed through the forest, instinctively knowing where to put his feet to soundlessly proceed.

During his travels he noticed that his third class skill, Forester's Constitution, had finally had its first progression either during last evening or this morning, now showing 1/30. The problem was that he wasn't quite sure what he did to progress it. The system gave no ping or notification when his quests progressed, leaving him with no information on when it happened.

A log of his actions would have been very convenient, as then he wouldn't have to estimate his nexus coin gain from monsters or how much energy they gave all the time.

After he had moved for roughly 10 hours he finally slowed down. He was far closer to the incursion now than he had ever been before. This close he started to notice some jarring changes. For lack of a better word, the forest was *infected*. The red light of the incursion suffused all the surroundings, and the trees looked different, almost sickly.

Some had weird growths on them, others seemed to completely have lost all their leaves even though the summer was in full swing. The grass on the forest floor was turning a purplish color. There were also many young sprouts of a pitch black tree Zac had never seen before, which seemed to thrive in this odd environment. The very air seemed to be different as well, having an almost astringent taste. It didn't seem to be a problem for Zac luckily, apart from feeling uncomfortable.

It seemed like the red pillar was slowly transforming its surroundings, likely to better suit the invaders. This made Zac even more anxious to complete his quest, as he didn't know if this effect was reversible, and whether it would spread outwards. He didn't want to create his town on a desolate island that smelled a bit like farts.

He also was astonished at the amount of beasts he saw. It seemed that all the demons preferred to stay in this environment, and the forest was packed with monsters. He shuddered at the thought of this horde of beasts being unleashed upon a human city. Luckily they were stranded here on this island.

It also made him realize that it might not have been more beasts spawning during his month of grinding, it was enough that a few strays would leave the central area of the island for the edge of the island to be refilled.

What would've looked like hell for many, Zac saw as a treasure trove. He almost drooled at the prospect of grinding here, but he had a mission today. Most human cultivators would likely have trouble killing one barghest since they had their upgrade, but Zac had no trouble facing multiple at a time by now. He might get a few bites and scratches if there were too many of them, but that wouldn't be anything new for him.

Those plans could only wait though. He needed to gauge the magnitude of the invasion to make a proper plan. There was a lot to do in the coming month. Of course, he wouldn't hide from the beasts either, so everything that entered his path was met with a swift swing of his axe.

By now he was only a couple of kilometers away from the Incursion, so he started to slow down and focus fully on stealth. He did not want to enter combat again this close to the enemy base, who knew what kind of forces that they had.

The incursion was in a valley which stretched toward the mountain, and Zac gingerly moved toward the edge to see what was happening inside.

As he almost was at the crest he saw a solitary demon sitting next to a tree, currently napping. Zac was again shocked at their bad discipline, and it felt like the whole invasion was handled by a group of undisciplined children rather than an army. If he thought that the horde of barghest around the valley would be enough protection and give prior warning of an attack, then he was sorely mistaken.

After slowly looking at the vicinity to ensure there were no more scouts around he approached the demon soundlessly. He didn't bother to identify him, afraid he would sense the scrying. When he was 10 meters away he switched gears to a sprint, brandishing his axe.

The demon woke in the last moment, and made a terrified expression. He didn't have any time to activate any defenses or

shout for help though, as the axe descended and cleanly decapitated him.

Zac quickly grabbed the head and put it on top of the body again, before hiding again. He had already scrubbed his face with some dirt, giving him a greyish complexion similar to the demons. With his gear already of demonic design he should probably pass as a demon from a cursory glance from a long distance. Of course if anyone took a second glance he'd be found out instantly, so he didn't want to try it out.

He stayed next to the corpse and wormed closer to the edge. This part of the valley ended with a steep cliff, meaning that Zac would have to scale down 20 meters if he wanted to enter. But it also meant that he got a good view of the whole vale.

If the other parts of the wood had started to shift into a demon forest, then the valley looked like it was imported from another world. It was as though even the sky was different up above, feeling washed out and grey.

There should have been a great deal of vegetation just like the rest of the island, but it was sparse and looking sickly. There also was evidence of a large amount of felling, as he saw hundreds of cut off stumps. The combination made the valley look completely desolate. The ground was partly covered with smatterings of purplish black grass, but most was just black stone.

The demons clearly needed lumber for something. But for what Zac couldn't tell so far. His eyes kept going over the valley, until finally looking over to the huge red pillar.

Zac could finally see the terminus of the incursion for the first time since he had arrived. It was a huge crystal that reminded Zac of his Nexus Node at his base. However, this crystal was red, and at least 3 meters tall.

The very air around it pulsed from the power the crystal emitted, and Zac could feel the huge energy that it released all the way from his hiding place. It continuously shot out the light that formed the large pillar that had been a constant part of his life the last month. The glow was so strong that he couldn't see anything what was happening behind it.

Next to the pillar was a building and Zac could see a few demons milling about.

Zac planted himself within a bush, and while gnawing on some meat he had brought in his pouch he started waiting. After waiting for a full 3 hours he felt confident that there likely were limitations to the invasion.

He had not seen a single being appear from the crystal, nor disappear into it. Either they only came at certain times per day, or they couldn't go back and forth between the island and their home world. The demons at the small building seemed to be guards left there just to make sure nothing happened to the crystal.

They were mostly milling about or even taking naps in the shade of the house.

Of course, Zac would have to stay for a good while longer if he wanted to confirm that the gate was closed, and he didn't have time for that. However it made sense that they could only enter at certain intervals, from how the demons had appeared on the island.

The first wave assault had been the demonic beasts, and they arrived as soon as the world was integrated. The second wave was the humanoids who arrived after a month had passed. At the same time some limitations lessened on the beasts, making them stronger.

If the crystal only opened once a month, it would explain why Abby the eye had told him to finish the quest either within one month or within two. It stood to reason that the difficulty would take another noticeable leap within a month.

Zac was not sure if he would be able to handle that, as he was not powering up as quickly anymore as before. He had already gotten his class now, and gaining levels took more time now compared to earlier. The increase in strength he could gain within 30 days would likely be smaller compared to the one before, meaning that he really should try to end this invasion sooner rather than later.

As nothing really happened on this side of the valley, he decided to keep venturing further in. He moved along the edge of the valley in a roundabout manner toward the mountain.

The incursion and valley was located between the middle and the north of the island, while the mountain took up almost all of the northern quadrant. So Zac soon had travelled across the whole island, starting from his campsite in the far south.

Daylight was starting to wane, but Zac had already prepared himself to sleep outside today. While he was advancing he was keeping a lookout for possible temporary places to spend a night unnoticed. He had found some potential spots, but hadn't bothered to prepare them yet.

During his travels he had killed four more demons. They were quite sparsely placed, making Zac more and more convinced that they were not too concerned about invasion in the immediate vicinity.

Soon he had walked along half the valley, and he could now see what was hidden earlier behind the red glow.

There actually was a town down there.

On a second look a town would be a slight misnomer. The buildings were quite large and rectangular, reminding Zac rather of barracks than civilian domiciles. He noticed that the missing trees had been processed into houses and fortifications. There were a few structures that seemed more refined, maybe for the officers and generals of the army. Those buildings did use both stone and lumber in its construction, and had a quite elegant atmosphere.



The whole settlement was surrounded by a wall that was a few meters tall and at least thick enough to have watch towers and a large amount of guards patrolling. Zac couldn't fathom how they set up such a large wall in only a few days. He could only explain it with magic, as even hundreds of individuals with Zac's strength would have to work for months of gathering stones and setting up the wall.

Finally, in the middle of the town a grand structure was being erected at a speed visible even from his great distance.

# Chapter 34 - Conspiracies

Ogras Arh'Rezak was already starting to tire of this whole enterprise. The humidity of this baby world was far higher compared to what he was used to, and the two blaring suns forced him to keep squinting through the day. The terraforming was helping, but it would still take a long time until the climate got to the point that was comfortable.

He somewhat regretted exhorting his ancestor to let him lead this invasion. With his status in the clan, he still would have been entitled to any good items they could seize on this world, even if he stayed at home.

But he knew this invasion was his opportunity if he wanted to stay alive. If he could find enough goodies for either himself or the clan he'd be safe until he was strong enough to protect himself.

But who would have thought that The Ruthless Heavens placed them on a godforsaken island? It had rendered his tactic of unleashing his packs through the portal seem like a joke. There had already been voices of disagreement in the clan to such a cowardly tactic, but Ogras had only sneered at their snide remarks.

While most baby worlds were disorganized and paralyzed from the huge changes, some were quite dangerous. There were many anecdotes of new planets resisting and even sometimes completely massacring all the different invaders.

Of course, it was usually the forces behind the other incursions on the planet that were the real enemies, rather than the weak natives.

In any case, he wasn't about to stick his neck through a portal before increasing his odds of survival, even if it was considered cowardly.

His seven elder brothers had been heroic warriors, always charging into the fray, leading any charge in skirmishes. And now they were

all food for the maggots. Some were killed by their enemies, and some died from machinations of their own clan members.

The path to power was ruthless, and even among kin benefits preceded loyalty. There had been a large amount of dissatisfaction towards his branch of the clan for a long time. His great grandfather was originally a normal soldier who managed to rise to his great power through a few lucky encounters.

His prowess had allowed his progeny to enjoy great benefits and resources, even matching that of the main branch's youth. Ogras suspected that was why his siblings kept dropping dead one after another. He had voiced such concerns to his ancestor, but being a warrior for the clan his whole life his thought patterns had become rigid. He had bled and fought for the clan for over a thousand years, and couldn't imagine that they would backstab him and his kin like that.

That's why only the two of them were left, not counting his great aunt who disappeared to become a wandering warrior two hundred years ago. That was also why he kept this ridiculous persona going, pretending to have become a pampered wastrel not interested in cultivation. The fewer of his clan members believed that he was a threat, the lower was the chance that he'd wake up with his throat slit.

That's why he walked around in his gaudy outfits and surrounded himself with useless sycophants. It was another type of armor. And if he could further his ambitions while it looked like he was just being spiteful and stupid, then all the better.

He had almost laughed out loud when the news of the death of Kevoran arrived at his desk. That little prick from the main branch was one of his largest contenders for any potential goodies that would be found on this planet.

While Kevoran was afraid of his ancestor, only the youths and unevolved were able to go through the portal. So his attitude had

progressively gotten worse with each day since they arrived. Ogras had used a snide remark as a basis for ordering him to go with a scout's squad to canvas the whole island, in order to solidify his position while Kevoran was gone.

Who knew the idiot actually would get himself killed? It was a bit of a shame with Kaela dying as well, as her scouting abilities were top notch among the youths in the clan. But the death of Kevoran more than made up for it. Ogras could kiss the assailant on the mouth if he found him. Just before decapitating him, of course.

Ogras wasn't overly concerned about the little rats that were hiding on this or some neighboring island. He estimated the number of enemies to be somewhere between 10 to 20, judging from the number of beasts killed. They certainly had to be some elites on this world to be able to kill even his imps and two scouting parties this soon after their world changed, but it didn't matter.

He was well aware of the rules by which The Ruthless Heavens worked. As long as he stayed safe in his palace, then his mission would be a success in roughly two months. The portal would stabilize, and the area would be within his jurisdiction.

The native's group would have to infiltrate his army base, kill their way through the army, and then kill him in order for their quest to succeed. No matter how strong they were they still were only weak natives, and such an assault was suicide.

If they had actually been truly strong they wouldn't have been forced to use trickery to kill his poor Vul. They would simply have slaughtered all his four pack leaders and stopped the invasion before it even started.

Therefore he would simply stay in the base. Even if everyone thought he was a coward he didn't care. He had already planned everything out. He didn't plan on staying for too long in this world.

Initially, he had planned to stay here for a long time, protected from his clan by the limitations of the gate. It was an advantage for him that he could finally cultivate in peace here without anyone finding out, as the suppression would keep his real prowess hidden in any case.

But something had changed this. The mountain contained treasure.

More exact, it contained a Nexus Crystal mine. Even Ogras had been shocked when he heard the news. Of course, it was only a small F-Grade mine, but still, the wealth it contained was staggering. It could at least rival the whole accumulated fortune of some of the elders in the Clan.

With that kind of wealth he could obtain a Fruit of Ascension. It would save him decades on his cultivation time and would leave his competitors among his generation in the dust. Normally, for a clan of their limited power, using such a luxurious treasure on an F-grade cultivator would be considered far too extravagant. But for him it was a matter of life and death.

The supreme elders and clan leader usually turned a blind eye to killings within the clan as they believed it created stronger and more ruthless members among those who survived.

But if someone showed enough promise they would protect their seedlings from the shadows, as they were potential future powerhouses that could bring their clan to greater heights.

And if he just so happened to pilfer enough crystals for him to cultivate in solitude for a decade or so he could come back one advancement, maybe even two, stronger. Then he'd be the hunter instead of the hunted.

Ogras was giddy as he looked over the report containing yesterday's haul from the mine. Hesitated a bit and then with a swipe removed a few lines of the report, and added back a new tally. This time the

extracted amount of crystals printed were 1000 lower compared to before.

Unfortunately, he wasn't the only one who had this kind of idea. There had been quite a few children with good heritage that had come with him into the incursion. Everyone was hoping to find the lucky break which would allow them to stand out among the masses.

It was tacitly approved by the elders that the young elite would have a feeding frenzy when they arrived at the new world, as some healthy competition was good for strengthening. As long as enough benefits were lugged back they did not really care that some didn't make it all the way.

As Ogras was pondering about his next steps the door to his temporary study opened, and a man decked in an extravagant armor entered.

This time Ogras was angered for real, as such conduct was a blatant disregard for his authority. Still, he wouldn't break character for something minor like this.

"Insolence! How dare you enter my chambers like his! I will have my grandfather flog you when we return!" Ogras roared as soon as the man was inside the door.

"My apologies" the man answered with a face that spoke of no regret. "I wonder what steps you have taken to capture those responsible for my cousin's death."

The man in front of him was Rydel Arh'Rezak, one of the heirs to the main branch just like the departed Kevoran. Different from him though, Rydel was one of the most heavily nurtured youths in the clan, and also one they had spent the most Nexus Crystals to allow to retain as much power as possible when going through the incursion.

The more power you retained in an invasion to a baby world, the better your survival rate would be, and the better your position would be when contending for resources on this new world. But The Ruthless Heavens never just gave anything for free. It charged an exorbitant amount of Nexus Crystals if one wanted to keep more of their strength when passing through. And of course there was a limit, or the purpose of the incursions would be lost.

Clan Arh'Rezak wasn't overly wealthy, and could only pay up to a point for each daemon going through. Any more and the risk of the invasion turning unprofitable would be too big. The rest would have to come out of their own pockets.

Most of the soldiers couldn't afford it or only got a few levels extra, but the scions of their clan of course got some special benefits under the table. Either from their elders or even from the clan itself.

Maybe not even Ogras himself was a match for Rydel, though he had a few hidden aces in case they ever came to blows. And it might actually come to that, as Ogras had a strong suspicion that Rydel had been sent through the portal to both keep an eye on things, and if possible, neutralize him. That would eliminate any threat of a branch family becoming too strong in the clan.

"The crystal mine isn't going anywhere, and it would seem a waste to attach such large manpower to quickly excavate it. Also, a large portion of our mages are occupied building your... Palace. In my opinion, it would be more pertinent to..."

"It doesn't matter what your opinion is, Rydel. The clan decided I was the most suited for this task, so my orders are what goes. Now leave my study, and remember your manners in the future or there will be repercussions!" Ogras practically screamed, looking very much the part of a fool enjoying his new found power.

Rydel only sneered and performed a barely acceptable salute, and left the study without another word.

Left silently brooding behind his desk, Ogras prayed that the natives and Rydel would find and kill each other, solving all his problems at once.



# Chapter 35 - The Fourth Beast

Zac sat perched on a branch in a large tree eating an apple he had foraged earlier. The tree was one of the few in the vicinity that still stood tall and unaffected by the corrosive effect of the incursion, and its dense branches provided natural insulation from prying eyes. He had chosen this tree to be his temporary shelter to spend the night yesterday.

He had spent two nights close to the incursion now, trying to gain as much information as possible. Yesterday he had kept scouting around the demon city and up toward the mountain.

He had made some interesting discoveries. First of all, he had realized how the third skill quest progressed. It was based on time. It seemed that he had to be out in the forests fighting roughly 18 hours for the quest to progress by 1 point. That meant that he had to spend most of his time awake fighting every day. He didn't mind though, as he was planning on doing that anyway.

But it also meant that it would be an extremely close shave to actually manage to complete it before the 2-month deadline. He had already decided he didn't dare to wait, he'd kill at least the two remaining heralds as soon as possible. He didn't want to repeat what happened with Vul, being incapacitated and missing his deadline due to waiting until the last moment. He needed time to recuperate in case he got hurt from the fights.

He had also found the fourth type of beasts that the demons had brought through the portal. They were magic monkeys. Or rather they were called Stone Monkeys by his [Eye of Discernment], and did not look quite as demonic as the other three animals.

They were roughly up to his chest in height but had a bulkier build. They were an anthracite grey and surprisingly no fur. Instead, it

looked that they had plates of rocks covering most parts of their bodies, forming almost a natural armor. The aspect that made them look somewhat demonic was their shining red eyes.

The stone monkeys were the most well-rounded of all the demon beasts so far. The barghest was all brawn and no brain, the gwyllgi high speed but low strength, and the imps were incredibly dangerous but also incredibly frail.

The stone monkeys were strong, agile and also durable. Even more annoyingly they seldom moved alone. They seemed to be united in one large group, and Zac suspected that the fourth Herald was the pack leader. He hadn't seen it, however, as he didn't dare venture too far into the mountains as it was crawling with monkeys.

That meant that the final Herald apart from the monkey was either a juiced up gwyllgi or imp, depending on which of the two he had managed to kill with his lucky roll for survival. He wasn't sure which he preferred to be alive, as both felt like they'd be a pain in the ass to fight.

It seemed that the monkeys stayed in the mountain due to their affinity with rocks. Zac often saw them perched and completely immobile on outcroppings as though they were gargoyle sculptures. Their natural habitat was likely in mountainous regions back at their home planet.

He had been happy to notice that each stone monkey gave a lot of Nexus Coins upon killing them. However, he still would rather farm the less lucrative barghest after his only encounter with the monkeys.

Zac thought he had finally managed to single out a solitary stone monkey. It was far away from any demon activity and seemed to be randomly walking around close to the foot of the mountain. Zac had planned to fight it to test it out.

What followed had truly exceeded his expectations. As soon as the monkey noticed Zac it didn't try to fight. Instead, it screeched at the top of its lungs and started fleeing back up the mountain. While it was faster than a normal human, it still was no match for Zac.

Within a few seconds he had caught up to it, and a brief struggle erupted. The monkey's fighting style was a full-on brawl, and it was a whirlwind of punches and kicks in a disorganized and confusing manner. It also had a pair of sharp teeth which it tried using when an opportunity arose.

Zac estimated the Strength of the beast to be somewhere in the 60's, almost on par with Zac's before he got his class. Its other stats were quite good across the board, even its intelligence seemed higher compared to Earth's normal primates.

Of course, even with its strong stats, it was no match against Zac. He had grabbed an arm with his free hand and threw the monkey down on the ground. A quick swing and it was dead. The stone plating on the monkeys was quite hard but offered little resistance to his weapon.

The problems came after. The screech of the monkey had pulled a swarm of his brethren over, who all had seemed extremely enraged upon seeing their fallen comrade.

Thus Zac had been beset by an avalanche of angry fists and kicks coming in from all directions. Every swing of his axe had maimed or killed a monkey, but they were endless and fearless. Finally he had escaped, only because the monkeys seemed loath to leave the mountain and enter the forest. They had stopped right at the foot of the mountain, angrily roaring at Zac.

Zac was completely exhausted by then, both physically and his cosmic energy. Even new and improved pathways had barely managed to sustain him in his escape. He wasn't sure that he'd make it out if that onslaught had started a bit further up the mountain. He'd be drained and then finished off.

The upside from that experience was that it had been the most efficient farming of currency and cosmic energy he had ever done, except from when he killed the heralds. In that free-for-all brawl, he had gained a level and over 10 000 Nexus coins. He wasn't sure about how many he had actually killed during the escape, but it seemed that the monkeys each awarded around 350 to 400 nexus coins.

The individual gain wasn't at the level of the imps, but there was a horde of monkeys but only a scant few imps from what he had seen so far. Of course, there still were many locations on the island he still hadn't ventured to, and they might be a cluster of imps somewhere.

If the monkeys weren't so territorial and had such teamwork, he'd never want to leave the mountain again. He'd gain enough Nexus Coins to buy the movement skill [Steps of Gaia] in no time. But he deemed it too large a risk to farm these beasts, at least for now. He would have to venture up the mountain again soon though, as the Herald was probably hidden somewhere in there, maybe in the form of a monkey king.

He'd wait until he had his class skills first until he ventured back into the mountains.

He had also figured out the general composition of the demon forces. He estimated that there were somewhere around 5 000 demons on the island in total. Their current activities could generally be divided into three parts.

The first part was the construction of a giant palace in the middle of the town. It still wasn't finished, but Zac was amazed by the design even before seeing the finished product. It looked like medieval eastern architecture had been fused with nature. The structure was made both from stone and trees.

And by trees, he didn't mean chopped down lumber, but actual trees. There were dozens of mages that reminded Zac of the root mage he had killed, who grew large black trees out of the ground. They then

somehow forced it to grow in shapes that would constitute rooms and walls. It took less than an hour for a few mages to grow one of the house-trees into its final size. There were also mages who summoned rocks out of the ground. Under their care the rocks seemed like clay, allowing the mages to form them to their will to form a natural feeling to the walls and other stone features.

The palace was only three stories tall at the highest point, but it was expansive, featuring multiple buildings, beautiful gardens, sky wells, and courtyards. The gracefully curved roofs were made with tiles, with their eaves hanging out a few meters from the structures. The most central building in the complex had two layers of eaves, giving it an even grander feeling. Zac supposed that was either the general's living quarters or some type of throne room. Surrounding it all was a black hedge roughly 2 meters tall. It felt decorative rather than providing any protection, as anyone would easily get through or above it.

The only thing that took away from the grand structure was the dull colors. The palace was mostly in shades of black and grey, giving it a very foreboding feeling. The only flashes of color were splotches of red in some details, the shade reminding him of the shining pillar.

The second group moved back and forth between the town and a cave in the mountain. He wasn't exactly sure what they were doing there, as they held no equipment or the like when moving. They likely had magic pouches just like him, obscuring any hint of what was going on inside. He didn't dare sneak in, as there seemed to be activity inside the cave at all times.

His two guesses were they either were mining, or there was some sort of huge area beneath that they explored. He hadn't seen anyone hurt or wounded when walking back from the cave at least, so it shouldn't be full of subterranean monsters at least.

The last group, and also the smallest, was small parties heading out of the town and in different directions of the island. They looked like

small search parties, but not like the ones he had encountered so far.

It seemed that the demons had learned their lessons from their two missing groups, and had improved the power of the parties. They all held at least five demons, but that wasn't all. Accompanying them was a varied amount of beasts. They all had a few Gwyllgi running around to the front and the sides for the party, seemingly acting as scouts. There was also a couple of barghest that moved in the front, filling the role of meat shields. A few parties even had an imp or two subserviently following the demons.

Zac felt like he was no match for a party like this, there were too many variables and things that could damage him at the same time. He hadn't tried fighting those parties, staying far away as possible. Now that he knew what he was up against, he realized he really only had one advantage.

He knew a lot about them, but for them, he was still an enigma.

# Chapter 36 - Determination

After observing the demons for two days Zac also was certain that they were real living, breathing beings. He had always had a sneaking suspicion that they might be puppets, or NPC's if you will, created by the system to give a challenge to Zac and earth.

But the last two days he had watched them go about their day. They had worked, they had joked around and played cards. He had seen a few start a fierce brawl until a leader ran up and broke them apart. In essence, they were alive.

He hadn't really thought about it properly before, but they were just like him. Did they even want to be here, or were they forced by the system just like him? Could he just keep regarding them as the enemy, and killing them simply a means to an end?

But Zac soon had soon steeled his heart. The world has fallen, and chaos reigned. They were invaders on the island, HIS island. From everything he had seen and hypothesized since the integration in the multiverse he knew he couldn't go soft and hope for a peaceful solution.

Even if that somehow was possible before, he already had pulled the trigger and killed a bunch of their kind. Any opportunity for negotiation was already out the window. He would sooner or later have to decide how to act if he ever managed to reunite with humans again, but for now, the only diplomacy he'd deliver would be with the swing of his axe.

He couldn't and wouldn't give up on his goal of finding his family, and he knew that he had to become powerful to accomplish that. He had to become a true Defier as Abby called it, someone defying fate and breaking through his limits. Just his small island was fraught with danger, and this was only a small corner in this world. He had no

idea how the rest of the world looked since the system merged it with multiple others, but he held no illusions that it had become some sort of paradise.

If he had to sacrifice these demons to reach his goals, then so be it.

Besides, Abby had warned him of not completing quests given by the System. It could have unexpected and horrific consequences it seemed. It meant that people like Zac were almost like slaves to the System, forced to play its games. Unfortunately, he was incapable of doing anything about it, and could only play along.

Zac started heading back to his own camp after his second night at close proximity to the incursion. He had seen what he needed to see and now needed to get back. Being away from his camp for prolonged times filled him with anxiety, especially with the new larger war parties roving through the island for some reason. If a party found his camp while he was gone he would be forced to hide in the tree crowns and caves until he finished the quest, and he had no desire to do that.

Still, he made himself stop at the demonized part of the forest and farm out barghest and gwyllgi for a good 10 hours before continuing on. He could never stop fighting and killing in order to progress his skills. Besides, the density of beasts in the central area was so high that he was gaining coins and cosmic energy at a furious rate.

The only difficulty was that they were in such close proximity with each other's that often one or a few demons would hear the sounds of battle and join the fray. He got a few gashes and cuts from the onslaught, but nothing that would impact him.

Eventually, he left the area and started heading towards the south. Finally late at night he started to arrive at more familiar parts of the island. He had seen signs of the demon parties on the way and had made a hasty retreat in order not to get entangled with them.



After a while he finally arriving back at his camp he kicked off his shoes and sat down on his comfortable newly acquired throne. In the beginning he had felt isolated and afraid as he was stuck in his little camp, fretful when hearing roars in the distance. Now it felt like a safe haven, a home.

Even with the dried viscera from the exploding demon, the still somewhat visible aftermath from the first fight with the demonling, and the bloodied indoors of the camper, he felt his heartbeat and breath calm down just from entering through the illusion array. In this little bubble, he didn't need to be a walking slaughterhouse wreaking havoc on the demon population, he could just be.

He just sat on his new chair and closed his eyes. He felt the luxurious rug between his toes, and the wind caressing his hair. For a second he could forget the hellish existence he had led lately.

A bestial roar in the distance woke him up from his revelry. Zac sighed and got up on his feet. He still didn't have the luxury to relax, there were things to do.

His scouting excursion had given him most of his answers, but he was struggling with coming up with a plan that might work. From his guesswork, he believed one of the heralds was somewhere up on the mountains, while the other was still unaccounted for.

Finally he had to kill a general, and Zac guessed he would be the big boss. It likely was one of the fancier-looking demons in their city, but he had no idea as of yet how to actually get to him, or how strong he was.

He held no illusions that he would be able to take the straight-forward approach and kick in the gate down and charge his way through. He'd be punched full of holes before he knew what happened.

There was the possibility of sneaking in during the dead of night and assassinating the general. But Zac felt that this was unlikely to

succeed as well. For one he didn't know who the general was, but more importantly, he didn't have the skill-set to pull off such a caper. He wouldn't have any problem scaling the wall or climbing into a window in the palace.

But doing so soundlessly and without any of the numerous guards noticing was the real challenge. While the scouts at the edge of the valley had been very lackadaisical about their task, the military command seemed far stricter in the actual town.

There were guards in the towers and in the walls around the clock, with changes at intervals Zac couldn't figure out. It seemed almost randomized. He saw no chance to sneak in during a guard change. Furthermore, most of the vegetation had been cut down in the vicinity of the town, making a stealthy approach nigh impossible.

Zac had even considered tunneling into the town, but that felt much too risky. If a demon party found his entrance he'd be stuck inside. Besides, he had seen that the demons had multiple stone mages who built the palace. They might be able to detect him even when underground with some spell.

He had also toyed with the idea of trying to destroy the crystal. But he eventually gave that up as well. For one it contained such extreme amounts of energy that he was afraid it would explode and obliterate the whole island if he managed to crack it.

But more importantly it seemed that the demons were not worried in the slightest about the crystal. They just left a few men there and then left to build their town further north. If the crystal was instrumental to their invasion they'd surely protect it far better, as it seemed to be no effort for them to erect walls quickly.

Zac could only put it aside for now as he had gotten nowhere the last two days. He would focus on what he could do for now.

He had missed a few days of cutting wood while outside and had some catching up to do. His killing speed on this 3-day expedition

had been astonishing, mostly due to the sheer number of targets in the center of the island. As he rhythmically swung his axe down, he mentally brought up his quest panel.

## **Active Quests**

### **Dynamic Quests**

**Off With Their Heads (Unique): Kill the four heralds and the general of an incursion within 3 months. Reward: 10 E-Grade Nexus Crystals, E-Grade equipment, unique building depending on performance. (2/5)**

**Incursion Master (Unique): Close or conquer incursion and protect town from denizens of other alignments for 3 months. Reward: 5 E-Grade Nexus Crystals, outpost upgraded to town, status upgraded to Lord. (0/3)**

### **Class Quests**

**Axe Mastery (Class): Mastery is born through battle. Fell 1000 enemies. Reward: (548/1000)**

**Chop (Class): First chop Wood. Then their bodies. Reward: (1240/10 000)**

**Forester's Constitution (Class): Fight in the forests, be one with nature. Reward: (3/30)**

He still hadn't gotten any new active quests since finishing the class quest. He was starting to suspect that the active quests were locked to certain areas and events. He wouldn't get anything like an upgrade class quest for some while he suspected, as he just had gotten his class. Meanwhile, maybe the demon slaying quest he got was tied to the island, and he'd have to leave it for another area to get another.

Either that or he was missing something about the quests. Perhaps they simply were quite rare. The one he completed did give him a title after all, and those were permanent upgrades.

Zac kept cutting wood long into the night, before finally sitting down for a few hours of sleep. He still stayed outside, as he didn't want the walls of the camper to dampen any sounds of a potential demon war party heading his way.

The next day he woke up early and immediately headed out. He had decided to stop killing any demons close to his camp. He was afraid that a complete lack of beasts around a certain area would alert the demons. He headed toward the center, this time toward the eastern part.

He was planning on grinding beasts while looking for clues about the fourth elusive herald. Ur'Khaz had been killed in the south as it occupied the same space as him, and he had killed Vul in the western area. The monkey king was likely somewhere in the mountain to the north and that left the eastern quadrant. He thought that he would try gather some more intel while finishing up the class quests.

He went back to camp when the night approached and chopped wood for a few hours. He was lucky that he had found the pouch, as he was starting to accumulate a ridiculous amount of firewood. He had decided to leave most of it in a few dry spots around the island. Just for safety he'd construct a simple roof with some branches and leaves to protect the lumber from a downpour. The lumber was proof of his effort, and it felt wasteful to just throw away.

He kept this routine going for a few days. His intense activities left him with less than 4 hours of sleep, yet he felt refreshed when he woke up. He wondered if he'd get to a point where he didn't have to sleep at all if his vitality and endurance got high enough.

Suddenly, as Zac slammed down his axe into the head of a barghest, a huge surge of cosmic energy entered his mind, causing

him to almost black out.

# Chapter 37 - Monstrous Power

While having some difficulty staying conscious Zac finished off the other three beasts that had arrived due to the noise of the fight. Luckily the surge of energy soon dissipated.

He quickly retreated after the kills, not wanting to keep battling any more barghest for the moment. After running for a few minutes he reached one of his hideouts, another construction high up in a tree.

As he sat down on the bedding on leaves he could finally focus on the new things in his head. Just as he suspected he had completed the quest for Axe Mastery with his last kill. His speed of killing had far surpassed his expectations. He had given himself a 10-day deadline but had finished it in just below a week's time. It was mostly thanks to the high density of monsters in the central part of the island. The monsters were everywhere, and he didn't have waste a lot of time traveling looking for his next target.

Zac closed his eyes to go over his new skill and was surprised to suddenly find himself standing on the edge of a cliff. Jolted by the change in scenery he immediately opened his eyes, only to once again see the familiar sight of his hideout.

It had only been an illusion or something created in his mind, but it had felt so real he had thought for a second he had been teleported somewhere. Zac calmed his breathing and slowly closed his eyes again.

He once again found himself to be standing on the desolate cliff. As he looked around he found that the cliff was a part of a seemingly endless canyon. It stretched further than Zac could see and the bottom was shrouded in a thick mist, giving the impression of being bottomless. The illusory world itself was a dull grey, as though all life had been sucked out of the area.

The most shocking sight wasn't the canyon however, it was the enormous axe that was embedded in the ground a few hundred meters away from him. It was at least 50 meters tall and exuded a pressure that almost made Zac collapse just from standing in the vicinity.

The axe itself was simple and unadorned with a straight wooden haft. It was a double axe made in seemingly ordinary steel with curved edges. Even though it looked simple Zac felt that he was gazing at a supreme treasure just from the towering aura it exuded.

As soon as Zac's eyes landed on the edge of the axe he stumbled backward, his face turning a ghastly white. It had felt like he was being split in two from just looking at the edge.

After regaining his bearing he tentatively looked up at the axe again, careful to avoid looking at the edges. But as he did, his vision once more changed.

The bleak dead world changed to one that could best be described as a paradise. Golden clouds hung in the sky, and there were fantastical buildings upon them. A network of translucent bridges connected the sky cities, and flying contraptions could be seen gliding about.

Zac himself was floating far up in the sky, seemingly unencumbered by gravity. Facing him was a vast celestial army. The army shone in a splendor of white and gold, and the generals radiated a terrifying power that Zac wouldn't even be able to begin to grade. A few groups of the army were circling pillars as large as skyscrapers, and it took Zac a moment to realize the huge structures were actually supersized array flags, like the ones he had in his camp.

There were even titans among the ranks of the humanoid army, the shortest standing being at least 100 meters tall. Their muscular frames looked strong enough to carry mountains.

The army gave Zac a holy feeling, but it also emitted a monstrous killing intent, which largely seemed to be focused on himself. The very air seemed to vibrate with resentment.

Zac was terrified, as he instinctively knew that each and every one of these warriors would be able to end him without breaking a sweat. He tried to turn around and flee, but he couldn't move even his eyes.

A sigh escaped for his lips, making him realize he was not just an incorporeal being spectating, but inhabiting a body that was out of his control. It seemed he was viewing the scene through the eyes of someone else.

His eyes suddenly looked down on his body, seeing a muscular frame covered in simple linen clothes. His feet were bare and dusty, looking as though he had walked all day without any shoes. Suddenly an axe entered his vision. It was hefted in his right hand and looked identical to the enormous one he had seen in the first vision at the canyon.

The hand holding it was extremely rough and calloused as if it had been holding and swinging the axe for an eternity.

His vision went back to the army, who now seemed to be preparing to attack. The air was rife with runaway power, almost to the point that the cosmic energy would liquefy.

Thousands of warriors started infusing cosmic power into the towering array flags, who started to shine in a white light that superseded even the pillar on his island.

Suddenly two enormous gates appeared above the army, summoned by the arrays. As the gates started to open an even stronger power started to leak out. It felt like a god's punishment was held within those gates, and if they opened he would be destroyed body and soul.



But even against this force the being Zac inhabited didn't react. He simply lifted his axe, and with a grunt swung it down in a vertical arc.

It was as though the world turned white with that swing, and nothing existed except its almighty arc expanding outward. Nothing could withstand it. The celestial soldiers were dismembered without managing to even muster up a defense.

The pillars shattered, and the Titans roared and tried to defend against the wave with their superior physiques. It was to no avail as they crumbled when the wave passed through them.

Some of the leaders frantically summoned awe-inspiring amounts of cosmic energy to muster up defenses that left Zac in shock. Others ripped open tears in the air itself to escape, shock and horror visible on their faces. But the blade arc pushed through and crushed the defenses like dry twigs, annihilating the last remnants of the army. Soon after even the void was split apart and dismembered body parts were thrown out of jagged rifts, and Zac could see it was the leaders that had tried fleeing through the void.

Zac's vision started to blur, but the last thing he saw before everything faded was a hideous scar on the ground that stretched to the horizon. It looked like the world itself was maimed, and vast amounts of cosmic energy bled through the gash.

Zac's vision returned to the canyon and the huge axe. Only now he understood it wasn't a canyon, but the rift caused by that endlessly powerful axe-swing. The once celestial vision he had seen during the battle was gone, replaced with the empty desolation of a dead world.

Zac's emotions were in turmoil after the battle. He had become steady as a rock after over a thousand battles on the island, but he wasn't prepared for what he had seen. Who was that man, and why was that army trying to fight him?

Was that how a war in the multi-verse looked? If so, then earth was well and truly screwed. If someone arrived on earth with only a

fraction of the power of the man with the axe, then there was nothing the earthlings could do. It would be like ants trying to stop a tank.

Furthermore, he didn't understand why he was shown this vision. He had just gotten the skill Axe Mastery and suddenly was transported here.

As he was pondering what it all meant the gigantic axe started emitting a blinding light. When he turned his eyes over to the weapon the light intensified and suddenly the axe was gone.

In its place was a large fractal that shared the same general outline as the axe. It also emitted extreme pressure, making Zac feel as though he could somehow be cleaved in two from this pattern as well.

The fractal didn't stay still for long, and suddenly started to shrink. When it had shrunk into the size of his palm it suddenly shot toward him like a bullet. Aghast Zac tried to dodge. It truly felt like the monstrous axe was charging at him.

It was to no avail however, and it slammed right into his forehead. Zac froze, not daring to move an inch.

Luckily the release of death didn't arrive, and he found out he was completely fine. The fractal hadn't cut him but somehow entered his head instead. He could now sense its existence in his mind, and it hovered there now seemingly inert.

Finally, he bit his finger making a small bleeding wound, and willed himself back to reality. He opened his eyes, still sitting in his small hideout. He was shocked to notice that he was completely soaked in sweat and drained of cosmic energy. It also seemed that hours had passed, rather than minutes as it had felt like, since the suns had moved quite a distance in the sky. But as he looked down on his finger it was whole and without any wound.

It seemed that the experience had truly been an illusion. He was already somewhat sure of that but had cut his finger just to be certain. He knew the System was no stranger to teleportation from how it sent away Hannah and her friends, and needed to know if he was in actual danger if it happened again.

For a final test, he tried to enter the mystic space once more, but nothing happened. It seemed it was a one-time opportunity he had received. He was at least happy to notice that the mysterious axe fractal actually had remained in his mind, as he could still perceive it outside of the illusion.

He was quite sure that the new fractal was the axe mastery skill that he had received, but he had no idea how to utilize it as of yet. He had initially planned on heading back to camp to finish his Chop quest as well, but he changed his mind.

He believed he saw those scenes for a reason and wanted to go over it while the memories were still fresh. So instead he rested his back against the tree trunk and once again closed his eyes.

## Chapter 38 - Insight

Zac's instincts told him that what he had seen had been important. So he tried to burn every feeling and impression to his memory.

The immense pressure that emanated from the axe and the terrifying sharpness of its edge. The world-ending power of the seemingly casual strike by the barefooted man. He had just swung once, but somehow everything he had wished to cut was cut, and nothing could escape him. Even the people who fled through portals hadn't been spared and were somehow killed in another space.

He tried to figure out why he was shown this vision. He could only assume it came from the System, as he couldn't imagine who else would, and could, show him such a thing.

He did not believe it was something as fantastical as a glimpse into his own future or a prophecy, rather felt it was far more likely the System was trying to show him something else. The only thing he could come up with was that it was sort of a training video. The illusion showed him what axe-mastery at a great, or maybe even the highest, proficiency looked like.

If that was the truth he wasn't disappointed anymore that he didn't get a rare or epic mage class. That army had even called upon the gates of heaven to attack, but it couldn't even withstand one chop. That axe master had also conquered the disadvantage of being a melee class. Everything in his vision was chopped and dismembered, no matter how far or fast they fled.

Of course, Zac knew that even if that was a real event that had happened, it had nothing to do with him. The power levels of those warriors did not seem as simple as having an E-grade or even D-grade class. It felt like a level so far off that it might just as well be a dream.

But still if he could glean some sort of truth or secret from the vision he'd likely benefit greatly from it. It also gave him a wake-up call about how formidable the forces out in the multi-verse were. He had known that there would be powerful people out there, but he hadn't imagined it being to this degree. That axe wielder would be able to cleave his whole island in two. That was not something that should be possible for a human being. That was the realm of the gods.

So it seemed actual beings with the powers of gods were out there. If one of them got angered with him or someone else from earth there might be irrevocable repercussions. There were already demons on his island, and there might be other forces on the planet as well. It seemed the restrictions were weakening as well, and sooner or later any old monster might be able to waltz through one of the incursions.

If he wanted to keep himself and his close ones safe he had to keep pushing forward until he himself was one of those gods.

Of course, he had to survive this island first before starting fantasizing about deifying himself. He refocused and started looking at the new fractal in his mind. He didn't really understand how it worked, but it felt like it was housed in an actual space in his mind, rather than it being just a memory.

It was a very weird feeling, as it was akin to noticing your body had secret compartments.

Unfortunately, no matter how he looked at the fractal he couldn't glean anything from it. He tried driving cosmic energy through it but it had no effect. Since it had entered his mind its heavy aura was gone, and it seemed dead or deactivated.

Zac sighed, feeling slightly disappointed. He had essentially been shown a pretty cool action scene, and was left with a pattern he couldn't use. He knew he was likely missing something, but could only return to his camp for now.

As he walked back he kept pondering about the vision he had seen. He wondered if he'd ever get to the point of that man in his vision.

He looked down on his axe and with a half-smile he swung it down just like the man in the illusion. Of course, no earth-shattering wave of destruction erupted from the swing. Only a slight swooshing sound was the result of the swing.

But after he performed the swing he stopped. The attack just felt *wrong*. He couldn't put it to words, but it was as though the attack was bland and flat compared to the one in the illusion. And he wasn't talking about the earth-shattering power, but something else.

Even though his swing and the axe-man's had the same trajectory it felt like man's swing was real and his the illusion rather than the opposite. Like the man's swing was a forest and Zac's just a picture of one.

His swing was missing something, and it was not form or technique, but something more intrinsic. If he hadn't seen that scene he never would have figured it out. He would think that a swing was just a swing.

He imagined the intense pressure he had felt when standing in front of the huge axe, and tried to incorporate it into the axe. It was easier said than done of course, and Zac kept swinging away while walking back. He even used some demon beasts as practice targets to try to get the feel.

He also tried incorporating cosmic energy into the fractal while swinging, but it also didn't do anything. He was still missing that feeling that would make his swings feel full instead of empty.

He tried to discern what made the axe-man so strong and made him effortlessly defeat the army. It wasn't speed. His swing had been slow to the point of almost feeling lazy. It hadn't been sophisticated or complicated either, but simple and unadorned, just like his axe.

But the swing was sharp. Anything it attacked was cut. It didn't matter if it were the huge titans, the awe-inspiring defenses of the top cultivators in the army, or even the gates of heaven. Everything that the axe waves hit was split in two.

However, what had made the largest impression on Zac was the heaviness the swing had contained. By that he didn't mean that the axe grew heavy like the great sword, but it felt like the axe had contained an unstoppable force when falling down. It had felt that the weight of a world was contained in that swing, and it had an unbending determination and intractability contained in it. Anything that tried to impede its path would be destroyed.

Zac didn't understand how he could know these things. They should be subjective opinions and personal impressions, but it felt like those impressions were rather inviolable truths. That the man's attack contained these abstruse elements felt as true and real as that the sky was blue.

Zac also somehow knew there was a multitude of other aspects hidden in that seemingly simple swing, but they seemed too far away and elusive for him to grasp onto. He decided to focus on the power and forcefulness for now rather than the sharpness as he felt the heaviness the most clearly in his mind. He was afraid of trying to study both aspects at the same time would be too hard for him to handle.

Zac tried to bring this sense of force and weight into his swing and started to bring more and more cosmic energy into it. His energy started to naturally flow along his pathways, and the whirling sounds from the axe started to sound slightly deeper.

Just as he started to feel that he started to grasp something a blue box suddenly popped up by itself.

### **[Dao seed gained - Heaviness]**

Confused, Zac stopped swinging and brought up his status page.

**Name**        **Zachary Atwood**

**Level**        **28**

**Class**        **Hatchetman (F)**

**Race**         **Human (F)**

**Alignment** **Human (Earth)**

**Titles**        **Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao**

**Dao**            **Seed of Heaviness - Early**

**Strength**    **136**

**Dexterity**   **57**

**Endurance** **77**

**Vitality**     **66**



**Intelligence 46**

**Wisdom 46**

**Luck 64**

**Free Points 0**

**Nexus  
Coins 134780**

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had constantly been at the forefront, be it with achievements or levels. But he had actually been bested on this aspect.

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Besides, he knew he wasn't a born warrior, and it had taken him an enormous amount of effort to get where he was today. Perhaps there were geniuses that simply were perfectly suited for cultivation and the new world order.

The lost opportunity made him feel a bit depressed, and he swore at himself for all the time he had wasted. Had he gotten to this point a few days quicker he might have snagged a better title.

If the third spot got 5 points in all stat and 5% increase, what did the second and first place get? Perhaps as much as 10 points for second spot and a whopping 15 points for the first?

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# Chapter 38 - Insight

Zac's instincts had told him that what he had seen had been important. So he tried to burn every feeling and impression to his memory.

The immense pressure that emanated from the axe and the terrifying sharpness of its edge. The world-ending power of the seemingly casual strike by the barefooted man. He had just swung once, but somehow everything he had wished to cut was cut, and nothing could escape him. Even the people who fled through portals hadn't been spared and was somehow killed in another space.

He tried to figure out why he was shown this vision. He could only assume it came from the System, as he couldn't imagine who else would, and could, show him such a thing.

He did not believe it was something as fantastical as a glimpse into his own future or a prophecy, rather felt it was far more likely the System was trying to show him something else. The only thing he could come up with was that it was sort of a training video. The illusion showed him what axe-mastery at a great, or maybe even the highest, proficiency looked like.

If that was the truth he wasn't disappointed anymore that he didn't get a rare or epic mage class. That army had even called upon the gates of heaven to attack, but it couldn't even withstand one chop. That axe master had also conquered the disadvantage of being a melee class. Everything in his vision was chopped and dismembered, no matter how far or fast they fled.

Of course, Zac knew that even if that was a real event that had happened, it had nothing to do with him. The power levels of those warriors did not seem as simple as having an E-grade or even D-

grade class. It felt like a level so far off that it might just as well be a dream.

But still if he could glean some sort of truth or secret from the vision he'd likely benefit greatly from it. It also gave him a wake-up call about how formidable the forces out in the multi-verse was. He had known that there would be powerful people out there, but he hadn't imagined it being to this degree. That axe wielder would be able to cleave his whole island in two. That was not something that should be possible for a human being. That was the realm of the gods.

So it seemed actual beings with the powers of gods were out there. If one of them got angered with him or someone else from earth there might be irrevocable repercussions. There were already demons on his island, and there might be other forces on the planet as well. It seemed the restrictions were weakening as well, and sooner or later any old monster might be able to waltz through one of the incursions.

If he wanted to keep himself and his close ones safe he had to keep pushing forward until he himself was one of those gods.

Of course, he had to survive this island first before starting fantasizing about deifying himself. He refocused and started looking at the new fractal in his mind. He didn't really understand how it worked, but it felt like it was housed in an actual space in his mind, rather than it being just a memory.

It was a very weird feeling, as it was akin to noticing your body had secret compartments.

Unfortunately, no matter how he looked at the fractal he couldn't glean anything from it. He tried driving cosmic energy through it but it had no effect. Since it had entered his mind its heavy aura was gone, and it seemed dead or deactivated.

Zac sighed, feeling slightly disappointed. He had essentially been shown a pretty cool action scene, and was left with a pattern he

couldn't use. He knew he was likely missing something, but could only return to his camp for now.

As he walked back he kept pondering about the vision he had seen. He wondered if he'd ever get to the point of that man in his vision.

He looked down on his axe and with a half-smile he swung it down just like the man in the illusion. Of course, no earth-shattering wave of destruction erupted from the swing. Only a slight swooshing sound was the result of the swing.

But after he performed the swing he stopped. The attack just felt *wrong*. He couldn't put it to words, but it was as though the attack was bland and flat compared to the one in the illusion. And he wasn't talking about the earth-shattering power, but something else.

Even though his swing and the axe-man's had the same trajectory it felt like man's swing was real and his the illusion rather than the opposite. Like the man's swing was a forest and Zac's just a picture of one.

His swing was missing something, and it was not form or technique, but something more intrinsic. If he hadn't seen that scene he never would have figured it out. He would think that a swing was just a swing.

He imagined the intense pressure he had felt when standing in front of the huge axe, and tried to incorporate it into the axe. It was easier said than done of course, and Zac kept swinging away while walking back. He even used some demon beasts as practice targets to try to get the feel.

He also tried incorporating cosmic energy into the fractal while swinging, but it also didn't do anything. He was still missing that feeling that would make his swings feel full instead of empty.

He tried to discern what made axe-man so strong and made him effortlessly defeat the army. It wasn't speed. His swing had been

slow to the point of almost feeling lazy. It hadn't been sophisticated or complicated either, but simple and unadorned, just like his axe.

But the swing was sharp. Anything it attacked was cut. It didn't matter if it were the huge titans, the awe-inspiring defenses of the top cultivators in the army, or even the gates of heaven. Everything that the axe waves hit was split in two.

However, what had made the largest impression on Zac was the heaviness the swing had contained. By that he didn't mean that the axe grew heavy like the great sword, but it felt like the axe had contained an unstoppable force when falling down. It had felt that the weight of a world was contained in that swing, and it had an unbending determination and intractability contained in it. Anything that tried to impede its path would be destroyed.

Zac didn't understand how he could know these things. They should be subjective opinions and personal impressions, but it felt like those impressions were rather inviolable truths. That the man's attack contained these abstruse elements felt as true and real as that the sky was blue.

Zac also somehow knew there was a multitude of other aspects hidden in that seemingly simple swing, but they seemed too far away and elusive for him to grasp onto. He decided to focus on the power and forcefulness for now rather than the sharpness as he felt the heaviness the most clearly in his mind. He was afraid of trying to study both aspects at the same time would be too hard for him to handle.

Zac tried to bring this sense of force and weight into his swing and started to bring more and more cosmic energy into it. His energy started to naturally flow along his pathways, and the whirling sounds from the axe started to sound slightly deeper.

Just as he started to feel that he started to grasp something a blue box suddenly popped up by itself.

## **[Dao seed gained - Heaviness]**

Confused, Zac stopped swinging and brought up his status page.

**Name**        **Zachary Atwood**

**Level**        **28**

**Class**        **Limbsplitter (F)**

**Race**         **Human (F)**

**Alignment** **Human (Earth)**

**Titles**        **Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao**

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# Chapter 39 - Guidance

Next Zac wanted to check out the Dao seed. Soon he managed to open a new screen in the system.

It didn't have a lot of information, just a list in the same manner as the titles.

**[Dao seed of Heaviness – Early. Strength +10, Endurance +5]**

While the menu or information wasn't very spectacular, the stat bonuses were quite good. As Zac's main stats were Strength and Endurance this seed's bonus was a perfect gift. Perhaps a reason why he learned the Dao seed so smoothly was due to this.

It also made him understand the importance of Dao to the system. He just gained a seed of the Dao of Heaviness, and it was only an early seed. Both things indicated that he had just taken the first steps to understand this concept, but it already gave a boost worth a few levels.

What would it give if he managed to improve it to a higher level, like the Late stage? And what happened if it stopped being a seed and turned into the real thing? The boost it gave would likely be astonishing.

Zac felt that the seed and the fractal in his mind were somehow connected. He gained it while trying to emulate the powerful feeling in that axe swing after all. He once again turned his sight inward and gazed upon the axe fractal again.

He couldn't tell exactly how, but he sensed that the pattern of the fractal somehow subtly changed. It also no longer seemed inert as it was before, but emitted an aura that gave Zac the familiar sense of weight and intractability.

It was the same sense of heaviness that he somewhat managed to instill into his swings while trying to emulate the axe-man. Now that he could contrast it to the aura in the illusion, he understood that the Dao of Heaviness was only part of the whole picture, and the suffocating aura of the axe was something far greater.

Still, it was a step in the right direction. His seed was only at the early stage. There surely were ways to improve upon it, and perhaps someday his axe aura, or Dao, might be as mighty as the one he saw.

Now that the fractal felt active again, he once more tried to circulate cosmic energy through it. This time it actually worked, and the fractal lit up.

Suddenly his vision changed, and fractals started appearing. Some shone up like glowing footprints in the ground, and others were lights forming arcs and trajectories around him. The lights seemed to have no effect on its surroundings, not lighting the ground or trees up in the slightest. Furthermore, when Zac moved his head the lights moved with him and slightly adjusted. Meaning it came from the system in the same manner as his different menus.

It felt like he was wearing augmented-reality goggles, giving him an extra layer of reality that only he could see. At least he assumed only he could see the lights and the menus, as they only seemed to respond and change in reaction to Zac's movements and commands.

He tried to touch the fractals that formed the trajectories, but it was like trying to touch a rainbow. Furthermore, as he moved his hand the lights adjusted and moved as well. After adjusting to his new vision he tried stepping on the glowing footprints and moving his body according to the illuminated trajectories. He found himself swinging his axe in a slanted upwards motion. The movement felt smooth and natural, and it felt like he was able to bring the full force of almost his whole body into the swing.

He kept following the glowing instructions and found himself performing a multitude of attacks. There were not only normal swings, but every part of the axe was used. From the butt of the haft to the spike on the back-side of the head, everything was used in an array of methods to maim and kill enemies. It even showed how to use the rest of his body, such as grabbing with his off-hand, footwork and tackles.

It couldn't be said that the fractals in the air taught him actual Skills, but rather basic guidance on how to properly move and handle an axe.

Every strike had one thing in common, it contained the mass and intractability of his Dao. It made him realize many aspects of his weapon of choice as well. An axe differed from a sword in that it was balanced toward the head, whereas a sword was closer to the handle. This gave an axe a higher forward momentum and higher destructive power.

To master the axe he should focus on the part where it excelled, meaning this power and forcefulness. Its disadvantage was that it wasn't as flexible as a sword was. The bladed area was also far shorter with an axe, so some precision was needed for a killing strike. At least until he could swing his axe in the fantastical manner of the man in the vision.

Zac kept going through various motions as he moved toward the camp. He was entranced by the beautiful simplicity in the moves, and the power they managed to bring out.

Suddenly he stumbled and fell down, shocked to notice that he was completely and utterly drained. He hadn't completely recovered his energy from his vision earlier, and it seemed like using the axe fractal consumed large amounts of cosmic energy.

At least Zac finally felt he had figured out how the **[Axe Mastery]** skill worked. It wasn't what he expected, but he was still very happy with the result.

He initially thought he would get a bonus to stats similar to the Demon Slayer title, like bonus stats while wielding an axe, and perhaps generally get imparted some knowledge about axes. The reality actually trumped his expectations, and the rewards were twofold.

The first part was the vision, which Zac now was certain was showed to him so that he could plant his Dao Seed. The other part was this guidance system that could help him improve his form and fighting abilities. It might have been more convenient if the System crammed his head full of these things, making him master these aspects immediately.

Perhaps that wasn't possible, as it was related to the Dao. Or perhaps the system didn't want to just hand things out willy-nilly. The guidance system was a god given in any case as Zac had missed the tutorial and sorely needed some guidance.

Of the two he felt the Dao-vision was the most valuable. One might be able to gain those seeds by themselves by meditating or being an expert on a subject, but Zac's intuition told him that it wasn't that easy. Otherwise, he wouldn't have been the third, but the 3<sup>rd</sup> millionth, to attain a Dao Seed. The world was full of experts, after all.

He decided on the spot to use the time he earlier spent on cutting wood on practicing his axe-form in the future. That time would be freed up as soon as he finished the second class quest in any case.

Zac sat down to recuperate and devoured some meat from his pouch, before continuing back home. It was dark when he returned to camp, as usual, this time due to his new skill rather than grinding monsters all waking hours.

Still, he couldn't rest, as he was too excited about what his other skill would be like. He started cutting wood in a furious speed, lumber flying left and right. After roughly 90 minutes he slowed down and caught his breath. He was only 10 swings away from finishing the

quest for the **[Chop]** skill, and he wanted to be in rested condition just in case.

He drank a mouthful of water and steadied his breath before once again hefting his axe and swinging the 10 final strikes.

This time cosmic energy didn't enter his mind, but information. This time the impartment was akin to when he bought **[Eye of Discernment]** from the Nexus Crystal. Zac was a bit disappointed that he wouldn't get another vision that could give him another Dao seed or the like, but he knew that was a rare opportunity he gained.

The skill was another fractal, and the usage was similar to the identification skill. It needed him to circulate cosmic energy through his energy pathways in a specific manner, then imagining it entering this fractal. The difference was that while **[Eye of Discernment]** placed the fractals inside his eyes, the new one was on the top of his right hand. It wasn't a physical manifestation, rather it superimposed itself on his pathways.

This was different from his eye skill, which was isolated fractals in his eyes. The **[Chop]** skill's fractal seemed to actually merge with his Class-pathways. It didn't look out of place or messy, but it felt as a missing piece of a puzzle was added.

When Zac rewrote his pathways there were many parts that looked blurry and missing. It seemed that from his new skill that they were slots for his skills. Maybe even other skills, like **[Steps of Gaia]** that he was eyeing in the store, could be slotted into his pathway gaps.

He tried doing the same with his ocular skill, but it was a closed circuit fractal, giving no opportunity to integrate with his pathways. The axe mastery fractal was in an enclosed space in his mind, and he had no way to connect it to his pathways either. Unfortunately, he lacked any more skills to experiment with. He actually had enough Nexus Coins to buy the cheapest skills by now, but he didn't want to burn his hard earned cash for an experiment.

He wasn't sure what benefits there were to slotting it into his pathways compared to simply having them like his identification skill. He would have to test it and find out.

Even though it was late at night he couldn't wait, too eager to find out the effects of his new skill. Even if he realized it would be nothing like the great spells he saw in the vision, he had already fought against someone with an impressive skill. It was the demon leader with the great sword, whose furniture now adorned his campsite.

The black arcs of lightning had almost gotten him killed a few times. From the simple name of his own skill he realized that it might not be as extravagant though. But he did get it from a rare class after all, so it shouldn't be useless.

He planned to try out the skill by using it a few times, then finding a demon beast to test it on, so he left his camp in search for a decent target.

As he walked some ways from the camp he made a new discovery. A skill screen had been added to his various prompts. It hadn't been there when he bought the identification skill, which is why it had taken him all day before trying it. He surmised it must've activated when he got his class skills.

## **Normal Skills**

**Eye of Discernment - Proficiency: - . A glimpse into the unknown. Upgradeable**

## **Class Skill**

**Axe Mastery - Proficiency: Early. The seed of Dao is planted. Upgradeable**

**Chop - Proficiency: Early. There is greatness in simplicity.**

The screen showed scant information, but it did give Zac a few answers to things he had been wondering about. The class skills seemed to have proficiency, and both were at early stage. His Dao seed was at early stage as well, and he guessed that if he progressed in **[Axe Mastery]**, the seed might follow.

**[Chop]** would likely simply get stronger if the proficiency increased. His identification skill had no proficiency, and it seemed that it wouldn't get stronger. He had wondered about whether he could improve his skill and get more information about enemies, or even be able to identify items.

It was, however, upgradeable. He saw no hint of the requirements, but it was good to know that he could improve the skill into a better one. **[Chop]** wasn't upgradeable, which was a bit disappointing. He could only hope the description was true, that there was greatness in simplicity.

If he went by his knowledge from video games, then he'd likely need to raise proficiency to the max before somehow upgrading **[Axe Mastery]** into a higher tiered skill. As that option wasn't available for **[Eye of Discernment]**, he could only hope to find out some clues at a later date.

Of course, even if he wouldn't be able to upgrade **[Chop]** he'd still try to max out its proficiency. Who knew if the System would reward a Title, or new class quests if he did. The system did like it when people put in effort, after all.



# Chapter 40 - Chop

As he walked away from the camp in the dead of the night he was going over his future path of development. He couldn't just focus on training with the new guidance system all day due to the third class skill requiring large amounts of time battling in the forest.

On the way from the camp he tried using **[Axe Mastery]** in an actual battle with a barghest. He was disappointed to see that the trajectories wouldn't actually assist him in battle, and completely shut off right before the battle started. It seemed it was purely a training mechanism.

Finally he arrived at a small clearing some distance from the camp. He didn't want to accidentally ruin his home in case the skill had any unexpected effects.

He started with using a small amount of energy and channeled it through his new fractal as he swung the axe. The energy transformed as it ventured out through his hand and into the axe. As he swung down he could see a translucent edge formed by cosmic energy.

It was like the axe head had gotten a bit larger, as the translucent edge ran a few centimeters in front of the actual edge, and its length was roughly 10 centimeters longer compared to the actual steel edge. The edge created from cosmic energy looked like a copy of his axe's actual edge, with some faint fractals added along its length.

It wasn't spectacular but he used a minuscule amount of energy in the strike. He tried using the skill once more, but this time he put far more cosmic energy into the skill. The translucent blade grew quite a bit larger, now stretching noticeably outward. The blade was now over one meter long, making his once short-ranged axe have almost as long a range as the great sword he had commandeered. Luckily

the edge didn't grow downward along the haft, but rather outward. Otherwise it would be hard for him to swing it without maiming himself.

It was out of Zac's expectation it would grow to this size. As he continued putting in more power into the skill it kept growing, but Zac soon felt that he was starting to lose control over the skill. Suddenly the cosmic energy blade simply dissipated, leaving no trace of ever being there.

It seemed that there was a limit of how large he could grow the blade without it starting to become unstable. After some experimentation he knew that he could keep the blade stable at roughly one meter. Any larger and it would quickly become unstable. The longer he made the blade the shorter duration he could keep it.

It seemed that this was all that there was to the skill. He tried shooting it away like a ranged attack or boomerang, but nothing happened. It was firmly lodged to his axe. Of course, the proficiency was only at early stage, and it might get more functions at higher levels.

Zac was still quite pleased with the skill, even though it wasn't as flashy as the black lightning of the demon leader. It wasn't fancy but he could immediately imagine a few uses for a skill such as this. For one he could surprise an enemy. He or she might have thought that they dodged his strike, but instead they were well within the range of his skill blade.

It was also a brutal instrument when fighting against multiple enemies. If he pushed it past its point of stability he could wield a huge blade and slash at multiple people at one, at least for a short duration before the skill broke. With his monstrous strength he believed that he could create a great deal of carnage in that brief window in time.

Of course, that would be a last resort attack, as cramming that amount of cosmic energy into one skill use would greatly drain him.

There was one thing he didn't understand with the skill. He had gained his Dao seed from managing to incorporate this intangible force of heaviness into his strikes while he was walking back to the camp, but he was utterly incapable of doing the same with the skill.

He tried using a few Dao empowered strikes, and they did have an air of weight to them. It wasn't as tyrannical as the axe-man's of course, but it felt like these strikes should be harder for someone to block compared to normal strike.

But when he tried incorporating this feeling into **[Chop]**, everything got jumbled and he didn't even manage to produce the blade. He saw no reason that they shouldn't work together but guessed that he had to practice some more before being able to use it as he wished.

The last thing for him to test out with the new skill was the sharpness. It was somewhat pointless if he got a larger edge if it wasn't sharp. Sure, with his strength he'd do damage anyways without a sharp edge, but if the translucent edge was dull he might as well swing around a tree trunk.

He charged up a meter long blade and swung down upon a rock almost as tall as him. With a clang the cosmic energy blade cut halfway into the stone. Satisfied, Zac let the blade dissipate.

It seemed that cutting through things would use up the energy faster compared to simply having it summoned, but even while not cutting things it continuously drained him slowly. Of course he could likely keep inputting more and more energy and the blade would remain. But it seemed to be a wasteful use of cosmic energy.

Zac felt that the skill was best used as either a finisher or surprise attack, not in a long protracted battle. He would only be able to use it continuously for a few minutes at the most before being completely drained.

The sharpness seemed to be roughly the same as with his actual axe. It did seem to model itself after his axe's edge after all, so it

made sense that they would share some features. He wondered if the sharpness improved if he got a higher grade weapon in the future. He was sure that his weapon was a low F-grade blade, as he had looted it on some random demon after all. It couldn't be too valuable.

He then brought out a sword from his pouch to test whether he could use **[Chop]** with other weapons, but it at least didn't work with swords.

He was planning on testing some more but a snap of a twig in the vicinity stopped him in his tracks.

Zac got a sinking feeling, as he had made sure that there were no beasts in the area before trying out the skill. He quickly slunk down into nearby foliage and started to retreat toward his camp, taking great care to not make a sound.

Only the gwyllgi among the demons seemed to be active during the night, but he had never heard those beasts make any sounds while moving through the forest. That meant that the snap of the twig was more likely to be one of the war parties moving about.

He swore at himself for his carelessness. He had been on a high from his new boosts and wasn't as careful as he should be. Even when grinding beasts his biggest priority had always been keeping a lookout for these parties. He always kept moving and didn't fight close to his base as he didn't want to attract attention to that area.

Now he was quite close to his camp, and his swing into the stone had made a sound. He soundlessly passed through the layer and entered his illusion array. He could only hope it was a large critter that was lumbering around in the dark.

Zac held his axe at the ready, vigilantly gazing into the woods. His hopes were soon dashed as he saw one of the roving war parties moving close by. The demons conversed in their language with subdued voices, seemingly arguing about something.

The core of the party consisted of 6 demons and an imp. They generally seemed to be average soldiers, with none of them wearing expensive-looking gear. There also were a few gwyllgi and barghest surrounding the party.

Zac didn't dare to move even though he knew that his camp just looked like an empty area with some extra dense bushes. His illusion array was effective on the eyes, but he had no idea whether there were skills that could sense the array. He had tried it with his **[Eye of Discernment]** without finding anything, but it was also the cheapest skill that the Nexus Node offered.

Suddenly he saw a gwyllgi was slowly coming extremely close, moving some ways from the group. If it kept moving the direction it did, it would enter the bushes he had moved to the edge of his camp, and soon after enter his array.

Zac's fears came true as it trotted forward and entered his camp through the dense bushes. Zac was ready and with lightning speed he grabbed the hound's neck as soon as it was through the array, and with a twist broke it. With his strength he could probably rip its head right off, but he didn't want any blood to spill.

He slowly dragged the corpse into the camp and flung it to the side. Luckily the array also had sound dampening, so no one should have heard anything. He resumed his vigil against the rest of the group, and it seemed no one among them had noticed the missing beast. The gwyllgi often moved some distance from the parties acting as scouts, so it would likely take some while before they noticed their missing beast. Unfortunately, they had stopped just 50 meters away from the camp.

They still seemed to be arguing about something in hushed tones. One of the demons seemed nervous and kept pointing toward where Zac had tested his skill. The others seemed unconvinced and dismissive.

One of the demons rolled his eyes at the nervous one and started to actually walk toward Zac's camp. The nervous demon entreated him, but was just met with a dismissive wave of his hand. He started fiddling with his pants and stopped at a tree just half a meter away from the edge of the illusion array.

The demon was actually relieving himself. He looked around the area while he did so. His eyes stopped a second on the camp. It should look like a normal clearing to him, but the demon slightly furrowed his brows. Soon they smoothed out and he casually looked away again and continued with his business.

But Zac's heart started beating rapidly after scrutinizing the demon's face.

*He knew.*

# Chapter 41 - Apex Predator

Zac didn't dare hesitate and furiously chopped his axe down through the array while the demon still had his pants down doing his business.

As Zac suspected the demon was ready for the strike, and without hesitation, he lifted his sword to meet the oncoming attack. Unfortunately for him Zac's strength was in another league, and with the addition of the Dao of Heaviness the force of the swing simply broke the poor demon's arms and continued unimpeded into his head.

It looked like that the array didn't hold up to scrutiny when observed at such proximity, or maybe the demon simply used some ocular skill more powerful than his **[Eye of Discernment]**. The demon had noticed something was wrong but didn't want to alert anyone to this fact until he was back at safety in his group. But some discreet facial tics had foiled his plans.

After the swing Zac quickly grabbed two of his knives from his pouch and hurled them at the war party just as they were shocked by an axe appearing out of thin air and killing their comrade.

One of the knives punched a hole through the imp, instantly killing it, but the other missed the demon he was aiming for. He'd trained his throwing skills diligently since his embarrassing throw that completely missed the target in his first battle against a barghest. Together with his increased stats in Strength and Dexterity, his aim was quite good by now, but he still couldn't always hit his targets when throwing in rapid succession.

He threw another dagger but the demon dodged it, as it was ready for the attacks now. The barghest were stupid however, and a knife instantly slammed into its torso, maiming it badly. He had a decent

stock of knives by now since killing the scout demons surrounding the valley with the incursion, and could keep throwing them for a while.

He didn't have any time to kill the other barghest, as he saw one of the demons starting to conjure a fireball. Aghast, he didn't dare to hesitate, and hurled a dagger at the mage. He couldn't have him burn the camp down, or even start a forest fire. Every demon on the island would know a battle was happening here.

A magic shield stopped the dagger in its tracks, so Zac had no choice but to charge out of his array toward the demons. There still were 5 demons and a couple of demon beasts against him. Fortunately he killed the imp immediately, otherwise he'd have to worry about those fireballs. They were still extremely deadly, even with his improved constitution.

Suddenly as he was approaching spikes shot out the ground. They looked like thin stalactites, so it seemed one of the demons was a rock mage. Not expecting the attack one of the spikes managed to stab into his gut before he could react.

His breastplate was high quality work, but unfortunately it only covered his upper torso. Therefore his only protection on the rest of his body was the common leather armor which barely impeded attacks. He broke off the one impaling him and then destroyed the other with a swing.

An arrow crackling with electricity zoomed toward his head as he was getting rid of the stone spears. He had to dodge before properly removing the tip of the spike from his stomach, making it do some extra damage while he rolled away.

As he got back to his feet the fire mage already seemed ready to fire his spell. But to Zac's horror he wasn't actually aiming at him or the camp, but straight up. The demon intended to use it as a signal flare while the others impeded him.



Zac desperately infused all the cosmic energy and heaviness he could into his arm and threw his axe with a grunt. The axe sounded like a propeller as it ripped through the air at the mage. The magic shield that stopped his knife shattered like a mirror, and the axe head slammed into the mage's chest, instantly killing him.

Lucky for him the ball of flame snuffed out as soon as the mage died, just like how it did with the imps he had fought. There would be no signal flare or forest fire this time at least.

But Zac didn't have time to breathe out in relief, as a barghest slammed straight into him. The demonic brutes could charge straight through smaller trees, so the force completely winded him. Had he been prepared he could have used the inscription on his chest piece, as his chest armor held one charge where it could nullify an attack. But Zac himself had to activate it and he wasn't prepared for the body slam.

An arrow shot into his stomach as he was pushed backward as well, piling on to his misery. Luckily his endurance was up in the high 70's by now, and it didn't get far into his body before stopping.

However, the arrow released a lightning shock right into his intestines, making him unable to breathe for a second. Zac coughed out a mouthful of blood but didn't dare move the arrow, remembering that leaving the weapons in the wound when stabbed was safer. He could only break it off and ignore it for now. Instead, he punched the barghest which caused it to crash hard into the ground.

A flash of pain erupted on his back, and he noticed a gwyllgi had approached soundlessly from behind. Normally these beasts were of no concern, but he also had to worry about the mage and archer. There also were two more demons who still stayed put. One of them carried a two-handed sword, and with his muscular build looked very much like a classic warrior.

But the other's gear gave Zac no indication of her means of attack. He assumed she was some sort of mage, as she held a tome in her

hands.

Zac growled in annoyance and kept the barghest down on the ground with one hand and grabbed a knife out of his pouch with the other. With a quick stab he tore its throat out. It was still alive but wouldn't be for long. He just barely dodged another arrow coming at him right after his kill, but simultaneously an earthen spike tore straight through the dying barghest and headed for his head.

Just as he was about to dodge a splitting pain in his mind made him completely blank out, and as he tried to dodge the incoming spike he realized his body didn't respond.

But with a muffled roar Zac used all his will-power to force himself to move. He succeeded in breaking the odd restriction and managed to move his head away somewhat away from the stone spear. It still tore a huge gash in his left cheek, doubling the length of his mouth.

Breaking free from the binding left him with a pounding headache and a bit woozy, and he had to shrug his head to reorient himself.

A quick glance at the enemies showed that one of the demons who earlier had been staying put was puking blood while looking at Zac aghast. It was the one who was holding a tome looking mysterious. He didn't have time to think about what kind of skill she used, as he was beset from both behind and the back.

A gwyllgi charged at him again, but this time he was prepared. With a quick stab blood gushed out of its chest, and it crashed into the ground. He took another arrow, this time to his leg, but it was a worthwhile price for another enemy down.

He grabbed the dying gwyllgi by its neck and used it as a shield while charging toward the group. Their distance wasn't big and he was upon them before they could send another salvo of earthen spears and arrows.

Zac ran toward the downed mage in order to get his axe back, but the warrior demon who had stood rooted until now placed himself in his way. From his bulging muscles he seemed he focused on the Strength attribute, which actually made Zac relieved rather than anything else. If it was one thing he was confident in it was his supreme strength.

The warrior roared and swung his sword toward him. Zac didn't dare use his knife to intercept, and could only use the beast carcass as a club. He swung it at the warrior, trying to angle it so that he would hit the flat of the blade rather than the edge.

The corpse and the sword clashed, and the corpse exploded in a mangled shower of blood and viscera, drenching both Zac and the demon. But it did its job, and the sword was deflected once. That was all he needed, as he crashed into the demon with all the strength he could muster.

The warrior was flung away like a ragdoll, not being able to muster any resistance in the slightest. He fell down a few meters away, and whether he was alive or dead was unknown. The demons seemingly hadn't expected that outcome of the collision, and he managed to immediately snatch up his axe before they could react.

Zac then made a beeline for the archer. At these close quarters, the archer had actually dropped his bow and instead held a short sword and a blade respectively. Zac would have expected him to make some distance like the last archer he fought. But perhaps he either actually focused on blades, or didn't dare turn his back on Zac while fleeing. Both the blades were crackling with the same lightning as the arrows he had shot at Zac earlier.

Zac ignored an earthen spear stabbing into him and pushed on toward the Rogue-looking demon. He wanted to make short work of him and swung a horizontal swing intended to cleave him in two.

However the demon almost seemed to have no bones in his body, and curved his torso to avoid the swing, and then retaliated by trying

to stab Zac's heart and throat. Zac was out of position with the swing and could only desperately protect himself with his free arm, really wishing he had a buckler right about now.

The knife heading for his heart plunged into his bicep, and the short sword changed trajectory slightly to avoid hitting his arm as well. It at least managed to nick his throat, and a small gout of blood spurted out. But at least it hadn't hit an artery. The electric shocks hurt as well, but with Zac's Endurance he could grit his teeth and simply force his body not to spasm. These arcs of lightning couldn't compare to the black lightning he had tasted earlier as well.

He turned his hand to readjust his edge and tried to swipe the demon on the way back. The demon once again deftly repositioned his body so that he would be able to avoid it, but this time Zac wouldn't be denied. Just as the axe blade was about to miss the demon's throat a translucent edge grew out a meter and cleanly decapitated the ranger.

Zac didn't really want to show his ace while there still were 3 demons alive, but he had to kill the ranger. The ranger was the only one he wasn't sure he would be able to catch if they started to flee. And if they were sane they should. He had decimated half their force in almost no time. His wounds looked grisly but nothing that would stop him from continuing his onslaught.

With his new skills and power-ups he truly felt like the apex predator of his island.

# Chapter 42 - Exodus

With only two demons left, not including the knocked out warrior, Zac charged toward his next targets. The two demons briefly looked at each other in the eye, and both launched an attack before fleeing.

The tome-wielding demon's attack was an almost invisible ripple in the air, whereas the earth mage erected a large wall. Zac once again threw his axe just before the wall completely obscured the two fleeing combatants, and then he crashed straight into the wall.

The wall was hastily erected and couldn't withstand Zac's momentum, and he blasted through it like a wrecking ball. Just as he did the ripple hit him, making him nauseous and disoriented. But the attack wasn't as strong as the earlier one, and he soon managed to dispell the effects.

A quick glance at the demon who used the ripple attacks showed her dead with an exploded chest, with his axe stuck in the ground some distance away from her corpse. But before he could continue on to kill the earth mage he felt an intense amount of danger as he heard a whistling sound. It was the sword-wielding warrior who Zac had punted earlier.

Somehow he had gotten up and snuck right behind Zac without him noticing, and his two-handed sword was bearing down on his throat. Zac had no time to dodge and could only put his hopes on the spell on his chest. The familiar golden sheen of the armor's skill immediately enveloped him, just in time to intercept the large sword.

With a crash, the warrior was flung backward once again, and this time Zac could hear the sound of bone breaking.

The earth demon was still running and Zac couldn't let him get away. He barreled after him and threw a knife at the back of the mage. A

block of rock rose up behind him intercepting the dagger, but the scare made the mage stumble.

Zac immediately rushed to the fallen demon, and ferociously stabbed down at his throat. However, a layer of rock appeared on the mage's skin, creating another layer of defense. The knife simply couldn't cut through it.

Terror was still evident in the demon's eyes, and it stuttered some words in its own language. Zac ignored it and brought out the huge greatsword from his pouch. He increased the weight to the max through the inscription on the blade, and slammed it down on the body. It was cruel, but he wouldn't risk letting the mage somehow alerting the army of what was going on.

Over 130 Strength and a heavy greatsword resulted in a ruptured lump of flesh on the ground, and even a crater was created.

Zac didn't waste any time, and immediately ran back toward the last demon. He found him limping away from the scene of the battle, his sword discarded where he fell. He soon noticed Zac approaching with fear and hatred evident on his face. Suddenly he completely disappeared, shocking Zac.

He wondered if the demon used some sort of teleportation skill which would allow it to escape. He furiously ran toward where the demon disappeared and looked around for any clues.

Zac saw a glimmer in the distance and immediately threw a dagger at it. Suddenly the background looked like it was distorting, and the warrior reappeared, the dagger lodged in his arm. Zac ran over, and with a swing of the great sword ended the fight.

The last demon had used an illusion skill like his array, or something similar. That was also how he snuck up and almost decapitated him earlier. Zac was a bit surprised a meat head-looking warrior knew such a skill, as that felt like something that usually belonged to rogue-like classes.

It made him realize he couldn't rely on his gaming experiences for everything. The system was quite omnipotent, and anything was possible.

With the demons killed there was no hurry anymore, so Zac quickly treated most of his wounds and then gathered up all the corpses and their gear in his pouch. This also made sure none of the demons pulled a ruse on him and played dead, as nothing living could enter the pouch. He also retrieved his daggers and axe, and while doing so he was attacked by the last barghest and gwyllgi from the roving party.

With their masters dead they went back to their ordinary hyper-aggressive behavior. Without any demons shooting various things at him he finished them off easily, officially eradicating the war party.

The fight had gone above his expectation, and he was almost like a fox let loose in a hen house. His stats were getting increasingly scary for his level. Furthermore, the fight had also made him realize something. Not one of the demons he had fought thus far used any Dao while fighting. They had used battle tactics and skills, but the indefinable quality of Dao, such as Zac's heaviness and force he could imbue into his strikes, were missing. Perhaps gaining a Dao seed was something uncommon, or at least hard, making it a rare boost reserved for the elite.

He was also very satisfied with his new skill **[Chop]**. It worked just as he hoped, providing a great method of sneak attacking. He wasn't sure if it was designed to be used this way, but he felt it was the most effective method in this type of combat.

Zac had wanted to use the skill a bit more to test it out in battle, but unfortunately, he spent a good deal of the battle without the axe in his hand. He really hoped he would be able to pick up some back-up axes, or even throwing axes, soon. Unfortunately Azzun had been the only demon so far who fought with an axe.

Even though he luckily stopped the signal flare and finished the battle quickly Zac didn't feel relieved. The fight took place right by his camp, making him realize it was just a matter of time before he was exposed.

He spent the next hour going over the scene of the battle, meticulously removing any traces of battle that he could. He was forced to crush the earthen spikes into rubble, but the wall was crumbling by itself for some reason. Perhaps it was erected so hastily that it couldn't properly stabilize, sort of like his **[Chop]** blade when making it too long.

When finally done it wasn't readily apparent a battle took place outside his camp. There were sections of overturned earth though, as Zac had to hide the blood and viscera somehow. Hopefully a day or two in the sun and wind would make it appear more natural.

Finally Zac returned to the camp and properly stitched himself up. He had already removed the arrow-head, but the ugly gash in his face was still open. He prioritized hiding the scene of the battle and had only kept his mouth closed in hopes that it would help the wound close by itself.

After taking a look in the mirror he saw it was already slowly starting to close. He knew that it would leave an ugly scar though, permanently disfiguring his face.

*'Well, better ugly than dead I suppose'* Zac thought with a sigh. Besides, that scar was only the latest in a litany of wounds on his body accumulated over the last month.

Finally he closed his eyes to sleep for two hours before getting up. His wounds were getting better. Most of the wounds had been quite shallow thanks to his high Endurance, and he felt healed enough for another day of battle.

While cleaning up the scene during the night he made a difficult decision about his future. He would abandon camp, at least for now.



The risk of returning home after a day of monsters grinding and finding himself in an ambush started to feel too high for comfort. He would only return if absolutely needed.

He started to pack up anything of use to bring with him. Luckily he acquired another magic pouch from the battle, although its space was smaller than his first. It was half-way packed with various rocks and plants. It seemed that the demon parties were roving the island to collect samples of various things. Zac didn't know why, but he felt they didn't do it to compose a botanical encyclopedia.

His guess was that it was for healing remedies or poisons. Even before the world changed plants with healing properties existed, and if they got crammed chock-full with cosmic energy the effect might be far greater. Maybe the demons had some means to test whether the local flora possessed any value, so they collected it to be tested. That would explain why it was only a few samples of each type in the bag.

He left the rocks and herbs in, as he didn't require a lot of space. The herbs might come in handy in the future after all. He filled the other half with spare gear and the two luxurious chairs. He kept the table, rug, and parasol in his original pouch. He had grown fond of the furniture and didn't want them seized by the demons if they found his deserted campsite.

He also tried storing the nexus crystals and the array flags, but it didn't work. He wasn't surprised, as he already knew he couldn't move them too far from the camp either. He once tried it earlier, as he had wanted to use the gravity array as a trap device. But when he moved the flags too far away from his designated outpost the flags started to vibrate ominously.

Apparently, they would self-destruct if they were moved too far. They were bought by the System as an outpost improvement, so the System restricted them somehow. Maybe he could purchase non-restricted versions in the future in the shops he had seen in the outpost store. He could only leave them where they were and hope

that the demons didn't destroy them. Most of the things would be pretty cheap to purchase again, but losing the gathering array would hurt.

Finally he tried to store his new pouch in his old one, but it didn't work either. Perhaps one couldn't place a magic space inside a magic space, as it would violate some law of space or whatever. He could only carry the two pouches next to each other on his belt.

Having packed all his essentials he paused as he looked over the camp briefly, some sadness welling up in his heart. He probably wouldn't return here until the demons were dealt with. He now had both brought a demon here for interrogation and also fought a large battle right at the steps of his camp. The risk of staying here was too large.

He could buy defensive arrays, but he held little assurance that something that only cost around a 100 000 nexus coins could keep a whole demon army at bay. Besides, they simply needed to siege him by leaving a hundred men outside, and sooner or later he would run out of resources and also fail his quests.

With a sour feeling he set out, moving toward the western part of the island, where he fought the Herald. After arriving at the vicinity he dumped the bodies and tried to stage the area to look like it had happened there. He wasn't too optimistic that he'd fool anyone though, but he didn't want to waste time with burying them. They'd know the party was dead one way or another soon anyway, and he hoped to move their attention to this part of the island.

The corpses were left on the ground without any of their gear and weapons, as it was all pilfered by Zac.

Done with the task he set out again, this time heading for the mountain.

# Chapter 43 - Stone Monkeys

Zac moved through the forest with determination. He felt that he couldn't look around for information or clues anymore. He simply couldn't find the last Herald, and he was making no headway regarding the General either.

The general was likely holed up in the city, and the last herald either stayed in the cave or in the city as well. He had traversed the whole island while grinding for his quest skills, and hadn't even seen a trace of the alpha beast. The city and the cave were the last two options that he could come up with.

He needed to progress his quests, and the monkey mountain was the only way he could as he saw it. The other option was entering the cave, but he felt it was too risky for now. There was a lot of foot traffic to and from that cave, and it seemed they placed great importance on it. He had no idea of the topography inside either, meaning he might be stuck in a large cave with no other exits.

The mountain was a safer bet. While it was somewhat close to demon activity, the cave was located at the foot of the mountain towards the southeast. If he kept his activities to the western part and the central area of the mountain he should be able to act unconstrained without any demons noticing. That was as long as another war party didn't happen upon him of course.

But the mountain sported a complicated terrain with a multitude of outcroppings, caves, and paths, making it convenient to escape even if he was found out.

He soon arrived at the mountain and stealthily started making his way forward, looking for targets. He was planning on thinning the herd for a few days while looking for the monkey king. Since the stone monkeys had a strong sense of camaraderie he was afraid

that the monkey Herald would be able to summon hundreds of monkeys with a shout.

But if those animals were already dead he'd be able to fight the boss without any interruptions. He had already seen that no reinforcements came through the crystal, so every monkey he killed was one less to worry about in the future.

There were a lot of monkeys in the mountain, but nowhere near the seemingly endless amount of barghest that were skulking in the forest. He soon found a group of roughly 50 monkeys that sat huddled together and seemed to be sunbathing. They were completely immobile and staring up at the sky. It was a group like this that had almost ended Zac's life just days before.

Zac didn't prepare any tricks or traps for this fight, and after a quick survey to make sure not another group was in the vicinity, he charged into the pack. He charged up **[Chop]** through the fractal in his hand to the limit of what he could control, and with a great arc decimated three monkeys with one swing. Apart from being a good skill for surprise attacks, it also was excellent when fighting large groups of weaker prey.

Between the haft and the elongated blade of his skill he had a far greater reach compared to a normal axe wielder, and everything within two and a half meters of him was a zone of death. Enraged screams erupted from the pack of monkeys, and they started to frenziedly throw themselves at him.

This time he wasn't in as dire straits as the last. His strength and endurance had increased considerably, and the skills increased his efficiency against large packs of enemies. Last time he often wasn't able to completely kill a monkey with a swing, only managing to hurt or maim it. But with **[Axe Mastery]** he learned better ways to handle his weapon, and with **[Chop]** he managed to hit more targets at once.

He was like a harvester cutting down his crops, as with every swing a few monkeys perished. The rock plating on their bodies offered almost no protection against Zac's inhumanly powerful swings, and rock chips and body parts kept flying in all directions.

The battle only lasted for a minute but almost every monkey died. Terrified by the onslaught some of the smarter monkeys had desperately fled when Zac had killed half of the pack. Zac couldn't be bothered with hunting them down, as he was quite exhausted and panting. The fight had been fast, but it also had been furious. Keeping his **[Chop]** skill active at maximum capacity for a whole minute also drained him of a lot of his cosmic energy.

Exhausting himself had been worth it though, as the fight gave him another level. Of course, he was quite close to leveling up already before the battle. Zac pulled up his status screen to allocate his points while he moved away from the battle.

He quickly allocated 2 points in endurance and 1 in strength, but as he was about to close the status screen he noticed that all his stats improved again after the allocation. He quickly stopped and took another look to see what changed.

**Name**            **Zachary Atwood**

**Level**            **29**

**Class**            **Hatchetman (F)**

**Race**            **Human (F)**

**Alignment**    **Human (Earth)**

**Titles**            **Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500**

**Dao**                **Seed of Heaviness - Early**

**Strength**        **145**

**Dexterity**       **59**

**Endurance**     **84**

**Vitality**         **69**

**Intelligence**   **49**

**Wisdom**         **49**

**Luck**             **67**

**Free Points**    **0**

**Nexus  
Coins**            **157096**

He had once more gained another title, this one called The Big 500. He focused on it and a prompt explaining the title appeared.

**[The Big 500: First in world to reach 500 total attributes. All stats +2]**

*'And the strong get stronger'* Zac thought wryly. It seemed somewhat unfair that the System rewarded those with the most attributes with even more attributes, but no one said that the System was fair.

Just look at how it sent the talented people to some tutorial, deeming the rest as trash and leaving them here to fend for themselves.

It wasn't a large boost, but it did cheer Zac up after the Child of Dao title. It also reminded him of his strong points. He might not be as smart and talented as others, and he might not be able to cultivate. But even if the cultivators came back with a bunch of skills and knowledge he could still beat them up with his pile of attributes if needed.

He found a secluded spot between a mountain wall and some bushes and sat down to recuperate. With the assistance of the mother-daughter array and a Nexus Crystal it only took him 45 minutes to restore his cosmic energy to its peak. He felt the pinch when using a crystal for recuperation instead of cultivation, but he didn't want to waste any time so close to enemy territory. A crystal lasted for roughly 2 hours, so his reserve of crystals would be enough to keep a breakneck grinding pace for weeks if needed.

As soon as he was topped off on energy he kept looking for the next group. He didn't dare look while recuperating, as he never knew when he'd be stuck in an avalanche of monkeys. Soon he found another gathering of the beasts, this one slightly larger than the last. He didn't know if these groupings were families or packs, but he was thankful that they were spaced out a bit in this manner.

After another recon of the surroundings, he once again started a slaughter. There was not much of a difference between this fight and

the last, and it soon ended. He was a bit worse for the wear, but blunt hits from their stone fists did not impact his body overly much. He had over 80 endurance by now, and he gauged the monkey's strength to be somewhere in the 60's. They still hurt, but it would take some while for him to take actual damage.

The only real dangers the monkeys could muster up was either from their sharp teeth or from simply tiring him to death with numbers. But with the reach of his weapon infused with **[Chop]** no monkey maw really managed to get close to him, and he carefully checked the surroundings before every fight for hidden backups.

Zac kept this rotation between fighting and resting going, slowly making his way toward the central area of the mountains. Zac figured the Herald should be somewhere on one of the peaks. Unfortunately, the mountain had a number of peaks rather than just one, so he was planning on checking them one by one, and killing the monkeys in-between.

Zac had already known grinding monkeys would be lucrative as each monkey gave almost as much cosmic energy and Nexus Coins as four barghest. But with his improved stats and skills, his grind speed skyrocketed, shocking even himself. As the suns set Zac finished up his last battle for the day, which had actually rewarded him a second level, bringing him to level 30.

Done with the fighting for now he retreated to a small cave he found while traversing the mountain paths. It was secluded and seemed to have once housed a bear or some similar animal from the shed fur in the corners. But from the dust gathered it seemed that no one had been here for weeks.

Zac guessed that this cave was moved here with its inhabitant from wherever this mountain came from, and that the stone monkeys killed the bear when it ventured out for food.

The cave wasn't huge but provided Zac with sufficient space to practice using the **[Axe Mastery]** guidance system before he finally



sat down and rested. He also spent over an hour on trying to gain another Dao seed. He was trying to actualize the other aspect he had sensed the strongest from his Dao vision, sharpness. If he got another Dao Seed he would gain another power-up and speed up his farming even more.

But no matter what he did or how, he couldn't take even one step on the path. When he had tried to imagine the one for heaviness it went very smoothly, and he couldn't quite figure out why the difference in difficulty was so huge. He could only speculate that he either simply had no talent for the Dao of Sharpness, or that the System restricted Dao seeds somehow.

Perhaps the skill could only reward him with one Dao Seed. If he wanted more he had to work on it by himself by arduously practicing and meditating on it. He knew that it would likely have taken him years to figure out the feeling for the Dao of Heaviness if it wasn't for the vision essentially imprinting the Dao in his mind. He more and more realized the value of that vision as he kept trying to meditate on the Dao by himself.

Finally, he gave up and called it a day. But he would dedicate some time every day for meditation as well he decided. At least until someone told him it was a waste of time. It had been a long day, and Zac was exhausted. He wiped his sweat and then crept into a small crevice that secluded him even further, and fell into a deep slumber.

# Chapter 44 - Peak

Zac woke up just at dawn and decided to meditate briefly before getting ready. He wasn't sure whether it helped him gain insight and progress his Dao Seed, or help gain a new one. Even so, he felt it was a worthwhile endeavor. He was starting to get worried about his psyche. He had bathed in blood and battle constantly for weeks, and it had taken its toll. He felt he almost shut off all his emotions as a coping mechanism to not go insane, but it wasn't a permanent solution.

He needed to adjust his state of mind to be able to endure. He knew that even if he survived the island, his life wouldn't likely change much. He still had to defend his island from new invaders for three months even if he managed to kick out the demons. At least if he understood his quest Incursion master correctly.

**Incursion Master (Unique): Close or conquer incursion and protect outpost from denizens of other alignments for 3 months. Reward: 5 E-Grade Nexus Crystals, outpost upgraded to town, status upgraded to Lord. (0/3)**

Since the quest still hadn't progressed after over a month he believed it would start up as soon as the demons and the Incursion were dealt with. If it meant that he only needed to worry about the critters on the island for three months afterwards, then everything would be well and good. But Zac held no hope that the System would be so nice about it, and would likely send some trouble his way.

As he was looking through his quest panel he also noticed that the Forester's Constitution quest unfortunately hadn't progressed from his day of battling Monkeys. There were some solitary trees rooted on the cliffs, but it seemed the system made a clear distinction between a mountain next to a forest and a forest.

He closed the menus and silently stared out over the tranquil view. The mountains were quite a bit calmer compared to the forest, as the stone monkeys didn't have the tendency to incessantly roar like the barghest did. It almost felt like he was just camping again, which made him think about Hannah.

To be honest, he hadn't really been thinking about her and the others a lot lately, as he was focused on surviving and getting stronger. As he was reminiscing about her he realized he had missed an important clue about the tutorial. The four of them hadn't returned to his camp after the month-long tutorial had ended. He didn't reflect over it at the time, his mind occupied with the newly arrived demons and his class acquisition.

As he saw it that could have two reasons. First, they were all dead, and the system didn't bother to teleport back corpses. Second, after finishing the tutorial they were not teleported back from where they were snatched up, but somewhere else. Perhaps to human settlements or the like.

He could only pray it was the second reason. He wondered if they were looking for him, or if they just assumed he died. Had Hannah moved on?

Zac sighed and looked out over the sunrise. What obligations did he have to a new girlfriend when the apocalypse came? They had only been together for a few months when the world was integrated into the multi-verse. And even if he managed to find her again it would likely take a long time. Could they still even be considered a couple? He couldn't find any easy answers and simply tabled the matter.

There were monkeys to kill.

He ate a quick breakfast and headed out. Today he was planning on scaling one of the peaks to look for the Herald. As he traversed the mountain he made an intriguing discovery. The further up he climbed, the more concentrated the cosmic energy felt.

He was clueless if it was related to altitude, or something about the mountains themselves caused the phenomena. But he realized that it might be very valuable in the future. He wasn't a cultivator, but even he felt invigorated by the density of cosmic energy in the surroundings.

Perhaps he could rent out the mountains to cultivators in the future at exorbitant rates. He could only assume that cultivating in this kind of environment would be far more effective compared to doing it at a place with a normal density of energy. It could be a great source of income if he got a town up and running in the future. There was something about the thought of becoming a post-apocalyptic slumlord that gave him a comforting sense of normalcy.

Zac spent half the day killing monkey packs and scaling the closest peak, with his efficiency in monkey dismantling starting to reach a sublime level. There were some surprises where unexpected backup that Zac had missed entered the fray, but it generally only resulted in more Nexus Coins for himself. The scariest moment was when a monkey somehow managed to sneak up on him, biting him in his inner loin. Just slightly to the left and the monkey would have eaten his precious jewels.

He reached the peak midday, and after a brief survey could conclude that this peak wasn't the home of the Herald. The air felt quite fresh up here, and Zac decided to have his dinner with a view. He sat down between some rocks to look more inconspicuous and retrieved some fruit and dried meat from his pouch.

His experiments with food and the pouch was a great success. Everything he put inside kept even better compared to a refrigerator, the fruits and slabs of meat still looking pristine after over a week. He didn't dare start a fire for some barbeque this close to the demon town though, so he could only stick to his dried rations.

As he ate he looked over the mountain range. His view from the peak afforded him a unique vantage, and he made some new discoveries.

There were a total of five real peaks, of which he sat on the westernmost. The peak he occupied was slightly off on its own, whereas the other four were a bit more clumped together.

Between the four peaks there seemed to be a secluded valley that wasn't visible from down below as it was located a few hundred meters above sea level. The mountain range itself had some sparse vegetation, such as some windswept shrubbery and small trees, but the valley seemed quite lush with an abundance of leafy growth. Zac even thought he could discern a small pond or lake, but couldn't be sure as a large part of the valley was covered in a mist.

The valley certainly looked intriguing, like a secret little paradise hidden from sight. If he was on a treasure hunt he'd bet all his doubloons that any riches the island had to offer were hidden there.

More importantly, it also seemed like a good resting place for a Herald.

The only thing making him unsure was the fact that the monkeys seemed to like the rocky outcroppings and cliffs of the mountain. It would be a bit odd if their leader preferred to stay in a forest instead.

The great elevation also allowed him to finally confirm that he was indeed on an island. He hadn't been able to see anything behind the mountain range before, and knew there might have been land on the other side as well. But steep cliffs gave way to the ocean at the end of the mountain range, looking almost as though the mountain had been sliced clean off. Perhaps the System simply had chopped off part of a larger mountain range and slapped it onto the edge of the island. It was quite the sight, with a drop of at least 100 meters down into the waters below.

Zac finished his meal and made his way back down the mountain slopes again, and started trekking eastbound for the other peaks. He kept killing every monkey pack in his way, bringing a storm of carnage to the mountain. He was somewhat surprised that there still

wasn't a more concerted effort to catch him by the monkeys by now, as the monkeys seemed to care greatly for each other.

But they stayed in their groups still, and made perfect targets for him. He even gradually dared to attack larger packs as his confidence grew. Initially he skipped the gatherings that were too large, but by now he felt confident enough to attack most packs.

Zac thought that he would actually gain another level this day, but he was forced to suddenly stop fighting during the evening. It wasn't because he was hurt or lacked targets, the problem was his axe.

His war-axe possessed a self-repairing and sharpening feature through its inscriptions, but it seemed it couldn't properly keep up with Zac's recent activities. During his barghest-genocide it had no problems staying in good shape, but here it was dull and blemished after only one day.

Zac realized that the tough rock plating on the monkeys' bodies was the problem. His strength and endurance provided all the power he needed, but it was his weapon that failed him. He was quite confused about the whole thing though. When he fought the monkeys he always used his skill **[Chop]** to create the translucent enlarged edge to cover his actual axe head. Still, his actual axe was worse for the wear.

It seemed that the skill didn't just copy the edge of his weapon, it rather projected it. That was a disadvantage he hadn't expected, but then again it still was an extremely powerful and diverse skill for being the first attack skill the class offered.

With no other option he could only find a refuge for the night again, and instead spend greater time on practicing with **[Axe Mastery]** and meditating. He briefly considered whether to keep going, using one of the large swords in his pouch as a weapon instead. But he eventually decided against it.

For one he couldn't use his skills with a sword, and there also was another reason he hesitated. He wanted to use other weapons as little as possible in general.

When he picked his class it generally looked like the options were based on his activities. Since his stats, skills and experiences all were centered on the axe he wanted to upgrade in this direction when he got the opportunity to upgrade the Hatchetman class. He was afraid that he might miss out on a good class upgrade if he kept using too many various weapons and not fulfill the prerequisites.

That's why he also really wanted to find more axes, so he wouldn't be forced to use knives as much for throwing or as back-ups. He even toyed with the idea of stalking the roving gathering parties on the island to find someone with axes, and then take them out. But ultimately it still felt like an unnecessary risk. That he managed to kill the party at his camp so smoothly largely could be attributed to the element of surprise. He felt that he could likely wipe out most of the parties by now, but he couldn't guarantee that they wouldn't be able to send out a warning signal like the flame mage had tried.

Zac finally found a decent cave and settled in. As he was practicing his axe technique he was pondering whether he already had to change his plans. The reason was the huge amount of Nexus Coins he was racking up. A day of killing the monkeys resulted in roughly 100 000 nexus coins. That amount took him almost a week to gather when desperately hunting barghest.

He currently had 347 000 coins, and only needed two days to gather the necessary coins for the movement skill **[Steps of Gaia]**. He felt his current weakness was that his speed was lacking. If he could move faster he wouldn't have to keep throwing his axe at people, but instead simply run up to them.

Allocating his free points in Dexterity was an option, but he felt it wasn't the correct one. He had already decided to focus one or two stats and let his titles take care of the rest. He already had 59

Dexterity, which should be considered a lot for anyone not having Dexterity as his or her main attribute.

Besides, after observing the demons he fought he realized they did the same thing. They were specialized in one or two stats as well. The mages didn't have overbearing Strength or Dexterity and likely focused on Wisdom and intelligence. Instead, they used things like magic shields and earthen walls to protect themselves from attacks.

Zac felt that this was the way that people powered up in the multi-verse. Focus on the attributes that best empowered him, and have skills shore up the shortcomings.

He knew he likely had survived the mentalist mage's binding during his last bout with the demons due to his high Intelligence and Wisdom. But he assumed that normally a warrior would have a skill to protect their mind instead of wasting their free stat points on those attributes.

The only problem for Zac was that he didn't have a ready source of skills except the Nexus Node. But the choices there seemed quite limited, and he hadn't gotten any new Class skill quests yet. If specialization was the way to go it also meant that he had wasted some stat points in the beginning by putting them into Vitality and Dexterity.

Of course, without the points in Vitality he might be dead by now, but not being optimized left a bad taste in his mouth.



# Chapter 45 - Monkey Captain

Finally Zac reluctantly decided to not get the skill for now. He wanted to find and kill the third Herald first.

He really wanted the power-up, but he also realized he was working against the clock here. He was already somewhat surprised there wasn't a monkey army hunting him in the mountains after his activities. It wasn't a small number of stone monkeys he had killed in the last two days after all.

He was also getting closer and closer to the area where the demons were active, and they could notice his activities at any moment. The mountains were getting filled with sites of desolation, with hundreds of monkey carcasses adorning the hills by now.

He was afraid that if he spent another two days grinding monsters, and then one day to travel to his camp and back to get the skill, his window of opportunity to kill the Herald would pass.

After all, the cave where the demons worked all day was quite close to the easternmost peak. It wasn't unreasonable to assume they would wander around the peak as well, looking for more of whatever they wanted in the cave.

He needed to find the Herald quickly and kill it. He decided to spend the day moving toward the valley and kill any packs that were in the vicinity of it. Then he'd finally try locating the Herald early the next morning.

After he woke up he briefly meditated, and after confirming his axe was back to tip-top shape, set out toward the cluster of peaks. He gained a level on the first pack he encountered, bringing him to level 31.

He soon arrived at the foot of the westernmost peak of the four clustered mountains. He planned to scale it halfway up, which would lead him to the entrance of the valley. Then he'd make a circle around the peaks to kill off any packs close to the valley.

That would both let him scout out the four peaks for anything out of place, and also kill any potential back-up that the Herald could call for. If the herald was on one of the peaks rather than in the valley he hoped there would be something different about it to give him some hints.

As soon as he started climbing the first peak he started to notice an increased resistance. The packs grew slightly larger, and there were stronger monkeys in the packs. Monkeys in the wild usually had an alpha who led the group of primates, but he hadn't really seen that so far in the groups he had killed. Zac simply assumed that the Herald was the big boss of everyone, but it didn't seem that simple.

But now there was a monkey with bulging muscles standing a head taller compared to the others. Zac used **[Eye of Discernment]** on it, but it still was only called a Stone Monkey. The other Heralds both had names, so he could only assume this was not it.

The alpha monkey maybe could be considered a captain, and the Herald was the general. Just the fact that the packs were getting stronger felt like a good indication that he was on the correct path. It showed the Herald likely was nearby as he hypothesized.

Zac hesitated for a second, before doing his customary sweep of the surroundings.

The monkeys in general seemed stronger compared to the outer packs, so he needed to do some preparation. Close to the pack he found a narrow path up in the mountain, with sheer wall on both sides. It seemed that the rocky formation cracked in two sometime in the distant past, which had created this path. That would hopefully only let a few monkeys charge in at the time. It would slow down his

assault but he wanted to play it safe until he could gauge the strength of these juiced up monkeys.

The next part was to lure the monkeys over, and Zac simply picked up a boulder the size of a head. With a grunt he threw it straight into the clump of monkeys, and with its huge momentum it smashed a poor monkey's head in.

The monkeys angrily roared and flooded toward him. Zac slowly backed away and placed himself some ways into the crack. He planned to kill a few and then back further in to make room for the corpses.

The battle started as intended, with Zac quickly reaping the lives of a dozen monkeys in quick order. But as he retreated further in he noticed a very bad sign. The monkeys had no problems climbing the sheer rock walls.

Zac wanted to slap himself in his scarred face. He should have realized that rock monkeys were good at climbing rocks. He had simply forgotten about the nimbleness of their primate brethren as the stone monkeys always seemed to sit immobile among the rocks rather than climbing them.

Just as he berated himself he heard a loud roar from the back rows of the group of monkeys. Suddenly all monkeys in front of him threw themselves to the ground in perfect harmony, and taking their place was a rock hurtling toward him. It was twice the size of the one he had thrown, and he didn't have time to react before it slammed into him like a truck.

Zac was flung backward from the momentum and spit out a mouthful of blood. It seemed the monkey captain wanted revenge for his earlier throw.

Before he could get up multiple monkeys hanging on the walls jumped down on him. Rather than trying to pummel him like monkeys used to, it seemed that they tried to pin him down. They

gripped his extremities with all their might and tried to keep him from getting up.

Unfortunately for them his strength was 160 by now, and he could lift the monkeys like they were children. He ignored the monkey clinging to his axe arm and furiously swung the axe, killing the monkeys who were gripping his legs.

As he finally was getting up after getting rid of all the monkeys another projectile was flying into his direction. This time it was a sharp stalactite, and Zac couldn't understand where the monkey captain had gotten it. He managed to deflect it in the last minute with his axe, but the force made him fall back a few steps.

He immediately jumped into the fray, now fighting both monkeys on the ground and those hanging on the wall. He madly flailed the axe around, the only thing keeping him safe was the great reach of **[Chop]**.

He soon got the answer from where the monkey captain found its stalactite. As he was desperately defending against the deluge of rabid monkeys he saw the captain grab onto the rock wall. Its fingers actually carved into the wall, and suddenly he dragged out another stalactite straight out of the wall.

It actually looked like the monkey could use a skill, or at least an early prototype of one. It wasn't as fancy as the spikes the earthen mage had used, but he was shocked that a dumb animal could do it. It seemed that skills, and perhaps even exploring the Dao, was not something exclusive to humanoids.

He didn't have time to reflect on it further before another projectile came flying toward him. He saw it coming this time and grabbed a monkey to use as a shield. The monkey absorbed most of the blow, but Zac was still pushed back somewhat.

The monkey captain seemingly was able to keep generating these projectiles, as he once again moved his hand toward the wall. Zac

didn't want to keep this status quo going. He wasn't really hurt apart from some bruising so far, but if he didn't do something soon he might run out of energy or get hit by a lucky projectile.

He stopped his retreat into the crack and instead started to furiously push forward. He was a whirlwind of carnage as he pushed through the horde of monkeys. He wanted to finish off the leader first and then whittle down the others.

Monkeys started to climb around and charge Zac from the back, but with his 90 Endurance he could shrug off the strikes for now. The only time he stopped his onslaught was when some monkey managed to grab his legs and risked pulling him down on the ground again.

The leader threw another large rock at Zac, seemingly trying to impede his advance.

Zac saw the projectile approaching this time, and swung down his axe in a fierce vertical strike to cleave it. He had expected the two pieces to slam to the sides of him, but was sorely mistaken. The only result from his strike was that two boulders hit him instead of one, slamming him back once again.

Zac could only redouble his efforts and ignoring his cosmic energy expenditure kept utilizing **[Chop]** to the max.

Finally, as he was 3 meters away from the captain, he couldn't be bothered getting in close with it, and overcharged the skill, increasing the length of the blade with a full meter extra. With a roar he swiped in an upward arc, and the captain was split in two. He could only maintain such a length for a second, but one second was all he needed for one quick kill.

After that, he simply planted his back against the wall and kept killing until there was no monkey left willing to fight. There were a few monkeys who kept screaming at him from the distance, but Zac

hurled another rock at one, instantly crushing its head. Then finally the last remnants of the pack finally fled.

Zac was truly exhausted and hurting from the fight, but he forced himself to get up and move away from the battle. The sounds carried far in the mountains, and he didn't want to be around if either the Herald or some demons heard the noise.

He kept sneaking up the mountain and soon reached the entrance to the hidden valley far up in the air. He didn't dare enter yet, but instead opted to hide between some rocks and recuperate from the battle. The melee reminded him that just because he had gotten the **[Axe Mastery]** skill he still was by no means a master fighter. His planning impeded him rather than helped, and he would probably have been better off just charging in as usual.

It felt like he had been fighting for his life on the island for an eternity, but in reality he had only been on the island for roughly 40 days. Before that he'd just been a desk jockey, completely oblivious to any fighting tactics. He had made a few real beginner mistakes in this fight, and could only strive to do better in the future.

# Chapter 46 - The Hunt for the Herald

As Zac stood at the edge of the valley he was shocked by the density of cosmic energy. The amount in the air was already quite a bit higher in the mountains compared to down on the ground, but in this secluded vale it was a whole tier higher still.

The density made his suspicion that the Herald hid in the valley much stronger. He was sure that the Monkey King would prefer the increased amount of cosmic energy if even the monkey captains were able to use skills and maybe even cultivate.

The amount of cosmic energy made Zac worried that there might actually be demons here as well. While he had observed their activities for a few days he didn't really see any demons enter the mountains further than the cave, but that didn't mean that there weren't cultivator demon's stationed here.

He refrained from entering the valley at the moment, as he still wanted to thin the herd of monkeys in the mountains first. A large enough roar from the valley might be able to call for reinforcements from all four peaks after all.

The fight against the pack with the monkey captain was a bit shaky, but it was mostly due to his mistakes. The monkeys on the peaks were slightly stronger compared to the ones he had fought earlier, but not to the point that they could stop his onslaught. He only needed to kill the leader and then it was carnage as usual.

There was one more pack he needed to kill on the mountain peak he had climbed. It didn't have any captain, but the monkeys in general were slightly bigger even compared to the last pack.

Zac entered the fray after having restored his energy and made short work of the pack. He made the interesting discovery that none of the monkeys dared to enter the valley, even when they were fleeing for their lives. Perhaps the valley was the private residence of the Herald, and they had strict orders not to enter.

Or perhaps something even scarier than Zac lived in the depths of the valley. He supposed he would find out later.

Zac kept his momentum going moving toward the next peak. He didn't try any fancy tactics anymore, he only tried to knock out the leaders of the following packs by throwing a boulder at them. He didn't even bother with the throwing knives, as they had trouble penetrating their stone armor. No matter whether the throw succeeded or not he simply charged straight into the throng of stone monkeys, swinging away.

At midday he reached the third peak, having mostly cleared out the two earlier ones apart from a few who managed to escape. This peak was the easternmost, and also the one closest to demon activity. The cave that the demons found so interesting was located not too far away from the foot of the mountain.

Zac was unsure whether he dared to start a battle here, as it might attract the demons below. While the distance was quite great between his location and the cave, he was afraid the sound would carry all the way down. The monkeys got quite loud and agitated during the fights after all. He decided to find a hiding spot with good vantage before deciding anything further. As he was somewhat ahead of schedule, he decided to wait for roughly an hour to gauge any activity in the area.

Weirdly enough there was no monkey pack close to the entrance of the valley. Instead, the monkeys were stationed on the outer side of the mountain peak. This differed from the other two peaks so far, and Zac wanted to figure out why. He soon found his answer, as he was surprised to see a monkey captain hurl a large rock at a demon war party that approached the peak or the valley.



It hit one of them, and with a wail he was flung away from the impact. The demons screamed at the group of monkeys angrily, waving their weapons. But the monkeys were a stoic wall that wouldn't let them pass. After another minute of posturing, the demons could only turn and leave the mountain.

Zac was confused as he slunk back to the inner side of the mountain. Weren't the monkeys the pets of the demons, like the other demon beasts? How did they dare deny the demons access to the mountains?

Zac started to get nervous that the monkeys actually weren't the fourth monster race, but rather some native beast. The System did say it merged Earth with other planets due for integration, and they might be from another one. That would mean that there actually wasn't a Monkey Herald, but instead two Heralds he couldn't find.

He felt that shouldn't be right though. Everything pointed toward them being a part of the demonic invasion. Perhaps the monkeys had a higher standing, and could actually boot the lower demons from their territory.

He knew he wouldn't get any real answer from just mulling it over, and continued on toward the fourth peak. The weird power dynamic between the monkeys and demons actually helped him out in the end, both removing the threat of demons in the mountains and not having to battle any monkeys that close to the demon activity.

He arrived at the fourth peak and after an intense melee finally finished killing all the packs close to the valley. As it only was evening still he decided to head into the valley after all. Initially he planned to wait until next morning, but due to the inner side of the third peak being free from monkeys he saved a few hours of work.

He took his first steps into the valley, vigilant against any hidden monkeys or other beasts. But after a few minutes of walking it seemed that the forest was deserted. It was odd, as the forest itself felt like a paradise on earth. The air was fresh enough that his cells

felt invigorated just from breathing, and the foliage was lush and healthy. The earthy smell of the area calmed Zac's heart, inviting him to sit down and relax.

However, not even critters were present, making the forest eerily silent except for the occasional rustle from the wind. This stillness felt quite jarring to Zac as his life had been accompanied by the sounds of the forest constantly since the world changed. From critters in the bushes to the calls of the birds. Even the deep roars of the barghest.

That all these sounds were gone didn't feel natural, and his vigilance only increased, instead of having a soothing effect on him.

As he walked he noticed that he didn't recognize most of the trees or plants in the valley. Now he wasn't any botanist, he only knew of the staple flowers and trees. But he felt he should at least recognize some of the vegetation if it was from earth. There were a few trees he assumed were maples but the leaves were as large as his torso.

He didn't know if the forest had mutated or evolved from the extremely dense cosmic energy in the area, or whether this forest came from another planet, but it felt like the old earth wasn't able to produce a forest feeling so vibrant.

He was debating whether he should collect samples from the various flowers and herbs like the demon parties did, but soon decided against it. He had no immediate use for them, and the valley would still be here if he managed to kick out the demons.

He soon arrived close to the small lake he glimpsed from the mountain peak. With how pristine the rest of the forest was he had expected that the lake to have clear beautiful waters. While it didn't look or smell stale, it also wasn't clear.

The lake was a mysterious shimmering blue, and he could barely see a decimeter into the water before everything was obscured. The

water itself seemed to be packed with cosmic energy, as though the lake consisted of liquefied Nexus Crystals.

His body almost instinctively reached down to drink a mouthful of the enticing water before hastily stopping himself. It seemed like such a good natural resource, but still, there were no animals or monsters around, which was very eerie. Perhaps there was something lurking in the depths, prowling on anything stupid enough to come too close to the shore.

He couldn't let the water go to waste though, and tied a string to one of his magical canteens. He then threw the canteen into the water, and waited some time before dragging it out. It now contained the cosmic water, but he wouldn't try it before he could feed it to some beasts and see its effects.

Feeling uncomfortable by the mysterious lake Zac continued onward toward the center of the valley. The mysteries of the azure pond would have to wait until another day.

He was almost at the core of the valley by now and slowed his pace. If the Herald was in this valley then it would stand to reason that he was somewhere in the center. Slightly nervous he gripped his axe for comfort, as memories of the struggle with the last herald still haunted him.

Not far ahead it seemed that the forest gave way to open fields, so Zac crouched down and slowly made his way to the edge of the forest. What met his eyes from his hidden vantage point shocked him.

It was a large field, filled with shrunken and desiccated fallen trees. There were signs of bushes and flowers having existed as well, but they too looked like they had been baked in an oven. The only thing still standing tall was a solitary tree in the center.

It wasn't very large, only being roughly 5 meters tall, but it was spectacular. The trunk and branches had a crimson hue and a

smooth exterior. The leaves weren't red or green but a pristine white, making it look like crystals adorned the branches.

It was a spectacular sight, and Zac didn't for a second think that this was a normal tree. It was something created with a lot of cosmic energy. The tree virtually hummed with power, making Zac wonder if it actually was alive.

Zac guessed that this tree was the reason for the desolation in the vicinity. The tree seemingly had absorbed the life or cosmic energy out of everything in its surroundings. Perhaps it even had killed all the animals in the forest as well, explaining why it was so quiet. It was a scary thought that the tree wasn't satisfied with the huge density of energy in the air, and needed to drain its surroundings to be satiated.

It took Zac a second to register that something else was next to the tree. A monkey, roughly two meters tall with a build somewhat slimmer compared to its brethren, sat cross-legged with closed eyes under the tree. What made it stand out apart from its build was its color. If the other monkeys in the mountain were made of anthracite rock, then this monkey was made of lava. Red shining streaks ran along every part of the monkey's otherwise black body, emanating a heavy pressure.

It was the monkey king.

# Chapter 47 - Collision Course

The lava monkey didn't look aggressive or violent like the normal monkeys, but rather harmonious. Even if it seemed crazy, it really looked like he or she was meditating under the peculiar tree. It was quite picturesque, the red streaks of the monkey matching well with the crimson trunk.

The good news was that it looked like he found his Herald. The bad news was that he had no real idea on how to improve the odds in his favor. He saw no method to sneak up on it, as the dried husks of the vegetation on the field wouldn't provide enough cover.

He didn't dare use **[Eye of Discernment]** to see its level either, afraid it would notice him like the Imps. That it stayed in this forest with higher cosmic energy concentration, rather than in its natural habitat of the mountain peaks, was telling Zac that the monkey king possessed some sensibility for cosmic energy.

He debated whether he should charge in blind, or wait for a better opportunity. Finally he decided he had to go for it. Finding the Herald sitting by itself with no backup in sight could only be considered a perfect opportunity.

He also discarded the idea of creating crude traps as he had for Vul, the barghest herald. If this monkey could meditate it likely was too intelligent to run into spikes like an idiot.

The only question was whether this monkey was of roughly the same power as Vul or not. When the limiter was lifted at the turn of the month he had concluded that the beasts improved roughly 50% across the board.

He himself had improved far more than that though. When he fought Vul he had only 59 Strength, and now he was at 160. On top of that,

his gear had improved considerably, and he already gained a class and improved pathways. He felt that even if he met an improved Vul today he wouldn't have to rely on traps to kill it, and it wouldn't be a desperate struggle either.

But the monkeys were far stronger compared to the barghest. Would the monkey Herald be far stronger compared to the barghest Herald as well?

There was only one way to find out. He slowly repositioned himself to arrive from the east, which would at least let him approach the back of the Herald. It might give him some time to close the distance before it could react.

He steeled his nerves and slowly ventured out of the protective cover of the foliage, and entered the dead zone surrounding the magical tree. He took great care not to step on any of the dried twigs or branches that covered the ground, not wanting to alert the monkey of his approach.

But even though he made no sound it seemed to be to no avail, as the monkey snorted and slowly got up on his feet. Zac held no hope that it was just a coincidence, and immediately pulled out two daggers out of his pouch and threw them at the monster in quick succession.

The monkey turned around in a lightning-quick manner, and with two casual swipes slapped the incoming daggers away into the ground. As the edges collided with its hands sparks flew, but no wounds could be seen. Zac wasn't surprised as the daggers were barely any use on the normal monkeys, let alone on this super-powered one.

Afterwards he gave up any idea of stealth and thundered straight toward the monkey, with his axe at the ready.

While charged he used the **[Eye of Discernment]** on the monkey, which gave him a terse line of information.

## [Cindermane, Level 58]

That line removed any last doubts whether this monster was a Herald or not. A solitary Named beast around level 50 fit the bill perfectly. It was a full 13 levels above Vul, who had been level 45 when they battled. He didn't know how levels worked for beasts, but if it was like for himself it meant it should have almost 100 more attributes in total. Together with the removed limiters, he realized he might be in for a tough battle.

Cindermane didn't stay put, but charged toward Zac as well. As he did the red streaks on his body lit up and started to emit a fiery shine like lava. They clashed a few meters away from the red-white tree, with Zac doing an upwards horizontal swipe aimed at its torso.

The monkey actually dared to intercept the strike with its bare paws, which lit up completely to look like magma. A tremendous clash erupted when their attacks collided, the dead plants in the surrounding being pulverized by the shockwave.

Zac was surprised to see that his strike didn't immediately overpower the Herald. With his recent improvements he started to believe there was nothing on the island that could have a comparable level of points in the Strength attribute.

The Herald was pushed back from the force however Zac didn't emerge unscathed out of the initial collision either. The hands of the monkey did not only look like lava, but they were also as fiery hot as well. The air around them was wobbling due to the heat, looking like a mirage. The axe edge actually showed clear signs of heating up where it collided with the monkey's palm.

Zac knew he couldn't fight a protracted battle, as the monkey would destroy his weapon if they kept clashing like this. Using **[Chop]** wouldn't help either, as the damage was transferred to axe anyway.

Angry at being pushed back Cindermane roared and stomped the ground, causing multiple spikes to erupt beneath Zac. They looked

similar to the spikes of the earth mage, with the distinction that they seemed blazing hot and far more numerous.

Zac managed to destroy most of the spikes with a chop, but one managed to stab into his leg. A blinding pain erupted in his thigh, causing him to involuntarily scream. A sickening sizzling sound could be heard and Zac smelled the fragrance of grilled meat. The spike was actually barbecuing his leg.

Ignoring the pain he grabbed the burning hot spike with his free hand, ripped it out of his leg and threw it away. As he did the Herald took the opportunity to grab the ground, dragging out a stone the size of Zac from seemingly nowhere. Its molten fingers penetrated the boulder and soon the whole rock was glowing a sinister red.

With a roar it tried to slam the stone down right on Zac, who could only ungainly dodge. Not daring to hide any of his cards any longer he infused his strikes with Dao and started swinging away against the Herald.

Cindermane possessed either great reflexes or combat experience, as he kept dodging or deflecting the strikes. Zac tried to grab onto the monkey with his free hand in order to throw it down on the ground, but as soon as he got a grip on its arm the red streaks lit up and the arm got searing hot. Zac instinctively let go with a scream, and the monkey took the opportunity to try to claw out his throat.

Zac saw no choice but to activate his armor, and the golden sheen protected him from getting killed. He wouldn't give up even with his lifesaving device used up though, and wildly kept swinging at the Herald, unheeding of any cosmic energy expenditure. After a few exchanges the monkey king managed to get a stab in with one of its hands, pushing a centimeter into Zac's arm. The finger burned even hotter compared to the spike, and Zac couldn't refrain from screaming out in pain again.

However Zac's every strike was overwhelming. He used every trick **[Axe Mastery]** had taught him and weaved a net of destruction with



his axe. Marks started to appear on the monkey's hands, and it looked like it wouldn't be able to block his strikes forever. It was lucky as well as the edge of the axe was starting to shine with a red sheen from all the collisions as well. Not much longer and Zac feared that the inscriptions on it would be ruined, which meant that it wouldn't auto-repair any longer.

He also had pushed the Herald back toward the tree, and they were currently fighting under the white leaves.

The monkey became more agitated as they approached the trunk, and furiously fought to force Zac away from the tree. There clearly was something special about it, and the Herald didn't want to risk it getting damaged. The Monkey suddenly emitted a penetrating screech, its whole body lighting up.

It spat out a white-hot ball of magma straight at Zac's chest, forcing him to jump out of the way, and away from the tree. As he dodged he also saw that the lava spit wasn't the only thing that changed from that scream.

Like a scene out of a horror movie suddenly an endless number of bodies rose out of the ground, pushing the dried trees and bushes to the side. It wasn't zombies, but a vast number of stone monkeys, all looking larger and stronger compared to normal ones. With a quick glance he could make out at least 40 monkey captains among the reinforcement.

The monkeys had been lying dormant under the ground, and the roar called them to action to create a trap. He didn't know why it waited so long to unleash them, but he knew that he had run out of time. In just seconds he would be overrun with stone spears and boulders. He would have problems contending with just the monkey horde, but if he had to watch out for the spells from the Herald as well he'd surely die.

A desperate idea grew in his mind, and he didn't have time to go through pros and cons before trying it out. He was currently two

meters away from the tree trunk, and with an exaggerated roar he swung his axe in a horizontal swipe. As he did the familiar blade of **[Chop]** rapidly grew out, soon longer than he could stably maintain for any longer duration.

Cindermane screeched and hastily jumped to intercept the huge edge from cutting down the tree. Zac's premonition was correct, the tree truly held a great importance to the monkey.

The Herald couldn't properly grab the translucent edge with its awkward positioning, and the edge cut into its whole body horizontally across the chest. A deep grisly gash was carved onto its body, but its great Endurance prevented it from getting cut in two. It still was badly hurt and bled profusely as it fell down on the ground.

Just as he was about to finish it off with another swing a boulder slammed into him from the side. He fell over away from the Herald and he barely managed to get to his feet before another hit him again, forcing him even further away from the dying lava monkey.

Unreconciled he once again charged a great edge and swung it at the prone monkey king. But it still had some energy left and pushed itself out of the way.

He knew his window of opportunity had passed. Boulders and stalactites were approaching from all directions, and the only way to kill the Herald was a suicide dive. As he only needed to kill it for a quest he had no reason to die just to bring it down to hell with him.

Zac didn't hesitate and turned around to run. He could only hope the huge wound he inflicted upon it was lethal and that it would bleed to death. The lava monkey wouldn't have it though and used its last powers to shoot a few molten spikes his direction as well. Zac could only strike away what he could and endure the rest.

Just after a few seconds he had already gotten hit by another two boulders and was stabbed by three more stalactites. Then the army of monkeys was upon him.

## Chapter 48 - Simian Haranguing

Finishing off the Herald was suddenly the last thing on Zac's mind, and he was horrified as he saw an avalanche of monkeys approach him from all directions. He activated **[Chop]** and frenziedly waved it in front of him, decimating any monkeys that would impede his escape.

The assault was slowing him down though, and finally the enemies were upon him, punching and kicking with wild abandon. Every time a punch or kick hit where the lava spears pieced him earlier it hurt enough for him to almost pass out.

Zac couldn't care about his cosmic energy expenditure anymore, and with a roar pushed as much cosmic energy as he could into the fractal on his hand. An enormous blade over 5 meters tall blazed into existence, and Zac swung the axe in a mighty horizontal arc.

The edge managed to stay active for less than a second, but the brief window carved out a large pocket in the swarm of monkeys. The swing killed at least 20 monkeys, and he even gained a level. He couldn't bother about that at the moment though, as the short respite in attacks allowed him to rush out of the field and into the foliage.

Blood was running freely from Zac's mouth as he was shakily running through the forest, away from the magical tree and Herald. The monkeys wouldn't relent though and swarmed all around him, jumping between the trees or running on all fours on the ground. Had it not been for his wounded leg he might have been able to maintain some distance after a mad dash. But now he was stuck in a quick jog, but even that was taxing.

He constantly was pelted with kicks and punches, and the occasional mouth trying to bite into him with their sharp canines. A

rock whizzed by his head, and instead hit a monkey square in its chest. It appeared the monkey captains had problems with keeping the pace and throwing the projectiles simultaneously at least.

More good news was that the Herald was either dead or too wounded to join the pursuit, as there were no molten spears attacking him anymore. But that was about all the positives that Zac could list while he was mindlessly running.

He already was lost and could only run in a straight direction. Since he was in a valley between the peaks no matter what direction he ran he would sooner or later arrive at the mountains.

He desperately swung his axe back and forth to maim and kill his attackers. He didn't dare to use **[Chop]** anymore as he was already running low on cosmic energy and there still were at least 100 monkeys following him.

He instead infused the attacks with his understanding of the Dao of Heaviness to add some impact to his strikes. It was the first time he was using it so freely and for a prolonged time, and he was starting to feel a headache coming on.

Soon he couldn't even use his Dao in order to empower his strikes as he was afraid of increasing the pounding in his head.

He kept going, and with every few steps he killed a monkey, but they seemed endless. Zac's whole body was hurting, but he couldn't stop. Another boulder came hurtling toward him, this one with proper aim. He was already mid-swing against a monkey and couldn't reposition in time, so he could only lift his left arm to block it.

The small boulder slammed into Zac and a sickening pop could be heard. Zac was pushed back and his arm hung limply by his side. Something was protruding oddly at his shoulder and a blazing pain radiated through the arm. After a quick glance he realized that his shoulder was dislocated.

Zac grit his teeth and ran straight into the first monkey he saw, slamming his dislocated shoulder straight into the chest of the monkey. A blinding pain almost made him pass out, but it also temporarily dispelled the pulsing headache from overusing his Dao.

While it still hurt Zac could move his arm again. He had used the monkey as a wall to slam the ball of his arm back into its socket. As a thanks Zac gave it a quick chop which decapitated it, and then kicked its headless body into two oncoming stone monkeys.

This couldn't continue for long, as Zac had less than 10% of his cosmic energy reserves remaining while the monkeys showed no desire to relent. Thankfully the lush forest soon gave way to rocky outcroppings and cliffs, showing that he was approaching one of the peaks.

Due to the haphazard escape he wasn't sure which one of the peaks it was, but a quick glance outward showed the familiar forest of the island. That meant he wasn't running north at least, as he'd only be seeing ocean then. He was thankful, as he was afraid he would have been forced to jump down the steep cliff, praying to survive the 100-meter drop into the ocean.

Zac kept running, and he planned to escape into the forest down on the ground. The first time he fought the monkeys they had stopped at the foot of the mountain, and he could only hope they'd do the same again.

But almost immediately as he ran he knew that plan wouldn't work. As he passed a small crest a larger view of the island came into view, and he could see the incursion and the demon town. The position immediately made him realize he was on the easternmost peak. If he ran right down this peak he'd be in prime demon territory. Straight out of the frying pan and into the fire.

He stopped for a second confused as what to do which allowed a few monkey captains to drag out new projectiles out of the ground and hurl them at Zac.

He slammed one of them away but the other hit him with a deep thud, eliciting a bloody cough. Even with his 90 plus Endurance, it felt like he couldn't take many more of those throws. He couldn't remember how many he'd tanked by now, and it felt like his body was on the brink of collapse.

He sluggishly swung his axe and killed a monkey who was foolish enough to get close and looked around for options.

In his vision he saw a cave entrance slightly hidden behind some shrubbery and boulders. After a brief hesitation he changed course for the cavity. If he continued on along the mountain path he'd arrive at where he had spotted the demon party earlier, and the risk of running into the monkey packs was great. He couldn't return either, as he wouldn't last running to another peak.

He didn't really want to enter the cave, but he knew that it was his only hope. Right now he couldn't see any other method to shake off the monkey horde. They seemed truly consumed by rage, which made sense as he had killed well over a hundred of the assailants by now.

Either the cave was a small dwelling for an animal, or a part of a larger network of tunnels. If it was the former he'd make a last stand, and at least the enemies would only be able to come from one direction. If it was the latter he might actually survive by fleeing into the tunnels.

There were roughly 10 monkeys in the way, and Zac grimly summoned **[Chop]** for one last charge. His arms and legs felt like they were coated in lead, but he determinedly swung his axe while he advanced.

The monkeys could offer no resistance against Zac's reignited spirit, and he soon was at the mouth of the cave. A rock slammed into his back just as he entered, making him realize he couldn't just stand at the entrance and fight it out. He would be sniped to death. After a

quick glance inside it seemed that the cave actually was just the entrance of a bigger cave system.

The monkeys seemed to have no problem following him into the tunnels, as they charged towards the entrance without hesitation. Zac suddenly was afraid that he would be in even worse straits if he let them enter. They were stone monkeys, who knew what advantages they'd have inside a cave.

Out of options he could only do something stupid and desperate. He put away his axe and brought out his great sword. With a furious slam he hit the roof of the cave entrance, causing huge cracks in the roof and making rock chippings fly in all directions. He didn't stop and slammed twice more with all the strength he could muster, and finally an ominous rumbling could be heard.

The roof of the cave started to collapse, and Zac desperately ran further into the cave. Falling rock and debris pelted him, and he was forced to leave his sword behind in the chaos. After a minute the rumblings stopped, and the cave was completely blocked for at least 20 meters of debris. It would take even the strong monkeys a good while to excavate the entrance, if they even wanted to.

His hope was that the monkeys would give up and go back to the valley, but he wouldn't dare put his life on the line for it to be true. So he hesitantly ventured further into the cave to create some distance. His body was hurting all over but he wouldn't let himself sit down, afraid that he wouldn't be able to get back up in a short while if he did.

The caverns seemed to be a confusing maze of interconnected tunnels and chambers, and Zac saw no change after 30 minutes of slow walking. The caves weren't completely pitch black at least, as there actually was growing moss on many of the walls which gave off some luminescence. He didn't understand why they would create light, but he assumed that the moss was mutated by cosmic energy.

The tunnels were actually full of cosmic energy, almost at the level of the valley. The high concentration on the mountain peaks seemed to only be a result of some of the interior energy leaking out. It would be strange if something didn't change with the subterranean flora if they were consistently bathed in cosmic energy of this magnitude.

Finally satisfied with the distance from the entrance he had created, he stopped in a quiet chamber which at least wasn't completely dark due to the glowing moss. He sighed and thumped down on the ground with a grimace. It was pitch black apart from the blue scattered lights from the moss but he didn't care. He did have a flashlight he had brought from the camper if he needed proper light, but he didn't know how much charge the batteries still had. He instead brought out a Nexus Crystal from the pouch and started absorbing.

It didn't help in healing his battered body, but it did help in recovering his depleted energy. Together with his amulet, he was absorbing energy at a great rate, and after only four hours he once again was full of cosmic energy.

That didn't mean that he was in prime condition though. His head still hurt from overusing his Dao, and his body screamed in protest as soon as he moved slightly. He could only stay put for a bit longer in order for his Vitality to do its thing. He had nothing in his bag that could help against his wounds that were mainly blunt-force trauma as far as he knew. He did put some ointment on the burns from the herald though, even if he wasn't sure whether aloe was effective against burns from magic monkey fire.

Finally done with everything he rested his back against the wall and sighed despondently. Today did *not* go according to plan.



# Chapter 49 - Spelunking

Since Zac felt somewhat refreshed from absorbing the Nexus Crystal he held off on sleeping, and instead decided to take a quick glance at his status screen.

Name	Zachary Atwood
Level	32
Class	Hatchetman (F)
Race	Human (F)
Alignment	Human (Earth)
Titles	Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500

Dao	Seed of Heaviness - Early
Strength	164
Dexterity	59
Endurance	92
Vitality	69
Intelligence	49
Wisdom	49
Luck	67
Free Points	3
Nexus Coins	485286

The last few days had actually brought in almost all the coins he needed for the movement skill. Getting his skills and Dao boosts had increased his daily earnings tremendously. Of course he knew that this was the limit for now. The only targets more lucrative compared to the monkeys on the island were the demons and imps. But he held no illusion that he would be able to charge into 50 of them at a time and start a massacre as he had with the monkeys. He would be blasted to smithereens in no time.

Next, he opened up his quest menu to see the progress of his quest

**Off With Their Heads (Unique): Kill the four heralds and the general of an incursion within 3 months. Reward: 10 E-Grade Nexus Crystals, E-Grade equipment, unique building depending on performance. (2/5)**

He was quite disappointed to see that the monkey king apparently survived the slash. Of course, there was the possibility that it wasn't a Herald, but he felt that the chance of that to be quite slim.

He had gained a level right at the start of the pursuit, and he sensed he wasn't far away from reaching level 33 either. It was a shame that the System didn't provide the same type of service as many games, restoring both health and mana at the level up. Then he might have actually have had a chance of turning things around and finishing off the monkey king.

The whole experience was quite a let-down and the first real setback except constantly getting hurt. He constantly went over things he could have done differently in order to actually kill the monkey. But soon he threw those depressing thoughts out of his mind, as he knew he had to work with what he got, and try to continuously improve.

As he waited for his body to get better he planned to meditate some on the Dao. He wished to both improve his current Seed of Heaviness, and get another seed, the Seed of Sharpness. These two forces were those he sensed to be strongest in the axe in his vision, and he felt that getting both of them was the first step on the path of true axe mastery.

Besides, the Dao of Sharpness might also be of some use for his throwing knives. Since **[Axe Mastery]** came with no manual how to progress the Dao or his other skills he could only fumble around in the dark. This time literally.

Unfortunately, he could only focus at the large axe fractal in his mind for a short while before his head started hurting again. It seemed that using Dao was still impossible after his overexertion. Zac wondered if there was something like mental energy or soul power that was used when pondering on the Dao or using it in battle, but he hadn't been able to sense anything of the sort thus far. He only knew his head hurt and felt swollen like a bad migraine.

Helplessly he could only go to sleep. He would have preferred to take a look around the area, but his body didn't really listen to his commands anymore. Besides any sound carried through the tunnels and amplified, and it was completely quiet apart from his breathing.

There should be no monsters or creepy crawlies around at least this part of the subterranean system.

Zac woke up some time later, not being able to tell exactly how long he was out. His watch had broken long ago, and his cell phone ran out of charge as well. He had learned to tell the time somewhat accurately with the help of the suns, but down in the caverns this was useless.

Judging from the state of his body he felt that he had been out somewhere between 3 and 5 hours. He was still bruised all over but at least he could get by. He got up on his feet but stopped before setting out.

He was a bit unsure how to proceed from here on out. After some hesitation, he decided to look around the caves for a bit, and then find an exit. Nothing had really changed apart from the monkey king being hurt. The general and other herald were still unknowns.

The caverns were the last place apart from the city that remained uncharted on the island. There was a real possibility that the last Herald hid somewhere in here as he hadn't even seen the shadow of it before. If he could find something out while he was stuck here anyway it would be great assistance to his quest. One of his fears was that he would fail his mission and get punished by the System, not due to a lack of trying, but because he simply couldn't find his targets.

Since the System wanted him to kill these targets he felt that he should have been provided with some navigation and targeting method. But if mentally complaining about the system had any effect he'd long have solved all his problems.

But he also put a time limit on himself. He hadn't given up on killing the monkey king, and would certainly try again. The reason for his failure was the horde of monkeys interrupting. He was quite certain that he would be able to kill him if he got him alone.

That's why he didn't try to rush back. For one he wasn't sure how to get out, and besides, he believed that the monkey army would be on high alert for his return in the short run. It was a shame, as the monkey king was currently an easy target with its wounds. But he still had half a month until his 2-month deadline. He didn't need to risk it all just yet.

Zac took a glance at his axe, confirming that it was almost completely repaired, and continued further into the caves. He still used only the glowing moss as a light source as he didn't want to alert any enemies. Besides his eyes were getting accustomed to it by now and he could somewhat make out his surroundings.

Just before he ventured down he carved a small Z beneath the glowing moss to mark his passage. He could still track his progress in his mind, but better safe than sorry.

The tunnels he progressed through led steadily downward, and it felt like he was walking toward the foot of the mountain. That also meant that he was closing in on the cave system the demons explored so he was careful to not make any excessive sounds. He even ripped down some moss from the wall and tied it to the bottom of his feet to mask his footsteps. It was the non-luminescent kind of moss, of course, as he didn't want his feet to become beacons for the enemy.

As he descended he sensed that the ambient cosmic energy was steadily growing stronger. Not only that, the tunnels started to change as well.

From being dark and dour, apart from the occasional weak blue luminescence from the moss, the caverns were turning into a vibrant fantasy world. Thick vines with purple flowers started to grow out of the ground, large glowing mushrooms lined the tunnels and the lights from the moss grew stronger and polychromatic.

Zac had never taken any hallucinogenic drugs, but it almost felt like he was high as he walked in these psychedelic tunnels. After walking along dazed for a few seconds he suddenly started, and then started

to collect samples of all the various herbs and mushrooms. He was careful to not let anything touch his skin, just in case it was poisonous.

He still had no method to discern if they were of value, but he felt that at least some of the magical plants should be of some use. It seemed quite clear that they had grown due to the high density of the cosmic energy, so they might have some magical properties.

Zac started using the vegetation as a basis where to head when he reached crossroads. He simply chose the one with a higher density of subterranean growth, as that passage should have a higher density of cosmic energy.

He was starting to get very curious why there was so much energy in the mountain, and he believed that the demons were so interested in the cave for the very same reason. There should be something in the depths that either contained or produced an immense amount of energy, to the point that it leaked out into the whole mountain range and valley.

If the demons removed it and took it with them then Zac would lose a potential goldmine. He added the task of finding out what created the energy as well before leaving. If it was something small and portable he would try to steal it. If this much cosmic energy could be poured into a couple of arrays he wouldn't have to worry about the demons ever again.

Zac had walked for almost an hour when a sound made him stop in his tracks and shrink into the wall. It was light hurried steps that echoed through the tunnels not far ahead. They didn't seem to be coming toward him, so Zac slowly ventured forward, careful not to make a single sound.

The steps slowly were becoming a bit more distant, and Zac hurried up until he reached a crossing. He carefully looked around a corner toward where the sounds came from to see what made the steps.

And just before it turned another corner, he could briefly spot a small imp trotting along.

Zac's heartbeat started to speed up, as seeing the imp opened up a possibility. Perhaps the imps' main area of activity was underground, which would explain why he had encountered so few up above ground. And if it was, then their herald was likely down here as well.

# Chapter 50 - Crystals

Zac waited for a bit to make sure no other imp or demon was incoming before he ventured the same path he saw the imp take.

He surreptitiously glanced around any corners or crossroads, but even after a minute he still hadn't seen any signs of the imp or anything else of interest. Either the imp was a lone explorer in the caverns or it was out of the way for some reason.

A scratching sound stopped his train of thought and Zac moved to the next intersection to see where the sound came from. He finally found the small imp again and it was just 10 meters away from him, currently digging through some moss. After it removed a top layer it sneakily put something inside, and then carefully put the moss back on top. It got up and turned around, and suddenly found itself staring right at Zac.

Zac didn't hesitate and instantly killed it with a dagger. He walked up to the corpse and put it in one of his pouches, before walking over to where it dug around earlier. Initially he had wanted to follow it back to wherever he came from, but he had been too careless and immediately got spotted. He'd have to get better at sneaking in these tunnels unless he wanted to get mobbed down.

After removing the moss he actually found a small stash of Nexus Crystals. They weren't polished and uniform like the ones he had taken from the demon leader, but rather looking like uncut raw gems. Some were as small as a fingernail while the largest was slightly larger than his own crystals.

It seemed like the imp actually was hiding away its wealth in this uninhabited part of the cave system like a cultivating squirrel. So it looked like it wasn't heading to any other imps or demons, but rather away from them. Perhaps daylight robbery was a real problem



amongst the imps, so hiding their cultivation resources was imperative.

The imp's actions raised a few questions. First of all, could imps cultivate? They seemed to have some inherent proclivity for magic, as all of them thus far were able to shoot those nefarious fireballs. But it felt like all of them more or less were of the same strength, making him believe they couldn't get stronger.

There seemed to be some fundamental differences between the imps and the demons or himself. They didn't have levels when he inspected them with **[Eye of Discernment]**, and it didn't look like they had classes either as everyone used the same attack. That's why Zac placed them in the same group as the other beasts in his mind.

So what was the use of the crystals? The most likely explanation he could find was evolution. He had seen all kinds of mutations and evolutions in the flora on the island caused by the cosmic energy. Who's to say it didn't work with the fauna as well. Perhaps the crystals could help a normal imp to evolve into something greater, like the Heralds.

It was a bit worrying, as normal imps were deadly enough. If suddenly a throng of them evolved into super-imps wouldn't they burn down the whole island? He could only hope that evolving wasn't that simple a matter for now.

The second thing on Zac's mind was the crystals themselves. Where had it found them? If there were a bunch of them it would explain many things, such as why the density of cosmic energy was so high in the mountains. It could be due to the proximity of a large amount of Nexus Crystals, whose energy bled through into the surroundings.

It would also explain the unceasing flow of demons coming into the mountains. A mountain full of Nexus Crystals should be the equivalent of a multi-verse gold mine.

That, unfortunately, meant that the demons were continuously pilfering the resources that Zac would need to continue to improve and build up a town.

Zac was sorely lacking in Nexus Coins right now. He could barely improve himself, let alone build up a whole town. His gains lately from killing monkeys had been tremendous, but it was nothing compared to the costs of creating, and running, a town.

For example, there was an array called **[E-Grade Medium Scale Town Defense Array]** that was a combination of a defensive shield and some attacking functions. It looked like a good all-around addition for a newly established settlement. But that array alone cost 5 million Nexus Coins, and furthermore, it wasn't free to operate.

There were defensive turrets and anti-siege weapons as well, each costing over a million coins. There was just no way for him to grind that kind of amount of coins. Even if he got twice as strong and murdered monkeys without rest or sleep it would take years before he got all the basic structures of the town.

But if he had a large number of Nexus Crystals he might be able to pay all this, and maybe even more. He didn't have any means of selling the Crystals for Nexus Coins at the moment, but there were things such as shops and auction houses in the outpost store. If he purchased one of those he was sure they'd accept his crystals for some coin.

Of course, it all hinged on him actually getting the crystals. Driven by a renewed sense of purpose, Zac headed back toward where he came from. Since the imp went out of its way to hide the crystals out here, there shouldn't be much activity in the surroundings as well.

Zac made a mental note of the area since he might need a base of operations down here. As he carefully proceeded through the paths the ambient cosmic energy kept increasing, now starting to reach the density that he had felt in the valley with the monkey king.

After continuing on for roughly 10 minutes he heard some shuffling further down the path. Zac immediately stopped, a glint of greed and anticipation on his face. Every demon he found down here would probably make him wealthier. He imagined looting magic pouches packed to the rafters with crystals, a creepy grin slowly starting to emerge on his face.

Unfortunately it wasn't a walking nest egg he encountered, but a white crocodile.

At a second glance he realized it wasn't actually a crocodile, but a supersized salamander. It had a thick build and was roughly four meters long. It was mostly white with some purple markings. Zac thought that subterranean species normally possessed no eyes, but this didn't seem to apply to this specimen. It lazily ambled through a subterranean tunnel, swiping up various mushrooms and herbs with its mouth along the way.

Zac didn't know if it was a guard animal for the demons or just something that lived down here. He shrank into a side corridor to hide as he didn't want to bother with this huge beast at the moment. The beast seemed oblivious to his existence until it suddenly exploded into motion just as it was next to the side-tunnel Zac hid in.

Its maw opened showing a line of large translucent teeth looking like huge salt crystals. The beast tilted its head and charged straight at Zac's torso, but he was accustomed to this manner of attacks from the countless barghest he had fought.

Channeling his cosmic energy he grunted and punched the lizard in its head, slamming it into the wall of the tunnel, creating large cracks on the stone surface. That type of attack was usually enough to kill barghest by now, but it only seemed to enrage the salamander. He didn't want a prolonged fight though and swung vertically with a maxed out **[Chop]**, cleanly decapitating it.

A surge of energy entered his body and he saw that he gained roughly 800 Nexus coins. That was even more compared to some of

the weaker demons, surprising Zac somewhat. It had been pretty quick for its large size, but it felt like less of a challenge compared to a demon.

As he was mulling it over a sizzling sound interrupted his train of thought, and he turned his head toward the sound.

Smoke rose up from the ground next to the chopped off head and a sizzling sound could be heard. He went closer to take a look, and was appalled to see that its saliva was highly corrosive. The sounds came from its tongue touching the ground, and it had already corroded a small hole where its saliva dripped down. Zac realized even a flesh wound from a bite might cost him a limb when fighting these salamanders.

It was a shame he couldn't use his eye skill on it as it was already dead, but it didn't matter much what the system called the animal. He went over to the headless carcass and observed the body. At least the blood wasn't corrosive as well, otherwise, the huge pool of blood forming beneath the body would have carved out a new path among the tunnels.

Zac barely managed to cram the beast inside his smaller pouch after chopping off the tail as well, and then moved on. He didn't want to leave a carcass out in the open that was clearly killed with something sharp. He still didn't know what the relation between the demons and this animal was, and he'd just have to lug it along until he did. Or found somewhere to dump it where it wouldn't be found.

Zac continued on, diligently marking crossroads with a Z. By now he was starting to fully acclimatize to the cold light of the moss and various other plants and had no problem discerning his surroundings.

After a while, the tunnels started to change once again, as he saw spots glimmering between the pieces of moss on the walls and ground. He walked over to the closest spot that shone and saw that it was a crystal.

His heartbeat quickened and he quickly pried it out with a knife. The stone was far harder than he expected, and the extraction taxed even him with his huge Strength. But he only increased his pace with a widening smile adorning his face, and soon he held his prize in his hand. The crystal he pried out truly was a Nexus Crystal, roughly half the size of the ones in his bag.

As he looked around the walls he saw glimmering crystals embedded all over the walls.

He was *rich!*

# Chapter 51 - Stench

After a bout of excitement Zac suppressed his giddiness and refocused. As much as he wanted to, he couldn't start a mining operation at the moment. He had things to do.

Besides, it likely was more effective to let the demons mine the crystals, and then commandeer it when it was all extracted and gathered. They shouldn't have sent their most powerful warriors to mine, so an assault wouldn't prove to be too difficult. He longingly took another look at the glistening walls and then kept going.

This obsession with wealth was something new he had started to develop. He hadn't really cared too much when the world still was normal, and he just was a white-collar worker. He was happy as long as he had enough to live a comfortable life.

But lately he was running toward corpses like it was Christmas morning and the bodies contained presents. It was a weird type of callousness that translated corpses into loot. He had always enjoyed the grind in video games, waiting for that rush of seeing some glimmering unique or valuable item drop. He was starting to get the same feeling in real life as well. Just the thought of finding a magic pouch full of crystals made him want to forget about the Heralds and go on a treasure hunt instead.

But he knew he couldn't, at least not for now. As he walked, he started to gradually hear rhythmic sounds of metal hitting rock. It was still far in the distance, but Zac presumed he was hearing mining operations.

He hesitated for a bit, but then reluctantly decided to go in another direction. There was no real need to see the miners at the moment, and he wouldn't risk getting exposed this early just to steal a peek. What he currently wanted to explore was whether the thrifty imp was

a loner who had snuck into the caves, or whether it was part of a larger group.

As he crept along the paths the sounds of pick-axes hitting rock didn't diminish, rather it was a constant drone in this part of the cave system. This made Zac realize that the mining operations were on a larger scale than he had expected. After walking for 30 minutes the sounds finally started to diminish, letting him know he was moving away from the mining operations.

Suddenly he heard another sound and he stopped in his tracks. It was the familiar sound of light scuffling on the ground that the imp had made, but this time it sounded like came from multiple sources. It was accompanied by some clanking and subdued inane chatter that didn't quite sound like a language.

He gingerly crept forward, careful not to make a sound. He wasn't sure how sharp their senses were, and he didn't want to find out. Zac took quick peek around a corner and saw that the tunnel led into a cavern that was roughly 10 by 10 meter large. The roof was also higher compared to the usual 3-4 meters of the tunnels.

The first thing he noticed was that he didn't have to be careful of the imps smelling him out, as a wall of overbearing stench hit him as soon as he looked around the corner. It seemed that sanitation and hygiene were alien concepts to the small humanoids, as that level of smell could only come from a buildup of waste and excrement.

What entered Zac's vision could tenuously be called a camp. Moss had been ripped from the walls and placed on the ground to make simple bedding, and in the middle of the room was a handful of lumber together with vines making a fire whose black smoke polluted the cave. Luckily for the imps there seemed to be some cracks in the roof which kept the cave ventilated, otherwise they might have killed themselves accidentally by inhaling all that smoke. Piles of food waste and other unmentionables were strewn randomly about the camp, and in a corner there was a large rotting carcass of a smaller version of the salamander Zac fought earlier.

There were roughly 20 imps that inhabited the disgusting campsite, and it looked like they were turning in for the night. Zac was a little fuzzy about the exact time but felt that it should be somewhere around 4 to 6 am. He had assaulted the Herald in the evening, and after his escape spent a few hours on absorbing energy, then a few hours of sleep.

From what he'd seen from his travels across the island the imp's weren't nocturnal and guessed that their sleep schedule had gotten messed up from living in this subterranean cave.

Most of the imps were already lying on the ground snoring away, while a few lazily milled about. Two had a small scuffle over a moss bedding, and after a short while the victor lay down while the loser skulked away. It seemed the beddings closest to the fire in the middle were the most desirable, and the losers had to pick some spot further out.

Zac waited and only 15 minutes later the whole group was fast asleep, and they didn't bother with sentries or the like. Perhaps that was what the bedding arrangement was for. If they were attacked the weaklings in the outer rim would be attacked first, and their death wails would be the warning alarm for the others.

Zac deliberated whether to attack or to go around the camp. He felt that such a large group of imps indicated that the caves might very well be the main area of the imps. The imps he encountered in the forests had been mostly solitary, but here he immediately saw two dozen of them.

That meant that the likelihood of the herald being down here had gone up by quite a few points. He didn't want a repeat of the battle of the monkey Herald, where it summoned a throng of subordinates to wear him down. And being attacked by hundreds of imps seemed far more deadly compared to the monkeys. He'd be blasted to smithereens in no time.



But he also was still quite unclear about things down in the tunnels. He only possessed a shaky grasp of the layout down here so far. But soon he came to a decision and brought out some rags from his pouch. They had once been a shirt of his but were ripped up for bandages long ago. He wrapped the rag around his mouth and nose, and then brought out a large dagger he had taken from the last fight with the demons.

The rags were a small defense against the smell. He was already getting nauseated just smelling it from a distance, and he did not look forward to experiencing the stench point blank. He crept forward, with his dagger at the ready.

He soon arrived at the mouth of the cave, and the overwhelming stench almost made his eyes tear. He forced himself to ignore it and moved over to the closest imp. He bent over, and with quick movements put his padded hand over its mouth and simultaneously cut a huge gash over its throat, almost completely decapitating it.

The imp had no time to scream or struggle, and after a few shudders it was dead. Zac stopped for a second to survey the surroundings, but they were all still fast asleep. He kept going and moved to the second one, repeating his actions.

In short order he killed 8 of the imps without alerting anyone, and he moved to the 9<sup>th</sup>. He was approaching the innermost circle of beddings now and was quite close to the fire. As he did he reflected that the only thing that smelled worse than imp excrement was hot imp excrement.

Zac was starting to wonder if a stench could physically hurt someone, as his eyes were tearing up from the stink. If he was forced to sleep in a camp like this he'd rather sleep on the edge of the cave at risk of getting eaten by a salamander, compared to sleeping next to this putrid flame.

The smell was so bad that he couldn't properly focus and he accidentally hit the sleeping imp with his foot as he approached. He

quickly bent down and finished it off, but not before it managed to release a high pitched screech.

Zac knew he wouldn't be able to sneak around anymore, and immediately swapped out the dagger for his axe. He activated **[Chop]** and with three quick swings another five imps were dead before they managed to properly wake up.

By now the surviving imps were up, and all of them charged up a purplish-black fireball without hesitation. Zac managed to kill another two before they were done charging, but afterwards four fireballs slammed into him. The cave was simply too small, and he had no time to dodge them. Normally he would have used his chest piece here, but he wanted to save it unless it was a true life-and-death scenario. He might meet a Herald soon, so he needed all the tools at the ready.

Zac could only grit his teeth as the nefarious flames hit him, sticking to him like glue. He knew that the fires would die out when their owners did, so he wasted no time and charged at the remaining four imps. They screeched and started to flee towards a tunnel opposite where Zac came from, but Zac wouldn't give up.

Ignoring the impractically large consumption of energy, he elongated the **[Chop]** edge and managed to hit two of the fleeing imps, bisecting them in an instant. Their two compatriots didn't care and only started flapping their wings more fervently in order to escape.

Zac fished out a throwing dagger out of his pouch, and as he followed he threw it into the back of one of the two imps. He took out another dagger, intending to quickly end the fight. But as he prepared the throw a huge white maw suddenly emerged out of a side-tunnel, snapping shut over the imp in a lightning-quick manner.

It was another salamander that emerged from the tunnel, contentedly chewing on the small demon. It lumbered forward toward the other imp that Zac had downed and gobbled up it as well, knife and all.

Zac wasn't in a mood to fight against the salamander unless needed, as he liked the idea of these huge lizards walking around in the tunnels and helping him out by whittling down his enemies. Therefore he quickly receded into a side-tunnel in order to avoid its approach. The huge monster soon came to the entrance looking toward Zac's direction, and seemed to be hesitating for a few seconds. Zac didn't understand how they kept sensing him, as this time he had fled even further back, but he could only get ready to kill this white giant as well.

Finally it turned around and ambled away, toward the now deathly silent imp camp.

## Chapter 52 - Odor

Zac let out a breath of relief as he saw the beast lumber off. Not that he was afraid of fighting it, but the enemy of his enemy was his friend, even if the monster itself didn't know it.

Zac moved some distance away and applied some more Aloe cream on his burns. His skin looked grey and sickly, but not like a desiccated corpse's like it had the first time he fought an imp. His endurance was quite a bit higher by now, and while the fireballs still hurt like hell it took them longer to drain his body.

Zac felt he was at the cusp of leveling up, and continued onward through the tunnels. It didn't take long until he found another cave with sleeping imps. This time it was a bit smaller, with only 15 imps. This group also seemed to be a bit more vigilant with one imp standing guard. It seemed to barely understand the concept of being a lookout though, as it was leaning against a wall half-asleep. Occasionally it would rouse itself, but only to scratch its butt then go back to dozing off.

Zac saw no way to get next to it without being spotted, even if it wasn't too vigilant. He really wished he could get the skill the crafty swordsman used, and turn invisible for the approach. Even the lackadaisical imp would notice his approach and warn the others if he tried to sneak up on it.

Seeing no alternative he took out another throwing knife and threw it at the guard. It hit straight in the middle of its torso, almost instantly killing it. It slumped down into the ground with a small whimper and then stopped moving. Zac froze, waiting for any reaction from the rest of the group.

However, they snored away contently, oblivious to their impending doom. Satisfied Zac ventured in and repeated his grisly

assassinations. This time he managed to keep going unnoticed until only 3 were left before they were alerted, but Zac finished off the last stragglers with a few quick chops.

The kills in the second cave gave Zac another level up, bringing him to level 33. He put in 1 point in Strength and two points into Endurance, bringing the attributes to 171 and 99 respectively.

Zac soon trudged on, continuously looking through the seemingly endless tunnel system. He found a few more imp camps on the way. Not all the camps were sleeping though, and he skipped the ones who were awake for now. He was forced to eat four fireballs earlier which hurt quite bad, and didn't want to imagine how getting bombarded by twenty of those infernal balls would feel.

After traveling for an hour he felt that he should be below sea level by how much he had descended. Of course, it was hard to get an exact feeling when everything felt the same. But it opened up a new avenue of escape for him. He had been pondering whether he should build a raft to leave the island if the demon quest didn't pan out.

But the thought of being stuck at sea on a crudely built raft and no knowledge of how far he was from land soon quenched that idea. Besides, who knew what kind of monstrous things lurked in the depths after the integration into the multi-verse.

The caves felt like a safer option. Even if he found no way out, he could always back-track to the island. The only downside was the claustrophobic feeling of these tunnels. The tunnels were quite beautiful right where he was, but he guessed it was due to the high amount of cosmic energy in the surroundings. If he left this area the tunnels would likely be far more dour and oppressive.

As he continued his exploration he started to smell a very acrid odor, differing greatly from the earthy scent of the vegetation or the putrid stench of the imp camps. Intrigued he decided to find the source and started to slowly follow the smell.

After a few twists and turns, he finally managed to find the right direction. It seemed that none of the stats really improved his senses overly much, so his plethora of titles hadn't given him eagle eyes or a super sniffer. He, therefore, made some wrong turns before being able to tell what direction the smell came from.

As the smell got stronger and stronger he saw that the tunnel was starting to change. There were signs of mining activity in the area, with holes in the walls peppered about. Most of the greenery had also been ripped out, leaving only some of the luminescent moss for some lighting. It looked like the source of the smell was man-made rather than something natural.

He started to take greater care for any potential enemy or trap cropping up, but still decided to continue toward the source of the smell. As he peeked around a corner he saw a few imps milling about near the mouth of a large cave. He couldn't properly see what was going on inside the cave due to the distance, but it was well lit up and he could see a purplish smoke wafting about inside.

It would be impossible to approach without alerting whoever was in the cave, so Zac retreated to find another entrance. After twenty minutes of looking around, following his nose, he found another cave mouth, but this one was guarded as well.

He turned toward the last path he found that had a stronger smell compared to the others and tried his luck one last time. This time he was lead to a dead end, the path simply stopping after a while. The acidic smell was extremely strong though, almost to the point of making Zac lightheaded. After looking around for a while he found a small crack in the wall behind some luminescent moss.

He ripped down the moss and another light shone from the wall, but this time it was light bleeding through a small crack. It appeared he was right next to the cave, but with a thin layer of rock in between.

He tried to look through the crack but it was too small for him to see anything, so he brought out one of his thin throwing knives from his

pouch and started to carefully carve out the crack. It was a slow process as he didn't want the sounds to alert anyone inside, and it took almost half an hour until the hole was large enough for him to be able to see through.

He eagerly glanced inside, and what met his eye made his heartbeat speed up. The cave was one of the largest ones he had seen so far, being a full 30 meters across. The first thing he noticed was the large cauldron in the middle of the room, and it was the source of the smell and the purple smoke he had seen. It was almost as tall as Zac was, and held in the air by a crude rock and lumber contraption.

The source of the fire confused Zac, as it didn't produce any smoke. He only saw a handful of the raw Nexus Crystals placed seemingly haphazardly on the ground, and above them a blue-white flame was steadily emitted, heating the bottom of the cauldron. Zac made a mental note, because if he could burn crystals without creating smoke he would be able to provide warmth and cook food without having to worry about demons finding out.

Next to the cauldron were various mounds of resources. Zac recognized almost all of them as the various herbs and plants he had seen while walking the tunnels. There were mushrooms, vines and purplish grass neatly separated into their own piles. He also identified a few plants that he had seen above ground in the transformed area close to the incursion.

On a stool stood an imp, slowly stirring the contents of the cauldron with a large wooden ladle. At least he thought it was an imp, but he couldn't be sure as because it was almost as large as an adult human. But it shared many features with the imps such as its purplish skin and bat wings.

In contrast, its skin wasn't mottled and irradiated like it seemed like with most imps, but rather smooth and clear. It also wore a proper, albeit simple, robe. The most advanced clothing he had seen on an imp thus far was a dirty rag used as a loincloth, while most of them were simply naked.

It lacked any horns or ears, and as it turned its head to grab a mushroom to throw into the pot he could also see its face, making him sure he was dealing with an imp and not a demon. It had the extra set of eyes placed in its forehead, just as the normal imps.

He had found his fourth Herald. He couldn't see any other explanation than that. It looked far too different compared to its brethren, and its intelligence seemed to be on another level if it cared about things such as clothing.

Zac didn't dare to use **[Eye of Discernment]** I to make sure though, as even the normal imps could sense it when he used the skill on them.

The Herald wasn't alone, unfortunately. There currently were a group of roughly 10 imps milling about in the cave. They were sorting a pile of resources and moved them to their respective mound close to the cauldron. When an imp made a mistake it was ruthlessly slapped in the head with the boss's ladle, eliciting a scared whimper.

Zac decided to wait for a while in order to let them finish their task and then hopefully leave. Between this group and the ones just outside there simply were too many imps for comfort. But before they were even halfway done with the task a few imps entered the cave and dumped an armful each of various plants.

Meanwhile, the herald kept throwing some plant or mushroom into the pot every now and then, constantly stirring. Zac started to feel that the cauldron had to be a magic item like his pouch, as it never seemed to flow over, even after Zac had watched the Herald throw things into it for an hour by now.

It looked like the imps wouldn't leave the cave in the end. Zac deliberated whether he should wait some more or fight. By now he was more or less completely restored from his escape from the monkey Herald, apart from being covered in tender bruises. Finally, he opened up his quest page to make sure of the progress of his dynamic quest, slowly reading through it.



With all preparations done, he threw his worries and doubts out of his mind and hefted his axe.

## Chapter 53 - Blitz

The wall separating Zac and the cavern was less than a decimeter thick, and wouldn't be able to hold against him kicking it down. Luckily there were no crystals embedded that strengthened its integrity as well. He moved his axe to his left hand and gripped a throwing knife in his other.

After a few deep breaths, he put all his weight on his left leg and kicked forward with all the power he could muster. A deep thud echoed out and a large part of the wall completely crumbled. Zac shouldered his way through the newly created crevice, not caring about the few cuts he got from the sharp rocks.

He immediately threw his dagger with full force at the Herald, hoping for a quick conclusion. Unfortunately, it didn't work, as the blade seemingly combusted by itself and turned to ashes as it approached the large imp.

Zac wasn't surprised, and without hesitation pushed forward. He managed to kill two of the smaller imps with daggers on his approach, and then he was instantly within 10 meters of the herald.

The boss roared angrily and lifted the ladle, using it as a staff. A huge wave of pitch-black flames rolled outward toward Zac. Anything it touched turned to ashes immediately, even a few unfortunate imps that were incinerated since they stood at the wrong position in the cave.

A golden sheen enveloped Zac completely, and he jumped through the wall of flames. He could hear a peal of eerie laughter and a snap, then he was through the flames. He didn't hesitate and pushed all cosmic energy he was able to gather into the fractal on his hand, creating a five-meter blade which whooshed toward the herald.

The blade slammed into an invisible barrier and started sizzling, causing extraordinary pain somehow transmitting into Zac's mind. But Zac's power wasn't for show, and after a brief struggle the blade pressed on, slamming into the Herald's body.

Zac expected the Herald to be bisected, but with a shocked expression saw its seemingly simple robe light up and protect its body. The robe couldn't remove the huge momentum from the swing though, and the monster was shot into a close wall like a rocket.

Zac rushed after it and was almost upon it to end the fight.

The Herald spat out a mouthful of purple blood from the impact and screeched angrily at Zac. Its four eyes started blazing ominously, and once again summoned flames. This time nothing in the cave was safe, as black insidious waves billowed in all directions from floor to ceiling. The Herald was like a demonic sun that radiated nefarious flames that wanted to consume the world. The mounds of resources instantly turned to ashes, and the few leftover imps perished as well. The only thing that could stand the onslaught was the cauldron which seemed completely unaffected by the flames.

Zac had already used his armor's one-time defense inscription, and could only grit his teeth and force his way through the sea of fire. The fires would extinguish as soon as the Herald died, so he placed a bet that the fight wouldn't last long.

The scorching pain that enveloped him was far worse compared to the normal hellfire of the smaller imps, and it caused him to scream and stumble. The swing that was supposed to cleave the Herald in two lost much of its power and his aim got off-kilt. But he at least managed to slice one of the Herald's arm clean off spraying blood everywhere.

He shakily prepared to swing his axe once more, but the Herald had had enough. With a few flaps of its wings, it desperately tried to flee, leaving a trail of burning blood in its wake as it escaped through the

flames. Every flap of its wings caused the flames to erupt in the air, creating a natural barrier from chasing it.

Zac couldn't afford to let yet another Herald to flee his pursuit, and charged most of his remaining energy into **[Chop]** once again, and furiously swung a five meter edge after the fleeing imp. But the imp was quick and he saw that his edge wouldn't reach even when maxed out.

That was extremely bad news as the whole cave was still covered in the black flames, and they were quickly consuming him whole. If he didn't kill the Herald he would likely perish before getting out of there. Anger and desperation filled Zac's mind as he maniacally tried to increase the reach of the blade.

"REACH!" he roared as the edge was moving horizontally in the imp's direction.

Suddenly, the blade detached from his axe, and continued outward like a wave. It moved as fast as his swing did, and soon reached the back of the fleeing Herald. It proceeded and penetrated the imp without any resistance from the magic robe, Splitting its torso and wings in two.

The body various body parts of the Herald fell to the ground, and Zac thankfully saw the flames covering the cavern quickly snuff out. He didn't have time to go over the battle scene, as a gang of screeching imps entered through the entrances. Now that the hellscape had subdued, the back-up could finally enter without being incinerated.

Zac was in no mood to fight these little demons, and threw out the huge salamander carcass to block the incoming fireballs. With the newfound room, he placed the Herald's cauldron in his magic pouch and dashed out the same way as he came.

He kept running through the tunnels to create some distance from the area controlled by the imps, elated with the result of the fight. His bet had been successful.

He had planned to avoid a drawn-out fight with the Herald, and thrown everything he got on it from the start. With how dangerous the small imps were he knew that the Herald would be a true terror if allowed to fire off its attacks. He hadn't even taken time to use his **[Eye of Discernment]** on the boss, afraid it would slow him down a fraction of a second.

He had also learned his lesson from the fight with the Monkey King, ending the battle before reinforcements could arrive. Certainly, last time he had been tricked into thinking he killed all the backup until they sprang out of the ground like mushrooms. But that only showed that anything could happen in a fight, and the longer it dragged on the more variables could crop up.

With his blazing speed the imp boss only managed to shoot two attacks before he was killed, and only one of them had managed to hit him.

Zac touched to his scalp as he ran and grimaced as he felt that all the hair on his head was singed clean off. After a quick confirmation, the same held true for his eyebrows and beard. He didn't have a mirror with him but he could only assume he looked like a beggar monk by now.

His felt body felt drained and burned, and he stopped as soon as he felt the distance was enough. He had consumed almost all his cosmic energy during the fight, and the hell flames the imp spewed out burned his vitality or soul as well, making him feel truly wrung out.

He sat down on some moss, brought out a bottle of water, and opened up his status page.

**Name**            **Zachary Atwood**

**Level**            **34**

**Class**      **Hatchetman (F)**

**Race**      **Human (F)**

**Alignment** **Human (Earth)**

**Titles**      **Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500**

**Dao**      **Seed of Heaviness - Early**

**Strength**    **175**

**Dexterity**   **59**

**Endurance**   **100**

**Vitality**     **69**

**Intelligence** **49**

**Wisdom**      **49**

**Luck**            **67**

**Free Points** **3**

**Nexus**  
**Coins**            **545716**

The battle had only given him one level, compared to the almost 3 from the last Herald he killed. He currently felt he was roughly halfway to level 35. That showed just how much harder it was getting to level up the higher his level became. The only reason he kept leveling quite quickly was that his killing speed had improved faster compared to the increasing level requirements.

Before doing anything else he quickly opened his quest page as well to make sure whether what he killed was actually a Herald or not.

**Off With Their Heads (Unique): Kill the four heralds and the general of an incursion within 3 months. Reward: 10 E-Grade Nexus Crystals, E-Grade equipment, unique building depending on performance. (3/5)**

It was indeed the third Herald he killed. He sighed in relief, elated with finally having moved his quest forward. He had been looking for this boss for weeks and started to worry whether he would find it in time to complete the quest. But this part was finally solved.

He already knew where the last herald was located, and it was badly wounded to boot. The last missing piece of the puzzle was the general. Zac still had no idea how to locate and eradicate him or her, but one step at a time.

However, the good news didn't continue.

Zac closed down his quest page in order to allocate his points into Strength and Endurance as usual. This time something went wrong, however, and he was unable to put his free point into Strength. He put two points into Endurance without a problem, bringing his total to 103. But no matter how many times he tried, he simply couldn't allocate his last free point into Strength. Zac started getting a sinking feeling in his stomach, worried he might have screwed up quite badly.

It looked like he had reached his cap for Strength. This was extremely bad news as his main stat was Strength, and he automatically got 3 points allocated every time he leveled up. Would he be able to level up at all? Would he just lose those 3 points if he gained a level? What if his Dao Seed improved or he gained a new Title?

He didn't believe that 175 Strength was the limit of what was possible in the multi-verse. Those titans he saw in the vision should have had thousands in Strength from the aura they emitted. Therefore the problem came down to how to increase his limit.

Zac pondered for a few minutes and came up with a few ways that might work. The simplest method, and the one he desperately hoped was true, was that the cap would increase with a set amount of points every time he got a level. Then his problem would be taken care of. If the increase per level was low he could simply allocate his free points into more Endurance or a third stat.

But if this wasn't the case his problem got a lot thornier, because the only other method he could think of currently was getting an upgrade. Both his Race and Class were currently F-Graded. If he upgraded one of them, his limits might get increased as well.

The problem was that he had no idea how to do that. Usually, in games, you got a class upgrade when you reached a set level. Unfortunately, Zac didn't know whether this was at level 35, 50 or even 100.



As for Race, he was even more clueless. He had seen no indication anywhere what to do about race, and the only hint he had gotten that it was actually upgradeable was that the grade got added when he attained a class.

It might take a long time until he found a solution to this problem. The thought of losing tens of levels worth of attributes while he waited for getting an upgrade made Zac truly sick to his stomach.

Zac's vision started to close in on him, and his thoughts were getting scattered. Suddenly he puked out a large mouthful of blood and bile, before falling down on the ground.

*'Something else is making me sick as well'* Zac realized, just before passing out.

# Chapter 54 - Luck

Zac woke up woozy and disoriented, and his innards felt like they were on fire. A sheen of sour perspiration covered his whole body and he was weakly shaking.

If he didn't know better he'd think that he had caught a bad case of the flu. However, he felt that he should be immune to things like the flu or a common cold since his constitution improved.

His next guess was poison, and it felt far more likely. He was somehow poisoned during his fight, and it started taking effect on him after he left and settled down. His first guess would be the cauldron. He just barely touched it when he put it in his pouch, but he did breathe its fumes for a good while.

And it felt far more likely that a creepy imp was concocting poisons down in a subterranean cave rather than a healing potion. If so he felt that he scored an amazing weapon by chance. If just the run-off fumes were this poisonous, he didn't even dare imagine what the liquid inside would do.

It didn't help him with his current predicament of course. The most advanced healing tinctures in his possession were some aspirin and aloe cream meant for sunburn, neither likely to be effective against demon poison. He did have the mysterious azure water from the pond, but he didn't dare drink it in case it only made things worse. He could only hope to slowly flush it out by drinking lots of normal water.

He had no real appetite at the moment but forced himself to drink a large amount of water. He tried eating some rations as well, but his stomach started churning threateningly at the mere smell of food. He arduously moved some distance in the tunnel as well, as a pool of his puke had turned the area quite putrid.

Zac took out a Nexus Crystal and started absorbing it after he found a new resting place. Being full of cosmic energy couldn't hurt in case something happened. He actually felt that his body was getting slightly better as he was absorbing the energy, but it could be his mind playing tricks on him.

After a few hours he had absorbed all the energy he could. If he continued it would turn from restoration to cultivation, and he didn't want to gain any experience before he made sense of his situation.

The poison had interrupted his train of thought, but he was still met with the same problem, his capped Strength. If he returned to the mountain it would only take a day or so of furious monkey slaying to reach level 35, something he was loath to do before he knew his options.

He decided to slow down leveling speed for now, and even stop pondering on the Dao. He even took off his gathering array amulet and put it into his bag in order to not even passively move toward the next level.

He'd focus on his axe technique instead as that was the only safe option left. Lost over what to do he opened up his status screen again, staring at the free attribute point. He knew he likely would have to gain a level to see what would happen, risking throwing away his Strength points. But for now, he wanted to look for another method at least for a while.

His conviction of focusing on only one stat had taken a hit from reaching the Strength cap. For now it was only Strength, but Endurance would be there sooner or later as well if he threw all his points into it now that he couldn't put anything into Strength.

His eyes lingered on the other attributes, hesitating over what to do. Finally, his eyes landed on Luck.

It was an attribute he had completely put aside since the beginning, as he didn't want to hinge his survival on something as unreliable as

luck. But by now he was a walking juggernaut. The last fight was risky, but he had completely overpowered the Herald. The Monkey King wasn't his match either and only survived due to his reinforcements.

By now he could put some points into luck, as his basic survivability was taken care of. He might not be exactly sure how it would help him, as he couldn't quantify it. But since he desperately needed a solution to both his Strength-predicament and finding the general, getting some more Luck couldn't hurt.

Satisfied with his plan he placed his remaining free point into Luck, but once again was stopped from actually allocating it.

"God damn it..." he muttered under his breath. "System, could you explain what's going on?" he entreated while looking up.

It was the first time in a month he had tried to communicate with the System, but he was still ignored like the last times. Maybe the System lost interest in the world soon after the integration and left everything on auto-pilot before leaving.

He felt that the situation with Luck wasn't the same as with Strength. He only had 67 points in Luck at the moment, a far cry from the 175 point cap. All his luck came from titles, and he never allocated any points into it so far, and Zac realized that might be the only way to increase his luck.

Luck had a major difference from the other attributes. All the other stats could be improved even before the integration into the multi-verse. Strength and Endurance were the most obvious, but even things like Intelligence could be slightly improved with active training and a good diet. But there was no way to train up your luck.

If this was true then getting the titles gave an even greater advantage than he thought, as they improved an attribute that should be static. He still didn't understand how the Luck stat worked, but it

might help him win a battle against someone equally strong but less lucky.

He suddenly wished that Charisma existed as an attribute as well, as getting that stat to over 60 points might have turned him into a handsome hero instead of his current look of a bald creeper.

With a sigh he allocated the last free point into Vitality, hoping it would speed up his recovery a bit. There was one last thing left that he needed to check out. He brought up his skill window to take a look.

### Normal Skills

Eye of Discernment - Proficiency: -. A glimpse into the unknown. Upgradeable

### Class Skill

Axe Mastery - Proficiency: Early. The seed of Dao is planted. Upgradeable

Chop - Proficiency: Middle. There is greatness in simplicity.

**[Chop]** had improved as he suspected. In his fight with the Herald, he'd actually shot out the edge like a projectile, something he hadn't been able to do before. The desperation in the fight helped him breakthrough from Early to Middle stage of the skill.

He truly hoped he didn't need to be on the verge of death to improve his skills in the future, but it seemed that pushing oneself to the limits

was effective in improving not only levels and titles, but even skills as well.

As he was done with everything he could do for now, he closed his windows and helplessly closed his eyes.

It took a whole day before he could move about again, and another until he felt strong enough that he dared resume exploring.

He set course for the area where he had heard sounds of mining a few days earlier. As he approached he heard some shuffling ahead. He hid in an unlit side-tunnel, getting ready for a battle in case the imps discovered him.

To his surprise, the two imps weren't alone but accompanied by three demons. They did not seem like miners, as they all were holding weapons and carefully looked around. They all seemed to be warrior classes as none of them held staves or tomes or the like, and Zac's eyes lit up when he saw one of the demons actually held an axe of exactly the same make as his own.

He originally planned on avoiding the fight as he didn't want to rack up a body count, but now he charged at them as soon as they were within a few meters. With a **[Chop]** two of the demons instantly died, not even having a chance to react. Zac grabbed the remaining one with his free hand and threw the terrified demon down on the ground. With a mighty swing, he ended him as well, leaving only the imps standing. The imps barely managed to start summoning their fireballs before one was decapitated and the other was kicked into the wall, the force breaking most of its bones and killing it.

Zac looted the corpses then threw them into his pouch. He didn't love the idea of carrying around a bunch of corpses, but he also didn't want to just leave them lying there to be discovered. As if answering his prayer a salamander lumbered into view a few minutes later, and Zac tried throwing one of the demons at it.

It quickly snapped up the body and with a few disgusting chews had eaten him whole, the saliva creating a sickening sizzling sound as its acidic nature quickly melted parts of the body before even swallowing it.

Zac continued to throw bodies at it, and it actually managed to eat the whole party except one of the demons. But it grabbed him with its mouth, and after a glance at Zac turned around and returned to wherever it came from. It looked like the salamanders truly weren't a part of the demon's forces.

Zac continued forward, now holding an axe in each hand. He was delighted to see that the **[Axe Mastery]** skill still worked while dual-wielding the axes. But after trying it out for a bit he felt it was very hard and unwieldy to use. He preferred using only one axe, and having a free hand seemed more convenient for him. Even using a dagger in his off-hand felt more natural.

He reluctantly put back his second axe in his pouch and continued on. He might just be lacking experience, and he would have a lot of time to train his axe-work if he couldn't level up for a while. As he walked through the shimmering tunnels he finally started hearing the droning sounds of tools hitting the hard walls.

Zac knew by now the effort it took to mine the Nexus Crystals. It had taken him quite some effort to dig out only one crystal from a wall, and that was with maxed out Strength. It seemed as though the dense cosmic energy empowered the rock that encased the crystals, making it far harder than it normally was. It was no wonder that new demons kept streaming down into the tunnels from the demon town.

# Chapter 55 - Hey There Buddy

Zac wished he had a mirror to more sneakily look around the corners, but could only work with what he got. He rubbed some dirt on his face and singed scalp to cover his skin, and then wrapped some of the vines around his neck and head. Somewhat satisfied with his camouflage, and carefully peeked around a corner, mostly hidden behind a huge mushroom.

The tunnel Zac peered into contained five miners, and he was surprised to see that most of them used different means to extract the crystals.

Two were using basic pick-axes to gradually chip away at the walls. But each swing only made some tiny chippings fall, proving that their strength was nowhere near Zac's. If he used one of those pickaxes he would likely be able to slam a decent hole in the wall, even if the rock was strengthened.

Another two of the miners were actually mages, and they simply held their hands to the wall. It took some time to see what they were doing, but he saw that a Nexus Crystal slowly was emerging out of the wall after a while. Apparently, the rock was even resistant to spells, as the earth mages Zac encountered so far usually had a far easier time manipulating stone.

The last miner was slamming away at the wall with a mace, and his Strength was overbearing. Every slam created a reverberating thud that made stone chippings fly.

The miners were all demons who looked well fed and cared for and didn't really look weaker compared to the scouts he encountered. He had hoped that the demons placed their weakest in the mines, which would make Zac's next actions more convenient. But the Strength of



the mace wielder seemed to be even higher compared to the demon with the great sword and black arcs of lightning.

Next to their feet, they each had a sack of extracted Nexus Crystals. The mace-wielder's sack was filled the most and the mages were second. It was all these sacks that were the goal of Zac. He had decided to scout out the demon activity in the cave for a bit, and steal as many Nexus Crystals as he could. He wanted to see if the crystals could help him in evolving his race or class before biting the bullet and gaining a level to see what happened. He knew he was grasping at straws, but he was really out of options.

Zac based his guess on two things. First the monkey packs. The higher density of energy the packs stayed in, the larger they became. The packs closest to the valley sported the largest monkeys, and a few even evolved to the point of using skills. The second clue came from the imp that was hiding crystals in a stash. He guessed that it maybe wanted to use the crystals for evolving as well.

If the beasts could use cosmic energy to evolve, then why couldn't he? So he wanted to steal a large amount in order to experiment. Perhaps there was a method of usage that would evolve his body, but not improve his level.

Zac slunk back into his tunnel, moving further on. His target wasn't these half-filled sacs. Moving onward he spotted quite a few tunnels with miners, and rhythmic thumping on the walls filled the tunnels. He soon found a deserted tunnel whose crystals all had been extracted. He picked this tunnel and started moving through it, ascending slightly as he did. He wanted to get closer to the center of demon activities.

All these miners had sacs, but Zac never saw anyone carrying them back to the Demon City. That meant that either they were collected and put in a pouch or were left here in the caves. In either case, they should be collected somewhere.

The tunnels that had been mined looked truly bleak compared to the magical feeling of the untouched ones. Not only were the crystals in the walls removed, but most of the vegetation had also been ripped out of the tunnel. The only thing left was a smattering of moss to somewhat illuminate the area. Luckily for Zac, these exploited tunnels were completely deserted as anything of value was taken. It made it easy for him to move around the active excavations and into the inner area closer to where he expected the cave mouth to be.

He really felt thankful that his titles had improved his mental stats quite a bit. Normally he would be completely turned around after days in the tunnels. But while he couldn't exactly pinpoint where he should be in relation to the mountain, he generally knew the layout of the tunnels he had traversed and the direction he was moving. This was completely different from the old Zac who could almost get lost in his own neighborhood, and could only be attributed to either Intelligence or Wisdom.

Perhaps putting points in these stats wouldn't be a waste for a warrior, and not because it would help with his lacking sense of direction. He had been pondering on attributes a lot while healing up from the poison. If he was to throw his 1-stat-strategy out the window he needed a new direction. One alternative was to focus on all his physical stats, including dexterity and vitality as well. Find a good balance between the stats that still had Strength as the main focus, but not as lopsided as now.

But a new alternative he hadn't thought about was to start focusing on wisdom and intelligence. When he let go of his chosen path he started to think more deeply about what the various attributes could help him with, and he believed the mental attributes might help him with the Dao and Skill advancement.

If putting his free points in Intelligence allowed him to improve his Dao Seed faster and acquire new ones it might be more effective compared to putting them into more physical stats. If putting 10 points in wisdom helped him get another Dao Seed that gave 15 bonus attribute points, it was a worthwhile investment.

It might also be possible that even physical attacks needed those stats. His **[Chop]** skill was approaching the realm of magic as it could be turned into a projectile now. Perhaps Wisdom and Intelligence would help it fly faster or further, rather than Strength.

He could only put aside those things for now, and for the hundredth sighed that he had no one to ask about these things.

The sounds of battle in the distance interrupted his thoughts. Who would be fighting down in the tunnels? Intrigued, Zac moved towards the clangor. He soon arrived at the mouth of a cave and saw four huge salamanders in a pitched battle against twice the amount of demons.

Earthen Spikes were shooting at the monsters while warriors were keeping the lizards at bay. A pyromancer conjured a huge fireball that shot into the open maw of a salamander, burning it alive from the inside. It started to furiously thrash about, slamming one of the warriors into the wall, at least breaking a few bones.

It was clear that apart from the fireball the salamanders held the advantage. Had the demons met only one or two of the monsters they'd likely have been able to defeat them, but four were too many.

The warriors didn't have the power to keep the monsters occupied, and the earth mages' attacks were largely ineffective. After their kill, one of the warriors sporting a large hammer and a shield shouted something in demonic and their party started to move backward.

Zac was happy to let this play out and hid behind a boulder, but the development put him in a predicament. The demons were moving in his direction.

After some deliberation, he picked up a few rocks and started pelting the demons. With his Strength he could likely throw them hard enough to blast through their bodies like bullets, but he controlled his power output. The first stones hit one of the warriors in the neck and in the back of the head of another.

It didn't knock them out but contained enough force to daze them. In a pitched battle like this a brief mistake could be deadly, and the salamanders unhesitatingly pounced. They bit onto the two demons and after a few furious shakes threw their mangled corpses away.

A small stream of cosmic energy entered Zac, and he was delighted to see that the System only awarded a small part of the full amount to him. It looked that the system did use some sort of distribution method that somehow gauged contribution or damage dealt.

He managed to throw another stone that actually knocked one of the mages out cold before he was discovered. One of the mages screamed angrily and shot a few earth spikes toward him. But a few hastily summoned spikes possessed no danger to Zac, and he broke them off with a wave of his axe.

Zac moved forward quick as lightning and grabbed the scruff of the mage. Then with a grunt he threw her like a doll right at the warrior that ordered the retreat. She slammed into him with enough force that they both helplessly went sprawling on the ground.

The salamanders were quick on the uptake and started helping out with the pincer attack. The two downed demons were quickly dealt with and suddenly it was four demons left versus three salamanders and Zac.

With the frontline down the remaining mages were in dire straits. They desperately erected defenses against the hulking monsters, and then tried to force their way through Zac. But Zac was well versed in anti-mage tactics by now and quickly threw the pyromancer over the hastily erected wall. The mage wailed and then went quiet forever.

The salamanders weren't standing idle either, and with a roar the largest one slammed straight through the defenses and snapped up one of the demons. Another one followed and started biting one of the earth mages. The stone skin the mage used was completely

ineffective against the lizard's saliva and strong jaws, and he screamed as he was being eaten alive.

Only one solitary demon remained, and with a desperate roar he started gathering cosmic energy from the surroundings. With the large density in the air it felt like a whirlpool of energy was forming. Zac recognized that sign and immediately cleaved the demon in two from head to crotch, just before jumping for cover.

He held his hands over his head for a few seconds, but the expected explosion didn't come. Perhaps Zac managed to kill him before the energy managed to reach a critical mass. Somewhat embarrassedly he got to his feet and found himself facing three salamanders silently staring at him.

"Hey there buddy, let's be friends" Zac croaked toward the largest salamander, hoping to sound friendly.

# Chapter 56 - Ill-gotten Gains

Zac spoke to the salamanders with the same voice he used to chat with his old neighbor's dog. While he felt that fighting the salamanders wouldn't be an impossible feat, he didn't want to move closer to another level unless he needed to. Besides, who knew if they would remember him as an ally if he kept feeding them demons and imps. Having an army of giant lizards to help out against the demon city would be very handy.

One of the salamanders ignored his request for friendship and started lumbering toward Zac, who helplessly backed away with his hands held up in response. Thankfully the leader's maw opened, and a surprisingly childish squeak emerged from its mouth. The squeak stopped the advancing salamander in its tracks, and it lumbered back toward one of the demon corpses.

Zac surveyed all the corpses for anything of value. He quickly noted that none of them carried a magic pouch, and the only other gear he found interesting was the shield one of the warriors had carried. It lay flung to the side by the corner of the cave. In case he spotted anything of real value or a magic pouch he would probably have initiated a fight, but he now saw no need to.

He briefly wondered what would happen if a monster ate one of the pouches while he moved away from the cave. Would it explode like a magic piñata, spewing its content all over the place? Or would the items simply be lost? Would a tear in space occur, sucking anything in the vicinity into some unknown void?

He waited some distance from the cave for fifteen minutes until the sickening sounds of feasting were gone, and sneaked back to the site of the battle. The salamanders were gone, apart from the dead one lying in a corner. All the bodies of the demons were gone as well.

Everything that the demons had worn seemed to have been ingested together with the bodies, but things they had dropped was left where it lay. Zac went and picked up the shield from the corner and examined it. It was slightly dented and corroded from the battle, but overall in serviceable condition. He threw it into his pouch and left again, not bothering with the damaged swords on the ground.

He was happy to see that the salamanders were actively hunting the demons, as that would provide an explanation of why some demons went missing when Zac started his activities.

With gusto he returned into the tunnels, looking for some stash house or clues where the mined crystals were gathered. But after looking around in vain for some time he changed his strategy. He found another group of miners and made sure he could get to both sides of their tunnel through side-paths.

After making sure he had a good grasp on the surrounding topography he simply sat down in a tunnel close by, waiting to see what happened with the sacks. Luckily he didn't have to wait long as the group of miners had been going at it for some time judging by the bulging sacks. Zac heard footsteps and hid his face deeper among the vegetation, hiding the rest of his body around the corner.

Five demons arrived at the tunnel, with the one in the middle wearing a fancy dress and having an air of haughtiness. The four others accompanying her were clearly bodyguards judging from their attire and how they encircled her. When she arrived the miners immediately stopped their activities and saluted the lady.

With a few words she brought out a clipboard from a pouch and one by one the miners brought their crystal sacks over to her. She lifted the first one up with her free hand, and after a comment wrote something down on the clipboard. She then put the whole sack into one of the pouches in her belt.

One of the guards brought out an empty sack from a backpack and handed it out with an expressionless face. The miner bowed and

went back to his position. This process went on for two more miners without anything of note happening. But when the lady commented on the fourth miner's sack he couldn't help but grimace and hesitantly say a few words in demonic.

The bodyguards immediately perked up and started radiating a dangerous aura, but the lady waved them down. She simply pointed to the bag and said a few words with a smiling face. The miner looked horrified and went down on his knees looking like he was begging for his life.

The exchange continued for some time until finally the lady put the sack into another magic pouch, and the miner could only return to his position with a devastated expression. The other miners simply stared down in the ground, not wanting to be implicated by their mouthy associate.

After the lady was done she simply turned and left, with her four bodyguards in tow. The miners sighed and sat down to eat, conversing with subdued voices. Zac didn't linger on and instead crept behind the party of five.

*'Don't worry buddy, I'll mete out justice for you soon.'* Zac gave a silent prayer for the unlucky miner as he was skulked away. He kept a healthy distance from the group, afraid that any sound would alert the group, and the walking treasure trove would slip out of his fingers.

The group soon arrived at another tunnel with a group of miners, and the process repeated itself. Zac kept following the group for an hour and watched them collect sack after sack of crystals. He wasn't sure whether the group he first spied on was among the first the lady visited, but just going by what he had observed the pouches on her belt contained an astonishing amount of crystals by now, and could only be counted by the thousands.

Zac felt he couldn't wait any longer and got himself ready. He steadied his breath and placed himself at a side-tunnel that the party



should be passing after finishing their collection. It was some distance from the mining group, so Zac had no vision of his target anymore. However, they were moving in a very systematic pattern through the tunnel system so far, and Zac could only assume they would continue.

Sure enough, soon the tell-tale echoes of the steps of the party were approaching. Zac held his breath, not wanting to give any indication of his presence. The first two guards came into view, but Zac didn't react.

As if sensing something was wrong one of the guards started to turn around, but it was too late. Zac entered the tunnel right behind the two and without hesitation swung a Dao-empowered strike at the lady in the middle. She looked shocked, but a golden sheen immediately enveloped her as an inscription pattern lit up on her dress.

Zac knew that inscription very well by now and forcefully stopped his swing. It hurt his muscles to do so, but it was better than getting the whole force of the strike redirected at himself. Instead, he lightly punched the golden barrier, and a recoil traveled through his arm bringing some discomfort.

Having fulfilled its purpose, the golden layer shattered, leaving the lady once more exposed. Black lightning arcs flittered all over her body, but Zac swiftly decapitated her with a grunt. The black arcs traveled all over his body, making it feel like he was being electrocuted, and he actually blanked out from the pain for a second.

During the brief pause from the shock, a sword stabbed into his side, drawing a small gout of blood. The pain shook him awake, and he immediately pounced on the two guards that had stood behind the lady. They were alarmed, but still warriors. One had produced a spiked mace whereas the other's hands started glowing with lightning. From his muscles he didn't seem like a mage though, but rather a pugilist.

They tried to pincer Zac, with the mace-wielder swinging at him from the left and the pugilist attacking him from the right with a clawed hand. Zac ignored the martial artist, and instead swung his axe to meet the mace.

The collision was completely one-sided, as the force from Zac's swing slapped the mace out of his hand and made the demon lose his balance. Simultaneously the clawed hand slammed into Zac's back, easily destroying the leather protection, and trying to tear into his flesh. Unfortunately for him, Zac's skin was all the armor he needed, and the demon only managed to create a small flesh wound. The lightning entered Zac's body, but by now this level of power had scant effect on him.

He grabbed the mace-wielder's neck with his free left hand and slammed him down on the martial artist. The sounds of bones breaking could be heard, but Zac was interrupted as he planned to finish the two. A blade was flying right toward his throat, and Zac activated his armor to block it.

But he was shocked as no golden sheen enveloped him, and he could only desperately lift his arm to block the strike. The blade cut into his lower arm, only stopping after carving into bone. The pain was blinding but only served to enrage Zac. With a furious **[Chop]** the blade wielder was bisected, and then the two demons on the ground followed him into death.

He turned toward the last bodyguard only to see him desperately fleeing, heedlessly throwing away his weapon. Zac started running after him, throwing a few daggers his way. But the bodyguard was surprisingly nimble, managing to dodge most of them while running. One hit him in his back, but he only staggered slightly but kept moving.

Suddenly he started shouting at the top of his lungs, horrifying Zac. He threw one more dagger at him, but the demon turned a corner and disappeared from his vision. He could still hear the screams though, as they echoed through the tunnel system.

Zac hesitated a second, but then ran back toward the killed demons. With a furious speed he grabbed the pouches on the lady's belt, then threw her headless body into one of them. He then ran away in the opposite direction from where the screaming bodyguard was fleeing toward.

After a minute he stopped and quickly bandaged his wounded arm. It was bleeding freely and was currently creating a trail to his location. After making sure the blood didn't get through the bandages and rags he started running again. After he had run for an hour and completely left the area with mining activities or imps he finally slowed down and found a good resting spot.

The fight wasn't very taxing, but he was worried about the results. First he dragged his chest piece off his torso and inspected it. The armor itself looked whole, but the inscribed fractal on the front had multiple cracks on it. That should explain why the shield didn't materialize earlier and he got maimed instead. But a smile crept on his face as he glanced down at his belt. He knew he would be able to afford to buy a new one with his ill-gotten gains.

## Chapter 57 - Dressing up

Zac suddenly remembered hearing a snapping sound when he used the shield against the imp Herald. He had no idea how to fix the inscriptions and could only reluctantly put the armor into his bag. He didn't want to risk damaging it further until he could fix it, as it had been a great life-saving tool so far.

He then brought out the headless body from his pouch. After a great deal of hesitation he stripped the bloody dress from the body, leaving the corpse only in its undergarments. He then put the dress on himself with a sour face before putting back the body into the pouch.

It wasn't ideal, but the dress had the same inscription as his armor, and it could be the difference between life and death. The dress he put on was strapped was a neutral beige and reached down to his knees. The design was luckily armless and somewhat nondescript, making it almost look like an overly long tank top. He put his belt over the dress then turned his eyes to the pouches.

A creepy grin was slowly surfacing once again, as he grabbed the closest one of the three he looted and took a peek inside.

If this was an old school cartoon then Zac's eyes would have turned into dollar-signs by now. The bag was almost filled to the brim with sack after sack of raw Nexus Crystals. If he had to guess he'd have to say there was at least an equivalent of 10 000 crystals in the pouch. The shapes and sizes were completely random as well, ranging from the size of a finger to almost a whole hand. Most of the crystals were encased in some stone and needed one last processing before being pure.

The second bag was unfortunately empty except a few solitary sacks, likely a spare in case the first one was filled up. The third one was the personal pouch belonging to the noble lady herself. It held

various personal effects such as daily necessities, clothes, and jewelry. It also had a nasty-looking claw weapon with fractal inscriptions. Zac brought it out and tried to put it on his hand, but it seemed to have been custom made for the demoness, or at least made for ladies, as his hand didn't fit.

Most noticeably in the pouch there was a sizeable mound of raw crystals. There even were a few sacks as well. It looked like that the lady foreman was skimming off the top after all, as crystals worth a couple of hundred standard-sized ones could be found in the pouch.

Satisfied with his haul he took out some food and water from his pouch to have his dinner. As he did he started to plan his next step. He had planned on stalking the tunnels for a while longer, but unfortunately, he was already exposed. He didn't doubt that the fleeing demon soon would warn all his superiors about Zac. The demon had seen the whole fight where Zac showed many of his cards as well.

After half a month of living with the demons, he was finally exposed. It was better than he expected to be honest, as he wasn't really the stealthy type. It seemed he could only begrudgingly give up on finding any more mining foremen, and instead refocus on the monkey king. It was time to head back the way he came from, and search for an alternative exit.

But suddenly Zac got an acute sense of danger, and instinctively dove to the side. A soundless black arrow flew past him where his head had just been and a throng earth spikes followed right after. Zac scrambled to his feet and found himself face to face with over twenty demons swarming into his cave from all exits.

This clearly was an ambush that they prepared for some time, as they entered from both exits simultaneously. Feeling like a caged animal, Zac growled and immediately ran toward one of the groups, trying to avoid a pincer attack.

As if practiced beforehand, the group started to back away from him, with all the mages erecting barriers to keep him at bay. There were the translucent magical barriers accompanied by earth walls and earthen spikes. There was even a tree mage who manipulated the subterranean vines to ensnare his feet.

Meanwhile, Zac got pelted by the other group of demons with an array of ranged attacks. He could only give up his charge in order to avoid most of it. As he dodged he turned around toward the attackers who harassed him from behind and swung his axe in a mighty horizontal arc.

A translucent blade grew to four meters long in an instant and then shot toward the surprised group. Only a few in the back managed to dodge in time, and the others could only hastily erect defenses.

With Zac's power the defenses of the average demon were simply insufficient, as it tore through them one by one. The blade wasn't perfectly stable though, and after slicing through 6 demons it flickered out of existence.

Two daggers came whooshing straight behind the huge blade, one slamming into an eye and the other into the gut of another demon. Satisfied, Zac turned back and started pressing forward through the defenses of the group.

He summoned his large edge but kept it at maximum stable capacity for now. As the attacks from behind had paused from his strike he could once again focus fully on the group he had initially charged at.

He slammed the axe down on one of the translucent barriers and it cracked like fragile glass. Two spears stabbed into him as he advanced, one lodging itself in his side and the other got stuck on the bone of his pelvis.

It was two warriors who used their long weapons trying to keep him at distance. Zac ripped one of the spears out of the hands of the demon, making him stumble forward, and slammed the butt of the

spear at the other warrior. The spear broke in two and made the demon fly into the wall with a thud.

Immediately after he actually threw his axe straight in the chest of one of the mages. He didn't know which kind he was, but he died instantly from the strike. He brought out his identical axe from his pouch and continued to press forward.

A few arrows slammed into his back, but only elicited a grunt in response as he pressed forward. He once again got the prickling sensation of danger and sidestepped without hesitation. An arrow flew straight past him and once again missed his head. Unfortunately, the archer that shot the super-powered black arrows still was alive.

He kept pushing forward, and with a great leap he was within the group of demons. He ate a spear strike and two stalactite attacks by the earth mages due to his reckless charge but now he was within striking distance of the demons. Zac started madly swing his axe, with **[Chop]** charged to its limit.

He kept taking various hits but for every strike he received, he returned one in kind. And with Zac's far superior stats he whittled down the group to only 3 combatants from 9 in under 10 seconds. The survivors from the other group joined their brethren in the fight, and Zac found himself encircled by the 6 last surviving demons.

Zac was completely drenched in blood by now, both his own and the demon's, and filled with small wounds from head to toe. Almost ten arrows were sticking out of his body at various spots, making him look like a demonic porcupine. He was panting and it looked like it was a chore to keep his axe raised, but he was still standing. Fighting twenty demons at once was a bit more than he could confidently handle, even in an enclosed space like this.

None of the demons were keen on being the first to attack, as over 15 demons already had made the ultimate sacrifice and they didn't

want to be next in line. They seemed to be content to simply watch as Zac slowly bled out.

They all kept a healthy distance from him, making him unable to reach them even with **[Chop]**, and he currently didn't dare use his ranged attack due to the huge consumption of energy.

Zac knew he couldn't keep stalling and threw a dagger at one of the mages, who quickly summoned a barrier. The translucent wall shook when the dagger hit it, but it held true and the dagger dropped to the ground. Zac didn't want to throw his axe as his other one still was lodged in the mage some distance away.

Needing to break the status quo, he moved his hand down to his belt, and with underhand throw hurled a large crystal sack at another demon. The demon slightly froze from seeing a small mountain of wealth flying in his direction, and even instinctually reached out his hand to catch it.

But how could a heavy sack thrown by Zac be so easy to catch? It hit the demon who crashed into the wall behind with a wet thud. He slumped down on the ground and didn't move. The other five demons all charged at him as if by command, throwing desperate attacks at him.

With only 5 demons left Zac finally threw his axe at a mage keeping his distance. He hastily erected an earth wall, but the axe had the momentum of a meteor and passed the rising wall and blasted a hole through the mage before he could also activate his stone skin.

He took out one of his large swords out of his pouch and with a sweep slapped away two incoming spears. He then charged straight at the closest warrior. The warrior tried to keep Zac at bay with his spear, but Zac simply swung his sword at it with enough force that it broke the fingers of the warrior, and continued into melee range.

With a growl, he stabbed the great sword into the demon's gut, and with a ferocious upwards tug ripped him in two, drenching the



surroundings in a storm of blood. A second spear stabbed into his side, but it only added yet another shallow wound to the tally. The three remaining demons seemed to understand that they didn't have the power to contend with him, and simultaneously started absorbing inordinate amounts of cosmic energy.

Zac didn't want to see what a triple suicide explosion looked like, and desperately ran toward the closest target and decapitated him. He continued toward the next immediately, but as he approached a resounding explosion threw him ten meters away and straight into a wall.

Zac puked out a mouthful of blood, and his wounds only got worse. Just as he shakily got up to his knees his vision filled with a bloated demon falling down in front of him. It was the last living demoness, chock-full of cosmic energy. The demoness stared into Zac's eyes as she shed one solitary tear before she blew up with a tremendous explosion.

## Chapter 58 - Quest

The world was shaking nauseatingly and an incessant ringing filled Zac's ears. He shakily got to his feet but immediately fell down again. His state was already pretty bad, but the last blast completely messed him up. His new dress had used the golden protection just a few hours ago, making it unusable for another day.

Luckily he managed to drag a corpse over at the last second to use as a shield from the blast, otherwise, he might have bit the bullet, 103 Endurance or not. And now he was covered in a blood mush from the demon shield to boot. However the last minute protection was far from enough, and it felt like everything in his body was broken.

But he knew he couldn't stay where he was. The demons somehow knew his position, and he had no other recourse but to flee. He shakily got to his feet and collected his two axes, and only swiped up a few knives if convenient. Zac didn't dare to properly loot the bodies as he needed to put distance from the cave.

His movements were extremely slow, even if he mentally screamed at his legs to move faster. He desperately wished he had some health and stamina potions right now like in a game, but the only thing he got was a cauldron full of poison.

After hesitating for a few seconds he took out his canteen with the azure water from the pond. The water was crammed full of cosmic energy and might help him recover enough for him to properly flee from the area. The problem was that he had no idea whether it also contained something else like poison or deadly super bacteria.

Zac knew he couldn't be picky at a moment like this, and had to risk it. With a few chugs he downed a couple of mouthfuls of the azure water. It tasted sweet and cooling in his mouth, and was hands down

was the best tasting beverage he ever had. But as soon as the water entered his throat it started burning worse than the strongest spirits he knew, making him feel like he swallowed a sun rather than some water.

The burning feeling didn't abate in his stomach, but rather kept intensifying. He felt his body was turning into a pressure cooker that was ready to burst. Veins popped out all over his body and he was forced to stop walking from the intense pain. Sweat was pouring down his face like a waterfall and even his eardrums popped from the pressure.

Zac was starting to worry for real that he might explode like the demons any time now. But soon the intense pressure abated, and the scorching heat in his belly turned into comforting rays of warmth that spread all through his body.

Zac felt his cosmic energy reserves rapidly filling up, but his wounds were barely reacting to the water. He thought he might be seeing some improvement but couldn't be sure. It rather felt like he had taken a dozen shots of adrenaline and simply couldn't feel the pain any longer.

It was better than nothing Zac thought as he continued onward at a brisker pace. As he walked he dumped everything from the lady foreman's pouch onto the ground, leaving only the Nexus Crystals. He still didn't feel secure though and started to meticulously scan through the bag containing most of the crystals.

He went through them one by one to see if anything was amiss, trying to find out how the demons were able to track him. Perhaps there were bugs planted in one of the sacks he had stolen from the lady foreman, as that was when the trouble started. Soon his scanning stopped at an inconspicuous rock that was placed in one of the sacks. Most of the sacks had some rock chippings mixed in with the crystals, but this was the first time he saw a rock of that size. He brought out the sack and groped around inside until he found the stone.

As he glanced at it did not seem overly suspicious, but he could see some slightly odd veins on the stone. He brought out his flashlight for the first time and shone it on the rock. In brighter lighting he could see that the veins actually were fractals. Zac grimly stared at it for a second, before he crushed it under his foot.

He immediately backtracked a bit and changed direction. As he walked he kept checking each and every bag, and eventually found two more similar stones. Finally sure that was the last of them he sped off, ignoring any wounds protesting.

As he walked he multitasked by checking his status page. The fight with the demons pushed him over the limit and gotten him to level 35. He had already been somewhat close to leveling again after killing the Herald, and the melee was all that was needed.

His fears were unfortunately realized and he saw his Strength still was stuck at 175 instead of increasing from the class bonus. It looked like he really had to try and evolve somehow. He helplessly allocated his 3 free points into Vitality, as he didn't dare put any more in Endurance for now either.

Hoping for a class advancement quest activating from reaching a "big" level, Zac opened up his quest window next. Things weren't that convenient, as no advancement quests popped up.

He did, however, receive a new class quest.

**Loamwalker (Class): Walk a thousand kilometers touching the earth. Reward: Loamwalker Skill (0/1000)**

He suddenly was pretty happy that he didn't spend a few days to grind in order to buy **[Steps of Gaia]** from the shop. He only lacked 5000 coins for the skill by now, and could now use them to improve other things instead. **[Loamwalker]** was clearly some type of movement skill, just like **[Steps of Gaia]**.

Honestly, his class skill sounded quite a bit blander compared to the one in the shop, but he had learned not to underestimate the dull-sounding skills he received from his class. It was also very convenient to complete, as he only needed to walk around.

A slight scuffling interrupted his thoughts, and he could only bring out his axe again with a grimace. He placed himself at a corner in wait, and soon a demon came into view. This one was highly alert, and immediately noticed Zac's presence.

But Zac was ready and the axe was falling down on the demons head as just as he appeared, instantly killing him. He immediately entered the tunnel and unleashed a maximized **[Chop]** edge that flew outward before he could even register what was in the tunnel.

A few screams and groans were heard, and the demons were almost all dead before they knew what hit them. There were two that were badly hurt but alive, but Zac made short work out of them as well.

There was one final demon who for some reason had been doubled over when the edge passed through the party and was completely unharmed. Horrified he started running but Zac wouldn't let yet another straggler escape. With a grunt, he threw his axe at the demon and then started his pursuit.

Luckily this time he hit, and the party was no more. He stopped by the fallen body and ripped out the embedded axe while glancing at the bloodied tunnel. He didn't know who made the sound while walking, but that mistake cost the whole group their lives.

It looked like the demons hadn't given up the chase. They had finally identified him and seemed determined to remove the problem. He quickly threw all the bodies and gear into his empty pouch and continued on until he found a secluded cave where he dumped them all, including their things. He actually wanted to bring them with him to hide his pathing, but who knew what else the demons could detect.

His speed slowed down somewhat due to taking even greater care to be completely silent, and thoroughly checking side-tunnels. But as he moved he was steadily moving upward. Zac figured the Demons might be impeded by the monkeys if he managed to exit into the mountains again. It was easier for him to hide as a solitary person, compared to their large groups.

He saw a party again as he checked a tunnel, but this time they were moving away. Zac kept completely still until they moved far away before skulking forward. At least it was clear that they couldn't locate him anymore. It had just been a guess, but it truly seemed that those stones were some sort of tracking device.

He kept skulking forward and avoided any demons that he came across. He was lucky that the tunnels amplified sounds and it was almost impossible for a group of 10 people to be completely silent at all times.

He was forced into one more fight but ended it quickly before moving further up. After another hour he hadn't seen any demons for 30 minutes and finally sat down and brought out a crystal. He should be some ways up the mountain by now, and could happen upon an exit at any time. Even if he didn't want to stop he needed to recuperate before reentering the mountains.

The tunnels were endless and even if the demons sent hundreds of them into them it was still somewhat unlikely for them to happen upon him, as there was so much ground to cover. Meanwhile, he was afraid that the Herald had prepared an ambush for him the moment he reemerged.

So he finally allowed himself a break, eating some dried meat and then quietly waited for his wounds to get better. After two hours of quiet rest a loud ding entered his ears and forced him to his feet, warily looking around. But the area around him was completely deserted, with not a demon in sight.

**[Special Dynamic Quest activated. Emerge victorious and seize the Fruit of Ascension. Struggle for supremacy.]**

It was the familiar emotionless voice of the System entering his ears, but Zac barely had time to reflect on its words before his vision changed.

He suddenly was up amongst the clouds and stared down toward the familiar sight of his island. He could clearly see the whole topography, but the sea around it was blurred somehow. The vision moved and he closed in on the island with terrifying speed, hurtling toward the mountains.

Soon he arrived at the valley where he fought the monkey king earlier, but it looked different from how it did when he visited. The zone of death around the red and white tree had expanded to stretch across almost half the valley, and even the azure pond was shrunken down to half its size.

After having almost exploded from the energy contained in just a few mouthfuls he was shocked at the amount the tree had absorbed.

The vision kept moving and in seconds he was next to the tree. Zac would have thought it would be even lusher after absorbing the surroundings and the lake, but it actually looked a bit dried out. A couple of leaves had even fallen to the ground.

Neither the herald nor any other monkeys were anywhere to be seen, but Zac didn't ponder about it overly much as his eyes were glued to a pair of fruits that had grown on the tree. They were similar to a cantaloupe apart from their color. Instead, they were a glistening red mixed with white lines that almost looked like fractals.

The fruits were beautiful, but more importantly, they had some magical effect on him even though it was just an illusion. It felt like every cell in his body was screaming in desire, wanting nothing more than to consume the fruits. He hated the fact that he was just there in a vision, and not in reality.

As quickly as the vision appeared it suddenly ended, leaving Zac in the cave with a mixture of greed and hesitation.



## Chapter 59 - Now or Never

"That fucking monkey!" Ogras roared, this time enraged for real. No wonder it sent its underlings to keep his search parties out of the peaks. He thought it was just posturing that he'd allow for some time before setting monkeys straight. But Cindermane had likely found the Tree of Ascension long ago and just waited for its fruits to ripen. Somehow the monkey must have broken free of the clan's mental restrictions, otherwise it would have been compelled to report such a find.

"But if you think that breaking free from my grasp is that easy you're in for a rude awakening..." he muttered and then turned to his aide. "Assemble the regiments, we're heading toward the mountain."

"Yes, sir. What about the search parties in the mines?" The aid asked.

"Leave them. Hopefully they will keep that human busy while we deal with this."

He had been shocked to learn that the group of natives he discounted earlier actually was only one human. At least he hoped there was only one of them, as his power seemed high enough to give even him a headache. Of course, the human wouldn't be a threat to him if all the limitations on him were removed though.

Worse yet the human killed Qugo and stole the poison that was supposed to be one of his aces in case everything went south. Ogras had actually decided to hide the news of the third Herald's demise, afraid that his clan members would chain him up "for his own protection", while gleefully stealing all the loot Ogras had rightfully pilfered.

As if summoned by his thoughts Rydel walked in through the door, as always unheeding or dismissive of proper protocol. He wore a resplendent silver battle armor that matched his long white hair well. Strapped to his back were two swords with intricately carved hilts.

"Cousin, I assume you have seen the proclamation by The Ruthless Heavens?" he said with a smile.

"I'm not blind Rydel, of course I've seen it. The army is setting out immediately. And here on the baby planet I'm General, not cousin." Ogras spat out in annoyance.

"It is ironic, wouldn't you say cousin? It was you who championed sending the beast hordes through the gate first. But it seems they have only turned into lucrative target practice for the humans instead of paving our way, and now one of the hordes is even revolting. I wonder how the elders will react when they hear of this." Rydel smilingly continued, seemingly unperturbed by the troubling developments.

"That's not for you to worry about Rydel, know your place. I'm leading the armies myself to fix the monkey problem, and that human hiding in the tunnels will soon be caught." Ogras couldn't stand being in the same room as this thorn in his side any longer and prepared to set out.

Ogras didn't actually want to lead the army, but faced with the emergence of a D-ranked treasure such as a Fruit of Ascension, he couldn't sit still. He needed to secure it by himself, and if that failed destroy it so that Cindermane or some crony of Rydel didn't get it.

If someone from the main branch managed to get the Fruit of Ascension he might as well lay down and kill himself, as the family assassins would find him as soon as the incursion stabilized anyway. His plan was to turn the wealth of the crystal mine into acquiring a treasure like the Fruit of Ascension, and use that as a springboard to become the future hope of the clan. But if suddenly Rydel had the fruit as well, then he knew who the clan would favor.

"I'm sorry cousin, but I need to correct you on a few accounts." Rydel said while holding up a hand to stop Ogras' exit, his smile slightly widening. "The human has escaped the ambush, leaving at least thirty corpses behind by now. He also seems to have figured out the tracking stones, and now we can't locate him. Furthermore, the one who will lead the army to fix your mistakes is me, not you."

"Are you revolting against the clan precepts Rydel? You know the elders appointed me at least until the incursion stabilized. Are you sure you want to face the wrath of my grandfather?" Ogras spat out, a dangerous glint entering his eyes.

"Your grandfather is well-aware. As you were untested when appointed general, the elders came to an accord with your ancestor." Rydel retorted as he retrieved a parchment from his bag. "In certain events that are deemed to be critical to clan Arh'Rezak's future developments, the military command is temporarily transferred to me. Just to make sure nothing goes wrong due to inexperience."

The bright smile looked like a death sentence to Ogras, as he snatched the parchment with a snarl. After reading through it he saw it was true. He immediately sensed his grandfather's magic sigil on the decree, telling him that this was real. The parchment detailed certain events that would result in a transfer of leadership to Rydel, and the emergence of a D-class treasure or higher was one of them. It looked like his grandfather had been forced to make some concessions in order to snatch the leadership position for him.

"But not to worry cousin. As soon as this matter is dealt with I will return the command to you as per the instructions. I suggest you stay in your beautiful castle for now, as your safety is paramount to the clan. I have allocated a few of my guards to protect you. We have to make sure that the humans don't assault you while we're up at the mountain." A cold ray flashed through Rydel's eyes as he retrieved the parchment from the now mute Ogras. "Well then, I have a fruit to retrieve. I will be seeing you later cousin." He said as he exited Ogras' study, the last sentence rife with hidden implications.

Ogras briefly considered having it out with Rydel then and there, but soon gave up the thought. Rydel likely was ready for him, and he could also see multiple main branch members standing outside, sneering at him.

Ogras glared after Rydel, looking like a volcano ready to erupt. The aide sensed the atmosphere and made a quick excuse and fled the room, closing the door behind him.

Soon the energy left Ogras' body, and he slumped down in his chair.

"Shit."

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Zac's heart was still beating quickly after having seen the vision. He wanted to immediately rush toward the valley but first checked his quest tab.

As he suspected a new quest had arrived.

### **Dynamic Quests:**

**Ascension (Limited - Open): Seize the Fruit of Ascension upon ripening. Reward: Fruit of Ascension. [Time until ripening: 11:58:23]**

The classification of the quest was new, Limited – Open. His other two dynamic quests were classified as Unique. If he guessed correctly limited meant it was a short duration quest. And he hoped he was wrong, but he believed open meant that everyone within a certain area got it.

The system said to emerge victorious and to struggle for supremacy. Then it conveniently showed the location of the treasure a full 12 hours before it ripened. It wanted a bloodbath.

Zac slowly sat down again and took a small sip of the azure water. He wasn't in the mood to wait any longer and needed to heal quickly.

The burning sensation spread through his body again, but this time the amount was manageable. Once again he felt his wounds slightly improve, and the throbbing pain he had felt come back once again was gone.

As the heat spread through his body he pondered on what to do. He was hesitating if he should actually compete for the fruit, as going against both the monkey horde and maybe even the demons sounded like a suicide mission. He also felt he had no choice.

He didn't know what a Fruit of Ascension did, but from how it managed to create a quest it couldn't be a small matter. If his enemies got it and received a huge power-up he might be screwed. The most likely recipient would be the monkey herald as he was the owner of the tree. It was a pretty even fight before, what would happen if it evolved once more?

Besides, it also presented an opportunity for him. The fruit would help someone ascend judging by its name. It sounded awfully similar to evolve, and he guessed it might help him get a better class or evolve his race.

He also almost knew for certain he would find the Herald by the fruit in 12 hours, hopefully still hurt from his slash. Zac knew the monkey possessed high values in Strength, Dexterity, and Endurance from their fight, and could only hope that it also didn't have a strong Vitality. It also felt reasonable that the general would be there to commandeer one of the fruits. That would mean that both his targets would be gathered at one place in roughly 12 hours.

In a sense, the quest represented an all-or-nothing gambit. If he succeeded, all his problems might be solved, including his incursion quest. But the danger would likely be off the charts. If he failed his mission would turn harder, no matter who got the fruit. If he even survived.

But he felt it was do-or-die. Time was running out, and he needed to take some risks. With a steely determination, he decided to

participate in the fight.

Of course, there was no reason to rush there. He only needed to travel for less than two hours to get to the crimson tree. And getting there early would make him a sitting duck. He was only one man in what might be a huge free for all battle, and he needed to avoid attention as much as possible.

His goal should be to sneak in at the last minute, kill the monkey king and steal the fruit. If possible he should kill the general as well, or at least identify him. Then run for his life and see what the fallout was.

He sat down again on the ground, and while keeping a lookout for more demon parties only focused on getting back to prime condition. He waited a full 6 hours before he felt well enough rested to be able to give it his all.

The wounds from the ambush were somewhat healed by now, but a few wounds would likely reopen if he exerted too much force. But there still a couple of hours before he should see any action, and hopefully he would be in even better condition by then.

He set out again, and after some trial and error found a way out of the mountain. It wasn't the same path as the one he had entered through. He didn't want to dig through meters of fallen rocks, and besides it might be marked by the monkeys.

Instead, he found a tunnel that should end somewhere on the inner side of the peak, close to the entrance of the valley. It didn't actually have a cave entrance, but a few holes in the rock let sunlight through. The wall was quite thin here, and with a few minutes of effort, he would be out.

The outside was completely quiet, so Zac decided to wait some more before emerging. As he waited he started chipping at the wall with a dagger, not completely breaking through but making a quick exit easier. Finally done he sat down and continued to recuperate.

When the timer showed roughly two hours until the fruits ripened, a cacophony of roars broke the silence.

Zac heartbeat fretfully hammered in his chest as he opened his eyes and stood up. It was now or never.

# Chapter 60 - Entering the Fray

Zac Immediately got ready, even though his wounds hadn't completely healed. But between his high vitality and the numbing effects of the azure water, he was in an almost perfect fighting condition. With no more time to lose, he finally pushed down the rock wall that blocked the entrance while hefting an axe in his hand. It made quite a crash, but it was nothing compared to the roars of thousands of monkeys, with demon screams peppered in.

As soon as he got out he was stunned by the mayhem.

Zac had emerged from a secluded spot on top of an outcropping, giving him decent vantage over the peak and down toward the valley. Everywhere he looked he saw throngs of monkeys duking it out with legions of demons.

The air sparked with energy as fireballs and lightning bolts filled the sky, the ground rippled from a multitude of spears and other projectiles shooting out. Even nature itself had entered the fray as trees slowly reached down to grab unsuspecting monkeys, before ripping them apart.

The other beast types were here as well, as a thick wall of barghest stopped the monkeys from getting into melee range of the demons. They mindlessly charged toward the monkey groupings, completely heedless of their survival.

Groups of gwyllgi roamed the battlefield with far more finesse compared to the hulking demonlings. They roved in packs and struck weak spots or lone stragglers almost with surgical precision and then quickly got out of harm's way.

There also was a smattering of imps placed together with the mage demons, but to Zac, it seemed that most of them still were in their



underground dwellings, as their numbers were quite sparse. Perhaps Zac recently killing their boss had caused some sort of chaos to their ranks, making it hard for the demons to control them.

The monkeys wouldn't be outdone though, and the air was filled with flying debris, from the stalactites from the monkey captains to anything that the normal monkeys could get their hands on. Zac even saw corpses being used as projectiles, flung at the magical barriers erected by the demon mages. The barghest that came close to the monkeys were largely helpless after their first impact and were pelted and bitten to death by the angry monkeys.

The magical shields held for the most part, but every now and then they got overtaxed and shattered. The monkey captains were quick on the uptake and focused their energies on those areas. The focused fire turned the unlucky few behind the broken shield a crushed meat paste beneath a mountain of boulders.

However, most of the projectiles didn't reach the demons but rather slammed into the demon beasts who fulfilled their purpose of being meat shields.

Overall the demon's clearly held the advantage, as they steadily pushed forward. For every demon the monkey horde killed, at least five monkeys died. It still was early in the battle though, and from experience, Zac felt that the demons would run out of juice sooner or later. Those spells cost cosmic energy, while the monkeys likely could keep hurling debris for a good while. As long as the monkeys could withstand their furious onslaught long enough they might have a chance to turn the situation around.

Besides, the terrain was not ideal for organized warfare that the demons were trying for. He saw that the orderly lines were starting to splinter, and the legions forced to split up as they advanced.

Zac didn't know why it had come to a full-scale war, but he didn't complain. This kind of chaos was the best news for him. He

wondered if the monkey's disadvantage was because of him. He had thinned out their horde quite a bit after all.

Some movement in the distance grabbed his attention. It was a solitary group that emanated a pressure a notch above the other demons. They were steadily pushing forward and was entering the valley at a furious pace. None of the magic shields were breaking and the monkeys could offer no resistance to their advance.

In the front a few demons in resplendent gear were personally reaping the lives of monkeys like they were harvesting wheat. Especially attention-grabbing was one male demon with shining white hair that was dancing in the wind. He held a sword in his hand and had another strapped to his back, and as he moved forward it almost looked like dancing rather than engaged in battle. The sword moved in graceful curves and moved around him in a mesmerizing pattern. But Zac knew it was no performance art, as that demon's speed of reaping monkeys seemed to eclipse even his own.

It looked like he had located the general.

Satisfied with what he had found, he started to make his way down from the cliff. He had wrapped his head in rags to hide his features and covered as much skin as possible. Zac hoped that the demons would be too preoccupied with the monkeys to realize he lacked horns and wore shoes instead of having taloned paws.

He skirted around the main army and aimed to enter the valley from a slightly different direction. There were a few clumps of demons along the path but none thankfully reacted to him. It was lucky that the demon armies all used individual clothing and gear, making their composition look very chaotic.

As he walked around a bend he almost ran straight into a party of 6 demons. The one in the front snapped something in demonic as Zac passed, but Zac only waved his axe in response. His heartbeat quickened as he kept running, waiting for the demons to go their own way.

It seemed the proximity was too close, as an arrow came whizzing at his back. Sensing danger Zac whirled around and blocked the arrow with his axe head. Sighing he made a 180 and rushed into the demon group while he summoned **[Chop]**. The man in the front held a sword, which by itself started burning as he swung it to intercept Zac's chop. The demon hadn't imagined the power contained in the axe, as the edge hit him like a truck and breaking most of his fingers as the sword was forced away. The swing continued onward as it chopped off his upper body, and continued to decapitate the unlucky demon who stood next to him with a short sword and shield.

Zac pushed on and made quick work of the last four demons, whose feeble attempts to stop him couldn't even slow him down. After the blitz he was bleeding a bit from two small wounds, but it was nothing serious. A few of his old wounds had opened as well, but there was nothing to do about that for now. He was also drenched in demon blood, and could only hope that the smell wouldn't attract any beasts.

He slowly kept moving forward, and after half an hour he reached the forest at the edge of the valley, taking twice the time compared if he had rushed straight in.

As he moved forward he saw that the orderly war at the slopes of the mountain was turned into a chaotic melee in the valley by now. There were clumps of demons fighting monkeys scattered all over the place. In most places, the demons still held an advantage, but at a few other they got overrun by sheer numbers.

He saw an unlucky group of 10 demons getting ripped to pieces by an angry horde of monkeys. They put up a valiant defense, but two fists couldn't defend against ten, and in just moment they were mangled corpses strewn on the ground. A few of the monkeys had even ripped off a limb and contentedly chewed on it as it moved toward the next pack.

Zac tried to avoid battle as much as he could, not wanting to get any more experience until he seized a Fruit of Ascension. He stayed

clear of any larger battles, zig-zagging forward in a careful manner. Of course, every now and then he got accosted by either a group of demons that figured out his identity or a group of enraged monkeys happy to target any humanoid.

The clashes resulted in furious melees as Zac wanted to finish the battles as quickly as possible. Unheeding of energy expenditure he ravaged any party that got close with great chops using his skills. When he ran low on cosmic energy took a sip from the lake water and let the burn quickly restore his deficit. He did avoid using the Dao of Heaviness though, as he didn't have any means to restore his mental energy apart from sleeping.

Soon he arrived at the field of desolation, his body covered in a multitude of shallow wounds by now. Due to the consumption of the water he didn't feel any pain though, and still felt he was in peak condition.

The vision the system showed earlier was accurate, and a huge area was now covered in dried out and dead trees. The once lush forest was gone and replaced with a dead space.

After a quick look he saw that it only was fifty minutes until the fruits ripened. Even if he had blazed through all resistance in the forest it took some time to traverse the distance. He figured that if he ran it would take him twenty minutes or so to reach the crimson tree. He was hesitant whether he should leave the cover of the forest to enter the field as he would be completely exposed if he did.

After some deliberation, he ran along the forest edge toward the opposite side of the field. The demons should be concentrated on the eastern side, as they entered the valley from there. The army might have spread to encircle the tree by now, but it should at least be thinner at the opposite side.

When he was a bit more than half-way to the other side he veered into the dead zone and headed for the tree. He was running out of

time and needed to get to the fruits. The area was largely devoid of combatants, either monkey or demon, and soon he saw why.

As he approached the tree he saw a scene of utter chaos. The magical tree still stood tall as it had before, with the addition of the two ripening fruits. Covering it was a glimmering shell covered in dense fractals. Zac felt that the shield should be the work of the System, as the fractals felt perfect and in harmony with the universe, just like the ones on his array flags. The inscriptions on the demons' weapons were far more simplistic in comparison.

Packed around the shield was a confusing and bloody carnage between monkeys and demons. There were no lines of demarcation, no strategy, and no order. There were just hundreds upon hundreds of bodies crammed together, desperately trying to kill anything on the opposing side. They all tried to claw their way closer to the shield and the tree, to be as close as possible when the shield dropped.

Right by the edge of the shield, a few areas almost devoid of people could be seen, and in one of them, Zac saw the white-haired demon fight against the monkey king. The Herald had a few supersized monkeys by his side, and they furiously did everything they could to support their leader. It looked like the Herald was mostly healed up, but a huge scar adorned its chest now.

Every strike between the Herald and the general created rippling shockwaves in the area, keeping all the grunts at bay. The ground looked blazing hot with fire and molten rock, likely a result of the herald's onslaught.

But the general clearly held the advantage, and with dizzying swordplay was whittling down Cindermane's defenses. The large scar on his chest had started to open up, and new wounds over his arms accompanied it. Zac realized the lethality of the general, as even Zac's own mighty swings had only left a white mark on the Herald's sturdy hands. The hulking monkey captains were covered in wounds from head to toe as well, one of them even had a whole arm missing.

Meanwhile, the general still looked pristine apart from some soot marks, as though the carnage and fire in the surroundings was isolated from himself. The monkey captains were doing what they could to ease the pressure, but it seemed that they wouldn't be able to hang on for long unless something changed. Since Zac didn't want the general to kill the Herald, at least not yet, he was determined to be the change that would turn the tides.

# Chapter 61 - Pitched Battle

The ground was barely visible beneath the forces as blood and broken bodies covered most of it by now. Even fires were starting to erupt at various spots around the battlefield, likely from the attacks of Pyromancers and the Herald. With the dried out tree husks on the ground the whole valley would likely be an inferno of flames in a short while.

Zac could see that more combatants from both camps were steadily streaming in from the surroundings, and immediately joined in on the mayhem when they arrived. He checked his quest and saw that the timer showed **[00:10:03]**.

Zac once more glanced at the mouthwatering fruits glistening on the tree, and after a few steadying breaths, he charged into the frenzy. He steadily moved forward wielding an axe in one hand and a dagger in the other. He refrained from using **[Chop]** in this cramped melee, afraid to draw attention to himself.

He mainly used the axe to deflect or hook incoming swings, and finishing off the enemy with a quick stab in their throat or heart before moving forward. It was a quick and dirty method that didn't announce his monstrous Strength.

He steadily moved forward, forced to kill a combatant almost with every step. His disguise was still assisting him immensely, as it often took the demons a second to register that they weren't facing an ally. And a second was all that Zac needed to quickly and discreetly kill them.

Soon he was just 30 meters from the edge of the shield, and the area actually was getting less cramped compared to more. Every single monkey at the core was a captain, and they were furiously

fighting with various well equipped demons. The monkeys had to fight a few captains per demon, not being able to match their might.

Each battle had its own space, as the swings and shockwaves could kill, or at least disrupt anyone coming too close. Getting hit and distracted in an intense situation like this could be a death sentence, so everyone kept their backs clear.

It was obvious that the demons steadily were gaining the upper hand, as almost all the bodies on the ground were monkeys. That couldn't go on, as Zac needed the fight to keep going to a point where they whittled each other down. Zac took out a dagger and discreetly threw it straight into the back of a well-gearred demon. The make of his armor was the same as Zac's old chest-piece, only covering the upper torso, so Zac's dagger slammed straight into his back without giving the demon time to react.

The hit destroyed the demon's spine and he helplessly fell on the ground. The monkey captains immediately pounced and punched his head into the ground into it was a bloody pulp, before moving on to assist its brethren. Satisfied with his work he continued on and acted as a hidden reaper.

He still was forced to kill monkeys and demons coming too close to him, but he kept moving around to avoid getting exposed. He also kept a healthy distance from the battle between the Herald and the general, which were still going at it with extreme prejudice. Every chance he got he threw a dagger at one of the stronger-looking demons. Sometimes he got a perfect hit and actually managed to kill them himself, and at other times he managed to at least maim and distract them, allowing the monkeys to finish the job.

Soon he ran out of knives and was forced to start throwing Nexus Crystals at the demons. They weren't as effective as the knives, but with Zac's strength anything he threw could be considered a weapon. Soon the war at the center of the battlefield was starting to sway into the favor of the monkeys.



After Zac helped kill so many of the demons there currently were far more monkey captains fighting every single demon, and the extra help was often enough to turn the tides.

But the demons quickly figured out something was wrong, and a mountain of a man angrily shouted something with a piercing voice that carried over the sounds of battle, pointing a huge battle hammer straight at Zac. Many of the demons immediately spotted him, and it looked like his ruse was over.

However, he had already mostly accomplished his plan, and a great number of demons were killed due to his machinations. Also, the general and Herald's battle were reaching a white-hot intensity, and they couldn't be bothered with the scream. The Herald was quite ragged by now, and the old monkey captains had been replaced with new ones. Zac had a feeling that the only reason the monkey king was still alive was that the demons knew he was of importance to the incursion. Otherwise, Zac couldn't imagine that the General didn't have some ace to kill him after all this time.

He tried sneaking back into the chaos of the battle, but a few of the demon leaders wouldn't have it and they charged straight at him. A rock wall was erected in front of Zac, halting his escape. He tried shouldering through it but it was far sturdier compared to the walls he had encountered earlier. It held together against Zac's slam, although it sustained some cracks from the impact.

Suddenly he sank down into the ground, and couldn't move his feet. The ground had first liquefied then solidified in quick succession, making it seem like he was wearing cement shoes.

Zac didn't have time to rip himself free, as a huge mallet was falling down upon him. Through some means, the mallet was getting larger as it fell down toward his head and soon was large enough to completely smash him into a pulp.

Zac saw no choice but to infuse his hatchet with his Dao, and brought his axe in a two-handed swing, holding nothing back. Zac

had severely overestimated the demon from his size and choice of weapon, and when his axe collided with the huge mallet with a terrifying clash it flew out of the hand of the demon like a rocket. It sailed over the crimson tree and landed somewhere on the other side of the battlefield.

Zac was startled, but not as startled as the demon. He wasted no time and slammed the axe haft down on the demon's shoulder, and then used the spike on the back of the axe head as a hook to pull him to melee distance. As Zac dragged him close he ended the demon with a quick stab in his throat with his dagger, and then used the body to intercept a few ranged attacks.

The force from the weapons colliding had actually cracked the ground he was standing on, freeing him from the binding. He located the earth mage some distance away and grabbed a monkey captain by its arm.

The monkey captain furiously slammed his fist in Zac's chest, but Zac only took it with a grunt before he lifted the huge monkey up in the air and threw him like a boulder at the demon mage. The earth mage hastily erected another wall to intercept the monkey projectile, but the force behind the beast powered through it.

Zac was not far behind as he entered the wall through the breach and with a quick chop decapitated the demon, who didn't even manage to activate his stone skin skill in time.

Zac moved on toward the next demon who had tried to gang up on him, but a blinding light interrupted his plans. It was the large shield covering the tree that started to shine many times brighter compared to before.

Zac glanced around and when he saw no one was attacking him at the moment he brought up the quest skill again and saw the timer go down from 2 seconds to 0. With a bright flash, the shield immediately winked out of existence, exposing the tree to hundreds of greedy eyes.

No one moved for a split second, before all hell broke loose. Everyone started rushing toward the tree, holding nothing back. Even demons were hitting other demons in a struggle to reach the fruits.

Zac wasn't any different, and taking full advantage of his close proximity to the tree he pushed forward, driving massive amounts of cosmic energy into his legs. The ground cracked with every step he took, and it would be more accurate to say Zac pushed himself forward by slamming into the ground with his feet rather than running. He summoned **[Chop]** and killed any monkey or demon getting too close, and soon he was almost underneath the tree's branches.

Zac was among the first but he was still behind two individuals, Cindermane and the dazzling general. Both had already moved toward the fruits, their arms reaching to grab them first. The monkey king had actually created large lava pillars that lifted it up toward the branches, and the general somehow stepped on black arcs of lightning as he moved upwards through the air.

Zac knew he was out of time and with a roar he created a huge edge with **[Chop]** and unleashed it at the two. It seemed that no one of the other camps dared intervene with the two in the forefront, perhaps afraid that they would inadvertently ruin their leader's plans. The edge shot up at the two, cutting a few of the crimson branches on the way.

The Herald screeched and looked horrified as he stared at the incoming edge, and actually missed his steps and fell down from the pillars it created. It appeared that Zac's last chop had left a shadow in the Herald's mind.

The general looked surprised to be ambushed at this moment but still managed to smoothly dodge it. He was far up in the air by now and only needed one more step on the black lightning steps to reach the fruits. Desperate, Zac infused his axe with the Dao of Heaviness and hurled it at the demon. The fruits were 5 meters up in the air, so

Zac and the general were extremely close. With Zac's power, it almost looked as though the axe teleported as it slammed into the general.

The general had skillfully blocked the strike with his sword, but between Zac's huge strength and the Dao of Heaviness, the momentum of the throw wouldn't be denied. The demon was forcefully pushed away from the tree and the shockwave destroyed most of the branches of the tree.

Even the branch which held the two Fruits of Ascension were broken off, and they were falling straight toward Zac. Not wanting to waste such a God-given opportunity he jumped up in the air and snatched the fruits, and immediately stashed them into his pouch.

He couldn't believe how easily he had acquired the fruits, it looked like 67 Luck wasn't just for show. But the elation of getting the treasure quickly dissipated, as hundreds of murderous glares focused their suddenly undivided attention on him.

# Chapter 62 - Crescendo

Zac brought out his second axe from his pouch, nervously glancing around. His plan had been to kill the Herald as well, but being stared at by hundreds of hungry eyes quickly extinguished any desire to remain. For a second he thought about throwing out the cauldron but soon discarded the idea.

The run-off fumes from when the imp Herald was concocting the poison was enough to do a number on him, and he didn't dare imagine what the finished product would be like. Unfortunately, he had no method to control the dissemination of the poison, and best scenario he managed to kill some of the demons. But that would still leave him to fight his way out against the survivors, now with one less ace in the hole. Worst case scenario the poison took too long to activate, or he poisoned himself as well, dying in a bout of friendly fire. The poison would have to be for when he truly was out of options as the last Hail Mary.

Zac instead shot back away from the tree and started cutting his way out of the packed masses. But how could leaving with the treasure be so easy? Combatants from both camps furiously impeded his path, and he was immediately beset by attacks from all directions. New wounds joined a litany of old ones, and even with Zac's great constitution, he was starting to feel the pressure.

With a furious roar he overcharged **[Chop]** and created a wide circle of death with a radius of 6 meters with one fluid motion before he pressed forward. But he only managed to take one step as an intense hair-raising danger made him turn around.

A silver sword was aimed straight at his throat from behind, and Zac barely had time to block it with the enlarged edge of **[Chop]**. The power of the strike was enormous, and Zac was flung back from the

force. He didn't even have time to land as a molten spear struck him in his back, the searing pain eliciting a howl.

Neither the Herald nor the general were ready to give up the fruits, and for a second put their differences aside in order to hunt down Zac. The same couldn't be said of their underlings of course, as their furious melee quickly resumed after the fruits were snatched. The monkey horde was once again starting to lose control of the situation, but this time Zac was too occupied to do anything about it. The fires started to grow, and soon the whole valley would likely be consumed in a conflagration.

Zac was in no position to worry about his island burning down, as he currently had two formidable foes to contend with. With steely eyes he activated chop to the limit he could sustain it and charged at the duo. With a roar he swung the axe in an upwards curve, rending a huge gash in the ground as he did. The edge flew toward the general, who Zac estimated to be the most formidable foe.

With a slanted blade the demon managed to nullify most of the force and redirected the swing upward. He then immediately followed up with a quick forward stab aimed straight at Zac's heart. Zac barely managed to inch his chest to the side in order to avoid the blade, but it still tore a bloody gash along his chest. The sword had to be of superior make, as it actually ruined the inscribed dress he wore over his armor. If Zac had known this would happen he would have immediately used its charge instead of holding out for a more threatening situation.

The Herald wouldn't miss the opportunity either and spat some magma in Zac's direction. Most luckily missed, but some splattered on Zac's arm, and some nauseating sizzling could be heard. Zac could only press forward, hoping to end things quickly.

He used every trick he had learned from **[Axe Mastery]** trying to get past the sword of the general in order to do some damage. Each swing was imbued with all the strength he could exert, and wailing

sounds of his axe filled the air. He even swapped between using his Dao and using **[Chop]** trying to disrupt the general's rhythm.

But it seemed that nothing worked against the demon. He smoothly deflected or dodged every strike that Zac put out, not even looking strained. His strength clearly wasn't at the same level as Zac's, but he made up for it with skill with the blade. Still, Zac judged his Strength to be far above 100 though, as every strike with the blades created terrifying collisions, the shockwaves keeping any fire out of their way. The ground beneath their feet kept cracking and getting destroyed as well.

Even more dangerously it looked like the demon also possessed a Dao Seed, or at least was beginning comprehend one. His strikes contained a sense of sharpness, and the shockwaves from his strikes actually cut small wounds on Zac's body when the air hit him.

The Herald had gone somewhat passive, content in letting the two duke it out for a bit as he recuperated. By now it likely knew that it was not the match of either one of the two combatants, and probably hoped they would kill each other. It threw the occasional spear or boulder at Zac, but rather focused on helping out his brethren against the demon army. A few demons had tried to join the general in his battle against Zac, but the Herald luckily killed them as they came. Unfortunately, the General was in no need of backup and was doing just fine on his own.

Zac was steadily accruing wounds from his fight with the demon, as he wasn't able to dodge his lightning-quick stabs. The best he could do was to avoid the sword hitting fatal spots by adjusting his body. Even worse, the general was one of the demons who used the black lightning attacks.

He used it far more freely compared to the first demon he had met. Every strike contained the biting sting of the arcs, and the lightning was actually slowly accumulating inside Zac's body. His arm suddenly jerked from the shock, completely exposing his chest. The

demon was prepared, and with a lunge stabbed his sword straight in Zac's chest.

Lightning poured freely into his body, and Zac coughed up a mouthful of blood from the damage. He normally might have passed out from the pain but the lightning kept him awake. To make matters worse lava spikes erupted from the ground between Zac's legs from a stomp of the Herald.

Surprisingly, the spikes shot toward the general, with the largest one aiming straight towards his exposed heart. It looked like the Herald had been waiting for an opportunity for a double knock-out. However, the general simply snorted and from nowhere all the spikes were cut into pieces. Hovering next to him was the sword that the demon had kept on his back throughout the battle.

It crackled with black lightning and seemed to have no problem with defying the laws of gravity. It hovered a few rounds around the general before it returned into the scabbard on his back on its own.

Abruptly the spike on the back of Zac's axe head slammed into the temple of the Herald, instantly killing it. Zac had taken advantage of the brief pause in the Herald after its attack and used it to mount a surprise attack. Zac had consistently focused all his energy on attacking the general thus far, and the Herald had grown lax. He hadn't actually planned on killing the Herald before the general, but he saw an opportunity and took it.

A huge surge of cosmic energy entered Zac's body, and he felt himself gain another level. There was no time to go over it though, as the general renewed his attacks on him. Zac once again found himself at an impasse, steadily losing ground. The chest wound was creating trouble for him to breathe and move freely as well, and the fight turned even more one-sided. He wanted to somehow create an opportunity to flee, as he had accomplished all he needed for now. But the General would barely let him breathe, let alone leave the scene.



A tremendous amount of roaring erupted in the surroundings as well. The monkeys lost their minds upon seeing their leader fall and started madly swing at everything around them. In their madness they completely gave up on defense and started dropping with even faster speed compared to before. One after another the monkeys died, becoming food for the expanding fires. The flames hadn't died out due to the death of the Herald, instead truly becoming a force of their own as they spread over the dried leaves and husks.

Zac desperately tried to swing faster and with more power to turn the tides, but the general felt like an impenetrable wall of deft blades. As he kept fighting and swapping back and forth between **[Chop]** and the Dao, something suddenly clicked in his mind, and he once again summoned out the fractal blade.

This time it was different as it held a darker hue and emanated the aura of a lofty mountain. Even the fractals on the edge had grown denser, weaving another line of inscriptions along the edge. He finally managed to integrate his Dao with his skill, and the result wasn't as simple as one plus one equals two. Something new was born out of the fusion.

With renewed vigor Zac roared and furiously swung his axe at the general, aiming to end it all with one strike. It was a huge overhead swing aimed at the demon's head, and it carried the aura of a falling meteor.

The demon immediately sensed something was wrong but didn't have time to dodge. Looking serious for the first time, the demon roared as the sword on his back flashed into his free hand, and he held up both his swords in the air in order to block the strike.

Just another sword wasn't enough and the force slammed him down to his knees, the impact blowing any debris or bodies in the surroundings far away. The general tried to deflect the force, but the Chop of Heaviness was intractable as it pushed his blades down. A golden sheen flashed into existence around the demon, but it only held for a second before it cracked. The force in the strike contained

everything Zac had learned and gained so far, and a flimsy armor inscription wouldn't stop it.

An amulet around the neck of the demon started shining with a blinding light, and a silver shield winked into existence next. It looked like the shield of a celestial, as it shone with brilliant fractals as it met the oncoming axe.

The collision didn't create a huge impact as Zac expected, but it rather seemed the shield somehow absorbed the momentum. After the strike the shield started to crack, and the general groaned miserably as a crack could also be heard in his right arm. It looked like using that amulet didn't come without its price. But it was sufficient to stop Zac's monstrous swing.

The general didn't seem lax as before, and with an angry roar and his hair in disarray, he got to his feet. With a couple of furious slashes he created some distance from Zac, then pointed his sword towards the sky. His second blade crackled with an extreme amount of lightning and rapidly flew over ten meters up in the sky. The lightning kept expanding around it, creating a wide field of a lightning hell-scape.

The black arcs changed and actually turned into sword silhouettes covered in fractals. It reminded Zac of his own cosmic energy edge, but the danger he felt from the roughly hundred swords sinisterly hanging above was above anything he had felt thus far. The general didn't pull any punches anymore and wanted to completely eradicate him.

The lightning blades started falling towards Zac like a heavenly punishment. Any one of the blades could kill Zac if it hit, and there were over a hundred of them incoming. Knowing there was nowhere to hide from the strike, Zac could only fight it head-on. Cramming all his remaining cosmic energy into his fractal on his hand he created his largest edge thus far, sporting almost 8 meters long blade. It was imbued with the Dao of Heaviness, and with a roar of defiance, he launched it like a projectile up against the sword rain.

For a second it felt like a colossal mountain rose from the ground to intercept the heavenly thunder above, in a struggle between the Heavens and Earth. The collision was earthshattering and the chaotic energies temporarily blotted out the sky. Errant lightning blades fell all over the area, killing and maiming monkeys and demons alike.

Zac had managed to avert most of the attack with his colossal edge, but he was completely drained and his head hurt. Furthermore, his swing wasn't able to destroy all of the falling blades and he found himself impaled by multiple lightning swords. The general was panting as he walked over to Zac, one arm hanging limply to his side. He didn't look like he had much fight left in him either, but it was enough to finish Zac off.

His second sword floated above his head, looking like a sinister scorpion's stinger. Its crackling lightning had dimmed considerably, but it still held a strong killing intent within. Their eyes met for a brief second and the sword shot down towards Zac's head. He tried to muster up a response, but he could only feebly lift his axe in an attempt to avert the incoming sword.

A spear of complete darkness suddenly emerged out of the general's chest and lifted him up in the air, forcing him to puke out a huge amount of blood as his body started spasming. The sinister looking weapon had truly impaled him, and likely completely obliterated his heart.

Behind the general a nondescript demon in average gear was standing, with a determined glint in his eyes as he looked upon his dying leader. The general arduously turned his head and when he saw his assailer his eyes shrunk to a needlepoint.

With his last breath, he let out a ragged roar that covered the whole battlefield, garnering the attention of all the combatants.

"OGRAS!!!"

## Chapter 63 - Purple Haze

The sinister blade that was supposed to end Zac's life powerlessly fell to the ground as the general died. Zac mutely stared at the impaled demon, unable to comprehend what was going on. The same seemed to be true for the hundreds of demons who watched the betrayal. They stared blankly at the scene until they were awoken by an angry roar from one of the well-dressed leaders.

Suddenly a murderous air filled the air as multiple demons were screaming and pointing their weapons at Zac's unexpected ally. The demon stood up from his hunkered position as he looked around at its supposed allies with a sneer. He threw away the corpse of the demon leader like it was trash with a whip of his lance after looting his pouch, and then turned toward Zac with a half-smile.

Suddenly the killer took something out of his pouch and popped it into his mouth. Unsure of what was going on, Zac shakily got ready for another round of battle as he finally scrambled to his feet. The wounds where he was impaled by the lightning blades screamed in protest, but he forced himself to stay upright. He looked at the demon in front of him with a dubious expression, wondering why this man saved his life. Zac's eyes widened as the demon unexpectedly puked out a huge amount of blackened blood, and fell over to the ground. With a few spasms he lay dead next to the general.

"WHAT?" Zac exclaimed, completely unable to follow the quick turns. Was the man an assassin or a member of a death squad that some rival demon group had sent after the general? But why would they want to ruin their own invasion? From what Zac understood the incursion would close the moment the four heralds and the general were dead.

But he could only put aside his doubts for now, as he was completely wrung out but still surrounded by hundreds of demons. At least they

looked shell-shocked by the turn of events as well, as they hesitantly stared at the two corpses on the ground. Zac used this brief respite to quickly take a swig of the azure pond water, the familiar burning sensation quickly spreading through his veins, temporarily muting the blazing pain in his various wounds. He knew he had to treat himself real soon though, as he was starting to feel woozy from blood loss, even with the water strengthening him.

Just as he put away the bottle the assassin suddenly spasmed again, and with a few wretched coughs he rose from the dead. Zac didn't want to take any chances, and started to advance on the zombie demon.

"Wait human, we are on the same side" the demon croaked as he weakly scrambled to his feet.

Shocked at hearing something else than demonic for the first time since he met Abby, Zac paused and hesitantly stared at the demon. The surrounding demons suddenly woke up from their stupor and started angrily screaming at the assassin again, which was completely ignored by him.

"We don't have time for a chat human, you should have a cauldron of poison from the imps. Throw the contents into a fire if you want us to survive" he continued.

"Why should I believe you? Why did you kill that man?" Zac questioned, loath to just follow some stranger's instructions. He glanced around and saw that most of the demons were closing in, except for a few who were taking care of the leftover monkeys.

"It doesn't matter. Unless you do something we're dead. Even if you drink the whole bottle of the Cosmic Water your wounds will kill you before you're out of this valley if you keep fighting." The demon interjected, having seen through Zac's original plan of trying to slash himself out with the help of the azure water. An arrow whizzed past Zac head as a reminder he was strapped for time, and he needed to act fast.

After hesitating for a while he decided to comply with the suggestion. He subconsciously knew he wouldn't make it out, as the only thing keeping him on his feet was the temporary boost from the water. He had held off until now, but it was Hail Mary time.

He brought out the large cauldron, and with a grunt threw it into one of the fiercest fires created by the Herald. The contents spilled out over the fire, and instantly a huge purple cloud, far more sinister compared to what he had seen in the imp Herald's cave, swelled out. The poison vapors created in the caves had only been from the small fires underneath the cauldron heating the concoction, but this time the poison was actually burned instead of heated up. It looked like it fused with the smoke of the raging fires, and quickly spread outward.

"What now?" he asked as he turned to the mysterious demon.

"Now I wish you the best of luck human" the demon answered with a slight smile as he popped another pill into his mouth. It was a different type of pill from the one that temporarily killed him, giving out a refreshing herbal scent. He then took one step and disappeared into thin air.

Zac got a sinking feeling as he turned back to the cauldron. The fire was spewing out purple gasses in a terrifying volume, and it quickly expanded outward. Judging from the horrified faces of the demons he realized he might have made a big mistake. Not wasting any more time on the enigmatic demon, he madly ran for his life back toward the forest. He stumbled and couldn't keep a very high speed even powered with the water, and his wounds kept bleeding as he ran for his life. With the mountain winds helping, the poison cloud would likely soon envelop the whole valley judging from its rapid expansion.

Only a few of the demons bothered with Zac after seeing the expanding purple haze, and instead fearfully dashed away from the battlefield, unheeding of any wounded comrades screaming for assistance.

A few of the wounded demons went for Zac with madness in their eyes, bent on taking him with them to hell. However, most of those who had given up fleeing were even more wounded than Zac, and could only helplessly glare at him as he stumbled away fueled by the azure water. An errant arrow hit his back, but Zac only grunted and continued on.

But the cloud moved too fast, and soon it was right at Zac's heels. As he ran he took out a rag from his pouch and put it over his mouth, hoping it would at least provide some protection against the approaching cloud.

Just before the cloud overtook him, he took one last deep breath of fresh air. Soon after the world turned purple, and a stinging sensation made his eyes tear. He couldn't see very far ahead anymore but could only keep moving forward as long as the air in his lungs let him. He madly dashed as quickly as his broken body allowed toward where he remembered the closest peak to be. Still, he knew it would take over 30 minutes at his speed to get there, and even then he might not be safe.

The wounds of his body seemed to be entrances for the poison as he started to get nauseous even though he kept his breath so far. After a while he couldn't hold on any longer and was forced to inhale a lungful of poison. He immediately started getting extremely woozy, his power quickly leaving his legs. The strength of the poison truly was on another level compared to the fumes down in the Herald's cave.

As he started despairing over what to do the familiar sight of the magical pond entered his vision. He lacked the luxury of having time to think things through, and immediately jumped into the azure water. He would have to risk meeting a pond monster, as even a few more breaths of that poison would kill him.

He planned on swimming down to the bottom of the lake and hopefully find a passage down into the mountain. Since the water was crammed full of cosmic energy Zac guessed it was connected to

the crystal mine somehow. But he only managed to swim for 10 seconds deeper into the pond before his whole body felt like it was on fire. It was the water, as it seeped into his body through his wounds, and perhaps even his pores.

The heat quickly became unbearable, but it only kept building up. Meanwhile, his insides were churning from the poison, only adding to his misery. Zac's whole body started to swell up, and in seconds looked completely bloated. His whole skin was red and if he wasn't underwater he'd likely be steaming from the heat.

Zac felt hopeless and desperate. It was heartbreaking to think that he actually managed to defy all odds and beat the incursion, only to end up in this situation. He had killed the four heralds personally, and even helped set the stage for the general's death by destroying all his protective treasures and forcing him to expend all his energy in the fight. Almost two months of ceaseless life-and-death struggles, only to explode from over-ingesting super-water.

Completely unreconciled, Zac made one desperate attempt to survive. He grabbed one of the fruits from his pouch and tore into it with his teeth. An unimaginably sweet taste exploded in his mouth and made him almost forget that he was dying. It was by far the tastiest thing he had ever eaten, and it felt like he was munching on something that gods feasted on in ancient stories. As he swallowed it a fresh cooling sensation entered his body, immediately sweeping the poison away.

He devoured the fruit completely apart from some juices that leaked into the water, completely frenzied from the taste. He even accidentally swallowed some water with the fruit as he forgot himself from the otherworldly deliciousness. The cooling sensation spread throughout his extremities as he feasted and actually started combating the burning sensation from the magical water.

Zac was relieved as it looked like his gambit had been successful. But the relief didn't last for long as his body quickly started to go from blazing hot to freezing cold, over and over again in quick succession.



Two forces were fighting for supremacy, and the ravaged battlefield was Zac's body.

Even though he was underwater he couldn't stop himself from desperately screaming in pain, with even more water filling his lungs. He couldn't even register it as the pain was all-consuming, far worse than getting burned or stabbed in his chest. With every change in his body, it felt like his cells were melted down into a puddle, then frozen solid again by the freezing cold of the fruit.

Zac sensed that his spirit could collapse at any moment, and every second felt like an eternity for him. Soon he couldn't take it anymore and brought out a dagger from his pouch. With his last energy stabbed it toward his throat, hoping to quickly end the suffering.

The dagger tore into his throat and then sunk to the bottom of the lake as Zac let go with relief. He felt a sting of shame when thinking of his family that he never was able to save, but he felt they would understand if they knew what he was going through.

But the sweet release of death didn't arrive. The wound closed with visible speed and soon his neck was as good as new. Zac despaired, not knowing what to do. His body wouldn't listen to his commands anymore, and his brain was overtaxed by the pain signals bombarding his synapses.

The continuous changes in his body kept on going uncaring about Zac's plight. Finally, his eyes rolled up into his head as he passed out into blissful darkness, and as he fainted his body slowly kept descending into the depths.

# Chapter 64 - Taking Stock

With a scream Zac woke up from his head hitting a sharp rock formation. Groggily he tried to orient himself and found that he was bobbing about in the azure water in a cave. Afraid that the burning pain would start again, he quickly scrambled up on a piece of dry land.

His body felt surprisingly good after all it had gone through. The mental scar from remembering the excruciating pain was far worse compared to anything his body was actually experiencing right now. Just thinking about it caused his hands to shake and almost made him cry. That had been too harrowing, far worse than risking his life in any of the fights or the pain from getting wounded.

It took some time for him to regather his wits before he finally looked at his surroundings. He was currently in a decently large cave that was 10 by 20 meters. Almost half of it was submerged in the azure water, and the other half was crammed full of subterranean plants. It made sense, as Zac had never encountered any tunnel or cave with a density of cosmic energy that could compare to where he was.

It was as though the boost from the crystal mines below had fused with the boost of the lake and created something even more intense in the enclosed space of the cavern. Zac was unsure of how he had gotten here. After snatching the fruits he had fled the purple cloud of death and jumped into the mysterious pond. After that everything had turned fuzzy, apart from the very real memory of the pain.

He could only guess that some stream brought him down into the depths of the mountain while the Fruit of Ascension kept him alive. Even though he felt generally restored, he wasn't ready to set out, as there were many things he needed to check out after the cataclysmic final battle.

**Name** Zachary Atwood

**Level** 36

**Class** Hatchetman (F)

**Race** Human (E)

**Alignment** Human (Earth)

**Titles** Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500, Planetary Aegis, One Against Many

**Dao** Seed of Heaviness - Early

**Strength** 189

**Dexterity** 69

**Endurance** 130

**Vitality** 84

**Intelligence 57**

**Wisdom 57**

**Luck 77**

**Free Points 3**

**Nexus  
Coins 746317**

The first thing he noticed was that his strength now was at a full 189 points, having increased by 14 points since he last checked. He had actually broken past his limit of 175 points, and could only attribute it to the fact that he luckily evolved to an E-ranked Human according to his status page, whatever that meant. He did a quick check all over his body and was relieved to find there were no wings or other new appendages that suddenly grew on him. He even checked between his legs and was half disappointed and half relieved that no evolutions had taken place there as well.

He didn't really feel any different, but he guessed that he would find out sooner or later what it meant to get a higher race class. He at least knew it helped him increase the limit of his attributes, which was one of his most important goals.

He had also gained two new titles, and he brought up the title menu to check it out.

**[One Against Many: Fight against 500 warriors of the same tier and survive. Endurance +10]**

**[Planetary Aegis: First to stop an incursion in world. All stats +5, All stats +5%]**

The first one was not bad, a nifty reward for staying alive through those odds. He guessed that there were tiers to that title, and he'd have gotten a better one if he actually defeated them rather than fleeing after throwing out a bunch of poison.

The second was even better, and the fifth one he possessed that gave a percent boost to all stats. The title didn't mention anything about solo kill like some of his other titles and he wondered if it was because he actually wasn't the one who killed the general.

He couldn't be bothered about that mysterious demon right now, even if he could speak human language and seemingly had helped him. Zac was sure the demon survived from how he had acted before disappearing. Since there only were so many places to go on the island Zac figured he'd find him sooner or later and get his answers then.

After having checked the title he closed the panel and did some mental calculations. He realized that he actually had missed out on another 3 points of Strength when he turned level 36. He still received the stats from the new title though, which confused him a bit, as he should have received the title before he evolved and broke his attribute cap.

He was also a bit surprised with the amount of Nexus Coins he amassed from the battle. He had gained roughly 150 000 from his whole day on the battlefield. While it was not a small amount by any means, it still didn't feel like it added up. That poison cloud should have killed hundreds, if not thousands, in the valley. Only the strongest combatants had been right by the tree, while the rest were spread out through the valley. Perhaps a few of the speedier ones had managed to escape, there couldn't be too many survivors with how rapidly the purple cloud had expanded.

Zac shuddered at the thought of having poisoned hundreds of beings to death but forcibly threw the thought into the back of his mind. Either all those kills didn't actually improve his level or give him coins, or they all were still alive.

Zac was convinced that they died from the poison. Just one breath of the poison cloud made him who had over a hundred endurance keel over, and he couldn't imagine normal demons or monkeys survive that. Furthermore, he had seen the horrified looks on their faces when they saw the billowing purple clouds.

Zac briefly considered trying to swim through the pond to get back into the valley, but soon perished the thought. Even if he managed to actually swim through the water now, the poison might still be up there.

Suddenly a thought popped up into his mind, and he opened the quest screen.

## **Active Quests**

### **Dynamic Quests**

Off With Their Heads (Unique): Kill the four heralds and the general of an incursion within 3 months. Reward: 10 E-Grade Nexus Crystals, E-Grade equipment, unique building depending on performance. (5/5) [COMPLETE]

Incursion Master (Unique): Close or conquer incursion and protect outpost from denizens of other alignments for 3 months. Reward: 5 E-Grade Nexus Crystals, outpost upgraded to town, status upgraded to Lord. (0/3) [43:12:32:11]

### **Class Quests**

Forester's Constitution (Class): Fight in the forests, be one with nature. Reward: Forester's Constitution Skill. (8/30)

Loamwalker (Class): Walk a thousand kilometers touching the earth.  
Reward: Loamwalker Skill. (0/1000)

Zac sighed in relief, as the first incursion quest finally could be confirmed as complete. This had been his goal since Abby's warning, and it was thankfully done with after almost two horrible months. He already had been pretty sure he completed it the moment the general got impaled, but it was nice to finally see it set in stone.

He was also relieved to see that the quest said [COMPLETE] instead of just disappearing, as that meant the system hadn't spit out the reward somewhere while he was unconscious. As one of the rewards was related to his outpost he assumed he would have to get back to his camp to collect them.

The next quest had gotten a timer just like the limited quest. If he read it correctly he either had to finish it within 43 days or something would happen in 43 days.

Finally, he was surprised to see that the Loamwalker hadn't progressed at all since he got it. He wasn't exactly sure how far he ran yesterday, but he had been pushing it pretty hard with his inhuman stats for a few hours, so he felt that he should at least have ran a marathon on the mountain slopes. And walking on a mountain should constitute touching earth in any sense of the word.

After a brief hesitation he took off his shoes and threw them into his bag. He was reminded of the man in the vision, and could only try copying him. Perhaps his soles had to actually physically touch the earth for it to count, and if true he wondered what that meant when using the skill in the future. Would he become a barefoot warrior in the future just like the axe-man? At least his endurance was high enough that his soles wouldn't get cut or damaged even if walking around on glass shards.

Satisfied that he had gone through everything for now he brought out some food and water. He was generally happy with the progression, but also a bit pissed off that that harrowing experience in the water hadn't done anything except boost his Race a level.

From how precious the Fruit of Ascension appeared he thought that the fruit alone would be enough to ascend a stage, but with the harrowing molding his body had gone through he figured he should at least have been awarded some bonus attributes or a title. He wondered if the System had a complaint department he could contact, as its rewards weren't balanced.

Internally grumbling he tore into a piece of dried meat and he was surprised to see that his appetite was simply monstrous, and he ate a couple of kilos of meat before he felt satiated. Looking at his slightly protruding belly he wondered if evolving your race meant that you got a separate dimension tucked into your stomach.

Finally all set he stood up and ventured out. He had after some deliberation chosen to head into the tunnels instead, as he simply refused to enter that water again. He refilled his canteen though, just for emergencies.

The cave he was in was connected to the larger tunnel system he found out after some traveling. Only a small hole was open though, and Zac was forced to cut his way out with a sword. As he worked the sword he felt that his body was more coordinated than ever, as every muscle was working in perfect harmony. He wasn't really stronger or more agile, but rather had greater control of his body. Normally he would think that it was due to increased Dexterity, but the change was too large that just a few extra points from his new title couldn't cover it. He guessed instead that it was another advantage of being an evolved human.

After some hesitation he carved out a couple of boulders from a nearby wall and covered up the path again. That secret cave would be an excellent cultivation cave in the future, and he didn't want a salamander or wandering demon to ruin it.



Perhaps it wouldn't be useful for himself, but maybe for his sister or Hannah if he managed to bring them back to the island. Now that the demon threat was taken care of he needed to actually start preparing for the future.

At least he hoped that the demon threat was over, but he couldn't be sure. He never got any indication of what would happen when he finally killed the Heralds and the general. There still should be quite a few demons still around even after the huge battle. There had been at least a thousand demons in the mountains, but even if all of them died, there should be hundreds in the tunnels. Add to that the demon town and the roving parties and most demons should still be around.

Putting the matter aside, Zac pushed forward in the tunnels. Soon he found a familiar cave, whose tunnels led to the demon mining operation. After a brief hesitation he headed over there to check things out. As he walked he heard absolutely no sound of activity, which could only be considered a good sign.

The mining tunnels were completely deserted as he hoped, with not a single demon in sight. As he continued on he soon exited the cave entrance he had seen the demons use daily. Still, he didn't see a single demon anywhere. A few sacks and tools were thrown here and there, hinting at a hasty escape.

More importantly, for the first time since he woke up on this hellish island there was no huge red glaring pillar shooting into the sky. The incursion was simply gone.

But that didn't mean his work was over.