

The New World

Chapter 4: Break Them

I grinded my skills for three days before I ran out of food from my backpack. No matter how much I rationed out the food, I couldn't squeeze any more days out of it. If I hadn't found Michael's backpack too, then I'd have run out within the first day as well. That wasn't because the guy was a heavy eater, either.

Michael always brought extra for me. He and his mom understood my situation, so they always packed leftovers and extra meals for me. When I first figured that out, it brought a tear to my eye. I remembered the little things like that, they spurred me forward in this cave.

During those three days, I gained quite a few skill levels, but unlocking more skill trees required character levels, attributes, or maybe achievements. For all of that, a singular step stood in my way – I needed to kill a bat.

They still scared the living hell out of me, but to quell those fears, I studied the bats' movements and lifestyles. I found the bats flew around at certain intervals, those spans as far apart as mornings and afternoons. Between those periods of activity, the creatures alternated between comas and napping. They breathed most of the time, but in the comas, they ceased all activity entirely. It was as if they starved. Either way, my plan involved waking up one bat during their comatose state before trying to kill one.

This avoided being swarmed, as the other bats would be resting. When I first spawned in BloodHollow, I fought the bat during their coma induced state. The only thing keeping me alive then had been dumb luck.

Not wanting even more luck to keep me alive, I planned out the fight this time. I chose a flat, open location, since the bats had poor maneuverability. Their raw power acted as the trade off for that, so I would kite one bat around until my Agony aura finished them off.

Crazy as that plan sounded, it was my best shot. A swat from a bat's wing ruined my leg before, and fighting an uninjured one meant they'd be even stronger. Making matters worse, this strategy of mine required lots of time to work itself out. I had the tools for success, however.

From a bit of practice, I uncovered that most rolls required ten or so stamina. Each minute, I could roll four or five times without losing stamina. That meant I needed to dodge the bats without rolling if I could help it. A hefty task, surely, but with all my new buffs from this system, I stood a solid chance.

Arming myself with those thoughts, I walked over towards the flat piece of ground before I activated Agony. With all my damage reduction and willpower bonuses, I found the aura was around eight feet from me in all directions. Not large by any means, but it proved serviceable for defense.

Before I began, one of my knees wobbled. I stared at the cavern roof, thinking of the creature's teeth again, how it moved like living stone. Doubts raced across my mind like cars in a freeway, each of them threatening to run me over.

I blinked. This was it. I had to move or die. I gave myself a few slaps on my cheeks, the crisp, stinging pain waking me up. This would be my last day with any real food, so killing a bat needed to happen and now. I would grow weak from starving soon, and it wasn't going to get any easier either way.

Taking the leap, I picked up a stone and tossed it overhead at the landing place of a bat I scouted out earlier. The rock landed on the bat as I sprinted towards the falling pebble. Reaching the stone, I winced while catching it in both my hands. I even bent my knees as I caught it to reduce the impact and following noise.

I took a shaky breath. I passed the first stage of the plan. If that rock hit the ground, the bats might've been on me like ants over a grasshopper. Peering up, I glared at the pale, disgusting creature above. The bat unfurled its wings, popping into existence before it squealed out in a light, airy tone.

I trembled. Now it was go time.

I revved up Agony until it reached about eight health a minute. A cracking headache and familiar exhaustion smothered me. The bat dove down. When it reached Agony's range, I darted sideways. Wind off its descent brushed my chest, and the creature crashed into the rock like a truck. I smiled. The plan was going perfectly.

See, other bats crashed into the ground at random, some falling down from time to time. The sound of it falling mimicked the impact of that first charge. The other bats rustled above, but they remained asleep thanks to that quirk of theirs.

Now, it was time for the hard part. I closed the gap between the bat and me before the monster reeled back at Agony's aura. I set up my stance for boxing, mainly for the speed boost. The bat glanced around before echoing its signal. Turning towards me, it flexed its wings and bolted forwards, fast as a bullet. I rolled sideways, the monster passing inches from me. Its wing brushed my face, leaving a slight cut.

It was so damn close. Without an uninjured wing, the bat moved much faster. It neared me once more, and the process repeated itself. The bat scratched me several times before clipping my shoulder with a solid gash. It hurt less than I expected, but more than I wanted, like pulling a tooth.

Soon, a sheen of sweat traced us both. The conflict dragged on, minutes turning to hours. By the time the bat had any wounds, we were both heaving for air. Gashes littered my body, but the bat fared no better. Blood poured from his mouth and pieces of his skin. His crashes had covered him in scrapes as well.

Once his teeth started falling out, I secured my victory. The bat slowed before I began slipping in punches. I dashed in, jabbed, then dashed out. The monster always chomped where I hit it, but I pulled back well before it snapped my hand in its jaws.

The bat lost the ability to move after a while, its own tenacity working against it. I pummeled the poor thing as Agony slowly whittled away its life. The body felt like slamming my fist into stone, but that wouldn't stop me. After fifteen minutes of punching it, the abomination finally died.

Underleveled bonus active. Level up! 3 levels gained!

Staring at the three, I pinched the bridge of my nose. The sheer drop off from the twelve I gained before left me wincing, but it made sense. The other had a first kill bonus, and my higher level meant slower level gains. I still bit my lip at that, however.

Either way, the attribute screen popped up. I added all three points into endurance. I figured twenty points in it would unlock another perk, following the pattern from before. Even then, the health kept me alive while the health regeneration meant Agony strengthened.

In that way, endurance was my bread and butter stat.

The next set of perks appeared, this time for level fifteen. Based on the previous sequence, I gained a perk on level one, three, five, then once every five levels. Being level sixteen now, I owned five perks in total.

Perk Selection. Choose One.

[Unrelenting(endurance 20) – Your endurance is very impressive. +50 health and stamina, +5 health regen, +50 stamina regen. Adds 1/10th of your endurance to willpower.]

[Fledgling(Reach level 5) – You've just started learning. +10% to experience.]

[Beginner(Reach level 10) – Now you know a little. You can step out of the tutorial zone now.]

Considering how I killed bats, my choice became obvious. Unrelenting was exactly what I needed right now. It also gave me more room for making mistakes, something I would do in time. My hands trembled at the thought of a bat biting me, but they also shook from exhilaration.

I was alive. I did it. I jumped up and down a bit, there in that lonely cavern. Somehow, that tiny celebration meant more to me than any birthday, aced test, or fight I'd had before. It was a palpable relief. I could fight my way out of here, one bloodied bat at a time.

Peering back at my screen, I picked Unrelenting and finalized my selection. Instantly, the pain of Agony weighed less on my mind. With that wave of relief washing over me, I focused on my status for a minute. My attributes were starting to beef up by quite a bit. The extra willpower really helped too, since it made agony better and helped me keep focused.

Finishing my rudimentary analysis, I checked out my skill trees. I had over a hundred tree points after the last few days and the fight just then. My skills started to slow down their level ups, but I had enough for what I needed.

| II Determinator(Tireless, Unyielding, and Unrelenting unlocked, all before level 20[0/100]), I Vicious(Fight in a battle with an opponent 20 levels over you and win, Scorn, Desperation, and Death's Dance unlocked)[0/25] |

With a few quick thoughts, I put one hundred points in this next Determinator tree. Four notifications appeared.

Nothing can stop you. They tear your legs off, you walk with your arms. +15% to regen stats.

They tear off your arms, you crawl with your chin. +15% to regen stats.

They tear off your chin, you crawl with your tongue. +15% to your regen stats.

They tear off your tongue, you crawl with your teeth. You are a walking, breathing storm. Let them hear your thunder and see your lightning. +25% to regen stats and +10% to willpower.

That changed everything for me. Imaginary numbers or not, these represented my best chance at survival. Each notification meant Agony grew stronger than ever. Feeling elated, I poured twenty five points into Vicious. Five notifications came as expected.

Whether you stand or fall, your enemy will feel your intent. +1% to damage dealt.

It is to kill all that come your way. +1% to damage dealt.

You feast on hatred. +1% to damage dealt.

You live for their deaths. + 1% to damage dealt.

They will feast on your hatred too. +1% to damage dealt.

The damage worked in the background, something hard to notice but still effective. Compared with the Determinator trees, it paled, but I appreciated the award regardless. With my perks and attributes settled, I inspected my other screens.

Level 16 Attributes (3 Points Left)

Strength – [8.8] – Increases carrying weight, maximum speed, and physical power.

Constitution – [5.5] – Increases the hardness, density, and weight of your body.

Endurance – [23.1] – Increases regeneration of stamina, health, and their totals.

Dexterity – [4] – Increases ease of movement, flexibility, and reflexes.

Willpower – [11.3] – Increases internal motivation, mana regen, and Mental Resistance.

Intelligence – [4] – Increases memory, critical thinking, and total mana pool.

Charisma – [4] – Increases likeability, persuasion, and decreases prices at shops.

Luck – [3] – Increases money found, odds in your favor, and chances of rare events.

Perception – [4] – Increases comprehension, the five senses, and awareness.

Character Screen

Health – 301/301 | 29.24/health a min | Mana – 40/40 | 2.26/mana a min | Stamina – 301/301 292.4/stamina per min

Damage Resistance – 6.1% | Mental Resistance – 8% | Elemental Resistance – 0% | Plasma Resistance – 0% | Radiation Resistance – 0%

Physical Power – (+)9.8% | Debuffs – Agony(5.15 hp/min)

The discomfort of agony weighed on me less for a good reason. My health increased by leaps and bounds, but Agony's debuff hadn't. Yet. Willpower also helped me with the pain as well. My regen stats also augmented into different beasts altogether. That health regen rose high enough that it may help me in an actual fight, and the stamina regen boggled my mind.

I leaped, rolled, and jumped. No matter how much I moved, I never tired out. On one of my jumps, I rolled an ankle before busting my ass on the ground. I stopped my yelp, wincing at pain radiating up my back.

Well, moving all the time probably wasn't the best idea anyways. After that, I checked out Agony.

Agony – Drains all nearby unit's health, including the caster. The more health the caster drains from themselves a second, the larger the effective range of the aura. Damage to self reduced by constitution. Willpower increases damage of Agony. Current conversion: $1.11(\text{Willpower bonus})/.939(\text{Constitution bonus}) = 1.185$

I dwelled on the numbers, wishing I practiced more algebra. I rubbed my temples, trying to do the mental computations required. After a minute or two, I took a different approach. Scoping it out by feel, I willed Agony to activate. I kept raising it until, and my hands started shaking after a little while. The dull aches turned into sharp stings as I pushed Agony to my current health regen.

At this point, I'd have died from the aura in less than ten minutes without my constant rejuvenation. That aura suffocated me like I dipped myself in acid, the bright burning putting me on edge. A notification rang in my ears from it.

Skill Level! [Pain Tolerance | Level 53]

I sensed an ever so slight reduction in pain. It didn't really matter. This discomfort overwhelmed me, like having a hot nail hammered through my hand. The pain never receded, and after a while, all I could do was exist.

But I reminded myself why I did this. I was going to survive, so I bathed in that pain. I forged myself in it. The torment turned into an eternity. I took deep breaths, trying to manage the intensity. One breath. Two breaths. Time crept by until I shut Agony down after maybe ten minutes.

I couldn't handle it anymore.

Sweat dripped from my brow. My eyes watered. Glancing over at the dead bat, the corpse had deflated during my stay here. Blood leaked out from it in all directions, like rivers of red. The bones softened, and the skin dried. Agony destroyed the corpse at a basic level, and far faster than before.

Learning to move with that kind of pain was going to be difficult. It would be harder than my mother dying. It would be even harder than having to see my father break down after he lost her. But, Agony couldn't be harder than coming home to the smell of cheap booze on dad's breath.

The dread of those nights reminded me of my anxiety now. Just like then, I steeled myself. I swallowed this piece of me that wanted it all to end, to just let go. I wouldn't break down like my father had. He walked a path that I wouldn't follow.

I swore to myself to stand tall and towering in the face of this.

I'd sacrifice my soul for might.

That night or day inched by in a persistent drip. Hunger set in after several hours. I ran away from the bat's corpse when other bat's lunged towards the corpse, along with some other creatures. At my cove, I clenched my teeth and clasped my fists before turning up Agony.

Hours had passed. My skin felt like fire and my bones like mush. This torture, this despair, this misery crushed me. I hated it. I hated this schema. I hated my father. I hated myself. I wanted it all gone, to all just wash away. Why couldn't I just fight monsters anywhere near my level? Why couldn't I just have an easier way of fighting them? Why did I have to melt my body to fight them, to turn to human sludge?

There were no easy answers. I simply had to do this to live. I couldn't help but hate. What else was there for me? The seconds stretched out like minutes. After several more hours passed, each second stretched out to hours.

Pain Tolerance plodded along after level sixty. Even after ages, I only reached level seventy-three. When that clicked in place, something changed about the skill. Each level up made a difference, becoming a firm boon instead of a slight gain.

I looked at Pain Tolerance again.

Pain Tolerance | Level 73 – At times, there is no way of avoiding pain. In those dark hours, your will is tested by how well you endure it. Minus 73% of perceived pain.

It was as I thought. If pain tolerance reached level one hundred, then I wouldn't feel pain. That was why every point gained made a difference now; I was approaching that soothing numbness. Agony still stung all over, but it kept receding until it lingered as a mild ache. In time, even that ache became a pang.

The hardship passed, and not a second too soon. Pain Tolerance leveled to eighty-three as I fell asleep in my little cove of rocks.

When I awoke, the bat's swarmed in all directions, but maintained distance from my spot. Pain Tolerance leveled up to eighty-five as I slept. Gaining levels didn't require being conscious, and I took a note of that for later.

It still surprised me waking up under the aura's influence. I always shut the scathing ability off when I fell asleep, but I passed out before I could this time. My augmented willpower may have helped me more than I thought it would.

That wasn't the only part willpower assisted. Agony evolved into a simmering aura. Any bat that flew within it howled before flying away. I grinned at that. They tried killing me before, but now they avoided me. It seemed my new and improved aura was living up to its namesake now.

Keeping it on, I avoided a swarm of bats feeding on me. More would die soon, but I bided my time until I could kill hordes of them at once. I glanced at my character menus and attributes before noticing a new skill tree.

| Ancient(Regenerate 100,000 health or 100,000 mana or 10,000,000 stamina)[0/100] |

Apparently, the Schema judged age by these regenerative stats. Considering how quickly I reconstituted, I burned through that time quickly. It also helped to have my health always whittling down from Agony.

I put all of my tree points into the tree, and it rewarded me with a notification, as always.

Some measure their time in seconds, others in eons. You are the latter. +10 health, mana, and stamina. +10% experience and skill gain.

I smiled in appreciation. Little boosts to my stats always aided, but that experience and skill gain made a real difference. Seeing how useful the tree was, I tried learning some new skills while waiting for the bats to settle down.

Peering down at my backpack, empty wrappers and plastic packages littered its insides. I hadn't even opened the portion of the pack holding my textbooks and scholastic materials. I mean, Michael and I always acted like we'd study while spelunking, but we never had.

But now, the game had changed. Opening up the books, I studied them with diligence, hoping for new skills. I found a few of them.

Skill Unlocked! Mathematics | Level 1 – Understanding the universe requires viewing it. By seeing the world through numbers, you've gained new perspectives into this vast unknown. Plus 1% to computational speed.

Skill Unlocked! History | Level 1 – It is spoken by sages that history repeats itself. This is both a warning and a call, as it expresses a dual sided message. You may fall into the same mistakes as those before you, yet you may rise from the ashes of their mistakes as well. Plus 1% to historical recall.

Skill Unlocked! Biology | Level 1 – Understanding the body, what composes it, and how it operates grants insight. Whether you use that insight to put someone together or break them apart is up to you. Plus 1% to biological recall.

Those skills came with the standard, cool descriptions, but patience came with a nice bonus instead.

Skill Unlocked! Patience | Level 1 – To be patient is more than tolerance. One may remain in place for hours, yet dread each moment of that passing time. True patience involves accepting that time as necessary. In the end, it is the willingness to endure. Increased willpower while waiting.

Maybe it wasn't some groundbreaking evolution, but the skill chipped in. My other stats did as well. With all my stamina regen, I slept less, so by the time the bats entered their comas, I drilled in chapters of each subject. In fact, I probably studied more in the last eight hours than I had in all my years of school.

Motivation was a hell of a drug. I kept studying until I reached two more ranks in Ancient. The notifications stuck out in my memory.

Many move through life in a haze. You wandered out of that haze long ago. +10 health, mana, and stamina. +10% exp and skill gain.

You live through the olden ways. Those ways lead you down the path of legends. +10 health, mana, and stamina. +10% exp and skill gain.

I shut a textbook, unable to tolerate it any longer; I was ravenous. I hadn't eaten in over two days. Settling my resolve, I stepped out into my open clearing before throwing another stone at a bat.

Skill Unlocked! Throwing | Level 1 – In fighting closely, one presents themselves to death. By fighting from afar, one presents death to others. Plus 1% to throwing speed and force.

I caught the falling stone again, and the bat squealed before diving towards me. This time I dodged with a subtle side-step, keeping the monster in Agony's range. I learned from my last fight that these pale creatures mirrored flying bulls more than their aerial counterparts. After some practice, anyone could lead them around without too much effort.

Considering the mellowed pressure, I kited the bat around like a practiced matador. The bat squealed out of pain at times, but it never wailed with enough intensity that other bats awakened. At the same time, the unrelenting fear and pressure on me lessened. Unlike the other fights, I kept my composure because I controlled this battle from start to finish.

I showed no mercy. I darted, weaved, and ducked through the entirety of the conflict. I kept that control even as this bat learned while we fought. The creature cut off my escape a few times, some of those interceptions leaving me with gashes. Yet despite its efforts, the bat melted under Agony's wrath.

Its spirit waned until it crawled across the ground. I abused that weakness, charging in and mauling it with my fists. When it died, my bloodied knuckles dripped blood that decayed to black on its corpse. I rose a hand, victorious.

Underleveled bonus active. Level up! 3 levels gained!

The attribute screen cropped up yet again, and I placed all three points into endurance. Each point made Agony stronger from the health regen, and that doubled down with the Determinator trees' awards. I filled into that emergent build, reaping its rewards as I killed a few more bats.

In time, these monsters would be child's play for me to handle. From what I could tell, they had about twenty-ish health for each level. A level thirty-five bat had seven-hundred health. If I could get Agony smothering a large area, I could kill these things to extinction. In fact, I likely would out of spite.

That grudge of mine fueled a simmering anger. Wiping blood off my knuckles, I stepped away from a bat's corpse as another lunged down. The new bat cannibalized its brethren, but before it finished the meal, I stepped in. I stayed and fought it with a smile on my face.

Within about twenty minutes, the bat's body rested under my worn shoes, having just been stomped to death. I reached down, finding a massive gash on my chest. I didn't worry about the wound, however. I frowned at my gray shirt, which wouldn't regenerate back.

Marveling at the hideous wound, it unnerved me more than it hurt. That discomfort still radiated from the slash, and if not for my Pain Tolerance, I'd have died there.

But, I had very high Pain Tolerance, and the bat did not.

Underleveled bonus active. Level up! 1 level gained!

I put my attribute point into endurance, giving me well over the twenty five I needed for the next perk. When I read its bonuses, I grinned a wide, malicious smile. These monsters, who days ago tried eating me, would be dying soon.

And I wouldn't stop until none of them were left. I would break them just as they tried to break me.

One bone at a time.

Chapter 5: A Destroyer of Bats

I put yet another point into endurance, leaving me with just over twenty seven. A set of perks appeared right after,

Perk Selection. Choose One.

[Unstoppable(endurance over 25) – Your endurance is incredible. +5 health regen, +50 to stamina regen, +5 total health and stamina gained per point in endurance, another 1/10th of your endurance is converted into willpower.]

[Willful(Willpower of at least 10) – Your willpower is good. Doubles mana regeneration.]

[Fledgling(Reach level 5) – You’ve just started learning. +10% to experience.]

[Beginner(Reach level 10) – Now you know a little. You can step out of the tutorial zone now.]

Unstoppable was exactly what I hoped it would be – awe inspiring. When I selected the perk, I gained over a hundred health and stamina from it. Days of sprinting would be nothing for me now. That meant that the stamina gained from endurance was useless now as well, but the other bonuses more than compensated for the difference.

One of those benefits came from Agony. The aura’s irritation lessened until I hardly noticed it. Instead of applying this constant pressure, it turned into a slight malaise. I reveled in that comfort, feeling good for the first time in a while. After a few moments of enjoying the extra energy, I checked out my skill trees.

| III Determinator(Have Tireless, unyielding, unrelenting, and unstoppable perks unlocked by level 20, Endurance of 25 or more, willpower of 15 or more)[0/500] |

I jogged away from the other bats before glancing at my tree points. I needed twelve to finish Ancient. I ramped up Agony until it matched my health regen, making several bats in the cavern fly away. To keep them coming back, I pissed them off at this point before ramping up the aura. Otherwise they just flew away.

Regardless, I trained a few hours, shifting my weight and firing my fists. My hands shifted in my eyes with professional speed now, faster than I could keep up with them. Combine that with all the movement, and my other skills developed as well.

Pushing hard until I got my points, I sat down dripping sweat and having twelve points to my name. I finished the tree.

You are one of the few to leave a lasting mark on this world. In that regard, you are living history, so make your actions echo across time. +20 health, mana, and stamina. +20% to exp and skill gain.

Opening a textbook, I gained a quick level up in mathematics, investing in the next Determinator tree. Now I couldn't lose it once I leveled over twenty, which would be happening real soon.

Standing up, I went through the motions once more. I threw a rock towards another bat, and it dashed towards me with the same charge as the others. However, when it entered agony's enlarged aura, it cringed, causing it to crash hard. I dashed in, hitting the beast as it struggled with focusing under the onslaught of pain. Within fifteen minutes, it died.

Underleveled bonus active. Level up! 1 levels gained!

I quickly put another point into endurance before tossing another stone at a different bat. I dodged, weaved, and kited the bat to death within ten or so minutes. It died fast.

Underleveled bonus active. Level up! 1 levels gained!

Another point into endurance and I killed another bat in ten minutes. Then another and another and another. The bats fell like flies. Flies with huge teeth, and ugly, ugly faces. Like I mean horrifically ugly.

Regardless, I gained level after level, putting all my points into endurance. Over several hours I gained experience until I reached level twenty five. At that point, it took four or five bats just to level up. In a word, my leveling leveled off. It didn't matter though. I'd keep going. I put my points in endurance and checked out my perk list.

Perk Selection. Choose One.

[Unbounded(Endurance over 30) – Your endurance is without end. Movement impairing effects, poisons, curses, and radiation are 75% as effective. Add 2 health, stamina, stamina regen and .2 health regen per gained level, halved sleep and sustenance requirements, and lifespan doubled.]

[Willful(Willpower of at least 10) – Your willpower is good. Doubles mana regeneration.]

[Headstrong(Willpower of at least 15) – Your willpower is admirable. Willpower adds extra internal motivation per point. +1 mana regen.]

[Fledgling(Reach level 5) – You've just started learning. +10% to experience.]

[Beginner(Reach level 10) – Now you know a little. You can step out of the tutorial zone now.]

I had to admit, Headstrong interested me, but my choice remained obvious. Unbounded didn't show quite as many numerical advantages as the previous endurance perks, but it held a lot of intangible benefits. Lessening the requirements on food and sleep alone made the perk worth it, especially considering I was starving.

So, I selected it along with the finalize button. The change radiated through me as sinews, muscle, and bone altered. The shift proved more slight and subtle when compared with my previous perk, but the rush still arrived all the same. The individual level-ups had stopped giving me an enormous surge of strength a while back, however.

At least, until I began investing in other attributes. Once I had another five points of endurance, I'd see if I got access to another perk like Unbounded. If not, then constitution would be my next main attribute. It only required a point or two of investment at this point to test. Just as well, the bonuses for those attributes synergized amazingly well since damage resistance increased my total effective health.

Even if constitution only added a measly one percent damage resistance per point, the perks would help mitigate that small increase. If I could get my damage resistance high enough, I could amplify Agony up to absurd extremes. My entire setup revolved around Agony in fact. I couldn't imagine being able to kill the bats without it. Not yet, at least.

Even though it hurt like hell, it already saved my life. With that pain tearing at my mind, I got back to killing bats. One bat. Two bats. Three bats. I discovered my punches sped the process up, though marginally. The main difference came from leveling my skills in each battle. The ensuing struggle, the pounding adrenaline, the sheer danger, those factors culminated in surging urgency. That urgency pushed my skills forward.

Several hours later, I reached level twenty seven. The level gain slowed down after I hit twenty five. When I'd checked it out, I found out it would take a ridiculous amount of exp for one level. I finally hit a wall, one that took well over an hour of grinding for a single level.

Still, killing them devolved from a traumatic undertaking to a mundane habit. Even if they hit me, I could take four or five of their head-on charges before death. My health pool became massive. Despite that durability, I stayed sharp. Instead of being eaten, I feared starvation more than anything. Without Unbounded, my hunger might've even robbed me of my tenacity by then.

But I continued until I needed rest. Finding my cove, I slept and woke up the next day. Most mornings, I stayed groggy until a couple hours passed. This time, I powered through that early haze with ease. The extra willpower really paid off when it came to stuff like that.

Without missing a beat, I hopped back on the bat-killing train yet again. Two hours later, I reached level twenty-eight, putting a point into constitution. After selecting finalize, the narrator's voice rang out once more.

I'd almost forgotten it existed.

'And their fists shattered against my skin, for I was living stone.'

Unlike endurance, constitution changed more than numbers on a screen. My body condensed and hardened as if I became closer to a rock. By comparison, endurance came with a...A rubbery sensation? It was as if I were harder to pull apart, my flesh stretching more. Constitution developed me in a different manner entirely.

It turned soft meat into moving stone, my sinews and skin becoming like metal. Combine that with my Pugilist skill reaching forty four, and I noticed a dramatic increase in the hardness of my hands.

And so did the bats.

I reached level twenty nine later, putting another point in constitution, further crystallizing my hands. Now I hadn't planned on investing in constitution, but the attribute did more for Agony than endurance. In fact, it helped more than willpower thanks to the Fighter trees I considered useless earlier.

Another couple hours of grinding out the bats later, I finally gained another level. I put another point into constitution and opened the perk menu once more.

[Willful(Willpower over 10) – Your willpower is good. Doubles mana regeneration.]

[Headstrong(Willpower over 15) – Your willpower is admirable. Willpower doubles internal motivation per point.]

[Fledgling(Reach level 5) – You've just started learning. +10% to experience.]

[Beginner(Reach level 10) – Now you know a little. You can step out of the tutorial zone now.]

Headstrong seemed pretty good, so I selected it. In a synaptic burst, my motivation sparked out in a flood. Whatever I wanted to do, I could. My body became an engine of my will, a device for my cause, and my cause was killing the hell out of those bats.

So, I went about my business. In order to level, dozens of bats had to die. Fortunately, Agony became a force by level thirty-two as I hit eleven constitution. I had over seven hundred health, 1.3 health regen a second, over sixteen willpower, and 13% damage resistance. Agony stacked up to over a whopping one hundred damage a minute. I could kill a level thirty five bat in seven minutes even if I held back my fists.

During that time, Agony took on a different utility aside from damage. Within its aura, I controlled the bats. They howled out in, well, agony when they got in its enormous radius. Even with this increased speed of about five minutes per bat, I could only manage about one level every two hours or so. That didn't bother me anymore, however.

Before, I dragged my feet at the prospect. By then, the willpower helped keep me focused. I hungered like a wolf in winter. I hadn't spoken to someone in over seven days, and that loneliness grated me by now. I was filthy. Despite all of that, I kept an unreasonable and unwavering faith in my escape.

Even while trapped in this god forsaken, endless cave, I would be fine. My will never wavered, my motivation like steel. I had all the confidence in the world that I would crush the bats and get the hell out of there. And crush bats I did. By level thirty-four I piled their corpses near me. Bats kept coming to cannibalize their kin. I exterminated them as they swooped down.

I no longer made attempts at keeping quiet. I even fought them when they entered their swarming frenzies. In fact, that became my preferred time to attack. It was easier to get many fighting me at once. The bats wouldn't approach me unless I attacked them first with a rock or fist. It made the farming process safer than expected.

Though, it was strange they never dogpiled me in a vast throng. I inspected and searched for them in the meantime, but I never found any reason for that. I chalked it up to the dungeon's influence on them.

Either way, by the time I got sleepy, I killed at least a hundred bats, finally reaching level thirty-five. I put another point in constitution, leaving me with just over thirteen. It was enough for the first perk gained from the attribute.

[Willful(Willpower of at least 10) – Your willpower is good. Doubles mana regeneration.]

[Tough(Constitution of at least 10) – Your constitution is good. Adds +0.5% damage reduction per point in constitution.]

[Fledgling(Reach level 5) – You've just started learning. +10% to experience.]

[Beginner(Reach level 10) – Now you know a little. You can step out of the tutorial zone now.]

The Tough perk didn't double the attributes bonus like the endurance perks had, but with the Fighter trees' multipliers, my damage resistance started adding up. It mounted to 21% damage reduction now. Putting the perk into action, I finalized my decision.

My bones condensed, matter siphoning into them from an unseen place. My hands turned into thickened, callused hunks, more for fighting than dexterous work by now. I winced as even my organs and blood thickened, my heart pulsing with greater strength to keep my blood moving. The changes faded, and I grabbed a rock nearby to test out that sensation.

The rock felt...soft. Well, *softer*. Tossing it at a different bat, the beast charged me. I side stepped but with some struggle. Slicing a quick hook into the bat's side, its stony flesh bent under my knuckle's force. They proved softer as well.

The killing continued. I kept drinking out of the glowing, cyan pools, so I wasn't thirsty. I dreamed of eating the bats multiple times, but I never did. They looked disgusting, and Agony left them looking like gelatin after I killed them. Not exactly the most appetizing meal, even for a starving man. Hell, they made me sick if I stared too long.

They wouldn't make for a meal. So, for the first time since I entered this god forsaken cave, I planned on exploring. From my backpack, I got several clear plastic bags. I filled them with the glowing cyan water, giving me some makeshift light. I wanted a couple extra just in case, and I stuffed them into my pack. It was time to venture out.

I finally moved away from my little cove of rocks. By now I defecated and pissed enough in a nearby pool that it turned murky brown. I had to slip my cheeks into the pool of water so it didn't make a sound. Otherwise, it would've made the 'plop of doom' as I called it.

The bats would've swarmed me then. Probably. Knowing I needed water, I used the same pool over and over again since I didn't want to ruin all my water sources. It was an animalistic, disgusting process, but I did it to survive...And to not make a plop sound.

But alas, the poor plopless pool was behind me as I trekked down BloodHollow. Passing many stalactites, multiple bats assaulted me. I dispatched them over fifteen minutes, being careful of my positioning. The closer to a wall I was, the easier the fights were. They couldn't come at me from multiple directions then.

With that handled, I walked out into the dimly lit caverns with little bags of water as my guides. The cave changed from before, warping until it lacked any semblance of its previous self. It was nothing like I remembered when Micheal and I first came here. Thinking of another person, my throat burned for a second.

Man, I missed the guy. Kelsey too. Loneliness burned in my chest before I dismissed it. I had to move on. The stalactites formed sharp points like teeth. The ridges of the walls molded into twisted, warped faces. Any insects near me curled up and died. These bugs died from agony, not the cave itself. Finding a grotesque centipede, I stared at it before a bing sound rang out in my ears.

Skill lvl! [Pain Tolerance | Level 86]

I smacked my forehead. I'd forgotten to distribute my skill points into Determinator. Before doing so, I checked out my skills, spotting a few new ones.

Pain Tolerance lvl 86, Desperation lvl 37, Ava Maria lvl 7, Death's Dance lvl 51, Dodging lvl 28, Pugilist lvl 44, Physical Fitness lvl 21, Focus lvl 27, Scorn lvl 52, Sneak lvl 13, History lvl 7, Biology lvl 9, Mathematics lvl 11, Patience lvl 5, Throwing lvl 13, Momentum lvl 8, BloodHollow Bat Slayer lvl 16, Coarsened Hands lvl 11 | 446 total – 336 spent |

Momentum | Level 8 – To attack with momentum is to take risks. In each of your blows carries the weight of death for this reason, both your own and your opponents. You choose to fight this way out of courage, not your ignorance. Plus 8% to weight and power when using momentum for attacking.

BloodHollow Bat Slayer | Level 16 | Note: Initiation Skill – Initiation Skill Limit: 1/3 | – You've murdered many of their kind. They become easier to kill. +16% damage to BloodHollow Bats.

Coarsened Knuckles | Level 11 – Weapons are often made of metal. You need no weapon, for your knuckles are like steel. +11% damage with your bare fists.

These skills explained why I'd been killing the bats in under five minutes. Agony dealt at least three damage a second with all my damage buffs and active skills. It made the killing process smooth, like slitting a throat with a knife. Just as well, all the fist fighting I committed to early on paid dividends now, even if the start was a bit rocky.

Having stockpiled for a while, I put over a hundred points into the third Determinator tree. It rewarded me with a notification at the one hundred point mark.

To determine is to make definite. Your will determines whatever you choose to be. +10% willpower, +10% endurance.

I did a little fist pump, jumping for joy. The extra attributes were always welcome, coming with the usual, accompanying rush. They synergized well with my current build too, and if I invested in this tree for several hundred more points, I'd gain crazy levels of endurance and willpower.

Taking a moment to think, I rested my hand over the Agony debuff marker. Without this aura, my build wouldn't function at all. I'd be a useless blob, one that could take a hit, sure, but I'd be eaten alive by all kinds of enemies. This strange skill mentioned an error when I first selected it, and that seemed normal at the time. I mean, I spawned in this dungeon because of a glitch as well.

But, my build fit together a little *too* well. Once I got out of this hellhole, I resolved myself to figure this out. With that in mind, I redoubled my efforts of pulverising the bats with punches as they died to my aura. Traveling the entire time, I gained a level, and I

placed a point in constitution. After another long distance, I reach another set of glowing pools.

Approaching them, the pools glowed a soft crimson, the water shimmering rosy pink. Blending into this red glow, an enormous bear rested beside the pool. Its fur reflected the pool's light, each strand of hair like a spine. Its barrel chest rose up and down slowly as it breathed. Red mist piled out of its pitch black nostrils.

As I got closer, I analyzed the bear and discovered something about its level. As I did, my blood froze.

BloodHollow Bear | Level 75 – An enormous, terrifying creature. Fight with caution as its red aura and monstrous strength are very effective tools when it comes to dismembering adventurers.

Adventurers like you.

Holding my breath, I snuck backwards. This abomination exceeded my level, and the last thing I wanted was another fight to the death. I preferred beating bats up instead. Taking a few steps away, I got some distance from the animal. Its misty breath no longer shimmered out nearby, its form a distant and horrifying memory instead of a pressing nightmare.

A bat from above squealed out. My jaw went slack as I turned towards the huge bear. It stayed asleep before I glared at the bat above. Its left wing bled before it fell down. An idea popping in my head, I charged towards the bat's fall. I caught the white, pale creature, my legs buckling under its heft.

A cold sweat poured from my brow, and I turned to the bear again. It rumbled, getting closer to awakening. The bat in my arms scrambled for an escape, but I squeezed it with all my strength. Not having very much of that from starvation, loneliness, and perhaps a poor attribute distribution, the white bat bellowed.

Frustration mounted in my chest before I ran over towards a stalagmite nearby. Picking the bat up, I smashed its open mouth into the stony pillar, gouging the rock into its throat. It gurgled before I wrapped my arm around the roof of its mouth.

Using my arms like ropes, I pressed one knee against the bat's jaw. The bat's mouth shut, the creature no longer able to breathe. It fought me tooth and nail, scrambling for air. I held it down until my knuckles turned white and my teeth hurt. My arms popped, along with my fingers and hands. Vibrant splashes of pain radiated from my joints.

But I held firm.

The bat pushed and pulled. I tightened and constricted. Two minutes passed before the pale animal's breath ceased, life leaving its disgusting body. I kept my own breathing

shallow, despite sweat pouring down my pits. I turned around, and the giant bear stayed asleep. I stopped the worst case scenario but just barely.

Taking a sigh of relief, another bat crashed into the ground beside me. The bear's eyes popped open before it stood tall. It opened its maw, and it roared forth with enough force that the ground quaked under my feet. A stream of cold sweat poured down my forehead in an instant, activating Desperation.

The stat boost was nice and all, but I needed more than a few attributes. At that moment, the behemoth scraped its claws on the cave's ground. A barrage of sparks ignited from the monster's claws as they dragged on the cavern floor. The red mist expanded around it, making its silhouette even bigger.

Its eyes met mine, and we matched our gazes for a few seconds. The bear roared like thunder once more before charging towards me. Picking up the bat, I tossed it away from me as a lure. Once it left my arms, I sprinted behind a stalagmite before the sounds of the bear's stomps grew loud in my ears.

Time slowed down as my mortality proclaimed itself, howling out in my mind. I could die. No, I was probably going to die. My fragility, my lack of training for this situation, even my loneliness, it spurred in my chest like fire and poison and pain. Adrenaline spiked in my mind as thoughts of death and being eaten loomed in my head.

The bear approached me, and Agony only made it madder. I leaped out from behind the stalactite I used for cover. The pillar exploded, powdered rock spraying over me. Splatters of stone bit into my skin, like a heavy, sharp rain. From the dust cloud, the bear charged forward, far faster than the bats. Far faster than me.

I froze in place, panicking. I gave my face a slap, the crisp pain waking me up. I stepped sideways, and the wind from its charge pushed me away. The air alone lifted me. I flopped onto the ground, busting a lip before peering up. I looked for anything to hide behind. Nothing stuck out.

The bear jolted towards me, speeding like a cannonball. Like a thousand tiny fires, sparks danced off its claws as they cut into the stone floor. Those paws pulled it along, making its charge fast and furious. It reached me, and unlike the bats, it learned from last time.

As I sidestepped, the bear reached out a paw. A large gash cut into my stomach, reaching my entrails. I winced, expecting an unbearable torture. Pain roared out to me, but it did not thunder in a deafening boom; it merely shouted in anger. It passed over me in a vivid flash, and I gasped out blood from my mouth.

I swallowed the thick red pooling in my throat. Standing there, I inspected my HUD. My health fell by a third from that slap of its claws. In each of its paws, the bear

commanded immense power. My eyes locked in on those paws as the bear turned towards me. The giant reared onto its back legs before smashing them into the ground.

Like cars crashing, the paws impact echoed into the distance. It left smashed stone in its wake, and a haunting mist radiated from it like evaporating blood. I stared it down, my breath honing in. From my thoughts, every consideration faded away. I focused like a laser onto the situation.

This titan outran me with ease, but that was while charging. That meant escape wasn't an option now that it found me. Panicking gained me nothing, and neither did fearing the beast. Before I could plan out any actions, the bear sprinted up again. Reacting instead of thinking, I fainted to the right before dodging to my left.

The bear reached out in the wrong direction, blazing past me in a red blur. It smelled of iron, a bloody incarnation. Its miss gave me time to think. As the bear curved back for its next charge, my mind illuminated me with my only way out.

Agony. I needed Agony to kill this thing.

Instead of charging, the bear eyed me for a moment. It walked up, forcing me back. We danced like this until my back pressed against the cavern's wall. The bear walled me in, and its eyes carried a menacing intelligence. I grimaced at the creature.

Scorn Active!

It gave me the boost I needed. The bear got within a swipe's distance, and it slashed diagonally towards my right. I leaned into that direction, twisting on the balls of my feet. Using the turning force, I slammed my fist into the bear.

My fist met its hide, and bones broke in my hand. My eyes watered. Hard. Jagged. Terror. This abomination was hard as a brick wall. The bear swiped again, and I bent towards his strike, dodging underneath its arm. The claws cut my hair while I pushed off my feet.

Another heavy strike slammed into the monster's side. Another bone in my hand snapped before the bear headbutted forward. I sidestepped before lunging forward while turning my heels and dragging my fist behind me.

The bear cracked the stone wall behind me. As it pulled its face from the rock, my punch collided with its nose. For the first time, it stumbled back. Tears matted its eyes, more as a reaction than from actual pain. I lunged forward, building force in my fist.

My hand impacted into its nose once more, and my bones crushed. Something in my wrist snapped. The fractures in the back of my hand radiated out to the knuckles down. Without the system, I'd never recover from this kind of damage to my hand. I'd never even pick up a pencil and use it, let alone fight with finesse.

But that's just it; the new system let me regenerate, so I abused that fact. The bear winced from my punch, taking another step back. I growled at it while pounding my chest with my wrist,

"You wanna fight? Then let's fight. Come on."

Its eyes narrowed, but so did mine. This wasn't my first time dealing with conflict. I'd fought plenty of times before this system came about. I'd boxed since I was eleven, day in and day out after school. I was never the brightest kid, but I could take a punch pretty well. Enough to be a professional in time, according to my coach.

He told me that years ago. Since then, I honed my fists into weapons. The Pugilist skill only accentuated what I already had, so I unleashed my real potential now. All the extra stats and skills didn't hurt either.

But it wasn't all sunshine and rainbows. My knees betrayed me, wobbling for a flash. I took a breath, fresh fear racing up my spine. Taking a deep breath, I let out a primal growl. It wasn't for the bear. It was for me. I needed to pull myself together. I raised my hands. Now wasn't the time for fear. I pushed it down while the bear rubbed its nose. It stood and glowered down with rage in its eyes.

The red aura became a fog, like a mist of crimson. When it touched me, my skin burned. I stepped back out of its range. The bear barreled at me but I sidestepped again. The bear swiped at my legs, expecting me to duck like before. Instead, I jumped. The bear's paw crushed the rock wall behind me, covering us in a cloud of dust once more. As it settled, he and I stared at one another.

This was going to be a long fight.

My wrist was a lumpy mush. Every breath was fire in my lungs. My blood turned to acid and my arms were bars of lead at my sides. I'd mauled the monstrosity so many times. Like me, it refused to die. The bear no longer owned a nose. I replaced it with a bloody pile of mash that rested on its face. The eyes were next. That was where I broke several of my fingers poking it till it went blind. The bear's missing ears explained what I did next. I couldn't take that sense entirely, however.

It could still hear, but without its other senses, it fumbled around weakly. I tossed rocks around the room, keeping it running around in agony's range. Of course, I stopped fighting the damn thing thirty minutes ago after disabling its senses, but I couldn't stop agony's damage. If I did, the red mist would restore the bear's wounds.

It happened once already. There's nothing more demoralizing than watching your work go to waste. Especially when that work involved tearing off a giant bear's nose.

Without its usually keen senses, the bear fumbled in a dark abyss of pain. I cranked agony up as much as it could go without killing me. Even without any regeneration of my wounds, I had to kill this thing. I wouldn't die here. People were waiting on me. They might need me too. I'd find Micheal and Kesley and get somewhere safe once I got out of this cave. This evil, demonic, diabolical, insane cavern.

First things first, this bear needed to die. The bear's movements had slowed quite a bit, to a crawl almost. With a renewed resolve, I sprinted towards it, gaining a skill.

Skill Unlocked! Sprinting | Level 1 – To sprint is to devote yourself to a course of action. It requires force but decisiveness as well. In this manner, one cannot move quickly without direction. You've learned this well.

I bent low and smashed the bear's pulpy nose as it fell down from the pain. Like a brute, I smashed my limbs into its eyes, ears, and nose again and again. I faced demons, and in fighting them, I became one. Blood covered my hands. Whether it was my own or the bear's, it didn't matter. Nothing mattered anymore.

I crushed and crumbled. I maimed and murdered. I ripped and rived. I pounded. I punched until it's face was red porridge, just like my hands and arms and feet. I'd win. I had to. There was no other option.

Level Up! Four levels gained!

It was the four hardest levels of my life. I placed all four points into constitution, giving me over seventeen in the attribute. The perk selection came up once more,

[Willful(Willpower of at least 10) – Your willpower is good. Doubles mana regeneration.]

[Dense(Constitution of at least 15) – Your constitution is admirable. Adds another 0.5% to damage reduction per point in constitution.]

[Fledgling(Reach level 5) – You've just started learning. +10% to experience.]

[Beginner(Reach level 10) – Now you know a little. You can step out of the tutorial zone now.]

Well, Dense wasn't anything special, but I selected it before slouching beside the bear. Despite my abject exhaustion, I selected finalize. I didn't want a bat killing me while I was vulnerable, and so, my body changed once more.

Starving to death and thirsty, my body still filled out as my height and frame bolstered in size. No food flooded my body. Instead, a liquid, palpable energy arrived from a far off place. It gave me warmth, energy, and a strange density. My skin became like wood instead of playdough, and I raised a hand. Well, what was left of my hand.

Over the next ten minutes, it came back together before my eyes. Ominous and unnatural, I thanked the system for making me into something that could fight these monsters. At the same time, I hadn't eaten in three days, I fought day in and day out, and I lived in darkness now. It was this dungeon that caused it, along with this mysterious Schema.

It was both my ticket to this hellhole and my ticket out, so I analyzed my status. My damage resistance reached all the way up to 38%. It felt like my skin covered bark now instead of muscle. My heart felt like it pumped syrup instead of blood. It was weird yet awe-inspiring at the same time. It made me wonder if this was how superman felt, being the whole man of steel thing.

I was getting there. A prick hurt my head, so I shut down Agony. Taking a moment, I let my mind wander. It had been a long time since I had the aura off, several days at least. Even though the discomfort was slight, it became a painful norm. Within minutes, all the broken bones, ruptured skin, and spilled blood restored itself.

I swallowed, clearing a thick gunk in my throat. It tasted of iron. Finding myself rejuvenated, I shook my head at how durable I really was. Near death one minute then restored the next. It was wild. I squeezed a hand, dwelling on how much easier this journey would've been with a hammer or knife. A simple tool like that would've made a world of difference.

Instead, I turned my body into a weapon. A gun would've been the best possible tool, but I never owned one. I didn't think I'd ever need them. Turning my fist for inspection, several new scars shrunk in my vision, the scrapes turning back into smooth, untouched skin. Fighting like this kept me alive. Wanting to stay that way, I opened every menu in my status and searched the menus.

Skill Unlocked! Heavy Hands | Level 1 – Some weigh their decisions. Others choose to weigh their odds. With your life on the line, you choose to put weight in your fists instead. +1% to fist weight while striking.

Unique skill unlocked! Heavy Hands, Coarsened Knuckles, Momentum, Dodging, and Pugilist fuse into one skill | Lumbering Brute | Half of points below one hundred in each skill are rewarded from skill fusion.

I checked it out.

Lumbering Brute | Level 3 – You ground your feet and trade blows against any foe. This puts your life on a thin line, one you tread willingly. Points in this skill enhance this style of fighting.

This new skill explained how I began fighting one on one with the bear. Without it, I might've been eaten alive. I shivered at the thought before rereading the rest of the

details. A touch of deductive reasoning later, and I verified my assumption that level one hundred was the maximum amount for a skill.

I just cross referenced the previous listings of my skill totals, and the math checked out. With that settled, I invested all the extra skill points into the Determinator tree. Two notifications rang out.

To be determined is to be definite. Define yourself. Make your aims and ambitions like stone. Give your unstoppable will a purpose, and let it go and crush that which stands in its way. +10% endurance. +10% willpower.

Do not squander these gifts you've earned. Push beyond your limits, shatter walls in your way, and become a golem of your ambition. +10% endurance. +10% willpower.

I stared down at the notifications before a wave of unrelenting hunger soared up my stomach. I gawked at the dead bear before my desire took over. I found a rock nearby, smashed out one of the bear's teeth, and used that tooth to gut its hide. Steaming entrails spilled out, and it didn't smell as acrid as you'd imagine.

It smelled good. Hunger did that to the mind. Once you passed a certain threshold, starvation consumed all higher level functions. It turned people into beasts, myself included. Engulfed by that hunger, I tore out chunks of meat and devoured the beast.

It was disgusting, raw, and gamey bear meat. Despite knowing what it was, it might as well have been a five star buffet to me. I cherished the fullness, an exhausting sense of weakness leaving me. I wiped blood from my chin, a deep sense of satisfaction ebbing within me. I survived. I would escape this place.

Once full, I simply sat in place for an hour or two after that. I stared forward with a blank mind. I didn't do anything. Once my stomach emptied, I feasted on another portion of the raw meat before a wave of fatigue passed over me. Using my arm as a pillow, I layed on the hard floor.

Taking a deep breath, I activated Agony with the discomfort coming back in waves. Cave bats echoed in the distance, but I couldn't remain awake. A creeping cricket jumped somewhere near me. It died instantly. Before passing out, I blinked a few times. For some reason, my throat burned.

I shook a bit, shaking in place for a second. It was like I had a hot coal in my throat, fiery and scorching. My eyes fogged over, both of them burning too. I blinked, pooling tears falling from my eyes. They crawled across my face while I wondered where this sadness came from.

I just survived. I won. I wasn't dead. Why was I crying? It didn't make sense. I swallowed, the bear's flavor still there. A wave of disgust passed over me, not for the

raw flesh's flavor but for myself. Images of the bears and bats filled my mind, and they overwhelmed me. I sat by myself until my crying turned to weeping. Tortured sobs gave way to sleep, but I still cloaked myself in Agony for protection.

Whether it was the skill or my own agony, I still don't know.

Chapter 6: Baldag-Ruhl, of Many

I awoke the next morning with dried snot all over my face. That, and in a thick, black bile from the bear's corpse melting. Agony disintegrated the corpse, and all the insides leaked out until I laid in them. Taking a breath, I lifted myself with a nice, quick snap up. Once upright, I steadied myself, the crusty black gunk being slippery.

I took a second to understand what the hell happened. As I did, a sinking sensation passed over me. I melted my only source of meals I'd found so far. I gasped before shaking that sinking feeling off. I'd just kill another bear, and I wouldn't melt it next time.

I rinsed myself off in the pink pool beside the bear. The water warmed me, my clothes ragged from all my fighting. The bath stunned me with how tingly the water felt, and it was thicker than normal for some reason.

Without any real information on why, I moved on. Still soaking wet, I found the leftover skin of the bear. Instead of melting, it remained pristine despite Agony's influence. After a few seconds of observing it, I figured out why.

BloodHollow Bear Skin – A tough, resilient skin with damage reflective qualities due to the external spines. Common Rarity.

The material would make a nice set of gauntlets or a cloak if I could cut it. I sliced it before, but the tooth left a jagged slice. Actually crafting the material required more than just a dull canine. A knife, once again, would've been helpful. Either way, it would've been a shame to waste the material since the bear skin's reflective qualities would help me quite a bit. Especially considering my tanking build at the time.

I folded and carried the hide across my shoulders as I went onwards. There was no point in staying here any longer. Passing further into the cavern, bats continued fighting me as I traveled along these disparate pools. I smashed those creatures now, my new fighting style giving me an edge.

Before, I dodged without really fighting back outside of jabs. Once Agony incapacitated the creatures, I jumped in and finished them off. With Lumbering Brute, I landed blows that dealt some pretty ok-ish damage during the initial stages of fights. Not life-changing, but better than before.

I dodged and ducked before swinging in another heavy hit. I knocked a tooth out of a bat's mouth. With further strength and constitution, my fists would start to dish out real damage soon. I ducked sideways, and a bat collapsed behind me. Yup, Agony still served as my primary dps source.

Handling those bats, I approach another pool. At that moment, a notification popped up.

Skill Unlocked! Travel | Level 1 – The world is vast, and there stands one method to traverse it. You know this now, and you've chosen to excel at it. +1% to self travel speed. Not effective during combat.

Extra skills always helped me out, whether in combat or not. Even if they leveled super-slow and didn't do much, they helped in the background. Far off in the distance, I spotted the next source of lit pools. They leaked out like little stars in the distance before growing into whole rooms full of whatever light the pools radiated.

This pool's color sheened like crimson, a darker red than the pink of before. In the distance, a clittering of legs caught my attention. Hiding behind a boulder, a pile of insects writhed beside the pool. A bat swooped down for water, but the insects reached out, dozens biting the bat before it even touched the pool.

These bugs swarmed over the bat as it howled out. The centipedes, cave crickets, and spiders crawled into the bat's throat, swelling the creature from the inside. They crawled out seconds later, eggs hatching from within the bat.

Tiny creatures ran out of its skin before eating its hide. A dripping, bloody skeleton remained from their infestation. The writhing insects tossed the bones into the bloodied pool with a plop, right as I gulped.

To avoid an enemy, I had to understand it. I snuck closer, and the Schema identified it for me.

Baldag-Ruhl, of Many | Level ??? – Baldag Ruhl is a hivemind that gained sentience hundreds of years ago. Slowly it has gained intelligence, learning to control more and more insects. It's intelligence and talent with runes is unmatched, as is its horde of flesh eating beetles, centipedes, and locusts.

Avoid at all costs.

I wanted nothing to do with this thing, so I began skulking away. From behind my neck, an ancient voice hissed,

"Cease your steps, little one, or I shall cease them for you."

My blood froze over in my chest as I locked in place. I couldn't move, and its voice echoed,

“You speak with words. I’ve heard them, for this is my domain. You will be useful for more than just food because of your words.”

I turned as the insects formed a vicious mouth, with centipedes for teeth. Its voice pierced through me,

“How did you wander into my den then, little one?”

I frowned before saying, “I’m trying to get out of here. This place really doesn’t want me to though, so now I’m lost.”

“You wallow in darkness, and so, you’ve lost your way like a little lamb...I can help you, little lamb, but for a price paid in blood and flesh and *bone*.”

I blinked, cold sweat dripping from my brow, “So, I’d rather keep all of that stuff with me, thank you.”

“The flesh I wish for belongs to others. You, you are soft and delicate...and small. I require something more substantial to feed my growth. I can see you’ve met a bear here. Their skin is difficult for me to deal with. You see, the spines tear my children apart. You have slain them, and eaten them. A part of its flesh is still in you. I can smell it. It drenches your breath.”

I shivered as it commanded, “Bring me the flesh of these bears. If you do so, I will consume them instead of you. What do you say to my deal, soft, little lamb?”

Feeding a Monster: Baldag-Ruhl has offered you to feed it BloodHollow Bear meat instead of fighting it. Do you accept? Yes? | No? (Quest time limit of 1 week)

Without even thinking about it, I clicked yes. I barely killed the bear, and this thing had an unknown level with a backstory to boot. It killed the bat in seconds, and from what I could tell, the bats had 700 hp or so. They also had a bit of resistance too. Despite that, Baldag-Ruhl chewed through that much hp in moments.

Fighting him was suicide, and I didn’t want the abomination laying eggs under my skin. Baldag-Ruhl writhed around me,

“You are a wise one for such a foreign creature. I will give you seven cycles to collect enough bears to make me full. Fail me, and I will find you wherever you hide. I will keep you living, and I will use your blood to create my children. All will be torment until you perish.”

I nodded before turning around back where I came. Baldag-Ruhl shifted in front of me, “No. You walk towards the bats. Past me are far more of the bearkin. That is where you will go.”

A tentacle of insect bodies pointed behind me. I held back the urge to vomit while hugging a wall opposite to the hivemind. I lowered Agony's range until it didn't touch him, though he didn't seem to mind the aura's influence before.

He either didn't notice it or it didn't really damage him. I had a long way to go before fighting this monster. As I started towards the bears, the hivemind cackled,

"I feel that fear oozing from your pores and skin. It makes your movements slow and your mind dull. Put the fear behind you, little one, and use it for power...Or it shall consume you."

I nodded as I gained a skill.

Skill Unlocked! Fear | Level 1 – Fear may freeze you in place or spur you to action. In your life, you will decide whether fear holds you down or pulls you up. Augments strength and dexterity, but dramatically increases stamina consumption while afraid.

This skill weighed me down ever so slightly, the stamina drain notable. Normally, the skill would've been awful, but my stamina exceeded my consumption of it. This meant Fear was a nice bonus instead of a blah headache.

I wouldn't be using Fear for long though. Agony's area of effect would wreck all his little bugs in time, giving me a massive edge versus the hivemind. That was the plan, and considering Agony liquified a body at a basic, primal level, I gained confidence. I could do this, and I doubted the monster could resist the damage.

I'd strengthen myself versus the bears before killing this thing. Or escape this place. Whichever came first, honestly. As I set out for the pools, no bats came out to stop me. Baldag-Ruhl's aura kept them at bay.

Once I passed a few minutes from him, the bats returned, but with a slight difference in build. The black skin on their wings extended towards their belly. This dark coloration crawled out like black veins towards their chest.

While I fought them, a bat's maw opened. What was once a red pit turned into an inky abyss. This hid them when they dove down, and the only way to sense them was via hearing or the flash of teeth. It renewed the challenge of fighting against them.

Camouflaged or not, Agony still beat them down in a few minutes. When I killed one, I inspected one of the bodies.

BloodHollow Bat | Level 45 – Their umbral blood now constitutes more of their body, giving them far greater guises in the gloom of BloodHollow. Still fodder, these bats can catch unsuspecting adventurers by surprise.

As one dove for me, I ducked below the teeth before pushing off the ground. My torso rotated, my hand building force before slamming into the bat's stomach. Like hitting a pillow of organs, the bat belched blood.

Agony softened it already. The monster collapsed onto the ground beside me, and it squirmed around. I didn't bother finishing it off. Agony handled that nasty business for me. Another swooped down, then another.

I evaded the second bat, its body smashing stone. When the third one dove down, I got a handle on its descent. Timing a punch, I charged towards its teeth. Tucking my fist against my side, I turned my body. My feet pressed against the ground hard when my fist smashed into the bat's open mouth.

The bat's teeth sliced into my arm, but my whole forearm was lodged in its throat. I gripped its insides before smashing it into the ground. With it unable to bite, I lifted it above my head and growled. I smashed it into the ground until its blood drenched my arm. Wielding the corpse, I lobbed it into the second bat's second dive.

It flopped to the ground, and I swarmed it. I heel-stomped it until the beast resembled a black puddle beneath my foot. They gave me some experience, though nowhere near the value of a crimson bear. Either way, I appreciated the boost in exp.

To gain a level, fifty lesser bats needed to die. I only needed to kill twenty now. After two more hours beating bats to death, I leveled up to forty one. After placing my attribute point into constitution, I reached another pool of pink water. A bear much like the one I faced before was there, slumbering next to the water.

BloodHollow Bear | Level 74 – An enormous, terrifying creature. Fight with caution as it's red aura and monstrous strength are very effective tools for dismembering adventurers.

I hit my forehead with my knuckles a few times to psyche myself up. A part of me still feared the bear, even though I already killed one. I got slightly stronger since then, but this bear would still be a challenge.

Not letting myself get lost in my thoughts, I heaved out a breath like a madman before sprinting towards the sleeping bear. Agony's range hit the bear before I did, causing it to stir. It rubbed its eyes with its paw, the razor sharp, black claws glistening in the pool's light.

I collided my fist into its nose. My fist crushed but so did the beast's face. My hand held up better than last time, the bear's nose being softer now. Not letting myself get cornered and getting the first attack helped me too.

The bear reeled back, more out of pain than actual damage. I ran up and wailed on its sides. My hits did minimal damage, but they added up over time. The bear got its

bearings and smashed the earth with its front paws, pushing me back with the force of his stomp. Powdered stone ebbed out as it roared.

I flipped backwards, rolling on the ground. I lifted my head, and the spined bear growled as it charged me. I shoved myself back up, taking a deep breath. The bear slung its weight into its right paw, but I leaned towards the attack in a lunge. My fist followed behind me, building in force. As the paw skimmed by the top of my head, my knuckles clashed into the beast's cheek.

The bones in my arms shook and creaked under the strain, but they held up this time. My shoulders and arms screamed at the incoming force, but they did not relent. They obeyed my iron will, withstanding the force of the hit.

The counter-impact off my hit slid me backwards a foot. The bear opened its jaws and came at me once more. I ducked back before torquing another hook into the bear's face. The bear's face barely budged, and it gave me a hideous grin.

I returned the gesture. I rained my strikes and they landed often. Each time, my hands hurt as if hitting a sandbag full of lead. But I kept hitting. The bear retaliated in kind. It gnawed and slashed and cut and bit and clawed and roared. It sliced me open a few times, but I managed my health and stayed patient.

After regenerating, I attacked the monster again. The bear couldn't dodge at all, but its strikes whirled and hissed in the air. This made for a deadly dance where I walked on the edge of life and death. It reminded me of fighting, and unlike the previous bear, I almost found myself smiling.

The last bear fought me when I wanted to run. Now I battled on my own terms, and that mental prep made all the difference. I got after the bear, hounding it like a bulldog with something to prove.

However, over an hour passed, my mental endurance waning. The bear slipped in several gashing swipes. A set of four deep claw marks dripped from my chest. It ruined what remained of my shirt. Several of my knuckles lacked skin by then, becoming scarred masses. Blood dripped from my mouth from when the bear tackled me into the wall.

It almost killed me, but I kept myself together enough to recuperate. The bear fared worse, its regeneration paling by comparison. No nose, eyes, or ears, the beast lashed out with wild, desperate attacks. Making sure it kept exhausting itself, I circled it, slipping in free hooks when I could.

Welts had formed in its sides from the continuous bruising. I kept my distance for a while, keeping Agony low enough that I regenerated my wounds. The aura gave the bear no idea where I was, so I just sat by the pool, cooling off as it died.

Once I healed, I went forward again with a renewed charge. The bear stumbled and fell like a giant sack of heaving flour. I dove on top of the beast and beat it further. My hands slowly but surely turned him to a thick soup of blood. A notification appeared as it died.

Level up! Two levels gained!

It was a hard-fought two levels, but not like the four of before. It took time, effort, and focus to kill this bear. Last time required enough effort that I almost gave in. The benefits from my Determinator trees were paying off.

Thinking of which, I wondered how many tree points I had at this point. I checked it out, finding over twenty already built up in my various skills. I even had new ones.

Countering | Level 4 – To use your own power confines you to your own strength. When you use your enemy's power against them, you exceed your limits. +4% damage to counter attacks.

Challenger | Level 4 – To challenge requires much, but remember, the most important component is resolve. A challenge is chosen. A trial is endured. Your strength rises against stronger foes.

Savagery | Level 3 – You crush your enemy's body before crushing their spirit. Additional damage inflicted while evoking savagery.

I couldn't help but frown at the last skill. I'd imagine every beast I'd fought so far had the skill too. I just smashed them because it was that or die. And I wasn't the biggest fan of death.

I put all the points into the Determinator tree, leaving it at about two thirds finished. I had quite a few points left to go before completing it. What also interested me, however, was the new trees I unlocked.

| II Vicious(Beat an enemy 40 levels higher than you in combat lasting over an hour, Death's Dance, Scorn, and Desperation over level 25)(0/50) | III Fighter(Kill an enemy 40 levels over you) |

Both trees looked solid, though I'd probably go with the Fighter tree first. The extra damage resistance and physical power would be huge at this point, especially with the constitution I stacked up since the first tree.

With that in mind, I put both my attribute points into constitution before scratching my head at the bear's corpse. If I tried dragging the body, Agony would melt it. If I tried dragging it without agony, the bats would eat the corpse and me. Even then, this was a huge bear. Carrying it was well beyond my abilities.

It gave me time for a meal at least. I cut off a portion of the bear's thighs with its own teeth. I chewed and gnawed the raw meat, desperate for the sustenance. I waited another hour, and I ate another meal.

Once finished, I stuffed my lungs with a deep breath before shouting,

"Hey. Baldag-Ruhl. I need your help."

I cut off Agony as I waited. Ten minutes later, a pile of ten bugs reaches me and spoke in its voice,

"Have I misplaced my faith, little lamb? I spoke of you feeding me. It seems you are...Ah."

I pointed at the bear's corpse, "I've already killed one. The thing is, I can't carry them. They are really heavy, and I'm not all that strong. Can you, I don't know...drag it or something?"

The insect's crawled over towards the bear's corpse. They opened the bear's mouth before crawling down its throat. The bear's skin swelled, bulbous and deformed before deflating in seconds. Over twice as many insects poured out of the corpse's mouth. I almost threw up at the sight.

Baldag-Ruhl cackled, "Hah, excellent, little lamb. You've given me more children so soon. You're more capable than I imagined. How did you kill it?"

I pulled up my bloody fists, "I beat it to death."

"Its meat proved tender and delicate. Your gift will not go unrewarded. Give me the bear skin on your back."

I grimaced as I handed it over. Baldag-Ruhl took the other skin and after a few minutes of disgusting writhing, the insects reached out towards me. At the tip of the squirming limb, a pair of gauntlets matched the size of my hands. The Schema recognized them.

BloodHollow Gauntlets of Baldag-Ruhl | Tier: Unique – Gauntlets crafted from BloodHollow Bear skin by the hive mind, Baldag-Ruhl, of Many. The gauntlets add hardness to your hands, allow guarding with your forearms, and count as unarmed for skill gain. Additional corrosive damage dealt with punches, and blocking reflects some damage dealt to you.

I grabbed them from the filthy, disgusting tentacle as I said, "Thank you. I'm pretty sure this will help tremendously with killing the bears."

"I will reward you more once I'm sated."

Wanting to continue talking, I waved a hand, "Could I, like, ask for something."

"No. Go and face more of them. I'm still ravenous."

The insects clattered and crawled away before I reached up a hand, "Wait a minute."

They pooled together, and they spoke in a menacing undertone, "Do you wish to anger me with your chattering?"

I waved my hands, "Do you know a way out of here?"

The monster snapped, "Would I be in this cavern still if I could escape it? No. I would relish the light over an open sky. I would cherish that sun and live in abundance...I would bathe in it, drench myself fully."

It grew sad, "I would drink from cold, flowing waters, not from these stagnant, shining pools. I would enjoy more than the meat of mere bats. The world, your world...It would be my feast. A feast for my teeth and tongue, yes, but for my eyes and ears as well."

It whispered, "What I would give to hear music or read books again...I would be free."

A silence loomed over us. The mass trembled, "But...I will settle for the bears. Kill them, or I shall kill you."

There was a sense of loss in his voice that I hadn't expected. Being trapped here for hundreds of years...I couldn't even imagine what that must've been like. As Baldag skulked away, I equipped the gauntlets, the material warm over my hands. The spines of the skin lined up with my knuckles and fingers nicely, fitting like, well, a glove.

Terrible analogies aside, I banged my gauntleted hands against the rock floor. They clinked back with a robust thud. With a quick couple hooks, I already adjusted to the added weight and heft of them. Almost like a second skin, they didn't chafe or jiggle around as I punched. They hugged my hands like a lover would, both firm and gentle at the same time.

It was a strange analogy, and I needed to talk with or I'd go insane soon. Either way, with the gift received, I trekked out further into the cave. The new high leveled bats swooped down more frequently than before, but a few gloved punches dispatched them with Agony's help. After another hour of killing them, I found another pool.

This one was like the pool I started at, a bright cyan. Unlike the other pink pools, there were no bears or monsters guarding the water. I connected disparate dots, the information clicking together at that moment.

The pink pools meant monsters, and the cyan pools meant no monsters. Baldag-Ruhl's crimson pool meant that he was the boss monster of the BloodHollow dungeon. Maybe, just maybe, if I killed him, I could escape.

The thought gave me some extra resolve, so I filled up more water bags while passing the blue pool. All the while, I fought stupid bats for another hour or so. Between fights, I practiced my school subjects. Every skillpoint counted after all.

Falling into that pattern, I eventually reached a place unlike the others of this cavern. I reached a ravine where cliff sides surrounded a depression. I paced up to it, peering down. I found an enormous figure guarding a trapdoor beside the entity. An aura of violet radiated from the eleven foot tall giant. That energy infused a blue miasma thicker than water. That visible atmosphere shifted around its hulking frame.

The thick, interlocking plates over its body showed no face mask, only six dots lining where eyes and a mouth should be. Dense shoulder pauldrons connected to its head, leaving no neck nor weakness. In its right hand, it held a spear edged with a blade of violet energy. That instrument glowed, crackling and humming with violent, volatile energies.

This being exuded strength, nobility, and purpose. There was no doubt in how this being stood; it acted as an unwavering guardian. The Schema recognized it for me.

Nameless Sentinel | Lvl ?,??? – A sentinel sent by Schema to guard a volatile rift for a planet newly assimilated by Schema. [Fighting one is death]

Already I got a bit of knowledge from the thing. Baldag-Ruhl's level indicator had three question marks while this one had four. By my educated guesstimations, that meant this guy was at least level one thousand.

In other words, a literal god to me.

Aiming to avoid it, I turned away. As I pushed with my back foot, the little outcrop I stood over crumbled beneath me. My vision circled, and panic raced up my chest. I tumbled like a ragdoll, rolling and rolling as I hit rocks. After a few seconds of being bruised and battered, I landed near the guardian.

The aura around the guard turned from blue to violet as it turned to me. Sparks of energy rippled near it as the air around me grew heavy, almost choking me from being near it. Arcs of violet lightning shot from its metal plates as it gripped both sides of its spear. They boomed out with the violence of thunder.

It whirled the blade with mastery, and I pushed myself against the edge of the cliffside. It pointed the blade at me, speaking in a metallic voice,

“Preparing for combat. Protective protocol initiated.”

I hadn't shut down Agony.

Chapter 7: The Sentinel of Monolith

I pulled the aura away from the behemoth, raising my hands and shouting, "I didn't mean to fight. I surrender. Please, don't hurt me."

The Sentinel slammed its spear into the ground, quaking the entire cave. It announced,

"I accept your surrender. I will not do so again."

The violet prisms of energy waned before dissipating from around it. Its presence waned from overwhelming to merely oppressive. It stared forward, ignoring my existence entirely. I pace up,

"So...what are you exactly?"

"I am a Sentinel of Schema."

I frowned before spreading my hands to it, "So uh, is that all you do or?"

"I guard the entrance and exit of this rift. Schema deems certain dungeons as highly dangerous, giving extra rewards for the extra danger within them. Anyone who enters is 'gambling' as your species calls it. You have gambled, so now you will pay the price for the risk you've undertaken."

I frowned, "Uh, no I didn't. I was just warped here. Is that the exit? Because I would really like to leave right about now."

"No. The only way to leave this dungeon is by killing the riftkeeper. The guardian here is and has been Baldag-Ruhl, of Many."

My assumption was right. That thing was way stronger than me. I waved my hands, "How strong are you compared to that *thing*?"

"Stronger than it or *you* will ever be."

"Huh...We'll see. Either way, can you let me out?"

"No."

"The thing is, I didn't actually want to enter this dungeon. I was warped in when reality warped a while back."

“That cannot happen. Schema automatically spawns all members of the dominant, sentient species of newly acquiesced planets to tutorial zones. You cannot spawn in a dungeon, therefore, you are lying.”

I blinked before locking eyes with its facemask, “That doesn’t make sense. I warped into here.”

It kept its gaze facing forward,

“If you did, you didn’t, since it cannot be.”

I spread my arms, “But, I’m here without ever entering the tutorial.”

“No you are not. You are here, meaning you passed the tutorial.”

“Man, ok, asshole. How about this, can you see my menu screens?”

“I am not the defecatory duct for releasing solid waste matter. And yes, I can see them.”

“Then that’s enough to prove it to you.”

I open my perk menu, showing the grayed out screen with the Beginner perk unselected. An awkward silence passed over us before it stated,

“There is no known way of spawning outside of Schema’s tutorial zone.”

“Then there shouldn’t be any way to leave the tutorial without selecting these perks, right?”

“Affirmative.”

I rolled my hands, “So I’m out of the tutorial zone without selecting these perks. See how this isn’t adding up?”

Another strained silence passed over us. It turned its head to me, “You may leave my proximity.”

I pointed at the door, “Does that mean BloodHollow?”

“No.”

I facepalmed before pointing both my hands at him, “Now wait a minute. I’m not trying to break any rules or anything. What you just said is what I’m working with. An error occurred and I’m just trying to get it fixed, alright?”

The Sentinel sighed, “Schema didn’t make a mistake.”

I threw my hands up in frustration before changing the subject, “Ok, can you at least tell me what the Schema is and what it wants?”

“All fundamental knowledge of Schema is given out during the tutorial. I will not repeat it for you.”

I closed my eyes, holding them shut for a second. This was ridiculous.

“So...in other words, you can’t do anything but stand there?”

“I am capable of many other functions...but yes, all I do is guard this gate currently.”

I let out a long sigh. I tilted my head at it, “Then can you tell me what you think of the Schema?”

“It is a construct benevolent beyond measure.”

“How?”

It opened its menu, letting me see a video feed from a far off place. It showed a picture of the Milky Way. The Sentinel pointed at the image with his spear,

“What you understand as the universe is an unstable entity. Within the infinity of it, there are cracks formed from its expansion. These cracks will rupture, letting *things* out. Horrors, abominations that should not exist and don’t...as long as they stay within those cracks instead of here.”

The guard glanced up, “Schema stabilizes these cracks. It prevents the fissures and allows assimilated worlds to fight against the incoming tide of horrors. Your world is lucky we found you before you were consumed utterly.”

My brow furrowed, “Wait a minute...consumed. What do you mean consumed?”

“You’ve seen the weakest spawns from those cracks. Know this – what you see is merely the beginning. These monsters will pour forth in an unending tide, a torrent dark and brimming with hunger. An unstoppable hunger, a ravenous starvation that your flesh and blood will satiate.”

He tapped my chest with the hilt of his spear, “If you allow them. Those things have no form before coming here. Once they have manifested, they *eat*, and they never stop. Even I struggle against the most advanced among them. As is, your world is nothing but an easy feast.”

My heart raced in my chest. This dungeon wasn’t the first or the last of these places. Wanting more info, I raised a hand, “Then the Schema, or Schema is here to help.”

“Only if you survive the Culling.”

I winced, “So, uh, what do you mean by the Culling?”

“Your questions tire me. Read the data entries in your codex regarding basic, fundamental details of Schema owned space.”

I opened my mouth for another question, but the Sentinel raised a palm to me, “Silence.”

We waited there for a bit before I pointed at the wall, “Can you at least help me out of this hole then?”

The Sentinel loomed over me before stabbing its spear into the ground. The behemoth cracked its knuckles,

“Gladly.”

The Sentinel wrapped its hands around my torso. It reared me back like a ragdoll before slinging me through the air. I flew with the grace of a bird, but, you know, with both its wings broken. I landed on my legs, but the bones of my shins snapped like twigs. I cringed, suppressing a scream.

Within five minutes of waiting, my legs rejuvenated. After that undertaking, I gawked at the Sentinel guarding the dungeon’s exit. At least it gave me someone to talk to, even if only for a few minutes. It gave me some info to work with as well, like some kind of culling going on outside BloodHollow.

If that sounded as bad as it was, I needed to get out of here and find Michael and Kelsey before someone else did. I may even check on my dad. Taking a breath, I went about slaying bats while slinging obscenities around about the Sentinel’s mother. If it had one, of course. Petty, maybe, but so was breaking my damn legs. After an hour of cursing, I reached another pool with another crimson bear.

The level seventy six beast slumbered just like the last. I pumped myself up with a couple pats to my cheeks. Once revved up, I charged straight at the bear. I smashed my fist into the bear’s nose, breaking it like the last one. With my new gauntlets and my extra constitution, the bear no longer felt as hard as iron.

It mirrored wood instead. The difference may not sound substantial, but punching a rock versus a tree makes a huge difference. Stone bites back like a cobra against a fist. It outright crumbled the bones to fractured fragments. Wood resisted more like punching a forehead. Hard, but it gave a little.

Sometimes, a little meant a lot. It made keeping my eyes open a lot easier since I didn’t want to close them each time I punched. That let me see this bear attempt another

quick ground slam to blow me back. Seeing it coming, I jumped up. The shockwave and rumble passed under me, only sending me back a foot or two.

My feet dragged on stone before I dashed forward. Slicing claws shaved the top of my head while I slammed a fist into its side. It gnarled its teeth, but I turned sideways, uppercutting its jaw. Another swipe of its paws, and I ducked under them once more.

I was ready for its tricks this time. As Agony burned the beast down, it realized it wasn't ready for mine. The grueling battle lasted another hour, but I stayed standing while it fell. With only scrapes and bruises, I rolled my shoulders over the beast as it died.

During that fight, I noted the extra heft constitution gave me. That was why its ground pound didn't send me flying. The bear even headbutted me in my chest at one point, yet I kept on my feet. Sliding a ways back, sure, but I wasn't sent tumbling off into the distance.

A notification gave me a satisfying, dopamine releasing ping, and I gained another level. It was addictive, in a way. Wanting to see how much exp I had left for my next level, a little bar of yellow appeared under my hp bar.

It was over 3/4's the way full. A few more bat's and I'd be level 45. I ate some bear, turned off Agony, and called good old Baldag-Ruhl. He ate the bear in the most terrifying way possible, and I went to sleep after he left. Hiding in the leftover bear skin, I rested well with Agony on for once.

I rose in the skin the next day, my head clear and in control. After a few swallows of water, I trekked out into the day. After an hour of traveling, I caved in a bat's skull with a stomp before I gained another level.

Things were on the up and up. I placed another point into constitution before the perk screen appeared.

[Willful(Willpower of at least 10) – Your willpower is good. Doubles mana regeneration.]

[Disciplined(Willpower of at least 20) – Your willpower is excellent. Willpower adds an extra 1% mana regen for every 1% missing max mana. Your mana can form a shield around you, blocking 1 damage for every 2 points of mana.]

[Hulking(Constitution of at least 20) – Your constitution is excellent. Doubles mass and density gain from each point in constitution. Doubles the hardness of bones.]

[Fledgling(Reach level 5) – You've just started learning. +10% to experience.]

[Beginner(Reach level 10) – Now you know a little. You can step out of the tutorial zone now.]

The perks this time didn't give me an easy choice like the last couple times. Of course, I only had two options, but I was still torn. The mana shield sounded amazing. I mean, it effectively gave me my mana at extra hit points when I needed them. Hulking, on the other hand, gave me an excellent way of increasing my damage potential.

Both were tempting choices. In the end, I went for Hulking since I would still be investing points into constitution past this. When I finalized the selection, the change was immediate and dramatic.

I steadily built up my constitution over several days, making the increase in weight subtle. When I selected finalize, my weight *doubled*. My bones turned to steel. My skin turned like wood. When I slammed my hand into the stone floor beneath me, my gauntleted fists made a thin sheen of powder. I could crush stone with my hits.

I waved my arms around, their heft like hammers. My legs acted the same, making me feel slow and awkward. With over twenty four constitution, I got over 50% damage resistance. I was over twice as tough now, and it showed. Compared to my pre-Schema self, I was over ten times bulkier. That wasn't even factoring in my hp regen or Agony either.

The only problem was that my body fought back each time I moved. I couldn't jump as well anymore, and trying anything remotely technical became an impossibility. When I checked out my status screen, a debuff showcased my feelings precisely.

Overencumbered – You are carrying more than is reasonable for your current strength. Stamina consumption doubled.

The Determinator paths almost eliminated this weakness with all my stamina regeneration. Without them, I'd burn through my stamina in a few minutes. It made me wary of constitution, as the attribute could start causing problems. I kept that in mind when planning out the rest of my build. Killing Baldag would require mobility, after all.

That was a pipe dream at the moment, so I picked up my pace before finding another pool in the distance. It glistened, a yellow star amidst a sea of gloom. Once upon it, the center of it carried a giant eel curled in a charged loop. Vibrant crescents of lightning radiated from its skin. The water mirrored liquid gold with how it shined.

I gawked at the beauty, stunned by it for a second. The eel locked eyes with me, knocking me out of my daydream. Its bottom jaw carried several curved teeth like tusks. It opened and snapped the jaw like a crocodile's mouth.

If it bit something, it wouldn't let it go. The cheeks of the eel hung off it in wrinkled humps, just like a bulldog's. Schema recognized the eel once I got closer.

Bloody Bolt Eel | Level 80 – An evolved version of the Bolt Eel, the Bloody Bolt Eel lashes out at adventurers trying to come near its pool. With tremendous biting strength and powerful, long range electricity for attacks, this beast shouldn't be underestimated, or else you'll face electrocution.

As I got closer, the eel uncoiled and turned towards me. A deafening, blinding streak of lightning passed over towards a nearby stalagmite. Finding a thick pillar of stone, I darted behind it as streaks of energy crackled through the air. Goosebumps formed over my skin as my hair stood on end.

From behind that pillar, I closed my eyes with glowing marks lingering from the flash of blinding plasma. The eel thrashed in the water, launching dozens of arcs of electricity towards me. The sheer volume of bolts riddled the cavern with dark streaks. The single eel created a thunderstorm in this tiny hall.

The lights left every bat fleeing in terror, and I'd have joined them if I could. If I stood out from behind the rock pillar, I'd have died in an instant. But, you see, I was behind the rock. The eel remained in Agony's range, and over time, it melted into a black ether.

Level Up! One Level Gained.

The leveling had really slowed down since I got past level forty, but each point mattered more now than before. I placed a point into constitution, bumping up my heft and durability further. After calling Baldag-Ruhl, the beetles swarmed up. They found me finishing some eel with my hair standing on end.

"Yo, what's up?"

The beetles formed a mouth, "What are you eating?"

I gestured to the beast, "An electrified eel. It's tastes way better than the bear."

"And you wish for me to indulge on this as a replacement for the bear meat?"

"I was hoping so, yeah."

It raged into the eel's maw, insects bursting out of the thin hide. I scrambled from the monster before Baldag's voice radiated,

"These will do nicely. You're doing well. Very well."

"Any rewards?"

"Not yet, little lamb, but soon. Soon, I will give you much."

He kept an ominous touch to his voice, but pretty much everything out of his mouth sounded malevolent. Trekking onwards, I found other pools of vibrant yellow. These yellow pools made for easy, simple gains compared to the bears.

I ran up, hid behind a boulder or thickened stalactite, and then the eel died over time. It only took about thirty minutes a pop. Getting to each pool was more difficult than the fights themselves, actually.

I reached level forty nine in a flash before I reached another set of pools. The first pool glowed a bright, steel gray. In the pool's sheen was a giant cluster of rocks that moved in a tornado kind of formation. Passing close, Schema identified the creature.

BloodHollow Golem | Level 90 – These are golems given life by ambient energy from nearby pools. This mana produces a golem as a guard, mimicking acts of sentience. Many philosophers have debated whether or not these sources of ambient mana are actually sentient. While never coming to a consensus, what they all agree on is that the golems are extremely dangerous.

You would be wise to heed their words.

To be honest, I didn't know if agony would affect a bunch of floating rocks. That and its high level scared me off. Instead, I hunted bats between each cavern while training my skills. I found that the harder I tried, the more skills I gained. Willpower worked hand in hand with this, allowing relatively rapid gains for my skills.

I wasn't so lucky with levels. By now, the bats yielded minimal experience. Even after five hours, I gained zero levels. I killed over a hundred bats before I finally got the notification for level fifty. Grinding the bats turned into a tedious, mind-numbing chore by now. If not for my enhanced willpower, I wouldn't have stomached it.

Still, I wanted that juicy constitution perk. I put yet another point into that attribute, and the next set of perks appeared once more.

[Willful(Willpower of at least 10) – Your willpower is good. Doubles mana regeneration.]

[Disciplined(Willpower of at least 20) – Your willpower is excellent. Willpower adds an extra 1% mana regen for every 1% missing max mana. Your mana can form a shield around you, blocking 1 damage for every 2 points in mana.]

[Titanic(Constitution of 25 or higher) – Your constitution is incredible. Half of damage resistance is applied to other resistances. 1/10th of your constitution is added to strength.]

[Fledgling(Reach level 5) – You've just started learning. +10% to experience.]

[Beginner(Reach level 10) – Now you know a little. You can step out of the tutorial zone now.]

Titanic floored me with how incredible and timely it was. The perk patched up my strength problem while making my defenses more well rounded. It reminded me of the upper tiers of the endurance perks.

They both had the theme of rounding out their attribute's innate weakness. For example, if I invested heavily into endurance, but lacked willpower, I couldn't use endurance effectively. It required tremendous will to get the benefits of endurance, after all.

The extra willpower from the endurance perks helped with that. Investing heavily into constitution made strength an issue, but once again, the perk trees helped alleviate the issue.

I'm sure the strength perks would help with dexterity, since greater strength required greater control to use it. That kind of foresight was appreciated, especially since it helped patch some of the numerous innate problems with my build.

After thinking about it, I finalized Titanic and the constitution point. I took a step back, my flesh writhing as energy shifted through me. The matter and even my mind reorganized into stable, powerful chains, locking me in place. The air around me turned lukewarm. I walked over, putting my hand against rock.

It wasn't as cool to the touch. Even more, my body expanded. The ground didn't press against my feet. My feet pressed into the ground. The cells across my body thickened, adding strips of mass and muscle onto my frame. My weight evened out a bit as my gaunt limbs filled out some.

When I clenched my fist, a new power returned from my fingers. As if exploding with energy, I leapt, rolled, sprinted, and punched with abandon. Endurance was hard to notice. Constitution had been a slow, gradual process. By comparison, strength, well, strength was like liquid power. Every single point made a monumental difference.

You could even say the difference was...titanic.

Poorly placed puns aside, I finished jumping off the walls and raced off to test my newfound strength against the golem. Of course, I prepared myself for a tough fight. The perk gave me confidence, but my days of struggle wouldn't be so easily forgotten.

By then, I had come close to dying many times, from the first bat to the first bear. Both took me to the edge of my abilities. Despite that fear, gaining levels had slowed down to an abysmal crawl. Killing over a hundred bats over eight hours may have sounded fun...Oh wait, that's right; it didn't.

It was even worse living through the process, let me tell you. It had the effect of making me sloppy instead of sharp, like smashing a sword against a rock. I had to push my limits for any real results, and that would keep me on my toes too.

Speaking of results, I checked out my treepoints and found fifty-seven points unallocated. With a few quick presses, I had nearly 400 points in Determinator. A little quick grinding would get me the next notification.

With a bit of brainstorming, I gained and leveled up a few skills, like Swimming, Climbing, and Jumping. I got five skill levels worth of them before putting the points in Determinator. A quick notification sounded out like music to my ears.

There is no stopping a Determinator. They don't understand surrender or compromise. This stems not from stupidity but from defiance. They are resolute in their faith. They worship their own wills, feeding them fuel for the returning fire. +10% to endurance. +10% to willpower.

With the extra damage added onto Agony, I moved towards the earthen golem with a slow sneak. Once I reached it, I found a thick shield of air surrounding it. Closer to water, this thickness permeated near the pool. When I tapped it, the golem flew towards me.

Angry as a hornet, the golem's boulder body turned into a set of arms and legs as it landed near me. Placing a palm against the thick air, I pushed through when a jumbled voice gurgled back,

"Leave me. I am. You are. Not kill...me."