

The New World

Chapter 8: Living Mana

Another mind crawled towards mine, feeble and fleeting. Jerking my hands back, I gripped my palm that touched the mana. This blot of mana was alive. Not giving me time to think, the BloodHollow Golem crashed through the field of mana before slamming formed fists at me. I rolled sideways, bits of stone pattering on my skin.

I charged forward and smashed a blow into its thigh boulder. A powder dusted off my fist before the golem slammed its fist into my shoulder. Bone cracked. My vision blurred. I flopped through the air, bruises forming where I tumbled. The golem pulled its boulders from its body, engorging its arms with pebbles and boulders. Like swinging whips, the earthen thrall slammed its elongated arms at me. I dodged several strikes, but the attacks never ceased. Two or three blows skimmed me before the golem turned a full circle. Its arm dragged behind it before it reached me.

I braced for impact. A deafening echo sounded from my shoulder, and I slid on my feet. I stayed standing after the blow, pieces of stone falling from my shoulder. It pulled its arm back, but I kept a piece of it in my hand. I smashed against the cavern floor before shouting,

“Is that all you’ve got?”

The golem raised its arm back and lobbed another heavy strike. It whipped past my face as I darted forward. The golem’s arm smashed the rock behind me as I pressed my heels into the ground and planted my feet. I clasped my hands, turning them into clubs. I torqued my body for momentum, smashing my fists into the golem’s side.

My bones bent, and my flesh sheared. I snapped another blow into the monster before its arm crashed into the side of my face. Blood poured from my forehead, and I grimaced. I smashed another blow into its side before it crashed another hit into my chest. My shoes rubbed on stone as I dragged back.

It tried again, but I blocked its strike with crossed arms. It pulled back, but I closed the gap while growling,

“Come on Golem. We’ve just started.”

I ducked under a blow with my fist dragging behind me. With a whipping hook, I crushed my fist into its side. A sharp, cracking boom resonated through the cavern. A set of bats flew away, terrified of the fight. My body held on as we traded blows for minutes at a time.

Agony burnt the creature's stone body, melting the rock to jelly. Scrapes on the boulders turned to cracks that turned to cleaved slabs as we fought. The massive health pool of the golem waned over time, but mine did not. Time passed, and I got a grip on its style of combat. I evaded more of its strikes, finding opportunities to hit the monster.

In the last moments of the battle, I ducked under a quick slice of stone and countered with a hook. Another blow missed me as I tilted my torso. I countered again. I weaved in counter after counter, its hits predictable until chunks of its center fell apart. More like fighting a mountain than a monster, I tore it apart with my granite fists and Agony's aura once it stopped moving.

When the golem died, I almost felt sorry for the poor thing. Almost.

Level gained! Two level ups!

I put both points into constitution before checking out my attribute screen closely.

Level 52 Attribute Menu

Strength [12.4] | Constitution [33] | Endurance [48] | Dexterity [4] | Willpower [11.3] | Intelligence [4] | Charisma [4] | Luck [3] | Perception [4]

I tilted my head at the screen, the menu changing from the last time I saw it. I guess a reality warping status screen changing its formatting wasn't exactly too surprising. Either way, my attributes beefed up since investing into the perks. Those cascading gains resulted in attribute totals that exceeded my level.

Keeping that in mind, I checked out my character screen. The numbers amazed me.

Daniel Hillside | Character Screen

Health – 944/944 | Health Regen – 101.12/min | Mana – 40/40 | Mana Regeneration – 4.74/min | Stamina – 944/944 | Stamina Regeneration – 16.85/sec | Damage Resistance – 70.95% | Physical Power – (+)28% | Damage Increase – 5%

Debuffs – Agony(430 hp lost/min)

Compared with when I started, I improved my toughness forty times over. Agony burned down hp like nobody's business, and my stamina regen was effectively infinite. For now, at least. The willpower and constitution bonuses to Agony made the skill a terror to deal with too. By level fifty five, I'd be able to finish the Determinator tree and get the last perk for constitution.

With my status checked, I moved back towards the golem's remains. Besides stubborn rubble and fine ash, a glowing core remained. The orb swirled with stormy energies, tiny clouds whirling on its glassy surface. Schema identified it.

Golem Core – Contains remnants of the mana required for summoning the golem. Can be used for many useful recipes or enchantments.

I pocketed the tiny, glowing orb before turning back towards the writhing cloud of mana. I neared the wall of heavy air before placing my palm back onto the surface. The pieces of a mind shouted and wailed,

“Do not. Kill. Me. Beg. Stop.”

I pulled my hand from it, the primordial consciousness giving me an eerie feeling. With a piece of my will, I told the fragmented mind to calm down. The fluctuating voices silenced. A message appeared.

A cloud of mana has offered to inhabit a container of yours. You are given a choice: store the cloud in the golem’s core, or allow it to live within your own mana. Warning: Co-inhabitation of mana may lead to corruption. You may absorb the cloud’s mana from the core at any point.

Wanting to avoid the ‘corruption’ at all costs, I put the cloud of mana into the golem’s core without a second thought. I hoped it would become useful later. The pool of gray water dimmed until only my little blue sacks of cyan water kept the cave lit, though the water remained. After washing myself in the dark pool, I trekked back out into the cave’s depths.

The bats increased in volume, but I dispatched them with mechanical proficiency. I couldn’t avoid killing them even if I tried. I found myself daydreaming as I fought them, the motions of murder practiced till they required no effort anymore. As I jogged forward, an hour passed of further monotony.

I was so tired of the cave, the endless walls of stone, all of it. Another pool appeared with living mana. I thanked the change in scenery, and when I approached, water rose from the pool of gray. Ice formed in massive chunks, even larger than the last one. They came together, forming a moving glacier.

BloodIce Golem | Level 95 – A golem made of crystalized mana and ice, bound with blood. Can use long range ice spears, a chilling debuff in melee range, and can freeze targets. A very powerful and dangerous foe.

By now, fear didn’t flavor my mindset much. I wanted a change, even if it was dangerous, so I pounded my fists together before charging forward. Above the golem, water spiraled into spears. The golem lobbed them at me with large sweeps of its arms. They shot forward like glass bullets.

I bent backwards, dodging the first, but two others stabbed into my foot and through my shin. Like kicking a glass table, the pain shot through my legs, electric and vibrant. I

raised my fist and smashed one ice spear. I grimaced before smashing the one through my foot. I ducked sideways, dodging another lance.

I gritted my teeth. Running in wasn't the best idea. I pulled my feet and shins from the shattered ice spears. As I did, a chilling crack and sickening suck sounded from my wounds. The mana wall around the golem rippled in response. I couldn't tell why.

Another spear shot forward, I weaved sideways, more a wild reaction than timed dodge. Shutting Agony down, I let my regeneration begin. Another lance of ice came, and I dove onto the floor. My right leg gave out as I did, making me roll more than I intended. Magical ice pierced rock behind me as I did.

The beast of ice and malice spiraled, its form composing more ice to fire at me. Having a few seconds, I got a handle on the situation. Closing the distance required avoiding the lances. Once I got close, it looked far more frail than the last golem.

With that plan in motion, the crystallizing water popped and crackled in the distance. My legs healed before the golem lifted a spindly arm. It rotated, a thin javelin crossing towards me. I rolled sideways as the ice flashed into the rock beside me. I tried sprinting, finding my leg still giving out.

I cursed before limping behind a boulder. Ice clashed against the rock. A cool mist of ice sprayed over me in an oncoming wave. Another deafening crack and another gust of icy mist followed. This boulder served as a defence.

The golem's stomps echoed through the cavern, their volume growing with each step. A few more seconds passed, and my leg skin wrapped back around my leg. Times like that made my new body feel like it wasn't mine. Waiting until the footsteps stopped, I charged out of the boulder before rolling forward.

Brittle cracking resonated throughout the cavern and a shard whistled over my head. I stood back up, finding the ice golem forming a swarm of needles. Panicking, I bolted behind another rock. A rain of sharpened spines impaled the stone instead of me. A shrill howl filled the air before another blob of ice tore into the stone behind me.

A sharp explosion boomed from behind, the colossal boulder cracking in two. I whipped around the crags and sprinted at the golem. When I got within ten feet, a wave of cold chilled me down to my core. I pressed through the frigid temperature before ducking beneath a swing of the frozen thrall.

I reached it. Pushing up with my heels and digging them into the ground, I wailed at the beast. I snapped two quick punches into the monster before it formed an icy mallet over my head. I pivoted sideways as the maul crushed where I once stood.

My right arm dragged behind me as I lunged forward. Momentum built throughout my core, my shoulder, and eventually, in my hand. With an ear splitting pop, the golem's

chest cleaved. A chunk of ice fell apart before it let out a piercing howl. Keeping my arms close to my sides, I turned on my feet like a tornado.

I whipped hook after hook with Agony melting the ice. The cracks on its body webbed outwards, appearing throughout the golem. It raised its arm towards me, slamming my chest. I flung back a few feet before it raised its other hand towards me. I ducked back, but the arm extended out, smothering me in ice.

The frost covered me in a thick layer, holding me in place. Clear and crystalline, I glanced around from within, unable to move in the prison of snow. The golem snapped off its arm before pulling more water from the pool nearby. Ice expanded above its head in layers. The lance thickened until a spear the size of a car coalesced above its head.

Surging fear stormed in my chest. I struggled against the ice confines around me. I writhed and squirmed with all my strength as the spear grew. The golem reared its arm back, the harpoon following the movement. My frantic squirming doubled in intensity, veins popping out of my neck. I was going to die.

The golem stepped forward. My eyes grew bloodshot from my effort. A nosebleed formed and filled my nostrils with blood. As the spear fired forward, the ice around me shattered and I fell. The wind of the spear pressed against my back. A second later, a thundering crash left my ears ringing. I pulled myself up, enraged as the golem fell onto its knees. I stare at the faceless ice. Exhausted and unmoving, it stared back with an eyeless face.

Silence. I shattered that quiet and its face with a slapping hook to its neck. It fell sideways, and I was upon it. Over and over, I pounded and pulverized its remains with my fists. They act as hammers and mauls as I crushed the ice into a fine powder. When it falls apart and melted, a notification sounded.

Level gained! Three level ups!

I placed three more points into constitution, and the difference proved palpable. My body stiffened until my flesh felt like bark. Even with the strength bonus of Titanic, I slowed down by a bit. I hit the wall of what constitution could give me without suffering for the durability. Wanting to mitigate that issue, I'd invest in strength until it wasn't a problem anymore.

Keeping that in mind, I opened my perk menu.

[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.]

[Uncompromising(Willpower of at least 25) – Your willpower is incredible. Doubles mental resistance from willpower. Half of mental resistance from willpower added to elemental, plasma, and radiation resistances. 1/10th of willpower is added to intelligence.]

[Colossal(Constitution of at least 30) – Your constitution is without limit. Half's strength requirements for moving bodyweight and limbs. Adds another 1/10th of constitution to strength. Adds .2% damage reduction per level, extra weight, density, and height per level, and each point in constitution grants 5 health. Doubles stamina consumption.]

[Strong(Strength of 10 or more) – You are strong. Doubles physical power bonus.]

[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.]

At this point, I warred with two options – Colossal and Strong. The more damage reduction I had, the more like steel I became. Being steel had its perks, but unfortunately, it was also very hard to move. Strong would double the benefits of my strength perks, making movement much easier.

That being said, Colossal also halved the strength requirement for moving myself, giving me the same benefit. It also gave me some strength as well, further assisting my movement. The delicious damage resistance would also give me tons of tankiness for Agony as well. Knowing I probably shouldn't but doing it anyway, I picked colossal and selected finalize.

A rush of strength flooded my limbs, and yet, I became unbending. Arcane, shifting powers flooded into the tendons, ligaments, and bones of my body, making me metal. My blood turned like liquid mercury, heavy and weighted. My arms and legs turned like iron, and for moment, it felt as if I'd fall into the stone beneath me.

It held me upright as the surge of the perk faded. My body remained stiff as the mana left me. So stiff, I could lift my arm out in front of me and relax, but the limb wouldn't fall. It remained outstretched. As if attached to wires, it floated in the air without me having to hold it there. Even with the extra strength and lowered requirement, shifting quickly turned into a chore.

All of that early endurance went to good use as I burned stamina from just moving. I brushed off bits of ice and took the golem's glistening core. A blizzard howled inside the marbled exterior, and I pulled the field of mana into the orb.

Taking a second, I gave myself a mental slap. Whether I liked it or not, being here by myself was weighing on me. I was starting to make stupid mistakes and thoughtless decisions. To avoid that kind of stupidity, I needed constant reminders to keep my motivation high. I did that, making sure I didn't do something that idiotic again.

I paced onwards to my next enemy. My entire body felt like someone else's, as it proved awkward and dense. The sheer unwieldy heft made going forward take mental effort. It was like moving a rhino's body instead of my own. I was certain I'd adjust, but it might take a while. At least if I stood still, it wasn't a problem.

Based on strength's feel, a perk or two in the attribute would alleviate a lot of my concerns with rigidity. Dexterity might help as well. Mentally squaring that away, I raced over towards the next pool while killing bats. As I fought, Colossal showcased its might.

Even if one of the umbral bats slammed into me, I kept balance. I was moving a wall now, and they couldn't fight me anymore on equal terms. One slammed into my back, and I pushed myself into it. The monster literally splat. It gave me a cool feeling, but yeah, blood gushed everywhere.

I rinsed twice that day.

To reflect the ease of killing, the bats dished out less exp. If a creature was ten levels below me, I still got full experience. At eleven below, I earned one tenth less experience. That tenth less experience pattern continued until they gave me negligible amounts. It was a multiplicative difference, but it still mounted pretty quickly.

Considering the dramatic increase in exp requirements as I leveled, anything less than full exp felt outright *painful*. Still, the pool mini-bosses helped out quite a bit. They gave at least a level a pop, and the mana cores were interesting to look at. I kept them in a plastic bag, the same kind I used to keep glowing water on me for light.

By now, I ran low on the bags, but there wasn't anything I could do about it. I'd be stumbling around in darkness soon. With that in mind, I pushed onwards as my steps thumped against the ground, training random skills as I walked.

I ran, jumped, and tried out various acrobatics. I fell many times, and if someone was with me, we'd probably have laughed about it together. Man, I really missed having someone to talk to. If Michael hadn't warped out, I'd be fine. As is, the extended silence battered on me with brutal strikes.

But, there were only two options. Either he died in this cave or he disappeared into the tutorial. I hoped for the latter, as I was lucky to defeat the first bat. A stalactite stabbed through it before it ate me, and the chances of that happening twice were next to none.

Even then, the chances of Michael killing a bat bare handed was non-existent. I relied on Agony, which also glitched into my status. If anything, it seemed suspicious the more

I thought about it. The Schema might have been testing me as an experiment or something. I didn't have enough information to tell.

With that in mind, I trained and trained and trained. I focused on the task, and after several hours, I reached the next pool.

BloodHollow Bear | Level 76 – An enormous, terrifying creature. Fight with caution as it's red aura and monstrous strength are very effective tools for dismembering adventurers.

This time there was no fear. Turning myself into a stony creature may have left me immobile, but I gained the heft of a giant as well. Using that mass, I gained speed, running towards the bear. My steps thumped on the ground. The wind whistled in my ears. When I tackled the bear, it flew back into the pool it guarded.

Its skin, once stone, became like my own. It scrambled out of the water, panic stricken and suffering shock. My fists sunk into the beast's soft body, like punching a leather sack. Thirty minutes passed, and I beat the thing to death. I gained a level, and placed a point into strength. A quick meal later, I gave the bear to Baldag-Ruhl.

Like clockwork, I ran, found another pool with another bear, and I killed it again. The cycle repeated three more times before I gained another level. I placed another point in strength. By now, my onward momentum carried me forward as I drilled my skills between trips, eager for skill levels.

That was when I reached a cyan pool. Filled with disappointment, I approached the glowing water before a screeching howl roared out. By now, howls were common place, but this scream was like a symphony for my ears. It was like ecstasy, a release that I needed. The reason for that was simple.

It was a human voice.

I shut off Agony before running towards the source of the sound. A part of me filled with hope at seeing Micheal, though it was a woman's voice. I found the source of the noise seconds later. A short, brunette girl was here, with a bow at her side. She wore plated leather armor from the hides of monsters, and a subtle, white aura shined off her skin.

I found her stringing her bow over a dropped teacup. The liquid steamed from a campfire they made, though they used a glowing gemstone for heat instead of actual fire. As I slowed behind the cyan pool, I tilted my head at her in confusion.

She stared at me like I was a wild animal. I peered down, finding myself covered in scrapped clothes, blood, dirt, and a few fluids I didn't know the name of. She *may* have had a point. Either way, I raised my hands while trying to say I come in peace.

Having not spoken for days, my voice cracked. The sound echoed, my voice deeper than I remembered it being. The girl's wild eyes widened as she sent an arrow flying towards my chest. It thunked hard, sinking an inch and a half deep into a rib. I growled out before snarling,

"What the hell's your problem?"

Her face went pale as I pulled the bladed arrow out of my chest. I snapped it between my fingers before she raised her hands, "Oh my god, are you ok? I-I thought you were some kind of, uh, troll or something."

I touched the regenerating wound, making sure I wasn't spraying blood, "Man, do I look *that* bad?"

She grimaced at me, "What happened to you?"

I winced, holding back a wave of relief and emotion, "A lot...A whole hell of a lot."

Curiosity bloomed over her face before another arrow slipped through to my face. I bent my head down, and the arrow hit my forehead, sliding off my skull. It left a four inch slit across my scalp, and turned to the hiding attacker. Agony roared into activation, and I smothered whoever hid in the darkness.

A howl erupted before I stepped up while seething,

"Whoever you are, if you attack me again, I'll feed you your teeth through a hole in your throat."

Behind a boulder, I found a thin, gangly guy on his knees, grabbing the sides of his head. I picked him up by the cuff of his shirt,

"Why are you both firing arrows at me?"

He hissed in pain, "You...you look like a monster."

I raised an eyebrow, "Even I know you need a notification before recognizing monsters. Even if I'm looking worse for wear, I'm still roughly humanoid at least. Check next time before you try killing someone."

I pulled Agony back before tossing the guy against the boulder. It knocked the breath out of his chest. The girl waved her arms, frantic to smooth things over, "Look, we thought you were the dungeon boss. When you got near us, everything was pain. Doesn't that sound like a monster to you?"

My eyes widened. They fell into Agony's aura, and that explained the immediate animosity. I frowned before taking a deep breath. This was a misunderstanding, and I

had some fault in it. Walking around with Agony cranked to full all the time wasn't exactly prudent.

I rubbed the back of my head as the guy stood up, clenching his stomach. I turned a palm to them, "Alright, so I think we all got off on the wrong foot here. How about we introduce ourselves and start from there?"

The two of them shared a glance. Not just any old ordinary glance, a glance that tells a conversation in a moment. It could only happen between two people who understood each other exceptionally well. The guy stared down, taking a deep breath, he stood up straight and outstretched a hand,

"Yeah, that was my bad."

I gave him a handshake, "Same."

The girl carried a small smile as she gestured to herself, "I'm Stacy. He's David. We're here to explore our first dungeon since the tutorial. We finished them about a week and a half ago."

I raised my eyebrows, "Over a week? Damn, I've been stuck in here longer than I thought."

David tilted his head, "Wait a minute...stuck here? Like, you can't leave?"

I frowned, "Yeah. Both of you are stuck here too."

They peered at each other, each of them turning pale. Changing the topic, I pointed a thumb at myself, "The name's Daniel, by the way. Daniel Hillside."

Stacy blinked and raised a hand, "Uhm, it's good to meet you. You said we're stuck here? We...We can't leave?"

I nodded. They stared down, each of them falling into an abyss. I raised my brows, "Welcome to the club."

David waved his hands, "Ok, this isn't right. We're supposed to be able to leave whenever."

I shook my head, "You'll need to kill either the dungeon boss or the big guy guarding the door's for that."

They took a moment before Stacy leaned back from me, "Gah, you reek."

I crossed my arms, "Yeah, fighting alone in a cave for weeks does that too you. Do either of you have soap, maybe?"

David scoffed, "We have some hand soap for dishes."

He got some out of his pack, tossing me some. I caught it while smiling at the beautiful sight,

"That'll do."

Taking a moment, I cleaned myself up, taking off the scrapped remnants of my shirt. I washed myself in the pool while they continued setting up camp. After I felt human again, I dried myself off beside their heated gemstone. We sat in a circle on the ground around the gem, and they got me some bottled water and trail mix. Needless to say, it was a step up from raw bear meat.

In fact, it was so delicious, it was a damn near *sexual* experience. I relished the nutty goodness, and they watched me inhale the food like a vacuum cleaner. After a few minutes, Stacy leaned back,

"When did you decide to come here?"

I shook my head, "I didn't. I spawned here."

They gawked at each other before David scratched the side of his face, "Like, you spawned here before the tutorial?"

I devoured the food before me, "Yes."

Stacy narrowed her eyes, "How are you still alive?"

I lifted the rags of my shirt, "Pain, hardship, and blood."

They both grimaced before David leaned towards me, "What's your level anyways? It's got to be high if you've been fighting since day one."

"Fifty seven."

David blinked, "Woah...That's thirty levels higher than anyone I've ever seen."

I peered up from my food, "Thirty, huh? I thought people would be leveling faster."

Stacy bit her lip before wincing, "It's...Well...People are still pulling themselves back together. The internet and power went down, and people haven't figured out how to put it back up. Cell lines, all of that stuff went dark."

David sighed, "It's been chaos. A lot of people died in the tutorial too."

I pointed a finger and gestured to our surroundings, "Was it worse than BloodHollow?"

Stacy scoffed, "Absolutely not, but, you know, not everyone's a fighter. David and I, we were more than fortunate because our warping wasn't, you know, *terrible*."

I raised a brow, "Warping?"

David waved a hand, "Everybody just disappeared all of a sudden. We popped up in a forest, surrounded by wolves. We got weapons before having to walk out of a pillar of light."

I remembered the pillar of light at least. I chewed some food before saying, "How hard were the wolves to kill?"

David closed his eyes, "They were level five, and a pack. It, well, a lot of people didn't make it."

Stacy spread her hands, "It was ridiculous. It's like, no one had any idea what was going on. We needed to team up, but not everyone wanted to leave their pillars of light. Our group got lucky, and no one died from it. I heard that one guy on another team tried to organize everybody, but then he just left the pillar of light while no one else did."

Stacy seethed, "And he was torn to shreds. Imagine trying to get everybody else out after that."

My stomach sank hearing that, "You're kidding, right?"

David's eyes went distant, "No."

A silence passed over us before I set the trail mix aside, "Why are you guys here instead of with your families then, and why this dungeon?"

Stacy scratched the side of her head, "Like I mentioned earlier, we were lucky. We got through without anyone really passing in our families. Our grandparents died a long time ago, so most of them were able to pull together."

I smiled, "Well, it's good to hear not everybody's life has sucked since this whole thing started."

David rolled his eyes, "I wouldn't say that. Our parents don't want us leaving the house for anything. It got so boring I wanted to peel my eyes out of my head."

I raised my brow, "So you guys tried to find a dungeon you could handle." I smirked, "BloodHollow, huh?"

Stacy narrowed her eyes, "Yeah, yeah, we get it. We're in over our heads. We both have leveled since the start, so we thought we'd be ahead of the curve. We were wrong."

I rolled my shoulders, "It's a good thing we found each other, at least. How about we party up and get the hell out of here?"

David nodded, "Oh absolutely. I'm level fifteen and Stacy's seventeen. We can't even kill the bats."

I shrugged, "Good luck getting past the bears. They're over level 75."

David put his palms together, giving me a slight bow, "Oh mighty dungeon dweller, we are in need of your help."

Even with the sarcasm, I couldn't hold back a slight smile, "It turns out, I'm in need of some company."

Stacy stood up and brushed her clothes off, "We'll team up, but just know you still look like a troll to me."

I helped them pack the gear, putting some in my backpack, "Eh, ugly or not, at least I can fight."

David got up with us, "Do you know where to go?"

I threw my hands up, "Honestly? No. I'm just heading towards more pools of water. I need to give the dungeon boss some bear meat or else he'll hunt me down and kill me. It's a tough life."

Stacy took a step back, "You're helping the boss out?"

I waved my hands, "It's a long story. Let's just say I'm biding my time, alright?"

They gave each other another look. David zipped up one of his packs, "So, er, how strong is this boss exactly?"

"Too strong for me. We need time to level." I stood tall, "But once we have, I'm confident we can take it."

They both perked up. David smiled, "Hell yeah."

I smiled back, "Then let's head out."

Before we got our packs ready, a rustling echoed above. A bat swooped down right at David's neck. I ran over, shoving him aside before jamming my hand at the bat. My hand disappeared into the bat's maw. It bit down, scratching my skin before I gripped its squishy insides. I grabbed one of its legs and pulled it back.

With a sweeping slam, I butted my head against the monster's skull. A sickening crack ebbed from it, so I pulled the creature back and cracked it three more times. Each popping thud degraded its face to a bloodier pulp. Once it stopped moving, I threw it down and stomped the head in further for good measure. Getting its blood on my face, I turned to the others.

"Damn. That was close."

They gawked at me like I was a monster myself.

Skill unlocked! Intimidation | Level 1 – Some lay in fear of those that surround them. You have chosen to be the one they fear instead. Increased success of intimidation attempts.

Chapter 9: Schema

I cleaned the blood off my face before stepping up and offering David a hand. He reached up, but his hand shook a bit, likely from the bat. They finished packing up, and when we started to leave, an awkward silence passed over us. When I pulled my glowing bags of water out of my backpack, Stacy frowned,

"Wow. You weren't kidding about being stuck here, huh?"

David snickered under his breath before I frowned at him, "What's so funny?"

"Nothing man, it just looks ridiculous." David pulled out an orange crystal the size of my palm from his pack. The gem held a moving fire within its glossy surface, and it glowed brighter than torches. It illuminated more of the cave and even exposed a few outlines of the bats.

I peered around, "Huh...neat."

Once we started walking, they gave me several pieces of bread and jerky. Before I scarfed the food down, I asked, "Just making sure, but this cave's still close to Springfield, right?"

David gave me a thumbs up, "Yeah. We're just outside the city."

I let out a sigh of relief, "Oh man, I didn't know if I was in a different country or what."

Stacy shook her head, "No, we're still near Pier's Creek. Nothing changed outside besides the pit leading here. It's not the same, and once you go a certain depth you can't leave. It was very...surreal."

I frowned, "Yeah, pretty much everything has been since the Schema arrived."

David raised a hand, "So, like, you mean Schema, not the Schema, right?"

I leaned back, "You're acting like it's a person."

Stacy deadpanned, "It is. It's an AI."

I turned to him, my eyes widening, "It's an AI? Like skynet or something?"

Stacy nodded. I peered forward, "Oh man, I don't know anything."

David looked up at where the bats were, "You know how to fight, so there's that. Considering we're surrounded by eldritch, that's pretty nifty."

I pointed up, "The bats are called eldritch?"

David raised a hand, "Well, no. They're BloodHollow Bats. All these things, even those bears you mentioned, are called eldritch. Any monster in a dungeon is. If you ask me, it sounds pretty eerie."

Stacy shivered, "I just can't wait to get out of here."

My expression deadened, "You have no idea."

Interrupting the conversation, a bat flew over towards us. Ready and waiting, I stepped in front of the others. The bat smashed into my chest, and I caught it like a heavy football. I stepped back from the impact and wrapped my arms around it. I crushed down, and the bat squealed as I squeezed the life from it.

Unable to just pulp it in my arms, I body slammed it, putting all my weight into mauling the creature. The monster squashed beneath me before I pulled myself up, slinging some blood off. I kicked the deflated bat aside before David pursed his lips. He mouthed,

"I get why your shirt didn't make it."

I shrugged, "Eh, I do what I have to for survival. Anyways, you mentioned schema being an AI?"

Skill level up! [Intimidation | Level 2]

Stacy gulped before replying, "Yeah."

I kept my eyes peeled, "Ok, so why is it, er, assimilating worlds? Is it to stop the cracks in dimensions or whatever?"

David nodded, "Uh, yeah, pretty much."

Another strained quiet passed over our group, so I pinched the bridge of my nose,

"Guys, look, I'm not going to kill you. Calm down. I'm too busy trying to survive here."

They sighed. Apparently they'd been holding their breaths for a while now. Stacy turned a palm to me,

"You're just scary looking. You're like, I don't know, seven feet tall or something."

I stopped walking and turned to them. Leaning back, I tried looking at myself, "Wait a second, I'm taller?"

She shrugged, "Maybe. You might have been taller than you thought."

I touched my face like I was molding dough, "Do you guys have a mirror?"

David dug his hand into his backpack, "Uh, yeah, we do. It's for lighting campfires."

He tossed it over, and I pulled it up, "Doesn't matter. I just need to see if my face looks any different."

Mirror in hand, I pulled up to the torch gem. There I was, looking like a giant. I turned to the others, "How tall are you guys?"

Stacy pointed at herself, "I'm 5'6. He's 5'7."

David peered at her, "I'm 5'7 and a half."

Using them as a frame of reference, I was close to seven feet tall, though not quite. Before the system came, I stood just over six foot, so I was pretty tall before. I sprouted up a couple inches since then. I bulked up as well, though that wasn't the hardest thing to do. All the boxing and cardio kept lean.

My hair had tousled around into a horrific mess, and my hands were large and brawny. Calluses covered my knuckles, along with scars. One traced down the side of my forehead, from when I first fought the bat. I glanced at a few other parts of myself, noticing a few scars along my arms, sides, and chest.

I turned to Stacy and David, "Am I grayish to you guys?"

David let out a breath, "Oh man, I have been wanting to tell you that since we met. That's why I shot that arrow at you."

I frowned at him, handing him the mirror back, "Thanks a lot."

Thinking about it, the bats and bears stood smaller compared to before. Details like that obscured when I fought in the darkness, but the torch gem gave me a good enough view to discern those details. Peering down, the glowing bags hung over me and bulged out like glowing tumors. With the streaks of dried blood on me, it was no wonder they were terrified of me when we met.

I grimaced, "Damn. I do look like a monster, don't I?" I took out the bags of water, tossing them aside. They left a dim shine over the rock before I reached up my hands, "I'll be taking on the boss here soonish. I'd say a week or two tops. When I get about ten or so levels higher and finish some trees, I'll take him on. You guys are free to tag along if you want."

David put his hands on his hips, "Sounds good to us. I didn't wanna mention it, but we really do need your help here."

I laughed, "Hah. Trust me, I noticed. You guys would be chewed up and spit out by Baldag-Ruhl."

Stacy peered up at me, "What level is it?"

I cupped my chin, "Hm, over level 100. I can't imagine it being much more than that."

They peered forward, both of them dwelling on their mistakes. Stacy gasped, "Coming here was a huge mistake. This dungeon's only supposed to go up to level 60."

I shrugged, "This wouldn't be the first time Schema glitched out for me. Either way, that faulty info doesn't matter. What does matter is we have to kill Baldag-Ruhl to leave."

Stacy waved her hands, "Couldn't he just, I don't know, let us leave?"

I kept my eyes sharp for bats, "You heard his name, right? Baldag-Ruhl, of Many. That name makes Sauron sound like a schoolgirl. It's a hivemind that uses insects. It's ancient, hundreds of years old. I don't, and haven't, trusted that damn thing for a second since coming here."

David murmured, "Do you think you'll beat it?"

I grinned, "Oh, I know I will."

They perked up at my confidence. We continued for an hour before Stacy whined, "Why in the hell are these caves so big?"

I raised a finger as if I had a solid explanation, "To hurt your feet, break your morale, and crush your spirit."

David raised his brow, "Anything else?"

I gestured around, "To be annoying."

Stacy whined, "Yeah, I already got that part."

Our conversation cooled down to pointless chattering at that point. I appreciated it more than I let on, the endless, ringing silence turning into the warmth of company. By the time we reached the next set of pools, I perked up quite a bit. I pointed at the gray pool,

"The blue pools are safe. Gray, pink, and yellow are dangerous. Crimson means it's the boss, Baldag. I'll keep the golem distracted while you guys pepper it from a distance. I'll be keeping my aura active during the fight. It'll hurt you guys if you come close."

I glared at the gray miasma, "Oh, and try not to die to the bats. I don't want to have to carry your corpses out of here."

They gave curt, fearful nods of acknowledgment before I charged towards the rock golem. I flicked Agony on when I reached a few feet from it. The golem met my charge, each of us colliding in a monstrous clash. Bits of stone flung outwards. My shoulder bruised. Sound boomed out.

The clash left my ears ringing. We locked hands as the golem pushed me back, and I bent down. It pushed over me before I strained, pushing up. Veins pressed out from under my neck, tracing down my shoulders. I grunted and roared as I lifted the rock golem a few inches off the ground.

The golem kicked towards my face, and I headbutted its foot. The boulder cracked while my vision went white. I kept upright before pulling the golem down and smashing it into the floor. Cracks appeared in the ground from the force of the slam. The golem fractured all over as arrows snapped into stone around me.

One stabbed into my back. I winced before pulling it out and shouting, "Watch where you're aiming."

They both stammered, "Sorry."

I flipped the arrow in my hand before driving the arrow into the golem's face. The golem reared and arm back before smashing it into my face. I blinked back surging pain before spitting out blood. Its limbs detached from its main body, spiralling around us both. I kept its chest and face planted on the ground.

The storm of stone thundered around me, chips of rock piercing into my back, arms, and legs. Knowing where its core was, I lifted my arms, ready to crush it. I smashed one hand down, and it chunked a chip against my cheek. Blood dripped from the scrape, but I lifted my other hand.

Another bone-crushing blow slammed against it. The creature slit another wound across my back. Blood dripped from the wound before I lifted my other hand. It trembled beneath me before I began smiling.

Over and over, I ground and pounded its body and face to powder. My blow's booms blared across the cavern, each hit rippling with sound. The golem's life dwindled before I wrapped my hand around its face. I cracked it against the floor, again and again and again before it snapped, revealing the core.

Once it fell apart in my hand, I checked my status.

Level gained! One Level up!

I put a point into strength, getting a little rush. I picked up the golem's core and drained the mana pool nearby. As I paced back towards Stacy and David, I deactivated Agony. My wounds healed as they glanced at me. Dumbfounded, David spread out his hands, "How in the hell did you lift the golem?"

"Well, I have twenty strength and a perk that helps with moving my body." I clasp a hand. "It makes moving myself twice as easy, so if I'm just swinging my hands, it makes my effective strength much higher."

Stacy frowned, "I've been keeping my attributes all spread out. They all looked so useful."

I raised my brow, "Huh, really? I did the opposite. I put all my points into one attribute until I got to thirty points, then I moved on to the other ones. From what I've seen, the perks stop there...so far."

They gazed up at me, soaking my tips up with eager interest. I continued, spurred on by their attentive glances,

"So yeah, some attributes go together really well. A perfect example is constitution and endurance. One gives you health, one makes that health better. Strength and dexterity would probably go together well too. Intelligence and willpower. Etcetera. You get the idea."

David shook his head, "And here I am with less than fifteen in any attribute. You have over thirty one. That's crazy."

I waved a hand, "My endurance is 48. That's by far my highest attribute. Besides that, I'm level fifty eight. I'm not going to be struggling to get thirty in a single attribute."

David glanced down, rubbing the back of his head, "Yeah, good point."

I stared forward, "I don't know everything, though. There may be a jack of all trades perk. If that's the case, let me know when you find it."

I slung some of my blood off my arm before it congealed. Stacy leaned back, "Blegh. Well then mister brutal, where to next?"

I chuckled, "Heh, I actually have a skill called Lumbering Brute. We're heading off to the next pool, simple as that."

We walked and talked through the cavern until reaching yet another pool, this time with a bear. I charged it, mauled it to death, and gave the coat to them. Being this high a level, the bear didn't push me anymore. A lot of that stemmed from my regeneration and endurance stats, each bolstered by the Determinator trees.

Talking with David and Stacy, I learned that the tree was impossible to obtain for anyone who went through the tutorial. It required two perks in endurance before level fifteen. You got four perks by level ten, but the first three perks in the tutorial were always Beginner, Fledgling, and one of the first perks in the pillar of light.

That made Determinator unobtainable. Being put in BloodHollow stopped that, and gave me the extra endurance and willpower. Why Schema set up the tree like that, I didn't really understand. However, I reaped benefits from the mess-up, so I counted my blessings where I could.

Speaking of blessings, we took the killed bear and cooked its meat. This evolved the meat from a gamey, gelatinous mass to a spicy, flavorful meat. David and Stacy only carried salt and pepper for seasoning, of course, but I cooked a good bit at home. That meant I gave the bear meat a bit of sear, making it taste better than it otherwise would.

As we finished eating, Stacy shook her head at the meal, "That was actually really good. I can't believe you can cook and fight. What else can you do?"

I frowned, "That's about it. I was struggling in school, and I was considering dropping out even before the system arrived. This new way of life probably suits me more. Either way, I gotta give this bear's meat to Baldag-Ruhl, so go hide behind a boulder or something."

David raised a brow, "Why are we hiding, exactly?"

I sighed, "He made a quest with me, but neither of you. He might kill you both."

They peered at me, a chill running up their spine. They skulked away before I called out for Baldag-Ruhl. A pile of bugs showed up a few minutes later. They made the shape of a mouth, speaking in his ancient voice,

"I see you've given me another delicacy."

“Oh, you know me. I only offer up the finest of foods.”

After ingesting the corpse with bugs, Baldag echoed out, “You’re an industrious being, aren’t you?”

“It’s more like I’m bored.”

“You found entertainment in battle then. It’s forged you into a different creature since we first met. Like tempered steel, you’ve turned soft flesh into hardened mass. I admire the form you’ve fostered.”

A winced at his wording, “Uh...Thanks, I guess.”

“You’ve helped me a great deal in my conquest of this cave. I will reward you for it. Come to me once more.”

I gave him a slight bow, “Of course, Baldag-Ruhl, of Many.”

Seemingly pleased, the pile of insects strode off with a horrid clittering of legs. Once out of earshot, I turned to the others, “Alright guys. It’s over.”

Stacy said, “That was utterly disgusting. What the hell. Ew.”

David and I laughed at her grossout. A few seconds later, I gained a skill,

Skill Unlocked! Speechcraft | Level 1 – You’ve spoken with an awareness of your wording. Your tact gains you favor, pulling you a step closer to what you want. +1% to fluidity and wording during conversation.

Any help for my interpersonal relationships was a bonus. Squaring the notification away, I gestured a hand, “Come on. Let’s go.”

They nodded, and I gained another skill.

Skill Unlocked! Leadership | level 1 – You tread forward. Where you walk, others will follow. +1% to leadership skills.

The skill points were valuable, even if leading wasn’t at the moment. We walked on until Stacy flopped down,

“I can’t keep going. I’m about to collapse here.”

David let out a breath, “Same.”

I frowned, “We have ground to cover, guys. Do you really have to stop right now?”

David set his pack down, “I’ll be honest, that meal with the bear is taking me out.”

Stacy leaned back against a boulder, “I’m kind of falling into a food coma, personally.”

I had a perk that halved sleeping and eating requirements. They didn’t, so that’s where their exhaustion spawned from. I shrugged, “We’ll stop here then. I’ll stand guard. You guys sleep.”

They set up camp, talking about the outside world. I stayed silent for the most part, tired of talking. I hadn’t spoken for a long time, so talking so much all of a sudden was exhausting. Still, I listened, and the more I learned about the outside world, the more unnerved I became.

More people passed than these two initially let on. The tutorial put people up against wolves, and that required some serious physical fitness. Older people lacked that, so most elderly people didn’t make it. People dealing with other issues struggled as well since the tutorial lasted several days.

During that time, no one got food either. If anything, it seemed like the rough draft of a tutorial instead of the real thing. Why a near all-knowing and all-powerful AI designed the program like that, well, I couldn’t say. Neither could David or Stacy.

Humans proved resilient, however. People stabilized the situation, searching and finding family. Once set, they began forming groups and rallying against the new monster spawns. Oddly enough, those spawns had a pretty logical reasoning to them.

According to Schema, the universe’s expansion led to cracks forming along space and time. Dark things came pouring out of those cracks, destroying worlds, solar systems, even entire galaxies. Schema had found a way of reorienting these cracks into something that made sense, something that could be fought against.

In other words, Schema turned dark ether into dim dungeons. The process wasn’t perfect, but it sounded a hell of a lot better than the alternative. Regardless, Earth was right in the middle of it all, so the monsters spawning ramped up quickly. Oceans of these creatures, these eldritch, poured out.

We fought within a cracking dimension, one of the designated combat zones. A dungeon. If left to their own devices, the eldritch would tear open the walls of the dungeon, releasing hell upon the earth. Knowing that inevitable outcome, Schema gave humanity a set goal – cull or be culled.

What the Sentinel had called the culling had been the initiation process into Schema-owned space. Schema didn’t have time for details, so it just dumped all of these changes onto a world at once. Large parts of the population died in the process, which people now called the culling.

These little pieces of data snapped together, forming a bigger picture for me. This whole time, this living hell, it was all because Schema didn't have time for me. A tiny glitch that through me in this pit wasn't worth its time. Being put in this position because of negligence, it burned in my chest for a minute.

With a deep sigh, I chose to just let it go. The AI dealt with more than I could imagine handling all the time, so a mishap here or there was a certainty. I'd been a mistake, a little blip outside its radar this whole time. Compared to what it dealt with, I was unimportant.

That realization was like jumping into cold water. I wasn't special. I was forgotten.

I shook it from my face before standing over David and Stacy. There were still quite a few questions left unanswered. How did the cracks form? Where were the eldritch coming from? What had happened to the people that made Schema? I wondered if they were still here, wandering from world to world.

David and Stacy drifted off to sleep, likely their first real rest since arriving. Having me stand guard helped them in that regard. Having time to think, I trained skills while dwelling on our new reality. At the same time, I killed some bats, leveled up once, and tried keeping my motivation high. My progress slowed down now, and what was once like drinking water turned into downing motor oil.

It took nine hours to gain a level. A single level. My willpower kept me focused though, almost like my body was a puppet and I was its master. When Stacy and David finished trying to sleep, they found me dripping sweat over dead bats. They stumbled across the camp for a bit, each of them struggling to wake up.

It made sense. Even a war veteran struggled to rest when surrounded by constant danger. These two were teenagers, so they fared far worse. I had a leg up in that department since I was used to the constant tension. It was no different than home.

I'd sleep at school often, practice boxing during the afternoons, and I'd come home to my dad. He'd become a drunkard after mom died. It had broken him into tiny pieces. Those pieces got violent when he drank too much. He put that violence on me on more than one occasion, so I never slept soundly anymore.

I got the better of him just before this whole system started. I used all the skills I got from the boxing gym to teach my old man a lesson. However, the police didn't see it that way. That's why Michael and I went spelunking in the first place. I was about to be taken to juvie for beating my dad.

In coming to this place, I'd wanted to just run away from my life. I succeeded more than I ever imagined I would. I hadn't dwelled on it. I didn't have time, and bad memories led to bad thoughts that led to bad actions. I couldn't let that happen.

If there was one thing I wouldn't do, it'd be following my father's footsteps. Dramatic, maybe, but I held that thought close to my chest. I'd be stronger than he ever was. Strong as steel and hard as a hailstorm. I'd never be pushed into another piss-filled toilet. I'd never let someone snuff a cigarette out on my skin. I'd never be tormented like that again.

No, I'd crush anything that tried, either under my heavy heels or my storming fists. I picked up a bat and threw it over onto a pile of their corpses.

It was time to add to the pile.

Chapter 10: The Lord of Worms

After killing a few more nearby bats, we all traveled forward. Both Stacy and David zombied it out in the morning, each of them exhausted still. It gave me time to access my status and check it out. I needed thirty seven more points to complete the Determinator tree. Any more willpower and endurance was appreciated since both attributes were vital for my build.

So much so, I'd be investing in some willpower perks after the strength ones. With that in mind, I shadow boxed while we walked. At first, Stacy and David kept their distance and treated me like a complete weirdo. Right as they were, talking about my trees changed their tune. Despite my advice, they didn't start training as we walked. The endless walking wore their morale down enough already.

But we weren't walking without a purpose. Talking with them, I learned that Schema generated a map based on what you perceived. Knowledge was power, letting me check out my own map. I hadn't perceived much, but the thin strip I had for a map gave us a telling revelation.

BloodHollow was an enormous circle this entire time. The edges of the circle twisted and turned some, making it difficult to tell. Using glow bags for light wasn't exactly a plus either. It was about an hour before we reached another pool, this one crimson. Confused by it, I told David and Stacy to stay back while I scouted it out.

This time, the mana soaked the surroundings like a thick coat of sand. Well, as thick as what sand used to feel like. Squeezing sand probably felt like squeezing tiny balls of plastic by then instead of quartz. Regardless, I'd still suffocate in the mana cover. From within the mana, something morbid emerged.

A large, grotesque human hobbled in pain. Giant warts, misshapen lumps, and deformed features covered its moist skin. A pair of intelligent, malicious eyes gleamed over its sagging eyebags. A torn robe covered it, runic markings stitched into the cloth's surface. Long ago, that robe would've beamed out a noble, majestic aura.

Now, only dilapidated rags lingered. It found me even as I hid behind a stalagmite. I peered from behind my cover, and its missing teeth and gums appeared with a haunting smile. A deep yet raspy voice reverberated,

“Good. So you’ve come after taking my poor little experiments. They acted as the last line in an era, my era. A defense against tormentors unbounded. Your treachery, the cores, I’ll teach you to be a proper vessel. Your flesh is sacred, pure. I will rip that purity from you, and in that corruption-”

He slapped the side of his head, “I hate the scratching of wood on metal. It is disgusting to my ears.” He scratched his ears with ragged fingernails. They left bloody gnashes on the side of his face as he howled out, “Make the voices, this...this hunger stop.”

My brow furrowed. This guy sounded insane. Schema agreed.

Lord of Worms | Level ??? – A corrupted wizard. After allowing too many pools of mana to co-inhabit his mind, he was overwhelmed by their presence. His psyche’s shattered pieces linger, and this creature experiments on hapless adventurers. It uses their souls to act as anchors for mana and golems. Should it overwhelm you, the same fate will befall you.

He is a summoner who can spawn a variety of enemies from his bountiful mana pool. He is extremely dangerous.

Cold sweat dripped down my back as thoughts raced in my head. I never imagined a wild hive mind would be the lesser of two evils, but this guy seemed even worse than Baldag-Ruhl. The more humane of the two was the hivemind of flesh-eating insects. What a strange thought.

Regardless, the mystery markings of its level meant it was over level one hundred. I cranked Agony to full as Stacy and David shot their arrows at it. The weapons caught in the mana, sticking six or so inches deep in it. Agony, on the other hand, caused the wizard to scream.

And scream he did. I waved my hands at David and Stacy, trying to get them to run, but they couldn’t hear me over the Lord of Worms. Before I got out of there, the necromancer summoned skeletons, zombies, mice, beetles, bats, and ghouls. They charged toward the others before I charged at the incoming wave.

I tackled a skeleton, and it toppled over. I followed its fall, crushing bone to powder on the ground. Another skeleton lifted a rusty sword over its head, slashing down at me. I swung my arm hard while kicking at its leg. The blade snapped and so did its shin bones. As I stood up, I popped its skull beneath my foot.

A pack of mice caught up to me. They felt no pain, so Agony didn’t incapacitate them. It still damaged their bodies, so they reached me in a half-molten state. I picked up a

wooden shield from the skeleton, battering them away from me before a beetle reached up to me. It tried goring me with a horn, but I blocked its charge with the shield.

The beetle crushed the wood, but its momentum stalled. Grabbing it by its horn, I swung it in a circle and crushed a zombie trying to shuffle past me. Being a useful club, I swung the beetle at three more zombies before the beetle crushed against a fourth. It splattered into a green spray, and I growled as more summons ran at me.

It would be a long fight. I pressed on, tearing limb from limb. I couldn't progress towards the summoner because his minions and I fought to a standstill. I couldn't tell my party to run because anything I said drowned in the necromancer's screams.

But I chose a build based on longevity. I never tired, my position both steady and firm. The skeletons broke under my fists. The mice were torn asunder. I pulped the zombies to mush. The beetles acted as clubs while the small bats collapsed before reaching me. I thanked Agony for that.

My motivation stayed as high as a kite the entire time. You'd think killing a wave of monsters would put me in a foul mood, but quite the opposite. The reason was simple – each summon gave me full experience. Notifications appeared, raining down as I killed the endless waves of beasts while the wizard's flesh melted in the distance. As if by some miracle, he kept fighting even when his nails fell off and his cheeks corroded to exposed teeth.

I couldn't even bear to look at him, yet it kept fighting. Whatever it spawned from, the will the Lord of Worms held was amazing. It felt every ounce of pain, every melted tooth, and each bleeding blister. It held the intelligence to surrender, but it refused to do so. It couldn't stop us...And despite the odds, it continued in spite of everything.

The Lord of Worms used healing spell after healing spell. It tried different formations of its monsters. It even tried collapsing the cavern. None of its defensive measures made a difference, and its behemothic mana pool waned over time. In normal circumstances, I'd have been smothered by its summons, unable to fight past its shield of mana. I couldn't even breathe in the aura, let alone fight in it.

But Agony gave me a leg up. It allowed me to fight it outside of its shielding, and my regeneration gave me enormous longevity. A losing battle turned into an experience buffet. It gave Stacy and David a good chance to level too. Having to look after them 24/7 wasn't practical, and this would put them in a level range where bats wouldn't kill them anymore.

They lacked my longevity, however. The hours stretched on until Stacy and David were dooms-daying in the back. By now, the Lord's screams stunted some, but there wasn't any reason to retreat. Stacy howled out,

"It's immortal. We can't kill it."

I rolled my eyes as I smashed a rat underfoot. I shouted, "Come on. It's only been a few hours. Calm down."

David shot an arrow through a skeleton, "I don't think I can make it."

A miasma of energy condensed within the mana beside the Lord of Worms. Bones materialized then flesh then skin. A goblin came screeching from within the mana along with several others. I growled, "Of course you can. Quite being weak."

An arrow shot into the eye of a goblin as it stepped out of the mana. David sighed before I snapped, "See that? You can continue."

A coy grin popped on David's face, "You know what? I may have a bit more in me than I thought."

I crushed two goblin skulls together in my hands, "Let's not get ahead of ourselves, eh?"

Stacy laughed before the Lord of Worms gurgled, "I hate you. I will feast on your hatred and devour your soul, just like the others. There is no other option. It is the only remaining way."

I frowned, "Obviously not. You're just going to sit in that thick cloud till you die."

"You will not outlast my mana. None have. None will."

I put my hands on my hips, "Alright, You won't surrender then?"

Desperation spread over its face, "I cannot."

I winced, "Then keep fighting until you're a pile of black sludge."

His ear fell off as he sputtered, "I don't understand how you can possibly contain...Agh...The way I scrape against-"

"Back to the gibberish, eh?"

The Lord of worms thundered out, "You are an abomination."

I pointed at him, "And you're about as appealing as a broken glass smoothie. How about we fight then, one monster with another?"

He ran towards me, like fire in his anger. I retaliated in kind. The moment he reached out of the mana pit, I swung towards his face. He fell, and I crushed him into the ground. I pounded his face into a red soup with bits of bone in it. He wailed the whole time.

Lord of Worms? More like Lord of Tears.

Levels gained! Six level ups!

During my last punch, I broke my thumb knuckle on something hard under its robe. I cringed before snapping the bone back. I pulled out something from under the scrap of clothing.

Corundum of Souls | Tier: Legendary Unique – A mythical gem foretold to hold endless mana. The gem will gain life at 1,000,000 creating a living soul, trapped in the container.

677,340/1,000,000 Mana Charged

Glowing forth, the gem contained strange, moving runic symbols. They shifted over its iridescent surface, many layers of those runic formations hidden in its depths. I lost myself for a moment, marveling at the overwhelming complexity within the gemstone. It made the runes over the lord's robe appear simple by comparison.

Not that I could make the robe's runes out anymore with all the black blood splattered over everything. I pocketed the fist sized gem, taking the spoils of war. I'd share the rest with my party, but it wasn't as if I didn't manage the majority of the fight anyway.

Before I could even stop the gem in my pocket, it siphoned the thick, sandy mana into its depths. It continued draining mana, even drawing from the golem cores in my pockets.

Corundum of Souls | Tier: Legendary Unique – A mythical gem foretold to hold endless mana. The gem will gain life at 1,000,000 creating a living soul, trapped in the container.

921,455/1,000,000 Mana Charged

It came close now to being completed. It could store more energy, and having a full mana gem when I need it may be helpful. For the first time since entering Schema, I reached for my mana. No response ushered forth. I blinked, taking a moment to think.

Instead of trying to summon mana, I put a hand in my pocket, clasping the corundum in my hand. Trying again, I pulled at the unseen force. Like a different blood in my body, I found a small pocket of energy pooling in my body. It flowed through me like a heavy liquid. I raised my hand, releasing the energy.

From my fingers leaked an aura of blue.

Skill Unlocked! Mana Manipulation | Level 1 – Many choose to fight with the will of their bodies. You've decided to wield the will of your mind. +1% to fluidity of mana manipulation.

I leaned back from my hand as Stacy and David came closer. I couldn't believe using mana was that easy the whole time. I put my other hand over the blue aura. It wrapped around my hand like a cool wave of air. In its current state, it mirrored an air conditioner more than a force of destruction.

I stopped the blue breeze and deactivated Agony as Stacy put her hands on her hips, "What was that out of your hand?"

I stood up, slinging blood off my hands, "Mana, apparently."

David frowned, "You're a magician and you never told us?"

I scoffed, "Apparently so...Though this isn't anything special. It's a tiny, cool wind at most."

Before continuing the conversation, I siphoned my mana into the gem until my mana pool depleted. A wave of palpable exhaustion rushed over me like I ran a marathon. No, it was like taking a six hour test.

A throbbing headache formed in my head, rising in intensity with each passing second. My nose began bleeding, my regeneration unable to stop it. I fell down, and they ran towards me. Stacy gasped, "What's going on, are you ok?"

I blinked, my surroundings muddled, "I...I need a minute. Back off."

They pulled away, and I spent ten minutes recovering my mental capacity. I checked my status screen, and I found a debuff called mana depletion. If that was this engulfing sense of mental exhaustion, I'd avoid it at all cost. Without all my resistances and pain tolerance, it would've flattened me for the rest of the day.

Once I waved them back over, they made sure I was ok. Knowing I was fine, they drooled over their statuses. Stacy lifted her hands, shaking them,

"I gained fourteen levels from that one fight. I can't believe it."

David shook his head while grinning, "I know right? I got thirteen of them."

I nodded, standing up. I shook off the jitters from bottoming out my mana before saying, "Let's handle our statuses before checking this place out. We'll search the area after."

They nodded. We dug our faces into our statuses like a group of teenagers crouching over our phones. I put all six attribute points into strength before checking out my tree menu. Filling out my trees would serve me better than handling perks first. Trees could grant special perks after all, and I gained plenty of points since the battle started.

Seventy two to be precise. That gave me more than enough points to finish off the Determinator tree, and a notification greeted me when I finished it off.

Your will is your agent of change. You are the determinator, turning the ethereal into the definite. Internal motivation scaling doubled, mental fortitude doubled, and immunity to external corruption. +10hp regen, +100 stamina regen, +10 mana regen.

While I gained no attributes, the intangibles seemed incredible. I selected finalize on my status to feel out the tree, and my focus sharpened along with my thoughts. Rolling my shoulders, I relished a sensation of dominion over myself. Every part of my being came under my control. Outside of that, the only regen I noticed was the mana one.

It helped my headache from my mana stunt earlier. Taking a breath, I put my mana into the gem once more. This time, I only gave it as much mana as I regenerated. This left me strained, but it didn't slice through my skull like a psychic halberd as before. The crystal gobbled up the energy with a hungry abandon while I opened my trees.

| [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), Obliterator(Kill a boss over 50 levels above you, before level 100, while alone, and without previous assistance)[0/1000] |

I gawked at the Obliterator tree and its gigantic 1,000 points. Surprisingly, David and Stacy weren't even considered assistance during the fight. I mean, I dished out all of the damage onto the actual summoner, but them getting no credit still seemed harsh. Schema sure as hell didn't give participation trophies, that was for sure.

Their lack of credit was my gain. Obliterator doubled the Determinator's limit, and it seemed like a rare tree to get. It would require several weeks to complete bare minimum. Over the course of these past months, I only gained 844 tree points with intense training. Getting another thousand? It would take forever.

So, I figured I might as well get started. The journey of a thousand miles started with a single step and whatnot. I put my nine remaining points into Obliterator. With that handled, I checked out my perks. They didn't disappoint.

[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.]

[Uncompromising(Willpower of at least 25) – Your willpower is incredible. Doubles mental resistance from willpower. Half of mental resistance from

willpower added to elemental, plasma, and radiation resistances. 1/10th of willpower is added to intelligence.]

[Strong(Strength of 10 or more) – You are strong. Doubles bonus physical damage bonus.]

[Powerful(Strength of 15 or more) – Your strength is admirable. Doubles carrying weight.]

[Devastating(Strength of 20 or more) – Your strength is excellent. Double's your body's ability to withstand self-created physical forces. Doubles precision of strength. Adds 1/10th of strength to dexterity.]

[Overwhelming(Strength of 25 or more) – Your strength is incredible. Increases physical power by a flat 30%, adds another 1/10th of strength to dexterity, and physical attacks have a chance to maim targets.]

[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 was hoping I could take the Disciplined and use the Corundum of Souls as a free half a million point shield. Unfortunately, the perk required the mana to be my own. I tsked before moving on. Since that wasn't an option, I analyzed my attributes. I had just over twenty seven strength, which meant I'd gain three dexterity for either Overwhelming or Devastating.

Six dexterity would go a long way to fixing my clunkiness in combat. That didn't even include the strength bonuses themselves, and I just so happened to gain two perk points from the fight. My mind made up, I picked Devastating and Overwhelming before finalizing my choice.

The flood of mana coursed in like concentrated ecstasy and pure power, unlocking my latent potential. My muscles condensed into cords of steel, my ligaments becoming unbreakable. I evolved into something worthy of my newfound frame. I shifted in place, feeling out the raw physical might. I noticed something else, however.

My large body seemed less clunky and awkward. Moving my hands, I confirmed that sensation. The rush of dexterity gave me a ligheness and grace I lacked. It gave even more, however. I moved my hand in front of my face, and I followed it with a strange precision. Dexterity rewired my brain.

It was like the electric signals shot out faster and more efficiently than before. I went to grab my toes, and my palms hit the floor with only a slight resistance. If I focused, I could move my eyes towards opposite directions. One could face up and the other

down. The effect disoriented me, but that was the change. Hopefully, the differences in reflexes would show themselves with time as well.

Walking around, I banged my hands together, and they bounced back from each other like banging blocks of granite. I cracked my neck and punched myself in the face. Smart, I know. Sarcasm aside, my strike didn't hurt. All the constitution and strength gave my body the tools of a devastating weapon; a weapon I would wield in my favor.

I checked out my Attributes and character screen, awed at the glory of it all.

Level 52 Attribute Menu

Strength [27.8] | Constitution [36.3] | Endurance [48] | Dexterity [9.6] | Willpower [26.4] | Intelligence [4] | Charisma [4] | Luck [3] | Perception [4]

Daniel Hillside | Character Screen

Health – 1,152/1,152 | Health Regen – 151.2/min | Mana – 40/40 | Mana Regeneration – 25.3/min | Stamina – 970/970 | Stamina Regeneration – 25.2/sec | Damage Resistance – 91.05% | Physical Power – (+)66.5% | Damage Increase – 5%

Debuffs – Agony(35.6 HP/sec lost)

Agony gained so much strength it literally changed its damage unit from per minute to per second. It moved up to five times higher than the last time I checked. I took a second glance at Agony's formula.

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 is reduced by constitution. Willpower increases damage of Agony. Current conversion: $1.264(\text{Willpower bonus})/.0895(\text{Constitution bonus}) = 14.12$

It converted my health regen fourteen times over... That number floored me. Here I thought the strength was why I killed things faster. Instead, my constitution and health regen gave me all the benefits I'd misunderstood. I still needed the strength so that I could move with all this constitution, but the recheck was a wake-up call.

Still, other benefits came up too. My mana regen was five times higher than before. With two points in strength, I'd get thirty along with ten in dexterity, giving me two perks from only two attribute points. I could put the next three level ups into willpower and unlock the level 30 tier perk as well. Even my stamina converted to seconds instead of minutes.

Things were looking good.

Rubbing my hands together, I smiled at my status screen. Stacy frowned at me, "What's with the creepy smile?"

I raised a hand, "You know that aura skill I have? The one that causes pain?"

"Yeah."

"It does thirty six health a second now."

Both of their jaws dropped. David shook his head, "Can you imagine what that would do to us? We'd die in seconds."

They winced at me. I spread out my hands, "Why would I do that? Besides, what's so scary about it anyways?"

Stacy raised her brow as she said, "I've got one hundred health. David has one hundred and fifty."

I frowned, "Just stay way back when I'm fighting. Simple."

Stacy peered off, and a pressing silence passed over the ground, "It's just a lot of pressure and all the time. We'd have a couple seconds before you outright killed us."

I pointed at them both, "There's people who carry around guns who could've done the same thing. Hell, anyone driving can kill dozens of people in seconds too, and from a way farther distance than my aura. It can close the gaps in seconds."

I pointed at my hand, "Even then, I could have just killed you both by beating you to death. The aura doesn't change that. It also doesn't change the fact that I'm not going to do that. I'm not a crazy murderer."

Stacy pursed her lips, "The way you fight gives a pretty damn effective case for the opposite."

I narrowed my eyes, "That's out of necessity."

David put his hands on his hips, "I don't know man. You get this crazed look in your eye sometimes. You grin while you fight too."

I tilted my head, "What the hell? No I don't."

Stacy nodded, "It's eerie."

David raised his brow, "Terrifying, even. Perhaps some might even say horrific."

I pointed at them both, "You guys are the ones who've put multiple arrows in my back, and I still trust you."

David busted out laughing before he gave me a pat on the back, "Dude, relax. We're just joking."

I blinked. Oh yeah, people could do that. I flushed, "Ah...My bad. I'm just on edge."

Stacy pointed at the wreckage left behind after our fight, "Come on. Let's find some loot."

We searched the premises, and we found nothing. The only part remaining was a pool of thickened mana sludge. Around it, a confusing, runic language enchanted the area. What for, we didn't really know. Finding nothing else, I turned to the others,

"Alright then. Let's go teach good old Baldag-Ruhl a lesson in manners...Manners meaning death, of course."

We went forward with confidence, each of us feeling great after the battle. It put us ahead of the game, putting us that much closer to escaping this hell hole. Considering Agony's generic power, we'd be able to chew right through the hivemind's little insects. Just like with the Lord of Worms afterward, we'd smash the bug with ease.

Feeling fine, we headed towards him, following the circle of caves. My minimap led the way as we traveled for about two more days like that. I killed a couple more golems and bears. I also culled hundreds of bats, and I even slept some while Stacy and David guarded me. I gained a level during the process, and I put a point into strength. We were half a day from Baldag-Ruhl's pool when we set up camp early for extra rest.

I wasn't sleeping that night, instead opting for skill gaining away from the camp. I was within striking range if need be, but David and Stacy weren't weaklings anymore. A stray bat wouldn't kill them out of the blue any longer.

While imagining the outside world, a pile of bugs came crawling out of the cavern's ceiling. It echoed out,

"Shut off your aura, little one. I have an offer for you before you try killing me."