

## 5 To Become 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 relished 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 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. 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. Their bonuses 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 me out. 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.

Even though it hurt like hell, it already saved my life. With that pain in 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 now.

But I kept going until I needed rest. Finding my cove, I awakened 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 onto 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 chopped 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(lvl 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(lvl 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(lvl 16 | 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(lvl 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 | lvl 75 - An enormous, terrifying creature. Fight with caution as it's 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 ebbed 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. Pulling 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.

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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 mush 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(Ivl 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(lvl 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(lvl 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.

## 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 | Craftable - 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(lvl 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 ebbed out like little stars in the distance before growing into whole rooms full of whatever light the pools radiated.

This pool's color ebbed 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 writhing 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 | lvl ??? - 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 Gained! (Fear lvl 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 resisted 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.

Fighting 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. Whenever I killed one, I inspected one of the bodies.

**BloodHollow Bat(lvl 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 grip its insides before smashing it into the ground. 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 bats 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 | Lvl 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(Ivl 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(Ivl 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(Ivl 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 | 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, higher leveled bats swooped down more frequently than before, but a few gloved punches dispatched of 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 ebbed from the eleven foot tall giant. That energy infused with 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 his 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 suffused 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 backfoot, 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 thunder shot from its metal plates as it gripped both sides of its spear.

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

"Preparing for combat. Protective protocol initiated."

I hadn't shut down Agony.

## 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 climacteric 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 gnarls its teeth, but I turn sideways, uppercutting its jaw. Another swipe of its paws, and I duck 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 got a meal of 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 | lvl 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 tastes way better than the bear."

"And you wish for me to indulge in 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 overtime. 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 | lvl 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 strut, 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 now, I came 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."