

1 A New World

Micheal and I caved, each of us trying to wisp away a dull, Saturday morning. We went out spelunking with some camping supplies, and it was a day like any other, both ordinary and sleepy. Caving gave our day a jolt of excitement though when compared to the norm.

The dark, dank tunnels led to pools of water clear as glass. Weird, fascinating creatures swam in those pools while creepy critters squirmed on the walls. The air hung heavy and humid. The hard stone gave us a firm footing as we climbed down, deeper into its subterranean depths.

We caved for over an hour when we stopped for an early lunch. We chatted while we ate a trail mix with some jerky and water. Though pretty bland, it wasn't terrible. Our conversation added more spice to the meal, each of us talking about the usual. I complained about my dad and how sore I was. Michael talked about girls he liked back at school.

In the middle of the meal, something bizarre passed. In a surreal moment, a tiny blue screen popped up in front of my face.

Schema Initializing. One minute until complete transference.

I squinted while turning towards Micheal. He glanced at me,

"So Daniel...What is this?"

I shrugged, "I don't know. Looks like a screen from some game to me."

Micheal moved his hands in the air. I followed suit. My hand never blocked the screen, even if my hand lingered over it. The screen existed on a different layer of reality than my hand. Either that or it couldn't be blocked from sight. It was hard to tell.

The message changed.

Schema Initializing. 30 seconds.

I frowned, "Alright, there's no way that Kelsey followed us and set up some prank. There's just no way."

Michael's eyes narrowed, "You're right. That's *impossible*."

Micheal and I cupped our chins as we said in unison, "*Unless...*"

I grimaced, "I mean, I wouldn't put it past her entirely."

Micheal nodded, "And she's done worse. Remember that time she put a handful of cockroaches into your toilet?"

I shivered, "Gah, that was the worst. I was only six, and she said they were trying to crawl into me and eat me from the inside. It gave me nightmares for months."

He and I squirmed as the message changed again.

10 seconds left. Commencing countdown.

I gritted my teeth, "Get ready for the worst. This may be her best prank yet."

Schema processing...5 seconds remaining.

Michael shook his hands, "Oh man, this is gonna be good.."

Initialization complete. Welcome to the New World.

As I read the message, the world quaked and the air writhed. It had come. Kelsey had *really* nailed us this time.

2 One Lone Creature

Everything blanked white for a moment. My eyes adjusted as I blinked. The cavern's walls warped like a crumpled brown bag. The pools of water glowed a bright cyan. Volatile streams of white light cast the environment in an ethereal glow. After passing, it recomposed areas of my surroundings in square, pixelated segments.

This snapped by my vision in seconds. The quaking energies left as quickly as they came. Some of the cavern remained lit up from the water's light below. These glowing pools revealed blind bats and creepy crawlers.

I winced in disgust. Centering my attention back to me, I found a circle of light surrounding my body. I tapped the edge of the white light before a message popped up in front of me.

**Schema fully functional. Distribute stats before finalizing starting position in -
|***(ERROR)***| - [BloodHollow Caves]?**

I tapped my chin. Micheal disappeared, and our unnamed cavern turned into the BloodHollow Caves. Using my unparalleled intuition, I guessed that this wasn't exactly the best place to be. I know, I know, hold your applause. I peeked at the screen before glancing around. As I inspected closer, the stone walls were a tinge of purple. I facepalmed. Of course; the cyan pool's light was bouncing off red stone, making them seem purple.

Thinking more about my situation, I doubted that. Even rocks untouched by light showed signs of this color change. Gazing around, nothing else about the stone altered. I raised an eyebrow as another box opened.

Open attribute menu using thought commands. Distribute the attribute point then finalize selection before selecting a tree point.

As I comprehended the screen's meaning, another screen appeared in its place.

Level 1 Attributes (1 Point Left)

Strength - [6] - Increases carrying weight, maximum speed, and physical power

Constitution - [5] - Increases the hardness, density, and weight of your body

Endurance - [7] - Increases regeneration of stamina, health, and their totals.

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

Willpower - [8] - Increases internal motivation, mana regen, and Mental Resistance.

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

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

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

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

At least the totals made sense. I boxed since middle school, and after taking more punches than I should've, I may have slowed down. Slightly. I mean, I assumed fives were average though. That may not have been the case. Either way, I didn't dwell on it.

As I read over the streams of data, another box appeared beside this one.

Character Screen

Health - 70/70 | 0.70/health per minute | Mana - 40/40 | 0.80/mana per minute

Stamina - 70/70 | 7.00/minute | Damage Resistance - 5%

I raised an eyebrow at the new statuses, and I moved my hand over them for a test. They both couldn't be blocked from my sight, like the other screens. These displays also bolded their text, maybe for easy viewing. With a little thought, I put my first free point into endurance. Having more health and stamina would help keep me alive, regardless of the circumstances. As I did so, a voice spoke out in my mind.

He who laughs last, laughs loudest.

It sounded like a mixture of an old british narrator and Morgan Freeman. I appreciated the subtle and convincing inflections of the voice, but mostly, it was just cool.

Perk Selection. Choose one.

[Body of Iron - Gives a permanent 10% bonus for endurance, constitution, and strength attribute bonuses]

[Mind of Iron - Gives a permanent 10% bonus to intelligence, perception, and dexterity attribute bonuses]

[Spirit of Iron - Gives a permanent 10% bonus to luck, charisma, and willpower]

Of course, I could've tried juggling which cocktail of attributes proved most valuable. Given I understood next to nothing about my situation, I let math make my decision for me. Eighteen of my total attributes remained in Body of Iron, twelve in Mind of Iron, and fifteen for Spirit of Iron. Within seconds, I eliminated Mind of Iron from my choices. It carried too few attribute points. Charisma wouldn't help me get out of this cave either, so that bonus would be wasted.

My last reason came from usability. I fought often, and so the extra attributes from Body of Iron wouldn't go to waste. I selected it and hit the finalize button. Immediately, a rush of strength filled me. My body restructured, becoming denser, tougher, and more powerful. I cracked my neck and clasped my hands into fists. My fingers clamped with a quick, satisfying snap. As I did so, the bones of my hand seemed harder, my skin thicker. I clanked them together, finding that observation true.

It was awesome.

Fizzling into the air, the circle of light disappeared from around me. I neared the glowing pool, my only source of light. A flapping sounded above me. Glancing up, a giant, faceless bat glided towards me. Above it was a message.

BloodHollow Bat | Level 34 - BloodHollow Bat's are generic fodder within these caves. They act as the bottom of the food chain here. You would have to be outright ignorant to die to one. Like really...

I mentally screamed, and not in a girly way mind you. I jumped sideways as it collided into the ground. Stone splintered beneath it, its impact echoing through the cave. This thing was as strong as steel. It's large, white ears twitched before its mouth turned towards me. The putrid smell of rotten flesh drifted from its maw while it held no eyes. Flapping its wings, the creature cleaned off the broken rock from its hide. One of those wings dripped blood, like something chewed on it.

That injury saved my life.

Skill unlocked! Dodging(lvl 1) - When given the chance to act, seize it. In this case, you've decided to avoid damage, a worthy pursuit. +1% to dodge speed.

Peering around, I acted in desperation. I picked up a rock before tossing it away from me. Without eyes, I prayed these things relied on sound. If I had some luck today, maybe the echoes would confuse the bat. Luckily enough, it did. The pale, sickly creature dove towards the small rock I threw. Another heavy collision echoed as it landed.

Its mouth chomped onto the rock. Cracks formed on the red stone. A loud crack resounded as that crag crumbled in the bat's mouth. I shivered in fear. Sprinting to my backpack, I wanted something to fight with. The bat gazed at me, but it didn't even squeal. These bat's didn't use echolocation, instead relying on normal sound.

I zipped open my pack, pulling out some Jerky. I ran from the backpack right as the bat chomped into the peppered meat. As it chewed, I peered at the bat, searching for a weakness. Its alabaster shaded skin showed sleek limbs and muscled wings. The membranes of its wings, black as night, pulsed as the abomination's heart beat. Scratches coated the wings, creating drips of liquid red flowing from them, especially its left wing. It was from that injury.

An idea popped into my head at the sight. In a mad dash, I charged towards the bat. It turned towards me and roared like thunder. As its mouth closed, I kicked the injured wing on its left side into its closing mouth. The teeth gashed it, slicing through skin and

membranes. The small gashes gushed blood, far more than I'd imagined. It lashed its right wing out, slapping my leg.

Skill unlocked! Ave Maria(lvl 1) - In hopeless times, you've chosen to stand in defiance. Wield that defiance as a weapon, and it will be your friend.

Like a wall of stone, the wing shattered my leg on contact. Bones splintered. My mind went black and red with pain. Like a sack of flour, I flopped onto the rocky ground. I scratched my face and hands as I landed. I hardly noticed them. The fire charging up my legs was agony. Once it reached my head, I was agony.

Skill unlocked! Pain Tolerance(lvl 1) - At times, there is no way of avoiding pain. In those dark hours, your will is tested by how well you endure it.

The torment lessened ever so slightly. My vision flashed before I spotted the creature coming towards me. With what little strength I had left, I rolled sideways. The bat flapped its wings, streaking crimson blood from its left wing onto the purple stone. It flopped up towards me, but the injured limb threw it off balance. The bat crashed against the ground, inches from me.

Skill unlocked! Desperation(lvl 1) - To feel desperation is to be alive. Take that life and continue forth, an anima of your ambition.

I'd about had it with these damn screens and their motivational quotes. I crawled away from the bat. Everything was hazy, besides for the vibrant, crisp pain in my leg. That still radiated through with an absolute, consuming intensity. I didn't look at it. I'd vomit if I did.

I turned around. The bat's left wing stuck out in three, odd angles now. Blood squirted from open arteries. It must have crashed from trying to dash forward so fast. That served as my only opportunity to kill it. Even then, nausea grew in my stomach as I faltered. My eyes burned as I wanted to just rest.

Something in me snapped before I gave in, and I swallowed that weakness. Anger formed in its place. This thing had to die. Either that, or I would. I smashed my hands into the stone, breaking fingernails as I desperately crawled away. The monster chomped towards me. The bat's teeth clamped inches from my butchered foot. I grimaced. The bat inched closer and closer. Inches turned to half inches, then hair lengths. I felt its rancid breath on my foot. I smelled its pouring blood.

My own blood dripped from my hands as I dragged myself away. Sweat poured from my forehead. My teeth grit hard, hard as the stone I was on. I didn't want to die. This bat

wasn't going to get me if I had anything to say about it. With a last jerk of effort, I closed my eyes before pulling my broken foot away.

Lightning pain splashed across my mind in an untamed fury. My limbs stopped responding. My face grinded against the hard floor. Thoughts flashed through my mind. My eyes burned as I grimaced. I couldn't move. I was going to die.

Death's Dance(lvl 1) - Walking along the edge of your demise is a unique thrill. It carries the implication of great loss, but also, of great gain.

The bat's chomps echoed in my ears, but faintly, like the bat howled in another room. I glanced back, watching it crawl near me. The alien creature's blood squirted without the vitality it had before. The monster's strength worked against it as its heart bled it to death.

The head fell on my shattered leg. Agony roared up the leg once more, but I still couldn't move. I willed myself too, but nothing responded. Despite that lack of movement, I sure as hell could feel pain. Interrupting my abject torment, a screen popped up in front of me.

Underleveled bonus active. First kill bonus active. 12 level ups gained!

Notifications passed by my eyes as the narrator's voice reverberated again.

No traveler crosses a thousand miles in a single step. No artist is born knowing his craft. No fighter is born thirsty for blood. They each must earn their masteries, and in those domains, they will be given freedom and power abound.

You have started your journey to join them.

Another message appeared.

Open Attribute menu using thought. Distribute the attribute point(s) then finalize selection before selecting your perk(s).

In desperation, I opened my attribute points before placing ten points into endurance. I remembered the message about moving faster with strength, so I put two points into strength before finalizing the decision. The relief was palpable.

The pain disappeared from my legs. I flexed my toes, relishing the newfound function of them. Man, it was nice having feet that worked again. My mind cleared, though the memory of the pain lingered like a fresh scar. My breathing steadied and my heart beat

strong once more. No, it was better than before. I could've run a marathon. I could've climbed Mount Everest.

At least it felt like it.

At the same time, I gained a firmer awareness of my own strength. The narrator's voice echoed once more, saying,

'Those that are immortal stood the test of time.'

A moment passed before another voice spoke aloud, this one rougher around the edges.

'A mage tried to trick me with big words. Too bad he didn't have big bones.'

I guessed the quotes were selected based on the attributes I selected. The first saying was for endurance, and the second for strength. Despite the ridiculousness of it all, I admitted to myself that the upgrading aspect was pretty cool. Opening my character screen, I inspected my stats.

Character Screen

Health - 120/198 | 1.98/health per minute | Mana - 40/40 | 0.80/mana per minute

Stamina - 119/198 | 19.8/minute | Physical Resistance - 5.5%

My health lingered near the halfway point despite my level ups. Doing some quick math, I had less than ten health after my first battle. If not for that one point in endurance I placed at the beginning, I'd have died already.

I shivered at the thought of death. The enormity of my situation caught up with me. All of this happened so fast, faster than I comprehended it. Facing a single overleveled enemy almost killed me. If that bat wasn't dumb as a rock, then I would've been a corpse. I blinked as a wave of nausea assaulted me. I almost ended right then and there.

I blinked back tears before vomiting onto the ground beside me. My hands trembled as I took several deep breaths. Once I calmed myself some, I glanced back at the bat behind me. The corpse chilled as a huge stalactite jutted out of its back. That stalactite and its injury saved my life. Glancing closer, I noticed arteries jutting out from the torn wing. The mouth reeked of rotten meat. I keeled over and discharged what little I had left in my stomach.

Staring at the drool laden vomit, I gasped at my situation. This wasn't some fun game; it was life or death. Before I fell into a depressive spiral, another flap of wings echoed in the distance. My adrenaline spiked as I wiped my mouth. I limped towards a large cluster of rocks. They arced into a hidden cove, keeping me away from anymore of the blind bats.

Hiding behind the crags, I reasoned for a moment. I had nearly twenty endurance and almost nine strength. Not bad, probably. If this system put me into this position, abusing it would be important for my survival. Considering my current situation, I didn't have time to consider anything else.

Those racing thoughts opened another selection screen, this time for perks.

Perk selection. Choose one(3). Requirements met. New perks Unlocked!

[Tireless(Endurance over 10) - Your endurance is good. Doubles Stamina regeneration.]

[Unyielding(Endurance over 15) - Your endurance is admirable. Doubles health regeneration.]

[~~*(ERROR)***~~ Agony(Death's Dance, Pain Tolerance, and Desperation unlocked before level ~~***~~) - Aura effect draining hp of anything in the effective radius, including the caster. Causes intense pain.]**

[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 Fledgling and Beginner perks looked like total garbage. Extra exp meant nothing if I died before I got another kill in. Considering my proximity to death so far, I stuck with immediate, effective options in the short term. As for Beginner, the perk helped me get outside of some kind of 'tutorial' zone. It would've been a great perk if I found myself stuck in a tutorial.

The other perk, Agony, caught my attention more than the others, however. It looked like some kind of system error, the same kind that got me stranded in this cave. Staring around, other bats shifted on the cavern's roof. I shivered at the thought of many hiding in those dark recesses above.

The outside world must've been a better time than this. It had to be, otherwise I wouldn't have anything to come back to once I escaped BloodHollow. Holding onto that thought, I stopped my shaking hands by squeezing them into fists. Now wasn't the time for weakness.

Without any more hesitation, I selected Tireless, Unyielding, and Agony since the other perks wouldn't help me right now. Once I selected those perks, I made my character screen reappear.

Character Screen

Health - 128/198 | 3.96/health per minute | Mana - 40/40 | 0.80/mana per minute

Stamina - 198/198 | 39.6/stamina per minute | Damage Resistance - 5.5%

Looking at the numbers, they explained why I hadn't passed out yet. The stamina regeneration kept me awake, cranking out forty stamina a minute. As I wondered about the extra tree points, another message popped up.

Select Talent tree for distributing points. Requirements met. Additional trees unlocked.

| I Fledgling[0/5], I Beginner[0/5], I Fighter(Kill a creature 20 levels above you)[0/25], I Determinator(Unyielding and Tireless unlocked and character is below level 15)[0/25]|

I reasoned that if the tree paths for fledgling and beginner were unhelpful as the perks, then I'd avoid them for now. Fighter seemed useful, but Determinator had a level requirement. If I got over level fifteen, it may disappear, but Fighter would remain. That exclusivity made my choice for me.

I put a perk point into Determinator. Nothing happened. I frowned before putting in another. I put three more points in before a notification greeted me.

Those that are determined do not stop. They do not relent. They do not yield. +5% to regeneration stats.

The tree points came from gaining skills. From the looks of it, the Determinator tree was all about regenerating through combat or extended conflicts. Hell, by the time I finished putting points into the tree, I couldn't have known how much regeneration I'd gain. That gave me hope, and I smiled without thinking. The grin appeared for one reason - I had a way to fight in this cave, though it would be a slow and excruciating one.

I would just kill my enemy before I killed myself.

3 Hitting My Stride

I placed all my remaining points into the Determinator tree. Four notifications generated.

Determinators are walls of stone, each of them an unstoppable force. +5% to regeneration stats.

Less a mind and more a machine, they tread in one direction. Forwards. +5% to regeneration stats.

To stop one is to kill one. To befriend one is to align yourself with one. +5% to regeneration stats.

For they have wills of steel and minds of metal. You are now among them. +10% to regeneration stats.

As I resolved myself for what was to come, I held onto what these sayings said. Even while I gripped with this new reality, each of these sayings pumped me up. But yeah, my regen increasing by 30% was a nice bonus. It left me regenerating around five health a minute. With my damage resistance, that was more like five and a half.

So, I could get five health a minute against however many bats I could fit in the radius of Agony. Not the most promising thought, but whatever. I could handle it. I had to. What I really needed was to learn how to use Agony. As I pondered about that, a message interrupted my thoughts.

Agony - Drains all nearby unit's health, including the caster. The more health the caster drains from themselves a second, the larger the effective range of the aura. Damage to self reduced by constitution. Willpower increases damage of Agony. Current conversion: $1.08(\text{Willpower bonus})/0.945(\text{Constitution bonus}) = 1.14$

I rubbed my temples while stopping my eyes from going cross. Oh man, *math*, and it was even beyond a third grade level - my greatest weakness. Taking a second to adjust, I made sense of it. Willpower helped Pain Tolerance while the constitution attribute made me more difficult to damage. With that in mind, I willed the power to activate.

Like a firecracker in my skull, a headache formed along with a stinging discomfort all throughout my body. A bead of sweat dripped down my forehead after a minute, and I

wondered how much health I lost. This must've been a pretty massive amount I lost each second considering how much it hurt.

An interface appeared in the right corner of my vision, displaying health, mana, and fatigue. Convenient.

It would've been really helpful during the battle with the bat, but I took it with a grain of salt. I was clearly an outlier for what this system had in place. On the top left corner of this HUD, a debuff was showing,

Health loss from Agony - [5/min]

I gaped at the sight. I questioned my existence for a moment, perturbed that this much pain amounted to so little health lost. The sheer discomfort amazed me before another notification appeared,

Skill level! Pain Tolerance(lvl 13)

A eureka moment popped up in my mind as I put the dots together. My Pain Tolerance gave me the skill points for the Determinator tree. I wondered what all the skill levels were when a list appeared,

| [Ave Maria(lvl 1)], [Pain Tolerance(lvl 13)],[Desperation(lvl 8)],[Death's Dance(lvl 6)], [Dodging(Lvl 1) |

These were the skills and descriptions from earlier. They acted in vague ways, so I wanted a clear, crisp understanding of what they did. This system, whatever it was, didn't fail me.

Ave Maria(lvl 1) - Plus %0.5 to success rate of risky plans.

I couldn't believe this was a thing.

Pain Tolerance(lvl 13) - Minus 13% of perceived pain.

Desperation(lvl 8) - Additional willpower granted when desperate.

That was a powerful buff when I would need it. A useful skill for sure.

Death's Dance(lvl 6) - Plus 6% to damage dealt when receiving damage.

Dodging(lvl 1) - Plus 1% to dodge speed and minus 0.5% to dodge reaction time.

Every single skill proved useful, most of them life changing. It seemed the Schema gave me skill points when I was using the skill; a reward of sorts for using the buff. That meant that I could use Agony for Death's Dance, Pain Tolerance, and maybe even Desperation if it came down to it.

In fact, these skills had been gained by simply doing what the skills were. After a little brainstorming, I thought if I did some of my boxing, the schema would recognize it as a skill too. I put myself in my normal fighting stance, my feet set slightly wider than my shoulders. I set my shoulders high and forward, keeping my chin protected.

My backfoot left the ball of my foot planted while my front foot pressed hard into the ground, letting me lean forward. Unlike some boxers, I grounded my front foot when I fought. I wanted the power so I could hit hard and heavy, like a hammer. That strategy gave me my fighting name: Outlast. I prayed the name would be true in this situation.

Swinging a few times, I fumbled my forms, even though I practiced them many times before. Agony's perpetual pain distracted me, so I willed the ability to cease. It did. I went through a few hooks, jabs, overhands, and straights before a notification appeared.

Pugilist(lvl 1) - Many have chosen to wield weapons aside from their bodies. You've chosen a simpler, straighter path, and it rewards you with blinding hands of hardened steel.

I raised my fists in success, the Rocky theme playing in my head. I checked the skill.

Pugilist(lvl 1) - Plus 1% to fist hardness, fist speed, fist damage, and general speed when using only fists for weapons.

I swung for a few more minutes in my little rock cove as quietly as I could. After about half an hour, I worked up a good sweat as I read my notifications.

Skill level! Pugilism(lvl 8)

The bonuses from the skill already made a difference. It defied all my expectations, honestly. I made a year of progress at my gym in just a few minutes. In particular, my fist's speed astounded me. My fists blurred in my vision at times, though that might've been the sweat and dehydration.

Thirsty or not, this gave me some joy and confidence. I cracked my neck before glancing back at the bat I killed. Two other bats devoured swooped in, gorging like ravenous dogs fighting over a steak. I winced in disgust before tapping my forehead

with a knuckle. I needed to get serious here. Sure, getting stronger was fun, but if I went about it with a lazy attitude, I would die here. I had better things to do.

Like not dying.

I ramped up Agony till it matched my health regen. The splitting headache, stinging sensation on my skin, and the burn in my muscles kicked in. It disintegrated me in a slow, steady drawl, and the sensation hounded me. After a few minutes of adjusting, I threw some punches out. It reminded me of fighting in the final rounds of a boxing match. In other words, utterly miserable.

I went about trying to get the willpower to really put out while training before a bat flew over my head. I froze faster than a housemaid caught stealing. The bat landed on a stalactite fifty meters away before covering itself with its wings, disappearing entirely amongst the stone.

At that point, I glanced up at the darkness away from the glowing pools. The bats were invisible. Like, invisibility cloak levels of invisible. Who knew how many of those killers just waited out there in the caves, sitting there, biding their time. In fact, it seemed outright strange how they hadn't noticed me yet.

I shrugged off those concerns though. Other, pressing matters engulfed my attention, like the idea of the blind bats roosting everywhere. That anxiety mounted until cold sweat poured from my brow. I could be surrounded by the damn things in every direction. I would need the ability to take on dozens, maybe even hundreds at a time, not just one. Either that or I would be torn apart by a horde of them just like the one I managed to slay.

Skill level! Desperation(lvl 9)

I needed to power at a speed that defied convention.

With that realization, I opened my character menu and found thirteen tree points. I glanced at my options for trees.

| I Fledgling[0/5], I Beginner[0/5], I Fighter(Kill a creature 20 levels above you)[0/25]|

Based on my deduction skills, Determinator II should've been available. It must've required something I hadn't done yet, so I silenced my indecision. I needed to hurry. I put all the points into the Fighter tree.

A fighter enjoys the thrill of battle and the taste of blood. He fights for pleasure, not out of necessity. +1% to general resistance multiplier and physical power multiplier.

You seek to join them and live for battle. You thrive on glory. You need nothing else, for what else is a warrior but the sum of his battles? +1% to general resistance multiplier and physical power multiplier.

Taking a moment to resolve myself, I decided to survive this cave. I swung my fists with renewed vigor. Like lightning coursed in my veins, I struggled to improve. I thought of counters, weak spots, even ways of shifting my weight. I tried moving as little as possible to dodge my invisible opponents. Sweat poured from my forehead and armpits in minutes.

It turns out, training disintegrating your own body was absolute hell. I mean, training was already hard. That and the abject terror from my situation strained my mind unlike it ever had been. Still, I put in the time and effort to get the task finished. It was something about me. Sure, I silently complained about whatever I needed to do, but I would get it done once my mind was set.

It turns out, death was a primary motivator. This steeled my mind, and I kept at it. As I did, my thoughts drifted to the people I'd known. Most of them assumed I was stoic. Michael knew otherwise. I hoped he was alright, but after what that bat had done to the stone, I doubted it. That pained me, but there was still a chance he and Kelsey survived.

I grasped that chance. Hours passed, and my eyes grew heavy. I couldn't tell how much time had gone by since I started training or the Schema activated. There was no sun, no phone, or any real reference for time.

That was a strange habit of mine, actually. I was one of the few students I knew without a phone. I never liked how they seemed to consume whoever used them. It was less like a person owned a phone and more like the phone owned them.

Thoughts like that passed over my glazed eyes as I kept on training. Even as exhaustion took over, my movements grew sharper and stronger with each passing minute. I'd unlocked several skill levels, along with a new skill or two. The sound of a corpse being chewed helped me there. It pushed me forward as a constant reminder of what would happen to me soon if I stopped.

At the peak of my fatigue, I walked over towards my refuge of overhanging rocks before falling asleep on my side. It'd been a long day, and fear kept me up no longer.

After a pretty bleh rest, I awoke with bats chiming above my refuge in a swarm. Instead of scooping up the many insects across the cavern, they stumbled around as if they were trying to escape. They must've been hungry, several of the bats stooping to cannibalism earlier, but they avoided every bug out here.

I must've been a bug to them because they ignored me as well. I couldn't fathom why, but it gave me an opportunity that I wouldn't take lightly. I opened my character menu spotting thirty seven tree points. I finished the Fighter tree with twelve of them, leaving me a clean twenty five remaining. Three notifications appeared,

So fight on in your life. Find meaning in war. Find fulfillment in bloodshed. Become the battle, and breathe it in. +1% to general resistance multiplier and physical power multiplier.

There's so little left in these corpses you stand on. You've built bridges of bodies and swam in oceans of blood. +1% to general resistance multiplier and physical power multiplier.

For you are war incarnate, a monster in a man's flesh. Swallow that darkness, and be swallowed by it in turn. +1% to general resistance multiplier and physical power multiplier. Fighter II unlocked.

I took a sharp breath as the sayings spoke aloud, each of them both eerie and inspiring at the same time. I checked out the remaining talent trees.

| I Fledgling[0/5], I Beginner[0/5], II Fighter(Kill a creature 30 levels above you)[0/50]|

Welp, the first Fighter tree gave me great gains already, so I choose it before placing all my tree points into it in one go. Three notifications appeared in succession once more.

You continue your path. Known by many names, but mostly known by what you leave behind. +2% to general resistance multiplier and physical power multiplier.

In your wake is nothing. You know no family. Your joy is the clash of steel, the spray of blood, the carnage that comes from killing. +2% to general resistance multiplier and physical power multiplier.

Loneliness is success to you. It means everything has fallen to you already. That silence is your home.+2% to general resistance multiplier and physical power multiplier.

I disagreed with a few of these sayings, but I needed them either way. While the bonuses were small, they'd add up over time. I checked out my skill levels to inspect my progress.

| [Ave Maria(lvl 1)],[Pain Tolerance(lvl 17)],[Desperation(lvl 13)],[Death's Dance(lvl 11)], [Dodging(lvl 3), [Pugilist(lvl 18)], [Physical Fitness(lvl 7)], [Focus(lvl 5)] |

Counting it all up, I gained seventy five total tree points. I glanced at the bonuses of Physical Fitness and Focus.

Physical Fitness(lvl 7)] - To condition one's body is to condition one's mind. You've used the latter to achieve the former, and so, you gain strength and speed in turn. Increased stamina usage during activity, but increased strength as well.

Focus(lvl 5)] - An untempered mind is a ghastly thing. It goes where it pleases, fulfilling impulses instead of goals. You've decided against that path. To that end, your mind is an instrument of your will. Increased skill gain when focused.

I raised a shaking, celebratory fist. This skill explained where a lot of the other abilities came from. I would be able to grind these up to something, especially the Physical Fitness skill. The strength bonus meant I gained some speed, which would be essential. No matter my skills, I still need as much regeneration as possible for what I planned on doing.

Noting that, I opened my character menu.

Character Screen

Health - 128/198 | 5.15/health a min | Mana - 40/40 | 0.80/mana a min | Stamina - 198/198 51.48/stamina per min

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

Physical Power - (+)9.8%

Debuffs - Agony(5.15 hp/min)

The screen changed a little, likely due to new buffs. It didn't surprise me, considering this Schema warped reality. A dynamic interface wasn't exactly stunning.

Peering at the numbers imbued optimistic thoughts of taking on another bat. I swatted those hopes for now after considering my last battle. Luck saved me then, not my own skill. Relying on chance again, especially considering how low my luck stat was, appalled me.

Flashes of the bats rotting teeth and breath flooded my mind. I gasped before shaking off some jitters. This wasn't the time for that. For now, the bats still swarmed around me. I tolerated my growing thirst while mentally preparing myself for more training.

It was all I could do.

After the horde died down to a standstill, I got back onto my feet. I shadow boxed with the discomfort of agony raging in the back of my head. Time dragged on again, and my motivation waned. It seemed hopeless to kill these bats. I stood no chance in my mind.

But, a few close calls with the bats reminded me of why I kept at this. This wasn't the time for doubt; this was the time for Desperation, which gained a few levels now that I mentioned it. After a few more hours, I lost all steam for training. My mouth dried out, my lips cracking some. My throat burned with thirst. I needed water, desperately.

Hunger hounded me with a burning stomach too, but that paled in comparison to my thirst. Intense exercise without water weighed on me, destroying my will. I wanted a few points in willpower soon so I could keep pushing myself. Before that, killing a bat took priority, so I placed ten more skill points into the Fighter tree.

Brushing up on my status, I planned out a mad dash towards the pools of glowing water. No matter how dangerous, I couldn't silence the call for water anymore. It just looked so damn sweet. Thinking of a way over to a glowing pool, silence popped up as my solution. I needed to be quiet.

I could be right beside a bat so long as they didn't hear me. Putting that thought into action, I snuck around my little cove of rocks for a while before a notification popped up.

Skill unlocked! Sneak(lvl 1) - The shadows are your cloak and silence your friend. They speak to you with umbral shades, and you speak to them in action.

I practiced the new ability with agony burning me down. All the while, I rolled, dodged imaginary swords, I even karate chopped some people down. Joking aside, I leveled my

Sneak, Dodge, and Pain Tolerance all at once for a while. Once I got some of the skills unlocked, I enacted my master plan.

Be. Really. Quiet.

I snuck around for about ten feet before a bat rustled above me. As its wings unfurled, the bat appeared into existence from nothing. It defied all rules of logic or physics, yet it occurred in front of my eyes like a surreal dream. I froze in place that instant, my blood running cold as ice.

The bat swooped down. In a wild panic, I pulled Agony back from the beast. It landed on the ground beside me. The creature opened its mouth, tasting the air for me. Waving its wings, it got closer and closer until it was inches from me. Cold sweat poured down my back as I held my breath. I could feel my blood beating in my ears. My left eye twitched from my overwhelming dread.

But I stayed still, and I got another notification.

Skill level! [Desperation(lvl 17)]

At that moment, something snapped in me. I despised this Schema. That indignation planted its seed in me, and it fed off that fiery spark of fury. I hated this damn thing. I hated it with a burning passion. My teeth clamped as my fists clenched. It mentioned an error when it summoned me into the BloodHollow Caves.

This entire predicament, my life, turned into this hell because the system made an error. I would die from a glitch. As the bat breathed down my neck, my ire fumed like smoldering embers in fire.

Skill unlocked! Scorn(lvl 1) - To feel anger is one thing, but scorn is another. It judges the object of anger as worthless, a failure in all ways. Scorn may ignite, but it may also inspire. You decide what its worth will be to you.

The quote spoke out while the bat opened its jaws beside me. Between its teeth, rotting bits of meat festered like a week old roadkill. My body told me to run, but my mind understood that if I didn't stand still, I'd die here.

Turning my face, I stared at the creature as it pulled back from me. It tilted its head towards the ground, rubbing a stone with its claws. The bat glanced up before flying back up. The wind off its wings brushed the sides of my face, cool and refreshing. I let out a slow breath of relief at its ascent.

I put my hands over my face, terror still consuming me. My eyes burned before I gave myself silent taps on my forehead, snapping myself out of my trance. It didn't matter if I wanted to lie down in hole and die. I had to move on. Taking a second, I willed Agony back into action. I snuck for a few more feet, gaining levels in the skill as I did.

I reached halfway between the pools and my cover of rocks. My backpack sat a few feet away, full of goodness I could eat. My stomach roared at me to stop and ravage the packages of jerky and trail mix. I silenced its calls. The water came first.

I paced further, reaching the cyan shaded pool in about ten minutes. As I arrived, I deflated like a balloon. I shut down Agony, the lack of pain coming in like a wave of fresh air. I placed my lips against the water before I drank it in.

Cold, crisp, and refreshing, I drank until my gut swelled. I waited a few minutes before drinking again and again and again. I sat in that tiny little piece of heaven, savoring the delicious flavor. It was a moment without the constant pain, effort, and thirst.

The moment flew by, however. I breathed deep and slow before lifting myself from the pool. I wanted to bathe, but that was going to take a while. It was more a distant dream than a pressing desire. Sneaking back, I reached my backpack after five minutes. I took out several pieces of jerky, scarfing them down before carrying what was left of my trail mix. Sneaking back, I reached my outcove with a far fuller stomach.

I gave myself a five minute break before turning Agony back on. Biting me like the cold of a winter morning, Agony hurt like hell. Engulfed in it, I started yet another grueling training session. It was better than thinking. If I dwelled on my situation, many aspects of it stuck out to me like sharp rocks underfoot.

I had no say in being here. This system jerked me here while I was unaware. The cold, the dread, even the hurt from Agony, they pressed on me from all angles. Despite those misgivings, I enjoyed parts of this process. The leveling, the training, and the growth, they gave me a motivation I never had before.

However, the bad parts of this dungeon outweighed the good ones. By a lot. By a colossal, consuming amount. Those thoughts burned in my mind as I trained. That ire helped me ignore the pain. I relished in daydreams of inflicting this torment tenfold on whoever caused this Schema. I envisioned smashing their faces to bits. I imagined ripping out their teeth and stomping their stomach. It gave me solace.

Waking up from that hypnotic state, I took a breath. My gut told me that submerging in that malice was a bad idea. Considering the amount of sweat on me, I trained for hours here. I stretched my arms, keeping myself together in the silence.

A notification appeared.

Skill level! Scorn(lvl 13)

I frowned before checking out the new skills objective bonuses.

Sneaking(lvl 11) - Noise is mitigated while sneaking, but stamina consumption is raised. Effect increased by skill level.

Scorn(lvl 13) - While in scorn, your strength, endurance, willpower, and Pain Tolerance increase, but your charisma and perception decrease.

So maybe wallowing in Scorn wasn't such a bad idea. I mean, sure, I'd be really dislikeable while it activated, but I needed those buffs. They worked great with Agony as well. Glancing at my character screen, I had thirty seven unused skill points. I put twenty points into II Fighter, finishing the tree. Two notifications appeared.

You are a warrior, a soldier, a mercenary. You are whatever you need to be to battle. +2% to general resistance multiplier and physical power multiplier.

For in battle, you leave only death in your wake, yet when fighting, you are truly alive.+2% to general resistance multiplier and physical power multiplier. +10 health and stamina.

I fist pumped in triumph. That tree gained me a point of endurance's worth of health. With seventeen skill points left, I peered at my trees.

| I Fledgling[0/5], I Beginner[0/5]|

Having nothing else left, I put the five points into each of them.

You've learned how to move through your new found screens. +5 health, mana, and stamina.

Now you're going out into the harsh world created by the schema. Prepare yourself for its trials. +5 health, mana, and stamina.

They weren't terrible by any means, but they weren't anything special either. No new tree opened up for me when the others were completed. That made sense to me. The

schema rewarded genuine effort and difficulty, not endless grinding. In order to progress, I would need to accomplish something first.

I mean, if you could just endlessly grind out the skill trees, then becoming ridiculously powerful would be simple. Everyone would be strong. No one would be dumb enough to go out and die without any real reason for it. They would just knit, jog in place, or practice some other skill until they were godlike.

In order to progress from here, my only option was upgrading my current skills until I could kill the bat. Otherwise, I would end up as a part of the bat feces piled in the corners of the cavern floor.

It was time to hit my stride.

4 Break Them

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

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

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

They still scared the living hell out of me, but to quell those fears, I studied the bat's movements and lifestyles. I found the bats flew around at certain intervals, those spans as far apart as mornings and afternoons. Between those periods of activity, the creatures alternated between comas and napping. My plan involved waking up one bat during their comatose before trying to kill one.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I trembled. Now it was time.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Underleveled bonus active. Level up! 3 levels gained!

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

Either way, the attribute screen popped up. I added all three points into endurance. I figured twenty points in it would unlock another perk, following the pattern from before.

Even then, the health kept me alive while the health regeneration meant Agony strengthened.

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

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

Perk Selection. Choose One.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Level 16 Attributes (3 Points Left)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Character Screen

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

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

Physical Power - (+)9.8%

Debuffs - Agony(5.15 hp/min)

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

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

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

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

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

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

Skill Level! Pain Tolerance(lvl 53)

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

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

I couldn't handle it anymore.

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

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

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

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

I'd sacrifice my soul for might.

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

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

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

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

I looked at Pain Tolerance again.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Skill Unlocked! Patience(lvl1) - To be patient is more than tolerance. One may remain in place for hours, yet dread each moment of that passing time. True patience involves accepting that time as necessary. In the end, it is the willingness to endure. Increased willpower while waiting.

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

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

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

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

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

Skill Unlocked! Throwing(lvl 1) - In fighting closely, one presents themselves to death. By fighting from afar, one presents death to others. Plus 1% to throwing speed and force.

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

Considering the now mellowed pressure, I kited the bat around like a practiced matador. The bat squealed out of pain at times, but it never wailed with enough intensity that

other bats awakened. At the same time, the unrelenting fear and pressure on me lessened. Unlike the other fights, I kept my composure because I controlled this battle from start to finish.

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

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

Underleveled bonus active. Level up! 3 levels gained!

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

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

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

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

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

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

Underleveled bonus active. Level up! 1 levels gained!

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

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

One bone at a time.