

Weapons of Mass Destruction #Chapter 11 - Read

Weapons of Mass Destruction Chapter 11

Chapter 11

It makes Damon start grumbling, but he surprisingly stands up and says, "Let's make it quick."

He lifts up his goblin, and a surprised look appears on his face.

Did he invest his stat points?

He should have leveled up, and Sophie as well. I am pretty sure he put it all into strength, so I decide to watch him carefully to compare his increased strength to my constitution.

My theory is that my increased constitution means I can use my peak strength for longer, and I will need shorter rest to be back at my peak form. I also have a suspicion that I will heal faster and have tougher skin and stronger bones. Just like the goblin.

Increased strength should increase the density of muscles and their strength, but it also comes up with a potential problem.

What if you invest too much into strength, but you don't have a body strong enough to handle it?

Once again, I become annoyed for not knowing and not being able to test it out as much as I want.

I also put the goblin on my shoulder, but I make sure to have my right hand free and be ready to throw the body on the ground. At worst, I can also use the goblin as a shield against an attack. Sophie also picks up the goblin, she does it quite easily.

Hmm. I guess that means that stat increase manifests fairly quickly. Few minutes maybe?

Hadwin puts the gun into his right hand and the goblin's spear in his left, and starts leading us into the forest.

As we enter, I don't feel as pressured as before, but I am still careful. The wind is now stronger, so we can hear the rustling of leaves and creaking branches as they bend in the wind. The sun seems to be right over us.

I still twitch every time I hear an unexpected noise.

As before, Hadwin walks first, me to his left, and Damon to his right. Sophie follows behind us, and I notice that she moved the goblin slightly lower to cover more of her back.

At this point, I am sure that the results of my increased constitution are showing, as I don't feel myself getting tired from carrying the creature. The only thing I notice is my empty stomach.

Food. I need lots of food.

I glance at the goblin, but I instantly decide that I am not that hungry.

Yet.

When we finally throw the goblins into the hole, I notice Damon's rugged breathing. He seems better than before, but it's easy to notice how tired he is.

I am now also 100% sure that he didn't put much into Constitution.

Sophie seems to be better than him, so I guess that she put at least something into it.

I move the knife to my left hand and pull out the pipe into my right hand.

On our way back, we are even more careful than before, but we move much quicker. Not being able to see what's behind the trees makes us all nervous.

When we get back to the bus, I feel relieved, even though there isn't too big a difference in our safety.

As I move away from people, I take a peek at my stats.

[Name: Nathaniel Gwyn]

Difficulty: Hell

Floor: 1

Time left until forced return: 4y 364d 20h 52m 59s

Lvl 2

Strength: 6

Dexterity: 8

Constitution: 8

Mana: 3

[Primary Class: Unavailable]

[Sub-class: Unavailable]

Skills:

- Focus Lvl 3

- Mana manipulation Lvl 1

[Skill Points: 0]

[Stat Points: 0]

I let Hadwin and the others take care of annoying stuff and sit on the ground, leaning once again against the bus's tire.

Wind brushes my hair as I close my eyes, and slowly breathe in fresh air.

It's so different from the air in the city. There's a hard-to-describe smell to it, slightly sweet but not too overpowering.

I like it

Warm rays of the sun on my hands touch my skin, and other than the passengers, I don't hear anything.

No cars, no machines, no planes.

It's quiet, almost peaceful, yet I know how dangerous this place is.

Also, It's called the 1st floor, so does that mean that the sun, wind, and sky are fake? Are there other floors above or below us, or is it just a place on a distant planet? Is it the whole planet? Simulation?

At the moment, I'm curious about what will be in the sky tonight, but at the same time, I feel a hint of fear.

It's hard enough to fight against unknown creatures during the day, but at night, with reduced visibility...

Sure, we can set up a campfire, but that would be like running around the place and screaming that we're here.

"Haaa..." I let out a sigh.

We're fucked, aren't we? I have a feeling that we were insanely lucky until now.

The wolf seemed to be starved or wounded and without its pack. We got ambushed by only three goblins, but even then, Hadwin almost died, and the other two got injured.

There will be more of them. I'm sure of it.

Should I leave? I glance back at the bus and try to ignore the discussion inside.

There are pros and cons to staying, but I feel like the pros outweigh the cons. I need someone to keep watch when I'm sleeping. Hadwin has a gun, so that's something, and it looks like the guy knows how to move around the forest. If we're going to stay here for five years, he would be useful.

I don't know how to hunt or skin animals.

Hell, I wouldn't even know how to set up a campfire or cook.

Then there are also others. I can collect some data just from watching them - stat point distribution, skills, classes if we get to it.

Footsteps catch my attention, and a student emerges from behind the bus - a girl around 17-18 years old, slim, blonde, and taller than me.

She briefly glances my way but then directs her focus towards the forest, leaning against the bus. Retrieving a cigarette and lighter from her pocket, she lights it up.

With her eyes closed, she slowly inhales, savoring the smoke.

"Haa... It will be really bad when I run out of cigarettes," her voice is quiet as she slowly smokes, enjoying every whiff.

She looks at me. "Do you want one?" she offers.

I just shake my head and stay quiet.

"So you did stop smoking... so responsible."

I still don't react. Let's see what she wants.

The girl stops when she is halfway through her cigarette and extinguishes it against the bus. Then she carefully puts it back inside the pack and then pocket.

One minute.

Two minutes.

Five.

She is leaning in silence while looking towards the forest.

"Do you also think that we are in deep shit, Nat?" her voice is quiet, and she still doesn't look at me.

Isn't that obvious?

One minute of silence.

"It all looks so normal... trees, grass, sky..." She falls silent after glancing at the sky.

"You know, before we ended up here, I had a fight with my mom," she said, her voice even quieter now. "I called her..." she pauses for a moment and a self-deprecating chuckle echoes in the surrounding silence.

She then continues to talk, and I don't say anything but listen.

I can do that much for her.

I feel like I owe her at least that much.

"Do you think I'm an asshole?" she looked at me.

I didn't get it.

Isn't what she thinks more important than my opinion?

I shrug my shoulders, and there is a slight disappointment in her eyes.

Then she chuckles.

"I should have expected such an answer from you. Anyway, Kevin found out something. Just say 'quest window'," before she disappears back inside, she asks, "Nat, will you help me if you can?"

I look up from the ground and our eyes meet.

Obviously, my life is a priority.

But if it doesn't put me in danger...

My answer is just a short nod.

Before she disappears from my sight, I see hint of relief on her face.

"Quest window," I say out loud.

[Floor quest]

Stay alive for 30 days

Rewards:

- Entrance to the second floor**
- Access to Community**
- 1 skill point**

- 5 stat points

[Side quest]

Stay alive for 24 hours.

Rewards:

- gear of your choice

Chapter 12

Ok.

Okay.

Fine.

I am not a person who tends to get angry easily, but even I have my limits.

If I ever meet an asshole who designed this thing, I will fuck him up.

Well, let's not think too much about it. My mind is most likely being read even at the moment, so it's better if I make some plans after I come up with a way to counter it.

Now then, Mana.

I lie on the ground and roll under the bus.

Let's try it here. I need to focus, and I don't want to get hit by a ranged attack from the forest. We are pretty far from it, but I wouldn't be surprised.

I close my eyes and try to use focus.

I have already used it a few times, so I know the feeling I should have.

It's hard to activate it at will, but after 10 minutes, I am finally able to do it.

It isn't as deep a focus as I was able to gain during fights, but it should be enough.

As I try to keep it activated, I start remembering the feeling of what I think is mana flowing through my body and strengthening it.

I start with my hand.

While slowly breathing in and out, my focus deepens.

What is it even? What needs to be done to turn something into a skill?

I quickly shake my head to get rid of useless thoughts and focus a bit more.

Sounds slowly fade out, and I can hear my heart beating slowly. Then I feel a slight tingling in my hand. It starts with my fingers and continues up to my wrist.

It's the same feeling as before.

By force, I calm down my now-faster heartbeat.

I focus on the feeling and try to understand it.

It's hard to explain.

It really is.

More than relying on my mind, I let my body do it.

Maybe it's something like when you catch something falling down from a table, and at the end it's just your body that reacts by itself. Just a simple reflex.

And only when you hold falling item in your hands, then you realize what happened.

So here I am, trying not to think about it too much.

Somehow it feels cringy.

Allow your heart to guide you.

Sense it deep within your soul.

Do not think, just do.

Let force...

God damn.

I just can't think of another way, not at the moment.

I try it again.

The feeling extends up to my shoulder, and I squeeze my fist.

I can't be sure if it isn't placebo, but I feel that my right hand is stronger than my left.

I furrow my brow.

I have a feeling that if I said it out loud, someone would laugh at me.

The system better not be recording my current thoughts or streaming them somewhere.

So, where is the mana coming from? That's what I am curious about at the moment.

Sure, I have a mana stat, but what does it mean?

Did I get another organ that is producing mana?

Is it just flowing through my body, or is it stored somewhere and moving to the part of my body I want it to?

Let's try again, and this time, slower.

I once again enter the focus and let my body take care of the rest. I feel strength in my right hand, but I just don't know where it came from.

I cancel it.

Again.

...

Again.

...

Again.

...

After around twenty more tries, and when I start feeling lightheaded, I finally feel it.

A thin thread of mana connecting my heart and hand.

Don't tell me.

I try it again, and now I focus on my heart right from the start.

I barely feel it, but mana forms there and then slowly flows through my veins, reaching my hand. It's not using only one vein but multiple of them.

So that's how it is.

I spend another 30 minutes trying to feel my mana, and when I hear Hadwin calling my name, I find a new skill between my existing ones and one of my skills leveled up.

[Mana Perception Lvl 1]

[Mana Manipulation Lvl 1 > Mana Manipulation Lvl 2]

I guess it's something.

Under Hadwin's amused gaze, I roll out from under the bus and stand up. Other than that, he doesn't react to it, which makes it even worse.

Asshole.

"Do you want to join us for another expedition? Damon and Sophie are coming as well, and I have one place I want to check out a bit more."

I grab my stuff and follow him after I nod.

"I noticed a spot where it appears to slope downwards. If we're fortunate, it could be a valley, and there may be a stream in the vicinity."

We come near the other two already waiting for us. Both of them hold short spears in their hands, the ones goblins used.

I guess it's better than nothing.

"Of course, we have to be careful. If there is water, then there is a high chance we will end up running into more animals or... other creatures."

"Anyone else joining us?"

My answer is Damon's derogatory laugh.

"They are busy shitting their pants every time they hear some noise."

Well, it's not unexpected.

"A few kids wanted to join but I turned them down," Hadwin adds in between Damon's trashtalk.

I ignore Damon's mumbling as he continues complaining.

Will I get a skill from it?

Damon's trash talk resistance lvl 1?

Hmm, maybe if I try hard enough?

While I am trying to acquire a new skill with Damon's help, Sophie is saying goodbye to her sister.

It's easy to see how worried she is.

Somehow, I can't help feeling a tiny bit of jealousy.

Chapter 13

Almost as if by habit, I am once again on the left, Damon on the right, and Sophie in the back as we follow Hadwin.

After just a few minutes of us clumsily sneaking, we stop at Hadwin's gesture. He just points in front of us, slightly to the left.

I frown.

I didn't notice anything.

I don't like it.

Leaves around a stone's throw in front of us start rustling, and I hear Sophie screaming in warning as the enemy also appears from behind.

Green creatures surround us while growling and showing their teeth.

Two level 2, two level 3, and one level 5 goblin shaman.

Not good.

Actually, it's pretty bad.

Really bad.

I get ready to run away when it becomes even worse.

A car sized wolf appears from behind the goblin shaman.

[Reanimated Wolf, lvl 2]

He's big, brown, and bloodied, but the most eye-catching thing is the iron pipe sticking out of its blinded eye.

I enter the deepest focus I ever have.

The world around me quiets, colors lose some of their vibrancy, and my mind filters out useless information.

My and the goblin shaman's eyes meet, and I swear he looks like he is laughing.

The goblins don't seem to be surprised to meet us at all.

Fuck.

Someone screams.

We don't even get time to run as the animated wolf rushes at us.

Hadwin makes the first move, and I can hear gunshots.

One.

Two.

Three.

All of them hit, but the wolf keeps charging and only slightly staggers after every gunshot. There is no blood.

Its target is Hadwin, who quickly swaps to the spear.

As the wolf shortens the distance, I put my knife away and hold my pipe in both hands. I let mana flow through my body, focusing more of it on my shoulders and waist as I burrow my feet into the ground

I clench my core, spin in my waist, and swing with all the strength I can muster.

The wolf passes by me, aiming for Hadwin, and I hit its front leg.

Something cracks really loudly, and the weapon in my hands bends. The wolf staggers, but there is no painful cry as it falls down while stepping on its broken leg. Hadwin quickly stabs with his spear.

But I am already behind the three and making a circle to the left towards the other goblins, knife back in my left hand. Mana is still flowing through my body.

I would like to save some and turn the skill off when I don't need it, but I want to stay as careful as I can.

The goblin shaman is holding his hands in the air and mumbling something under its nose, and its eyes are glued on me. One level 3 stays near him, and another level 3 slowly walks towards me together with a level 2. The last goblin is already fighting with Damon while Sophie is helping Hadwin with the wolf.

The level 2 goblin stabs at me with his spear, and its moves are painfully amateurish. With my body strengthened by mana, I easily dodge it and hit its face in exchange, breaking its nose and injuring an eye.

As he steps back with a painful groan, I move to the left and kick the dashing level 3 goblin. My leg hurts from it, but as he staggers, I dash back into his reach while he is regaining balance.

I stab my dagger as deep as I can into its neck and twist, breaking it in the process.

He falls to the ground, twitching his limbs and letting out wet choking noises.

Good.

After dodging one more attack, I finish off the lvl 2 goblin with multiple hits from my iron pipe on its head. Its skull cracks and it falls down without much resistance.

The fight took less than ten seconds, and the whole time, I kept a few trees between me and the goblin shaman.

Before continuing, I pick up both of their spears and peek at the duo. The shaman seems to be done with whatever he was doing, and now he is only waiting.

I peek just for a second and throw a spear at him. The weapon is terribly balanced, and it just hits the ground a few meters away from them.

It's harder than I thought.

When I glance backward, I see that Damon's level 2 goblin is already dead, and they seem to be finishing off the wolf. Hadwin is limping with a deep wound in his thigh, and Sophie's hand seems to be wounded too. Damon is holding a wound on his chest.

I have an opportunity but something stops me from running away and I turn back to the duo in front of me.

I bend to pick few stones from the ground when I hear it.

A terrible piercing noise

Not good.

Without even thinking, I dash to the side as quickly as I can.

Boom.

Something explodes, and I feel a pressure wave hitting my back, throwing me against a tree.

Even before the pain hits me, I know I have broken a few bones, but I try to roll as soon as I hit the ground. While limping, I run a few meters.

Boom.

Another shockwave throws me to the ground. The world around me starts spinning, and I feel blood in my mouth.

NOT GOOD.

I let mana flow through my body and crawl back on my legs. They are not broken, but one of my arms is, uselessly hanging along my side. That leaves my iron pipe uselessly on the ground. The spear I picked up is broken, and I am just holding its upper half.

As expected, the level 3 goblin is already next to me, and this time, I am unable to fully dodge its swift stab.

The spear grazes my side, and the goblin grabs my broken arm, sending a painful impulse through me and making me scream in pain.

But I stay focused.

I keep mana flowing through my body.

Even battered like this, I feel confident.

He will die.

My heart is beating like crazy, pumping mana and blood through my veins.

My breathing is ragged but steady.

It hurts.

It hurts so much.

But.

Even in such a state, there is not a single speck of doubt in my mind.

I will win.

Then I kick the goblin between his legs.

He lets out a painful groan and bends slightly.

I swing with my hand holding a broken spear and stab into the goblin's neck.

My spear doesn't enter too deeply, but with a loud scream, I pull back and thrust again and give him another kick between his legs.

He lets out a suffocating noise as blood starts flowing from his neck and mouth. He bends more while trying to cover his lower parts, and as he does so, I kick his lower chin with my knee.

Even in such a state, my kick is powerful enough, and I see consciousness disappear from his eyes.

As he falls down, I fall on him and stab his neck a few more times.

In the back of my mind, I hear a notification.

While holding a bloodied, broken spear in my hand, I stand up.

One more.

Chapter 14

It's painful.

It's tiring.

But I get up and squeeze the bloodied half-spear in my right hand. The rusty smell of blood hits my nose. My other arm is uselessly hanging along my body. Broken somewhere under my shoulder. I can't even move it without pain making my vision spin.

The goblin shaman is standing there with one of his hands pointing towards me and mumbling something under his nose.

I let go of the broken spear and grab a stone from the ground, instantly throwing it at the goblin.

Surprisingly, his chanting pauses and he frowns. Instead of hitting him, the stone slows down as it approaches him and then falls down about a meter away from him.

I do it again and get the same result.

His mumbling stops, and the stone slows down around 3 meters away from him and then just falls down, again. He screams something, and I quickly jump behind a tree, but there is no terrible noise, and the tree doesn't explode. Instead, I can hear him chanting something once again.

Then I hear a gunshot.

All of us freeze for a second, and unnatural silence fills the surroundings.

Another gunshot.

Hadwin is pointing his gun at the shaman. Surprisingly, the green creature isn't dead. Not even wounded. The same thing happens to the bullet as to stones.

As it enters an area close to the goblin it slows down and we can see it slowly traveling through the air. Then it stops and falls down.

"Damn..." Hadwin's voice is tired, and he is slowly limping.

Yet he seems to be in the best state out of the three of us. Sophie is holding a piece of cloth on her wounded hand while glaring at the goblin shaman. Damon is sitting on the ground and leaning against a tree. I'm not even sure if he is conscious or even alive.

The goblin looks at us, and his gaze is full of hate. He bares his sharp teeth, and a deep hissy growl escapes his mouth.

I move my tired body toward him, and the only thing I can think about is killing him.

I throw a few things at him as I walk closer, a stone, a branch, a piece of hardened dirt. Every time, they just slow in the air and fall down near him. But

every time I do it, his chant pauses, and his face becomes angrier and angrier.

"You don't like that, do you?" I smirk and I can feel the blood in my mouth.

I spit it out while continuing to walk closer and throwing stuff at him.

"Fucking piece of shit."

He keeps letting out terrible noises, maybe even words. He doesn't seem worried at all as I stop just a few meters away from him.

Is that a smile on his face?

Fucker.

I stab my spear at him, but at some distance away from him, it starts feeling weird, as if the spear is moving through molasses, and the feeling becomes worse the closer it gets to the goblin.

After around one meter, my stab loses all its strength.

When I try to quickly pull it back, it becomes even worse, as if it's stuck in something.

So I just let go of the spear, and it slowly falls down to the ground, almost like a feather.

The goblin's grin becomes even wider, and he chants faster.

You are so dead.

I step towards the goblin, and for a moment, his smile becomes even wider.

Then it instantly disappears from his face, replaced by sheer shock.

I enter the zone around him while moving really slowly. I am not attacking him at all, just taking a step toward him. Really slow step.

There is some resistance, almost like moving underwater and when I try quickly moving with just my finger, the resistance becomes much stronger.

So that's how it is.

Amazing.

His smile disappears, and it seems like he did stutter for a moment before resuming his chanting.

I continue slowly moving toward him. My body is turned slightly with my wounded arm facing him.

After entering the zone an arm reach away from him, I feel the resistance weaken slightly.

The goblin finally gives up his chanting, and a dagger appears in his hand. He is moving slowly, also affected by the field around him.

I focus once again and try to send the last drops of mana through my body.

The shaman seems to be an even worse fighter than the other goblins, as he just stabs at my chest.

I am already dodging even before he makes a stabbing motion.

His feet's placement.

His stance.

The way he turns his body.

I predict where he is going to stab and move my body slightly to make him barely miss me.

When his dagger enters my reach, I notice fear in his eyes. He slowly realizes that he is going to miss, and I can see his body struggle. Muscles twitching, his expression turning darker and darker.

Why did you stop smiling?

Is it not fun anymore?

Smile for me.

He is trying to move as much as he can and change the direction of his stab. Then he tries to quickly pull his attack back. There is panic in his movements.

But he can't. He is also restricted by the unnatural field around his body.

As he starts pulling back his dagger for another stab, I grab his throat with my fingers. I focus most of my remaining mana into my hand and try to bury the tips of my fingers into the front of his neck.

The monster tries to escape, but I follow him at the same speed, and he keeps panicking more and more.

He keeps trying to move faster than he can and keeps getting restricted while I just slowly follow his movement at the speed the field allows me to.

There is another stab coming. From the way he moves, I know that if I dodge it, he will continue and try to stab the hand holding his neck.

I should dodge.

It's smart to dodge.

But I just shift my body, and his dagger enters my broken hand instead.

The pain is terrible, much worse than I expected. The dagger is slowly penetrating my skin, tearing my muscles, and scratching my bone.

But I don't let go. Instead of that, I squeeze his neck harder and harder. He is already scratching my right hand with his remaining hand, leaving deep bloody grooves on my forearm.

I am almost worried that I will break my teeth from how much I am clenching them. It's easily the most pain I ever felt in my life.

He then twists the dagger inside my hand, and I feel tears running down my cheeks.

I can't help it, but a painful groan escapes my mouth.

But I don't let go.

I squeeze even harder and harder.

I feel the blood from his neck on my fingers, and then I finally penetrate his softer skin of the neck. It feels disgusting, and I am sure I will never forget this feeling.

Blood flows down his neck and on my hands as I grab his adam's apple and start pulling it out of his neck. In the process, I lose the last drops of my mana.

Then I hear soft noise, as if something is breaking, the necklace on his neck falls apart.

The feeling of my body being deep underwater instantly disappears.

The goblin shaman falls down on the ground while putting his hands against the hole in his neck. There is blood flowing through his fingers, and he is letting out noises I already want to forget about.

After a few seconds of struggling, the light disappears from his eyes.

Only a terrible, hateful, expression stays on his face, as until the last moment, he kept staring at me.

Chapter 15

[You have defeated the Goblin Lvl 3]

[You have defeated the Goblin Lvl 2]

[You have defeated the Goblin Lvl 3]

[You have defeated the Reanimated Wolf lvl 2]

[You have defeated the Goblin shaman Lvl 5]

[Lvl 2 > Lvl 3]

I instantly put two points into constitution and one into mana.

My body feels terrible. Every muscle feels as if it's about to tear and I feel weak.

I'm also so terribly hungry.

"Are you fine? Do you need..."

Just leave me alone.

"Nathaniel." The voice becomes louder.

Fuck off.

I slowly calm down by breathing.

Calm down.

Focus on breathing in and out.

Filter out the pain. A little bit is fine.

Good.

Now put more strength into your legs.

Good.

Now fall down and scratch your knees and palms, adding to your wounds.

Goo...What?

...

Fuck.

I clench my teeth.

Deep breath and again.

Yes, like this.

A bit more strength into the left leg.

Good.

More strength in the right leg.

Nice.

Now turn to Hadwin and try to look a bit more friendly, and not like someone who tore off the neck of a living being. Do it slowly so that your head won't spin.

When I turn around, I see a worried look on his face. I notice the fact that he's still holding a gun in his hand. I'm sure that it's just a coincidence that he's pointing it slightly in my direction.

Just in case, I try to predict the way he would lift it up if he wanted to shoot, and slightly shift my body.

If he moves that way, I can rush him. Forget about using my hands, I will hit his nose with my forehead.

He might be able to shoot me, but before he does so, I can slightly move his hand so it won't kill me.

Probably.

"God damn, Nat. You look terrible."

No shit

No fucking way!

Really?

Damn, that's craaaazy!

Asshole.

I nod slowly, not wanting to waste my precious energy on talking.

Hadwin puts his weapon away, and I feel the tension in my body dissipate. Instead, I focus on our surroundings.

"Let's keep our guard up. And I need a weapon," I mutter.

I lower my body slightly, and another wave of pain attacks me as I grab the shaman's dagger with my right hand. Before grabbing it, I wipe the blood on my fingers onto my once-white shirt.

I also grab pieces of his broken necklace and put them into my pocket.

"We have to go quickly. Sophie and Damon are also wounded, but they should be okay. Thankfully, they leveled up and put all their points into constitution. That should help them a little bit," Hadwin says, looking at me.

"How are you?" he asks.

"I'm fine. Let's move."

The points I invested seem to be doing their part. Just a little bit, but it's not like I can complain. Of course, I still feel terrible. The hunger I'm feeling is like there's a big empty hole in my stomach, and I bet soon enough, my stomach will start digesting itself.

As I'm walking, I let some mana flow through my body. It's not a big difference, but it's slowly becoming easier and easier. A small, really small, but noticeable difference.

Damon is still unconscious, and Sophie is breathing weakly while holding her hand with a terrible wound on it. I'm surprised she hasn't passed out.

"Nat," Hadwin says.

"Take Damon. I will follow with Sophie in a minute."

"...be careful on your way back."

He puts Damon over one of his shoulders while holding the gun in his free hand, and he disappears between the trees.

Huh, he agreed pretty easily.

After a few seconds I start counting.

One minute.

Two.

Sophie starts nervously looking at me.

Three.

"We should-"

She cuts out when I lift up my finger.

"We should talk."

"There is no time for talk. We don't even know if there aren't more of them..."
She moves closer to me, trying to hide, but I can see that she is getting nervous. "We can talk when we get back."

Does she still think this is Earth?

I put my hand on her wounded hand and squeeze.

A painful scream escapes her mouth.

I feel a slight urge to let go, but at this point, I don't even know if these are my feelings.

"W-what are you doing?" she screams while attempting to move away from me, but I hold her and squeeze harder.

She screams again but quickly quiets down while looking around with teary eyes.

Looking for help? Scared that there will be more monsters?

I am also worried about that, but right now, there is something much more important.

My mind is only mine.

Seeing her expression, I realize that I am hurting her more and more without even realizing it.

Am I really that angry?

Hmm.

Let's think about it logically since I can't trust my feelings at the moment.

"..."

I think what she did is something that would make me angry. Really angry.

Like really really angry.

My freedom is one of the most important things to me ever since I was young.

To be honest, I am surprised I am not angrier.

Is she influencing me even now?

Her chest moves up and down as she keeps her wet green eyes on me, almost pleading.

In the end, she is just a young girl.

"Let's talk later. Please?"

Her voice is shaking, and there is a drop of blood on her bottom lip from how hard she is biting it.

"Let's just go..."

"Did you...are you using skill on me?"

"..."

"Answer."

"... We need to go."

For a moment I don't say anything.

She avoids my gaze, and I can feel her muscles tensing. Her mouth opens slightly, but no sound escapes her.

Shock? Guilt?

I stay quiet.

"I don't know... I don't know what you mean."

A scream of pain, more tears in her eyes.

"You need to calm down and listen to me..." She puts her free hand on my shoulder, pleading. "We really need to go. It's not safe here."

My anger weakens even more.

Is her skill stronger with skin contact?

"We can talk when we get back."

"..."

"Nathaniel?"

"..."

My feelings are one big mess.

"One more chance, Sophie. No more lies, okay?"

She tries to open her mouth, but I gesture for her to stop.

"Think about your sister before you say something."

Then it hits me.

Terrible, terrible fear I never felt in my life.

I barely stop myself from shaking, and I feel cold sweat running down my back.

I almost want to scream, let go of everything, and just run away.

My heartbeat speeds up, and my limbs become cold.

Chapter 16

So terrifying.

So amazing.

I am clenching my teeth so hard they feel like they are about to break.
Goosebumps are all over my body.

I feel cold.

I am shaking.

It's hard to even think and **[Focus]** is only thing stopping me from running away.

Really, amazing.

How does it work? How did she get the skill? Is she using mana? How many emotions can she affect? How many people can she affect? Is it a level 1 skill? If yes, how strong can it get? And probably the most important question, can I use her to survive? Also, can she use it on monsters?

Did she use it only on me during the fight, or on the goblins as well?

Did she use it on the goblins to make them attack me instead of Hadwin and Damon, leaving three of them to deal only with the wolf and one goblin?

Maybe?

“Interesting...” I whisper, and I mean it. The feelings I'm experiencing at the moment feel so real. It's not hard to imagine how dangerous she will be if she gets time to develop her skills.

She could slowly manipulate someone instead of using raw power like she is now, her target wouldn't even have to realize it.

“DO. NOT. DARE.” she hisses through her teeth.

How scary.

“I will fucking kill you if you dare to touch her!”

“Good.”

“ ... ”

“Think about it this way. For me, my mind is the same as for you is your sister.”

“ ... ”

“I hope you understand what I mean.”

“I... will kill you...”

I interrupt her, “I think we might have started in the wrong way,” I let her lean onto me, and we start walking towards our camp. Well, I am almost pulling her as she resists a lot.

Let's risk it.

Sure, I almost died because of her, but I am alive. In future her skill can become amazingly useful. Hell, it's super useful even now.

I pause and terrifying thought flashes through my mind.

Is she manipulating me now?

Did I switch from killing her to using her because of her mind manipulation?

I will have to think about it later.

I know I am playing with fire, but I think I can now recognize when she is trying to manipulate my feelings, and her usefulness can outweigh all the risks.

Obviously, in a perfect world, I wouldn't have to be worried about all of that.

Now I will have to become stronger faster than she is. That way, she won't be able to control me.

I believe I can do it.

I trust in my decisions and my skill.

I trust in myself.

So let's keep her around. I won't get rid of a weapon I can use to keep myself alive, and if she does try something and I survive, well, that will be the end for her sister. The thought of hurting an innocent kid disgust me, but if I had to pick between me and her life, I wouldn't hesitate.

If me and Sophie fight I will either go after her sister, or the little girl won't be able to survive without Sophie in case she dies.

Who else would care about a little girl they don't know when fighting for their life?

Sophie isn't dumb.

"So let's start over again, yes?"

But I won't forget. I will always remember that she tried to use me as a shield, pushed me into fights without even caring about my life.

I don't care that she was scared or that she tried to take care of her sister.

I let a small smile appear on my face.

"Let's be allies, Sophie."

I won't forget.

We stay quiet for the rest of the way back.

Thankfully, we don't meet anyone while moving back to the bus. Our way back takes even longer than before because of our state,

My wound isn't bleeding anymore, but my arm is still useless, and it hurts every time I bump into something, also my wounds feel like they are burning.

The effect of an increased constitution is noticeable, but there are questions as well.

Do I require more calories now? 5 thousand? 10 thousand? Are there animals and monsters that can give me more calories, or will I need to eat all the time? Will there be a point where I can't get enough food, or won't need to eat at all?

Do I even need to sleep? Well, I feel tired, so probably yes, but what if I invest more points into constitution?

Another thing is that all my smaller wounds such as scratches are either fully healed or close to it. It's not like I can see the wound closing right in front of my eyes, but they are healing quite quickly.

Hadwin quickly joins us as soon as we leave the forest, and I leave Sophie to the boy who is following him.

"I was starting to be worried. It took you a long time."

Sophie just glances at me but stays quiet, and I shrug my shoulders.

As we get closer to the middle of the clearing, I notice Damon lying on the ground.

Unmoving.

Pale.

"He didn't make it..." says Hadwin quietly.

His face is empty, maybe slightly sad? It's really hard to read.

Did he...?

Damon didn't look like he was about to die the last time I saw him.

The clothes around his chest are terribly bloodied, and his expression is anything but peaceful.

His eyes are closed.

Sophie seems to be fairly shocked. "We talked just a few minutes ago... how could it..." she cuts off.

There were no last words.

No meaningful fight.

Just one goblin barely reaching his chest and one undead wolf.

In a fight where three of them fought against two opponents and yet Damon still died.

The wolf moved even slower than the first time we met him, the goblin was only level two, and they were armed. Hadwin even had a gun, and yet... he still died.

Just like that.

How?

How are they that weak?

Should I bother staying with them?

"Nat..."

I might be better on my own.

"Nat."

I am stronger than all of them.

"Nathaniel."

Should I even waste my time by helping them to develop? It might be better to invest all of that time into myself.

I feel someone touching my shoulder, and I feel as if I woke up.

What happened?

I notice my palm bleeding from my fingernails digging into it as I did squeeze my fist hard.

Oh.

Seems like Sophie isn't the only one shaken.

I glance at the blonde girl holding my shoulder. She is and always was taller than me, even though she is younger.

Her steel gray eyes are calm, and for a moment, we just look at each other.

She smells of cigarettes.

Focus on breathing.

I let out a little bit of mana and feel myself entering **[Focus]**. Just a little bit.

One heartbeat.

My heart pushes mana through my veins. It is flowing in the same pathway as my blood, just slightly faster.

Two heartbeats.

All unused mana is circulating back to my heart and then is sent back to my body.

Three.

Tension slowly escapes my body.

Four.

Slow and deep breath in. Yes, good.

Five.

I exit **[Focus]**, and I feel as if the haze covering my mind and eyes disappeared.

"Can you hear me now?"

I nod.

"Good, let me help you with your wound."

She pulls me towards the bus, and I follow her without words.

My head hurts.

Chapter 17

She is quiet the entire time. No questions, no bothering me. She just slowly cleans my wound as best as she can without water and with just a small piece of cloth.

She always knew me too well. I guess that's why I always felt comfortable around her.

The wound looks terrible even after some healing thanks to my constitution.

While she does her stuff, I drink the last few drops of water remaining in my bottle. I store the empty bottle inside my bag.

"I don't know what else I should do. Pour alcohol over it? I don't have any. Burn it? I've only seen that in movies, so it might not work. And someone already took the first aid kit from the bus."

Her face remains calm throughout, and I noticed she put her long hair into a pigtail resting on her back. She is also not wearing her skirt anymore and is wearing leggings instead.

I look up from the ground.

She is looking at me with an indescribable expression on her face.

I pause.

Why is it so easy to understand her?

"You can come with me next time I go into the forest."

I don't have to say more.

Slow nod.

[Name: Nathaniel Gwyn]

Difficulty: Hell

Floor: 1

Time left until forced return: 4y 364d 20h 9m 59s

Lvl 3

Strength: 6

Dexterity: 8

Constitution: 10

Mana: 4

[Primary Class: Unavailable]

[Sub-class: Unavailable]

Skills:

- Focus Lvl 3

- Mana manipulation Lvl 2

- Mana Perception Lvl 1

[Skill Points: 0]

[Stat Points: 0]

What. The. Hell?

Not even four hours? Is it bugged? It has to be, right? There is no way that we have only been here for four hours. It feels much longer.

Sigh.

“Tess.”

“Yes?”

“I am hungry.”

“...”

Well, I tried.

“How is your wound?”

I move my hand slightly. It hurts, so I stop quickly. I will have to rely on my constitution to heal it, but for now, my hand isn't usable. The wound on my side also hurts every time try to turn around.

Drops of sweat are forming on my forehead and I feel hot.

“Arm's unusable.”

“I thought as much.”

She pokes my left hand slightly, and a smile flickers in her eyes when I furrow my brow.

Her face stays the same, without expression.

“What are your stats?”

There is a short pause, but she doesn't think about it for too long and quickly tells me.

It's something like this.

Lv.0

Strength: 4

Dexterity: 7

Constitution: 2

Mana: 1

Her stats are a bit lower than my starting ones, but they aren't bad at all. I also know she can fight a little bit, which is more than I can say about others.

"When you level up, put two points into constitution and one into mana. You can do it even without talking. Just think hard about putting your points into the stats you want."

Then I continue to tell her about the goblins we met, the goblin shaman, and the animated wolf.

I try to tell her anything she can find useful. The way they usually attack, the weapons I saw them use, and everything I know so far about mana.

Tess also got two skills.

[Psychokinesis Lvl 1]

[Farsight Lvl 1]

She also told me that there are passengers with skills such as **[Reflection]**, **[Absorption]**, **[Telekinesis]**, **[Detection]**

, **[Strengthening]** and many other. There is even one person with my **[Focus]** and another one with her **[Psychokinesis]**.

To be honest I did expect each skill to be unique to a person so this surprised me a little bit.

Some people even started with 3 points in Mana. Weird.

Mana is usually a resource used to cast magic, enchant items, create spells, and is used as some sort of fuel for magic items.

And it fascinates me.

A lot.

If I could, I would most likely spend hours just experimenting with it.

It just feels like I'm a kid once again, and I got something amazing to play with.

Something very few have. Mysterious and so full of opportunities.

Unfortunately, I have no such luxury.

Tess is almost done smoking a cigarette when Hadwin appears. He is followed by two men who both seem to be around 30-40 years old. I noticed them before, and they seem to be fairly close to each other, probably two friends or coworkers.

Still limping Hadwin opens his mouth and closes it after taking a look at my wound. I can see that he is fighting inside, and in the end, he decides to be shameless.

"Nat, I will need you," he shrugs his shoulders and moves awkwardly.

At least he knows how shameless he is. But it's not like I can blame him. I'm sure I'm more useful than most people, even in the state I'm in. And it's not like I didn't expect him to come.

"When I was walking back with Damon..." he pauses for a second and continues after taking a deep breath "I saw the river down the valley. Probably 5 minutes of walking away from the place where we met them..."

At the moment, I am not sure if it's all just an act, or if he really feels bad for asking me.

How many bullets does he have left? It can't be many. One magazine? Two? Or is he already at the last one?

"Cassian and Dominic are going to join us."

Cassian is a shorter man with black hair, while Dominic has dark skin and curly hair. Both of them are in good shape, having figures that come from doing hard manual work.

I find it weird that they would want to join, even after seeing Damon's dead body.

I think it's better to go, but people rarely use logic in such situations.

Maybe...

I look at Sophie, who is standing nearby with her sister.

Whatever.

I slowly stand up. I try to calculate Cassian and Dominic's reach by looking at their arm lengths, and I assess their mobility by observing the way they move.

Let's see how you'll do.

"I'll be taking Tess with us, but I'll need a bit longer to rest. One hour should be okay. Oh, and give her one of the spears."

As I enter the bus, I hear Cassian and Dominic complaining.

I can't trust anyone.

Not Sophie, not Hadwin.

So I have to push, forget about my wounds, and get the last bit of energy from my body.

Because I am sure I will die the moment they become stronger than I am.

Chapter 18

Right after I reach the back seat, I take out my phone. Even before it turns on, I put the earbuds into my ears and turn on noise-canceling. The world instantly quiets down.

I connect the earbuds to the phone and scroll down through my playlist. Randomly, I pick one song and set it to play on repeat.

When I close my eyes, everything disappears. The voices of people around me, the lady sitting a few seats in front of me with her dog, a bunch of students, and twins.

The song starts playing.

I let it play two times before I start feeling better and let myself think a little bit.

...

I'm a wreck.

My hand hurts more than I'm letting them know. I feel weak, lightheaded, and my muscles hurt, most likely from using mana.

I am thirsty and hungry.

My clothes are dirty. My shirt is more red and black than white at this point.

I glance at my phone. It's at 78%. Earbuds are at 70%, and the case should have one more charge left.

I keep digging the nails of my fingers into my palm, and the wound keeps healing a little bit every time I do so.

My arm heals much slower, but there is some progress.

I increase the volume and close my eyes again.

[Focus]

The song keeps playing in the background as I try to manipulate my mana and send it toward my wound. I keep imagining the wound closing. I am trying to "feel" it.

While I do so, I keep wounding my palm.

Obviously, it doesn't work, but it calms me down as I focus on the mana flowing through my body.

It feels weird as if I got a new sense that's just for feeling the mana.

There are some losses as I circulate mana through my veins, in and out of my heart, but at this point, I can't even feel where little bits of mana disappear. I don't even feel how mana comes into existence. I just know it starts at the heart.

But why does it travels through my veins, through the blood?

Is it just using my veins as a road through my body, or does it need to be mixed with blood?

Is my heart some kind of generator creating mana, or is it getting it from somewhere else and sending it through my body?

At this point, I don't even hear the music and don't realize that I am draining my phone's and earbuds' batteries.

Fascinated by mana, I keep feeling it as it travels through my body and sometimes I slightly poke it.

How is it possible that I can manipulate it?

Is it because it's inside my body? Because it's my mana? Can I manipulate it even outside of my body?

Can I manipulate the mana of other people?

Time loses its meaning, and I hear notifications, but I ignore them.

Amazed, I just keep moving mana inside my body. It's somehow calming.

What I will be able to do with it in the future? Where are the limits?

I move the mana to the tip of my finger. It reaches the furthest capillary, and then I push it out of it. It travels through the meat of my finger and skin. It feels like I am spending it faster and using more of it than when it goes through my veins. I push a little bit more of it, and it exits through my finger. It doesn't hurt me and the consistency is like smoke so I add more and more.

My head hurts.

Knock knock.

Slow breath in.

Breathe out.

Focus.

I push more, and I feel as if the mana is reaching a centimeter away from my finger.

I focus on it. Make it thinner, and sharper.

I feel like I don't have enough air, my brain hurting as i hear ringing in my ears.

More.

Notification.

KNOCK KNOCK.

More.

I focus.

More mana, sharper, stronger.

Use it, shape it, and add density.

Much more density.

With a swipe, I move my finger across the side panel of the bus

More pain and the mana disappears from the tip of my finger.

My hand starts shaking, and my finger hurts as if it got stuck in the closing door.

But it's there.

A deep graze in the side panel of the bus.

When I finally turn to the side and look at Cassian knocking on the window, I feel much better, even though my head is hurting.

POV - Tess Hansen

He disappears inside the bus as Cassian and Dominic start complaining, but Hadwin quickly calms them down. Then, without any hesitation, he gives me one of the spears they were able to acquire. I also notice that he is much less nice and patient while dealing with the duo than when he talked with Nathaniel. His voice is also much more commanding and firm.

Two men leave at the end, not forgetting to give me a few nasty looks as they go. Hadwin gives me a short look and then also leaves. He doesn't even bother talking to me. His eyes just scan me up and down while checking how I hold the spear, and then he leaves while limping a little bit.

I watch him as he slowly strips dead Damon of his clothes and shoes and then pulls his body close to the edge of the forest. The pale body of a tall muscular man just lays there in his underwear. There is a lot of loose skin over his body, as someone who lost a lot of weight.

So that's it for you, Damon Beck. I feel a bit of sadness while looking at his body. I didn't know him that much, and I am sure Nathaniel didn't even recognize him as he looked so different after losing so much weight.

But I know for sure that Damon did recognize Nathaniel. How could he not? You can't forget such a beating.

He once visited the gym Nathaniel liked to use and got beaten to a pulp after attacking him. I didn't see it, but from what I heard, he got both of his hands broken, and since then, he hated the younger boy.

Surprisingly, one more memory flashed to my mind. That of a few years younger Damon smiling brightly while lifting up his little sister. Both of them laughed at some stupid joke.

The memory disappears, and there is only a dead body.

I sigh, then I hold my spear tighter and start practicing stabbing movements. I do it for half an hour to get used to the spear and the movement. Then I try to use my skills by following Nathaniel's guidance. Even though he said it feels awkward, I try to let my body handle it instead of trying to imagine it in my head.

At one point, a stone in the palm of my hand jumps slightly, but that's it.

One hour passes, and Cassian comes closer and knocks on the window. He knocks louder and louder until the young man inside finally starts moving toward the exit.

"...prick." I hear Cassian say. He says it quietly, almost whispering.

Nathaniel finally exits the bus. He is twenty one years old, with black hair and a face that could be called handsome if it weren't for his permanently expressionless look. Because of that, he just looks unapproachable and unfriendly, and people rarely bother to talk to him.

The most striking part of him is his eyes. One eye is a deep rich brown, while the other is soft gray, heterochromia.

He stops in front of Cassian. Nathaniel is slightly taller, but his figure is slimmer, and the man looks much more muscular. Yet, he doesn't say anything, and after a bit, he just avoids his gaze, and Nathaniel passes by him. I notice that Cassian is clenching his hands as he does so.

"Any results?" Nathaniel asks as he stops in front of me. His eyes briefly scan my face then he looks into my eyes for a split second and averts his gaze. He keeps looking at different things such as the weapon in my arm, my shoulders, the side of the bus, and our feet. He never liked making eye contact.

I share the results of my training without trying to exaggerate or lie and he simply nods in response. Surprisingly, he looks back into my eyes again, for a second time in a few minutes. That's unusual for him. It seems like something made him happy, but I don't even bother asking him about it. I know he wouldn't like it.

At the moment, he's the only one I can rely on, so I have to stay on his good side and follow his orders. He's fair, so in exchange, he'll help me too.

I don't have many options. It's either this or...

My eyes stop at the body at the edge of the clearing.

Chapter 19

Cassian is already with Hadwin and Dominic when I reach them. Only Hadwin greets me, while the other two mostly ignore me.

I also notice Damon's body at the edge of the clearing. He is only in his underwear and there is a massive wound on his chest.

I guess there is at least someone thinking a little bit. Even clothes can be useful, and it's not like we can go and buy some.

What I don't like is that they didn't even bother to pull him a few meters further in between trees.

Anyway, not my problem.

"What do we have for water?" I ask.

"A few bottles, a few plastic bags, and we also found this pretty big canister," he points at the iron canister near his legs. It's pretty big, probably for spare fuel or some other liquid.

I am not washing it for sure.

Sounds like a job for our newbies!

Yes?

Yes.

I just nod while pulling a knife from behind my waistband to hold it in my unwounded hand. It feels nice and heavy, much better than the knife I broke. Yet, it's still made from some kind of stone, crystal, or something.

I would much prefer a spear so I can keep some distance from enemies we might meet, but it would be pretty difficult to use one with only one hand.

And I think I prefer a sharp blade over a blunt iron pipe. Sure, the reach is shorter, but if I aim right, I can do more damage.

"Let's go then," Hadwin says and starts leading us toward the forest.

As we enter, I glance back and notice Sophie staring at me while holding her sister's hand. Her face is hard to read.

Tess, Cassian, and Dominic become really quiet as we start walking under the trees. They twitch every time we hear some noise, unsurprisingly. They saw

us coming back wounded multiple times already, and someone even died so it's not much of a surprise.

But this time there is no attack, not even as we start walking down the hill, near the place Hadwin talked about.

I like it.

I really do.

Let's keep it up.

Everyone perks up when we hear the sound of flowing water after a few more minutes. Cassian and Dominic instantly start excitedly whispering something, and even Hadwin speeds up his tempo.

After a few more meters, we exit the treeline and see a small stream of water flowing through the forest.

"Finally, we found it!" Cassian screams and rushes ahead of Hadwin.

"Shut up, Cassian!" Hadwin hisses and grabs his hand, pulling him back.
"Remember where we are!"

Unfortunately, Cassian doesn't seem to be taking it seriously.

He smirks and nods, nearly ignoring Hadwin, not aware of the danger he might put us in.

"Hey," I keep my voice soft, almost whispering, and when he turns to me I bury my knee into his belly.

Air escapes his mouth, and there is no cry because of that. Eyes wide open. Face grimacing from the pain. Before he gets back to his senses, I squeeze his neck.

In the corner of my vision, I notice Dominic wanting to charge at me, but Tess steps into his way and points the spear at him.

Silence.

No movement.

"Stay quiet, okay?"

Cassian hesitates for a bit and then opens his mouth to say something, so I squeeze harder. After a few more seconds, he realizes it and just nods quickly.

He gasps for breath when I let go of his neck, and I grab my dagger from the ground.

If he wants to die, sure, go ahead, but I won't let him risk my life by acting stupid.

I nod to Hadwin, and he nods back. While I am keeping watch, he moves closer to the water. From where I am, it seems fairly normal and, hopefully, it's safe to drink.

Hmmm.

Just to be sure, let's have others drink it first after we boil it, and if they are going to be fine after a few hours, I can drink it too.

Ah, the good ol' "human guinea pig" approach, always a classic.

Finally, they are going to do something useful.

Hadwin and the two men quickly start filling the canister, bottles, and a few plastic bags with water while Tess and I keep watch.

When they are almost done, Tess gestures at me and puts a finger to her lips while pointing somewhere between the trees. That makes me squeeze the weapon in my hand.

"Movement," I warn the others, and all three of them let go of the stuff in their hands and grab their weapons. I hear a click from Hadwin's handgun.

Tess gestures at me. She points at herself and then towards the source of movement.

She seems determined as she looks at me, most likely waiting for my approval.

Well, she seems fairly confident, so I just nod.

Both of us go between the trees while I gesture for the others to stay. After a few seconds of walking, Tess stops and stands up. She grabs her spear as if she is about to throw it, and then she does just that.

The spear flies out of her hand surprisingly quickly, and I would swear it changed its trajectory a little bit right after it left her hand.

What the hell?

Did they give her some self-homing magical spear?

I want that.

We hear a short scream, and Tess turns to me with a big smile on her face.

Yes, yes.

Did you level up? Sure seems like it.

What the hell did you kill?

Good job, I guess.

After passing a few more meters, we get to her kill. It's an animal similar to a deer. Its leather is light brown in color, but what's weird are its slightly glowing antlers. They are white and let out a soft glow that's slowly dimming until it stops after a few more seconds.

There's no name glowing over the animal/monster, so it's dead.

Damn. I didn't even get to see its level.

"Deer level two," Tess whispers.

Oh.

"I did level up too. One point in mana and two into constitution."

Oh.

"I used my **[Farsight]** and **[Psychokinesis]** too."

Umm.

"I think we might be able to eat that," she points at the dead deer, and even though her face is back to a calm mask, I can see that cheeky little smile in her eyes.

Great, now she's leveling up, using her fancy skills, AND finding us food?

Isn't she too capable?

I glance at the dead animal, and I could swear I can hear my stomach growling.

Ok, buddy, calm down. Soon!

Food, finally, about time!

I once again look at Tess, and she still has that cheeky look in her eyes.

Better be careful so I won't fall for her.

Yup.

Everyone knows that love goes through the stomach.

Anyway, let's grab the deer quickly. I grab one leg and gesture Tess to grab the other, and we quickly pull it back to the others.

Hadwin is keeping watch while Cassian and Dominic are waiting there, already done with their job.

Water and food.

Man.

What more do you need?

Fewer goblins would be nice, but I can't get too greedy!

"Cassian, grab the deer," I continue using my quiet voice.

"Fuck," he whispers really quietly, but I can hear him.

Well, well, well, if it isn't the consequences of his behavior.

Tess takes the stuff from Cassian, and with Hadwin's help, Cassian hoists the deer onto his shoulders. The deer isn't that big, right?

He groans and bends his knees a little bit. There's a hint of anger in his eyes as he looks toward me.

Great, now use all this energy to carry the deer!

Oh, the joy of seeing Cassian struggle with the deer. I can't help but feel a bit smug watching him squirm under the weight of that animal.

Our way back is fairly uneventful, and when we get back to the clearing, Cassian is covered in sweat and breathing heavily. He drops the deer as soon as he can and then falls on the ground right next to the animal. His chest is moving up and down, and he is breathing with his mouth wide open.

Our "camp" seems fine, and people quickly surround us. They're excited, and I even see some smiles. Once again, I hear the dog barking, and this time I look at him properly.

It's a fairly small, sandy-colored corgi causing a ruckus, barking away as his owner - a woman around 50 - pets him soothingly.

"It's okay, Biscuit. Calm down. Mommy is here."

I can't help but roll my eyes internally.

Dude...

At least there is some wood close to the bus, so I guess they did do something.

Unfortunately, Damon's body is still at the end of the clearing. We will have to do something about it pretty soon, I guess.

"Oh no," the way Hadwin says it makes me grab the dagger, and I enter Focus while mana starts flowing through my body.

I hear a scream.

Tess gasps.

Everyone is looking in one direction.

Towards Damon's lifeless body.

My heart races with fear as I catch sight of the massive, hulking bear standing over him. Its thick, gray fur ripples with each heavy breath, and its piercing orange eyes glow like embers.

[CinderBear, lvi 19]

Chapter 20

No one dares to move, not even a little bit. We just stand there and stare at the bear, just like a deer staring at car lights. Unable to move, unable to run.

We stand there and wait to get hit.

What makes it even worse is the fact that the bear is staring directly at me.

I don't dare to move.

The Cinderbear sniffs in my direction once again and then turns his attention towards the body at his feet, then back at me.

After a few more seconds, the monster growls once.

Vibrations can be felt in my chest, and the few unbroken windows of the bus rumble. Some of them even break. But no one screams.

Total silence.

The monster then lowers his massive head and takes a bite of Damon's stomach. As it pulls, it lifts up Damon's body, so it uses its paw to hold him down.

Then it starts chewing while looking around.

A little bit of blood wets its maw, and then it bites once again, pulling one hand apart from Damon's body.

Crunch, crunch.

It eats slowly while looking around. At us, at the forest. For a second, it pauses and sniffs a few times. Again, towards us and towards the forest.

Another bite.

Crunch, crunch.

We just watch.

We are next, aren't we?

SPLAT

Damon's head bursts open under the force of the bear's bite, creating a messy, wet sound.

The monster licks its teeth, and using both of its paws, it finishes the rest of the body.

A few people start crying as the bear stands up.

But that's just it. Its eyes land on me for a second, and then it turns around and leaves.

A few more seconds.

Then.

Screams, panic, crying.

Everyone rushes back inside the bus. People push each other and scream as they rush in.

I am one of the first inside.

My hand trembles uncontrollably. Each breath I take is ragged and uneven, as if I'm gasping for air in a vacuum. My heart pounds in my chest, a constant reminder of the terror I'm experiencing.

My mind races with thoughts of what could happen next.

Will I survive?

Is this the end?

Every noise, every movement, sends my nerves into overdrive. My senses are on high alert, and I keep mana flowing through my body.

The same feeling of helplessness and vulnerability washes over me like a wave.

I try to calm myself, to steady my shaking hand and regulate my breathing, but it feels impossible.

Fuck.

Fuck!

FUCK!

It takes a few hours before anyone dares to go outside. What a dumbass. Who would leave the bus with such a big fucking monster moving around?

And yup, that dumbass is me.

Tess was able to get to the roof of the bus with my help. Obviously, a few people followed her as it felt like a safer place.

While Tess is keeping watch with her **[Farsight]**, I move around.

Nothing.

It's quiet.

The forest looks normal again. As normal as a forest can be after a few hours ago when the fucking Cinderbear came out of it.

It's strange how quickly things can change - from a source of nightmares to just another stretch of woodland.

But I know that I won't be forgetting what I saw anytime soon.

Even now, I feel scared while not letting it show.

Thankfully, Hadwin quickly joins me, and without saying a word, he fixes the mess I made of the would-be fireplace.

I thought I did a good job, but Hadwin totally demolishes it and starts over

Hey.

I am a city boy, okay?

My closest experience to camping is passing by a grill party in someone's garden.

Still, I watch carefully and try to remember as much as I can.

Hadwin lights the fire using a lighter he got from someone inside the bus, and after a few minutes, there is a crackling fire.

My primitive instincts instantly start lying to me.

You are safe.

Fire equals safety.

Fire good.

What bullshit.

I help him, and we hang the deer against the side of the bus. Its hind legs are tied to the top frame of a broken window.

He is using a knife he got from me. I watch as he deftly slices away the deer's skin, working his way down from its hind legs to the front legs. The skin peels away with surprising ease, revealing the raw meat beneath.

Next, he guts the deer, carefully removing the internal organs and discarding them. The smell hits me, and I scrunch my nose, but I continue to watch and learn.

He works methodically, the knife flashing in the sunlight as he separates the organs from the meat. I can see the blood draining from the deer.

Once the deer is skinned and gutted, he begins to quarter the animal. I watch as he expertly navigates the cuts, making quick work of the process.

As he moves on to trimming the meat, I can see the precision in his movements.

So not a cop but a hunter?

He skillfully slices the meat; after each cut, he carefully sets the pieces of meat aside.

Meanwhile, we were able to boil water in an iron canister we brought back. Cassian and Dominic have already taken a few sips of the still slightly hot water, and I continue to monitor them while waiting for the water to cool down. They seem to be fine for now.

"Are you sure?" Dominic asks as Hadwin cuts the deer meat into smaller pieces. "We don't want that thing to come back after smelling it."

"It's not like we're inconspicuous here. A group of over 20 people is impossible not to notice. But we will use the canister," he nods towards the iron fuel canister we used to boil water in. "It shouldn't let off too much smell, in our current situation, it's our best option."

I guess he doesn't want to scare people inside and deal with them telling him that animals will smell the meat if we cook it over the fire.

He turns back to me.

"They seem to be fine; the water should be safe."

I look at Dominic and Cassian. They really seem okay at the moment.

"How long will it take to cook a deer?"

"One to three hours."

I am hungry, but I'd rather be safe.

"Let's cook it for three hours, and if they are fine when food is done, we can give it a try and drink some."

"Sure, for now, let's also put away some boiled water. We can let them eat a bit when the meat is done and wait a few more hours." Hadwin says.

Great, more waiting.

"Let's do that," I agree in the end.

I look at the duo for a second. They seem to be disturbed by our conversation.

Ungrateful pricks.

We put away a few bottles of boiled water, and the older man throws a lot of the meat into the canister and puts it on the fire. We also place a few pieces of clothing over the opening of the canister in hopes of filtering out the smell. Hopefully, it will help, this and boiling it in water instead of preparing it over the fire.

I also notice that Hadwin's fire isn't smoking that much, just a little bit of pale white smoke.

That's good.

We wait, and as we do, I continue to practice my **[Mana Perception]**, but I can't get fully into it as my eyes keep glancing at the spot where the bear came from. Yet, after three hours, I get at least something.

I feel something from where Tess is.

She is practicing her skills too, so maybe I can feel her using mana? It's as if for a split second, as if I noticed something in the corner of my vision, but when I look there, I see nothing. A feeling like that.

Yet it's something.

I also get the same feeling from Sophie and Hadwin.

Hadwin is keeping watch while watching the fire, and Sophie...

Well, Sophie is talking to other people while keeping her sister close.

It's not that hard to guess what she is doing as my **[Mana Perception]** keeps getting a "feeling" from her.

At the start, I want to go there and stop her. To not allow her to slowly manipulate people to get on her side, but then I decide not to.

Most of the passengers are useless at the moment, and if she manipulates them, we might get at least something out of them.

The same way she manipulated Cassian and Dominic. Now I am sure of it.

But.

Isn't her skill too powerful?

I am sure I can counter it somewhat because of my **[Focus]**, and I have a theory that having higher mana helps too, so I decide to invest all three points into it the next time I level up.

As for now, Sophie is avoiding Tess and Hadwin.

Tess most likely because of me and Hadwin because he's probably at a higher level than her.

Yet I am not naive enough to believe that she won't try to control them if given an opportunity.

Once again, I think about stopping her, maybe even killing her, but quickly change my mind, and my suspicion grows.

To test it I try something.

I think about hurting Cassian, and it's easy to imagine myself fighting him, hurting him. Yet when I try to do the same with Sophie, my mind wanders, and something makes me change my mind while looking for excuses to do so.

...

This can't be good, can it?