

Weapons of Mass Destruction #Chapter 21 - Read

Weapons of Mass Destruction Chapter 21

Chapter 21

I am sure that there are some lingering effects of Sophie's skill. Unfortunately, I am unable to detect them at the moment.

They seem to prevent me from hurting Sophie. They don't seem to affect me when I think about hurting someone else, so in the worst case, I can just blackmail Sophie.

That makes me reaffirm my decision to invest my next stat points into mana. I just don't know what else I can do, and my mind becomes a mess every time I think about it.

Sure, I can go and hurt her sister even now, but then what? Sophie will surely hate me, and I might be unable to fight back properly.

Should I ask Tess or Hadwin to do it?

It could work, but it might end up with her using them, or she may have already done so, and they won't be able to do anything about that.

So even though it deeply disgusts me, I need to give it a bit more time and learn more about how the skill works and what I can do to counter her.

Leveling up **[Mana Perception]** and **[Mana Manipulation]** should help me find what she did to me and counter it somehow. For now, it would be better to avoid her as much as I can.

After a few hours, Cassian and Dominic seem to be fine, so I drink plenty of water.

It smells and tastes slightly like gasoline.

That's another thing Cassian will have to pay for.

I know it's probably hard to wash it out properly, but he could try harder, right?

Still, I drink plenty and get some for Tess. After that, I grab one bottle and save it for later.

Obviously, there are a lot of people screaming and complaining, but I let Hadwin take care of that and move slightly away. No one bothers me, and I just filter out all the screaming and complaining.

With the corner of my vision, I notice a corgi named Biscuit eating small pieces of raw deer meat that fell from its carcass while Hadwin skinned it. The dog is trying to chew it, but the meat seems to be too firm for the small dog to eat, so he just gulps it and runs towards the circle of complaining people while barking.

It looks like we have another tester besides our duo.

After a bit of complaining and worrying, they eat a few pieces of meat, so now we are waiting. If they are fine after a few hours, I will take some too. I am sure that will start another round of complaining, but that's what Hadwin is for!

Yup.

I will shamelessly eat some, save some for later, and disappear into the background.

Yup, again.

Tess will get a lot of it as well since it's her kill, and the rest isn't my problem.

Most likely, Hadwin will share some. It's not like we can put it into the fridge or plan to smoke it, so it's better if they eat it rather than throwing it away.

I take a gulp of water, and Biscuit comes running to me. His owner, the older lady, is still complaining with other people.

Biscuit sniffs and barks softly while poking my leg with his snout. His short tail swings wildly, but the tail is so short it looks more as if he is shaking his butt. Like every corgi, he seems to be smiling cheekily.

Sigh...

I pour some water into the cupped palm of my hand and let him drink it. I repeat this a few times. Biscuit drinks everything and keeps licking my hand to get the last bits of water. Then, for a moment, he waits, and when he sees I am not pouring more, he barks, turns around, and runs back to his owner

while barking at the people surrounding her. He wobbles from side to side as he runs because of his short legs.

We will have to go for water soon enough.

Sigh...

What if that bear is there?

Somehow, dying due to a lack of water doesn't sound that bad of an option.

After a few more hours, everything seems fine, so I eat plenty of meat. Because of our lack of seasoning, it tastes very bland, but it's food, so I eat as much as I think I can without making myself sick.

Tess gets her portion, and she shares some with a few kids.

Then another round of complaining starts.

As I sit by the bus and eat a few more pieces of meat, the corgi comes running to me and starts poking my leg with his snout.

Shameless little bugger.

With a sigh, I feed him a few small pieces of meat, and when he sees he won't get more, he runs back to his owner while barking.

It looks so similar to the last time that I wouldn't be surprised if I were in some kind of time loop.

Tess is still on the roof of the bus, keeping watch, and I keep feeling pulses of mana from her. My **[Mana Perception]** is now easier to use than before, so the pulses are more clear. I am sure she is training her **[Psychokinesis]**.

Relying on her just a little bit, I practice my mana manipulation. Focusing on my legs, I keep sending mana into them. It's much more difficult than with my hands for some reason. Maybe because of the distance from my heart? I need to spend more mana to be able to reach my feet, but I keep pushing it. My intention is to use it to strengthen my legs. Maybe to be able to kick stronger or make me run faster?

To be honest, I don't know. It feels as if I am a monkey and someone put me inside the cabin of a helicopter and told me to fly.

It's annoying and discouraging.

But it's fun.

Every time I learn something, it feels as if it's worth it.

What excites me the most is the new skill I got from the past few hours of practicing. I did completely use up my mana a few times, and I still feel lightheaded, but I feel that it's well worth it.

[Oscillation]

The skill is still only at level one and far from being useful in combat. Right now, I can use it while in deep focus **[Focus]**, and the result is a tiny thread of mana extending from the tip of my finger. I was able to extend it a bit more than before and make it denser, and I was able to make it vibrate while testing. The result is an extremely sharp thread of mana.

During that, I also gained one mana stat point.

In the future, I hope to be able to apply **[Oscillation]** to weapons to make them sharper, but I am still far from that.

I stop my thoughts when Tess stands in front of me.

"The sun hasn't moved at all since we came here."

That's also something I already noticed. We have been here for close to twelve hours, yet the suns are still in the same spot as when we arrived.

"Kevin said that there are some places in Alaska where the sun doesn't set for over two months, so maybe it's something like that?"

Maybe?

"Someone said that two suns so close to each other shouldn't be possible. The second one wouldn't be so bright. Its brightness would be that of a bright star at most. Something about a binary star system."

I shrug.

"Also, I got my **[Psychokinesis]** to level two," she adds, and to prove it, two small stones float over the palm of her hand, spinning around each other.

"Did you try throwing stuff and pushing them with your skills to make them go faster?"

She nods.

"I'm not that proficient yet, and most of the time it's worse than just throwing it, but I will get there."

"What about the others?"

She sighs shortly.

"Most of them are too stressed to even try something. Unsurprisingly, younger people seem to be getting into it a bit easier, but only a few were able to use their skills."

While we talk, her eyes keep moving around, still keeping watch.

"Kevin was able to use his **[Reflection]**. When you throw some small thing at him, he can reflect it back at you, but with much weaker force." The tiniest smile appears on her lips. "He says he can't wait for his Hero class."

Dude...

What's with kids nowadays?

"I have a feeling that someone's trash-talking me!"

Tess sighs quietly and rolls her eyes a bit as a few schoolkids come closer to us. The boy leading them looks at me and smiles brightly.

"You must be the wulf slayer!"

Wulf?

"I expected you to be taller."

"..."

"You smell a bit."

"Kevin!" one of the girls shouts at him.

Is he asking for a beating?

"Anyway, nice to meet you." He reaches out with his hand, but I ignore it and continue sitting on the ground.

The same girl who yelled at him before pushes him back.

"W-we are sorry... Kevin is... weird sometimes," she ignores his outrage. Then she shyly smiles toward me. "We wanted to thank you for..." gesturing around, "for everything, I guess."

Finally, some appreciation.

Praise me more, bring me some offerings; sweets would be nice.

Darn, I would love some chocolate.

And sure, I may have done it all for myself, but they don't have to know.

So I nod.

"At least introduce the others, Kevin." Tess shakes her head and starts pointing at people while introducing them.

Kevin Wilson, 18 years old, brown messy hair, the kid with a weird laugh.

Lily Chen, petite 17-year-old girl, she seems to be shy. Black hair tied in a ponytail.

Kim Min-Jae, 15-year-old boy with big glasses. He is really thin.

"Others are keeping watch." Kevin smiles once again.

He seems to be really bright and optimistic.

I don't like him already and his seemingly endless energy.

My worst enemy, an extrovert.

I already feel as if he is sucking the life out of me.

Is it a skill?

It must be, right?

Tess probably notices my growing annoyance and stops Kevin, who is already talking about the class he would like to get.

Why Necromancer, and why does he think it will be OP?

What happened to the Hero class?

Whatever.

"I wanted to show you something." Once again, he smiles. "Try throwing a stone at me," he challenges me.

So I grab a stone from the ground and throw it at him. I aim between his eyes. That surprises him a bit, but the stone comes close to hitting him and then just deflects, flying back at me. The speed at which it flies back is much slower and even the force seems to be weaker.

A cocky smile appears on his face, and then a second stone hits him right in his forehead.

"Fuuuuc..." he staggers back and starts rubbing his forehead while reproachfully staring at me.

Another stone hits his nether region.

"What the heck!" he screams in pain.

Deflect that, dipshit!

Hahaha.

Look, he deserved that, and I am the last person to deny that I can be really petty sometimes.

"What was that for?" he asks, covering his crotch and looking at me like a sad puppy.

"I would recommend you to practice a bit more."

The skill seems to be fairly useful, but it doesn't matter if the person controlling it is just a clown.

He sighs.

"You sound just like my dad. Practice more, Kevin. Use your brain, Kevin. Why are you so dumb, Kevin," he gestures wildly and looks straight at me. "I will, I will, don't worry."

Something tells me that he isn't taking this whole situation too seriously.

Kim and Lily seem to be fairly scared. It's easy to see from the way they twitch sometimes and keep nervously glancing towards the forest, yet Kevin is... Well, I guess it must be slightly calming for other kids to be around him. It's his life, so you do you, Kevin.

"See ya later," he waves, and the others follow him. Kim nods towards me, and Lily gives me a small smile.

"I will go back to watch," I nod back at Tess as she says so.

"Buuurito, Buuurito, come here, boy," Kevin calls as they walk away from us.

"It's Biscuit. Miss Samantha won't like it if you..." I hear Lily say.

Then they exit my hearing zone, and I get back to practicing.

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In the end, Hadwin decides to smoke the rest of the meat. His reasoning is that the smell of meat wouldn't attract much more attention than a group of more than 20 people.

The bus and the clearing have become our base, and it looks like we can't go anywhere if we want to take the bus with us, as the clearing is surrounded by dense forest that's too thick for the bus to move through.

So we all wait for the end of the **[Side quest]**. During that time, I drink some water, eat some meat, take a short nap on the floor inside the bus, and practice handling my skills and mana.

The sun, or whatever it is in the sky, does not move at all. For a whole 24 hours, not even a little bit. The weather is the same. The clouds look mostly the same. The wind is the same.

There is something deeply disturbing about that.

Then, a few minutes before the completion of the **[Side quest]**, a man stops in front of me.

"Ethan Lee," he introduces himself. He is 10 or so years older than me, and his clothes are as neat as they can be in our situation. I notice a few luxury brands and even his watch seems to be expensive.

"Greetings, Nathaniel, right? I couldn't help but notice your impressive skills. I'll be direct. I'm pretty affluent in the real world. I'm willing to compensate you for your assistance in keeping me safe. Of course, I understand if you have other priorities, but I think you'd be missing out on a valuable opportunity if you passed this up."

Uh?

Okay?

Is he for real?

Just out of curiosity, I ask, "How much?"

"Excuse me?"

"I am asking how much you are going to pay me."

"Oh, I see, straight to the point." He gives me a sly smile and fixes his clothes. "One million dollars," he says, as if it's something amazing.

I give him a moment, but he doesn't say anything else.

Dumbass.

"What do you think will happen when we get back to Earth?"

"You've lost me there..."

One million dollars? What does he think will happen if we get back to Earth? Even right now, someone like Sophie would be worth tens of millions with her skill.

In 5 years?

Just a handful of people could be enough to fuck up entire nations.

One million. That's funny. Really.

"I am not interested." The conversation ends for me at this point, and I don't even listen to what he says. After a minute, he just leaves, and I get back to counting down until the completion of the quest.

[Side quest completed]

Please choose one of the following rewards:

- Flint and Steel Fire Starter**
- Crossbow**
- Short Sword**
- Pouch of Dried Rations**
- Portable Leather Flask**
- Small Hand Shovel**
- Cloak**
- Mace**
- Longbow**
- Light Armor**
- Leather Bracers**
- Chainmail Hauberk**
- Full Plate Armor**
- Shield**
- Spear**
- Dagger**
- Halberd**

- Greataxe
- Greatsword
- Scale Armor
- Padded Armor
- Bedroll
- Clothes
- Waxed Canvas Tarp
- Sling
- Warhammer

...

The list continues and is literally hundreds of items long without any categories, not even in alphabetical order. Just a mess of random stuff.

Obviously, I have to scroll through all of them and see if there is anything more useful than what I wanted.

I go through the entire list, and in the end, it's still either a mace or a spear.

Since the start, I've wanted to pick a weapon, as everything else is useless if I'm not able to defend myself.

The spear might be more versatile and easier to master - I think. It can also be used for hunting or fishing, and for someone who doesn't have experience with weapons, it could be easier to handle than a mace. Another advantage is reach, but that could also be a disadvantage in a dense forest.

The mace, on the other hand, is more fight-focused and less versatile. Also, I would have to get close to the enemy to deal damage. Yet, I like this option a bit more, as I should be able to deal much more damage just by swinging it like a bat, and it should be more durable without needing to sharpen the blade.

So in the end, I pick the mace.

The weapon appears in front of me. No flash, no noise. It just appears on the ground right in front of me. One second there's nothing, and then, even without me blinking, there's a mace on the grass.

I feel goosebumps all over my body.

I even activated my **[Focus]** and **[Mana Perception]**, but I didn't notice a thing.

Sigh.

One more thing I hate about this whole situation.

I bend down and pick up the mace.

The handle is made of sturdy wood. It is smooth to the touch, making it comfortable to grip. The head of the mace is made of iron, with menacing flanges protruding from it. The weight of the iron head feels substantial, making the mace feel heavy in hand.

The entire mace feels balanced, making it maneuverable and easy to wield, even for someone like me who is inexperienced with such weapons.

Hmm, not bad.

I think I like it overall.

I give it a few swings; it will take some time to get used to it, but it's doable.

Okay, let's check if we got a new side quest.

[Floor quest]

Stay alive for 30 days

Rewards:

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

- 5 stat points

[Side quest]

Reach level 10.

Rewards:

- Trait of your choice

Huh? A Trait? What could it be? I didn't notice anything like that before. Is it something new?

Also, what about classes?

Does "unavailable" mean that I don't fit the requirements to get one, or are they just straight up unavailable to me in Hell difficulty or on the 1st floor?

The longer we stay here, the more questions I have.

When I look around, I notice a short bow in Hadwin's hands. This decision surprises me slightly, as it seems like a dumb one.

Then, I see a few other people bringing him stuff.

Short sword.

A shield.

Axe.

Ethan is one of the people giving Hadwin their gear.

Huh? Did he make some deal with all of them? And they agreed? How dumb are they?

Hadwin is more ruthless than I thought.

To be honest I might be disappointed I didn't come up with that by myself.

Tess and Sophie both got a spear. Kevin is already putting on some sort of armor.

So what now?

If things go the way the last 12 hours went, surviving one month doesn't seem that impossible. We already have a source of water, and we should be able to hunt a few more animals.

That's option one.

Option two is going into the forest with the purpose of leveling up.

The second option is much more dangerous, but there is also a chance that something will attack us even when we're not trying to level up. So just sitting here and trying to survive feels naive to me. The safety we're feeling now is super unreliable and feels more like luck than something that is expected.

Soon after, I notice Hadwin and Sophie grouping up. Cassian and Dominic join them, and they slowly enter the forest.

Hadwin even looks towards me, and a small, apologetic smile appears on his lips. Then, they're gone.

Well, there goes the neighborhood watch.

I don't want to sound too cocky but they better be careful, going there without me. If this were a video game, I'd be mashing the quicksave button right now.

Also, did I just get ditched?

...

What the hell Hadwin?!

Did Sophie get him as well, or was it his decision? Does he think he doesn't need me now when he's more geared up? Is his target becoming stronger than me? I don't like it, not even a little bit. And what annoys me probably the most is that I somehow did expect Hadwin to organize everything and then come to ask me. Sure, I did want to rely on him while dealing with other people, but this?

Since when did I become so indecisive and come to rely on others to take a lead?

"Tess," I stop in front of a bunch of kids. "Are you going with me?"

I'm not in a good mood, so if she declines, I'm done with her.

That will be it, and I'll start a solo career as the world's least social adventurer.

Sure, it will become more dangerous, but I can do it. If Sophie and Hadwin become stronger, I'll be at disadvantage.

Tess just nods shortly and stands up.

"I'd like to take Kevin as well; I already gave him my old spear."

Kevin is standing there, wearing armor and holding her old spear. There's excitement visible on his face. It seems like they already talked about it.

"He'll have to listen to me. Did you explain it to him?"

"He will; we did talk about that, right?"

Kevin nods. This time, he seems to be a bit more serious.

We take a little bit of time to get ready.

"Let's go." I lead them towards the opposite side of the clearing where the others disappeared. I put my knife away, and I hold the mace in my right hand as we enter. My left hand is almost fully healed, so I feel confident.

Me at the front, Tess behind me, with Kevin at the last back; his main job this time is to leave marks for us so we won't get lost. At the start, I don't forget to control him a little bit, but he's doing it properly.

As always I am surprised by how normal this forest looks, sounds, and smell as we enter deeper and deeper.

"Right side," Tess whispers after what feels like around 30 minutes of walking.

We all instantly slow down. "It looks like the deer we found last time," she continues, so I nod. "Deer level 3," she adds after a moment.

"You can kill it." I don't have enough range to hunt it, but Tess should be able to kill it from what I saw before, and some experience is good for her. With my **[Mana Perception]** activated, I watch as she throws her new spear. It flies much faster than it should. It also changes its trajectory a little bit as it leaves her hand.

With a scream the deer falls to the ground. Dead.

Nice, get fucked Hadwin.

"Wait," her voice is louder than before.

Rustling.

Stomping.

A tall figure moves away branches of trees and stops in front of the deer; it sniffs the deer and then looks right towards us.

[Troll, lvl 6]

It's a hulking mass of muscle standing 3 to 4 meters tall (*9.8 to 13.1 feet*). Its long arms hang down, easily reaching the ground as it slouches menacingly. Dark, mottled skin stretches tightly over its massive frame, a grotesque display of raw power. Its monstrous face is a horrifying sight, with rows of massive teeth protruding from its twisted, gaping maw.

The troll's eyes, filled with a predatory hunger, staring right at us.

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My first instinct is to run away. The monster is easily more than twice my height, and its arms are abnormally long, reaching the ground. Its legs are a bit shorter, and it's slouching. Its mouth is full of long, sharp-looking teeth.

As I turn around, something makes me stop. Both Kevin and Tess are holding their spears, pointing them in the direction of the monster. Their stances are wide, and they are clearly ready to fight, even when the tips of their weapons are shaking slightly, especially Kevin's.

I clench my teeth.

Since when?

Since when have I become like this?

I squeeze the weapon in my hand.

I kept thinking about running away; I did start relying on Hadwin, and I even waited for him to make the first move and take me with him.

What bullshit.

I hear another roar and stomping behind me.

It's fine if I am realistic and run away from fights I can't win, but why did I stop believing in myself and didn't even think about fighting the monster?

[Focus]

[Mana Manipulation]

[Mana Perception]

I activate all of my skills, and the world loses some of its colors as the mace in my hand creaks.

I am angry.

I am so pissed off, but up until now, I tried to hold it back.

Hadwin?

Piece of shit. I will fuck him up for even thinking about messing with me.

Sophie?

Just wait, there is a lot you have to pay for.

Cinderbear?

Fuck you, you overgrown asshole.

I bury my leg into the soil, and the ground under my feet cracks slightly as I dash right against the attacking monster.

I focus more, and the world loses even more of its colors. Everything other than the troll seems blurry, and the sounds the troll makes sound louder.

Pain hits me as I use both of my hands to grab the mace.

The troll swings its right hand, and without any hesitation, I move to the right, closer to its body and duck under its hand.

More mana.

My muscles complain from stress as I don't even try to save mana and let it wildly flow through my body.

Crunch.

I hit its knee with the mace. Together with a loud crack, a roar escapes its mouth, and saliva flies out of its mouth.

The troll supports its weight by putting its hand on the ground, but I instantly lift the mace high into the air.

Crack.

The mace hits its arm.

Another roar, and the monster's bloodshot eyes look at me.

I duck under its swinging left hand and hit its wounded knee once again.

It lets out a louder roar full of pain.

At the same time, a spear hits the side of its face, but it only scratches him slightly. I grab the falling spear from the air and throw it back where it came from.

Another swing, and I dodge again. Then the monster puts more weight onto its wounded knee and tries to charge me.

The charge is slow, and I carefully move behind the tree. The monster roars at me.

Then another spear hits him. This time on the back of the head. The troll roars and turns around.

Instantly, I move closer and with full power hit its other knee.

My muscles burn. My forearm hurts from aftershocks. The wound I made seems devastating, the mana strengthening my attacks beyond belief.

The troll turns back to me and Tess quietly gets behind the troll.

Kevin helps and stabs the troll a few times. He isn't able to hurt him too much, but it makes the troll try to turn around while supporting his weight with his hands.

Crack.

I hit its unwounded hand as it tries to turn.

It roars full of pain and hate. Then the troll turns back to me again.

It's breathing wildly, drool is flowing from its mouth, and it keeps making biting moves with its mouth.

I hit its hand once again, and Tess and Kevin continue stabbing it from behind.

This time, the troll doesn't turn around and keeps staring at me with the eyes of wild animal pushed into a corner.

Through my **[Mana Perception]**, I feel Tess collecting a large amount of mana. Right after her spear burrows itself deep into the back of the troll's neck, and blood starts flowing out of its mouth.

While trying to put some weight on its legs, the monster wobbles and falls down. It tries to support its weight onto its arms, but it's unable to, and it falls face to the ground.

Waiting for that, I run more mana through my body and quickly step closer and hit the side of its head with as much power as I can muster.

Then again and again.

Blood splashes onto me, and its roar is almost deafening.

One of its arms partially hits me, and it throws me flying away.

I roll to reduce the impact and stand up.

The mace is still in my hand.

Tess grabs Kevin's spear and throws it at the troll with a push of her mana, and this time it burrows deep into its eye.

The monster tries to stand up using its hands, but it's just flailing wildly, unable to do so.

While dodging its arms, I step closer and once again hit the side of its head.

Crack.

Its movements slow down, and the monster spasms a few times before powerlessly falling down.

[You have defeated the Troll Lvl 6]

[Lvl 3 > Lvl 4]

Without thinking, I put all three of my stat points into Mana.

I proceed to pull out both spears and throw them back to Tess and Kevin.

In the process, more blood lands on me: on my hands, my shirt, my face. But I just wipe it off with the palm of my hand, forgetting that it's also full of blood.

"Use your stat points," I tell Kevin.

He nods.

"Already did so," says Tess.

I check the troll from up close, but there doesn't seem to be anything useful worth taking. So, instead of that, we move to the deer.

It's smaller than the one before, and we make Kevin carry it while taking short breaks once in a while.

When we get closer to the clearing, Tess notices something and stops us.

"Two goblins, level two and three, red tattoos," she whispers.

I don't like that at all.

They are too close to our base, and their tattoos are different.

"Level three is mine. You and Kevin take care of the other one," I say.

It's good for them to get as much practice as they can.

Kevin slowly puts his deer on the ground, and then we sneak closer to the goblins. Tess leads us right into their path, and then we crouch behind the trees and bushes and wait for them to walk into us.

Lets see how you like it.

I still remember them doing a similar thing to us while being led by the goblin shaman and that goddamn wolf.

They slow down as they come closer, and I can hear them sniffing.

Without waiting any longer, I rush at them as a surprised scream escapes their mouths.

The level three goblin stabs at me, but I dodge it and hit its head while strengthening my body. Its head explodes like a watermelon hit by a sledgehammer.

Pieces of bone and brain fly everywhere, and its headless body falls to the ground.

Heads up! Oh, wait...

Well, that's one way to blow someone's mind.

Not having anything else to do, I watch as Tess and Kevin fight against the other goblin that is also armed with a spear.

Tess is holding back a little bit and letting Kevin fight the goblin, but every time it tries to charge him, she stabs at its leg.

At some point, Kevin uses his skill, and the goblin's attack bounces off while he pushes closer, and his spear goes through the goblin's chest.

After a while, the green monster dies.

We then grab both spears, and Kevin once again puts the dead deer on his back.

"Ugh, why did I have to end up with Bambi on my back?!" the 18-year-old schoolkid complains, struggling to maintain his balance as he carries the dead deer through the forest. "Seriously, though, can someone remind me why I'm the one doing this? I mean, I'm not even a certified deer-carrying expert!" He continues to grumble playfully, trying to lighten the mood despite his obvious discomfort.

I mostly ignore his rumbling, and Tess is focused on keeping watch.

Her **[Farsight]** has proven itself really useful this time.

As we walk through the forest, I circulate mana through my body. Not a massive amount, just a little bit to get more used to it. I also keep using **[Mana Perception]** once in a while, but the only reaction I am getting is weak pulses of mana from Tess.

In the end, we safely get back to the clearing. Before we enter, I stop them.

"Starting from now, try to avoid Sophie as much as you can. She has some skill that can influence people's feelings or make them feel what she wants."

Sure, I wanted to ignore what she does as she could make other people stand up and do something that isn't hiding inside the bus.. That would also increase my chances of survival.

But now that they kicked me out of their club?

Fuck them.

I want to see them dealing with a bunch of angry people if it gets out.

"Tell others to be careful and don't let her touch you. It makes her skill stronger."

I am sure Tess will be careful, and I have a suspicion that Kevin's skill might counter hers if he levels it up.

[Reflection]

What would happen if he used it while she is trying to influence or manipulate him?

"If Sophie talks to you, try using your skill," I say to the Kevin.

"Who knew being a human mirror could come in handy, huh? So, no worries, my brain is staying off-limits!" He chuckles.

We enter the clearing. As we get closer, we find people once again huddled closer to the bus. There is a bunch of people surrounding someone.

As we get closer, I spot a haggard Hadwin, Sophie, and Dominic.

And Cassian?

He is sitting, his back against the wall while they push a piece of cloth against a terrible wound.

His entire right hand is gone.

Chapter 24

Cassian's breathing is rough. He inhales sharply and quickly exhales as if trying to take in as much air as he can. His pupils are dilated, and he is shaking. Blood keeps flowing out of the terrible wound, and his skin is getting paler by the second.

The one most shocked by all of this is Dominic. The man is trying to squeeze the wound, tie something around it, doing everything he can to stop the bleeding. His hands are shaking almost as much as Cassian himself.

"Damn it, not like this..." he keeps pressing a piece of cloth against the wound. "Someone...do something!" he screams.

The only answer to his pleas is quiet mumbling and then silence.

After a while, Cassian loses consciousness.

"No, no, no, wake up, wake up," Dominic keeps shaking him. "Hadwin, help me for God's sake. Sophie, you too." He turns to them, but his answer is only silence.

No one knows what to do.

"He's like this because he tried to protect you!" The rage is clearly visible on his face as he turns towards Sophie. "So at least, freaking say something!"

No answer, and she quietly averts her face away from him.

"You motherfucking bitch!" he rushes at her but quickly comes to a stop when Hadwin enters his way.

"Dominic, you have to calm down. Acting like this won't help anyone." His voice is soft but firm.

"You... you..." Dominic clenches his fists, and I can almost hear his teeth grinding.

Then he swings his fist at Hadwin.

Unfortunately, it doesn't land.

Hadwin easily dodges it and hits his chest. Even I can see that he is not using his full force, yet Dominic flies back and falls to the ground.

"I'm sorry... but there's nothing any of us can do for him."

"Damn it..." Dominic just covers his eyes and stays lying on the ground.

"Damn it..." he adds again.

So they just stand there, and in a few minutes, Cassian's breathing stops. This time, his friend doesn't say anything, just stares at him. After a while, his gaze turns to Sophie. It's full of resentment. He just asks Hadwin and the others to help him bury his friend in a quiet voice.

But at this point, I'm done listening.

I poke Kevin to make him come back to reality and with his help, I hang the deer by its hind legs in the same place where Hadwin skinned the first one.

I stand there for a second and just stare at the deer while playing with the knife in my hand.

I still remember Hadwin doing it, so I should be able to do it somehow, but damn, I'm not happy about that.

Sigh.

Let's not waste more time.

I am about to make the first cut but then I change my mind and decide to try something else. I use my new skill, **[Oscillation]**, and a sharp, pointy shape of mana comes to existence on top of my finger. Not waiting any longer, I make two cuts - one on the deer's neck to get rid of as much blood as I can, and the other one on its belly from its hind legs towards its front ones.

The mana at the top of my finger isn't as sharp as I would like it to be, so I enter **[Focus]** and activate **[Mana Perception]**. While feeling my own mana and watching its flow, I continue using **[Mana Manipulation]** to create a longer, sharper, and denser thread of mana.

Damn. Did it really take four skills to skin one deer?

I enter a deeper state of **[Focus]** and continue disassembling the deer. In the end, I don't even use the knife and just focus on improving my mana manipulation and getting used to **[Oscillation]** as much as I could.

It is hard to use so many skills at once, and the mana drain is pretty significant to the point where I am thankful I had invested my stat points into the mana stat. When I finally run out of mana, I continue by using the knife.

Unfortunately, I didn't level up any of my skills, but I am sure I improved the way I was handling them. While doing so, I also got a few new ideas, so I hurry up with skinning the deer so I can get to testing them.

I step back when I am done and look at all the harvested meat. It could be worse.

Not bad at all.

"Fuck, that's brutal! Half of Bambi is still on his bones and the ground."

Fuck you too, Kevin.

Oh, and eat shit, Kevin.

"Hadwin did it much cleaner."

Even you, Tess?

"Yeah, I guess we'll call it the 'half-Bambi special.'"

A giant pile of shit, Kevin.

"Hadwin's method was more 'fine dining,' while Nathaniel's," Tess pauses, "is more 'post-apocalyptic buffet.'"

What does that even mean?

Kevin giggles.

"It seems Nathaniel has taken a minimalist approach to skinning that deer."

I interrupt them before they can continue.

"Hey, Kevin?" He turns to me, curiosity visible on his face.

"Yes?"

"Take a few kids and smoke the meat. You saw Hadwin do it, so learn from that. If you fuck it up, I swear you will be eating smoked deer ass until we get out of here."

His pupils expand from surprise.

Reflect that, little twerp.

Then I turn to Tess, who is suspiciously on her way somewhere else, clearly much smarter than Kevin.

"Tess?" My voice is soft and creepy, even to myself.

She stops in the middle of her step and shudders. "Y-yes?" When she turns to me, she is trying to keep her expressionless face.

"You have two hours to get your Psychokinesis to level three."

"Ehm?!"

I leave her like that.

After around an hour, Hadwin comes to me while I am munching on some dried meat from the first deer and drinking some water. He waits until I finish and only then starts talking.

"Hey, I noticed you could use a few pointers when it comes to butchering a deer."

FUCK.

YOU.

Look, it was my first try. I will do much better next time.

Okay?

Okay.

"I wanted to talk with you about what happened." He finally gets to the reason he is talking to me. "We got attacked by a bunch of goblins. This time they had red tattoos, and they had a goblin warrior with them. We didn't have a chance and had to run away."

Interesting.

Why didn't they follow them?

But after looking at him it seems like he wants to keep it to himself.

"We might have to go around to get to water or find another spot for it."

I just sit there and wait. There is no way I am going to make it easier for him. It feels so good.

Go for it.

Ask me what you wanted to ask.

Come onnnnn.

"We should create a bigger group and try it again. We are almost out of water," he says.

Here.

Just like that.

"We found plenty of trash bags, so we can transfer water in them," he continues, then looks at me. "I need your help."

Silence.

I take my time, actually enjoying torturing him like that. I know that he is a proud man, so asking someone less than half of his age for help must be painful.

After one minute, I finally give him my answer.

"I will help, but I want your handgun in exchange."

Chapter 25

"Are you serious?"

"Yes."

"..."

Am I enjoying it too much?

Who knows.

Heheh.

But Hadwin is the one at fault here. Who asked him to pick Mindblender Missy over me?

He sighs.

"Can you even use it? It's not as easy as it looks."

"Yes, yes, no problem."

Just give it to me already; it's not like you have a choice.

His brain is almost smoking as he tries to come up with a way around it. He doesn't like it at all, not even a little bit. But in the end, he sighs and slowly pulls out the weapon, offering it to me.

I shamelessly grab it. It's the first time I'm holding a handgun, and it's heavier than I thought it would be. It has a nice density to it and feels cold to the touch.

"So we have a deal?"

"Yes, we do," I nod in agreement.

Then I use [**Oscillation**] and cut the handgun apart. I make two swipes, and my mana cuts through the iron from the earth as if it's no denser than butter. After ensuring it's destroyed, I throw it into the forest as far as I can while strengthening myself with mana.

Hadwin's face is the funniest mix of shock and anger. He opens and closes his mouth as if he's a goldfish, and I swear I can see a vein popping up on his forehead.

Damn. He might attack me.

Wait.

He might attack me?

Please do so!

You want to hit me, right? Just do it.

If he does, I can mess him up, and later he would have to come back to me again, asking for forgiveness and for me to join him again.

Please, do it!

Just one swing.

Unfortunately, he doesn't do it in the end.

"Why..." he barely manages to say.

"So, in one hour, yes? I will be taking Tess and Kevin; you can pick the others."

I leave without even answering, feeling much better than before our conversation. It's finally gone!

Gun control on Floor 1 is truly excellent.

I feel as if a sword threatening to cut off my head has disappeared. The gun was the weapon I was most worried about. Other than that, I am sure no

weapon any passenger has threatens me, and I am sure no one can beat me in a fight, not even if a few of them group up.

Now I just have to deal with Sophie, and the only danger will be monsters.

I can't even count how many times I shuddered when I heard Hadwin shooting his weapon. Every time, it could be a bullet going to the back of my head, and I wouldn't even be able to do anything about it, not at my current level.

I don't trust the man. He is too suspicious.

As for the gun's usefulness... who cares? My safety is the most important, and I am sure I can survive or run away even without the gun, even if I have to sacrifice a few people to do so.

Cinderbear doesn't count, fuck that guy.

"Tess, one more hour. Then we will go with Hadwin and a few others to bring back some water."

She just looks at me.

Leveling up her skill isn't going well, I guess.

"One hour," I repeat quietly.

Instantly, a small stone flies straight at my head, and I dodge it by tilting my head.

Pfff, try hard...

My **[Mana Perception]** senses a pulse of mana from Tess and then a smaller one behind me. I dodge to the side just in time to avoid the returning stone that lands back in Tess's hand.

At least pick a stone shaped like a boomerang if you want to do stuff like this.

I show her my thumbs up and leave before she has a chance to react.

While walking away, I have a feeling that she's showing her middle finger right at my back. She wouldn't do that, right?

There's no way.

Yet, I do not turn around to check and walk until I get back to Kevin, who is smoking some deer meat. There are three of his friends around him, and it's almost funny seeing them all trying to put together enough brain cells to deal with such a difficult chore.

"Hey, Nathaniel." Lily gives me a shy smile. Next to her is a Korean boy with big glasses, and he just greets me by waving his hand.

"This is Jason," she introduces the blonde boy.

"Sup," he greets me.

"Jason, help me out. Don't slack." Kevin complains and totally ignores me, so the boy just shrugs his shoulders helplessly and goes back to helping Kevin smoke the deer meat.

"Hey Kevin," he slowly turns to me, and I can see that his face is slightly blackened from his attempts to smoke the deer.

Hehe, here we go.

"Oh deer, what a disaster! What happened here?" I say slowly and as emotionlessly as I can.

Shocked silence.

"Total Grilltastrophe!" I try to add some emotions.

"Hey, do not..."

"Such stag-gering incompetence!"

He stands up, "Listen here..."

I don't let him finish and hold my hand up. He pauses and looks at me while frowning.

"In one hour, we will go for some water. Me, Tess, Hadwin, and a few others. So be ready if you want to go."

I leave again. The third time escaping and leaving my opponents utterly defeated behind me.

Oh, and it's not like I spent an hour thinking of puns to say to Kevin.

Not at all.

Reflect that, you little twat.

One hour passes fairly quickly, and we group up. On one side, it's me, Tess, and Kevin; on the other, there's still slightly mad Hadwin, Sophie, a fit-looking dark-skinned woman, and tall man with ginger hair.

The woman is called Maya, and she is quick to tell us that she's a certified personal trainer.

The man is Leon, and he is built like a strongman. His accent is really strong, but I can't determine where he's from.

Hadwin has a bow, a huge knife, and an axe. Leon has a mace similar to mine, and Maya has a spear similar to Tess's.

Sophie is holding a small shield and a short sword.

"Tess will go first, and I will go right behind her."

She glances at me; I can see that she's somewhat nervous, but she agrees in the end.

Hadwin doesn't complain at all, only lifts one of his eyebrows and nods. Kevin ends up to my left, while Leon is to my right. The rest follow closely behind.

We get to the water. We collect the water.

The forest is quiet.

We are on our way back when the forest grows even quieter, and I realize that the wind has stopped.

My breathing becomes ragged, and my body feels tense.

A minute passes.

We walk in total silence.

Two minutes pass.

Our steps and breathing sound so terribly loud.

A few more minutes.

My hand hurts from squeezing my mace's handle so hard.

A few more minutes.

I feel like vomiting.

More time passes.

The air feels so dry. All of us are breathing in loudly. It feels as if there isn't enough oxygen in the air.

Two minutes away from the clearing near the bus, one of the suns disappears.

All of us start running as if we planned it.

A minute or so later, another sun disappears.

Total darkness.

Not even a speck of light.

Someone starts screaming, and then scratching sounds come from all around us.

I recognize goblins growling, and plenty of wolves start howling.

I hear a lot of trolls and some noises I don't even want to know what makes them.

Someone begs for it to stop, and I can hear sobbing.

The cries of animals and monsters become louder and louder.

I hit something and fall down.

Mana is flowing through my veins, but I don't see anything as if someone gouged out my eyes.

I just feel the mana all around me. From the ground, the sky.

I throw up. Such a monstrous amount of mana.

Then there is light.

The black sky is suddenly pierced by a bright light, which unfolds into multicolored bands reminiscent of polar lights. The greens, pinks, and blues move rhythmically, casting a dim glow that transforms the darkness into a scene resembling a muted morning.

Then we hear a bus horn and the screams of goblins and people from the clearing.

Chapter 26

"Izzie!" Sophie screams and runs first towards the bus. We follow behind her, just not as enthusiastically.

The bus horn keeps sounding, and the screams of goblins become louder and louder.

We exit the trees and see other passengers inside the bus. Most of them...

There are two bodies outside, and a few goblins keep stabbing their bodies while screaming. Some of them are even taking a bite out of them.

Then there is another group surrounding the bus. They laugh and growl, still outside as people inside keep poking out with sharpened sticks and weapons they got from the quest.

Sophie staggers onto the clearing.

"N-No..." she stops, seeing around thirty goblins in the clearing. Most of them are level two or three, but some are level five goblin warriors. "Izzy..." she calls quietly, but some of the goblins already turn to her.

A pulse of mana extends to the surrounding from her body, and the goblins that turned to her look confused and turn back to the bus.

Another pulse of mana washes over the entire clearing. Even I feel something telling me to run away. Some goblins even start to leave, but others poke them, growl at them, and they start looking around while sniffing.

In between screaming voices, I hear that of a little girl and Sophie's face is deathly pale.

"Please..." she turns towards us. Another pulse of mana from Sophie, and I stop Tess and Kevin, who are taking a step towards the clearing.

They shake their heads, confused.

Hadwin seems to resist, but Maya and Leon slowly move a step closer and then stop. Even Sophie's skill is not yet strong enough to make them risk their lives.

The girl's eyes then turn to me.

Not to Hadwin.

To me.

"Please, Nathaniel, please..." her voice breaks at the end. Now, I don't feel any mana from her.

Is it doable?

I look at the clearing.

Hmm.

I think it is.

I can do it.

"Use your skill to make a few goblins come here. Around five."

I squeeze my mace and step closer to her.

I see her biting her lips, but she nods. She most likely wants us to rush straight to the bus, but that's too risky.

It's harder to run that way in case something happens.

"Tess, save your mana as much as possible. Only throw your main spear at level 5 goblins and if needed."

Not wasting my mana anymore on **[Mana Perception]** or any other skill, I step a bit back, just far enough into the forest so not all goblins will spot us. Sophie most likely uses her skill as six goblins turn towards us and rush while screeching.

I breathe out.

Four level two and two level three.

I breathe in.

Sophie holds her spear and stabs the first goblin that rushes at us. The monster dodges it slightly and rushes closer to her, where it's hit with Hadwin's axe.

Tess attacks another one with much greater success as her spear stabs its neck.

I step towards the goblin that rushes me to surprise him, and my mace aims for his face, but he is able to lift up his hand to block it. It breaks, and the goblin falls down with a scream.

Another one rushes me while stabbing, and I step back, grab its spear, and pull it to make him lose balance. While he is staggering, my mace smashes his head.

I notice Leon and Maya finishing off the first goblin I attacked.

Another one attacks me from the side while wildly swinging his dagger, and another one tries to hit Tess while she is fighting the first one.

I strengthen my body with mana a little bit and throw my mace, which hits the goblin attacking Tess and distracts him enough so she can turn and defend herself.

I dodge the goblin's knife and pull out mine, stabbing it downwards right into the monster's back.

He screams, and I pull out and stab again, this time into his traps, and then again into its neck. I kick him away, and he dies on the ground.

[You have defeated the Goblin, lvl 3]

Silence.

Every goblin is dead, and I catch my mace that Tess is throwing at me. She nods gratefully.

The green monsters, meanwhile, don't seem too eager to get inside and are more interested in scaring people hiding inside the bus.

Sophie is already bleeding from her nose, and her skin is pale. She is probably using her skill to manipulate goblins.

Maybe she is making them want to tease and scare people before they kill them, so they won't rush them instantly?

Is she making them ignore the screaming of their dying companions?

"I just need a few more minutes... I put more stats into my mana... I can do it..." she breathes heavily while clenching her teeth.

"Your sister doesn't have that long."

Pure desperation is visible on her face as she looks at me.

"Another group." I point at a group of 4 goblins nearby, one of them a level 5 goblin warrior with a dangerous-looking stone axe in its hand.

"I..." she seems so tired, so weak.

"Just do it." There is no pity in my eyes as I look down at her.

She breathes weakly.

"That's all? You're just going to sit there because you feel tired?"

I step closer to her.

"You will stop only because your head hurts a bit?" I give her a cold smile and whisper, so only she can hear, "But it's okay, just lay down and we can watch."

Her eyes become colder and colder with every word I say. More blood starts flowing from her bitten lips, and then she turns towards the clearing.

"You are such a bastard..."

With a groan, she falls to her knees and becomes paler and paler. More blood starts flowing from her nose, down her lips, and drips from her chin onto the front of her shirt.

Then the goblin warrior turns its gaze towards us. He bares his teeth and moves closer, followed by a few more goblins.

"Tess, you take the one on the left. Hadwin, shoot the goblin warrior just a little bit before we start, and then take one. Leon and Maya, the last one is yours. Feel free to run if you want to, but if you do, don't bother coming back."

I step towards the goblin warrior and lower my stance. He does the same.

He is slightly taller than the other goblins while still being slim. The tattoos that cover his skin are in a much darker shade of blue.

He rushes at me, and in the middle of that, an arrow scratches his arm. Another arrow completely misses him, and then the others start fighting their goblins.

Unsurprisingly, even a level 5 goblin is an amateur at best. His swings are faster and carry more force behind them, but they are easy to read now that I've seen their fighting style and taken their unnatural speed and force into consideration.

I dodge the first swing, I dodge the second swing.

He growls, annoyed, and swings again, this time putting more force behind it and losing a bit of balance when he misses. So, I kick his leg, making him stagger even more.

I send just a little bit of mana through my body and swing downwards with my mace.

He moves faster than before and is able to block it with his hand. It doesn't break. There is a wound on it, it's bleeding, but it doesn't break.

He bares his teeth as if smiling, so I take a quick step back, and in doing so, I kick right at his face with the bottom of my feet. I feel a crunch, and his nose breaks.

Another loud roar, and he rushes me again, this time moving faster and using even his hands to move while still holding the axe.

His face is a bloodied mask of rage.

[Focus]

The world becomes quieter, and under the light of polar lights, I focus on the goblin only.

He puts more strength into his left, and I already move to the side by the time he jumps quickly, rushing through the air while letting go of his axe. I feel mana from his hands as he reaches them at me.

But I am not there.

More mana flows through my veins, and the mace's handle creaks in my hands. As he passes in the air next to me, I wait until he misses me with his hands, and then my mace lands with its full power right on the goblin's back.

Crack.

The green monster lands and tries to turn to me but instantly falls, losing all power in its legs. He roars and growls, but his legs do not move at all.

With a hateful look in his eyes, he starts crawling towards me with surprising speed, but I leap a few steps back to the place where he jumped from.

Before he gets to me, I hold his axe in my hand and throw it at him, using some mana. He covers his face, and the axe just wounds him a little bit.

What a terrible throw.

But when he stops covering his face, I am already in front of him, and my mace hits his head with full power. His hands desperately trying to cover it don't help at all.

Crack.

Crack.

Splat.

He finally stops moving.

[You have defeated the Goblin Warrior, lvl 5]

[Lvl 4 > Lvl 5]

I instantly put all three stat points into Mana, making it my highest stat.

[Name: Nathaniel Gwyn]

Difficulty: Hell Floor: 1 Time left until forced return: 4y 363d 18h 9m 59s

Lvl 5

Strength: 7

Dexterity: 9

Constitution: 10

Mana: 11

[Primary Class: Unavailable]

[Sub-class: Unavailable]

Skills:

- Focus Lvl 3**
- Mana manipulation Lvl 3**
- Mana Perception Lvl 2**
- Oscillation Lvl 1**

[Skill Points: 0]

[Stat Points: 0]

Chapter 27

I get back to the others just in time to see Sophie collapsing to the ground.

"I... I can't anymore..." her voice cuts off, and the goblins that had been ignoring us up until now start looking around confusedly, most likely wondering where their friends went.

I stare at Sophie for a moment, but it looks like that's all I can get from her.

"Hey..." my voice spreads through the clearing, louder than it should be and distorted, but recognizable as mine. All thanks to the mana I send to my throat and vocal cords.

"You have 10 seconds; if you stay inside and don't attack the goblins after the time passes, we will leave." My voice is cold, and I mean every word I say.

"You can't..." Sophie barely gets out while supporting her body with her arm to look up at me.

But she doesn't use her skill on me.

She knows that would be it, and I would just leave her sister and others if I sensed even a hint of her mana trying to manipulate me.

This time, I will decide on my own, and if I put myself in danger, it's only because I am sure I can survive it and gain something out of it.

The goblins slowly screech and sniff and slowly turn towards the source of my voice.

Even if they rush us now, I am sure I can run away pretty easily.

If they don't attack them, I will leave. I won't risk my life just for them to sit on their asses.

"Five..." my voice spreads through the clearing, and goblins start slowly moving towards us, ignoring the bus and its passengers.

"Four."

Two goblin warriors poke and push a few goblins, making them more aggressive.

"Three."

One of the goblin warriors is level 6, and he holds a dagger in each of his hands; the other one is level 5 and holds a spear.

“Two.”

Their backs are turned to the bus, and they are halfway to us, leaving two half-eaten bodies behind them.

“One.”

My voice is louder and sounds more like me as I keep improving my usage of mana.

[Mana Manipulation Lvl 3 > Mana Manipulation Lvl 4]

The doors of the bus open, and an older man, the bus driver, I think Jacob, is his name—rushes out, waving an axe in his hand. His voice is weak and shaky, but he is attacking. Right behind him, a few more people attack, and some of the goblins turn around to deal with them.

For a second, the thought of running away goes through my mind. As they distract the goblins, we would get at least a few more minutes to run without pursuers.

But shouldn't you run only if you are sure you can't win?

I step towards the attacking goblins and enter **[Focus]**. All useless noises become filtered out, and some colors lose their vibrancy, yet some become that much more vibrant—the color of blood, polar lights on an inky dark sky.

“Sophie, make the goblin warriors focus on me.”

I saw them fighting; none of them can deal with them, especially if they attack together with other goblins.

“Tess, you will stay here and support others with ranged attacks. Use spears from dead goblins.”

They are already so close.

“Kevin, you will be on the front line with Leon and Hadwin, and Maya will support you.”

I am surprisingly calm.

Around twelve goblins are rushing at us, and I see around five of them fighting with other passengers. Goblin warriors stay slightly in the back, and I dash towards them while strengthening my body, right through a group of level 2 and 3 goblins.

I swing.

A head explodes like a watermelon.

[You have defeated the Goblin, lvl 3]

Another swing.

[You have defeated the Goblin lvl 2]

Multiple goblins attack me, but I put more force into my legs and jump right over them while still running.

There are two goblins slightly behind and surprised to see me.

[You have defeated the Goblin lvl 2]

[You have defeated the Goblin lvl 2]

Then I stand up in front of two goblin warriors. I feel a pulse of Sophie's mana from behind me, and other goblins rush at them instead of turning back.

There are only six of them, so good luck.

Mana rages through my body, and I enter deeper and deeper **[Focus]**.

[Focus Lvl 3 > Focus Lvl 4]

Breathe out.

The world becomes quieter, and I see only two opponents in front of me.

Breathe in.

I bounce on the balls of my feet and roll my shoulders back, a series of satisfying pops echoing.

Mana flares out, and I stomp my feet, feeling the earth respond beneath me.

The level six goblin dashes, and in a split second, reaches me with both of his daggers stabbing towards me. There is blood visible on his teeth.

Before he reaches me, I also dash towards him and swing my mace as if it's a bat. At the last moment, he pulls his daggers back and blocks my attack, which sends him staggering backward.

I step back, almost breaking my ankles from the pressure I put on them, and a spear stabs through the place where my head was. I already hold my mace in my right hand only and grab a dagger with my left even before I start dodging the attack.

I send more mana through my body and feel the muscles in my left shoulder and waist tearing from the speed of the movement as I turn my body and stab the dagger right into the goblin's left eye.

He tries to dodge but is unable to stop the inertia from his stab with a spear.

Then I jump to the side to keep the goblin warrior with the spear between me and level six. Just in time, two daggers stab the body of the dying goblin.

Both of them growl, one of them from pain, the other one annoyed.

Before he pulls his daggers out, I swing my mace at his head while holding it only in my right hand. He ducks and pulls his daggers out, so I quickly twist my body and kick his face, probably cracking my shin from the pain I am feeling.

The goblin is able to leave a cut mark on my leg as he flies backward.

Before he gets a chance to fight back, I put more strength into my legs and dash at him, while in my mind I scream from pain.

My mace hits his hand, and one dagger falls down.

He dashes at me, and I kick the bottom of his chin in exchange for a long cut on my left hand that already has torn muscles.

The goblin wobbles a little bit from the kick, and a spear comes flying out of nowhere and stabs right through his right hand.

Nice one, Tess.

The last dagger falls down, and I kick against him as he dashes at me with the spear still stuck in his hand. He falls down, and I swing my mace downwards while using enough mana to make my muscles hurt.

His face deforms under the mace.

One more hit to the same place.

His leg keeps twitching, and foam forms around his mouth.

The last hit.

[You have defeated the Goblin Warrior, lvl 6]

I turn around, take a few steps, and hit the conscious goblin on his head.

Once.

Twice.

[You have defeated the Goblin Warrior, lvl 5]

[Lvl 5 > Lvl 6]

I put all stat points into mana and turn towards the bus.

Just a few more.

Chapter 28

When I reach the bus, only three goblins are alive.

I hit the head of the goblin that is fighting with Jacob first. He is the bravest one of the bunch, so I don't mind helping him first.

The goblin's head dents, and he falls down, twitching and screeching, so I step on his neck, and something cracks.

[You have defeated the Goblin, lvl 3]

Another goblin is about to attack an older lady when a corgi attacks him and starts biting his leg.

Good boy, Biscuit!

I see that the goblin is about to kick the brave dog, so I dash and hit the goblin's head. This time, I use mana, and his head explodes.

Hmm, am I not getting too predictable?

Anyway.

[You have defeated the Goblin, lvl 2]

After that, I finish off the goblin that is kept at bay by Lily and a few kids who keep poking their spears and sticks at him so he can't get closer.

[You have defeated the Goblin, lvl 2]

That went pretty well, all things considered.

Jacob and a few people look severely wounded, but the only corpses are the ones I saw at the start. A few people are still inside the bus, so I make sure to remember their faces.

On the other side of the clearing, everything seems to have gone well.

Tess is not wounded, Kevin's armor is dented, and Hadwin also seems fine. Sophie, on the other hand, appears unconscious, and I would swear that Leon is missing one or two fingers.

I check my status and don't find anything new, so I look up at the sky once again.

The sky is inky dark with no stars at all. The only sources of light are the bright green, blue, and pink lights that swirl slowly in the sky, reminding me of polar lights, just much bigger and brighter.

I find it really beautiful.

Colors, movement, all are mesmerizing and provide enough light for us to see. The light is at the level of a dim morning, but it's much better than the pitch-dark darkness we went through just a few minutes ago.

But.

WHAT THE HECK?

How do you even get rid of two suns?

Anyway, it's almost certain that the suns we saw were fake, yet I can't even begin to imagine what is actually going on.

A fake sky and some kind of projection?

I guess it could be. We just started to learn to use mana, and from looking at all kinds of skills, mana seems fairly versatile.

"Nathaniel..." Tess comes closer.

Darn, I didn't even notice that I started spacing out while thinking about all of that.

"I'm out of cigarettes."

Well, that must suck.

But what a weird thing to say at a moment like this. Just say what you wanted to say.

She slowly breathes in, a hint of emotion visible on her face.

"Jason and Miss Miranda died. Leon lost one finger, and there are many wounded people..."

I see.

So?

I didn't know them at all so there is no way I am going to mourn their death. She should know that.

Tess pauses for a long moment and looks at me as if trying to read my mind. She shifts slightly on her feet.

"Never mind, I'll keep watch..."

Nice!

Now, let's talk with Sophie.

She is already back and inside the bus, her sister next to her. She's already awake but still looking really tired. There's a lot of dried blood on her lips, chin, and under her nose and her sister keeps crying while Sophie caresses her hair.

A few people step away as I walk in and stop in front of her.

"Let's talk."

Sophie hesitates for a moment but then slowly stands up, "Wait here for me Izzy." her voice is soft as she whispers to her little sister.

We walk outside, just far enough away so other people won't be able to hear and then we start talking.

"Name of your skill?"

"Manipulation," she answers instantly.

"Your level and level of skill?"

"I am level 3, and the skill is also level 3."

"Your second skill?"

"Mana Infusion."

Huh, what a weird name.

"Explain."

And she does so. It looks like her manipulation is what I thought it was. She can manipulate the emotions of other people, monsters, and animals. She can make emotions stronger or weaker, and if she spends enough mana or gets to touch her target, she can instill a feeling that the person didn't initially have.

Her other skill allows her to infuse mana into living beings and objects. She doesn't know what it does for now, other than wasting her mana. It could strengthen some items or share her mana with others, maybe?

What's most interesting is that she started on the 1st floor with her manipulation at level 2 and her mana with 3 stat points.

What the heck?

Even the system is playing favorites?

I did get **[Focus]**, which only allows me to... well, focus.

...

Damn.

I want **[Manipulation]** or **[Psychokinesis]** too. Even **[Reflection]** seems to be cool as heck.

Anyway, the system is clearly playing favorites.

In the end, I also want to ask Sophie what she did to me so I can't even think about killing her, but I decide against it. During our whole conversation, I came to the conclusion that she doesn't even know about that, so it might be better not to let her know that I can't do much against her.

Before I leave, I get a promise from her that she won't try to manipulate me or people around me.

My kids, my underlings, my minions.

My meatsmokers, my biological binoculars.

Obviously, I don't believe her that much, but it should at least make her think twice, especially now when I can feel her using mana.

And that's it.

That's what I get for saving her sister, and we are now back to a cold war.

Chapter 29

Much later, all of us are either inside the bus sleeping or gathered around the fairly large campfire we set up, as it's not only darker now but also colder. It's not too cold, but it's noticeable.

We've dragged all the dead goblins to the edge of the forest, perhaps in hopes that Cinderbear will eat them and leave us alone in case he comes back. We've also fortified our position somewhat.

To be honest, it's pretty makeshift, but I guess it's better than nothing. There are sharp sticks planted in the ground, pointing towards the forest. Some of them are quite long, while others are really short, possibly intended for goblins to step on.

We've also slightly upgraded the bus with pieces of wood that replace some windows and reinforce the entrance. It's rather unsightly and took a long time to complete.

A few small groups of goblins came while we were working, but they were relatively easy to deal with. They consisted of only two to four goblins, all of them level two or three.

So now, we just sit here. The fire crackles pleasantly, and the warmth feels nice on our skin. Oddly, the flames are redder than they should be – just another strange occurrence. At this point, I wouldn't even be surprised if the flames shone like a rainbow.

I'm sitting on the ground, and nestled between my legs is a small corgi. Well, it's not that small, to be honest, and it's quite heavy.

I swear it's bigger than before.

Surprisingly, this little doggo has taken a liking to me after I fed it a few times and saved it from a goblin.

Time to pay!

I boop its snout, and corgi woofs in its sleep, mostly ignoring me.

Now that I look at it up close, he really does resemble a burrito. Maybe Kevin isn't that far off at this point.

As for the corgi's owner? Well, she isn't happy about it, but she doesn't say anything – at least not to my face, obviously. I'm sure she isn't so quiet behind my back.

But, darn it, Biscuit. You're heartless.

Good boy!

What did she do to you? Did she try to turn you into a vegan or something?

I boop his snout once more; it's cold and the doggo only scrunches its face this time.

Tess is keeping watch again, along with Sophie and her sister. All three sit on the roof of the bus, while a few more people keep watch from inside. We didn't ask them to; they're just that worried.

It's easy to notice how close everyone is to each other, as if seeking safety and warmth from the people around them.

Perhaps a bit too close? A little closer and Kevin will end up sitting on my lap – well, on Biscuit and then on my lap. I'm sure the bravest doggo of the 1st floor of Hell difficulty wouldn't take that lying down.

On my other side is Lily. Like many people, she also leveled up and used her stat points. It seems that the experience requirements to level up from level 0 to level 1 are incredibly low. People were able to level up even after only poking a goblin once with a stick.

Oh, and one more thing. I've noticed that my emotions are somewhat subdued. The reason is most likely **[Focus]**. I finally realized that I'm maintaining a lower version of the skill almost constantly and only enter a deeper state when I want to. Has it almost become a passive skill?

It's hard to explain, and I'll need to experiment a lot more to fully understand it, but some of my emotions, such as fear, anxiety, and desperation, are still present – just much weaker than they should be. **[Focus]** is, well, allowing me to focus on my survival, and either I'm doing it on my own and unconsciously or it's part of the skill.

That would explain a lot.

Sure, I'm a phlegmatic person, but even in situations like this?

Absolutely not.

So yeah, thanks, Mr. Focus!

I should be more concerned about having some of my emotions nearly erased, but if it's for survival, I really don't mind losing a few. As for what will happen to me after I level up **[Focus]**

even more? That's a problem for tomorrow's me!

Okay?

Okay.

Thank you for your service, future Nathaniel.

I continue to use my skills and listen to the conversation of people around the campfire.

"...noticed it even before we got there. There were some disappearances of people all around the world. I heard that an entire class of kids disappeared in Japan a few weeks ago and another day, a plane full of passengers."

Oh?

"I heard it too from my mom. Her friend said some people on the beach disappeared. She saw it with her own eyes. One moment they were there and then they just vanished."

Huh, am I the only one who didn't notice anything? Well, who watches the news nowadays, right? And it's not like I need a friend to hear such stuff from them. Yup, I'm not the odd one here.

"I thought it was just a bunch of nonsense. They didn't even show it on the news. Just a few clickbait titles on websites..."

"So do you think we're not the only ones on the first floor? There might be some people who came here before us?"

"Maybe? You saw the rewards, right? One of them is Community, so maybe we'll be able to talk to others?"

"Maybe we can create guilds!"

Silence, then they continue, completely ignoring the boy.

"There might be other difficulties other than Hell. If so, why did we end up here?" Hadwin looks around, and no one can answer, "Also, what will happen after we get back to Earth?"

Not after, Hadwin, IF. I don't want to be mean, but it doesn't look like most of us will make it.

"Can you imagine the mess it will create if a bunch of superhumans appear out of nowhere?"

Who cares?

That's tomorrow's Nathaniel problem!

Maybe not even his, that's the government's problem!

Finally they will do something useful with my taxes.

"And we just started; look at how strong we are after just a little over one day," Hadwin says.

A few eyes turn to me.

Darn, stop, I'll blush.

But during Hadwin's entire speech, I notice that he isn't too unhappy. It's hard to catch, but I swear I hear a hint of satisfaction and relief in his voice.

"How many floors do you think are here, Mr. Hadwin?" Lily asks quietly, and a few heads turn to the older man.

"I want to know that too. Also, do we have to move to another floor, or can we spend the entire 5 years on the first floor? That's something we'll have to think about. Other floors might be much more difficult, so staying here might be a good idea."

A few people nod. They continue theorizing, but most of the time they don't say anything interesting, so I just filter it out. After some time, they begin talking about what everyone likes to talk about – themselves.

"I'm pretty well-off back on Earth, and I know some powerful people, so if we get back, I can arrange something for us. Imagine how much we can get paid with skills like this."

Oh come on, shut up, Ethan.

"What if we won't be able to use our skills after we get back to Earth? What if all of this disappears?"

Huh?

Good one, Kevin. It doesn't sound too impossible.

The group around the crackling fireplace quiets down, everyone deep in their thoughts.

I look up at the beautiful lights in the sky. What would I do? I don't like the thought of losing mana.

To be honest, I hate it.

I let it flow through my body, pushing it, making it circulate faster and slower as I wish. Wisps of mana appear on the tips of my fingers, like smoke, but then they become denser, sharper, and longer when I want them to.

That's another problem for tomorrow's me.

But I have a suspicion that tomorrow's me would prefer staying over returning to Earth without mana.

Chapter 30

Fantastic. The phony "suns" have returned to grace us with their presence.

That's a really weird sentence to say.

They just appeared out of nowhere and totally blinded us after a day in darkness, brightened only by beautiful polar lights.

The sky looks exactly like the sky we saw the moment we entered the first floor of this godforsaken Hell difficulty something.

Before that happened, we had to deal with one more attack of 15 or so goblins led by a goblin shaman. The level 5 jerk died like he was throwing. That's what Kevin said, not me.

The goblin shaman got sniped by Tess even before he was able to do anything. He just entered the clearing and an unnaturally fast-flying spear, or should I call it a homing missile at this point, went straight through his chest and pinned him to the ground.

Look, I love my **[Focus]**, I really do, but what the heck!

Whose ass do I have to kiss to get it as well?

I see that Tess is trying not to act smug about it, but it's making it even worse.

As a consolation prize, I was able to level up my **[Oscillation]** to level two. It sure is hard to level up. Most likely because of how OP it is, right?

RIGHT?

So anyway, during the fight, I caught a few goblins alive.

Well, I broke their legs and hands, so they couldn't do anything.

I totally don't understand why that made some people slightly sick and look at me like that. I did it for them! So they could stab defenseless monsters with their spears to get some experience. It's not like I can gain much from level two creatures anymore.

They should praise me, not look at me like that.

Also, give me some chocolate.

Damn, I would kill for some sweets right now.

I was able to obtain a candy drop from Lily - she had saved one for later but was nice enough to give it to me.

In exchange, I gave her two bloodied level three goblins to finish up.

YES, I know, I know.

The candy is much more valuable and harder to come by than these green jerks.

But I'll pay more, no worries.

Lily didn't seem to like it as much as I hoped, but that's something to be expected. She seems too nice for a place like this.

Another thing is Biscuit.

The little doggo isn't that little anymore. He has grown a bit. His proportions are mostly the same, but he is noticeably bigger. Maybe around 10 to 20% bigger? It might be the monster meat he ate, or maybe the little doggo is leveling up.

I swear, if he also gets an OP skill, I will be so angry.

He's also becoming smarter every day. He already knows when I'm going to eat and sniffs around with big sad eyes that become super cheeky the moment I give him some food.

Shameless little bugger.

We were able to get some water once more, and Hadwin hunted a boar on his own and brought it back. The animal must have weighed twice as much as him, but he brought it back alone.

In comparison to the first day or so, this seems too easy.

This thing is called Hell difficulty, you know.

It's not like I'm complaining that we're not getting eaten.

It just feels like the calm before the storm, so I stock up. I put away plenty of food and a few bottles of boiled water, put all of this inside my gym bag, and place it somewhere easy to reach so I can grab it and run if needed.

I notice a few other people are doing the same.

It's still difficult; we have to fight, hunt our food, fight for water, but... this is Hell difficulty.

There are such monsters as the Cinderbear, and seriously, fuck that guy.

Obviously, there is some infighting. Dominic still hates Sophie and Hadwin as well because the older man is defending her.

Oh, and one more person died from wounds she got during the fights against thirty goblins. Lily told me with red eyes that her name was Ava, and it looks like she was fairly nice to the kids, so the girl seems to be sad about that.

As for me, I'm surprised that more people didn't die and that more and more of them are asking us to bring them with us when we go hunting or for water.

Once again, Kevin kept trashing them behind their backs, calling them leeches and saying he won't be power leveling them, something about the bus and grinding.

As most of the time, I ignore him.

Even now, I have a suspicion that he has some life-drain skill.

Every time he starts talking so excitedly, I feel as if he is sucking energy out of me.

It has to be a skill.

Tess always steps in and stops Kevin from talking. It's nice to have someone to deal with people like him.

I'm not ungrateful, so I teach her in my free time, and she was able to obtain **[Mana Manipulation]** as well and is now teaching it to others. It's interesting to watch as her version of the skill is slightly different from mine. How to say it... it seems like she is relying on the skill itself more than myself? In my case, I'm trying to "feel" it on my own a bit more instead of just activating it through the system.

Anyway, it's nice to have another test subject, and to make Kevin a bit more useful, I make him train his **[Reflection]** while I watch him with my **[Mana Perception]**.

His skill seems to be amazing for defense, so I'm trying to copy it. I keep watching the movement of his mana while he uses it. There are no results after hours of trying, but I'm sure I will come up with something if given enough time.

Everyone is practicing as if their lives depend on it. They're swinging, stabbing their weapons, practicing their skills, and complaining.

A lot of complaining.

I wouldn't believe how entitled some people are, looking at me like I kicked their favorite kid every time I take more meat than they get.

But it's not such a problem, as I have an easy solution for that.

Yup, it's Hadwin.

We're not hunting together anymore, obviously, but I still let him deal with social stuff. He seems to hate it too, so that's a bonus.

It's not that easy to see, but I keep noticing his slow, annoyed blinking and veins on his neck every time he clenches his teeth.

I love it.

Screw you, Hadwin.

Now I'm going to hunt monsters or animals together with Tess and Kevin; sometimes, we also take some of the kids. Tess always makes sure that they know they might end up risking their lives, so that's it.

Sometimes they get hurt-a scratch here, a stab wound there-but Tess and Kevin make sure to cover for them. Especially Tess.

God damn.

She now walks around with like five spears somehow tied to her back, and she throws them while using her **[Psychokinesis]**. I'm sure at some point, she leveled up her skill, as they became much faster and more accurate. Combined with her **[Farsight]**, it makes an amazing combination.

As for Kevin, he became a pretty reliable tank. His second skill, **[Combustion]**, also helps. It allows him to cause objects or substances to ignite or even create controlled explosions.

Once again.

I'm not jealous, okay?

Okay.

Also, I will have to find some really annoying work for Kevin.

Spoiled kids. Back in my days...

A few more days pass like this, and one more person dies; this time, it's Dominic.

For some time, he kept getting angrier and angrier, and the stares he gave to Sophie and Hadwin were anything but friendly.

Then, he disappeared.

No one saw anything.

No one knows anything.

But I have my own suspicions about what happened to the man.

Lily cried a little.

Sweet girl crying for a man she barely knew who died. The knowledge that he had passed away in a strange and distant land, so far from everyone he knew, only amplified her sorrow.