

Hell Difficulty Tutorial

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, lvl 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?