

Hell Difficulty Tutorial

#Chapter 21 - Read Hell Difficulty Tutorial 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.

Chapter 22

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.

Chapter 23

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.