

HELL DIFFICULTY TUTORIAL

Chapter 7

Outside, we find the annoyed girl leaning against the bus. She is clearly keeping watch, looking towards the place where the wolf came from.

It's a good idea.

She is around my height, slim, and has an athletic figure. The most striking thing about her is her deep green eyes, which are even more noticeable against her tanned skin and brown hair.

"I want to join you," she says without holding back. Her voice shakes almost unnoticeably as she says so, yet she seems determined.

"I also want to level up. I need to level up."

Oh?

Did they have a group talk inside the bus while I was thinking outside?

They seem fairly used to the idea of leveling up.

"I need to become stronger as soon as possible. Wolves usually don't move alone, and... we don't know what else is here. I swear I won't slow you down."

Everyone should be level 0, with only me and Hadwin being higher level so she also might be worried to lag behind us. Or does she just want to protect the little girl next to her?

Did Hadwin share the results with others? Did he put all three points into strength and test it out while they were watching?

How much of a difference would three points make?

"I don't think we have to worry about that," says Hadwin, to my surprise. He continues, "The wolf from before did look starved and wounded, and he didn't even try to call for other wolves before attacking us." He looks at us. "So it's either the last surviving wolf from the pack or they chased him away from it."

I like the sound of that.

I really do but...

"I think we should expect the worst option," I say as their eyes turn toward me. I shrug my shoulders and don't say more.

"I partly agree with you," Hadwin says carefully, caressing his short beard as he speaks. "But we shouldn't let it scare us too much. Doing nothing because we are too worried could cost us."

I'm slightly disappointed. He seems too confident.

Whatever. If it seems like he's too careless, I can leave them.

"Hadwin," as he reaches his hand, the brown-haired girl grabs it. "I have to warn you. It will be really dangerous out there."

She just nods and shakes his hand.

"Sophie."

"Damon."

"Nathaniel," I add, and for a second, our eyes meet.

"I know," she says very quietly.

Hadwin and Damon probably didn't hear it, but I could because she is standing a little bit closer to me.

I try to think about it, but I can't remember her at all.

Maybe I met her at the gym? She seems fairly athletic and there aren't that many places where she could meet me.

I look at the girl next to her who stayed quiet up until now. She looks similar to Sophie. She isn't as tanned but her hair is the same and her eyes have a slightly lighter shade of green. She is around 10 years old, but it's hard for me to tell.

She is also shyly half-hiding behind Sophie, but she is peeking with big and wide-open eyes.

That can be a problem.

"I hope you don't plan to take a kid with you." As expected, Damon sounds as annoying as he looks.

It's not like I don't agree with him.

Quite the opposite.

There is no way we are going to take a little kid with us.

Damon just sounds... super punchable.

"I am not..." It's clear that Sophie wants to go with us, but at the same time, where should she leave the little kid? With whom?

The girl slightly pulls the shirt of a distressed Sophie, and she turns to her with a smile on her face. To me, it looks fake but I guess it's good enough to trick a little girl.

"Don't worry, Izzie." She gently caresses her head, and there is a lot of gentleness and love in her action.

However hard this might be, I am glad I ended up here alone.

"How about you leave her with Jacob? He seems like a good guy," Hadwin finally says. "She will be safer with others." He pauses. "You can stay too... with your..."

"Sister..." Sophie says slowly.

"Sister." Hadwin kneels in front of the girl, and a big soft smile appears on his face. "God knows I would do the same."

The little girl proceeds to avoid his gaze and looks back up at Sophie.

I think it's already taking too long.

She is most likely scared of being left behind, and probably not trusting us that much too.

Who knows what would happen if we come back much stronger?

For now, it looks like nothing much has changed, but the moment some of us obtain strength way beyond others, things will become... difficult.

"You should come," I say as she turns towards me with a surprised look on her face. Her sister starts peeking again. "We most likely won't go too far at first. Not far enough to not hear if something happens."

It's obvious that she already decided to go with us, so why is she struggling that much? Just trust your own decisions and then take responsibility if something happens.

"One or two hours should be enough to scan our closest surroundings. After that, we will come back with some wood which we can use for weapons and fire," I suggest. "If

something happens they can use the bus horn and we can rush back as quickly as possible."

After a little while, she finally accepts the plan and disappears inside the bus with her sister. I can see her talking to the bus guy, Jacob, apparently. Her sister starts crying.

"For fuck's sake," Damon complains.

When Sophie comes back, we finally start walking toward the forest. Not coincidentally, we walk on the opposite side of where the wolf came from. Everyone stops talking as we come closer to the trees, and the atmosphere instantly changes. It's as if the closer we get to the trees, the more nervous everyone becomes.

Interestingly enough, the trees seem normal. I don't know what I expected. Shining leaves? Faces on trunks? Whispers in the wind?

Tree branches wave slightly in the wind, as the suns shine through the crowns of the trees.

It looks like a normal forest...

Chapter 8

I keep my guard up as we enter the forest. I squeeze the iron pipe in my hand. For a start, let's not touch anything. Who knows if it's poisonous?

Hadwin enters first, closely followed by us. His iron pipe is behind his belt, and there is the gun in his hands. I am not an expert, but the way he holds it seems like someone used to weapons.

Maybe he really is a policeman. Judging from the way he talks and acts, I wouldn't be surprised.

"Focus and listen to our surroundings," he says as he slowly walks between the trees. "Nathaniel, you will take my left, Damon you focus on your right, and Sophie you will have our back."

I slightly change my position. Obviously, I don't focus only on the left, but I give it a bit more focus than other directions. Don't forget to check the tops of the trees as well.

"Talk only in a whisper, and if you hear flowing water, see wet places, puddles, or anything suspicious, let us know."

We slowly continue. It's almost funny. A bunch of adults led by a crazy man armed with a handgun sneaking through a normal-looking forest.

Fortunately, the forest isn't too dense, so we move without a problem.

Thirty minutes later, I can hear Damon silently cursing under his breath. Something about the mother and the forest?

"Motherfucking alien forest," I hear. Oh. That makes much more sense.

I don't blame him. Every one of us twitches every time we hear the slightest noise. After a while, it's really tiring. We continue as Hadwin leads us in a circle around the clearing with a bus. The clearing is on our right side, and we didn't walk too deep inside the forest.

I also noted that Damon touched the trees a few times, and he looks fine, so they most likely aren't poisonous.

"We are getting to the place where the wolf came from," Hadwin says.

Just this sentence is enough to bring us to the tips of our toes. Damon instantly shuts up, and I can almost hear him squeezing his weapon.

Somehow I feel calmer than before.

"Movement to our left," I whisper, and I hear Hadwin's gun click as he turns it towards his left. "A bit more to your right," I quickly add, and he points it there.

I squeeze the pipe in my hand as two human-like beings rush at us at once while holding primitive weapons in their hands.

I step to the left and avoid a stab with a spear. They don't seem to be too tall, almost like kids or young adults, so I hesitate for a second.

Then I hear a gunshot, just one, followed by a weird scream.

I dodge another stab and swing with the pipe, it connects and I hit the creature on its head

Its head is harder than expected, so I hit once more while using as much strength as I can while dodging its aggressive but clumsy stab. The creature falls down

When I look around, Hadwin is already running after another one.

[Goblin - lvl 3]

The goblin is shot, and Hadwin is holding the pipe in his hands, closely behind the monster.

Sophie and Damon are fighting the third enemy, which surprisingly attacked from somewhere behind us.

[Goblin - lvl 2]

Another level 2. They seem to be overpowering it, especially Sophie with some clearly well-trained moves.

Not bothering to help them, I quickly follow Hadwin. I am sure he wants to stop the goblin from running away and maybe bringing back more of them, but at the same time, he is saving his bullets.

I quickly find him fighting the monster. The green creature seems to be mortally wounded by his gun so that makes it easier.

While slowing down to walk, I keep my eyes on Hadwin. His movements are careful and calculating as he slowly makes a half-circle around the creature, which is swinging something that looks like a knife.

There are wounds other than gunshots covering the creature's body. Seems like the older man did get in some attacks.

Out of nowhere the cornered creature quickly dashes at him, but its movements are just that – quick. There is no technique and no other intent than just violence.

Hadwin almost dodges it, but the creature hits him with the edge of its shoulder, making him lose his balance and fall down.

For its size, the green monster is surprisingly strong.

I am already on my way as it starts a downward stab, and Hadwin lifts up the pipe against it.

Before it connects, I hit the creature's hand with my full strength, getting a scream out of it and making its knife fall.

The goblin turns towards me, a murderous look in its red eyes. I can see its pointy teeth as it fully opens its mouth and rushes at me with a loud scream.

In one move, I dodge to the right and hit the back of its head as inertia makes the goblin move ahead.

Of course, it's not enough, and the goblin charges me again. This time I dodge to the left and follow up with a kick, focusing more on pushing it further away than on damaging it.

The goblin screams with rage and turns back to me as I am lifting its knife from the ground.

For a second, it makes a beautifully dumbfounded look.

One long and quick step.

Stab.

It puts its hands in front of its neck, but in the middle of the move, I change the direction of the stab, and the knife easily enters its eye.

I step back, just far enough, to dodge its blindly waving hand.

The creature screams and scratches its face, surprisingly still alive.

Then Hadwin hits its temple from the side. Goblin falls to the ground. The second hit from Hadwin lands as the goblin starts twitching on the ground. Last hit. I can hear the wet and nauseating noise of the iron pipe breaking its skull.

The goblin finally stops screaming.

[You have defeated a Goblin - lvl 3]

Then I notice my wildly shaking hand, tense muscles, and rough breathing.

The world comes back into focus, and I feel like someone turned off the noise canceling.

Hadwin is breathing heavily and cursing under his nose.

I hear Sophie and Damon not far away from us.

"One goblin is only unconscious. Can you keep a watch?"

Hadwin nods with a tired imitation of a smile, and I can see the sweat running down his forehead.

Before running back, I grab the knife and pull it out of the goblin's eye. It makes a disgusting noise I am sure I will remember for a while.

When I get back to Sophie and Damon, I can see them repeatedly hitting the goblin they were fighting against. It seems to be dead, but they don't stop.

They have furious looks on their faces, and I can see some wounds on their bodies. The wounds don't seem to be serious.

The goblin I stunned is still lying on the ground. I kick its leg while standing as far as possible, and when it doesn't react, I calm down slightly.

I still can feel the adrenaline flowing through me and probably mana as well, and just now, I am slowly realizing what happened as if I am coming back to reality.

My heart is beating wildly and multiple feelings wash over my body.

Fear, relief... desperation

Calm down.

Think logically.

Calm down.

Calm down.

CALM DOWN.

My breathing slows, and I finally catch my breath, and my focus comes back to normal.

I am such a mess.

I hear quiet sobs from Sophie behind me, but she quickly stops, almost choking on them.

While clenching my teeth I slowly lower my body, carefully, while watching the unconscious goblin. And then, without hesitation, I stab a dagger deep into its eye.

[You have defeated a Goblin - lvl 2]

[Lvl 1 > Lvl 2]