

Unholy Player #Chapter 11: Among the 1% - Read

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Chapter 11 - Among the 1%

Adyr stood in front of the bathroom mirror, and the first thing he noticed was the absence of the scar on his lip. A fresh bruise from the punch had completely healed in just three hours.

His pale skin looked different, too. It now had a healthy sheen, smooth and clear, like someone who followed a strict skincare routine every day.

Curious, he flexed in front of the mirror, lit only by a single candle. His body had always looked fit, but in a lean, wiry sort of way. Now, his muscles appeared noticeably fuller. His abs and obliques, in particular, had taken on a sharper, more defined shape — as if sculpted from marble.

He had achieved more physical improvement in just three hours than most people could hope to gain in a lifetime. It was the kind of transformation only the rich and well-connected could normally afford.

For a moment, he considered using the second game helmet — the one Selina had sent — and diving back in for another three hours. But he knew the system's limitations: only one active connection per player and no way to create a second avatar.

With nothing else to do but wait for the power to return, he headed downstairs.

"Son, how was your day?" Marielle greeted him from the couch as he came down the stairs. Too tired to stand, she simply waved her hand lazily in his direction. Her black hair and sharp blue eyes were proof enough — no DNA test was needed to confirm she was Niva's biological mother.

"Exceptionally fruitful," Adyr replied with a slight smile as he found his way to the dining table, cluttered with textbooks and dimly lit by candlelight. He sat down beside Niva.

"Is that so? I heard you received an expensive gift today. Was it from Viktor?" Marielle's voice echoed again, weary, but laced with playful sarcasm.

She knew about her son's close friendship with Victor. And, of course, she knew exactly who Victor Bates was.

Adyr glanced at Niva, who gave a subtle shrug without looking up. He chuckled. "Yeah. A game helmet for the new release. Want to try it? I've got a spare."

"The spare one is from Selina White, in case you're curious," Niva added flatly, her eyes still glued to her textbook.

"Selina White?" Marielle paused for a moment. Then, with a smirk, she gave him a thumbs-up and said, "I'm proud of you, boy. Making friends with powerful people is the best kind of security for your future."

She knew that better than most. Having graduated from the same university herself, she understood all too well that for people like them, a degree alone didn't mean much. Her current job existed because of the connections she had built back then, and it was influence, not education, that truly opened doors.

"Also, I'm too busy and too old to play games," she added, closing her tired eyes.

"Okay," Adyr replied casually, without pressing the subject.

He chose not to mention that it wasn't just a game, but potentially a device capable of triggering genetic mutation. Not because of the promise he'd made to Victor, but because he still didn't fully understand the mystery surrounding it. The game was cloaked in unanswered questions, and he wasn't entirely convinced there was no malicious intent behind it.

He had no intention of letting the people he cared about play something so suspicious.

"Marielle, have you ever heard of a language called Latin?" He asked, hoping to shed some light on the biggest question still haunting his mind.

"Latin? No, I've never heard of it. Is it one of those old languages or something?" She replied, eyes still closed.

From his sister's expression, or lack of one, it was clear she was just as clueless.

"I guess so," Adyr muttered.

He briefly considered asking one of his history professors tomorrow, when suddenly, the landline phone on the wall began to ring.

For a moment, everyone froze.

Marielle's eyes snapped open wide with concern. Worry and fear were written clearly across her face.

During blackouts like this, landlines usually went dead. If the phone were ringing now, there could only be one reason.

An emergency line.

"The children!" Marielle gasped, suddenly throwing off her exhaustion and rushing toward the phone.

The only emergency call she could think of was from the orphanage where she worked as an assistant manager. The thought that something might have happened to the kids wrapped her in a wave of fear and urgency.

"Hello?" Marielle answered quickly, her voice sharp with urgency.

Adyr watched her closely as her expression shifted while she listened. The panic and fear on her face faded, replaced by irritation, then mild anger, and finally the exhaustion she had shown earlier returned.

She let out a sigh, turned to Adyr, and said flatly, "It's Victor."

As he stood up and took the receiver from her, Marielle sank back into the couch, relief softening her features.

"Victor?" Adyr asked, holding the handset to his ear. It was the first time Victor had called him this late, and he had a strong feeling it was game-related.

"Adyr, did you get the helmet I sent?" Victor's voice came through, tinged with curiosity.

"Yes."

"So... did you play the game yet?" This time, there was a hint of tension in his voice, like he was worried.

"Yes."

There was a brief pause.

"Tell me you didn't die in there," he said, now clearly anxious.

"No, I didn't. Why?" Adyr replied, his curiosity growing.

"Hell yeah! I knew it! You're among the 1%!" Victor's voice shifted instantly, all worry gone, replaced by almost childish excitement.

"One percent? What's that supposed to mean?"

"Didn't you check the internet? Everyone's talking about it on the forums," Victor said, clearly surprised by the question.

"Victor, we're in the middle of a blackout. There's no internet right now," Adyr explained, internally sighing. Of course, Victor hadn't considered that.

"Oh—right. So that's why I had to bribe the central station just to get connected through the emergency line," Victor muttered, as if something suddenly made sense.

"Anyway, you'll see once the power comes back. I just called to let you know—you only get one life in the game. If you die, it's over. You can't play again."

Then, after a brief pause, his tone shifted — more serious, more deliberate. "There's something else I need to tell you. But not over the phone. Meet me early tomorrow at the library. I have to go now."

He sounded rushed, and before Adyr could get a word in, Victor added one last thing. "Ah, and one more thing. Be careful when logging out. Your avatar stays in the game unconscious. If you leave it in the wrong place, it can still be killed. Find a safe spot before you exit. Bye."

With that, the line went dead, leaving Adyr staring at the phone, stunned.

Chapter 12 - Checking the forums

I miscalculated, Adyr thought, tasting the bitter sting of his mistake.

The mission he'd given the NPC, meant solely to understand its nature, had completely backfired. Now, knowing that his real body was lying there defenseless, waiting to be torn apart by a horde of skeletons, he realized everything had been left to luck. He had no control over the outcome, and he hated that to his core.

Or is it? He chuckled quietly as he hung up the receiver and turned back toward the table.

When Marielle saw that he had ended the call, she considered asking what could've been so important for Victor to use the emergency line — but she held back. She wasn't the kind of parent who poked around in her children's private lives, and she knew better than most how reckless teenagers could be. So, she let it slide.

Soon, her tired eyes began to close, and in the soft candlelit room, as the low murmur of her children studying filled the space, she drifted into a quiet, peaceful sleep.

Morning light poured through the window as Adyr slowly opened his eyes and sat up in bed. He glanced at the wristwatch resting on his desk — 6:00 AM.

The first thing he did was check if the power had returned. Sure enough, the game helmet's indicator light was on. It had begun charging.

According to the manual, a full charge took exactly three hours — the same as one in-game session. It also didn't allow play while charging, and although Adyr briefly wondered why a device this advanced didn't support fast charging, there was nothing he could do about it.

Since there was no need to rush, he stood by the window for a few minutes, watching the sun rise. Afterward, he did a light stretch, visited the bathroom for his usual morning routine, and then headed downstairs.

The house was quiet, no one else was awake yet. He made himself a cup of coffee in the kitchen, then set the table and prepared a simple breakfast for the family. Afterward, he returned to his room and opened his laptop.

Logging into the most popular local social media platform, he wasn't surprised to see the game trending across Shelter City 9.

He didn't have access to networks beyond the city. The internet was strictly local, but he had a feeling it wasn't any different in the other cities either.

He quickly skimmed through some of the top posts and noticed something striking: over 99% of the comments were negative.

Sure enough, everyone, without exception, had nothing but praise for the realism and full-dive immersion, calling it a technology decades ahead of its time.

But as a game?

Most found it disappointing — even infuriating.

The biggest complaint? Many players had died before they even had the chance to do anything, right after spawning.

Adyr clicked on one of the most viewed posts:

@ApocalypseSurvivorMan:

Are the devs messing with us?

Right after choosing my path, I literally fell from the sky into an active volcano. I didn't even get to move before I died. And the worst part? It felt real. I can still feel the pain of burning alive.

I want my money back. Actually, no — I want compensation for the psychological trauma they gave me.

That was just one of hundreds of similar comments below.

@WalletBreaker:

Dude, you should consider yourself lucky. At least yours was a quick death. I spawned in a dark forest. Five minutes later, a pack of wolves tore me apart. Slowly. I couldn't even log out. I had to sit there and die in pieces. Not peace. Pieces.

And of course, a few trolls in the mix:

@GrannyMage:

Hehe, you bunch of losers couldn't even last two seconds.

I survived exactly 30 minutes floating in the middle of the ocean before a shark got me. I'm obviously part of the top 10%.

As Adyr kept reading, it finally clicked — this was what Victor meant by "the one percent."

Apparently, players had turned their trauma and frustration into a ranking system. They started humorously measuring survival time as a badge of honor, jokingly assigning percentile brackets based on how long they stayed alive.

Those who had survived without dying, like Adyr, were being labeled the top 1%.

He also came across a few more pieces of information that caught his attention. It seemed everyone had experienced the same initial sequence, choosing one of the four paths in the sky. But there was no mention anywhere of a fifth path.

Another thing that stood out was the stat system. Each player seemed to receive only one stat, directly tied to the path they had chosen. For example, those who picked the Astra path were granted [Physique], while those who chose the Nether received [Resilience].

This made Adyr's situation unique — his character panel showed all four stats. A clear sign that the path he had taken was something entirely different.

But perhaps the most intriguing detail was the lack of any discussion about physical changes in real life. No one mentioned getting stronger by increasing their in-game stats — or experiencing mutations like Adyr had.

There were only two explanations: either no one else had undergone those changes, or they were keeping it quiet. Adyr strongly believed it was the latter.

After browsing the internet a little longer and gathering all the information he could, Adyr closed his laptop.

He noticed the campus shuttle would arrive in fifteen minutes, so he quickly changed into his uniform, packed his notes and textbooks into a leather satchel, and finally grabbed the box containing the game helmet Selina had sent before heading downstairs.

"Good morning, son. Heading out?" His mother, Marielle, greeted him from the breakfast table, where she and Niva were already seated and eating.

"Yeah. Are you staying home today?" Adyr asked as he slipped on his shoes and tied the laces.

Marielle took a sip of her tea and sighed deeply before answering. "I wish. A new group of kids is arriving today. I might be home late again."

Her voice was tired, but her eyes said otherwise — they sparkled with quiet joy. She never complained when it came to the orphanage. The more children they managed to rescue from the chaos outside, the more peace she seemed to find within herself.

He said his goodbyes to Marielle and Niva, then stepped outside.

The sky, usually choked with dense yellow clouds, felt lighter today. Rays of sunlight pierced through the thinning veil, casting warmth and light on the scarred earth below. It was still an apocalyptic morning, like so many before it, but something in the air hinted at renewal, as if the world itself was holding its breath for a fresh beginning.

Chapter 13 - Among the 0.5%

The shuttle arrived before Adyr had to wait long, and he took the first empty seat he could find.

The faces inside were all the same as always—tired, hollow, and worn thin by the silent scream of uncertainty about their futures.

Adyr knew each one carried a noisy story beneath that quiet mask.

He watched—always watched. A nervous tap of a finger, a smudge on a collar, the way someone's gaze lingered a second too long—every detail spoke. Within a year, he'd stitched together their inner lives from the smallest of tells. Breakfast routines. Favorite colors. Secret fears they'd never voiced aloud.

To others, they were classmates. To him, they were case files—open, bleeding, waiting to be read. Watching them wasn't just a habit. It was instinct. An itch in his brain he never tried to scratch.

And among them, there was one person Adyr had given a special place in his quiet routine. Like a treasured book he returned to with a cup of coffee on a rainy day.

His name was Eren. Towering at 2.05 meters with the build of a seasoned bodybuilder, he was the tallest among them. One glance was enough to sense his raw strength. It was hard not to wonder if he carried mutant genes; just how much more powerful could he become?

His head was nearly shaved, black hair cropped so close it looked like a shadow clinging to his scalp. His dark green eyes were sharp and cold, perfectly aligned with the hard, unforgiving lines of his face.

He was the kind of man people avoided on instinct, someone you'd cross the street to escape from. Even the wealthy mutant students, known for their arrogance, often thought twice before provoking him.

But only Adyr knew what lived beneath that monstrous exterior. The quiet grief. The unbearable solitude. And the tragedy that had carved him into what he'd become.

As he quietly enjoyed the morning, the shuttle gradually slowed and came to a stop at the final station—the campus terminal.

Without rushing, Adyr stepped off when it was his turn and made his way across campus with brisk steps. But instead of heading to the library, where he was supposed to meet Victor, he turned toward the cargo building.

Like all the other structures on campus, the cargo facility was massive. Its architecture reminded Adyr of ancient Roman design: monumental, cold, and proud. Above its grand entrance, written in bold gold and deep blue letters, was a name that caught every eye:

RavenCourt Logistics.

The only privately-run cargo company still operating across the Twelve Cities—and not just a company name, but the surname of one of the most powerful and historic families left in the world.

As he stepped inside, the massive glass door slid shut behind him with a hiss. He removed his mask and glasses, then passed through the second door and took in the filtered, purified air.

It was early, so the lobby wasn't crowded. He walked over to the digital kiosk and took a number. Before he even had a chance to sit down, a soft chime sounded, and his number flashed on the screen above a booth.

He approached the counter with quick steps.

"I want to send this cargo," he said through the thick glass.

The staff member looked up politely. "Hello, sir. Is this for a local delivery or to another city?"

"Local," Adyr replied as he slid the box through the small opening beneath the booth.

He then handed over his student ID and filled in the recipient's address on the form the clerk passed to him.

"That'll be 45 credits, sir," the clerk said once everything was finalized.

For a brief moment, Adyr felt the sting in his chest, but he didn't show it. 45 credits for a simple local delivery. It was nearly half of his monthly scholarship.

Without a word, he raised his wristwatch to the scanner. The payment confirmed with a soft beep, and he took the printed receipt before turning to leave.

His next stop was the library. It was the largest building on campus, towering over the university grounds. Compared to the cargo facility, its architecture was far more modern. The entire front facade was made of glass—opaque from the outside, but offering a clear, panoramic view for those inside.

Adyr stepped through the same two-door procedure, removed his glasses and mask, and entered. The interior was vast. After walking through the main hall and taking the elevator up to the 7th floor, he arrived at the enclosed terrace.

Several tables were spread out, and a few groups of students were already chatting quietly. This was one of the most popular spots in the library—a common meeting ground for those who wanted a balance of quiet and company.

"Adyr."

He turned to see Victor approaching with long, confident strides. With each step, his ponytailed blond hair bounced slightly, and his signature smug expression sat firmly beneath his half-lidded, light brown eyes.

Adyr didn't say anything at first. He just stepped forward.

Without missing a beat, their shoulders bumped—firm, practiced, like a ritual between old friends.

"Yo, Victor," Adyr said afterward, the corner of his mouth lifting slightly.

"Always late," Victor replied with a smirk, already turning toward an empty table like he owned the place. But then he paused, reconsidering. "You know what? Let's get a private room."

Apparently, whatever he wanted to talk about wasn't meant for wandering eyes or curious ears.

Adyr didn't argue. He simply followed.

They took the elevator to the sixth floor, where private study rooms were reserved for students. Victor picked one without hesitation. He scanned the digital panel beside the door with his watch—an extravagant piece embedded with polished stones—and rented the room for 100 credits an hour. The door unlocked with a soft beep, and they stepped inside.

The room was generously sized, easily dwarfing Adyr's bedroom back home. Heavy black curtains covered the tall window that would've otherwise offered a clear view of the campus below. In the center stood a broad desk, flanked by three high-end laptops, and off to the side, a neatly made bed waited—no doubt meant for students pulling all-nighters.

Victor didn't waste time with small talk. He dropped into a comfortable-looking chair and got straight to the point. "So, how long did you play the game?"

Adyr pulled out the chair across from him and sat down. "Three hours—until the device ran out of battery."

"You played until it was completely drained?" Victor asked, eyebrows lifting in surprise. "I hope you logged out somewhere safe."

"I'll be fine," Adyr replied confidently.

Even if he wasn't entirely sure, deep down, he knew the situation he left behind—chaotic as it was—might still have an opening for escape.

"Good," Victor said, visibly relieved, fully believing him. Then his eyes sharpened with curiosity. "So, did you notice the game's... let's say, real unique feature? Aside from the hyper-realistic visuals and sensations."

Adyr immediately understood what he meant. Without a word, he picked up a solid-looking metal pen from the desk and snapped it in half with his thumb—clean, effortless.

"Yeah," he said. "I discovered the gene mutation mechanic."

Victor's eyes widened, his brown irises gleaming with excitement. He let out a short laugh. "Ha! Of course you did. You're really part of the top 0.5%."

"Top 0.5?" Adyr raised an eyebrow. "Wasn't it 1%?"

"That was last night. The number's already dropped," Victor replied with a smirk. "I'm sure more players are dying even as we speak."

Chapter 14 - Chance to earn a surname

Victor shifted into a more relaxed position in his chair and added, "And even fewer have realized what you did. That increasing your stats actually affects your real body."

Adyr went quiet for a moment, then asked, "It's insane. What kind of game alters your physical body just by playing it?"

Victor shrugged. "I don't know. Even my father was shocked when he found out yesterday."

"Even your father?" Adyr asked, not hiding his surprise.

"Yeah. And he said not even the Twelve City Lords fully understand what this game really is." He paused for a beat. "He said it felt like something... touched by alien hands."

A tense silence settled over the room for a moment before Victor spoke again, his voice lower, now more serious.

"Look, Adyr. I know I'm the one who dragged you into this game, but I had no idea how deep it went, or how dangerous it really is. You're not just my best friend. You saved my life once, and I brought you in because I wanted you to have a real shot at what this world could offer."

He paused, took a breath, then continued.

"But that's not why I asked you here today. You need to see the full picture now. This isn't just a game—it's something much bigger. And the risks? They're real."

His words were as heavy as his tone, and he made no effort to soften them. He needed Adyr to truly understand the weight of the situation.

But there was another reason behind his insistence: he knew Adyr too well. He was the type who'd go out of his way to help others, yet never ask for help himself. Even if something went wrong, he'd deal with it quietly, carrying the burden alone.

And that was exactly what frustrated Victor. The idea of Adyr facing something serious in silence, without reaching out, was something he refused to let happen.

"I understand, don't worry," Adyr said with a light chuckle, playing his part flawlessly. "And you know better than anyone—I like risks."

"Yeah, I know," Victor replied, letting out a deep breath. "That's exactly why I'm being this serious." His mind drifted, just for a moment, to that night—staring down the barrel of a gun, his life hanging by a thread—and the guy who came out of nowhere, risking everything to save him.

"My father is setting up a new division outside the STF (Superhuman Task Force)," Victor said calmly. "He's planning to recruit third-generation mutants for it."

"Third-generation mutants?" Adyr repeated, raising an eyebrow.

As far as he knew, there were only two kinds:

The first were natural-born mutants, those who had lived outside the cities, exposed to extreme radiation. Their altered genes were passed down over generations. The second were measured ones, engineered under strict clinical supervision, usually commissioned by the wealthy and powerful within the cities. Victor and the other rich students belonged to this second group.

"Is he planning to recruit surviving players?" Adyr asked directly, taking a wild guess.

Victor nodded, then continued, "The facility will be ready in a few days. The government's pouring money into it—no expense spared. I'm thinking of joining the division myself, and I want you to be part of it too."

He paused for a moment, then quickly added to prevent any misunderstanding, "Don't worry—it's not something that'll tie you down. I promise, on my father's name, there won't be any assignments that go against your principles. This is strictly for your benefit."

He leaned forward slightly, his tone more focused now. "From what I've seen in the initial plans, the facility offers way more than what an average player needs. It'll be a place for information exchange about the game—maybe even deeper things. And most importantly, they're planning to grant official status to players who join."

Victor's eyes met his. "In other words, if you accept... you'll have the chance to earn a surname."

Adyr fell into deep thought. The offer was intriguing, especially the part about earning a surname. He'd never been particularly fixated on having one, but the advantages that came with it were far from insignificant.

"You can think about it and let me know later," Victor said with a laugh. "I'm not pushing you on this one."

"Yeah, just like you didn't push me into playing the game," Adyr replied with a smug grin. "You always know how to dangle the right candy."

"That..." Victor froze for a second, his lips twitching. "That wasn't my intention, okay?" He looked genuinely guilty, cornered by the truth.

"I'm just messing with you," Adyr said, letting him off the hook. Then, checking his watch, he added, "We don't have much time before class starts. Let's get going before we're late."

As he got up and was about to leave the room, something crossed his mind. He turned back and asked, "Any chance you've heard Latin before?"

But Victor just looked at him, clearly oblivious—no idea what it even was.

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After the first class—History—where Adyr failed to get the answers he was looking for about Latin, the rest of the day's lessons felt dull and pointless.

At one point, he considered skipping the remaining classes and heading home to dive back into the game. But the next shuttle wouldn't come until evening, and skipping classes was a dangerous move for someone in his position. Losing his scholarship would jeopardize more than just his education—it would damage the identity he had carefully built.

He also noticed fewer students in class than usual, which made him wonder about the game's growing impact. Some were probably still playing. Others might've stayed home, trying to recover from the all-too-real trauma the game had inflicted.

By the time the day was over, he was running low on patience. He boarded the shuttle and finally made his way home.

At last, he'd get to see the outcome of where he'd left off in the game.

The moment the shuttle doors slid open, a giant of a man stepped out. He didn't waste a second—his long, purposeful strides cutting through the street like he was racing against time.

As the evening sky darkened, the few people still lingering on the sidewalks instinctively turned to look. By now, they were used to the sight.

And so was Eren. He didn't slow down. Didn't say a word. He moved through the dimming streets, reached his worn front door, and stepped inside without a pause.

"I'm home," he said, his voice soft—softest than anyone would expect from someone built like him.

He stood still for a moment, letting the silence settle. Somewhere deep down, he was still waiting—still hoping—for a reply.

But once again, he was reminded that hope had died long ago, buried in silence.

Chapter 15 - Eren, the Pitiful Giant

He quickly removed his mask and protective goggles, then stepped into the living room. A warm, familiar smile spread across his face as he spoke.

"Sister, did you get hungry?"

The room was the largest in the house—bright, spotless, and carefully maintained. At its center stood a hospital bed, surrounded by softly humming medical equipment.

Lying there was a girl, motionless but awake, her pale green eyes locking onto Eren's as he entered. For a brief moment, they lit up with joy, speaking in place of the voice she no longer had.

A breathing mask covered her mouth, hiding the faint smile beneath. But that wasn't why she stayed silent. She hadn't spoken in years. Her body, slowly breaking down with each passing day, had long since taken that from her.

"Just wait a bit—I'll change my clothes first, then make us some dinner," Eren said, using the softest tone he could manage, careful to keep a bit of distance from the girl.

He was afraid. Afraid that his dusty clothes from outside might somehow harm his already fragile sister. Without hesitation, he rushed to the bathroom and changed into something clean.

When he came in, he was wearing an apron over his white pajamas. "How are you feeling? Any pain?" he asked, his voice tender.

When her eyes gave him the usual signal—*I'm fine*—he nodded and quickly hurried back to the kitchen.

As Mira listened to the clattering of pots and utensils coming from the kitchen, she quietly waited for her favorite daily routine. And finally, her brother's voice reached her.

"Today, the first class was History. The same professor I told you about before—you know, the really old one."

There was a brief pause, followed by the soft sound of plates being set down.

"I swear, he's so old I wouldn't be surprised if he had a few skeletons for friends."

A faint smile tugged at Mira's lips. The joke wasn't all that funny—but she loved how her usually serious brother kept trying anyway, always making the effort... and always failing in the most endearing way.

As Eren prepared the meal, he recounted every detail of his day, as if determined not to let a single moment of silence settle in the house.

His sister had already spent the day trapped in it—and if he couldn't take the silence from her world, he could at least keep it out of this room.

It was the only thing he had left to give.

Soon, he returned with two bowls of soup, the warmth gently rising into the still air.

He fed her with steady hands—one spoonful for her, then one for himself from his own bowl. It was a simple rhythm, one they'd repeated countless times.

And he kept talking, calmly and naturally, only pausing when his mouth was full. It wasn't just to fill the silence—it was his way of making the moment feel normal. Familiar.

Just like when they were kids, before their father died of a chronic illness, and before their mother took her own life out of grief. Or at least, back when his sister was still healthy, before she was diagnosed with the same inherited disease that had taken their father.

Now, as Eren watched her grow weaker each day, inching closer to the same fate, he hated it. He questioned what kind of brother he was—if he couldn't even take away her pain.

But what could he do?

He was built like a giant, strong in every way that didn't matter. The university he had fought so hard to get into, the one he'd entered with a single purpose, wasn't helping. None of it was helping. Nothing could stop the disease eating her away.

The only thing that could make a difference now was status—enough status and money to afford a genetic mutation procedure that might save her life.

But time was running out. And hope was already gone.

After the meal, Eren took care of her needs. He cleaned the bedsores on her back, massaged her motionless limbs, and checked the fuel in the generator—the only real support the university had ever provided. Then he went upstairs to change for work.

The 100 credits he received as a scholarship barely covered her daily care and medication. So at night, he put his naturally gifted strength to use, working grueling shifts as a construction laborer.

Once he was ready, he returned to her door, careful not to step too close. "Mira, I'm heading to work. Try to get some sleep, okay?" He said cheerfully.

Mira looked at her brother. It was the hardest moment of her day.

Every night, at this exact time, she ached to speak—to beg him to stop. *Brother, it's enough. You've done everything you could. Just let me go... live your life.*

But the words never came. They couldn't.

So she gave him the only thing she had left.

A big, heartfelt smile—one she saved only for him.

Eren returned her smile with one of his own—a wide, comforting grin he had mastered over the years. Then he laced up his worn-out work boots and stepped outside.

After locking the door behind him, he paused.

The smile that had lit up his face moments ago was gone, and the energy he carried so well had vanished without a trace.

It was as if the reality he kept forcing himself to ignore had come crashing back all at once. He leaned against the wall, then slowly slid down until he was sitting on the cold ground.

Suddenly, the giant became painfully small.

Silent tears escaped his eyes, followed by a shaky breath, then a stifled sob.

He prayed in that moment, just like he did every day. Prayed for a miracle.

A miracle to turn his shattered life around.

A miracle to save his sister.

He'd heard the stories, read the accounts. He knew miracles weren't just legends. They were real.

Even his mother used to say, "Miracles can come in any form." Of course, that was before she took her own life.

Still, he held on to that belief. Because believing—believing that a miracle could happen at any moment—was the only way he could keep going. It was the only thing that made the weight bearable.

As silent thoughts flooded his mind, his sobs gradually broke the stillness, raw, unfiltered.

And then, through the quiet night, another voice slipped into the sound of his grief.

"Mr. Eren?"

Startled, he quickly lifted his head, wiping his eyes, ashamed to be seen like this.

Standing before him was a middle-aged man dressed in a blue-and-gold uniform. But what truly caught Eren off guard was the emblem on his chest—Ravencourt Logistics.

"Sorry," the man said, glancing down at his notes, equally surprised to see the broken figure before him. "Are you the one residing in this house?"

"Yes... I'm Eren," he replied, still trying to collect himself. "What is this about?"

"You have a delivery," the man said simply, extending a box toward him.

Eren stared at it blankly, unaware that the miracle he'd been praying for... had just arrived in a box.

Chapter 16 - Returning to the game

When Adyr returned home, he didn't jump straight into the game.

First, he had the dinner Niva had prepared, then washed the dishes. Afterward, as she had begged him to, he helped her with her studies. With the big exam approaching, Niva's stress had been steadily growing, and since she knew she performed best when studying with her brother, she had been bugging him more than usual lately.

As the clock ticked into the late evening, Adyr finally made his way to his room.

He started by fixing the broken door handle with whatever tools he had on hand, making sure he wouldn't be disturbed. Then he changed the melted candle from the night before, lit a fresh one, and placed it where the light wouldn't bother him.

Before logging in, he repeated the same exercises he had done yesterday to better understand his strength. Though bodyweight training no longer did much for him physically, it still helped him control and measure his power.

And during that process, he realized something else.

When he first started the game, his [Physical] stat was 2. Considering he'd been doing strength training since he was a child, it made sense. If someone without any training had a stat of 1, then being twice as strong aligned with what he knew about himself. Based on that, he began to suspect that the average person's base stats—Physical and possibly the others as well—might all start at 1.

That is... if the game's stats truly reflected reality.

After finishing his physical and mental routine, he grabbed the now fully charged helmet, placed it on his head, and lay down on the bed.

The screen went pitch black.

Then, once again, glowing neon green numbers began to count down.

3...

2...

1...

When his vision returned, the familiar interior of the prison came into view. There was only one thing this could mean—the one escape scenario he had hoped for had come true.

But something was off—Vesha was nowhere to be seen. In the scenario he had imagined, she should've been here with him, trapped in the prison as skeletons clawed at the cell bars trying to get in.

Wondering what had happened to her, Adyr looked around, scanning for any detail that might explain her absence.

The cell he was in now wasn't the one where he'd found Vesha—it was two cells over. And this one had a working door, intact and shut.

Adyr kicked the rusted, centuries-old door open with a single strike. Unlike the three dramatic, prolonged kicks he had used on Vesha's cell door—purely for show—this one broke apart instantly with just one.

He then walked two cells down to where he had originally found her and began inspecting the area carefully. Whatever had happened, the answers were here—in the details left behind.

This is where I dropped. Face-first. After the logout.

He knelt, fingers brushing the damp earth.

And here—this is where she saw me. Crawled forward. Then stopped.

Adyr moved in closer, studying the trail she had left behind. The soil was still damp, the markings faint but readable.

There's a trace—hesitation. She was moving toward me to check, but something startled her. Fear, maybe. Or shock.

Probably heard something.

Skeletons. Rushing this way.

She panicked. Acted.

She grabbed my legs. Dragged me two cells over.

She struggled, but she got there. Impressive. For a girl who had no energy left. Must've been adrenaline.

Adyr paused, something bothering him as he replayed the trail in his mind. Something didn't add up.

She didn't go in. Just closed the door behind. Why? Did she think she could outrun them? No. That's not like her.

He frowned and began following the footprints that continued past the cell. *She walked straight in the direction skeletons came.*

He traced the prints farther, until they collided with another set—deeper, heavier, skeletal. At their intersection, he found a dark patch of blood pooled on the ground.

"So this is what happened." Adyr crouched, touching the still-wet stain as the truth settled in.

She pulled me in, thinking the bars wouldn't hold them. Then she sealed the door and ran. Not to escape, but to draw their attention away.

A flicker of something crossed his otherwise blank face. "Why? Why go that far?"

For a moment, a scene flashed through his mind. The moment he took the purple crystal... and the look on Vasha's face.

"What did she see in me? Who did she think I was... to make that trade? Her life—for mine?" He murmured, staring at the crimson staining his fingers.

It's a drip pattern—non-lethal. The blood's dark, likely venous. Judging by the position, it came from the arm or a shallow chest wound. The volume... not enough to kill. Even for someone as small as her.

Thankfully, Adyr's questions might not go unanswered—he knew Vesha hadn't died. Not yet, anyway.

He didn't know why the skeletons had taken Vesha or where, but that was a question he could answer once he found her. So without wasting time, he got to his feet and followed the trail.

Navigating the cave's labyrinthine paths with practiced ease, he moved forward. Here and there, he spotted fresh blood mixed with skeletal footprints and drag marks, along with signs of a struggle. Far from alarming, these were encouraging. It meant Vesha was still alive.

After progressing for a while and dispatching a few wandering skeletons to absorb their crystals, Adyr heard voices coming from the far end of the corridor.

"I command you in the name of God, Astraeus—stay back, you vile creatures!"

The voice was desperate, male, tangled with the sharp clash of weapons—and it was spoken in Latin.

As Adyr moved a little closer, he finally gained a clear line of sight to the source.

The figure was short—no taller than 1.60 meters—and looked to be in his twenties. His eyes were wide like Vesha's, but instead of her icy blue, his were a deep black. He held a short sword in one hand, a round shield in the other, and wore armor that resembled medieval plate—metallic and protective, covering most of his body except the joints.

Adyr's first thought was that he might be one of the guards who had come with Vesha.

Three skeletons were attacking the man, pressing him hard. He looked exhausted and wounded, and the blunt weapons in the skeletons' hands gave them an edge against his round shield.

The fight was nearing its end—the outcome already decided. Still, Adyr had no intention of intervening. He simply watched.

Before long, the man gave in to exhaustion. His shield arm dropped, leaving his head exposed—just in time to take a crushing blow. He collapsed, unconscious, but alive.

To Adyr's satisfaction, the skeletons didn't deliver a killing strike. Instead, they grabbed him and began dragging him away.

They were taking him somewhere. And wherever that was, it was likely the place Adyr needed to find.

Chapter 17 - Spark

Adyr spent half an hour silently tailing the skeletons as they dragged the man through the twisting tunnels. He remained hidden the entire time, avoiding any movement that might draw attention.

At last, the path opened into a vast chamber. The space was so large that when Adyr looked up, he saw countless blue crystals embedded in the ceiling, glowing like stars and casting a radiant light that illuminated the entire room like a false sun.

As the skeletons continued dragging the man down a sloping side path into the lower level of the chamber, Adyr took cover behind a large boulder and observed from above.

This had to be their gathering place. Below, there were at least a hundred skeletons—and that wasn't even the strangest part.

Every single one of them was kneeling, arms raised, facing the same direction, as if in worship.

And at the center of their collective focus, perched atop a stone platform, was a white bird.

"What is this, the dungeon boss?" He muttered, instincts shaped by old MMORPGs. But it was far too small to be one.

As Adyr studied the creature, plain at first glance, yet strangely ethereal, a familiar sight returned. Once again, green text flickered before his eyes—a system message, presenting new information.

[Spark detected]

[Name] Dawn Raven

[Path] Astra

[Rank] 1

[Ability] Lifegrace

Description:

Dawn Ravens are born from the remains of the living on battlefields and inhabit bright, cold regions. They feed on fresh flesh and the life force of their prey. Though often

mistaken for creatures of the Nether path due to their abilities, their powers affect only matter, firmly aligning them with the Astra path. Typically sluggish and non-aggressive, they're easy to catch—but rarely found alone. One must always be cautious of one's loyal guards.

Ability – Lifegrace: Dawn Ravens are grateful sparks, known to repay kindness with power. In exchange for a meal, they offer a fragment of their unique life force, transforming their prey's physical bodies into living skeletons bound to their will, and granting them an unnaturally extended existence.

As he read the description and looked at the raven, it hit him—this was the spark Vesha had mentioned. The one she was after.

One line in the description had especially caught his eye. At first, he'd assumed it was a boss to kill and loot—but the word "catch" shifted his perspective, and for the first time, the empty [Spark] slot in his stat panel began to make sense.

The game was still shrouded in mystery—if it even was a game at all—but he felt he had just peeled back another layer: a power system that included active skills.

"Oh fuck... I don't want to be a necromancer. That's so cliché," he muttered, a trace of irritation flickering across his face as he thought through the skill's mechanics.

But he quickly reminded himself—it was too early to jump to conclusions. Besides, he had a more immediate problem in front of him.

Tearing his gaze away from the raven, he noticed two bodies lying at the center of the skeleton gathering. The third—dragged all this way—was about to join them.

One of the bodies belonged to a man, clad in metallic armor much like the other. The second was the one Adyr had come for.

Vesha lay semi-conscious, her eyes fluttering open now and then—fighting to hold on, struggling to stay aware of her surroundings through the fog of fading consciousness.

Though still alive, Vesha looked deathly pale. She had already lost a significant amount of blood and was still bleeding. A dark red pool had begun to form beneath her. It was clear she didn't have much time. But what came next made it clear her blood loss was no longer the most pressing concern.

Just as Adyr had suspected, the skeletons dragging the third man didn't lay him beside the other two. Instead, they marched forward, past the circle, toward the stone platform where the Dawn Raven perched. There, they placed the unconscious man at the bird's feet, then stepped back and dropped to their knees, raising their arms like the others in silent worship.

It was unmistakably a ritual. A sacrifice.

The Dawn Raven remained still for a moment, eyes fixed on the offering. Then, with a sharp, soundless cry, it spread its wings and glided down to the man's side.

What followed was enough to freeze the blood of anyone with a conscience.

With a sudden jab of its beak, the raven gouged out one of the man's eyes and swallowed it in a single, clean motion.

"Aaaghhh!"

The searing pain jolted the man back to consciousness. He screamed, flailing, trying to escape the unknown torment—but the two skeletons flanking him pounced, pinning his limbs to the ground with an unyielding grip.

"Let me go, you cursed fiends! Let go!"

But neither the skeletons nor the raven paid him any mind.

The raven continued its work without pause. Each strike of its beak tore another piece of flesh from the man's body. Blood splattered across its white feathers, staining them deep red. The man's struggles grew weaker as the raven devoured him piece by piece—until his body, organs, and all, were nearly gone.

Adyr watched the entire scene with an unreadable expression. The carnage didn't faze him. If anything, his face showed faint disapproval.

As he kept watching, the raven finally stopped. With blood-soaked wings spread wide, it released a soft beam of green light that fell over the mangled remains.

The moment the ritual began, the kneeling skeletons around the chamber, who had until now been eerily still, began clacking their jaws. The sound echoed through the cavern like a chorus of bones, sharp and unsettling.

Within seconds, the green light consumed every trace of blood and flesh. It burned like fire, reducing the remains to ash. Even the blood staining the raven's feathers turned to dust, revealing once more its pristine white plumage.

Then, the real transformation began.

The man's skeleton, the only part left untouched by the flame, started to shift. The bones thickened, took on a metallic sheen, and grew in proportion—his limbs lengthening, posture changing. His frame now matched the other skeletons.

As the ritual's glow began to fade, a faint stream of green light branched off toward the two skeletons who had carried the offering. Their brittle, timeworn bones shimmered briefly—then grew denser, stronger, restored. The clatter of their jaws quickened, sharper now, echoing with something that almost resembled excitement.

Moments later, the light vanished completely. The Dawn Raven folded its wings and returned to its perch atop the platform.

Below, the freshly reborn skeleton slowly rose to its feet, only to kneel again—raising its arms toward the bird in solemn, wordless devotion.

Chapter 18 - Don't die

"Wow, that was quite a show," Adyr remarked, eyes glinting with interest. "Especially the final act—really captured the soul of it. Can't find that kind of drama in theaters these days."

The devouring process hadn't exactly been to his taste. It was too messy, lacking elegance. Still, he had to admit—the ending landed well.

Like a seasoned critic, he offered a few mental notes before reeling his focus back to the matter at hand.

Now, he had two clear objectives.

First, he needed to rescue Vesha before she died. This wasn't out of sentiment, gratitude, or some misplaced sense of heroism. His interest in her survival was purely practical—Vesha had answers he needed, and more importantly, she held status in this world, particularly within the Velari Kingdom. With her influence, Adyr could carve out a new path for himself once they escaped this cave.

The second objective was to capture the Dawn Raven. He didn't know exactly how rare or valuable it was, but the fact that Vesha and her guards had risked their lives just to find it told him enough—things like this didn't appear often.

Standing in the way of both goals were two major obstacles.

The first was time. He had already spent half an hour tracking the skeletons and nearly another twenty minutes observing the ritual. If he didn't act within the remaining two hours or so, chances were high that by his next login, Vesha would no longer be human, but another skeleton in the horde.

Besides, Adyr had never been one for brute-force heroics. He preferred something more calculated. More precise. Not the brawler on the front lines—but the blade in the dark.

After a few more minutes of calculating and planning, Adyr finally settled on the tactic he would use.

"Now," he muttered with a faint smile, "time to write the main character's entrance." His scene was about to begin.

—

I'm dying.

As Vesha lay there, the thought rose in her mind with the same brutal weight as the pain crushing her chest.

Each passing second drained more warmth from her body. She fought to stay conscious, forcing her eyes open, searching for anything, any thread of hope to pull her from this nightmare.

But all she saw was horror.

One of her loyal guards had just been devoured, only to rise again as a mindless skeleton. That was it—the final blow. The last crack in her hope.

I'm dying.

The thought settled into her soul like an undeniable truth. There was nothing left but acceptance. She closed her eyes.

And then, she saw light in the darkness. A silhouette.

Tall. Towering. Taller than anyone she had ever seen in the entire kingdom.

His face was cold, unreadable... yet the mask couldn't fully hide the warmth beneath.

"Adyr."

At death's edge, Vesha whispered the name instinctively. In the void, she saw him—not as he was, but as the hero of her fading mind. Striding into the darkness like a knight from legend.

A faint smile touched her pale lips, unaware she was dreaming.

Why not?

He was a practitioner—one not shaped by fate, but forged to walk his own path. The kind whose very presence brought peace to kingdoms and dread to their enemies.

And if he was the one who chose to save her, then who in their right mind would dare stand against him?

Now she could see it all clearly. The two of them, hand in hand, walking out of this cold cave. Returning to the kingdom.

She could see her father, standing tall in his favorite uniform, her mother beside him, adorned in her brightest jewels, both waiting at the city square. The cheering crowd. The jealous stares of her spiteful cousins.

Even the king was there in person, with the queen by his side, bearing witness to the grand event.

And there he was—tall, steady, revered by all—standing beside her, hand in hand.

Then, with perfect clarity, she heard the voice of the High Priest, smiling as he spoke, "Under the watch of God Astraesus, I now pronounce you husband and wife."

Then she turned to him—it was time. The moment of the kiss. She blushed as their eyes met, her heart fluttering.

He parted his lips and spoke. "Are you okay?"

She smiled, touched by his concern. "Yes, I am. I'm so happy."

As she tiptoed and moved closer for the kiss, eyes softly closing, his voice cut through—clearer, firmer. "Hey, open your eyes. Are you okay?"

"I said I'm okay, can you stop asking?" She whispered, a hint of frustration in her tone. She closed her eyes again, tiptoeing forward to seal the kiss that would mark their union.

But this time, she felt hands gripping her shoulders, shaking her. "I said, open your eyes. You're not dead yet."

At last, she truly returned to herself—back to reality. Adyr was crouched in front of her, studying her with a strange look. "Wow," he said with a faint smile. "For a second there, I thought you were really gone."

Though her body felt numb, cold as someone standing at death's door, Vesha's cheeks burned with embarrassment. She averted her eyes at first, then lifted her head again and asked in a shaky voice, "A-Are you here to save me?"

But before he could answer, her awareness caught up with her surroundings.

The circle of skeletons remained frozen in place, still locked in their eerie poses. One of her guards lay unconscious beside her—or more likely, dead. And the Devil Raven—the thing that would haunt her nightmares—still perched where it had been, calm and indifferent.

She turned back to Adyr.

He didn't look like a savior from her fantasies. Not like a hero descending from the light. He looked just like her—another prisoner. Another offering.

As Adyr saw the questioning, anxious look in her eyes, he spoke calmly. "Yes, I'm here to get you out. And don't worry—I've got a plan."

He tore a few long strips from her dress and quickly pressed them against the wound on her chest, wrapping them tightly to slow the bleeding.

"All I need from you is to lie down and play dead. The Dawn Raven only feeds on life energy, and the skeletons don't offer lifeless bodies as sacrifices," Adyr said quickly.

It was the conclusion he'd reached after observing the previous ritual and taking the description into account.

"But don't actually die, just pretend. Keep your mind awake." Given how much blood she'd already lost, he felt it necessary to add that part.

Chapter 19 - Evolutionary step

After finishing the bandaging and making sure she was lying comfortably, using the dead soldier as a makeshift pillow, Adyr settled in and began waiting for the next ritual.

His plan was actually quite simple.

He had intentionally let the patrolling skeletons catch him, just to be brought here, so he could check Vesha's wound and give her basic first aid.

And once he was sure she'd survive a little longer, he would ensure that he was chosen for the next ritual. The moment he was closest to the Dawn Raven—unguarded, exposed—he'd strike, catching it in a single move.

He still wasn't entirely sure what would happen to the rest of the skeletons if he caught or eliminated the Dawn Raven—but for now, that was a detail he was willing to ignore.

It's starting. Adyr thought as he saw the two skeletons that had brought him here begin to move.

His theory was correct—they didn't even glance at the other two bodies lying nearby. Their focus was solely on him, the one still radiating life energy.

"Be gentle, guys," Adyr muttered, extending his arms for them to grab.

As a sacrifice, he was well aware of his legal rights and the ritual rules he had to follow. As long as he played his part perfectly, everything would proceed as planned.

The skeletons grabbed him by the arms and began dragging him toward the stone platform, just like the previous offering.

Adyr looked up at the Dawn Raven, then knelt below the platform, mirroring the praying skeletons around him. He raised his arms, mimicking their posture precisely.

One thing he'd observed earlier was how simple-minded the skeletons seemed. They behaved like programmed constructs—responding only to commands and acting within a fixed task-reward framework. As long as nothing violated their sense of protocol, they didn't intervene. And so far, they haven't.

Seeing him kneel willingly, the two skeletons that had escorted him assumed he posed no threat. They lowered themselves beside him, adopting the same prayer-like position.

With nothing left to block his move, only one final step remained: letting the Dawn Raven get close enough.

Under his watchful gaze, the raven slowly spread its wings and glided down from the platform, drawing near. Adyr didn't move. He simply stared, eyes locked on the creature. And as the Dawn Raven drew closer, he looked straight into its eyes.

Into those pitch-black eyes.

What kind of creature are you? He couldn't help but wonder.

He had looked into the eyes of countless beings before—human, animal, dead, living. And he had always known exactly what he was seeing. Especially the eyes of someone whose soul was slipping away—those were the moments he savored most.

But now, staring into the Dawn Raven's eyes, what he saw caught him off guard.

It wasn't life he saw.

It wasn't death he felt.

It was something familiar. Something he'd seen before, but couldn't quite place. For a moment, he struggled to find the word. Then it hit him.

It felt familiar. And yet, he couldn't remember who they belonged to. Because those eyes had never belonged to anyone else—only to him.

The same eyes he saw staring back at him every time he looked in a mirror.

"You're just like me, aren't you?" He said quietly, voice cold and calm. "A monster... just trying to survive the life forced on you."

Then, without hesitation, he lunged forward, wrapping the strip of cloth, torn from Vesha's dress, tightly around the raven's wings and head, locking it down in a single, swift move.

As he held the raven in his hands, he could feel the creature's heartbeat racing beneath its feathers. "Shh... don't be afraid. I'm not gonna hurt you," he said in a reassuring voice, gently stroking its wings.

But just then, a sudden sense of danger struck him. He leapt back, barely dodging an axe that came down from above, missing him by inches.

"What the hell? Don't you see I'm holding your god—or whatever it is—hostage? You want it dead?" He shouted, quickly raising the raven high for all to see.

Before he could even register the skeletons' reaction to his actions, a text prompt appeared before him:

[You captured a spark. Do you want to start your evolution process?]

– **Cost:** 20 Energy

– **Rewards:**

Evolutionary step: Dawn Human

Unlock [Sanctuary]

Unlock [Spark]

Adyr gave the text a brief glance before dismissing it. This wasn't the moment for distractions.

The moment the skeletons saw their precious Dawn Raven in his hands, they froze. Suddenly, everything went silent—not a single sound, as if the entire chamber had glitched out.

Exactly as Adyr had predicted. The skeletons, driven by basic instincts and limited logic, couldn't process the situation. Faced with something outside their protocol, they stalled, paralyzed by uncertainty.

"Don't try anything smart—one move, and it dies," Adyr warned as he began walking through the motionless skeletons.

He had come here to play the main character, yet somehow felt more like a second-rate villain in a cheap play. Not that he minded—he was enjoying it more than he'd like to admit.

Without interruption, he reached Vesha's side. "Are you awake?" He asked.

At the sound of his voice, she slowly opened her eyes and mumbled, "Yes."

But as Adyr looked into her eyes, he could tell she wasn't fine. He could see it—the fading soul, the dimming life force slipping away.

"You're a strong woman, right?" He said softly, placing the Dawn Raven gently in her lap. Then he guided her hands to hold it in place.

"Just hold on to this for a while. I'm trusting you with it. Just hang in there a little longer—we're getting out of here." With that, he lifted her into his arms, cradling her like a princess, and began to walk.

For a moment, Vesha felt his warmth seep into her frozen body. She tightened her grip around the thing in her arms. She didn't know what it was—but Adyr had entrusted it to her, and she was determined to fulfill that duty before her time ran out.

Adyr noticed the small gesture. She was truly strong-willed. And even that one simple task might be enough to keep her holding on a little longer.

Just before stepping out of the chamber, Adyr paused and looked back one final time. The horde of skeletons stood motionless beneath the cold glow of the crystals—silent, helpless, stripped of all will.

I'll return for the purple crystals, he thought, eyes narrowing.

But not today.

Today, he walked away with something far more valuable.

Chapter 20 - The practitioners of the Four Paths

With Vesha in his arms—and the Dawn Raven resting in hers—Adyr navigated the maze-like cave with practiced ease. For him, the simplest way to find his path was

through footprints. The cave's slightly damp soil, untouched by wind or weather, had preserved every step with perfect clarity, offering him a flawless guide through the stone corridors.

During this time, the wandering skeletons in the corridors posed no threat. Just showing them the Dawn Raven was enough to short-circuit whatever logic they operated on.

Meanwhile, Adyr kept Vesha engaged, speaking to her to keep her mind active—anything to keep her awake. At least until he could be sure the bleeding from her chest had fully stopped, and her dehydrated body received some water and nourishment.

"Back in the prison area... why did you save me?" He asked. "Why risk your own life for mine?" His voice remained gentle, but firm enough to keep someone on the brink of sleep from slipping away.

"I—" Vesha parted her pale, cracked lips, taking a moment to gather her thoughts. Her voice came out weak, heavy with exhaustion. "In the Church of Astra... the first three things they teach every follower are: serve, obey, and sacrifice."

Adyr raised an eyebrow. "Serve who?"

"The practitioners of the Four Paths..." She replied, her words drawing out, slower with each syllable.

"Practitioners? Am I a practitioner?" He asked, curiosity slipping into his tone.

"You're tall."

It was the third time across both his lives that someone had called him tall—and all three times, it had been her.

But Adyr didn't even react. The repetition wasn't a coincidence—it was a clear sign her mind was starting to slip.

"Hey, stay with me," Adyr said firmly, noticing her consciousness fading. Holding her steady while trying to move fast wasn't easy, but he pushed his pace as much as the terrain allowed.

To make things worse, the charge on his game helmet was running low. If he didn't get out of the cave and reach a safe place soon, it wouldn't be just Vesha in danger—he would be, too.

"Are you still holding the Dawn Raven? Make sure you don't drop it," Adyr said, hoping to get some kind of response, and he did.

"Raven?" Vesha blinked open her tired eyes and glanced down at the bundle in her arms.

"R-Raven!?" She flinched at the sight of the very creature that had haunted her moments ago, briefly shocked, but her grip didn't loosen. She held it tight.

Adyr chuckled. At least it worked. It had pulled her back, even just a little. It might be enough to keep her mind busy for a while longer.

And the exit wasn't far now. He could feel the shift in the air, the still, heavy atmosphere of the cave broken by a faint breeze brushing against his skin. They were close.

And then came the light at the end of the tunnel.

"We're out. Look—the light," he said. But when he noticed her eyes glued to the raven, watching its every move with tense concentration, he decided to leave her be.

Stepping outside, the air greeted him like a forgotten memory. Crisp and clean, it rushed into his lungs, so pure it stung a little. But the sting wasn't unpleasant; it was oddly satisfying. His chest rose slowly as he took it in, and for a brief moment, he just stood there, letting the scent of damp earth and wild grass flood his senses.

Then, lifting his gaze, he saw it. The sky.

Night had fallen, yet overhead hung not a moon, but a sun.

Not warm. Not golden.

It glowed in quiet defiance of the darkness, wrapped in drifting shades of black and white, monochrome and unreal. Like a pale, lidless eye staring through a veil of smoke.

Unfamiliar. Wrong.

A sun, or a moon, that didn't belong to any sky he'd ever known.

To the right, the forest began. The ground was covered in lush green grass, and two lively creatures were grazing peacefully.

They looked like horses, but their fur was a deep blue, patterned with white spots that resembled stars in the night sky. Their manes were dark, like shadows, as if the night itself had brushed over them.

Not far from them stood a carriage—wooden, but well-crafted and elegant in design. On its side was a crest Adyr recognized.

"This must be their carriage," he murmured, glancing at Vesha. The crest was the same one he had seen engraved on the breastplates of the warriors inside the cave.

Without wasting time, Adyr carried Vesha toward the carriage. He pulled back the canvas flap and stepped inside.

It seemed like a good shelter. The animals grazing calmly outside and the untouched carriage, clearly undisturbed for at least three days, were enough to convince him this place was safe.

The interior was clean and surprisingly comfortable. He laid her down gently on a soft blanket, then checked her wound. The bandage was dry, no new blood. That was a good sign. The bleeding had stopped.

He started searching the space. In one corner, he found small leather flasks filled with water. In another, a box containing food supplies. Inside a smaller compartment, he discovered a pouch of white powder. A quick taste confirmed it was salt. He added a pinch of it to the flask, then crushed a few hard, lemon-flavored candies into powder and mixed them in too. After shaking the flask well, he returned to Vesha.

Her eyes were open, still fixed on the Raven—but now, they seemed to drift, her focus slipping.

"Hey. Can you look at me?" Adyr asked, helping her sit up slightly. "I want you to drink this. But first, I need you to talk to me."

He wanted to be sure her reflexes were intact—giving her water when she couldn't swallow properly would only risk choking her. A stupid way to die after coming this far.

"I'm not thirsty. Just tired," Vesha said weakly, her gaze shifting to the flask.

"Just a little. Can you do it for me?" He said gently, and without waiting for an answer, let a few drops fall into her mouth.

She managed to swallow. That was enough. After days of nothing, something with real nutrients was finally reaching her system.

She still looked like she could die at any moment—but at least now, there was a chance.

Adyr checked the mental timer—roughly half an hour left. He gave her a bit more water, then carefully replaced the non-sterile bandages with clean fabric he'd found inside the carriage. He even changed her torn and dirty clothes, down to her underwear, using a spare set he'd come across. Once he was done, he lay her down, covered her tightly, and stepped outside.

Wasting no time, he started a fire.

Using the camp supplies and whatever vegetables and meat he'd found, edible or at least they looked it, he threw together a quick soup in a large pot.

After a small taste, he couldn't help but briefly acknowledge his own cooking skills with a nod of approval. Even the system agreed, sending a message acknowledging his cooking talent. He dismissed it without a second thought. Not enough [Energy] to register it, anyway.

Then, without delay, he brought the pot back into the carriage.

The air was a little cold, and it would only get colder as night fell. The heat from the soup might help warm the space, even if just a little. And with any luck, the smell of food might lead Vesha into better dreams. If she woke up hungry while he was gone, well—that was a bonus he'd planned for.

Once everything was in place, Adyr lay down beside her. He made sure their bodies shared enough warmth. With roughly ten minutes of charge left, there was no point in dragging it out.

He'd done everything he could. The rest was in fate's hands.

"Fuck fate," Adyr muttered—and logged out.