

## Chapter 20 — God-Poking Rounds

The moment the golden dome appeared over the estate, an oppressive force nearly drove Raine to her knees. Without her usual essence sensory Skills she was blind to the sheer presence, but his Skill bore down on them with a weight that was impossible to deny. Arene was less affected, her defensive Skills making her scales smolder and bright pinpoints appearing in her palms as she raised her hands in preparation.

Then the Grand Paladin arrived in a thunderous crash, arcing out of the sky like a gold-plated meteor. His landing sent cracks radiating out along the tile of the courtyard, bowling over the closest, Copper-ranked refugees. Even where they were, Raine and Leese could feel the shockwave hit them like a punch.

Arene attacked instantly, her terrifyingly potent Skills focused on the Bismuth, and there was a moment of confused motion as the Paladin's golden magic contested Arene's flames. Everyone fled from the blur of gold and red in the middle of the courtyard, most people sprinting into the tower to take shelter from the sudden deluge of deadly energies. A shard of golden energy even spun past Raine's head, shattering against the wall but still leaving a dent in the Gold-rank material.

For a moment, Raine actually hoped that Arene could hold her own, even if Bismuths were supposed to be well out of the reach of Platinums. Onswa might have been powerful, but everyone knew Arene was a better fighter and half Onswa's age besides. Then the noise and fury came to an abrupt end as Arene sailed backward, hitting the wall hard enough to shatter it and leaving her half-insensate.

Golden chains snapped out from the Grand Paladin, his face scorched and blistered but still intact as his Skill bound Arene.

"Honored Bismuth!" Raine said, stepping forward as the last of the other refugees, some older Coppers, scrambled through the open door of the tower. Onswa's fate was fresh in her mind and she very much doubted that they would be so lucky that Arene could be saved the same way.

The Paladin rounded on her and she flinched back from his look. It wasn't murderous but rather detached and contemptuous, a man considering an annoying insect. She had seen that kind of regard in other places and by other people, and it always ended the same way. While Raine knew intellectually that death here was merely a setback and not the end, it wasn't something she truly *believed*, and fear coiled her tail regardless.

"I am Raine Talis, this is my sister Leese, and I believe you were informed of the situation by our companion Muar," she continued, speaking quickly before the Bismuth became bored and flattened them in irritation. Suddenly he had their full attention, no doubt using [Appraise] on them to verify the truth of her words.

"Yes, Muar did mention you two," Nikhil said, completely losing interest in the now-bound Arene and turning to them. "Cato's little pets. What are *you* doing here?" He waved a hand, and Raine felt a direct, suffocating pressure. "No lies, now. I will know."

That was exactly why they had extensively discussed their story on the way down. Leese knew that divine users often had ways to detect lies or enforce truth and she had even had the precursor to such a Skill as one of her perception choices. Which meant she also knew how misleading true statements could be.

“Honored Bismuth,” Leese said, stepping up beside Raine. “The reason we have been working with Cato was because he offered power, and we were powerless — and as everyone knows, power is the only thing that matters.”

“And now you come running to me?” Nikhil snorted, the dangerous pressure somehow only increasing as he regarded them.

“We have seen how easily you destroyed all his beasts and constructs,” Raine offered. “How there is nothing on Sydea that can contest you, whether of Cato’s or not.”

“Of course not,” Nikhil proclaimed, drawing himself up even further. “I have been charged by the gods with removing him from Sydea, and they have given me the tools to do so.”

“And Cato certainly can’t resist whatever you’re doing,” Leese agreed. “As you can see, we’re Coppers, and as Coppers we have very little power ourselves. Certainly not enough to stand up to either you *or* Cato. But we *do* have knowledge.”

“Knowledge you wish to use to beg for your lives,” Nikhil sneered. But he didn’t actually make any moves, his eyes sharp and interested.

“We can tell you that for all that you’ve destroyed on the surface and up above, you haven’t actually killed Cato himself,” Raine said. “The quest still exists. Cato still exists.”

“A temporary condition, I assure you,” Nikhil said. Behind him, Arene shook her head, blinking around groggily before focusing on the pair of them, her eyes narrowed. Raine hoped that she would realize what they were doing and play along or at least remain silent. Arene had been caught up in the plan by accident and Raine had no idea how much she had been told.

“Of course,” Leese said, inclining her head. “Yet even for a Bismuth this is a large planet, not to mention all the space in the heavens above. I am sure you do not wish to remain here for years or more, trying to chase down every last speck of Cato’s influence.”

“Is that your offer, then?” Nikhil said, crossing his arms as he stared down at him. Gold armor still clad the Tornok Clan’s body, his eyes glaring through the slits in glowing plate. “You are going to help me get to Cato?”

“Aside from Muar and Dyen, those of us here are the only ones who have seen what I believe is Cato’s original body,” Leese replied promptly, and it took Raine a moment to realize Arene had seen Cato’s Ahrusk form as well. Nor did Leese say that it was Cato’s *only* body, or that it even held any special role. None of their statements seemed circuitous, but were all very calculated to reveal facets of the truth that would lead the Bismuth to certain conclusions. “And we are still able to reach Cato and talk to him. There are certain things he can only do in his true form,” she continued, without reference to the fact that Cato’s true form and his original body were entirely separate things.

“You want to lure him out,” Nikhil said thoughtfully, obviously liking the idea. “Though you do realize if you are trying to trap *me*, your lives are forfeit.”

“We realized that a while ago,” Raine conceded, which was absolutely true. They were probably going to die — this version of them, at least. There would be others. “But we also know that Cato is, shall we say, unhappy with how things are going. If you continue to kill people who are supporting him, there’s no telling what he will do.” Nikhil’s eyes, barely visible through his glowing helmet, narrowed at them, and Raine continued hurriedly, knowing that she was more convincing than Leese about some things simply because her words weren’t as smooth.

“He told us he has some options that are bad for everyone. Perhaps you could suspend justice until you have the chance to confront him directly? Once that’s done, there won’t be any risk. I only ever reached Gold, but I learned it was better not to give the enemy a reason to play the cards they’ve been hiding.”

“You traitor!” Arene shouted, and that seemed to decide Nikhil. He snapped his fingers and more chains bound Arene, keeping her from even speaking, as the golden dome overhead faded.

“Very well. She certainly isn’t going anywhere,” he snorted, eyeing Arene’s struggling form with disgust. “You will call this Cato immediately.” Nikhil ripped the farcaster off Arene’s belt with a single blur of movement, tossing it to them before holding up his own. Raine caught the farcaster, and then handed it to Leese. “And you will tell me where you are meeting. If there are changes, you will keep me informed. Start now.”

“Of course,” Leese said, picking up the farcaster and examining it before holding it up to her mouth. “Cato? I think we need to meet with you personally. This Paladin is so powerful, there isn’t anything we can do but talk with him. If you want us to have any role in defeating him, we need to meet and see what you can do personally. We’re near Arene’s compound, if that makes any difference.”

*“I can do that. Halgour Dungeon is ten miles away from where you are now, will that suffice?”* Raine could hear the chuckle in Cato’s voice, coming through both lizard and farcaster — like Hirau’s farcaster. She was personally too strained by healthy fear and the Skill of Grand Paladin Nikhil to find the situation humorous.

“Yes, we can meet you at [Halgour Dungeon],” Leese said aloud, gripping the farcaster. “We’ll call when we get there.”

Nikhil sneered and waved them away. Raine hated to abandon Arene and the other refugees, even if the absolute best thing she could do was leave, but she turned and went anyway. She and Leese didn’t dare even discuss anything aloud, merely heading out into the wilderness.

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Grand Paladin Nikhil watched the pair go with a curl on his lip. He found that type to be the most repellent of creatures, scavenging after the smallest crumbs of largesse from those who had actually put in the work to rise to proper heights. They were right that power was the only metric that truly mattered, but power had to be seized by real effort. Simply panting around after others resulted in the pathetic sight of such Coppers willing to betray anyone for the slightest chance.

Yet for all that, they did have a point. While he still doubted much of that other Copper's story – Moore or Mal or whatever his name had been – it was clear Cato had some unusual abilities. If the pair could hasten his task, it was worth letting them scurry around. For now.

They would get what was coming to them, that was certain. He hadn't promised them anything. It might have to wait until Sydea was fully cleaned, but those two could not be allowed to simply go free after aligning themselves with an enemy. So far as he was concerned, they were as guilty as the Platitudes of Sydea.

Nikhil regarded the fire-based Platinum he had captured, who glared at him through the chains holding her in place. It would have been simplicity itself to kill her at that moment, but the two Coppers had implied Cato had certain individuals he was monitoring. Nikhil wasn't sure he believed that Cato had some doomsday Skill he could invoke, but multiplier-type Skills were strange enough that he didn't feel it was worth the chance. The Platinum certainly wasn't going anywhere.

But she would pay for landing a Skill on him. At mid-Platinum there was never any chance for her Skill to do more than inconvenience him, and his face was already healed, but the sheer temerity demanded a response. He lifted a hand and gathered his [Divine Smite] Skill, shaping it more carefully than usual.

"You and your world will be held to account for your rebellion against the divine System," Nikhil sneered at her, his chains holding her in their inexorable grip. "Once I take care of this Cato of yours, you will see how impossible it is to defy the will of the Gods." He flipped his hand, discharging a bolt of divine energy to boil away the side of her face — an exact mirror of what she'd done to him. She bucked as the golden bolt seared away scale and muscle, leaving a swath of bloody bone. As a Platinum she would heal in time, much slower considering the nature of the energies involved, but likely not before he properly called her to account.

He let the Platinum drop to the cobbles, leaving her on the grounds of her pathetic estate as he turned toward the courtyard doors and checking on the progress of the turncoats. The pair were moving fairly well for Coppers, heading west through the heat and the scrub. It would have been simplicity itself to catch up with them, but he didn't want to tip his hand before this Cato arrived. While he waited he strolled into the tower, scoffing at the Coppers cowering at the bottom, and ascended the stairs, poking around the living quarters until he found something drinkable.

It was swill, of course. The standard vintage that came with Gold-rank estates, something he vaguely remembered from when he'd reached Platinum himself. Of course, he'd had the spare tokens to upgrade much of his estate immediately, including the kitchens. By the look of it, the Sydeans were so poor that essentially *nothing* had been upgraded. He wouldn't even be surprised if the maintenance hadn't been paid.

To judge by the bare spaces, maybe even some of the furniture had been liquidated for tokens. The other Platinum's office had been the same, showing how the savages of Sydea couldn't even maintain what they'd been given by the Divine System. If anything, they were overdue for someone to properly take them in hand. Grand Paladin Nikhil was not the person to guide an entire planet, but he trusted the gods had appropriate plans in mind.

Soon enough the pair he was tracking reached their destination. Idly, he wondered if they'd actually be able to convince Cato to appear, or if Cato would sense a trap. Certainly Cato had *some* sort of power, but only a delusional fool would intend to take on the divine System. Even after the setbacks, he probably thought there was some hope, some plan.

Nikhil would prove him wrong.

"Honored Bismuth, Cato will be here in ten minutes or so." The voice came through Nikhil's farcaster, and he lifted it from his belt to mutter an acknowledgement. At least the Coppers knew what was best for them.

He kept his senses focused on the pair, far away as they were. Partly so he would know the moment that Cato arrived, and partly because he was curious about *how* the heretic would arrive. Nobody seemed to have any idea about Cato's actual Skills, let alone his rank, so clearly it would be unusual.

Yet he was still surprised when, in the space of a single heartbeat, something nearly the size of a building slammed down from the sky. It slowed a little just above the ground, but still impacted the earth only a hundred feet from the Coppers with enough force to knock them off their feet. A bizarre conveyance, laced with the odd essence fuzzing that Nikhil was beginning to suspect somehow shrouded the rank of Cato's creations.

A person-sized figure emerged, flanked by four enormous beasts of the type Nikhil had used the [Scepter of Annihilation] to summarily remove. That figure *also* did not bear any real essence signature, but Nikhil wasn't fooled. Cato clearly was using some kind of shrouding artifact, and the odd signature of his creations had to be a poor copy of the effect.

Nikhil crossed the distance in a flash, his divine movement Skill sending him through the air like some great golden comet. He crashed down just as the two Coppers were picking themselves up, landing directly in front of Cato. Immediately his hand went to the [Scepter of Annihilation], pulsing his own energy through it and annihilating all four of Cato's guards — and enjoying the look of surprise on Cato's face.

[Cato – Neo-human – Low Copper]

By [Appraise], Cato didn't even have any Skills. That made no sense, unless the blocking artifact was quite good — or he gave credence to Muar's story that Cato could somehow *leave* reality and return. Considering Cato's apparent power was far above that of a Copper, it didn't seem all that likely. Clearly not above *Bismuth* however, as Nikhil's chains snapped around him without any appreciable strain.

"You never should have come here, Cato," Nikhil thundered, lifting the so-called neo-human up with his chains. "It was folly to attack the divine System, reality *itself*, for the gods have sent me to cleanse you from this world." He waved his hand behind him, at the two Sydean Coppers. "Even your allies have abandoned you, seeing how powerless you are against the true masters of reality."

"I suppose so," Cato conceded, not even having the decency to *sound* like a powerful person. "I doubt any gods sent me, but I return the sentiment. *You* are what *I* will cleanse from this world."

"And how do you propose to do that?" Nikhil scoffed. "My protection is divine, I can destroy your creations at a touch. And now here you are, within my grasp."

“My people have a saying,” Cato said, apparently unperturbed by the situation. “If you aren’t willing to shell your own position, you aren’t willing to win.”

Something hit Nikhil in the back of the head.

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Cato only had one shot. There were two satellites, but they covered a hemisphere each, so the Bismuth’s location was hours of orbital velocity away from additional reinforcements. Fortunately, hitting a small target was actually *easier* with the god-poke weapon than it was with the railgun rounds. The latter moved at a sluggish single percent of the speed of light; the former upwards of *half* the speed of light.

The massively powerful capacitors spat a globule of anti-hydrogen wrapped in unbelievably potent magnetic fields, both to contain the antimatter itself and to hold in place an outer layer of heavily ionized ordinary hydrogen. The plasma sheath protected it from encounters with stray particles or the atmosphere, to prevent it from detonating prematurely, as the slightest touch of normal matter would result in spectacular fireworks. A laser of the appropriate frequency pulsed at the moment the antimatter was released, ionizing its pathway and further reducing the danger of incidental collisions.

Laser aiming also meant he could guide it to within millimeters, directly to the fur on the back of the Bismuth’s neck, just below its helmet. A fraction of an instant before it fired, Cato ensured he had saved the experiences of the two sisters. A fraction of an instant after it fired, the laser strobed and the antimatter round came screaming down through the atmosphere. In those fractions, only foreknowledge and powerful sensors let Cato perceive what was happening.

The round alone, the impact of a few grams of mass traveling at relativistic speed, carried the impact of a tactical nuclear weapon. Yet when it hit, a strange shimmering shield clad the Bismuth’s body, instantly robbing the projectile of its deadly momentum, somehow nullifying the unimaginable velocity. The plasma sheath hit the Bismuth’s immutable shield and dispersed, depositing the anti-hydrogen onto the patch of fur and letting atmosphere rush back in.

Anti-electrons and anti-protons reacted with their counterparts in a way that was not physical impact nor chemical reaction. It was a mechanism deep down in the bowels of physics, below what the System had altered. Atoms vanished into energy, violating the decree imposed by the System and breaking the shield of immunity that coated him head to toe. Something seemed to scream in protest — and the shimmering protection shattered.

Everything vanished in a universe-eating flash of light.

Far above, Cato’s satellites recorded a mushroom cloud rising from the place where the meeting site was held. A sleet of exotic radiation flashed past, then active sensors pried into the roiling inferno, finding that that there were no survivors. Nor much of anything, not after a detonation of that magnitude, just a crater gouged out around the still-lingering entrance to a dungeon. While the railgun rounds might have technically had more energy, the irradiating blast of the antimatter annihilation had a more dramatic impact.

For miles around, the scant foliage burst into flames, and the walls of Arene’s compound trembled as the shockwave hit them. Wind howled as it rushed into the rising thermal bloom.

Arene herself suddenly appeared above the compound, fiery wings spread and freed of the chains binding her in place.

*“The Bismuth is dead!”* Cato transmitted to Raine and Leese, wherever they were hiding in the city. *“Get through the portal!”* Without waiting for a reply, he triggered his own contingency.

Much of Cato’s orbital infrastructure had been wrecked by the Bismuth’s projectile spell, but a lot of it looked worse than it was. Besides which, there were *thousands* of Cato’s satellites in orbit at different altitudes and angles, many of them much smaller than the massive railgun platforms that had been the target of the Bismuth’s ire. Now, gas jets hissed as hundreds of them began to de-orbit.

*“We’re going!”* The transmission came back through the engineered radio-frequency lizards he’d created for the pair. Then he lost contact with them, the radio link attenuating to nothing. Unfortunately he had no repeaters, no infrastructure on the ground that would let him talk to the pair once they left Sydea. He had no way to know how they fared on the other side — and whether the inert versions of himself they carried would ever find purchase.

Shooting stars appeared in Sydean’s sky as many, many warframes began re-entry, targeting the dungeons he’d cribbed from Onswa’s Interface and verified by orbital surveillance. He couldn’t control and reconcile that many at once, of course, but with the basic biology there he could be in many places in quick succession. Copper dungeons only needed one warframe; Silver got a warframe and a repeater at the surface so he could transmit his mind back if he was caught in the dungeon collapse. Gold got two warframes with repeaters, and Platinum got a full set of four new-style warframes with, again, the repeaters. Cato very much doubted he’d be able to get his warframes out of the larger dungeons before their basement universes dispersed into nothing.

A special package arced down toward the capital. He had no idea how much time there was left, but each town’s System Nexus was also an anchor — and especially Onswa’s administrative Interface. If Cato were to free it of its shackles and load it into a proper substrate, he had to start now and abandon any caution. The tools he had were certainly deep into what would be considered weaponry if not warcrimes, the algorithms pulled from databases he certainly shouldn’t have had access to.

“So it’s starting.” Onswa didn’t ask it as a question, instead just studying the feeds from Cato’s surveillance.

The Sydean in question resided in a virtual space, though it was more than that. Even if it was temporary, the digital realm was a full aestivation — a virtual world designed for full-time residency of digital beings, simulating every sense and with sufficient resolution to be indistinguishable from base reality. The one in question looked not too far different from the Sydean’s former office, though instead of the System display, he had a number of feeds in the style of Cato’s own virtual world.

Onswa’s body was still being grown, as while Cato had already made extra blanks of the Sydeans he’d sent down to the surface — it was never a bad idea to have additional frames lying around — he had only just acquired Onswa’s gestalt and genetic information. Incomplete genetic information, at that, since Cato hadn’t had the chance to examine Onswa’s gut biome or epigenetic expressions.

The virtualization had still allowed him to let Onswa talk to his wife, bioweapon chromatophores and syrinx-like voicebox acting as an audiovisual interface, an impromptu viewscreen connecting technology above to the fantasy below. Cato had done his best to give them privacy, though he had of course been forced to listen in by necessity. Strangely, Cato's visit had outpaced news of Onswa's death, so the first time she was hearing of it was from Onswa's own lips.

"It is," Cato confirmed, as he checked over the gestalts of Dyen, Raine, and Leese before activating them, attaching their rooms to the same virtual world he shared with Onswa. "I'll try to get you back down as quickly as possible, but depending on how things go, the System might be mostly gone by then."

"That fast?" Onswa asked doubtfully, even though he had the evidence in front of him. Cato didn't blame him for his disbelief; it could be quite difficult to imagine the scales that automated factories allowed.

"Assuming your map of dungeons is accurate," Cato said. There were several supposedly-undiscovered dungeons that Onswa's Interface had shown, two of them in underground Zones. Those were likely to be the last to fall, simply because of the time it took to get there. He couldn't simply drop a pod directly on top of them, though there was nothing on Sydea that really threatened his warframes now that he didn't need to worry about being stealthy.

"How long were we out?" Leese's voice came as she emerged from her virtual room, poking her head into the office space. Cato waved his hand, adjusting the rear half of the virtual office to have more space and furniture for everyone.

"Only a few minutes," he assured her, as Raine emerged as well — Dyen had specifically requested not to have himself duplicated again. For the moment they could treat the virtual space almost the same as reality, especially since he didn't intend to keep them there. He already had new bodies for them in progress. "But I don't think I'll be able to send you down before the System goes away, because I'm going to do this as quickly as I can. There's probably a tipping point where the whole thing will crash."

Once they'd figured out how to remove the System's influence on Earth, the buildup and ensuing blitzkrieg had been swift and merciless, but there were some indications that a single dungeon was not stable by itself. At worst, though, he could blanket the planet with ground-penetrating radar to root out any lurking dimensional distortions.

Now that he'd tipped his hand, he might have to deal with the actual System-God. Before that happened, he wanted to restore as much reality as possible. So far the local System-God had been quite laggard, which meant there was probably time. But only probably.

And Cato only had one God-poking round left.

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Marus stared at the divination, slack jawed and with the dizzy heat of fear buzzing through his brain. The impossibility of what he'd just witnessed made it hard for him to think, and only faintly did he hear a voice somewhere far away. Only once he had remembered to blink and to breathe did he realize Initik was talking.

"What?" He snapped it, glaring at the insect.



"I said, I believe this shows that we need to embargo Sydea. Close the portals and lock out teleportation." Initik clicked softly as he regarded the growing cloud where Grand Paladin Nikhil had once been. "This cannot be allowed to spread. You will have to monitor—"

"I am *not* going to sit here and watch this blasphemy." Marus said, already manipulating his Interface. "He has something that can *kill gods*. I don't know what sort of heresy can break the mandates of the divine System, but there is nothing on Sydea valuable enough to take that risk." He'd be in trouble, of course, and likely get demoted and have to spend several centuries assisting some other World Deity. But the spoils he was bringing from Sydea, the entirety of the hoarded essence, would help to offset that.

"There," he added, jabbing at a control that he had needed the Interface's help to find. Part of him marveled at the foresight the System had to provide means for a full blockade, allowing the portals to be effectively shut down. Clearly the divine System understood that sometimes its servants would fail, and it would need to give them the tools they required under such dire circumstance. Initik reached up to touch his own Deity badge, reading the System notification that had just been sent, and a moment later a confirmation chimed from Marus' Interface.

[Traffic to and from World: Sydea has been suspended by authority of Marus EIn, World Deity of Sydea and Initik, World Deity of Uriva.]

Not quite content with the notification, Marus altered the focus of the divination and nodded with satisfaction upon seeing the two Sydean portals – both leading to Urivan – faded and gray, unable to be used. There were more esoteric protections that would prevent higher-rank mortals from teleporting offworld, but only Bismuths and above had such things. Certainly, there was nobody left of that rank, save maybe Cato. There was no telling what his true rank was, but destruction alone wouldn't be enough to bridge the gap that such a severing introduced.

Marus wasn't going to bank on that. He was leaving. Diving back into his System Interface, he pulled up old and barely-used options for his estate. The System Space itself was his, the ultimate evolution of the simple estates granted to Platinums. Only Alums had anything close to a Deity's space, and some of them actually had grown theirs larger than most World Deities needed, but even Alum estates didn't have the freedom that World Deity spaces provided.

He had to be attached to Sydea to rule it as a World Deity, but nothing stopped him from abandoning that duty save for the charge from his clan and his desire to reap the benefits of the position. Neither of which stood up to the threat of someone who could actually violate the divine protections afforded to gods. All the power and wealth in the System wouldn't matter if he was dead.

"You're simply *leaving*?" Initik asked, sounding almost offended. Marus scoffed.

"There's nothing left here. Look!" He pointed at where the Interface showed the defense quest spilling out over its bounds again as every zone seemed to come under attack all at once. "The Sydeans have brought their own doom upon their heads. Let them rot. Besides, you seem to want to deal with this, so now's your chance."

Marus would be just as happy if Cato's machinations claimed Initik as well. The insect had been helpful, but Marus couldn't forgive *needing* the other Deity's help. Especially when it had all come to naught anyway, and resulted in a loss of the essence he'd invested in the items

allotted to the Bismuth. Some core world Deities might be irked by the Bismuth's death too, but that was a far more minor matter and easily resolved.

[World: Sydea may now be claimed by a World Deity.]

Marus' interface chimed with the notification and he shooed Initik away. Even if he wasn't certain of his ability to force Initik out, the insect certainly wouldn't want to be brought along as Marus shifted the location of his System Space. There were places nearer to the core worlds where he could anchor it while he figured out what to do next.

"You will regret leaving this be," Initik warned, perhaps even threatened. Marus just snorted.

"Not with that thing loose on Sydea. If anything, you'll regret staying."