

Chapter 12 — Four Conversations

“Come on, you two. There’s four of me, no reason I can’t do four things.” Raine glanced up at the low rumble of the beast-Cato. Indeed, the other three versions were talking with three Platinums at once, filling the streets with the deep tones of Cato’s voice. It was incredibly strange to see him treating titans like Arene Firewing and Onswa the Unstoppable in the exact same manner as he treated Raine and Leese, as if their rank didn’t matter at all. But perhaps that was the privilege of the truly powerful.

“Where did you want to rank up?” He continued, and Raine looked over to Leese. By mutual agreement they retrieved their maps, glad to have something more reasonable to address than world-altering decisions

After facing death and regaining the vigor of youth, Raine wasn’t quite certain what they wanted anymore, but ranking up was a good start. Even if it was to be temporary, better they be temporarily powerful than temporarily weak. With their boosted strength, they didn’t even need Maur or any other party members.

“Normally I’d say we’d start with one of these Copper dungeons,” Leese mused aloud, manipulating the map to show the nearby terrain. “But as we are, mid to late Silver is probably better. We can pick up the rest of our Skills as we go.”

“Might even be higher tier Skills, if we’re delving above our rank,” Raine pointed out, feeling a little bit of anticipatory glee bubble up inside her. At first she had been frustrated at the idea of ranking up once again, but now that she considered how incredibly powerful they could be and how fast they could reach their prior heights – and how well she’d be able to fight – she was looking forward to it.

“New game plus,” Cato rumbled.

“What?” Raine blinked at the looming figure above them.

“Nothing,” Cato said, shaking a huge head. “I do have one request, which I didn’t want to make before but if you’re going to be sticking with me it’s important. Leese, when we were fighting back on Earth we saw the people with divine Skills were kind of linked to the System-gods, and they aren’t going to be on our side. I don’t know at what point the Skills move from just invoking energy to actually contacting or channeling the System Gods, but it might be best to aim for a different affinity theme.”

“I had noticed that certain things seemed clearer after I woke up,” Leese said, after a moment. Raine could see the half-dozen emotions in that one small pause. “It’s so strange now thinking about how strongly I felt about some things, and not for any real reason. I’ll be glad to not have that again, but what about healing? Do we have regeneration?”

“You’ll heal quick,” Cato confirmed. “Not as fast as a System heal could manage, but quick. Plus you’re a lot tougher to begin with, and that’s pretty good armor.”

“Ice,” Leese said, looking at Raine. “Hybrids.”

“Yes,” Raine agreed, and that was all they needed to say. She’d gone a full caster route in part simply because she had idolized the Firewing and was following in the Platinum’s footsteps.

Actually *meeting* Arene had been considerably more intimidating, and she wasn't sure she quite wanted to be that way anymore. The both of them had been quite frail when they started ranking up, as well, from the lean times after their village had been destroyed.

Their new bodies were full of energy, powerful, tough, and Raine had felt perfectly sharp and alert since waking up. She wasn't ready to abandon casting completely, the way someone like Karsa Longstrider had, and they were in the perfect situation to adopt a hybrid style. Normally only absolute geniuses or those with significant resources could walk such a path, as it required a far broader base of ability — something their new selves certainly had.

Fire and ice paired well, too, and Leese had dabbled enough in ice Skills before settling on her divine set that recapturing them wouldn't be too much an issue. The main obstacle was that neither of them had spent much time with weapons, but spear and buckler were solid enough even with scant training. Leese picked up on her thought and the two of them circled around the Cato-beast occupying the bulk of the street to the equipment shop across from the tavern.

She slipped inside the empty shop and touched the small obelisk to see what was for sale, then gawked at the prices. Even the basic, starting level equipment was ridiculously expensive, over five times what it should have been. Technically she could afford it, but it would have been an absolute waste of money.

"Just wait for early equipment?" Leese half-asked, half-confirmed, and Raine nodded. The weapons provided by Cato and their starting Skills would be enough to deal with at least a few monsters, enough that they could start getting proper System rewards.

"I can airdrop some equipment for you once you decide on what you need, and where we're going," Cato rumbled, clearly having eavesdropped through the door.

"Just poleaxes, shortspears, and bucklers for now," Leese said, shamelessly taking advantage of the offer. "As for the dungeon — [Rolech Depths Dungeon] do you think?" Raine opened her map again to check the dungeon in question. It was rated for mid Silver, rising to peak Silver for the final floor, which seemed a good start. Once they had weapons and a full set of Skills, they could try something harder.

"It's a bit far," Raine agreed. "But we can make it there by this afternoon."

"Got it," Cato said. "But it won't take nearly that long." The long tendrils on the back of the beast form, usually lying flat against the scales, flipped out before they could properly react, scooping them up with surprising gentleness and depositing them on the enormous back.

Leese laughed, and Raine couldn't help her own smile after she got over her startlement. It was absolutely absurd to be *riding* something that was a someone and also capable of flattening buildings. Mounted Skills were relatively infrequent, simply because finding an appropriate mount and then ranking it up was troublesome, but not completely unknown. Raine considered how potent such a Skill might be if they had something like a Cato-beast available — but then, Cato didn't seem to be able to rank up, or use Skills. Tempting as it was, going in that direction would be a poor idea.

"Hold on," Cato said, and Raine gripped onto the tendril that had rearranged itself as a back-and arm-rest. Then Cato sprinted out of [Sokhal Town], clearing the wall in a single leap, and headed out into the wilderness.

“I want a duel.”

Cato glanced at the Sydean with the warframe she had approached, the one he had used as an impromptu display. It was Karsa, the deep indigo one with the oversized war hammer and a bodybuilder’s frame, who stood head and shoulders above all the other Sydeans he’d seen so far. He’d noticed she had stared rather fixedly at his warframes, but hadn’t been certain why.

Even as large as she was, a forty-ton war machine towered over her. She barely topped one of his legs, but that size disparity didn’t mean much. The System concentrated power into individuals, rather than into mechanisms, so it wouldn’t surprise him if she could actually lift the warframe with brute strength.

His first impulse was to turn her down, if for no other reason than he didn’t find fighting all that fun. But he had two other warframes available, the fourth one being tasked with carrying his collaborators to a nearby dungeon, so even if she trashed one he could still carry on negotiations. In the interests of diplomacy, it was probably better to agree to it.

“I suppose I can do that,” Cato said, aware of the eyes and ears of the other high-rankers paying attention. “If there’s some sort of System function for it, though, that’s not going to work with me.”

“No,” said Karsa, who continued to stare at him with an unnerving intensity. “A simple spar will satisfy me just fine.”

“Right, well, I suppose we should do it where it won’t scare the civilians.” Cato glanced down through the satellite feeds and the eyes of the still-floating pod a thousand feet up. There was no place outside the city walls that were better than any other, so he just chose a line directly away from where the hundred-ish inhabitants of the town were holed up. He repeated the feat of jumping over the wall, not trusting that the stone would actually bear up under the mass of his warframe, and padded out into the grass.

Karsa blinked into existence right next to him, sending the normally suicidally-aggressive wildlife scattering. He personally couldn’t sense anything special from her, but there was probably some kind of essence aura that warned the low-rank creatures away from someone far more powerful than they. Or maybe Karsa was just terrifying; he had to admit that the intense stare was a little disconcerting.

“How did you want to—” he began, and was cut off as Karsa launched herself at him, warhammer at the ready. Even if he knew this was meant to be a duel, his threat matrix still framejacked him to full speed and gave him several subjective seconds to study her while he twisted out of the way. In general, leaving the ground was a poor idea in a fight because of the lack of leverage, though System folks could solve that problem with magic nonsense more often than not.

He decided to punish it anyway, back-tendrils lashing out to wrap around her limbs and slam her into the ground. They clamped with hydraulic strength around the nearest ankle and arm, only for her to latch on with blurring speed and pull hard enough to actually move the warframe. The forces involved were far beyond what mass and speed should allow, but that was just the perils of dealing with System-boosted people.

Six sets of paws dug into the earth to brace him as the tendrils in question sent warnings about being overstressed and Karsa whipped around to alter trajectory midair, if anything moving faster than before. He lurched sideways with five limbs, swiping at her with his forepaw for the simple reason that he did *not* want to contest her strength head-on. He knew he'd lose that one.

As it was, one of his claws shattered against her armor when he hit her, despite the fact that the force of the blow couldn't have done that damage. The monomolecular edges barely cut into her scales, scoring faint lines in the indigo, but the force was still enough to deflect her past him. He whipped his tail around at her as she landed, the thick armor scales cracking as Karsa countered with the warhammer, handling it like a toy rather than several hundred pounds of metal.

Before she could take another swing he simply slammed a rear paw down on top of her, shifting his weight to put almost all forty tons into the blow. It actually connected, driving her halfway into the ground, but she simply laughed and flexed her arms. The entire warframe was sent flying into the air, and he flipped himself around as she vanished from her place in the ground and appeared above his head.

As she brought the warhammer around he lashed out with his tendrils once again, sub-brain calculating vectors. The volunteers of earth had only a half-baked version of martial arts for the warframes, just based on kinematic models and grappling, but it was one he could use to make sure he was never opposing Karsa's strength. That way lay madness. Instead he used the tendrils to misdirect force, both the initial swing and the follow-up reverse blow, while he tried to figure out what would actually win the duel. They hadn't exactly set terms.

He really didn't want to hit her with the light-gas gun, even if he could get the distance for it. A regular projectile would probably just put a hole in her, which wasn't likely to actually do much, and neither the jamming nor doom payload were appropriate for a friendly spar. Yet he was fairly certain that he couldn't actually force a surrender without them. She'd already demonstrated that she could just heft the entire mass of the warframe.

A sudden tug from Karsa literally tore off one of his tendrils as they both fell toward the ground, but brought her within reach of a middle paw. He clamped it around her, even if he didn't have much hope in grappling, muscles squeezing hard enough to bend steel plate like foil, and drove her into the ground as they landed. For a moment there was silence, but then he heard laughter from underneath the paw and Karsa pried it open, crawling out and shoving aside dirt like it was nothing.

"Are we done?" He asked, lowering the framejack once it became clear she wasn't in a combat stance anymore. It could have been a deception, but considering everything else he didn't think that was likely.

"Do you know how often I run into anyone bigger and stronger than me?" She easily swung the massive warhammer over her shoulder and then took a step to wrap an arm around his left middle leg, the one that he'd used to slam her into the dirt, sleepy eyes slanted happily. "I definitely want to keep you."

“Uh, lady,” Cato said, thrown by the sudden change in her personality. He had a sinking feeling he knew exactly what she meant, but this was certainly something that had never appeared in any wargaming simulation. “You do realize this is just one giant war machine, right?”

“That just makes it more exciting!” Karsa said, trailing fingers over the warframe’s scales. Cato sighed. He knew that some people were just freaks, and knew of uploads who had immersed themselves in virtual scenarios of such degeneracy that they would make the Marquis de Sade blush, but nothing had prepared him to deal with someone being infatuated with a warframe.

Extricating himself was going to be a lot harder than the duel.

Arene watched Karsa go off with one of the Cato-beasts beyond the walls of the town, and she had to admit she was a little bit concerned. There were things Cato wasn’t showing them about the beasts he was using, and that wasn’t counting what he had hidden up beyond the sky. She still didn’t entirely understand what the Talis sisters had told her about the glimpses of his real power and self, and that bothered her.

If he were merely Bismuth or Azoth or even Alum rank, that would be one thing. She could understand that, even if that was power that nobody on Sydea could contend with. Cato’s abilities were too far different from the normal approach of Skills and ranks — as was his attitude.

“I want to know,” she said abruptly, dropping down onto the street and giving voice to something that had been bothering her for months. “Why you didn’t kill me when you had the chance. If you had, then—” She cut herself off, not wanting to follow that chain of thought, but still burning with a desire for an answer.

“Because you aren’t my enemy,” the nearest Cato-beast replied. The last one was discussing things with Onswa, apparently having no issue with the multi-tasking. Arene had seen people with duplication Skills that could do the same, but there seemed some strange and subtle difference she couldn’t quite put a hand on. Other than the lack of essence, of course.

“But you killed the two Tornok Clan Platinums,” she pointed out.

“Tornok Clan — oh, the ratinums?” Cato asked, slurring the word oddly. “Well, yes, but they were murdering fucks.” Arene blinked at the casual crudeness of the words. “You, on the other hand, double-checked on a party to make sure they were fine before coming after me. There’s a big difference.”

“I suppose so,” Arene said slowly, regarding the enormous creature in front of her. There were only two eyes on the massive head, though she knew for a fact it had more perceptions than that, and both of them blinked at her. “And the Gosruk Guardians?”

“Unfortunately, they were attacking me and I didn’t have the opportunity to settle it without violence.” Cato actually sounded regretful. “I was far more limited then, and had less ability to hide or deflect. An issue I have since rectified.”

“So, what, now you’re immortal?” Arene asked dryly, leaning against the wall of the System Nexus.

"It's complicated," Cato said conversationally. "I said that death is a little bit fuzzy where I come from, and that only gets more true with time. Truly claiming immortality seems like the province of gods, though."

"And you're not a god?" Arene challenged. "I would think it would take a god to bring down the System." For some reason that made Cato throw back his head and laugh before he grinned at her with teeth the size of her hand.

"As much as I have been told to answer yes when someone asks if I am a god, I'm afraid I am a very ordinary person, where I come from," Cato explained, gesturing to himself with one forepaw. "Everything I know and everything I can do is because billions of people labored for thousands of years to create the infrastructure for it."

"So can we do that without the System?" She wasn't sure she believed Cato at all, if for no other reason than she couldn't see how the world would survive if everyone was nigh unto a god.

"Certainly," Cato said easily. "But not right away. You can imagine the problems if newborns came out Platinum rank, let alone temperamental children with the ability to flatten cities. It's a poison pill to promise *that* to you."

"Though it'll be your decision on when we get it," Arene said, starting to understand at least a little.

"Oh, hell no," Cato denied, which broke her concentration with shock. "That'd be Mister Onswa over there, and maybe you other high rankers. None of you strike me as dumb enough to hand a child a hiltless blade."

"Forgive me," Arene said, straightening up. "I just find it difficult to believe you would hand us your power. Nor could we really trust that you had *truly* given it over, could we? It's yours, and what you give us can be taken away."

"What the System gives you can be taken away just as simply," Cato responded, the giant beast head shaking from side to side. "Knowledge is less fickle, if more difficult to leverage."

"You're saying all this comes from just knowing things?" Arene waved at the beast in front of her, though she really wanted to wave at the System quest and the impossible proliferation it demonstrated. Cato was quiet for a moment, then bowed his head slightly, the broad expanse of scales on his head lighting up with the System-like interface. It showed an image of one of the underwater Conflict Zones, though upon closer consideration it was moving, as if she were seeing it through a small window.

"This city was built by your ancestors," he said, quiet and sad. "They moved thousands of tons of rock, carved it just so, set one piece atop another in such a way that it would stand for centuries. They did this with no more strength than the lowest ranked of the System, creating something far larger than *any* of the cities you have been granted to live in. Now, the System has taken it from you and turned it into a home for monsters."

Arene stared at the image, the curving domes and the fluted columns, the faded carvings that were somehow picked out in a clarity approaching that of Gold tier senses. The ruins style of Conflict Zone were generally low-rank, even the underwater ones, and so she'd given them very

little thought for a very long time. Cato's description made her look at them with new eyes, some vague longing bubbling up as she considered the sprawl of buildings.

"I've been able to locate nearly a hundred cities of various sizes that were definitely yours. There are several dozen that are clearly *not*, and were brought here or grown here by the System," Cato continued, the scale-display flicking between various Conflict Zones, most of which she recognized. "Then there's some stuff I'm not sure of. It's hard to tell with how old it all is."

"How can you be sure about any of that?" Arene couldn't help but ask, not quite disbelieving but still feeling completely blindsided by such a revelation. It was the sort of assertion that was so ridiculous it was hard to believe Cato was lying. He didn't *need* to convince them, and if he was going to come up with some kind of story it really ought to be more believable.

"When the System came to Earth, it was the cities that became the most intense zones," Cato said, the scales shifting to show something else. Towers of metal and glass; vast spirals of greenery and stone of a scale that Arene found difficult to understand. In the blue skies a thin silver band stretched from one horizon to the other, seemingly tethered to several of the impossible buildings. "We've seen what happens when the System takes over, what things degrade and what things stay." His words were clinical, his voice far less so. Before the display vanished it shifted to an endless expanse of collapsed ruins, rendered in a vibrancy that made it feel that Cato had seen it personally.

"So, it is relatively easy to spot things that were destroyed by the System," Cato continued, voice lightening again. "The ruins it grows on its own have a different character. Different techniques, you see."

"Hmm," Arene hummed, fascinated despite herself. She was far more used to direct action than contemplation, even with all her duties as a local administrator, but she had to admit there was *something* compelling about the abilities implied by both what her own ancestors had wrought, and what Cato's people had done. She had to remind herself that it was still possible Cato was deceiving them, but found she didn't really believe it.

It wasn't what Cato was showing her, exactly. It was that he was not doing so with the air of smug superiority she would expect from a high-ranker, no matter where their power sprang from. Instead of trying to demonstrate the power he could wield, he simply seemed angry about what had been lost.

"...could you talk to your friend?" Cato asked abruptly, peering off in the direction that Karsa had gone. "She is proving to be quite difficult." Arene laughed, startled by the sudden change in topics but absolutely agreeing with the sentiment.

"Oh no, you're on your own with that, not-a-god Cato. I've never been able to convince Karsa of anything." For a moment she was amused, but then the reality of why they were all gathered returned and she sagged back against the wall. She had been trying not to think about how she was responsible for her grand-niece's death, but it was still there in the back of her mind. There were so few children, especially in her family, that she had met every single one of them. She hadn't been exactly *thrilled* with her grand-niece's choice of husband, but if the girl was happy that was all that mattered.

The Cato-beast's paw moved and she instinctively blurred to one side, leaving a bemused monster with a half-raised foreleg. He blinked at her again and then put the paw back on the ground with a shake of his head. Arene would have felt foolish, but she had been in too many life-or-death situations to dismiss such habits.

"I know how it is," Cato said quietly, as if he could read her mind. Which perhaps he could, but it was more likely he was just reading her expression. "When the System came to Earth, I had friends and family die — but some were taken in by the System. I saw them twisted, seduced by the rewards of killing and death. I was forced to confront them myself, because I had to try and bring them back."

"That doesn't make me feel any better," Arene pointed out dryly. Cato shrugged with two sets of limbs, looking pensive.

"A lot of people have already died thanks to the System, and more are going to as I free worlds from its grasp," he said, eyes serious as he met her gaze. "This isn't something I am doing out of whimsy, and I do not take the consequences of my actions lightly. I know I cannot be perfect, but I cannot simply dismiss the wrongful deaths along the way. So I sympathize, and I will do what I can. But I will not stop."

She noticed he didn't apologize again, but in a way what he said was better. One of the reasons that she had abandoned the climb past Platinum herself was how many good people were dying around her. Many high-rankers shrugged off such losses, indifferent to peers and lower ranks who were claimed by the crushing demands of rising up. Someone who was aware of the cost was at least respectable.

"Since we're speaking of death, tell me — how is it that you can bring people back to life? If it's not a Skill," Arene said, vaguely aware that there were some extremely high rank divine resurrection Skills, but she'd never been clear on the details.

"That's a complicated subject," Cato said after a moment. "But I suppose we have time."

Muar glared out the window of the Nexus building. He had been wrong to trust that the Platinums would properly take care of the threat Cato posed, a worse hurt than dying for the first time. Perhaps he had simply been expecting too much — everyone knew that the Platinums on Sydea hadn't truly advanced in ages. They didn't have the sort of drive a true warrior should.

Even without being able to hear much from his eavesdropping, it was clear simply by evidence of action — or the lack of it — that they'd decided to cooperate with Cato for the time being. There had been much talking, and no fighting, even though Muar was dead certain that all five Platinums together could have easily eradicated Cato's war-beasts. In fact, they probably could have removed all traces of Cato if they had truly worked hard at it, but they hadn't. They had succumbed to temptation and could no longer be trusted.

He wasn't going to be stupid enough to say anything about it. They were Platinums, and even if they weren't doing their jobs he was just a Copper. They could crush him as easily as breathing, and if they'd thrown their lot in with Cato they probably would. The question was what he was going to do about it.

Muar glanced over at his companion inside the Nexus, the young Dyen. He had been arrogant and entitled from the beginning, but that could be forgiven because Muar was no longer a Gold, and Dyen was so very clearly angry. And for good reason. Muar might have lost a companion-in-arms, but Dyen had lost his wife. The only problem was the boy barely seemed to know who to be angry at.

Suddenly Dyen shoved the door open, stepping out into the conversation between the Platinums and the Cato-beasts. There were only two of them left, the others having presumably gone off on whatever dire business Cato had planned. He'd seen one depart with Leese and Raine, which didn't surprise Muar much. The pair had always held themselves apart even within their adventuring group, so the fact that they'd broken off without even being upset about Cormok was what he might have expected.

That Cato could seduce a priestess away from the System was worrying, but he *had* struck during a vulnerable moment, when they were all away from the System. It seemed that Leese's faith had not been all that firm, and perhaps that's why the sisters had never proceeded past Gold despite being older than him. There was no telling what she was now, if she was still even herself. She looked different, she acted differently, and that was all the confirmation Muar needed to decide that they'd been replaced or altered somehow.

Muar followed Dyen outside, willing to give the appearance of being interested at least. Dyen clearly didn't have the proper attitude toward higher ranks, since he strode right up to where Onswa was discussing something with the Cato-beast and interrupted their conversation. Clearly his connection to Arene had gone straight to his head.

"Now that this power is available, I would be a fool not to seize it." Dyen looked square at the Cato-beast, or at least as square as was possible. The thing was so large that everyone had to look upward to meet its eyes. "I would like the advantages you gave to the other two. It's the only way I will be able to punish Tornok Clan."

The Cato-beast regarded Dyen, some kind of malign glint in its eyes. Muar had to force himself to stay silent, and not protest Dyen's absolutely suicidal desire to align with heretical interests. Muar knew his unaltered body was fine, as the System had not given him any warnings or protests, and if he felt healthier than he ever had it did make sense. Cato wanted to put himself in their good graces, after all, and ensuring they were properly healed was a minor matter.

"It might be possible," the Cato-beast said after a moment. "I'm not going to kill you again, transport you back into space, and then bring you back down. It would work, but you missed your chance. If it works down here on the planet — maybe." The Cato-beast glanced at Muar as Dyen grumbled, but did not ask. Which was fortunate, as it meant Muar didn't have to worry about rejecting him in a way that did not raise any suspicion. Instead, it was Onswa who spoke to Muar.

"And what about you?" The Platinum asked, and Muar felt the full weight of that regard. "Are you jumping in on this too?"

"I think this is all beyond me," Muar said humbly. "I would much rather return to Kalhan City, and take the time to relearn my Skills."

“Probably smarter than the rest of us,” Onswa said with a sigh, and made a gesture with one hand. A portal opened in the street, and through it Muar could see the primary System Nexus building, stretching high into the air.

“Thank you, Platinum Onswa,” Muar said politely, and stepped through. Even when it shut behind him, he didn’t relax. There was no telling what Cato was up to and how far his influence was spread, and anything with so blasphemous and terrible a goal as undermining reality itself, of *destroying the System*, wouldn’t balk at removing just one Copper. In fact, he suspected the two deaths were due to exactly that, though why he had been spared he had no idea. Perhaps because he simply hadn’t been devout *enough* before awakening.

What Muar needed to do was to leave Sydea and find someone who would listen to him. He had to rank up too, of course, but he already knew how to approach the process. The B-rank Skill he had selected was a *divine* one, because he had determined that he was no longer merely a warrior, no longer fighting only for himself.

Muar was going to fight for the System.