

Chapter 9 — Meddling Gods

Returning to the System, Niya Talur, née Raine Ikent, felt utterly out of place as they went through the rote requirements of slaughtering their way to Silver yet again. Only a few days had passed in base reality, but she and Leese – under the guise of Karis Eili – had spent five *years* living among a virtual Ikent community. It wasn't even a *System* community, but rather a place where they could pursue their other hobbies and interests, the ones they'd discovered only after leaving the System.

There were good reasons for it. First and foremost, it was awfully difficult to adopt a new identity when they were doing the same thing they had always done, returning to a life of ranking up and getting stronger. To really immerse themselves, she and Leese had needed a full break from their original lives and identities.

The second good reason was that there were all kinds of skills that would still be useful in Cato's vendetta against the System. Leese had pursued her biology interests, while Raine had spent a lot of time in the pilot's seat of various craft, as well as commanding war games and troop simulations. It was odd for the two of them to be doing *different* things for once, but without the pressure of the System forcing them down a single path, they actually had room to move.

Of course it wasn't like they never saw each other or worked together, or for that matter never saw Cato. Though he, oddly enough, spent most of his time in the simulation *gardening* — when he wasn't running simulations, at least. Within deep time he was merely their neighbor, not their patron. They hadn't even up come up for air or breaks from the deep time, just because what they were doing, what they *could* do now that they had the option, was just so utterly engrossing it never seemed necessary.

Now that entire life had vanished like a dream. A dream that had lasted longer than their entire new life, one where the Cato they knew was a friendly neighbor who gave them vegetables, and not the distant god who sought to bring down the System. They had *been* bird-people for long enough that the feathers and the half-size stature felt natural rather than some bizarre fevered imagining.

The mnemonic tools and combat algorithms that Cato had provided meant they hadn't lost any of their edge but, now that she was back in the System, Raine found she didn't like any of it at all. In fact, a part of her didn't even want to deal with it, would rather have returned to her beloved speedcraft even if they were virtual.

Cato had warned them about this problem, but she didn't understand it until she actually experienced it. It was the *real* world that felt false, because it was like the entire thing had been on pause while she lived her life. No situation had changed, no developments had been made. No new threats had appeared. It was like loading up one of the saved games she had played in deep time, where everything waited for her to interact with it.

But it wasn't a game.

"I don't think we can ever do that again," she told Leese, even as they went through the laughably easy task of ranking their surface frames up to Silver. "It makes all of this seem so unreal. Not worth bothering with."

“We’ll get back into the swing of it soon enough,” Leese half-disagreed. “But going from the virtual community to this is...” She trailed off and shook her head as her spear bisected a [Tunnel Eater], a monster that was mostly mouth. At this point, such fighting was just a chore to be done with as soon as possible. “I understand more why Cato hates the System, but it would be so tempting to just not bother with it.”

“I almost wish that he’d push harder to make us work at it,” Raine mused. “Knowing that I *could* just decide to go play in my aestivation, and I wouldn’t be punished for it, is this constant pressure in my mind.” Five years ago – or two days ago – she wouldn’t have believed that he would actually grant them that option, but she understood him better now. How alien his perspective was, if this sort of lost time was a normal phenomenon for him. He had even said his father was *from* an entire civilization that turned its back on reality in the same way she was tempted to.

She could believe now that he had no interest in conquering or ruling, or forcing people to work for him. Though that wasn’t the same as being generous. Even for the two of them, there were huge swaths of databases that were off-limits. Some because the information within was genuinely harmful without a specific neurology, others because they were private. But he had freely admitted that some of it was simply information and knowledge that he wasn’t comfortable releasing into the wild.

“Maybe we wouldn’t be punished, but Cato would be disappointed,” Leese said. “I don’t know about you, but I’d like to avoid *that*.” Raine barked a laugh.

“Yes,” she said. “We wouldn’t want that.”

Cato-Ikent was still disturbed, even months after the initial discussion, by the revelation that people Bismuth and above were totally System constructs. He wasn’t certain how deeply to read into what Yaniss had said, and perhaps the change was not as drastic as it sounded, but he already knew that at higher ranks, there was no normal equivalent to the System stuff. It defied analysis, and outside the System it simply vanished.

Testing it would be a problem, but that implied that he couldn’t abscond with a Bismuth the way he could with a Platinum or below. They’d simply die outside the System, and *crashing* the System on any world with Bismuths was a certain death sentence for them. Ultimately he’d have to extract any high ranker first if possible, though whether that meant some sort of replacement therapy under the influence of System-jamming or outright mindripping and putting them in another frame remained to be seen.

All that implied he needed to do a lot of work before the Sydean Lineage got too much further. He probably wouldn’t be able to do much more modification post-Bismuth, which meant he needed to sort out the hard changes *now*, and implement them with an eye for the future. So he needed to at the very least give them several sub-brains that could run wetware algorithms, even if he wasn’t going to be using them just yet.

With multiples of him, as well as different Lineages for Raine and Leese, dividing up that project was not too bad, though there was only so much that could be done in parallel. Most of the physical work was tweaking genes and working out the neurology problems, though he at least had been given more time to crunch through simulations and tests of the Sydean architecture.

He didn't want to overload either of the Talis sisters with input, and even the stealth-detecting capelet was pushing it.

Though he intended to add all kinds of things in the future, the primary project, and the one he wanted to get done as soon as possible now that they had hit Platinum, was adapting the combat algorithms. Translating it all over to wet biology wasn't entirely easy. Not only was he only passingly familiar with the project and the mechanisms in the code, but he also couldn't push as much energy through the processing substrate. He didn't want to kill the brain from overheating in the middle of a fight, even if it could heal itself.

At the same time, there was a certain buffer afforded to the biology by the fact that it was System-augmented. A little extra heat wouldn't cause the same problems for a Platinum as fever would in a normal body, even one with all his augments. Under conventional physics, chemistry had a very narrow range where it operated, but in the System that was no longer the case, and that was something worth abusing. At Bismuth, it might well be that neural connections were more like superconductors, and while he couldn't rely on it he could build in some future proofing.

"Is there any world nearby that's practically deserted?" Cato asked Yaniss, who was proving to be at least marginally helpful. She had her own interests he had to deal with, but it was better than having to fight. Though who knew how long that would keep up, since she'd gotten into a spat with the local temple. *Somebody* had noticed Raine and Leese's presence. It surely wasn't a coincidence that the two planets that had the most significant development, and some of the few resident Bismuths, had been the most responsive to his presence.

"Maybe. It depends on your definition of deserted!" Yaniss pulled her map out of nowhere, flipping through it with mannerisms strikingly reminiscent of someone conversant with – or addicted to – digital displays. "Renklin is a Hunting World. One city and one town, but lots of dungeons. There's traffic, but not many live there."

"I'm thinking a place where having the world defense quest up won't attract much attention," Cato clarified. "Though I suppose if there aren't any high rank people, Renklin would work."

"It's Copper to Gold." Yaniss shrugged and sifted through the map. "Sydea was the most deserted world on this part of the frontier. There's probably others like it elsewhere, but I don't have a map of *every* System world."

"More's the pity," Cato replied. The map she *did* have showed something like a galactic arm, a network graph of connected nodes in a shallow spiral, dense at the center and scattered at the edges. It was several hundred worlds, and if he extrapolated it to a full disk it put the size of the System close to a hundred thousand worlds.

Smaller than it could have been, considering the immensity of the universe.

"I think we should just get away from the Sydea area as much as we can," Leese said, speaking from the orbital facility where she and Raine were listening in. The pair were actually cooking, testing out recipes supplied by one Lineage that had come out of their deep time as chefs. "The System clearly isn't tracking the Sydean Lineage every step of the way, or else they'd have been accosted sooner. And the assassination contract is out of Uriva. It might be that all these issues are local."

“True,” Cato replied to her, though not with the frame down on Ikent. “I’m too used to everyone having robust communications and records. Given what happened with the Uriv Lineage, I’ve had the possibility of that degree of intervention nagging at the back of my mind. But if the news doesn’t spread...”

“I’ve never heard of any [World Deities] making an appearance like that,” Leese said. “Nobody in the temple had ever seen or talked with one directly. The most direct I know of is quests. If it weren’t for the recordings I wouldn’t have believed it.”

“That restraint won’t last forever,” Cato mused. “Once I start making serious moves it’ll be hard for anyone to ignore. But if we have enough misdirection by then, and the Sydean Lineage are nowhere near, it’ll be a lot safer. They’re going to need something to block the actual scrying though, eventually. To hide their identities.”

“There *are* supposed to be artifacts that do that,” Raine told him. “I don’t know if any of us will be able to find one that would work for a Bismuth or better, but we can at least find out where to get one.”

“A reason to get you two down on the surface earlier, I suppose,” Cato acknowledged. He was spread over twenty different worlds already, and now that they had made Platinum the Sydean Lineage could launch heavier payloads even further, cutting down on the start-up time.

The pair were out of easy communications range for the moment, even with the radio plants, going through the dungeons on the slow grind toward Bismuth. The plant network was reaching its limits anyway, even when most of what was being sent was simple text messages. He was going to have to make another pass at the problem, and implement something more robust. Maybe an actual tree, or something else that grew large and so could handle more power and more bandwidth.

He had time for it to grow, probably. There wasn’t an immediate crisis on most of the planets, unlike Sydea, but inevitably something would occur that he *did* have to address, and there was no telling when that would happen. His goal for the moment was simply to spread as far and as fast as possible, and gear up an invasion force for every planet so he could make whatever moves were required.

With his orbital infrastructure it was obvious that he could deal with anyone below Bismuth, and even Bismuths could be removed if necessary — though the collateral damage made it impossible near inhabited areas. He wasn’t sure how he was going to deal with Bismuth *dungeons*, considering the basement universe nature made them effectively immune to bombardment, but they might be less fearsome if every other System anchor and source of essence had been destroyed.

Cato-Ikent wouldn’t have any of those projects, though. He had to liaison with Yaniss, and try to actually convince her to align with him. Though that didn’t seem to be all that difficult, even after he repeatedly warned her that all her power would be gone without the System. It would, or at least could, be replaced with postbiological technology, but that wasn’t the same.

The avian Bismuth was proof that even the System couldn’t twist *everyone* to be a battle maniac. Of course, she was self-evidentially good at it, or she wouldn’t have made Bismuth, but it was clear her interest was more along the lines of basic science. Inquiry about the universe. It would almost have been restful, if it weren’t for the temple interfering.

Clearly the local System god knew that Raine and Leese had been there, but didn't seem to realize that Cato was still a guest. Or at least, the import of Cato's presence. He wished he knew if that was due to a limitation on what such gods could do – say, needing divine users to act as their eyes and ears – or just a limitation in competence.

"This is ridiculous," Yaniss said as she appeared out of nowhere, from yet another go-round with the local temple. "All of my contacts are getting quests to find a new patron! And the costs for my favorite foods have suddenly gone through the roof."

"That seems oddly petty," Cato said with his Ikent frame, which was staying in the estate. For some reason he'd thought that he'd be spending long hours one-on-one, but Yaniss had an entire life to deal with. She didn't simply sit in her estate waiting for things to happen. "And rather limited, if it's meant to be some kind of divine punishment."

"I've spent hundreds of years grooming promising talents and getting them into positions of power," Yaniss snapped back. "It's hardly nothing!"

"That is a lot of work," Cato agreed diplomatically. "But it is also something that you would have to give up without the System, in favor of cultivating Ikent itself."

"That won't be for years, though!" Yaniss scowled, flopping onto a couch with an impact completely disproportionate to her size.

"Perhaps," Cato conceded. "But if the gods start to move, it may have to be sooner than that."

"So they just got away," Initik said, regarding Mii-es with disfavor.

"Not all of us can just disregard the restrictions on interfering with the mortal world, darling." Mii-es glared back. "How many centuries of essence have you burned pursuing this vendetta?"

Initik clicked softly, conceding the point. He had kept a sizeable reserve of essence exactly for emergencies, though he had never anticipated this particular sort of crisis, but that reserve was essentially gone. It would return in time, and once the moons were more trafficked by high rankers there'd be even more essence, but that was not going to be happening any time soon.

He had issued quests to entice both his Bismuths and those from surrounding worlds to try the new zones and dungeons, and if he got enough people running them it would help offset his expenditure, but it would still be years. It had been worth it, though he doubted anyone, even Mii-es, would truly agree. They hadn't seen what Cato could do firsthand.

"Besides which, if *you* are to be believed then capturing just a few of his agents would do nothing! I *am* punishing that Bismuth for ignoring my priests, but what else *is* there to do?" Mii-es dismissed the entire thing with a flutter of her talons. "If any others with those names arrive I will take care of it, but *really*. There hasn't been any trouble that I've heard of."

"That's what worries me," Initik told her, turning to regard the pillared surroundings that Mii-es was so fond of. He wasn't really seeing it, though, as his mind was on all the connected worlds between Uriva and Ikent. "Where *is* he? What is he doing? I would have expected some response to removing him from my moons, but nothing. It's obvious that he wasn't *merely* there."

“You’re obsessing,” Mii-es said, stretching languidly. “I’ll grant you that the business with Sydea was alarming, but hardly subtle. If this Cato of yours hasn’t made any moves, it’s because he can’t.”

“The structures on my moons didn’t show any lack of capability,” Initik said with an irritated click. “You should at least *look* to see if you can spot any of his devices outside your world.”

“I have done some basic scrying,” Mii-es told him. “You should give me *some* credit, dear. So far I have seen nothing, but the night sky is immense. There are no blots on my moons, so I suspect I am unencumbered for the moment.”

Initik let it go. Even if Mii-es was one of the few who actually admitted there was a problem, she was never going to admit that failing to catch one of Cato’s agents was *her* issue. At least she was paying attention, and that was more than most. Until and unless Cato showed his hand elsewhere, most gods just didn’t believe he was a threat. Even the memory crystal showing the strange weapon breaking divine protection wasn’t going to intimidate most as much as it had Marus. A single, fragile, divine artifact did not compare to what a [World Deity] was, and most gods were not as cowardly.

Instead he made his excuses and left Mii-es to her own world. Right or wrong, she would be the one that had to deal with the consequences. But the fact that Cato’s agents had gotten as far as Ikent was alone suggestive.

He stepped out into the transport space, the place outside of places, where all the connections between worlds flowed with their own essence, and considered the nearby region. Cato could have spread to ten, twenty, even thirty worlds, and while that was only the tiniest corner of the System, it was *his* corner. He didn’t actually care if Cato humbled the rest of creation, as he had very few friends among the gods, but if that happened Initik would ultimately be encircled. To say nothing of what might happen if the core worlds fell.

Initik had already done the best he could to warn the inner and core worlds in the person of the Sydean boy he’d sent out on a [Crusade]. While other gods might not listen to Initik’s opinions, Muar would be seen as having the backing of the System itself — and as the System took command of the quest, over time, he *would* have it. That was an authority that nobody, not even the gods, argued with.

With a shake of his head, Initik threw off his mulling. There was no sense in just worrying, he had to take what action he could and let the rest fall as it may. The pair he had captured could stay in the stasis enchantment — he had no hope of getting anything actionable out of them at the moment, but they could be useful in the future — so the only handle he had on the situation was from an odd angle. The *other* creatures that had come from Ahrusk, or Earth as Muar said Cato had called it.

The deity Neyar was the closest thing Initik had to a friend among the core worlds, and not coincidentally he had been keeping an eye on the newcomers. Admittedly, it was only because they were, almost to a one, incredibly powerful. Quite like the pair that he’d spotted, so there was clearly something intrinsic to the place. It had been months since he’d last checked in, and while normally years and decades could fly by without anything important happening, Initik doubted that would be true in this case.

Initik followed the links from world to world, skirting around the large cluster that was at the core of the System and fetching up at the heavy portcullis gate that guarded Neyar's abode. The dark-furred deity admitted Initik without comment, summoning chairs and refreshments with a snap of his fingers in the orange-grassed valley that seemed to be the only thing that existed within Neyar's System space. That wasn't true, of course, but Initik had never seen any other sign of habitation.

"Take a look at this," Initik said, tossing Neyar a pair of memory crystals. One showed the attacks that had killed the Bismuths — both the initial strikes, and the one that had cracked the divine protection given to the Paladin. The other, Initik's findings on Uriva and his subsequent actions, including what he'd found on his moons. Rather than calling his Interface, Neyar simply curled his hand around the crystal and slitted his rearmost pair of eyes. That was the sort of easy mastery of the divine gift that Initik aspired to but hadn't quite yet achieved, even if he was leagues ahead of most of his peers.

"By itself, not a threat," Neyar said. "And yet..."

"Enough to scare the World Deity of Sydea," Initik said, not as derisively as he might have. Coward though he was, the Clan Eln deity had been completely honest and had done his part to shut off the Sydean portal. Clearly it hadn't been enough, but it hadn't hurt. "Are any of these *other* ones from Ahrusk showing anything like that?"

"No," Neyar said shortly. "They are, however, causing other trouble. Not of that sort, but the usual incitements of clashing mortals. These so-called neo-humans have been upending things on War-World Osk. I imagine the debate is ongoing as we speak." He flipped a hand and a scryed image of two gods appeared in one of the arches framed by the gazebo's columns.

"...and been controlling the [Great Radiance Dungeon] for the past six months! My priests have *quests* there!" Initik didn't know the World Deity that was ranting by name, but he did recognize Clan Lundt, the same as the prospective World Deity of Ahrusk. The heavy-set, densely-furred beings had always looked thuggish to Initik's sensibilities, though they wouldn't have become a major power in the Core Worlds if that was actually true.

"Have the rules changed just because some group is *too* good?" The speaker was a long-bodied, large-eared creature that Initik couldn't place, something with a vague resemblance to Clan Tornok but significantly larger and with twice the limbs. "You simply want the essence that they're making me as I, for one, am entirely satisfied with their behavior."

"Of course you are!" Another World Deity interjected, the scrying image shifting to include the newcomer, and Initik realized they were all communicating by scry and Interface. It was simply that the first two gods were clearly attached to the War-World and had similar System Spaces, but the third was not. Instead of the usual opulent meeting room, the Clan Lundt newcomer was at some sun-washed beach with naked females of his species cavorting in the background. Bad taste, in Initik's opinion.

"You're the one who is benefitting, at the expense of the rest of us! War-World Osk is a balance, so we all profit from the essence generation. These Ahruskians are throwing off that balance, even killing *Azoths* rather than—" The Lundt cut off, and the Clan Tornok-alike laughed.

“Rather than bowing to *your* clans?” The deity scoffed. “It’s about time we had someone who would give your forces a challenge.”

“Not to interrupt,” Neyar interrupted. The quarreling deities all focused on him. “Fellow deity Initik has had some interesting experiences with an Ahrusk-origin problem himself.”

“I have a memory crystal for you,” Initik said, glancing at Neyar, who tossed it into the scrying arch. He could track the complex patterns of essence duplicating it and sending it to the others, so they could see the same things he had. “This is from something that also originated from the Ahrusk portal, and it is a danger that may be present in the ones on the War-World.”

“No,” the Ahruskian patron deity said, before he could even have looked at the memory crystal. “They’re powerful, but hardly more than that.”

“So *you* say! They don’t treat fighting in dungeons or with [World Elites] with the proper respect. To them, it’s more like...” The beach deity struggled to find a word. “Like a *game*. They aren’t *serious*.”

“Serious or not, they’re doing better than anyone else at their rank,” the patron deity said, radiating smugness. “And they’re all mine. Teach *you* all to ignore the frontier worlds.”

Initik clicked thoughtfully. That seemed to explain how that group of Ahruskians had gotten to the Core Worlds so quickly. The deity had grabbed them straight off of Ahrusk, offering them the option of migrating to the inner worlds and the core itself, even if the world was under Clan Lundt control. It was the sort of nonsense politicking that he avoided, seeing no value in it for his people.

“I would advise you keep a close eyes on them. Perhaps even ensure they get any quests associated with this phenomenon, this *Cato*, should it surface again. Whether they would be allies or enemies, their interaction would be instructive.”

“There’s no point in sending any of my people *back* to the frontier,” the patron deity scowled. “But if something comes nearer the Core Worlds — I’ll consider it. If there’s already System rewards it wouldn’t hurt.”

“Very well.” That was the best Initik would get. He always considered essence a resource to be used, giving out quests and creating events specifically to drive his people forward. Many of the Core Worlds gods hoarded it and traded it and spent it on themselves, leveraging it against each other in their jostling and sniping.

He couldn’t entirely blame them, as there were hundreds of worlds between Uriva and the core and, even with portals, that created a comfortable amount of distance. He doubted most people in the core even thought of the frontier as anything other than some hazy, remote concept. A place where the lesser members of their clans could gain some minor credit.

“If *you* see anything, be aggressive,” Initik told Neyar, letting the other gods return to their argument. “I dislike anything that can have that power, but can still go unnoticed.”

“Not everyone can simply expand their planet’s influence,” Neyar reminded Initik, referring to the way the moons had been brought within Uriva’s domain. “Even with all the resources the inner worlds have, they would not dare commit to that expenditure.”

"It's all nonsense," Initik said with a contemptuous click. "If not for protecting and improving their worlds, what is that essence used for?"

"I'll see what I can do, Marus, but new worlds don't exactly grow on trees."

"Of course, I understand," Marus said, touching his Interface. "All I'm asking is that you speak to father on my behalf. Obviously I don't expect any promises." He transferred a certain portion of essence and his sister immediately brightened.

"Since it wasn't *really* your fault, I suppose there's no harm in lending my voice," she conceded. "Just don't make any waves in the meantime."

"Oh, I won't," Marus assured her. "I'm not stupid, I was just unlucky."

"Luck is its own kind of skill," his elder sister warned him, rising from her seat. "Any more of it and nobody's going to trust you with anything."

"I am aware," Marus said, politely rising as well and showing her out of his System Space. When she was gone, he let out a long breath and shifted himself to his relaxation beach and summoned a sweet drink to his hand.

Marus Eln, former World Deity of Sydea, was certain that his position would be far worse if he hadn't returned with such a bevy of essence. Though the recording of what the Cato had managed certainly went a long way toward convincing his superiors that Sydea was a lost cause. Even then, he doubted that he would have been treated particularly kindly if Clan Lundt hadn't *also* lost a world to, presumably, the same force. And *that* Lundt hadn't even escaped himself, though if he sent any messages back the Lundts weren't telling.

As it was, Marus was reduced to a comfortable but unimportant post on one of the inner worlds, looking over one of the Hunting Worlds where the various clan scions trained themselves at the lower ranks. It required only slightly more supervision than Sydea had, simply ensuring that the standard quests were allotted at the proper ranks and guiding opposing clans away from each other — or toward each other, depending on the situation. A little bit of conflict did the mortals good.

If he had his way, though, he wouldn't be there for long. Some judicious bribery and leaning on a few of his contacts had resulted in movement among his immediate family and, hopefully, the elders of Clan Eln. In his estimation the main issue would be whether Clan Eln actually wanted to stake a claim on some frontier world, rather than whether anyone within the Clan was competing with him for the post. Most people preferred the more interesting, more prestigious inner or core worlds, even if they weren't completely in charge.

Marus took a long draw on his drink, savoring the sweet, fruity flavor, and admitted he probably would prefer the inner worlds too, if he didn't need to prove himself first. Without a proper success he'd be relegated to something like his current post, or even worse, a peripheral nobody in his family's household. All the essence he'd gotten from his efforts would be frittered away over the centuries until he had nothing of his own.

A mere century or so wasn't much of a worry, though, so he exercised patience as the weeks moved to months without anything of note happening. He was rewarded when, eventually, his

father sent him a message to call upon the family estate. Since Marus hadn't been back there since his flight from Sydea and his current post was enough of a punishment, he had some hope of good news.

The estate was in its own System Space attached to the core world of Eln itself, as most of the Clan Eln households were. It was practically a world unto itself, a sprawling landscape dotted with castles, mansions, towers, and gardens, green and blue with white clouds above. The family entrance allowed him to emerge into the back courtyard of the expansive central mansion, the arrival point surrounded by crystalline trees and divine silks in the pattern of the Eln coat of arms.

It was nothing he hadn't seen before, and he barely noticed the opulent scenery as he walked inside, nodding at the younger family members still residing there. His father's study was deep within, the walls dominated by scry-views from the various worlds that their branch controlled, each one accompanied by a small selection of the local Interface messages. His father himself loomed large in a thronelike chair, broad shouldered and with a tail capable of laying recalcitrant family members flat.

"Marus," he rumbled.

"Father," Marus returned, standing at attention on the far side of the enormous and ancient desk.

"I will not repeat what I said when you returned home," he said, turning his full attention on Marus. "I have had some people prevail on your behalf, however, and there is a certain merit in your decisive actions when it came to preventing any wider chaos among worlds near Sydea. "

"Thank you, father," Marus said, as the preliminaries sounded very hopeful.

"The Elders have told me that the System appears to be generating a new annex already, though whether to replace Ahrusk or Sydea I couldn't say. So we need not wait centuries for the next opportunity." His father smiled, ever so slightly. That wasn't something Marus saw often. "Since most of the clans are not anticipating something so soon, nobody else has claims to annexed worlds other than us and the Lundts. Even if the other clans find out, the deliberations alone will stretch past when it opens."

"Am I to take it that you wish to send me to the newly annexed world when it opens?"

"Yes," his father said, pointing at him. "For two reasons. Until the incident, your handling of Sydea was entirely acceptable. But if what happened with Ahrusk and Sydea signals a new the System is issuing to us, you have already seen it, you know the signs, and will to know to act early."

"I certainly hope that does not happen again," Marus said with a shudder, but he didn't even think of refusing the chance.

"You may have to suffer someone from the Lundt Clan joining you," his father warned. "As I said, it will happen before any deliberations can be finalized so it is unlikely we can squeeze them out entirely. But they have no promising candidates – not after Ahrusk – so I expect you can keep the situation under control."

"Of course, father," Marus said.

