

Chapter 8 — Diplomatic Tasks

Muar meditated within the Temple, consolidating the gains he'd made at Platinum. The Divine System had seen fit to reward him with an A-tier Estate Token in recognition of his deeds, though he hadn't yet deployed it. Uriva had been generous to him, but he didn't think it was going to be his home. Especially not with the traitors still alive and on the loose.

As he sat before the pylon, the System saw fit to speak to him. Sometimes divine guidance was subtle, hints and nudges and feelings, but other times it was more straightforward. Such as with the words that unrolled before his mind's eye.

[The World Deity of Uriva has assigned you a Crusade!

With Cato's influence loose on the frontier, it is imperative that the inner and core worlds are aware of his presence, and how to fight it. Rank up, make your way to the core worlds and identify any agents of Cato you might encounter on the way. Convey the threat of Cato's presence to those who might listen. Ensure that the inner and core worlds have no moons or similar objects outside the System's influence that Cato might infest.

This is an ongoing quest, and will have ongoing rewards.

In recognition of your efforts in combating Cato, you have been awarded a Feat of Glory.]

Muar's tail swished, flexing with both satisfaction at the reward and anticipation that he had such a grand quest to follow. One that would surely lead him to further Feats of Glory over the coming years. Now that he was at Platinum, he could better appreciate all the factors that prevented people from rising all the way to Bismuth and beyond. At lower ranks, it was lack of skill and equipment — and cowardice. The rewards from delving dungeons and doing quests at or below the current rank were far inferior to those above, and those who wished to play it safe — or had no equipment to rely on — were forced into a long, hard grind.

Even with the benefits of the first, generous reward from the Grand Paladin, Muar would have had issues without all the experience he had acquired on his first climb to Gold. Those scions of the wealthy Clans who had incredible equipment and could quickly rise through the ranks would often find themselves *too* reliant on that equipment, and utterly baffled when at Peak Gold or Low Platinum their opponents were suddenly beyond them. Muar, though, knew how to apply himself properly.

Yet even those restrictions paled in comparison to the primary bottleneck of Bismuth and beyond — Feats of Glory. Only incredible tasks, grand quests, and the intervention of deities could award Feats of Glory, and while only one was required to ascend to Bismuth, he had heard the requirements became far more stringent after that. And all of that was aside from the fact that the sheer amount of essence required vastly increased with rank.

It had taken him something around six months to make it from Copper to Platinum, fighting all day, every day, and that was with the Temple quests giving him a massive tailwind in his headlong rush. Now that he was Platinum, it would take five times as long, doing the same things, just to accrue the essence required to reach Bismuth.

A process he now actually *knew* about, thanks to the temple. How it required a specific proving ground, as well as the fulfillment of certain quests prerequisites and, of course, the Feat of

Glory. It wasn't something that simply happened once certain criteria were complete, and required specific facilities that weren't available on just any world.

If a Platinum took up, or was assigned, a post such as a Planetary Administrator or Temple Priest, it made it ever so much harder to reach greater heights. Platinum-rank food and drink, since under-ranked food neither nourished nor satisfied, as well as the upkeep required for an Estate, would eat into their gains and rewards, making it no surprise that Arene and Onswa had never managed to make it to Bismuth.

Those were all things he understood, but the most important thing, the assignment from the gods, was *not* something he had heard of. A [Crusade.] Muar stood and made his way out of the nave, to the office of his superior — though not for long. The High Priest was almost certainly never going to make it out of mid-Platinum, especially since he probably wasn't even keeping up with his combat Skills. But he was still older and more knowledgeable than Muar, and that alone demanded respect.

"Honored Priest," he said, no longer *Honored Platinum* now that he was at the same rank. "I have been granted a quest, and hoped you might shed some light upon it."

"Certainly, Paladin Muar," the High Priest said, giving Muar his full attention. "What has the System granted you?"

"A [Crusade]," Muar said, and shared the quest screen with the Priest. "I've never heard of this before."

"I only have once before." The Priest took a long breath and let it out, clicking slowly in a sort of a sigh. "It is the Divine version of the Grand Quest, one that likely will not end until you have reached Alum, and perhaps not even then. You can expect the scope to slowly expand, and perhaps for others to join as the quest extends to them."

"Then it is a great charge, indeed." Muar didn't wonder that it had fallen to him, either. He was nowhere near stalling out, and he had no responsibilities to keep him near Uriva, unlike the Platitudes or even the single Bismuth that resided on the world. Moreover, he had *personally* witnessed what Cato could do — and his world had been severed from the System. Nobody else could be trusted to have the same investment, the same fire burning within them. Of course he couldn't solely focus on the quest, as he still needed to rank up, but he would not tire of pursuing it.

He thanked the High Priest and excused himself, returning to his room to ensure that he had everything properly stowed in his spatial bag. It wasn't likely he'd be coming back to Uriva anytime soon, or ever. Once he had everything, he proceeded to the Nexus and the portals off-world. He had no specific destination in mind, merely aiming further in. There would be dozens, if not hundreds of worlds until he reached the core, and he would have to make certain they were all prepared. That they knew the signs and portents of Cato's presence, that they could identify his mortal agents, and were ready to take the necessary steps to safeguard their own worlds.

Perhaps Muar couldn't stop Cato from spreading, but he could at least ensure people were ready.

“Isn’t there anything we can do?”

Cato-Ikent regarded the sisters where they sat in his virtual ready-room, high above planet. The events on Uriva put a hollowness into the pit of his digital stomach, but each world was almost entirely isolated thanks to the System’s ban on technology. The only thing he could send through the portals to Uriva was another version of the sisters, and they all knew it.

“Cato-Uriva has their gestalts, and he has the industrial base. And clearly nobody knows about the radio-plants yet, either,” Cato pointed out. The version of himself on Uriva was restricted to extremely low bandwidth communication, bouncing the signal through distant relays to the surface, but wasn’t completely cut off. “Rescuing them from the System-god there is going to have to be *his* project. What we need to do is keep the same from happening to *you*.”

“Not easy,” Leese said, flicking her tail in irritation. “If we want to get the connections we need to make any sort of preparations, we’re going to draw attention.”

“I agree, which means we need an extra layer of deniability, or at least obfuscation” Cato told them. “I’ve been avoiding trying to shove you deeper into my world than necessary because the System is *your* origin. I need your perspectives, your willingness to engage with it, your understanding of its processes and the instinctive social nuances.”

The sisters exchanged a glance, no doubt wondering where he was going. While he’d given them free access to his databases, it would have taken subjective decades to even comprehend the index, let alone go through every possibility within. They were still a lifetime away from really knowing what Cato’s civilization was like.

“I have access to some Summer Civilization technology,” Cato said, pulling up his father’s archive. *Some* was a bit of an understatement, though in this case he cared more about the technology and techniques used to *build* a Summer Civilization than what they created. “I figure we’ll build a deep acceleration server, and then we’ll spend several subjective years adopting different identities. Specifically, Ikent identities for you, and I suppose all our versions will have to do the same for their planets. Full immersion using all our surveillance data, and simplified abstractions of people to populate the simulation. Chatbots, basically, since I couldn’t countenance raising an AI in these conditions.”

He could spot the tell-tale signs of database access as they went to look up the terms and phrases he’d used. It wasn’t like Summer Civilizations – those pockets of digital life who decided to accelerate themselves to thousands or millions of times normal speed – were something they would have encountered before. He couldn’t just framejack them up with their current hardware, either, as thousands-to-one ratios required far better cooling systems to deal with the amount of energy involved. Plus better simulation in general.

Deep framejacking was such a disjoint from reality that without the proper simulation requirements and constraints, someone could learn *very* bad habits indeed. It also required very clear and proper coordination for entering and exiting the sim given the time magnitudes involved. All of that was a lot easier with an AI involved in the process, but an artificial intelligence couldn’t simply be programmed. It had to be raised like any other child.

Even if he’d been willing, that still wouldn’t have guaranteed anything. Even if the community that raised him treated AIs like any other person, they did not have human neural architecture and were in many ways completely alien to human sensibilities. Running thousands of

simulated people, or monitoring enormous swaths of complex infrastructure, were indeed both tasks that they were well suited for, but that was assuming they *wanted* to. Low level algorithms were one thing, but a thinking being couldn't simply be tasked with work like a slave.

"I suppose that makes sense," Raine said slowly. "But, years? Doing nothing but pretending?"

"There was a reason I didn't suggest it immediately," Cato admitted. "We don't need to immerse in a pseudo-System, though, so you can keep up your education and experiments. There should probably be something to keep you familiar with System structure, though, and there are some tools to help you acclimate to new identities without losing your former one."

Even with all of that, it was a big ask. Despite all of Cato's varied experiences as a digital human, spending multiple years on something tedious but necessary was never enjoyable. Then there was the dissociation involved with extreme framejacking, where subjective years could pass only for base reality to barely change when they returned to it.

"Better than getting spotted and abducted by a World Deity," Leese said after a moment.

"It's going to take longer to build the server than the real time passage during actual immersion," Cato told them, confirming the instructions he'd already queued for his autofactories. "I imagine two years should do it, which is somewhat less than eight hours objective with the lower complexity Summer Civilization gear."

"Wait, that short for that long?" Raine blinked, the tip of her tail twitching back and forth. "What does the *high* complexity do?"

"The most powerful I have the plans for is rated for over a million-to-one," Cato informed her, after querying his database. "You could meet someone in the morning, they could submerge themselves in it, and when they emerged at dinner time they would have experienced almost one thousand years."

"They wouldn't even remember you," Leese muttered.

"That degree of time acceleration is definitely to be taken with caution," he agreed. "And we might end up taking longer than the eight hours if we exit acceleration to decompress every once in a while. Or test what the System thinks."

"It won't be done in time to help the Sydean Lineage, though," Raine half-asked.

"No, but I don't need to blend in to handle that. I just need to deal with Yaniss." Cato wasn't sure what to think of the Bismuth. She had been far more amenable than almost any System native he had encountered so far, but she had also exhibited fairly odd behavior. The sort of focus that could drive someone to operate orthogonal to normal action, rational or otherwise.

"She *is* an odd one," Leese admitted. "It may sound strange, but she strikes me as too *much* for the frontier. She's more like that Paladin. The one that gave us so much trouble, not the other local Bismuths you took care of. Someone more fit for the core worlds."

"If the core worlds have more people willing to talk, that'll be a blessing," Cato said, though he doubted most of them would be. Not that he had any particular evidence of that, since nobody he had run into actually *knew* what the core worlds were like, but they were the heart of the

System's power. Though he could take some guesses; any concentration of resources always resulted in a certain set of problems.

That was a worry for another day and a future version of him. For the moment he had to go down and try to convince Yaniss to let the Sydean Lineage go. Fortunately it seemed the Bismuth was interested in knowledge that was easy enough for Cato to provide, rather than some more esoteric understanding. Or the kind of power that was not his to grant.

He was damned lucky that he had already developed an Ikent frame, even if he hadn't descended to the surface yet. Or rather, it wasn't simply luck, as he knew that there was always the chance that he'd need to make an appearance for local politics, but he hadn't imagined it would be so soon. Cato was already in the process of scrambling additional satellites and the re-entry glider so he could run the frame properly.

After his other experiences, he was now ensuring that every un-jammed body was run purely remotely. Every planet he'd encountered so far had an extra volume of System space stretching more or less ten thousand miles away from the surface, even if Uriva had showed that wasn't the limit. That distance still restricted how and where he could use his frames, and what they could do.

If Yaniss wanted him to go deep underground, or into a dungeon, she was going to be out of luck. If she wanted more of the pseudo-display that he could create with the warframes, she was out of luck. And if she hoped to actually interrogate him, she was *also* out of luck.

Cato took control of the diminutive Ikent frame, not much different from the mini-warframes he had used before, and buckled into the glider. The Ikent Lineage was getting a feed directly from the sensorium, so they could see and hear everything he did, and of course advise him. Since the moon was a bit too far for that kind of remote control – over a light-second away – he'd be hopping from satellite to satellite, orbiting just outside the ten thousand mile radius.

The powered vehicle dropped the glider off, letting it ride the last distance on inertia alone and aerobraking hard as it hit the upper atmosphere. Since he'd spotted Yaniss returning to her estate he had to hope she'd prevent anyone in the city from investigating the glider. There was no way that he'd be able to forge through any long distance out in the wilds, even as augmented as the Ikent body was, so he was going to land inside the estate.

Flames licked at the outside of the glider's re-entry shell until the satellites registered that he was going slow enough, and was deep enough in the atmosphere, to discard it, the shell and its drogue chutes falling away as he manually disconnected them from the glider. He ignored the initial System popup, having no intention to bother engaging with even the simplest of Skills. This version wasn't going to have to blend in.

He worked the muscle-powered controls as he aimed for the so-called estate, something between Arene's walled compound and a System town. There were a number of buildings within its walls, but it didn't have the characteristic belltower shape of a Nexus and his surveillance suggested very few people actually *lived* on the estate. Regardless, there was plenty of open room in the walled courtyard to set down, though it turned out he didn't actually need to.

When the glider neared the walls, a metal tendril rose up from within and enfolded the vehicle like a net, slowing it further and pulling it down with surprising delicacy. It was not so dissimilar

to the technique that Hirau had used back on Sydea, when he intercepted a similar craft with grown plant life, but executed far better. From the inside, it was still a disconcerting jostling and scraping as the device was pulled down to the ground.

Cato unbuckled himself when he was down, taking his diminutive self over to the door, though Yaniss opened it – properly and with the handle – before he got that far. Which was far more polite than the way Hirau had ripped it open, the last time he'd dealt with a higher rank. The birdlike alien blinked at him, clearly taken aback.

"You're not actually Clan Ikent," she accused, though whether she was referring to his name or just to his form he didn't know.

"I am not," Cato agreed, ruffling his feathers. "But I felt it would be better not to stand out here." He stepped out of the glider, into a bright but cool morning. The estate got a glance, but he was mostly focused on the Bismuth. She might well be his avenue to peacefully dealing with Ikent. It was just one world among many, but it was *his* world, so he welcomed the chance.

"Nobody is going to say anything about what goes on here," Yaniss scoffed, her beak clicking. "Now, tell me everything!"

"I'm afraid *everything* covers more than I could tell you in a lifetime," Cato said dryly, shifting from foot to foot on the short grass. "But I can start, though I will need you to let my agents head off. They've other worlds they need to get to." He'd confirmed that Raine and Leese – and Dyen – were whole and hale, but he could tell that none of them were particularly thrilled to be stuck in the home of someone so much more powerful than they.

"Yes, yes, in a bit," Yaniss said, waving it aside. Cato regarded her without much favor, but that was the sort of attitude he would have to expect from higher ranks. There were just too many reasons for them to think of themselves as better than anyone who wasn't as powerful as they, and he certainly didn't have the essence to trip their instincts.

"I do want to bring you on my side," he told her. "But it will be more on my terms than yours, and your continuing coercion does not endear you to me. There's no need to hold anyone hostage to get me to talk to you, because I am going to need your help on Ikent. Someone like you will make it much easier to remove the System from the planet." Yaniss blinked at him, going stock-still for a moment, then tilted her head sideways in a distinctly avian gesture.

"You aren't jesting," she said after a moment. "You intend to..."

"Destroy the System," Cato confirmed. "Completely, and everywhere, but for here and now all that matters is removing it from Ikent."

"Like you did on Sydea," Yaniss said thoughtfully.

"I suspect it won't be as easy as Sydea," Cato sighed. "The timing on that implies the World Deity either left or died immediately after the Bismuth. Considering that removing the one from Earth took *considerably* more effort — but you don't care about any of that."

"On the contrary!" Yaniss actually hopped on her feet, talons bouncing against the grass. "Nobody knows much about the gods — you *fought* one? What was it like?" Cato gave her a level look, and she let out a long, whistling sigh.

“I can let your agents go, but I warn you it would be a mistake for me to send them from this place when some wandering Platinums might find them annoying and swat them. You should at least get them past Gold!” Yaniss seemed personally offended by the fact that the Sydeans were stuck at Peak Gold, through no fault of their own.

“Unfortunately, there were issues with their defense quest,” Cato said dryly. “They were recognized. You can imagine that being opposed to the System comes with a certain level of ignominy.”

“That might be something I can help with,” Yaniss said thoughtfully. “And some advice for reaching toward Bismuth. But I’m going to want a lot more from you.”

“I can tell you quite a lot,” Cato said, as there was very little he could pass along that would damage his future goals. Virtually all the knowledge of a technological civilization was a curiosity at best within the System, and at worst outright wrong. “And bring my people up to speed at the same time, if you have some sort of meeting room.”

“Eh,” Yaniss said indifferently. “I can find something.”

Raine Talis found Yaniss to be entirely strange, and not just as a Bismuth. The size difference was actually the thing that threw her the most; her essence senses couldn’t deny the sheer power of the avian, but since Yaniss only came up to her waist her instincts kept thinking the Bismuth was some kind of beast or monster. Beyond that, Yaniss was oddly friendly and chatty, more like Cato than the distant condescension high-rankers she had known of, who separated themselves from lower rankers both by attitude and physical distance.

Or at least, she was to Cato. She and Leese were more or less ignored, off to the side of the opulent room with Dyen, the three of them given food and drink and some place to sit, but held there with the implicit threat of a Bismuth’s power. One that Cato readily ignored.

“I cannot even imagine that weight of metal,” Yaniss said, clearly enjoying the idea of dealing with Cato’s factories. Neither she nor Leese had seen the enormous machines close up, but they had gotten a glimpse of the vastness of what Cato was talking about. And that was the *smallest* part of what he could create.

“When you start discussing the resources you can have – and need – for orbital industry, it becomes mind-boggling pretty much instantly,” Cato said, his voice sounding odd coming from an Ikent. It was too high, and a little bit reedy, rather than the bass rumble of his Cato-beasts. “Unfortunately most of them are useless down *here*.”

“It sounds like it,” Yaniss said bitterly. “So many fascinating things!”

“Which you can’t mix with your System Skills,” Cato warned her. “Everything magical about interacting with metals is invented by the System and doesn’t apply in the real universe. I’d say there’s far more outside the System than in it, but they *are* exclusive.”

“I’m aware,” Yaniss said grumpily.

“Speaking of which,” Cato pressed gesturing toward the Sydeans. “*I hope you won’t need her help much*,” he added privately, by way of the radio lizards. “*I don’t entirely trust her*.”

“Yes, yes. You three need to hit Platinum, and then beyond.” Yaniss faced them, clicking her beak as she regarded them. “A defense quest is easy enough.” She pulled a farcaster from her spatial storage and spoke into it, listening to the reply. “Ulea Town, Rissivi, four days from now,” she said, and Raine pulled out her map to find the world in question. It wasn’t one they’d yet been to.

“I’m on the assassin’s path, Honored Bismuth,” Dyen interjected, sounding more polite than Raine had heard for some time. Which was good for him, as Raine very much doubted that Yaniss was as tolerant as Cato.

“Then you’ll have to figure that out yourself,” Yaniss said, instantly dismissing him. “I do have some advice for when you hit Bismuth, though,” she added, tapping her talons against the burnished wooden table. All the furnishing in the estate were themselves Bismuth-rank, and impossibly opulent. “You will have to determine which Skill will be your cornerstone going forward. I advise you to make it a sensory or movement Skill, rather than an offensive one. The people I know who elevated an offensive Skill all vanished off to the war-worlds. No interest in anything else.”

Raine exchanged glances with Leese, the two of them definitely not liking that implication. They’d heard rumors of various things in regards to the higher ranks, but never any suggestion that Skills affected people that much. Though, considering how Leese’s divine Skills had altered her, perhaps it wasn’t surprising.

“Honored Bismuth,” Leese ventured, putting down the mug of tea that the estate pylon had provided. “We have heard that the ascent to Bismuth is different, that it grants you true immortality?”

“The ascension quest will result in your body being remade by essence,” Yaniss agreed. “All your mortal frailties washed away. It doesn’t appreciably *change* you, though it is necessary before you can use more advanced transformation and travel Skills.”

“I don’t like the sound of that,” Cato’s voice buzzed through the lizards. *“If nothing else it sounds like the bonuses from your advanced bodies might be mostly nullified at that rank. I’ll have some more to provide you to let you keep that edge, though. Going to need some time in the bio-cots before you rank up, since I’m not sure that I can do any of that alteration on a Bismuth body.”* Raine inclined her head slightly in Cato’s direction, then focused on Yaniss.

“Thank you, Honored Bismuth,” Raine said, mindful that she could hardly speak with the same familiarity as Cato. “Can you tell us anything more about the Bismuth ascendance quest?”

“Only one of you can ascend,” Yaniss said, which jolted Raine backward. “You’d have to do the entire ascension grounds again for someone else to break through.”

“But we *can* do it again?” Raine pressed, and her tail uncoiled from its anxious contortion as Yaniss nodded.

“It’s rarely worthwhile, given the restrictions imposed by the trial, and the quest itself is difficult.” Yaniss flipped a careless talon in their direction. “You’ll need far better equipment than that to do it.”

“Of course, Honored Bismuth,” Leese said, before Raine could say something undiplomatic. “That is our next goal.”

"Then you should get to it," Yaniss said, and with another crook of her claw a strand of metal shot upward from the floor, working itself into a circle and snapping into a portal that led back to where they had come from. The ground was torn and riven, but there was nobody around.

"Better get while the getting's good," Cato said. *"I'll catch up with you and we'll see about what upgrades I can manage. We'll make sure you don't stall out at Bismuth."* A chime sounded as they stood and Yaniss frowned.

"Why is the High Priest here to see me?" Yaniss wasn't asking them, but it drove Raine and Leese to their feet. Dyen still managed to get through the portal before they did.