

Chapter 19 — Plans Rarely Survive

Raine Talis, no longer of the Gosruk Guardians, woke with a start.

The last thing she remembered was lying down in one of Cato's odd cots, planning how she was going to get through the portal while the other her lured out the Bismuth. Yet she was not in a cot, but rather clothed and armored and strapped into a familiar seat — the contraption Cato had used to bring her back down to Sydea. She glanced around, finding Leese and Dyen stirring in the other seats. Reflexively she tried to bring up the System, but nothing happened, confirming her conclusion.

She *was* the other her. All the plans she'd been considering no longer applied; no matter what, she wasn't going through that portal. Instead it was up to her to somehow convince a Bismuth to stray away from the populated regions, out to where Cato could take care of him. And possibly to die in the process.

Suddenly she actually *understood* all of Cato's warnings. Her tail twitched uncontrollably, caught in a welter of different emotions ranging from abyssal regret to a crushing claustrophobic panic about a future now set in stone. A strange resentment or jealousy stole into her, directed at herself. Both her past decisions and the other her, existing somewhere down on Sydea, which got to keep and benefit from all the work she had done.

"Good, you're all awake," Cato's voice came from a Sydean version of himself piloting the craft. Raine shook herself away from her strange inward spiral, taking a deep breath and letting it out. Beside her, Leese pulled herself from similar contemplations, but when she glanced back at Dyen, he didn't seem bothered.

"We're headed back down," Cato continued, as if that wasn't already obvious. "You'll have to burn what little money you get from the quest on teleportations, since I can't put you near any of the big towns. We're dropping down near Hirau's compound, since that's on the other side of the world from where that Bismuth is lurking — and he already searched the area, besides."

"Is Hirau still alive?" Leese asked promptly. "And what about Administrator Onswa?" Raine found herself nodding; Onswa was conspicuous by his absence.

"I'm taking the opportunity to orient him while he's up here," Cato replied, busying himself at the arcane controls of the craft. "Since I'm going to need his help once I start the next wave and begin destroying anchors. Besides which, I think him showing up, even as a Copper, would gain attention we don't need just yet."

"I suppose it would," Leese agreed, as most people would not care about or for Onswa as a Copper. Without the power granted by being Platinum, he was just one among many. Worse, he was someone who had *lost* his power, which was not something she had ever thought of before exposure to the world outside the System. Cato's backing would account for a lot, but without being able to personally enforce his will, there'd be trouble.

"Are you going to give him a — well, one of your beasts?" Raine asked curiously, since his larger beasts could compete with Platinums.

"I don't think his wife would appreciate him showing back up as one of those," Cato said with a laugh. "No, it's going to be a bit more delicate, since as soon as we get rid of this Bismuth and

open up the portals, I'm going to start destroying anchors. By the time Onswa's back down, a good chunk of the planet ought to be free of the System."

The statement was delivered casually, but it sent a cold shock into the roiling uncertainty that was making her tail twitch. Cato had said that was his goal before, but she had always taken it as something far in the future, an abstract possibility. Not something mere days or even hours away. She was one of the few people who had ever encountered the System-less part of reality – and what Cato showed was possible there – yet even she couldn't imagine what the world would be like without it.

"Anyway, you'll have another hour or so to plan before we hit atmosphere," Cato told them, glancing out the small window that showed black sky and stars. The four of them had discussed the basics as their other selves, but only the merest outline. Now that *they* were the ones that had to lure the Bismuth out, the need for details took on a different tenor. "The sooner we can remove him, the better."

Raine was almost surprised that Cato wasn't simply issuing orders, but he rarely had. Even at the beginning he had simply stated his ultimate goal and given them the chance to help or stand aside. That was close enough to how high ranks normally operated that she hadn't thought much about it, but now she, someone who wasn't even *Copper*, was faced with making decisions regarding a Bismuth.

"So long as the Tornok Clan dies," Dyen said darkly. "Any plan is fine with me."

Raine almost snorted, but Dyen was still young and angry. Fortunately, she and Leese had years of experience to draw on. Given how easy it had been to rise to peak Silver, she could almost forget that they'd made it to Gold the hard way. But the two of them had been off-world, through dungeons, through ambushes, through encounters with higher ranks that regarded the two of them as little more than insects.

Of course, they could only plan so far. The three of them went over possible arguments, justifications, omissions, and outright lies — though the latter might be useless in the face of a divine Bismuth. Or at least, she and Leese did; Dyen had very little to contribute. Cato had an unparalleled view of the surface and ability to coordinate, but he couldn't take any direct action until there was a clear shot.

"I just wish I could do more on the ground," Cato grumbled. "I *could* start destroying anchors, but I have no way to know how the paladin guy would react. The very last thing I want to do is provoke him into some sort of purge. Or give him the idea that I'm actually dangerous to him, since the only way he's going to be pliable is if he thinks he has the upper hand."

"If it were any other circumstance, I would say he *has* the upper hand," Leese mused. "He has divine protection, he's more powerful than the rest of the planet put together, and I'm certain he has a quest directing him. Beyond that, divine users can commune with the System to get a better idea of where to go and what to do. In the end, nothing on Sydea could hide from him forever."

"Another reason to move quickly, then." Cato made a noise of frustration. "Before he starts using that insight to track down everyone in hiding." Raine noticed the movements of his tail didn't really match the emotion in his voice, as if he were merely pretending — disconcerting, even if she knew the reason was that he wasn't actually Sydean.

Once again the System washed over them, Raine's Status appearing along with the now-familiar defense quest. Once again, she poked a small blob with a dagger to receive completely disproportionate rewards, though in this case what really mattered was the currency. They would have enough for one teleport, and only one, and nothing else. Not even food.

The craft shook and shuddered, pressing them into their seats as the sky outside turned from black to blue. A strange jittery anticipation washed over her, like when she was standing outside a dungeon and about to go in. It was familiar enough that she actually welcomed it, squaring her shoulders, straightening her tail, and finally committing to her role. Beside her, Leese did much the same, the two of them sharing a smile.

"Hirau is going to intercept us," Cato said in a warning tone, and a moment later there was a great screeching and crunching, the craft jostling and flinging them against their restraints. The view of the sky outside was obscured by green, and all motion stopped, the craft tilted at an angle. Then with a horrific screeching, wooden branches punched through the walls and ceiling and peeled away the outside of the glider. All that surrounded them was dense foliage, save for an opening of bark on one side, leading downward.

"Everyone out," Cato said, unbuckling his restraints while Raine hurried to do the same. Yet it was Dyen who was first freed of his chair, bounding out to the ramp of bark and down. Raine and Leese followed, hurrying at speeds Coppers couldn't normally manage. If anything, the versions of the bodies they were using seemed even better than the first ones Cato had provided. Cato himself seemed almost clumsy in comparison, at least in his current body. His beasts, of course, were pure and elegant menace.

Hirau himself appeared at the base of the immense tree that had grown to catch them. The Platinum emanated an aura of palpable anger, though the force of his glare was reserved more for Cato than for them. The moment they emerged onto the floor of the forest, Hirau began berating Cato, even as the massive tree sank back down to be flush with the rest of the canopy, creaking and cracking.

"Why are you coming *here*? You'll just lure that Bismuth out and endanger—"

"*The town is east of you.*" Cato's voice buzzed through her skull, and Raine reached up to find another one of the tiny communications lizards perched atop her head. She hadn't even noticed it during the descent. "*Might as well go, I don't know how long Hirau is going to be ranting.*"

Raine glanced to Leese and Dyen, then readied her spear and hurried eastward. According to her Status they were in the [Dark Thicket Border Zone], technically a Silver-rank area — but they knew they could manage against Silver rank creatures even with a single Skill apiece. The sound of Hirau's voice fell behind, but Cato's lizard sent corrections as they moved through the forest.

Several times they were accosted by the local wildlife: a pack of low-slung, dark-furred scavengers, a bulky, pinch-faced quadruped with thick skin and wiry hair, a flock of razor-beaked birds with four wings. More than fresh Coppers would be able to handle for certain, but with augmented bodies and Cato's weapons it was only work rather than a real threat.

That was all they had to worry about before they reached the town, however, Cato having guided them down practically a stone's throw away from the safe zone. It was one of the towns *without* the non-System building Cato had provided, a huddle of stark white boxes spreading out

from the tower of the central Nexus. A few of the town's natives gave them a look as they hurried along the pounded dirt of the streets, and Raine spotted at least one look of surprise as an [Appraise] no doubt showed their Copper rank, but nobody stopped them.

"The Bismuth is in Rehl Town," Cato reported, just as they stepped through the doors.

"Got it," Dyen said, stepping to the teleportation pylon first and vanishing. His job was to get the Bismuth's attention, and direct attention toward their target of choice. Raine and Leese were close behind, but they had a different destination.

In a way, luring Grand Paladin Nikhil out to a remote location shouldn't be too difficult. He very likely didn't believe that Cato could offer any substantial threat or resistance — after all, Cato hadn't so far. The problem was in offering a target or an excuse that wasn't obviously a trap. Bismuth-rank senses were good enough to sense that an area might be conveniently empty, and recognize how suspicious it was.

Raine watched her entire stock of tokens vanish, and the room shifted ever so slightly. They emerged from the other Nexus into a hot, dry evening and [Halghur Town], where Arene Flamewing had established her estate. She wasn't there at the moment, of course, as all the Platinums had gotten the message from Dyen and made themselves scarce, but hers was the only estate far enough from a town to use Cato's weapon.

More importantly, with the estate defenses active, even a Bismuth wouldn't be able to directly sense whether or not she was there. He'd have to actually be there in person. It was the only lure they'd been able to come up with, because neither she nor Leese could think of a good excuse to get the Grand Paladin out into the middle of nowhere. Not as Coppers.

The two of them sprinted through town, out into the wilderness that separated [Halghur Town] from Arene's estate. The main problem with their plan was that the estate still housed refugees, who needed to be evacuated, and quickly. Their other versions — or the other version of Dyen — should be informing Arene, a bizarre reality that made her feel strange and almost unreal. She remembered planning to inform Arene when their other selves were ready, but had never really considered being on the other side of that plan.

Both she and Leese had taken movement Skills for the free B-tier, meaning they slid through the scrubby near-desert faster than any of the Copper-ranked wildlife could follow. It wasn't a Skill that contributed to any set of Skills Raine was interested in, but that hardly mattered. If Cato got his way, the System wouldn't be around on Sydea for much longer and there would be no such thing as Skill selections.

Or Bismuths murdering the lower ranks.

Between their augmented bodies and the movement Skills, Raine and Leese could cover the twenty mile distance in something like half an hour. Even though it had already *been* hours, according to Cato, they still felt the press of time. The Bismuth's presence revoking the protective aegis of Sydea's Platinums combined with the inability to actually *leave* meant that there was plenty of violence in the streets of the cities. A single high ranker was causing more chaos and death than Cato ever had.

The walls of Arene's compound came into sight, Raine and Leese sliding along the stone with [Skating Steps] and up to the big doors into the courtyard. Without a Skill, Raine couldn't sense

Arene's presence — though judging by the faint tracery of light along the walls, the compound's defenses were active even with the doors standing open. Within, Arene herself appeared in a burst of fire, wrapping her whip around a group of refugees and vanishing again.

In a way Raine was surprised. She very much doubted Arene enjoyed the idea of using her home as bait, no matter how powerful the opponent was, but it seemed that she'd thrown herself into the plan regardless. Already the courtyard was down to just a few groups of older Coppers, those who for whatever reason had never managed to finish a dungeon and gather enough excess essence to reach peak Copper. As soon as she finished they'd have Dyen send the Bismuth their way.

"On," Raine said, making sure Cato's lizard was listening. "Looks like just a few minutes more,"

"Great. Dyen is in place and — oh dammit."

"What?" Raine asked, tailtip twitching.

"I don't know what Dyen did but the Paladin noticed him before I gave him the signal."

"Oh." Raine said, exchanging a look with Leese and then looking back to where Arene had reappeared in the courtyard. "Platinum Arene!" She called, running forward, and Arene's head snapped up. But Arene wasn't looking at her.

"He's here," she said, and a golden dome sprang into existence around the estate.

Raine Talis vaulted from one roof to another, joining Leese behind a beam supporting a shop sign as a bolt of sizzling blue ripped through the air where she'd been. They'd teleported into [Mosaw City], in hopes that it was less crowded than the capital, only to find the Nexus packed with distinctly too many Gold and Silver-rank offworlders for them to handle. Even though Dyen had specialized in killing people rather than monsters, that was only useful when there were two or three opponents.

But they couldn't just *leave*. There was no telling how long the portal would be available once the Bismuth was dead, especially now that the gods were involved. It wasn't just Cato's task driving them to cross over into Uriva, either — Sydea had no [World Elites], and defeating one of those was necessary for the ascent to Gold. If they couldn't get offworld, they'd be stuck at Silver, and Raine wasn't quite ready to abandon ranking up just yet.

"Sorry to interrupt, but the other Raine and Leese are headed out."

Raine grunted, having decidedly mixed feelings about there being another version of herself running around Sydea. Let alone another version of Leese, risking her life to bring the Bismuth somewhere that Cato could destroy him. Not that she was safe herself, nor was her Leese.

A rumble came from below and the two of them leapt out of the way as the roof burst into fragments, some Gold-rank earth Skill sending a boulder sailing into the air. Leese's movement Skill left ice in her path, which Raine used to follow while facing back the way they'd come. She swatted a pair of glowing daggers out of the air with her buckler as she followed Leese by touch, jumping and shifting blindly as she trusted her sister to lead.

Dyen had vanished. He had stealth Skills and she didn't trust that he'd come to their aid, so she wasn't planning any of their movements around it. It was just her and Leese, as it always was and always would be, and none of Cato's gifts would change that. If anything it was easier to coordinate than ever, the two of them practically able to read each other's minds, shifting in concert as they moved.

A brief warning made Raine brace herself, and Leese simply lofted her into the air. She flipped herself around and drove her spear into the Tornok Clan Gold that was hovering with some sort of air Skill, totally unprepared for a flying Sydean. He still managed to get a hand up, but the red-glowing spear punched right through and into the midsection of the disturbingly slinky body. Not enough to kill the Gold, but enough to make the flying Skill fail.

She gripped the spear as the Gold fell from the air, dodging the counter-blow by swinging herself around the impaled spear, thoughts feeling clean and crisp as she took in the layout of the streets and rooftops at a glance. Leese swung in through the window of the building below and Raine launched herself off the Gold, leaving the spear behind and retrieving a new one from the storage of her Skill. Her [Fiery Dash] sent her across the open rooftop while the Gold crashed into the side of the building with an audible thud, and she rejoined Leese on the other side.

There were three more Golds after them, most of the rest of the gathered offworlders having lost interest when it turned out that mere Silver Sydeans could not only keep ahead of them, they could fight back. She hoped that didn't mean they would turn their attention to the rest of the city, but there was nothing Raine could do about it if they did. Already, more than one of the white, boxy buildings bore scars of fighting, with damaged walls or even holes. Without Onswa or another Platinum to run the city, nobody was paying for the repairs.

[High Gold Tornok-Clan defeated. Essence awarded. Additional Essence awarded for tier difference.]

The death message came as a surprise, but she instantly leapt to the conclusion that Dyen actually was still around. There was no way a Gold would die to simple impalement, at least not that quickly. The opportunistic ambush meant that they were evenly matched, three on three, despite the rank difference.

They still couldn't scratch a Platinum, and Raine was thankful that such high-rank outworlders had been ejected before the Bismuth had arrived. The two-rank difference was simply too enormous to be overcome. That would probably never change; Bismuth was a tremendous barrier, and Azoth and Alum beyond it were worlds of their own.

"Three on three," she told Leese, who understood immediately and slewed around to duck into one of the holes that had been made in the building. It had once been a tavern, but a quick glance showed it was deserted, the furniture smashed. Despite the damage, the lack of blood, bodies, or scattered debris showed that the System pylon was still working, at least.

The two of them parted to stand at either side of the hole, charging their respective Skills. Raine still missed some of the utility and freedom of working at range, but the sheer strength and speed of their new bodies, multiplied by the benefits of Rank and Skill, meant that their best approach to any combat was entirely obvious.

Raine's [Combustion Spear Mastery] was fast and powerful, while Leese's [Frozen Spear Mastery] was deft, hard to track, and cut through defenses. Between them, they could deal with almost any defense — especially when they swapped targets, leaving monsters, or more intelligent opponents, scrambling to deal with the difference in approach.

Two Golds came through the hole, and Leese and Raine chose their targets. Leese slid around and under the massive maul a heavily-armored Tornok Clan wielded, her spearpoint seeking joints and gaps. Raine's own weapon blurred toward the other, outranging his pair of serrated daggers. Unfortunately, they'd both seen Raine take down their fellow and neither of them were as unprepared.

Raine found herself in a lightning-quick duel with a Tornok Clan whose blades flung off razor shards of air, gouging chunks out of her armor and buckler when she failed to dodge completely. One of them ripped a burning line along her cheek and she snarled, hearing Leese's spear skirl off the armor of the larger opponent. High-tier Gold armor was enough to defend against Cato's insanely sharp weaponry.

She lunged forward with her spear again, but invoked her Skill a different way. The Gold dodged the strike by habit, but didn't need to because her spear disappeared halfway through. Raine swapped to her poleaxe, the much heavier weapon appearing in her hand on the recover and catching the Gold in the back of the neck as she used her movement Skill to burst backward.

The blow didn't *quite* behead the Tornok Clan, but it did jar him for long enough for her to switch back to her shorter spear and punch a hole in the light armor. She threw him sideways into his companion, staggering the heavy armor user and letting Leese slip her spearpoint into the gap under the helmet and puncture his throat.

Before they could capitalize on their sudden advantage, the third of the group appeared through the hole in the wall, a crackling ball of blue energy hovering in his hands. The two sisters threw themselves to the side, but before the mage could cast a rapier punched through the back of his neck. Dyen ensured the mage was dead before stepping in, regarding Leese and Raine as they finished off their own opponents.

[High Gold Tornok-Clan defeated. Essence awarded. Additional Essence awarded for tier difference. Silver-Tier Essence Tokens awarded.]

[High Gold Tornok-Clan defeated. Essence awarded. Additional Essence awarded for tier difference. C-Tier Tradable Skill Token awarded.]

Raine dismissed the rewards, not needing them at the moment — though she *was* startled by the generosity of the System. Killing people seemed to be more lucrative than killing monsters. Especially when the target was a full rank up.

"Stayed behind to listen a bit," Dyen said shortly, bending down to take possession of whatever was in the wallet of his kill. "They're organizing a hunt for us. Seems you two attracted attention."

"And you didn't?" Raine asked skeptically. Dyen simply shrugged.

"We can handle four, but not forty," Dyen told them. "I'm sure they'll be especially annoyed when they realize you killed this group."

“Cato?” Raine muttered. “How are we on time? I don’t think we can play tag with a bunch of Golds for very long.” Let alone the possibility of the Bismuth returning and deciding to take a hand. He was *also* Tornok Clan, and very definitely would not be pleased with the death of his fellows. Dyen had obviously been hunting Tornok Clan for some time, but with no witnesses it would take some investigation to find out he was the culprit.

“*We’ve run into a problem,*” Cato replied.

Marus Eln let out a deep and relieved sigh. Everything was going to plan, from what he could see through the divination spell he’d had constantly running for the past day or so. He’d been able to watch Grand Paladin Nikhil dispatch a number of Cato’s creatures, and had even cajoled the divination spell to look upward and see the destruction of the things occupying Sydea’s skies.

Even he was staggered by how far away they were, but a Bismuth with an S-Class skill had certainly been a match for whatever heretical works Cato had performed. The amount he’d had to pay out for the [Crystal of Immunity] still hurt, especially as Cato had clearly run out of whatever resources he had used to devastate the other Bismuths, and hadn’t done anything to contest his pawn.

The [Scepter of Annihilation], however, had been worth every jot of essence it had taken to construct the thing. Or rather, that Initik had charged him to make it, since Marus had never bothered delving into that area of his System Interface. While Cato might boast about trying to remove the System, it seemed the System was far more powerful and destroyed his constructs with ease.

He was painfully aware of Initik sitting at his shoulder, watching the divination window with unsettling intensity. As much as the insect irritated Marus, he couldn’t eject Initik, not after the help his fellow Deity had offered. Besides which, he seemed intensely interested in the threat Cato offered.

Marus was still entirely certain that Initik was overstating the danger Cato actually posed. Even if the being was capable of somehow taking Sydea, that was just one world among many, a mostly worthless backwater on the frontier. If a *Bismuth* could utterly crush Cato’s plans, then an Azoth or an Alum was an utterly insurmountable barrier.

Not to mention World Deities like himself. It was true that there were restrictions on interacting with the mortal world, but Deities like himself could manipulate the System more directly, and even manifest if there was something of extreme importance. And of course nothing from the mortal world could actually harm him, unless he spent so long outside of proper reality he ran out of essence. Not that anyone would be so stupid.

“Ah! There are the last two,” Marus said happily. The three other Sydeans that Muar had mentioned were a little worry at the back of his mind. None of them were divine users, so finding them directly was a little tricky, as the best he could do with his System Interface was find the zone they inhabited. Even then, he couldn’t be certain they were the individuals he was looking for, as without actually having the distinct essence signature of a mortal he could only check by name, and those repeated.

However, Dyen had foolishly shown himself to Grand Paladin Nikhil, as if at Copper he could actually fight against a Bismuth. All that the creature had managed was to give up the location of one of Sydea's Platinums before being properly annihilated — because of course the Platinums had gone into hiding like the cowards they were. Marus could have informed Nikhil the moment the Paladin invoked his meditation Skill, but the Bismuth had been far too busy cleansing Cato's influence from Sydea. Something Marus very much enjoyed seeing.

Now that the other two were within sight, Marus felt that all the potential loose ends were taken care of. He doubted that Coppers could cause the same amount of grief as Cato, but he did remember that the beasts Cato used had no more essence than a Copper, so he wasn't quite willing to dismiss them entirely. But once they were all dead, it would just be a matter of cleaning up the pieces.