

## Chapter 10 — Spreading Out

“Nobody’s nearby,” Leese reported, as Raine withdrew the new, much larger and much heavier Cato-spear from her spatial storage. Not that either of them expected anyone else to be atop the enormous plateau, but their previous run-ins had shown that they were more obvious than they would have liked. In a process that had become exceedingly familiar, Raine prepared the weapon by slotting in the small vial of living green powder, revived with water, and then hefted it as she aimed into the air.

The air boomed as the heavy spear vanished into the night sky over the world of Kesul, dozens of links away from where Sydea used to be. It was just one of many worlds they’d seeded since their ascension to Platinum, working their way through the map that Cato had gotten from Yaniss. Both to stay away from the area near Uriva, where all their trouble originated, and to catch up their equipment. They’d taken to cycling between delving through dungeons and striking out to new worlds, seeding a few dozen before returning to the most promising spots.

“Which dungeon was next?” Raine knew the list they’d gotten from Cato just as well as Leese did – she hardly forgot anything anymore – but Leese was better at actually using that knowledge.

“[Great Zokan Heights Dungeon],” Leese said, waving in the direction of the far end of the plateau. “It has a chance of spear growth weapons. Not much, but it’s something.”

“*That* would be a relief,” Raine said. At Platinum, they were really feeling the lack of appropriate equipment. Even if it was lower rank, the multiplier-type equipment they’d found before was surprisingly powerful with their advantages, giving them strength and speed above anything a normal, well-equipped Platinum would have, but their edge had been distinctly blunted with the vast majority of their equipment being catch-as-catch-can Silver and Gold drops.

The two of them turned, and their movement Skills brought them across the plateau and its nearly continent-sized breadth in a matter of minutes. Each step of her still B-tier [Inferno Footsteps] blinked her forward in space, while beside her Leese’s ice equivalent did something similar with bursts of fire and frost flickering across the landscape. It wasn’t like Arene’s wings, back on Sydea, but it was still a genuine teleportation.

Even months later, Raine Talis found Platinum to be both unbelievable and underwhelming.

Unbelievable, because for most of her life a rank that high had been a distant dream, the end result of ages of hard work and scraping by. They’d saved tokens and taken risks for years just to reach Gold, and moving past Gold would have been harder still. Underwhelming, because with Cato as a patron it had not only been fairly easy, but was now merely the uncomfortable middle child between the anonymity of Gold and the true power of Bismuth.

They wouldn’t even know if they could jump directly to Bismuth until they reached the cap and got the quest, and could see if they had already completed a Feat of Glory. Something that was still a long time away. Before, their ability to delve a rank upward meant that by the time they completed the ascension quest they had a good amount of essence banked, enough to jump them partway through the new tier.

For Platinum, it was only a bare start, and they couldn't delve into Peak Bismuth dungeons — for two reasons. The first was that they simply didn't have that power just yet. Low Bismuth was possible, but it was slower and rougher than in previous ranks. The second was that there just weren't many Bismuth dungeons around.

It turned out that, at least on the frontier worlds, Platinum was the highest rank around. There would be maybe one Bismuth dungeon a world, for those with the best infrastructure, and even those were of lower tiers anyway. [Great Zokan Heights Dungeon] was one such. If they wanted to delve at higher ranks, they needed to head to the inner and core worlds — and for *that*, they needed more upgrades.

Cato called it *grinding*, from his experience outside the System. Something that applied to people who *weren't* risking their lives with every fight and places where equipment wasn't something worth killing over. A group that included both her and Leese now, so that was what she'd done to acquire the overloaded [Throwing Mastery] skill. The entire concept of grinding was still odd to her, because most people strived to make it through the ranks rather than focusing on equipment.

The two of them landed just outside the dungeon, the entrance to which was marked by a massive ring of purple standing stones, each of which was laced with glowing yellow veins. The entrance itself was at the base of a tower of the same purple material, which was as wide across at its base as a capital city and rose hundreds of feet into the air. Not as big as some of Cato's constructions, but larger than any other single building she'd seen so far.

[Welcome to Great Zokan Heights Dungeon! Recommended Rank: Low Bismuth]

It wasn't their *first* Bismuth dungeon, but the first one had been for *Fresh* Bismuths, and the monsters inside had mostly just been faster, stronger, and bigger. They lacked the complex Skill-like powers that Bismuth monsters could wield, and in a simple contest of power Raine and Leese had a significant edge. [Great Zokan Heights Dungeon] promised to be more of a challenge.

They stepped through the entrance, readying spears and shields, and climbed the broad, purple steps of the circular staircase. When they emerged, it was into a brilliant daytime, a vast blue sky with white clouds and buildings — towers, castles, fortresses, and hulking dark pyramids — floating in the air. There were no paths up; anyone who wished to climb the dungeon would need flight or something like it, but that was only to be expected at Bismuth.

The way to the next floor wasn't even visible, somewhere in the buildings scattered across the level's sky. Unlike Copper and Silver dungeons, which could be done in hours or days, a Bismuth dungeon could take *weeks* to get through, simply because of the scale of the things. Raine couldn't begin to imagine what even higher ranks were like.

Though the constructions drew the eye upward, her capelet warned her of vibrations from below. She and Leese vaulted into the air just as a massive maw burst from the ground, teeth clashing shut on empty air. The wyrm snorted, a heavy gust of wind laden with poison, and Raine swapped to her poleaxe. The weapon burst into flame as she invoked her Skill, a fiery aura wrapping up around her entire body and burning off the poison. Though with their bodies, poison was a particularly impotent form of attack.

Unlike for most people, her fire was *blue* and shed very little light in the spectrums most people could see. Cato had done much grumbling about how physics didn't apply within the System, but it seemed some concepts still translated. He had helped her figure out a much hotter flame, and Leese had been instructed on exotic forms of ice, ones that were as hard as steel even without the System's aid.

The differences were small, but they had helped push both her and Leese's primary offensive Skills to A-tier. When her poleaxe came down, wreathed in pale fire, it cut a deep, searing gouge through the thick hide of the wyrm's head. Leese was immediately behind her, punching into the wound Raine had opened and sending expanding ice crystals through its skull.

For a Platinum that would have been enough, but the Bismuth wyrm, a craggy brown monstrosity with teeth the size of a person's body, merely shook it off and dived back into the ground to ambush them from another angle. Despite its enormous size, the thing managed to submerge with barely a ripple, leaving only a patch of disturbed grass where it had been.

The two of them waited in midair, Raine hovering on jets of fire pluming from her feet while Leese stood on a slab of ice suspended above the ground. She wasn't sure how much difficulty normal Platinites – or Bismuths – would have had in tracking it underground, but with the additional sensitivity from Cato's anti-stealth capes she found it easy enough. When it broke out again they were ready, falling like twin stars, the impacts booming through the dungeon and sending the wyrm writhing for a moment before it went limp.

[Trembling Greatwurm defeated. Essence awarded. Additional essence awarded for defeating an enemy of higher rank. Bismuth tokens awarded]

The corpse vanished back into the dungeon, but the aftereffects of the poison breath remained, blighted and sickly plants strewn across the ground. Raine was glad that they were immune to that sort of thing, though she was worried about her communications lizard and capelet. They didn't have the same benefit, essentially only Copper even if they were Cato's creatures, and far too vulnerable to the kind of peripheral damage both Raine and Leese could brush off as nothing.

She reached up to pet the lizard where it crouched on her head, stuck to her scales, and then transferred it to an inside pocket of her shirt to protect it. Then she exchanged nods with Leese – who had already stowed her lizard – and launched herself upward, away from whatever distractions there might be on the ground. It was clear the important things were above, and the [Trembling Greatwurm] was likely only to discourage retreating to or camping on the ground. Great winged things wheeled and circled overhead, casting huge shadows from a false sun and flitting from building to building.

After finding out that some of the dungeons and [Conflict Zones] on Sydea had been made out of the original cities and buildings of Sydea before the System, she had wondered how true that was for other worlds. All the buildings levitating in the air, serving as nests for monsters or beasts, might well have been built by the original inhabitants of Kesul, whoever they might have been. The odd markings here and there, over doors or windows, might be writing in a language destroyed by the System.

Such thoughts weren't useful, not when they had to keep an eye out for attacks that might come at any moment, but they intruded nonetheless. At least her brain was sharp enough that, even

while musing over the presence of very un-System-like buildings inside a dungeon, she still reacted instantly to the sudden appearance of a slate-gray bird emerging from the stones of the castle wall. Her capelet caught up a fraction of an instant later; for all its useful and incredible perceptual abilities, it was *slow*. Noticeably so at Platinum, and at Bismuth there was no way it could keep up.

A ghostly spear of blue fire burst forth from the point of her weapon as she thrust it at the enemy, just behind Leese's own frozen arc from her poleaxe. Leese's blow cut a frozen path along the metallic feathers, piercing deep into the bird, while her own follow-up fire shattered everything that was frozen. Two simple cuts turned into a massive gaping wound, but once again that wasn't enough to fell a Bismuth.

The next few minutes turned into a spiraling aerial duel as the bird tried to chase them down, launching its own feathers and controlling them to turn the area into a storm of sharp-edged, metallic blades. It was impossible to avoid them all, and the quality of their armor told as it took far more damage than it should have. Exposed scales were only barely scored; a combination of Cato's augments and their own rank and toughness multiplier equipment rendering them actually sturdier than their armor.

[Razored Templebeak defeated. Essence awarded. Additional essence awarded for defeating an enemy of higher rank. Bismuth tokens awarded]

Eventually it fell, plummeting to the floor below, and the two of them entered the castle. There they both changed to spear and buckler to take advantage of the close confines, creeping through the hall until they spotted the first pack of monsters. They looked like bird-beings made out of some crystalline material, though Raine was sure they weren't nearly as fragile as they looked.

Perhaps they didn't have to clear the castle to finish the floor, but they needed the chances at drops and the essence gain from the Bismuth-level foes. So it was a long, slow grind through the castle, where each monster not only had Bismuth level strength and speed, but wide-area abilities that were supposed to contest what a Bismuth ought to have. As Platitudes, they had to simply brute-force their way through, relying on their superior physical abilities to augment their Skills and crush armor, pierce hide, and shrug off damage. Worse, they needed to trade off who got the final blow in order to equalize essence income and drop rates, making the end of every fight incredibly tedious.

By the time they finished the Dungeon Elites at the end of the castle – what Cato termed a *miniboss* – they were exhausted, nursing dozens of small injuries, and in dire need of a rest. Fortunately, or deliberately, there was a safe zone at the end of the castle, behind the throne room of the final fight, where they could rest and count their gains.

"I think this one's yours," Raine said, flipping a B-tier Skill token to Leese. Tokens were a faster and surer way of upgrading a Skill than working through mastery of it, but finding anything above B was incredibly rare. Even B-tier itself wasn't common, the abundance of skill tokens of that tier only coming through their ability to dive a rank ahead.

"We can probably start selling these soon," Leese said, the token vanishing as she upgraded her secondary offensive skill. She had taken [Inevitable Avalanche], which gave her a forceful option to go with the precision of her [Blizzard Spear]. Raine had gone in the other direction,

taking [Dance of Conflagration] to give her something delicate and precise, providing her more opportunity to land the ravaging hits of [Inferno Spear].

“Maybe,” Raine said doubtfully. “Best not to draw any real attention, though. Considering what happened on Uriva.” Leese flicked her tail in acknowledgement and pulled out one of the actual equipment drops they’d gotten, a pair of footwraps, while Raine retrieved a crystalline skirt from her spatial storage, giving it a thorough [Appraise].

[Zokan Crystal Armored Skirt

Tier: C

Rank: Bismuth

Coverage: Abdomen, Upper Legs

This armored skirt provides moderate protection against blunt damage, and significant protection against all other types. It provides a multiplier effect to all Light and Sound based Skills.]

Even if it was the exact kind of gear they wanted, the relatively rare multiplier type, neither she nor Leese had any Skills of that sort, so its secondary effect was useless. Yet for sheer protection it was probably worth to switch to it. Her current pants were D-Tier, Platinum-rank padded chain that added to the amount she could lift. Which was marginally effective in grapples, but they wouldn’t be grappling anything Bismuth-rank.

Each of the buildings floating in the sky was a similar experience, taking almost an entire day every time they cleared one. Then they finally reached the [Floor Guardian] at the top, and proceeded to the next level of the dungeon — an enormous mountain beset by storms of flaming hail and black lightning. They took a moment to change out some of their resistance accessories, and started the climb.

In all, it was nearly a month to clear the entire dungeon, only able to conquer the final [Dungeon Guardian] thanks to new equipment they had acquired on their climb. Yet they didn’t get the drops they *actually* wanted, so they had to start all over again. Being able to delve Low Bismuth at Mid Platinum was absolutely jaw-dropping by normal standards, but they had been spoiled by the power of Cato’s gifts, and the task was more tedious than anything.

By the time they were running low on supplies, kept in their spatial bags, Cato was well established on Kesul and had no trouble dropping them more. Better, they weren’t just the usual sticks and drinks, but entire packaged boxes with instructions for simply adding water and having Raine heat them with a fire Skill. A few were even meant to be chilled with Leese’s ice, something called *ice cream* — one of Cato’s earth-words.

Yet it wasn’t actually Cato who had come up with these things, not entirely. Over the past few years the various versions of themselves had been busy on their own worlds, and not all of them had been down on the surface. The meals had come courtesy of themselves, tailored for their own tastes, and Raine had no idea how to feel about it. Knowing in the abstract there were other versions of them out there was one thing; getting gifts from themselves, knowing exactly what they’d like best, was quite another.

*“I can sanitize it more if you want,” Cato offered, clearly recognizing their discomfort. “So I’m not rubbing it in your faces. It’s just I didn’t want to take credit for someone else’s work.”*

“No, we can handle it,” Leese said for them, the pair of them sitting outside the tower. More of the radio plants had been part of the various packages Cato had dropped for them, so they had no problems communicating. “We’re going to have to get used to it anyway. If you’re going to undermine the entire System, you’re going to need more than just us. If there are hundreds of thousands or millions of worlds...” She shook her head, and Raine wrinkled her muzzle as she contemplated hundreds of years of just throwing spears into space.

Not an enticing prospect, but odder to think they might well *have* hundreds of years. Cato said that the last *updates* he’d do before they hit Bismuth would make it easier to have a *backup*, in case they died, and with Cato already active over dozens of worlds they would be quite difficult to truly kill. Of course, neither she nor Leese *wanted* to die, be resurrected, and have to start the climb all over again, not after how long they’d put into it. At least after Bismuth it was much harder to be killed — and she’d heard that at Azoth and Alum there were ways to come back that didn’t rely on Cato’s technology.

They took a few more days to give themselves a break from the grind and spread a few more spears on nearby worlds, then returned to the dungeon. At this point they were practiced enough with the monsters and beasts within that it wasn’t nearly so tough a delve, but the dungeon itself refused to cooperate. None of the drops were even slightly useful, and the particular combination of monsters was most irritating. But they kept at it, and two runs later they had all the luck.

[Living Crystal Lance

Growth Weapon

Tier: A

Rank: Bismuth

This weapon can be shifted into different forms of lance and spear. It provides a major multiplier to all spear Skills, and is highly attuned to Ice, Lightning, and Sound Skills. This weapon can absorb essence to improve rank and tier.]

The spear looked like a long shaft of icy crystal capped by a crescent blade, but Leese was easily able to will it into poleaxe and armor-piercing lance forms, the material flowing like water. It was absolutely perfect for Leese, but it was only the capstone of the drops. The same run netted them both several pieces of new armor, and Raine got a pair of [Pyroclastic Footwraps] that pushed her movement Skill to new levels.

If they ran into Muar again, he wasn’t going to get off so lightly.

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Time was strange. That was true enough when in a strictly biological body, but in digital form where time could be made to speed up and slow down at whim, it was even more true. Yet according to the clock it was over two years since Cato had come through the portal from Earth, when it seemed like it had just been a short time ago. Maybe the hasty mess of Sydea dominated his perceptions, but it seemed like he was doing nothing at all.

A perception which was certainly untrue. On over fifty worlds he was building infrastructure, spreading from moons to outer or inner planets, with automated factories creating more automated factories. He wandered the halls of one such in a physical body, though one that was based more on void life than anything out of Earth just to avoid needing to introduce water and atmosphere to the enormous vacuum facility.

It orbited at the distant edge of Kesul's gravitational influence, an asymmetric slab of metal and graphene surrounded by tens of thousands of miles of solar panels. The enormous facility was tooled for production, and mining equipment spread throughout the system fed its appetite. Mass drivers hurled packages of raw material from Kesul's two moons and, as of a few hours ago, its asteroid belt as well. The long funnel of the receiver grabbed the incoming packages, slowed them down with both mechanical and electromagnetic processes – a spun graphene net was a surprisingly effective solution for how simple it was – and redirected the boules for sorting and processing.

The solar arrays powered cutters, smelters, rotating and microgravity alloying processes, chemical foundries, and the enormous computing power required to coordinate it all. Thankfully he didn't have to hack together all the operations himself, or even the complex logistics of processing lines. Some of it was just off-the-shelf, readily available programs, but a lot it came out of his father's Summer Civilization archive. While virtual civilizations could only do so much when it came to physical design and testing, they had solved information problems that most people didn't even know existed.

Obviously the Kesul facility didn't require his personal inspection, but Cato-Kasul was feeling restless. Even if he wasn't reconciling completely with the dozens of other versions of himself, he knew what they were finding. The radio-plant network was enough to send updates across, maximally compressed, and the state of the System was depressing.

As much as he wanted to, he couldn't simply start liberating worlds as he saw fit, even on those planets where he'd been established long enough to create the infrastructure. It was best to try and ease people through the transition rather than spring it on them, but the moment he started to show his hand he would attract attention — a lot of attention. After what happened with Sydea he doubted it would stop with just a few Bismuths and a cowardly System-god.

He had spent a lot of time running through simulations and situations, identifying how best to isolate sections of the System if he finally was forced to move. The network had orphan nodes and crossroads, places where he could sever dozens of worlds by a blitzkrieg of one or two and so cut off potential reinforcements with a simultaneous assault. It wasn't just the high-rankers that worried him either, but the potential of swarms of innocent low-rankers being used as shields or cannon fodder if he was forced to deal with gods by way of particle cannon. The approach was logical and necessary enough, but it was still soul-sucking to bear witness to so much that he could not yet address.

Some of the evils didn't actually require the System. Slavery, or something close to it, was widespread on some of the worlds; certain species barred from Dungeons and effectively beholden to the large clans for their daily bread. The expected amount of casual murder, from the Assassin's Guild, to competing adventuring groups, or just because a lower-rank individual didn't grovel sufficiently.

The System had more than enough evils of its own, though. On world after world he found ruins converted to Zones or Dungeons that bore the distinct fingerprints of xenocultures. Genetic sampling of monsters that connected them to the race on that particular frontier world — or a race that no longer existed. It seemed grimly certain that over half of the species that had been graced with the System had gone extinct, either as a result of the System's actions directly or by the more powerful clans taking over. There were probably a few scattered individuals somewhere in the System, but they didn't exist as a genetic population.

Even ecosystems didn't really exist within the System. It simulated a reasonable facsimile of life within a given zone, but the web of predator and prey, symbiote and parasite, was a rough sketch. Every single planet would require a massive amount of reconstruction to prevent mass die-offs from starvation, or being completely overrun with a hyper-adapted life form.

It was hard for him to *not* step in when he saw some of these things, but unless it was a dire emergency he needed to keep a low profile and spread out as far as he could. The Sydean Lineage was still the spearhead, able to go between worlds easily as Platimums and more capable of penetrating into the inner worlds. When they hit Bismuth, he'd need them to come back and plug the holes in his coverage where a planet lacked moons or other handy nearby celestial bodies, unless he came up with an alternative in the meantime.

The other Lineages, none of them actually going by Raine or Leese while on the ground, were spreading sideways from the main spine of the Sydean pair's travels. Even if they were able to avoid the obvious problem of the names, they still couldn't mingle much with the local population, as Uriva had demonstrated people *were* paying attention. Even with different names and forms, pairs of improbably-experienced Golds popping up all over would surely attract the wrong kind of attention. Once or twice would work, but that was best saved for something that really needed direct action.

It wasn't possible to start preparing the planets for liberation, at least not yet, so they just focused on ensuring Cato was firmly entrenched. They had at least gotten the initial ranking-up to a fine science. Most of the time the sisters would don a frame appropriate for the nearby worlds, use his orbital surveillance to find appropriate dungeons in which to level, and tackle a roaming boss mob away from any prying eyes.

The entire process only took a couple days, gated mostly by acquiring the proper Skills needed to fling a Cato-spear to the nearest moon. Sometimes after that, the Sisters abandoned the frame and returned to the orbital aestivation to pursue other aspects of the enormous amount of work that lay ahead of them. Sometimes they parked the frames in an out-of-the-way tavern, going back and forth between Cato and System pursuits.

Regardless of their personal choices, there was a sort of impromptu collaboration between all the versions on different worlds. Even if they were the same people, individual version of Raine and Leese had started to diverge, moreso after the years-long deep immersion inside the Summer Civilization aestivation. That didn't change their fundamental personalities or interests, but it meant that some versions of Leese worked more with the original Sydean biology, and others with the biology of the locals, or of the flora and fauna. Some versions of Raine took control of drone fleets and surveillance animals, while others ran combat and logistics simulations.



Worryingly, he hadn't spotted Muar again, and Cato doubted he could just hope that the System's violent nature had caught up with the man. Dyen, on the other hand, still popped up on occasion. Cato had, somewhat reluctantly, built communications capability into Dyen's capelet even if the assassin kept himself distant, and was how Cato knew the contract on the Sydean Lineage still existed. Another reason for the pair to find some identity-masking equipment as soon as possible.

It was the Sydean Lineage's requirements that brought him out to the orbital facility in physical form, even corporeal presence wasn't strictly necessary. Cato pulled himself into the physical laboratory that Raine and Leese Kesul were using, the multipurpose tendrils of the void-life frame grappling the handholds and sliding through the narrow access corridors. To a purely visual inspection the lab didn't look like much; a few cylinders spinning for gravity, some pressurized areas, a lot of machines that were entirely enclosed with metal and ceramic shielding. Beneath that surface it would have looked like a horror show, with cloned tissues and nerves spread out like dissected remnants; chunks of brain wrapped in sensors; all being poked and prodded and subjected to biochemical stimulation.

Of course, there was nothing thinking or feeling involved. The Sol System had gone through enough of those types of experiences that Cato's databases had many, many safeguards against such a possibility. Not that the information would stop intentional malice, but it was enough to avoid any accidental evil.

"How's the project going?" He could have simply looked through the plethora of data, or browsed the collaboration network the sisters had built, but that was so cold and impersonal and asking was a far more human way of going about it.

"I think it's about ready," Leese replied, though she wasn't physically present like he was. Instead she was in a virtualization of the laboratory, with all the control surfaces arranged for comfortable viewing. "Or as ready as we're going to get without forcing them to start ranking up from scratch."

"There's not much more I can add to their combat models," Raine added, from her own part of the aestivation. "Not until we see what things are like *at* Bismuth, at least."

"Then I'll get them going," he replied. There was unfortunately no way around the defense quest; the technology he needed to modify the Sydean Lineage was not something he could allow the System to get at. Nor was he certain that without the jamming it would even *work* properly; if the System integrated it, the bioweapon-based genetic modification pods might become some unholy abomination. He glanced around at the lab, then left to continue prowling the facility as the version of himself in closer orbit around Kesul started things off.

"We're ready for your last upgrades," Cato told the Sydean Lineage, where they were resting between Dungeon runs. He couldn't help but think that grinding the same dungeon for a year on end was incredibly tedious, but the results spoke for themselves. Instead of a motley collection of armor and weapons, they were clad in matching obsidian and crystal pieces, with weapons in a similar aesthetic vein.

"I think we're ready for them too," Raine replied, kicking the outer tower wall of the Dungeon in clear annoyance. "We need to move on from this Dungeon, and start dealing with higher ranks. The one with the [Appraise] artifact is Peak Bismuth, right?"

“That’s what Dyen said,” Cato agreed. Yaniss had known of lower rank scry-blocking artifacts, but the Assassin’s Guild knew of one that completely changed the information, which was far more useful. He doubted it’d stand up against direct divine scrutiny, but it’d let them travel around without tripping alarms. “I can’t guarantee that you’ll be able to handle it when we’re done with the upgrades, but you should be close.”