

## Chapter 11 — Digging In

“I wish I could use Appraise on what I’m seeing,” Yaniss grumped as she peered through the telescope. Or rather, the *digital* version of Yaniss did, controlling the abstraction of a light collector five miles in diameter.

“That would defeat the point,” Cato-Ikent told her with a laugh.

Cato’s mind-ripping algorithms turned out to be entirely necessary. There was no way that he could fully scan a Bismuth normally, and while there was a faint possibility that he could have brought in System-jamming biology to try, that would have been a risk on two fronts. One, that it might be incredibly harmful to a Bismuth, considering they were supposedly almost entirely a System construct, and two, Yaniss was clearly already being watched in some way given the hassling by the local Temple.

He’d prepared everything on an out-of-the-way world and Yaniss had spent a couple hours with a bunch of engineered biomass wrapped around her head. The mindripper algorithms had pulled information out of her brain, and that was why they were generally so restricted. None of the usual protections against foreign infiltration mattered, and like Roko’s basilisk he could create a full copy of her consciousness without her input at all.

Cato had also gotten genetic samples thanks to Yaniss literally spilling her own blood, along with gut biome – which turned out to be sterile – to try and avoid all the guesswork and testing he’d needed to do for Raine and Leese. Fortunately, even at Bismuth she was still biological, and not some sort of exotic System energy version of a frame. He wouldn’t have been that surprised if the System operated that way, with some central server from which all the high-rankers remotely piloted System-created bodies, but instead it seemed that the cells themselves operated without any apparent inputs and outputs. He didn’t know what to make of that, other than the obvious reliance on System exoticism.

In some strange quirk, perhaps an unfair one, Yaniss had absolutely no trouble not only with being digital, but with reconciling multiple versions of herself. More than Cato, even, and her tendency to shove her gestalt over his radio network was putting a serious strain on an already overloaded system. Still, her insight into the System was fascinating, especially since she was the closest thing to a researcher he could imagine. The usefulness of which was proven as one of the programs he had running in the background pinged him with a conclusion at a fairly high degree of certainty.

The Bismuth transition altered the fundamental nature of both people and items, according to Yaniss. So long as some amount of essence was paid, at Bismuth things simply didn’t decay. It wasn’t even as simple as being ultra-tough, but rather by examining her genetics and as he’d seen with her cellular activity, the regular rules of entropy didn’t apply. It was a situation that would have made Maxwell’s Demon proud, and not an approach that he would have immediately considered if it weren’t for her bringing up the phenomenon.

Given the crude nature of his toolset he couldn’t categorize it completely, but it wasn’t as simple as making things negative entropy, or even none — thermodynamics still needed to work for things to heat and cool, for energy to move at all. But all the functioning seemed to be done without flaw or loss, without the inevitable errors that piled up and had to be dealt with but never could be perfectly.

The System had a way to beat entropy.

Whether essence itself, the exotic energy of the System, was similarly unconstrained from the laws of thermodynamics remained to be seen, but it certainly didn't act like it was infinite. Though that was one of the things that particular program had been chewing through, doing a close analysis with more efficacy than anything he'd worked with in the past. At this point he was certain that Luna and Enceladus had bundled in tools of their own design, things with more finesse than the standard programs he was used to.

He wasn't really certain what to think of that. The synthetic intelligences could easily have sent their own probes, or endorsed people going through the portal, rather than playing at something subtle by giving him aid when he was violating their own directives. But perhaps the reason they had sent him – or at least, allowed him – to deal with the System was that he had no interest in anything it offered. But even a nonhuman intelligence might be tempted to try and take what the System was for themselves — to almost anyone else, the System's processes would be impossibly valuable.

Even he could admit that, given the energy requirements for everything he saw – the Skill manifestations, monster creation, even the cost of handling the information for things like [Appraise] – were astronomical. The program's best guess was that essence was, ultimately, *negentropic*: it made more of itself, which was utterly incredible and it didn't matter in the slightest. It all had to be destroyed, because that impossible, universe-bending property was being harnessed for petty, useless, and evil things.

He didn't know, ultimately, what use the knowledge would be, even if he could take some guesses at why the System existed at all. Without any sort of regulation an infinitely generating energy source might well rise up and collapse everything into a black hole, and it might well be that essence required some interaction with *conscious life* to be created. Even if that wasn't the exact reason, the System's deep hooks into the minds of its victims was surely no coincidence.

Aside from that useless speculation, the System's particular setup where there was a threshold at which someone actually entered into the post-entropy age mirrored some of the ways postbiological societies were arranged. Cato himself had been born fully biological and raised in a deliberately technology-light rural habitat where he could learn about bumps and bruises, fresh air, and the connection between good work and having food to eat. As he got older he could buy in of his own accord to more complex technological milieus and the inherent dangers they came with, until he finally felt comfortable taking the plunge into full postbiological life.

A threshold within the System where people could take full advantage of immortality and ultimately infinite energy made some kind of sense, considering the absolute disaster it would be for infants and children to wield forces of that nature. It made Cato lean toward the theory that the System was some sort of ultra-advanced aestivation with a touch of paperclip maximizer, some civilization's private habitat grown out of control. But he was well aware that was due to his own bias and background, matching known patterns to scant data. All his speculation could be wrong, and the System originated in a foreign reality or something even more esoteric.

“Well, I’m not sure how it helps, but you’ve helped solve at least one aspect of the System,” Cato told Yaniss, as he scanned through the report and mostly skipped over the complex modeling involved. He only cared about the conclusions. “At least I think. Without being able to look directly at its underpinnings we can only guess.”

“Oh, I’ll send it to myself,” Yaniss said happily, tearing her attention away from the telescope. While he’d digitized Yaniss and given her the same autonomy as the sisters – her own substrate, and the data and tools necessary for power and maintenance – he had not allowed her into the inner workings of his operations. He trusted her far enough to cooperate with her and offer her the benefits of postbiological existence, especially since her System-body wouldn’t be able to survive a System collapse, but not enough to let her see the extent of what he was and could do. Her database access was quite limited, and entire swaths of the information sphere – as well as physical constructs – were off-limits for her digital selves.

The Bismuth version of Yaniss had an upgraded comms lizard, capable of not only audio information but low-bandwidth visual communication thanks to chromatophores. The comms kept her abreast of her iterations spread over a double handful of worlds, helping make up for the lack of direct contacts. Since she’d lost most of her agents due to helping Cato, it was only fair he replaced them — but her constant communications were loading up his radio network enough that he needed serious upgrades.

Over the past year and a bit he’d worked with Leese, and they’d managed to cobble together a far larger plant-form with the same capability, something more like a fungal mat than a standard fern. Most of the time had been taken up with testing and debugging, working through the alterations to a laundry list of out-of-the-box solutions from his databases.

FungusNet could grow quite large, acting as an immense transceiver just underneath the ground and raising tree-like towers for line-of-sight communications. They had done their best to make it as innocuous as possible, with strict limitations on growth and none of the usual biochemical competition, to prevent the System from turning it into the sort of threat that would draw attention. It didn’t need to be particularly aggressive anyway, since with a different chemical basis than anything on the ground it wasn’t vulnerable to predators or parasites — which didn’t matter under the System, but once the System went down he didn’t want it to immediately ruin the local ecology.

Around Ikent alone he had several million tons of biochemical factories, and the other versions of himself weren’t far behind, so dropping the fungal spores down on the various worlds was already underway. Unlike the ferns, the fungal mat could be seeded with tiny, inch-diameter balls that he could toss down from orbit directly. That wouldn’t be very precise, but he could throw down hundreds of thousands and send the kill-code to all but the ones he wanted. Now that he had proper infrastructure, he could solve so many problems just by raw numbers instead of cleverness. Which was good, because Cato knew he really wasn’t all that clever.

Only the worlds at the edges of his expansion needed to have various instances of Raine and Leese carry FungusNet through. The places where Cato hadn’t yet been spread, or was only a few months into building his infrastructure and couldn’t spare the time and resources for the task. After multiple years there were many of those, but the System’s portal network prevented a *completely* exponential approach.

The portal network was actually fairly restrictive; many worlds only had a few links, and some only one. It didn't matter if there were a thousand versions of himself and the sisters when he only had a hundred worlds bordering his territory. They couldn't even follow too many links along the chain as Peak Gold was quite conspicuous outside their native world.

Most places had more muscle than Sydea, and outworlders were seen as easy marks. Which the sisters weren't, but they couldn't bridge the gap to Bismuth or, as they had already found, *too many* Platinums. Nor could all the various versions of the sisters rush to Platinum, bottlenecked as they were by the defense quest requirement. He couldn't change how frequently it occurred, so only a few pairs had gotten that far, on the edges of his expansion.

The total count of worlds he'd spread to was somewhere north of sixteen hundred, which sounded impressive, but that was less than one percent of the System's estimated size. Moreover, it didn't include the inner or core worlds, just the frontier where it was easier to operate. Based on the presumed size and network layout of the System, he was slowly creeping around the outer two thirds of the disc, and what he really needed was the Sydean Lineage to drive a spike through unknown territory. The further they spread him, the faster he could move and the more secure he would be.

He still wasn't quite sure how he was going to deal with planets where Bismuth ranks were common and higher ranks existed, though he'd already started plans on dealing with the occasional Bismuth dungeons scattered throughout the frontier. The inner worlds would take more consideration, and likely more preparation as there was no doubt he would need more weight of materiel to deal with those. Years, decades, maybe even longer simply to build the infrastructure, let alone execute on it. Time enough for the System folks to figure out ways to stymie him if he wasn't already spread wider than they thought.

The instances of Raine and Leese that had chosen to advance to Platinum had begun cutting branches through the frontier out from the main trunk of the Sydean Lineage's passage, following the massive perimeter of the System's portal links. But he couldn't be content with that, since everyone agreed it was the inner worlds that controlled everything. With the new upgrades, the Sydean Lineage could finally turn toward the core.

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The Hunting World of Renklin was not really a place for Platinums, so both Raine and Leese used their movement Skills to leave the city walls as fast as possible. The highest zone on the whole world was just Gold, so they stood out — or would, if they were in the city for more than a second or two. They blinked out, moving far and fast as the near-teleportation of their movement Skills allowed them. Not to the extent of Arene or Onswa, who had managed to find or improve their skills to S-tier, but enough that they could reach the other side of the planet in minutes.

*"Right, there is good,"* Cato's voice came through the radio-lizards, stopping them in the middle of an ocean. Hundreds of feet up, there was nothing around but endless waves. *"I'll send everything down and get this done."*

They'd put a spear into the distant, blue-green moon over a year ago, so there had been plenty of time for Cato to establish himself and be ready for the day when they got their final upgrades. All the preparations that could be made had been, but they'd have to trust that obscurity would

be their final shield. As out-of-the-way and low-rank as Renklin was, the Defense Quest manifesting there wouldn't attract any immediate attention, and by the time any word filtered out, they hoped to be done with it.

[Global Defense Quest! Destroy the Incursion: Recommended Rank: Bismuth. Reward: Overloaded C-Tier Skill. Location: Zemy Plains Conflict Zone]

A thunderous roar cracked through the sky above them as one of Cato's devices entered the atmosphere, an enormous dark slab plunging down toward the ocean. The shock wave slammed into them, though their Platinum-rank bodies barely noticed it, fire and ice deflecting the spray and the spume as an object half the size of a down smashed into the ocean's surface. It was far larger than any of the drops they'd seen from him before, every inch of it radiating the strange essence static that accompanied his technology.

Fog rolled out from it as the unutterable cold of metal chilled in deep space radiated out from the enormous slab, which bobbed and stabilized before the top opened up, hinging outward. Warframes and other forms Raine didn't recognize lined the sides, acting as guards for the small dome in the center. The black bulk of the interior shifted and then suddenly burst forth into thousands of small winged things that flocked upward and outward, circling the site.

*"Right, get in,"* Cato said. *"We'll get this done as fast as possible."*

Raine exchanged a look with Leese and then dived down toward the dome, where a Cato-beast opened the door. Inside were a pair of very large black pods, much more substantial than the cots from before, once again color coded for each of them. Without any further discussion Raine hopped into hers, stretching out on the oddly comfortable material before it wrapped over her.

She awoke without having even been aware of falling unconscious, the pod retracting away to let her free. For a moment she didn't feel any different, then it seemed like her mind expanded, a strange reverse vertigo where the world became small. The sensation only lasted an instant before settling, but all the knowledge she was used to getting from her capelet was entirely clear, she had an instant understanding of every thing in the room, and every single thing was utterly crisp. She thought that Cato's gift had given her thoughts focus before, but now there seemed to be an entirely separate realm of thought when it came to her physical and kinetic understanding.

*"So, you've got radio antennae along your spine, in addition to the sub-brains,"* Cato told them, though it was nothing wasn't he hadn't mentioned before. *"The capelet is now integrated into your body, so it should benefit from your System protections once it finishes growing out."*

Raine reached up to her shoulders, where the fringe of the capelet draped over her shoulders, merging with her scales at her neck, and sent it fluttering by flexing brand new muscles in idle wonder.

"What about the lizards?" Leese asked, holding hers in one hand and petting it.

*"You can leave those with me here or bring them with you,"* Cato replied, again speaking directly into her head. A moment's thought and she could feel the way to turn that off, like closing her eyes — only with something entirely intangible. *"You don't need them anymore, but you probably won't have anywhere to properly leave them until you cash out your estates."*

“It might be best to leave them,” Raine said, somewhat reluctantly. She wasn’t as attached to them as Leese, but she found she had become somewhat fond of having the little creatures around. Even if they didn’t do much, they *were* quite cute. But chances were that they wouldn’t survive the rigors of high-rank combat that were likely in the future. According to Yaniss, at some point in Bismuth they could tie themselves to their estates in such a way that they could teleport across worlds to get to them – assuming their movement Skills were high enough tier – which would make it possible to house such fragile creatures.

“*I’ll send them up to orbit,*” Cato assured them, one of the Cato-beasts entering the dome with a tiny version of the pods they’d just used. Raine and Leese deposited their lizards in the pods, gave them one last pet, and then turned to the door.

“You were out for a day, so it’s best to hurry,” Cato said aloud. “I’ll send these two up and then scuttle this thing. I’ve already chased off a few visitors but if a Bismuth shows up things could get explosive.”

“Yes, of course,” Raine said. “Thank you.”

“It’s the least I could do,” Cato said, and Raine believed it. Unfortunately the *most* he could do would end up getting attention they didn’t yet want. She followed Leese out the door and the two of them took to the skies, back toward the portal.

While she had been told about the kinematic modeling and combat algorithms, she hadn’t understood what that would mean. Yet the moment she began traveling and using her Skills in earnest, she began noticing little things, small inefficiencies in movement and direction. Fractional alterations in flexing muscles and Skill application, in posture and position, none of which were major but each correction added up. Soon enough both she and Leese were moving half again as fast as they had before.

[Pyroclastic Steps upgraded to tier A.

Skill merge with Dance of Conflagration!

New Skill: Whirling Inferno Flash]

“*I already got a Skill upgrade and merge,*” Raine reported to Leese, using the new connection in the back of her mind. The *radio*, which didn’t use essence and couldn’t be overheard. Skill merges *only* happened at A tier and above, and was the only way to *get* an S-tier Skill — aside from rumored, insanely rare token drops. She did have another B-rank Skill Token to fill in the slot left by [Dance of Conflagration], but that could wait until she discussed the options with Leese.

“*I’m nearly there, I think,*” Leese said, though she had been ahead of Raine on that front to begin with. “*This new knowledge is — well, it’s certainly something.*” Raine chuckled agreement as [Whirling Inferno Flash] sent her blinking forward at ever faster intervals. Already she was starting to understand the nuances of the new Skill, the information not coming from some external source but just from her being able to *recognize* things she never had before. Cato continued to act like a god, even if he didn’t realize it.

[Whirling Inferno Flash] wasn’t merely a traversal from one point to another, it was a movement with inherent dance, something graceful and yet immediately part of combat. Every step from it

was to gain an advantage or dodge an attack, and even just traversing open air there was a feeling that certain particular steps were not only better than others, but exactly right.

She was busy marveling at the new sensations when a vast roar suddenly boomed out far behind them, and she glanced back to catch a brief glimpse of something ascending to the heavens, a movement that would have been too fast for her before Platinum, and before Cato's upgrades. Then they moved on, to the city and the portal offworld, where Raine found another surprise.

She could see the future.

It wasn't *exactly* that, but it was something close enough. Just glancing at the motion of people gave her instant insight into how they were moving, where they were going, where their attention was. She could suddenly both see and understand infinitesimal expressions, twitches of muscle – even the motion of wind – and put it all together to know everything that would happen a few seconds before it did.

Somehow, implausibly, it wasn't too much information to handle. Nor was it some visual overlay, just the same sort of understanding as measuring the distance and force of an attack in order to dodge or deflect it. That, expanded to every single thing and person she saw. There was a stir from the lower ranks as the two of them descended to land, drawing patterns outward as predicted behavior created possible futures in her head.

*"We really need to hit that Bismuth dungeon and see what this is like,"* Raine said, teleporting inside the Nexus and slipping through the portal there. The two of them hopped from world to world as fast as they could, though at Platinum nobody was going to stop them, not even the cities that tried to tax portal access.

Their target was a mid-Bismuth dungeon, something that was over twenty world-hops away, toward the inner worlds. The inner worlds themselves were still off-limits, at least for the moment, as the pair wanted to be Bismuth themselves before they braved a region known to be frequented by *Azoths* — and they needed the artifacts that altered their status. Now that Cato had given them abilities that even Skills couldn't reproduce, that dungeon was almost certainly something they could clear.

Leese's movement Skill upgraded not long afterward, and for similar reasons as Raine's, the two of them effortlessly sliding through space. It was the sort of grace she had seen from Arene and Onswa, the fruit of decades or even centuries of experience with their Skills, but gained in only a few minutes. The process was still ongoing too, an incredible level of feedback that didn't actually interfere with her habitual movements and muscle memory. It was like with a single correction she'd been doing it that way all her life.

They would wait to actually replace their Skills until after fighting. Not only did they need to decide what they most needed to shore up any weaknesses, but Yaniss had supplied information on Skill merging to let them build toward even better movement and weapon Skills. With Cato's benefits and a Bismuth's knowledge, they could quite possibly have *all* their Skills at S-Tier while they were still in Bismuth, if not before. As it was, they needed a good fight, and their target dungeon ought to provide it.

The [Dungeon of The Abyssal Horde] was what seemed like an endless, pitch-black, blasted plain. The frigid gravel wasteland was absolutely teeming with swarms of Bismuth-level

creatures, each one a hulking figure somewhere between reptilian and insectoid, capable of hurling dark lightning and severing winds in addition to a horrific, corroding bite and wickedly sharp claws. It wasn't possible to engage just one; the best scenario was a swarm of twenty or more, and it was frightfully easy for roaming packs to join in any fight.

For most, it was a nightmare. For Raine and Leese, it was easy pickings. Raine's [Whirling Inferno Flash] let her dance around the jagged, branching lightning before they even came into existence, able to predict the random-seeming forks after watching a few. Leese simply breezed through them like a cold wind, sliding around anything in her path.

Vulnerabilities and openings that she would have needed to react to before were obvious almost a full second in advance. That single second was an eternity in combat, and even longer for her as her thoughts were accelerated beyond what a Platinum usually could manage. It was laughably easy to exploit every weakness, and she tore through the creatures with her obsidian and fire spear, finding herself back to the sort of overwhelming power she had come to expect. Of course, the two of them still lacked the ability to project their power the way a true Bismuth could, but the multiplicative advantages from the gear they'd spent so long getting stacked into far more potency than anyone at Platinum should possess.

"Let's go get those artifacts," Raine said.

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Elder Nomok of the Tornok Clan was not happy. There had been far too many losses on the fringe worlds ever since the Sydean portal closed, and he wasn't certain why. The loss of such a well-connected Bismuth as Grand Paladin Nikhil was a blow, of course, though at least that had been easy enough to spin into a heroic sacrifice of closing off a world that needed a thorough cleansing. Other attrition was harder to understand.

Ranking up was not safe, of course, and indeed it shouldn't be. The weak and stupid were culled by the System's testing, and those with no skill or talent were shown they were destined to remain at lower ranks. The heights were only for the exceptional and the gifted, like himself and the other Elders.

All of them were Azoth, able to properly command the Bismuths that passed through the Tornok Clan's home worlds, just outside the core worlds proper. More importantly, able to match the Azoths of other clan elders, and ensure the competition for territory and resources stayed within the proscribed bounds. Of course an Alum would be able to upset all that — but Alums rarely ventured outside of the vast war-worlds of the core. It was well known that Alums found the rest of the System to be insubstantial and ephemeral, unworthy of their consideration, and so there was no real worry of one arriving to upend the balance between the clans.

At the same time, the Elders *did* have a farcaster that supposedly connected to a Tornok Clan Alum, somewhere in the core worlds, in the event of a dire emergency. They had never dared use it, because short of another Alum they couldn't imagine anything they had encountered would count as dire for such an individual. Nomok's current crisis, the disappearance of so many Platinum and lower-ranked parties, was something not even quite worth bestirring his own power to address. A Bismuth would have been more appropriate, if he had one to hand he could trust with the task.

"Elder, we have a visitor that might be worthy of your attention."



The words of his retainer broke Nomok from his bad-tempered musing, and he turned from the balcony that looked out upon the massive gardens to regard the man. The retainer was only Platinum, but exceedingly competent for the narrow field of managing Nomok's schedule. Not that any person or event could *truly* make claims on Nomok's time, but he could hardly leave the current issue to the lower ranks.

"Elaborate," Nomok instructed.

"A Peak Platinum, but one bearing a [Crusade] quest. There are, in fact, quite a few Platinites with him." The retainer wasn't concerned about being threatened in general, but his posture told Nomok that the visitors had been well behaved. "He claims to have some knowledge both of Grand Paladin Nikhil and of the issue of our missing clan members."

Nomok's tail lashed in surprise, for there were *two* strange pieces in that report. A [Crusade] was exceedingly rare — and exceedingly valuable. Most quests could not be shared, could not spread, and certainly had no chance of reaching all the way to Alum. A [Crusade], on the other hand, was a direct divine gift and, even if it demanded the utmost from those involved, was a surer way into the higher ranks than any other. The patron gods of the Tornok Clan only offered such an opportunity on rare occasions, restricted to the most promising and even then only once every few generations.

Someone else bearing such a valuable opportunity was worth his time indeed. Then for the same individual to know about Tornok Clan's troubles was more than suspect, and certainly not coincidence. It had to be cause and effect.

"Very well," Nomok said, returning to his desk. The office had a sort of severe opulence to it, and combined with his Azoth rank aura should be enough to ensure that the Platinum was sufficiently impressed. Though perhaps he would not be, considering the [Crusade] quest — such a person, so closely connected to the gods, might see higher ranks as a simple goal, not an uncrossable gulf. "Send him in."

The retainer bowed and withdrew through the massive double doors, where Nomok sensed the teleportation pylon activating. Such pylons were requisite, for he was almost halfway around the world from the capital's Nexus, where visitors were actually allowed. The grounds for his personal branch of the clan occupied the entire continent, as the clan was hardly going to allow any outsiders to roam about their home unsupervised. A short while later the pylon activated again, and Nomok used [Appraise] even if the visitor was not yet within sight.

[Muar the Crusader – Sydean – Peak Platinum]

The race was surprising, as Nomok had always heard that Sydeans were savages, barely more than animals, so for one to be god-touched was something indeed. But the man's posture and the confidence with which he strode toward the doors demonstrated that he was perfectly self-possessed. The retainer showed Muar in, and the Sydean walked forward to precisely the right distance and bowed.

"Honored Azoth," Muar said, polite but not servile.

"Crusader Muar," Nomok returned. It wasn't so much the man himself that demanded respect — after all, he was only Platinum — but the title he carried. "I have been told you have certain information for me."

“I do indeed,” Muar said, straightening up and looking at Nomok. The Elder was forced to admit there was something in Muar’s gaze that, even at his rank, commanded attention. “I will first ask, have you heard of the being that calls itself *Cato*?”

What followed was a frankly unbelievable tale, one that Nomok would have grown tired with very quickly if it were not for the title and quest giving Muar’s story legitimacy. A threat from without the System – one that had already killed both Clan Tornok Bismuths and Grand Paladin Nikhil – that the gods themselves saw as a threat. It did explain exactly *why* the Sydean portal closed, as even a Paladin didn’t have that sort of authority.

Nomok stopped Muar in the middle of his tale to issue orders that, should any other Sydeans cross into Clan Tornok worlds, they should be detained. It was hardly likely, but in such a circumstance there was no need to observe any of the niceties of rank. Better to simply obliterate any agent of Cato with overwhelming force.

That simple action gave him the opportunity to accept the [Crusade] quest, which Nomok certainly did. Such things did not come around often, and rejecting the direct urging of both the divine System and the gods themselves was a foolish move. Besides which, the *rewards* of such a grand quest would be beyond measure, and even if Nomok had rejected taking the long climb toward Alum, there was no such thing as enough power.

“What about my other clan members?” He asked, not interested in the intricacies of Muar’s journey to the inner worlds. “What might be going on there?”

“I did mention Dyen,” Muar said. “He *also* accepted Cato’s heretical gifts, and while he was not a direct agent at the time, that is still a power beyond what should be possible at his rank, and a motivation directly opposed to your clan. If Raine and Leese escaped Sydea before it was removed from the System, surely he did as well. An elite fighter with a grudge, possibly even an assassin, would surely explain what has been happening.”

“It would indeed,” Nomok said, making another note. Such an agent was far more difficult to track down than one might expect, but just *knowing* that there might be a rogue Sydean out for blood, one that was far more dangerous than he looked, would be knowledge sufficient to blunt most of the surprises such a person could create. Being known was the worst thing that could happen to an assassin, and knowing the *name* of the agent made things even easier. True, a member of the Assassin’s Guild would have some measures against discovery, but every bit of knowledge made uncovering him easier.

“I commend you, Crusader Muar,” Nomok continued after a moment, considering the man before him. “You have spoken well and to the point, and the System itself gives assurance to your words. I will certainly look into ensuring that *this* world is not vulnerable to anything that might spread into the space beyond the skies, and I can even offer you passage into the core worlds.” That would be simple enough, and was in line with the [Crusade]. Better, it would spread the [Crusade] among others of the Clan, so even more could benefit from it.

Considering Muar, he had a further thought. At Peak Platinum, Muar was likely nearly ready for the transition to Bismuth — assuming he had a Feat of Glory to his credit. Considering Muar’s title, that seemed likely, so perhaps further ingratiation with both the plans of gods and the System’s [Crusade] was in order. Clan Tornok certainly had the resources for it.

“Tell me, Crusader Muar, are you ready for your ascension? We have a place prepared for the Bismuth Ascension quest on our grounds, and I would be remiss if I did not offer you the opportunity to use it. After all, you should be at least Bismuth before you enter the core worlds. [Crusade] or no, you need to have true power before they will take you seriously.”

“Thank you, Honored Elder,” Muar said, bowing once again. “I accept.”