

Chapter 14 — Opponents

Cato rolled his shoulders as his Sydean frame stepped out onto the grass. Even if they had a humanoid frame, Sydean joints had a different feel to them, not to mention the sensorium was subtly different. It wasn't the abstract informative tracking of the warframe, or the conventional human senses. The olfactory bulb did its own processing of scent before it hit the hindbrain, and the altered visual cortex shifted his familiar color palette and depth perception toward something more appropriate for the wavelengths of the binary sun above.

Normally that wouldn't have been a problem. He'd tried out enough frames to be able to adapt to whatever body he found himself in, but this one was additionally restricted. This version had to be compatible with the System, and he found himself just as annoyed as the human version had been, at least before Arene had destroyed him. Some of the gaps in knowledge were ameliorated by a microwave gland that kept him connected to the prime version of himself, but he was still *lesser*. He'd be glad when he was done with this and could reconcile back to his full self.

Another Sydean frame emerged from the pod, this one with a backpack. That was the version of himself that would try carrying a warframe seed through the portal, since the last attempt had met with such dismal failure. The presence of the System jamming would still trigger the quest, of course, but if he wasn't instantly disintegrated that was something he could work around.

He waved to himself, both Sydean frames jogging forward to meet Arene where she stood at the edge of Kalhan City's sphere of influence. He'd made no effort to disguise the pod's descent, so Arene had to warn people away from messing with it. She'd been loud enough that he'd been able to hear it from nearly a thousand feet up.

"So..." Arene began, looking between the two frames. The diplomat frame was tall, bulky, and black-scaled, while the other was short, lithe, and blue. Cato did understand how seeing two people named similarly and acting identically, even if they looked different, could be confusing.

"You just need to worry about me," diplo-Cato said. "I've got the four Bismuths under surveillance. Unless I've missed any, which is possible. Unlikely, though."

"It's hard to square that confidence with being a Copper," Arene said, turning to escort them to the city. Her steps brimmed with excess energy, though whether it was anger or nervousness or some other emotion Cato couldn't tell. "I think I actually prefer that other form. It's more honest."

"And yet still not my *real* form," diplo-Cato remarked. The traveler version of himself slipped off on his own the moment they crossed the city threshold. Technically they were headed to the same location, but he didn't want his other Sydean form to be too heavily associated with Arene and the other Platinums. Some people had already seen them together, but without digital media and with the chromatophores in the scales of his travel form letting him change color at will, he could stay anonymous long enough.

"Then what *is* your real form?" Arene asked, and Cato stretched his stride to match her casual, higher-rank speed.

“That’s still a matter of debate where I come from,” Cato replied with a laugh. “The human form you saw before is close to what I was born as, but as I am now, it’s difficult to say.”

“Not exactly comforting,” Arene grunted as she touched her hand to a closed door just inside the entrance of the Nexus building. It opened to reveal a staircase, and she ducked inside.

“I’d rather give a discomfiting truth than reassuring lie, at least to people I’m working with. Otherwise how can you trust me to help you?” Cato knew there would be a *lot* of people who couldn’t handle the truth of reality, or see the problems the System created, but that was a problem for another day. For the moment he hoped he could at least sway enough people by argument, as the more force he had to use the more trouble there would be in the future.

“We don’t really have a choice,” Arene said, casting a look back at him, and Cato inclined his head. He could have given her some aphorism about always having choices, but that would have been insulting to both of them.

The office at the top of the stairs was crowded, with five Platinums and Cato, and he could spot conspicuous empty spaces where decorations or trophies or maybe even furniture had been removed. Although Cato had a limited insight into the inner workings of people’s daily lives, he had a suspicion the missing items had been liquidated for funds, given the complaints about the System store prices. Liquidating high rank stuff could probably feed a *lot* of low rank people for a long time, but there were almost a million mouths and only five Platinums.

“Cato Diplomat?” Karsa blurted, obviously reading the name on his status. “Really? That’s your actual name?”

“It’s the name of this body,” Cato corrected with a Sydean smile, the corners of his muzzle curling up. “Since this one was custom-made for the purpose.” Even as he spoke, the traveler version of Cato stepped into the System Nexus and made his way toward the portal. While it was nominally guarded, there didn’t seem to be any obvious cost associated with its use — meaning there had to be some hidden reason it wasn’t seeing constant traffic.

That was a thought that diplo-Cato could follow up on later. Traveler Cato stepped through the portal, aware that it would bring up the quest once again and his presence would probably be too obvious — but he was not expecting the warframe seed in his backpack to dissolve without any obvious reason. The reason came a moment later, as a portal snapped open and Cato caught a glimpse of the same insect-person who had dusted his warframes only a few hours ago.

Then the portal closed again and the traveler Cato was gone, but neither diplo-Cato or orbital Cato were particularly worried about that. Without a connection to the orbital version, the lobotomized frame would self-destruct. Cato had no desire to be interrogated by any System authority, and would far rather terminate that version of himself. What *did* worry Cato was the attention of the System-god on the other side of the portal, and orbital Cato muttered curses to himself. It wasn’t going to be as simple as sending some kind of seed out into the System.

He didn’t want to raise that issue at the moment, though, since there were more immediate concerns so far as his potential allies were concerned. Specifically, the sheer amount of outworlders that had infested Sydea and especially the four Bismuth-rank types that were beyond the ability of the locals to deal with. Cato was well aware that his ability to move past

Sydea was tied into that particular problem in several ways, so he wanted to be a bit delicate about it.

Not only did he need help from the locals if he was going to smuggle himself past whatever checkpoint had been implemented, but if he was too energetic, it might spook the authorities even more. The last thing he wanted was to prompt someone to shut the portal of their own accord, forever stranding him on a single planet. Somehow he was going to have to be more subtle.

“Anyway, I have four targets at the Bismuth rank,” Cato said, addressing the Platinums. “I’d like to check that against what you know. For all I know there’s one buried underground somewhere, or otherwise invisible to me.”

“I believe four is right,” Onswa said, touching a crystal sphere embedded in his desk. What looked to be holographic projections sprang into being, already listing out the names and locations of the Bismuths in question. “I don’t have any authority to *do* anything about it, but my Interface can still locate them.”

Cato regarded the projections with interest. The System’s Interface was similar to direct neural feeds and familiar enough, but the display wasn’t something he’d seen before. Proper holograms needed a medium, so just arbitrarily projecting them into open air remained the realm of fiction — or magic, apparently. But what was most interesting was the apparent predictive nature of the thing.

Something nobody knew, especially not those inside the System, was exactly how intelligent the System was. For the most part it seemed reactive, with no more brainpower than a moderately well-constructed algorithm. Something truly responsive, however, almost always meant intelligence.

“Those are the ones I have under surveillance,” Cato said, making a note to add the Interface itself to his observation network. Making plans in the presence of an enemy spy was not the best idea, so he would be careful in conveying what precisely he could do. “Though I won’t be prepared to deal with them for a few days yet.”

“Need to make more bodies?” Arene asked, tone more thoughtful than accusatory.

“Something like that,” Cato agreed. It would take time to finish his railguns and set them into the proper orbits, since he would unfortunately probably need them for some time. The infrastructure for particle beam weapons would take longer yet, and he didn’t want to wait the months or even years it’d take, depending on what elements could be found on the local moons. Even autofactories couldn’t magically assemble such complex devices without intermediate infrastructure, and besides he wanted to have spread beyond Sydea before revealing something of *that* power.

“We can probably run off the lower tiers,” Onswa said thoughtfully. “Though the question is how to deal with the portal. I’m still locked out so I can’t blockade it again, and if a Bismuth comes through all of us Platinums together won’t be able to do much. Besides which, nothing in this city is above Gold rank. We’d flatten everything, and we certainly don’t have enough spare tokens or city essence to pay for repairs. Not to mention all the people who could be hurt or killed.”

"I can support you in whatever you want to do, but I don't have anything that would specifically block the portal," Cato admitted. "Perhaps once it's clear you can drive off or kill Bismuths, that will be sufficient?"

"That might just draw in other people who want a fight," Marek objected. "Or Clans looking to take revenge for losing a Bismuth. I know the core Clans have plenty at that rank and even above, but they aren't going to stand for losing one to a frontier world."

"Is that why you didn't just guard the portal before?" Cato asked, since he had been wondering. "Worries about powerful Clans?"

"After the Clans took over the [Ahrusk Portal Staging Area]? Yes." Onswa said, his jaw set. "There had been no reason to regulate the portal before. Sydea had nothing to offer. Now that the staging area is gone, that quest of yours is drawing in all kinds of opportunists."

"That's very true, and while it's too late for the current mess, in the future I will have to set my scouts to self-destruct instead of being killed," Cato sighed. "That was a perverse incentive I hadn't much considered."

"Can you prevent Bismuths from coming through the portal?" Hirau challenged, and Cato shook his head.

"Any force I could bring to bear would flatten the city, too," he said regretfully. "It might just be better to rebuild any vulnerable city so there's nobody in the crossfire."

"We don't have the spare essence, either in tokens or in the city bank, to make more cities," Onswa said grimly.

"Perhaps not, but I can make new cities," Cato said thoughtfully. The so-called towns and cities that the System provided were pathetically small, and even if he hadn't been able to get too much metal from the moons just yet, he could deliver silicon and carbon based buildings by the megaton.

"How can you do that?" Arene asked, skeptically.

"I assume you mean securing it, not building it?" Cato wasn't entirely certain about that; if the System was in charge of buildings and had been for generations, there might not be *any* knowledge left of how to even create the simplest shelter.

"Both, and more," Arene shrugged. "It just seems like a lot to overcome without a safe zone."

"It'll be fine, it's been done before," Cato assured them. He had some records of how refugee camps had been set up on Earth, using the System jamming to prevent monsters from appearing within the walls. Of course, what Cato considered barely adequate refugee housing was better than what the System had provided for the Sydeans. At the very least it wasn't as brutalist and boring to look at. "And speaking of housing, I believe it would be best if you prepare your people for the first set dropping from the sky. I will have some creatures to assemble it, but it won't take long."

"Then let us focus on that for now," Onswa said. "When you are ready to kill the Bismuths, *then* we will begin ejecting the lower ranks. We cannot afford to provoke anyone without proof that you have the force to back it up."

“That’s fair enough,” Cato agreed. “Power matters.”

Grand Paladin Nikhil crossed through the portal to Ikent, making sure his charges stayed in proper formation behind him. So far from the core worlds, the Clan Tornok name was not as much protection as it should have been, at least not for the mere Copper children he had with him. The security of a Clan reached only as far as its force of arms, which was why he was along. As he was firmly in the middle of Bismuth, he’d be the threat needed to ward off any uppity locals while not being so much of a threat that any true powerhouse would have to notice.

Ultimately he didn’t want their presence to be *too* noticeable. Otherwise other clans might question exactly what Tornok Clan found so interesting that they were sending a number of very important new rankers out to the frontier. None of the young Coppers looked too terribly unlike any other Copper, of course, and they were doing a fair job of not scoffing at the decline in luxury as they proceeded toward the frontier.

“Esik!” He snapped, his voice alone sending the inattentive Copper back into the column following behind him. “This is not a Clan Tornok world,” he reminded them. “Nobody here will respect any strength but your own, and you have none yet.” The young man looked suitably chastised, and Nikhil returned his attention to their surroundings.

Ikent was still several stops away from their ultimate destination at Sydea, and while there was some hurry it wasn’t worth rushing too quickly. One never knew what quests or opportunities the System might present. Some preferred to stay within the powerful core of the System’s worlds, but Nikhil knew that the System rewarded taking risks — and that included going out into the frontier.

Nikhil stopped by the pylon of the System Nexus to update his map, and grunted as he saw a temple adjacent to the city center. He shoved aside the surprise that the capital city was upgraded enough to host a proper temple — that was the exact attitude he was chiding the Coppers over, and a good reminder to keep his own expectations firmly in check. There were plenty of places outside of the core worlds with all the civilized amenities and all the infrastructure necessary for proper advancement.

“We will be making a pilgrimage stop,” he announced, to relatively little excitement. That didn’t bother him. Only two of the ten children with him were on the path of the Divine, and even those two were too young to truly appreciate all that the System did. Still, it was worth stopping into a temple, if for no other reason than to meditate on his own divine Skills and see if the System or any of its servants had a task for him.

His senses caught the presence of another Bismuth rank, in a compound just outside the city. People of that rank rarely took up the Planetary Administration jobs — that was something best left to people who were stalled at Platinum — but they were the ones who truly ruled. Only after someone had ascended from Platinum and been forged anew by the System could they be considered actually powerful.

Everyone knew this, and so all the lower ranks scurried from his path. He didn’t even have to break stride as he swept through the city streets toward the temple. It was only well after he’d passed, along with his train of Coppers, that the usual Silvers and Golds dared creep back into the street and return to their business.

The temple rose high above the rest of the city buildings, built upon a raised promontory abutting the eastern walls. By simply counting the spires – there were six – he knew precisely how upgraded it was, and inclined his head in respect to whomever had decided to spend the city budget on upgrading so far. For those who chose the divine route, such a resource would be invaluable.

Tasteful blues and greens accented the pristine whites of the door, which opened ahead of Nikhil as he approached. The Grand Paladin swept inside, noting a half-dozen people in quiet contemplation around the central pylon. The appointed Platinum-rank priest was one of the natives, a race that was unfortunate enough to have feathers rather than proper fur or even skin, and he bowed in the correct obeisance when Nikhil approached.

“Welcome to our humble temple, Honored Bismuth,” the priest said. “How can this lowly one serve you?”

“My charges here will be spending some time in meditation,” Nikhil said, shooting a glance over his shoulder to ensure that the Coppers got the message. Even those who weren’t on the divine path would benefit from the potential for insights or special quests that only a temple could provide. “For myself, I would be interested in hearing what the temple may need, or have heard that others need.”

The priest nodded thoughtfully, shifting the wings on his back, before beckoning Nikhil to follow him into an inner room. Nikhil strode along behind, pushing down his instinctive unease. The people of Ikent were quite odd, with four legs and two arms in addition to their wings, not to mention the fact that they were half-sized relative to other civilized races.

Soon enough he was shown into the priest’s own room, and the crystal there which was a mirror to the ones allotted to a Planetary Administrator. In fact, every high-tier building had some functionality of its own, but only the temples could truly channel the will of the System. The priest settled down and Nikhil took a seat across from him, waiting patiently as the priest accessed the crystal Interface.

“It seems we have enough adherents near here that there are few quests, especially at your rank,” the priest commented, eyes flicking over the System screen. “A Platinum-rank [Challenge Zone] has formed on Khyrea, but I suppose that’s the wrong ranking for your companions. Here on Ikent there is a Silver-ranked [World Elite] that is likely to appear within the next few weeks, though Harahk Clan generally claims it.”

“Our ultimate destination is Sydea,” Nikhil informed the priest, not interested in straying too far off their route, even if there were some interesting possibilities. Being able to acquire a B-tier Skill at Copper was more of an opportunity than most.

“Sydea, hmm.” The priest hummed to himself as his Interface pared itself down. “We do have an interesting report, that the portal on Sydea has been closed. I can verify that the quest for the [Ahrusk Portal Staging Area] no longer exists, but one of the temples nearer to Sydea claims there is a native there who knows more about it.”

“Oh?” Nikhil’s eyes fixed on the priest. He had known about the portal closing, but there was scant little information beyond that — one of the issues he intended to address himself. The Bismuth that had already moved on Sydea had not gone through the appropriate channels, and was not reporting as he should. “Elaborate.”

“The text I have is somewhat confused,” the priest said uncomfortably, glancing over at another System window. “The native in question is claiming something about a threat to the System itself. He is current staying in the temple on Uriva.”

“Interesting,” Nikhil said, suddenly far more eager to reach his destination. That seemed like precisely the sort of challenge the System would provide to test a pilgrimage. “Send a message to have it held until I arrive. I would like to hear the tale in person.”

“Absolutely, Honored Bismuth,” the priest said, a System window appearing before them. Sending such a message took a certain amount of currency, so Nikhil slid over a Platinum token to ensure he didn’t impoverish a fellow follower of the divine. It disappeared with a brief nod, and Nikhil returned to the temple nave to spend his own time in contemplation.

When he resumed his journey he felt renewed, confidently leading his charges through the portals located in the planetary capitals. Close to the frontier, the web of connections became more like a chain, with the portals not even located in the same city. Traveling overland was not difficult for a Bismuth, even with Coppers in tow, but it was certainly less convenient than the dedicated travel buildings to be found in fully upgraded cities. Finally, though, he arrived at Uriva, which seemed to be rather more wealthy than most places on the frontier. Not quite up to core standards, but surprisingly not too far off, either.

“This is young Copper Muar,” the priest said when Nikhil visited the local temple, which was also fairly well upgraded. “I’ve verified everything he’s said so far as I’ve been able to, and he is not lying, but his tale is still difficult to believe.”

“I will hear it for myself,” Nikhil said, eyeing the animal with cool disfavor. There weren’t many Sydeans outside their world, and the investigation he’d done had revealed them to be one of Eln’s soon-to-be-extinct savages. Yet anyone who was willing to commit themselves to the divine System had to have some redeeming features, so he was willing to listen.

“Honored Bismuth,” the creature said, bowing his head, and at the priest’s prompting launched into a story that was wild and quite difficult to believe. But Nikhil’s Skills insisted that it wasn’t lying, and to his perception it was clear that the Copper didn’t *hold* himself like a Copper. Certainly not like any of the near-children that Nikhil had in tow.

When he was done, Nikhil spent a few minutes in silent consideration, his claws absently stroking through the fur of his arms. He doubted the creature was completely accurate. Much of what it related could easily have been trickery, the application of Skills at Azoth level, or simply filtered through the raw ignorance of an unlettered savage. Still, it was more than enough to convince Nikhil there was something truly unusual occurring on Sydea, something beyond a quest that offered easy advancement for Coppers.

“You have done well to bring this to me,” Nikhil said, reaching to the badge around his neck and invoking his authority within Clan Tornok. Such information was certainly worth a reward, and since it was merely a Copper even the most lavish gifts would be barely more than what any Clan Tornok Copper would be allowed. Accordingly, he transferred a number of Platinum Essence Tokens, a set of D-tier Universal Skill Tokens, and four Silver-tier Equipment Tokens.

“Thank you, Honored Bismuth,” the sorry animal said, clearly overwhelmed as it should be. Nikhil waved the creature away, already considering what he should do. It was hardly worth the time to call for any of Tornok Clan’s Azoths, let alone an Alum, but Nikhil hadn’t reached

Bismuth by approaching problems without thought. He would make sure he was prepared before he crossed over.

Initik flexed his gripping claws thoughtfully, hearing them click in and out of their positions on his shoulders, and considered the conversation he had just heard. He had the authority to listen in on those with a divine connection, but he could not pay attention to everything everywhere. However, the presence of a higher rank foreigner had made him check in on the standard invocation of privacy, and he was glad he had.

It irked him that he'd not caught the first telling of the story, since it had been in that very same temple with his highest-ranking priest. The High Paladin showed obvious doubts about Maur's story, but Initik didn't think the young man was mistaken. If he had been misled, it was not about the most important aspects — that Cato was from outside known reality, and that he sought the destruction of the System.

Mostly because it so neatly explained the Sydean that had drawn Initik's attention by crossing the portal and triggering his Interface's alarms. The strange essence signature that was the source of that alarm and its associated quest had been destroyed, of course, but Initik had spent an incredible sum to take the Sydean in question to his own realm for further investigation. Except the man had promptly died, and Initik knew it wasn't anything that he had done.

Many World Deities never learned true precision or grace with their Skills, because they were born at that level. Instant access to any Skill, at maximum rank, with more power reserves than an Alum meant that they started out with more benefits than anyone who had ascended through the ranks, and a concomitant lack of control. But Initik had started at Copper, so he knew how fragile that rank was and how to restrain himself, so his handling of the Sydean shouldn't have injured the being, let alone killed him.

The most damning thing was that Initik had immediately plied the corpse with a healing Skill that should have resurrected him, but to no avail. The body was alive, but the person inside was dead. Initik had seen that happen enough times by happenstance to know it shouldn't have been the case for someone who seemed to keel over of their own accord. Somehow, it had been done on purpose.

At the very least he was vindicated in his expenditure of essence to screen this "Cato" at the portal. It was obvious Initik couldn't allow the being even the slightest foothold on Uriva, if for no other reason than he didn't know the threat. He had learned long ago that the unknown was always the most dangerous.

"Keep an eye on things and open an emergency portal back if need be," he told his Interface. He hated leaving while there was such a crisis going on, but he wouldn't be gone for more than a day or so. Under the circumstances it was more urgent than ever he visit the one deity who had replied about seeing a world portal close.

The Interface burred agreement and Initik stepped to the edge of his realm, opening up the link to the greater System. The connections there were similar to the portals that those below the divine realms used, but far more robust and under his personal direction rather than being subject to the System's discretion. Initik rarely ventured out to the other worlds, especially those

in the core where petty politics reigned, but he still remembered the technique to slide along the glowing web of System links and hop from world to world.

Each world had its own Deity Realm, some large and some small, some well-defended and some not. Initik skipped along the surface of these realms, at the nexus where the paths of the System intersected, not bothering to meet or greet any of the deities who ruled there. Most of them wouldn't have noticed his passage, and half of them probably weren't even within their own domain. All those scions of the core world clans spent far too much time with pointless internal wrangling and not actually managing their duties.

Not that any of the clans managing the frontier were any better. The Elns and Lundts were actively and willfully malevolent toward their worlds, pushing the System from being merely challenging to actively impossible. He hadn't killed Urivan's first World Deity simply because he wanted the position.

His destination was on the fringes of what was generally considered the core worlds, with a deity who had risen from Copper. Ascended deities were an overwhelming minority, but Initik didn't really get along with anyone else. The target domain was like Initik's, the boundaries of his realm reinforced and the sole entrance protected against any would-be intruders. In the System Space it appeared as a heavy portcullis gate standing at the edge of a pool of orange grass, embedded in the slowly swirling clouds of the in-between spaces. Initik simply knocked.

The gate rose, and Initik passed into a brilliant valley in orange and gold nestled between two snowcapped mountains, with one person standing in the waist-high grass. The deity that was a member of a furred race, dark with orange strips, with a triangular muzzle and triangular ears, his four eyes sharp and arterial red. Like Initik's race, he had four arms, though he had midlimbs that allowed him to transition between bipedal and quadrupedal rather than gripping claws that were designed for climbing.

"Neyar," Initik greeted him, stopping a polite distance away and nodding.

"Come on in, Initik," Neyar rumbled, voice almost too low-pitched to hear. He waved a hand and a small gazebo appeared on the grass, with a pair of seats and beverages. Initik had never seen Neyar's living space, but that was fine. "Tell me more about your problem."

Initik had been circumspect in his questions, not wishing to draw attention from the large clans and so invite a pointless conflict that would distract from whatever the *real* issue was, but with Neyar there was no purpose to dissembling. Clearly, quickly, and concisely, Initik set out everything he knew, from the closure of the Ahrusk portal to the conversation he had overheard. When he was done, Neyar took a long breath and knocked back the glass he was holding.

"Can't say I'm unhappy to see that Ahrusk portal gone," he drawled. "I've had a couple of the Ahrusk types come through here, following high-rank quests. They're proper monsters." Initik clicked curiously, and Neyar laughed.

"They're too damned powerful! Every single one of them. *Every single one.*" Neyar pointed a claw at Initik, whiskers bouncing as he talked. "They're Bismuths delving peak Azoth dungeons. Some of them were even *soloing* low Azoth dungeons! Azoth rank in all but name in less than ten years is insane. Faster than *I* ranked up anyway. Besides which, they all look different, and *that* is incredibly strange. I don't trust it. Even if there's a hundred-something of them now, can you imagine a whole planet like that?"

“They’d ascend by the thousands and take over the core worlds,” Initik replied, rotating his glass thoughtfully, not sure what to think about the oddness Neyar described. Power was one thing, but variety spoke of an alien element he could not fathom. “I certainly would not mourn the clans in such a case.”

“Nor I, but at least things are stable. These newcomers — I do not like them. Yet, I can believe that they fought off the System.” Neyar laced the thick digits of his midlimbs together and leaned back in his seat to regard Initik. “I know of two other times when a portal to a new world was closed. The last was some ten thousand years ago; the other, fifty thousand years before that. Both times I recall some rumors about strange encounters and higher ranks going missing before the portal closed, but neither time did we get a crop of monstrous individuals or this idea of someone wanting to destroy the System itself.”

“I did not believe it was merely a deluded fantasy,” Initik said grimly. “Though I am not entirely certain what to do about it. The best solution would be to simply cut Sydea off from the rest of the System — but I cannot imagine convincing anyone to do so.”

Neyar didn’t protest that Initik’s solution was too extreme. They both knew that the best way to deal with such slippery problems was with overwhelming force. Sydea was not Initik’s world, though, and as he could never persuade a clan member that anything not a deity was a threat, Initik would likely have to do the unthinkable.

He’d have to *help* Marus Eln.