

Chapter 5 — Getting Known

Gods were not supposed to feel fear.

Initik the Warden, [World Deity] of Uriva, was fairly certain that aphorism only applied to the soft, distant rulers of the core worlds. The ones who had never needed to rise from Copper, or the ones who had been safely ensconced in their own power for so long that they'd forgotten what it was to be alive. He very clearly remembered the early days before the System arrived and knew that even gods were not safe from those more powerful than them. Even so, he have never expected to feel so uneasy about the mortal realm.

In the months since Sydea had vanished from the System, he had been uneasy, even with no particular reason to be. There had been no stirrings either on Uriva or from the Sydean near-corpse he had in stasis. Yet something primal, down in the depths of his soul, had kept him on edge.

The fear came, at least a frisson of it, when his Interface delivered him a certain pair of names. Initik had kept track of Muar, even if the Sydean wasn't strictly one of Initik's divine users, if for no other reason than that uneasiness. When Muar reported that he had seen Raine and Leese Talis, whom Initik had seen die with his own eyes, it was obvious that the conflict with Cato was not yet done.

It was vaguely possible the versions he'd seen annihilated by Cato's weapon on Sydea were merely copies, in the same way that Cato could clearly copy himself, but his scrying had not implied that at all. They had been simply Raine and Leese, Copper-ranked.

More proof that Cato worked in ways outside the System. Cloning or puppeting Skills might fool the usual Copper-ranked [Appraise], but not a [World Deity]'s version of the same. Assuming Muar wasn't hallucinating – and Initik very much doubted the Platinum-rank mortal was mistaken – Cato's agents were still alive. Yet there was no global defense quest, so something was clearly different.

He turned to his Interface, which chimed happily as he instructed it to see if it could find the two Sydeans — to no avail. That hardly surprised him, for they had to know that Muar would report them to the local Temple. They had to be on some other world, lost among the sea of millions.

Initik stepped away from his Interface console, turning and leaving his System Space in a single stride. There was little he could do save for warn his neighbors — those that would listen. For some he merely left a message, as there was no point in engaging with them directly. Those of a similar background as the unlamented Marus, probably languishing in ignominy somewhere in the core worlds, weren't worth the effort of trying to convince.

Mii-es of Ikent was an exception. She wasn't one of the half-sized natives, but the similarities of feathers had drawn her attention, at least according to her. Regardless of reason, she was the only representative of Clan Sier in the area, and he found her to be tolerable company. Better, she wasn't a fool, which showed in how relatively prosperous Ikent had become.

He slipped through the ways of the System until he ended up at the green-pillared entrance to her System Space, and politely pressed some essence into her door chime. Mii-es didn't keep him waiting long, the woven reeds strung between the pillars parting to reveal a vast sky held up

by carved jade obelisks. The obelisks were adorned with broad shaded spirals of wood, each wooden platform adorned with colored ropes.

The ruler of the System Space waited for him at the top of the central obelisk, a tall and elegant form covered in iridescent feathers. Any mortal petitioner would have had to climb the long spiral to the top, but Initik was a [World Deity] and had no patience for those sorts of games besides, so he simply crossed to stand in front of the throne in a single step.

“Initik,” Mii-es greeted him, lifting a languid hand to wave jeweled claws at him. “What news, darling?”

“Ill news,” Initik replied, his gripping claws flexing idly. “The entity that corrupted Sydea is, I believe, still loose. Its agents were spotted on Uriva earlier today.”

“I’ve had the gossip about Sydea,” Mii-es said, still in a lazy drawl and draped bonelessly against her throne, but Initik wasn’t fooled. There was a sharp, bright light in her eyes. “How much of a threat is it really, my dear?”

“If nothing else, it’s hard to be certain when this *Cato* is actually dead,” Initik said, then nodded his thanks as Mii-es summoned a seat for him with a gesture. “And in truth I cannot be certain *Cato is* here, as the only obvious marker was a global defense quest generated by the System directly. I do have the essence signature of the beasts *Cato* was using — but it may have realized that as I have not seen either quest or essence signature on Uriva.” Initik reached up to touch the icon on his chest, reaching into his private storage to withdraw a memory gem and tossing it over.

She flexed a claw and it vanished partway with a surge of essence. Like Initik, Mii-es actually had chosen to work with essence directly rather than relying solely on Skills, which was one reason she had his respect. Though in truth he could only stand her personality for short stints.

“I do appreciate the information, dear. I will keep an eye, or two, on Ikent for just such an eventuality,” she said, winking her left two eyes at him. “But do you really feel this *Cato* is a threat to *us*? Neither of us are some effete Clan appointee.”

“The crux of the matter is this: I don’t understand what *Cato is*,” Initik told her, his gripping claws clicking against the chitin on his shoulder. “If he were using purely mortal power, that would be nothing. But he is neither mortal nor deity, so I cannot know what to expect. It will be worse if he is intelligent enough to adapt, and avoid the warning the System gives us with that defense quest.”

“Not much of a warning then, darling,” Mii-es said, but she did tap her own deity icon, accessing her Interface. “But I suppose I may be somewhat out of practice with *direct action*. Now is as good a time as any to brush up.” She flexed her jeweled claws, essence snapping around them as she invoked some sort of Skill.

“...are you asking me for a spar?” Initik tilted his head, almost unable to believe it. Most of the local World Deities wouldn’t have deigned to lower themselves — or dared to try, depending on how much they knew of his past. Mii-es had been rather indifferent before, but he had no idea how old she was. Perhaps bringing the news of something genuinely new had changed her mood.

“If you think you can handle it,” Mii-es said, rising from the throne in a flowing, boneless sort of way, as if she had been pulled up by invisible strings. Wings unfolded from her back, each feather dripping with wicked sharpness.

Initik flexed his hands, invoking his own Skills and summoning weapons to each limb. He’d long ago retrained himself to use any and every weapon, finding no value in being constrained to merely a few once he no longer had to worry about limitations on Skills. If it ever came down to a fight against Cato, Initik had complete confidence. In combat, he was an absolute monster.

They were absolute monsters.

That was the only thing Harik Lim of the Warden’s Claw could conclude about Raine and Leese, aside from the fact that their creche-master had an odd sense of humor. Or perhaps he had known what he was doing, with a group name representing the world itself. The pair were certainly worth representing the Urvan people.

While they were waiting for [Squirming Depths Dungeon] to repopulate, of course he’d offered to spar the pair. He wanted to test the claim that they had run through the entire thing in mere hours — not to mention their other claims. Ascending to Gold by killing a *Peak Gold* [World Elite] would surely result in a far better foundation than the Peak Silver one they had been considering tracking down.

Raine’s sparring pole smashed into his shields, sending him flying backward and forcing him to somersault to regain his balance, skidding on four limbs as he dug his shields into the ground. Though it was merely wood instead of a proper weapon, the impact made his gripping claws ache, and even before he’d managed to recover she was on him again. He could barely keep her at bay, let alone attack, and beyond all that she was not simply attacking. She was *instructing*.

“You’re too tall to brace yourself that way,” she said, her weapon flashing with impossible speed and forcing him to backpedal. “Bend your knees more. More. There. Now spread your toes and hook your claws.” Hark felt odd in the bow-legged and splay-toed stance, but when another fantastic blow sent him skidding, he didn’t lose his footing. His defensive Skill had enough leverage to hold him to the ground. “Your gripping claws don’t have enough articulation for that shield design,” she continued. “It leaves gaps and interferes with your range of motion.” Harik had never had trouble using his maces and shields together, but given Raine’s fantastic power he was thinking he should listen to her recommendations.

What was most bizarre was that he knew the style that Raine was using. [Landslide Arms] was an earth and stone affiliated Skill, suited to heavy blows, but should not have granted the sheer speed Raine showed. If anything it should have slowed her down, a steady and unstoppable force, one slowed even further as the associated stone defenses tended to restrict movement. Yet she was faster than any of them, even Mokri, who was supposed to be their finesse fighter.

Leese was no less capable, with another familiar Skill. [Zephyr Arms] was a rapid, mobile, almost phantom style that traded power for speed — but Leese hit with a strength far beyond what the Skill should have allowed. He could see her working with Orek on the other side of the clearing, dissecting the dazzled boy’s forms and styles down to the tiniest detail. Harik had no

doubt that the pair could have slaughtered them all in second if they wished, but fortunately they didn't have the disdain he'd seen from other elites toward normal rankers like himself.

For they *were* elites. Beyond elites, beyond the best-provided and richest that he'd ever seen. The two looked young, but spoke and acted like seasoned Golds or maybe even Platinums. Yet he doubted even a Platinum would be able to dissect each of their fighting styles after one spar and help them shore up every weakness. Even their casters. It wasn't simply natural ability, someone had spent a lot of time and effort to ensure the pair had more knowledge than most veterans.

Orek might actually be a problem. The boy was quickly becoming infatuated with the pair and, however kind they might be, Harik didn't want to chance offending them with the clumsy flirtations of a star-struck novice. Though it could be worse; Orek had no small talent himself, being nearly ready for Gold at his age and seeing someone who so vastly outclassed him could have put poison into the boy's ego. Fortunately, he saw it as inspiration rather than an impossibly distant goal, and it certainly helped that the two were giving real, applicable advice.

The only thing he couldn't really figure out is why the pair were bothering with the Warden's Claw. Only Orek was in any way notable, all the rest of them being strictly average. Not that he was complaining — he was advancing quickly enough to stay ahead of the ravages of aging, and hadn't taken the drastic risks that tended to kill so many others who pushed too fast. The entire thing was clearly a fortunate encounter, but he couldn't help wonder what exactly the catch would be.

It was on his mind when they finally started their delve, but even inside the dungeon he didn't want to broach the subject until they were deeper in. He took point as they proceeded into the depths, keeping in mind the pointers and tips he'd gotten from Raine and Leese. It had only been a day's worth of instruction, so the improvements were small, but surviving and even thriving was the sum of many small improvements.

They slowly worked their way through the first rooms, crushing the small swarms of waist-high centipedes. Harik couldn't help but think that Raine and Leese could have simply strolled through the rooms, rather than holding chokepoints and bringing down the monsters one at a time. Speed compounded; nobody at Silver could fight for hours at a time, so they had to take breaks simply to offset the strain of combat. If they could have slaughtered everything in seconds, then they'd need only take a break once a floor, rather than once a room.

"So what do you all think of those two?" Harik only raised the question once they were six rooms deep, far away from the entrance and with some amount of privacy.

"I like them," Orek said immediately, and Mokri clicked, cuffing his son lightly with a free hand.

"Of course you do, but keep your mind straight. You don't have a chance with either of 'em. Have to be some project from the core worlds. An Azoth, maybe."

"Really? You think it's that high up?" Koret clicked doubtfully. "A Platinum could do plenty without needing to invoke some core worlds monster."

"I've met Platinums," Orek said, gesturing with his gripping claws. "And so have you, at the Hall of Warriors. They're powerful, no doubt about it, but you don't surpass limits until Bismuth, and even they have more important things to do."

“I have only heard of two Urivans making Azoth,” Harik said thoughtfully. “Not sure if any of them are still around. Those circles are far beyond us.”

“So we shouldn’t take them up on their offer?” Orek asked, sounding devastated.

“Gods, no. I mean, we *should*,” Mokri said. “Even if the last we see of them is when we go offworld for the town founding quest, we’ll have gotten more out of it than years of going on by ourselves.” He pointed at Orek. “The level of instruction they’re giving is what you’d pay Platinum for at your Hall. Better, even. I’ve not seen anyone who had familiarity with your weapon.”

Orek had been lucky enough to acquire a growth weapon as a *Copper*, though a confluence of luck and daring, and the returning chakrams were quite potent — but so exotic that Orek struggled to upgrade his Skill. With no masters to turn to, he didn’t qualify for a tier-up, and since he hadn’t yet found a new weapon Skill token his was stuck at F-tier. Yet Raine and Leese had known exactly how to improve grip and angle, and even had discussed timing and rhythm after seeing Orek’s [Cascading Volley] Skill in action.

“Assuming they’re still around when we get out, we’ll say yes,” Harik decided, looking around at the rest of his group. Everyone agreed.

Cato was rather pleased with how the Uriv Lineage had taken to the information links. Some of the help they’d offered the adventuring group was from their own experience, but a lot of it was taken from the same combat modeling program they’d used for themselves. The program had originally been meant for a particularly involved gaming simulation, a third-party aid to train players for the highest level of raiding.

It had no problem analyzing the physics-defying abilities of System Skills, and in fact it had been rolled into the suite that was used to figure out how to fight *against* any given System opponent. Getting it to run inside a warframe was not so easy, especially considering that a lot of conventional interface options didn’t work with the biological restrictions. But with orbital support, that wasn’t necessary, and simply streaming someone’s sensorium for the program to crunch through was good enough.

Of course, such an exercise took on an entirely different cast when it was *actual* life or death, rather than a game. What should have been a fun exercise in optimization and learning became desperately treasured knowledge. He gotten some degree of instruction himself when he was far younger, even before he was postbiological, so he was very aware of the difference in attitude.

An ability to defend yourself, to determine your own life, was absolutely necessary regardless of reality. In or out of the System, in digital or fleshy bodies, in Summer Civilizations or base reality, a person had no real agency if they couldn’t make their decisions stick in the face of opposition. But the capacity for violence should never be the *only* thing that granted agency, and the lack of choice gave such training a sinister cast.

The other thing they had offered the group was tracking a World Elite and, by the time they actually needed to look for one, Cato’s observation network ought to be up to the task. The primary issue he faced was that he couldn’t directly appraise the ranks of the monsters on the

ground. Disconnected from the System, he could only make guesses by apparent output of force – when these roaming bosses encountered another monster – and by the zones in question.

He was fairly certain he'd been able to figure out the zone boundaries simply by virtue of creature habitats, and assigned them to the appropriate rank, all the way up to Platinum. It would have been easier if he could directly access a System map like the one Onswa's Interface had shown him in Sydea, but that wasn't in the cards just yet. So far as he could tell there were no Bismuth zones, and he didn't know if that was a failure of his observation and ranking system, or if they genuinely didn't exist on Urivan. There had only been a single Platinum dungeon on Sydea, and no Platinum zones, so it wasn't out of the question, but Uriva was leaps and bounds more developed than Sydea had been.

Then again, if Platinums could hit single-digit mach numbers, a Bismuth fight where each blow could flatten cities might require something special. An entire continent, or some kind of contained basement universe like dungeons generated. That was something another him would have to deal with.

Finding a Peak Gold boss, specifically, would be a bit harder. It'd be immensely embarrassing to point them to the wrong type of mob, and put a permanent dent in the reputation they were trying to create. Cato was already worried that somehow people would immediately realize that the sisters were imposters of a sorts, but such concerns seemed to be unfounded. Not only did the Warden's Claw fail to find anything unreasonable about their names, but nobody in town cared either.

Part of it was simply that there was no need to keep records. The System accounted for everyone's identities, and trying to cross-check that was an enormous waste of time and effort. More specifically, time and effort for those of higher rank, who would benefit the least from tracking people. If the System reported that two Urivans were named Raine and Leese and were Peak Silver, they were. No origins or paper trail required; with how much people had to move around to rank up there was no point in that anyway.

It was almost bewildering to Cato, who had grown up in a society where proof of identity was extraordinarily important. Within certain communities it wasn't necessary, of course, but everyone was very careful about who they let *in* to those communities. That wasn't even counting the natural and non-malicious confusion over identities, when postbiological minds could be duplicated by accident or on purpose. His own duplication and reconciliation schema had a thorough identity check built into it, as well as various methods of assuring that no individual instance had been compromised.

That was the problem with a hegemonic central authority. Perhaps it worked well enough most of the time, but the moment it failed, absolutely nobody was ready for it. Cato was pretty certain people would get suspicious if *too* many versions of Raine and Leese began operating on different worlds, but mostly because with their augments they would be at the very top of any rank.

The whole situation tempted him to go down himself, but it was a vague and restless inclination rather than anything serious. The invasive System prompts and the nightmarish loop of fight to live to fight again would drive him to something rash. As it was he still paced back and forth in his human frame, in the small rotating habitat built into the surface among the sea of factories,

burning off energy for the psychological benefit of doing *something* while other people went and did the important work. There was bioengineering to do, but most of that was just waiting for the equipment to do its work.

It didn't help that he was only intermittently in contact with the Sydean Lineage. To be fair to them, simply waiting near a central city with no other reason than to pick up any supplies Cato could deliver was not particularly interesting. Instead they'd gone to grind dungeons. That wasn't how they put it, but that was what it was, since even with all their advantages they simply hadn't been ranking up long enough for the odds of rare loot to be on their side.

A situation which frankly offended Cato's sensibilities. He didn't like dungeons to begin with, but it rankled that with thousands of years of human ingenuity at his beck and call the best he could do was give them starter equipment. Starter equipment based on designs older than spaceflight, even if the materials were newer. Unfortunately, the System's own rules meant that only System created items were useful at higher ranks.

The Urivan Lineage voyaging out to find their world boss was at least a welcome break from spinning his own wheels. His surveillance satellites had located a likely prospect, an oversized four-winged hawk creature soaring through a region of plateaus and slot canyons. According to the sisters, world bosses like that did respawn after being killed, but the longer they were around the more powerful they got. The easiest ones to find and kill were generally farmed — though of course, System natives didn't use those terms. For them, it was no game.

"It's about six hundred yards above you, south-southwest," Cato instructed them, watching through his satellites. *"Just give me the word and I'll clip its wings."*

The reason why this particular world boss was rarely downed was simply that Gold Ranks didn't have enough flight maneuverability to bring it to earth. Or really, to properly get its attention, as it generally roamed far above the plateaus like some sort of mesa-dwelling albatross. Fortunately for them, Cato could do something about it.

He didn't have proper railguns up, the Bismuth-killers that might as well have been nuclear weapons, but whipping together a small needle railgun was well within his capabilities, and so long as the bird didn't suddenly alter course it was easy enough to hit the thing with a much smaller munition. Not enough to kill it, of course, but hitting a wing would ground it temporarily and allow Raine and Leese, and the Warden's Claw, to attack it.

The Urivan Lineage even had an excuse — they were using an item given to them by their patron. It was true, to a certain extent, though of course the sisters could hardly reveal the full reality. Cato wasn't particularly worried about the railgun setting off any alarm either, as he'd already dropped supplies — and even people — on the surface, and a five-pound impactor wasn't even going to kill the creature.

"We're ready," Raine sent, and Cato signaled the railgun. The velocity was lower than his Bismuth-killers, a leisurely four thousand miles per second — practically walking pace. That meant that the time between firing and impact was a bit under eight seconds, and so hardly a weapon of precision, but the bird's habits of movement made it quite predictable. The steel needle sailed through space, almost its entire trajectory in vacuum and only in the last few fractions of a second hitting atmosphere.

The projectile blew a hole in the wing muscle, almost exactly where Cato had projected, and the thing tumbled down toward the ground. From there, he didn't have to do anything but watch as the six Urivans methodically dismantled the thing. There were limits to how many people could benefit from hunting one world boss, but apparently they were more relaxed for something so far above their rank. If it were Silver instead of Gold, only one of the groups – the Warden's Claw or the Urvan Lineage – could have benefitted.

It made sense from game terms, perhaps, but in the real world those sorts of restrictions would cause no end of trouble. Cato didn't have to imagine there were fights over such things, or over drops in dungeons — he'd been told. Raine and Leese had years as completely average people struggling through at-rank dungeons and scrounging every last piece of gear they could manage. He hadn't heard many stories from them, but Leese *had* mentioned a few unpleasant experiences with dungeon loot.

Considering how unpleasant the division of rewards could get in *games*, he could well imagine how bad it could get in real life, where an equipment upgrade could be a matter of life and death. Dungeons weren't run for fun, loot wasn't an enjoyable hit of dopamine. All of it was deadly serious, and a poor choice of group companions, or poor luck with drops, could have very lethal consequences. Cato couldn't think of a more effective way to remove all the fun from it.

The people from Earth, those few who had really taken to the System, had considered it just another game. It wasn't that they were detached from reality, which might have been understandable, it was that they genuinely preferred to be amputated of choice and thrown into a framework which required nothing from them but a simple behavior loop.

In the satellite feed, nobody *looked* like they were having fun. They were professionals, doing their jobs, as even grounded the bird still had some form of lightning magic that was forcing the six of them to be very careful. It was clear all of them had to get some damage in for the System to count it, even the nominal healer.

"Done," Raine broadcast, after allowing the youngest of the group the killing blow. Cato wasn't certain if there was a greater reward for the last hit, and added that question to the list of nuances he needed to understand to better work with System culture, but regardless it wasn't like the Urvan Lineage needed an extra boost. Augmentations aside, the System was going down on Uriva. In months or years, but it was going down.

"We'll need to give the Warden's Claw some time in town, but then we'll head offworld," Leese sent. *"A stop on Ellesz shouldn't be a problem."*

"Excellent. I'll let them know you're coming and then drop down the supplies as soon as everything is ready."

They'd probably have to delay a few more days, but Cato had just about finished the sensory organism. Part of him wished he knew how to make things more System-compatible, because if it could grow with Raine and Leese then it would be useful at all ranks and not just for a brief window, but he knew that it just wasn't possible. Even if it were, it'd take years more experimentation and he wasn't sure he had the right outlook for it.

What'd he'd come up with had ended up looking like a capelet, albeit one that lived and breathed. It wasn't exactly a single organism, more of an algal mat, a colony creature that

looked like it was made of fur. The fur was actually many, many sensory tendrils, none of them particularly complex but the sheer amount adding up to an exceedingly sensitive surface that faced in every direction.

He could have made a more discrete creature, but he was almost certain that it would get damaged at some point. The more surface area it had, the more likely it was to catch a glancing blow, and since he couldn't count on the System boosting its capacities he had to work under the restrictions ordinary physics — it *needed* that surface area, and not just for the senses. For respiration and radiating waste heat as well, though getting it enough energy to live and function was its own sort of problem. The capelets would need water and sugar regularly, even with photosynthetic uptake.

The main benefit was that it would work no matter how much or little of it there was – albeit at reduced efficacy if it was too damaged – and it would regrow itself over time. If he could get supplements to them, he could speed that up by quite a lot, but even if they were out of contact for a while they wouldn't be left high and dry.

He notified the sisters when it was ready, a day after the group had returned to town, and launched the care package. In addition to the capelets, it had more plants and supplements, both to spread his communication network and coax the Sydean Lineage biology to integrate properly with the capelets. They would be using direct nerve induction instead of microwaves, something only possible due to extra testing, but it would be more immediately usable than his first thought.

Hopefully his gifts would be enough for the Sydean Lineage to keep themselves safe, at least until the other versions of him came online.