

## Chapter 6 — Consequences of Getting Known

*"You can pick the crates up anytime."*

Cato's voice buzzed through Raine's head as she approached the outskirts of Ellesz's capital city. She let out a long breath, some tension within her easing. It was more stressful than she'd expected to know that she was being hunted by assassins, who might be Platinum or even higher. Even if both she and her sister had incredibly sharp senses for Peak Gold, they didn't have the Skills to defeat dedicated stealth and assassination builds. Something Dyen had proven.

It was damned unsettling, the way he could sneak around.

"Good," she said, tracing a burning path after Leese. "Dyen already intercepted one assassin."

"What, already?" Cato sounded almost offended. "How'd that one find you way out there?"

"Tracking Dyen, apparently," Leese replied, amused. "The fact is, though, once we start passing through cities someone is going to find us."

"Well, I can't stop that just yet, but this little gift ought to help you deal with it." Cato's voice, even through the odd mechanism of the lizard, was confident enough to be reassuring. "At least until the other versions of me get up and running."

"And we get to Platinum," Raine said.

"And you get to Platinum," Cato agreed. "And beyond, though once you start getting near the core worlds you're probably going to have to be very careful."

Raine nodded, even though Cato couldn't see it and such an idea was very far off. Reaching Platinum was one thing, but everyone knew crossing to Bismuth was an entirely different prospect. What exactly they would need to *do* was less clear, since they could hardly ask, but with Cato's help she was certain it'd be no problem.

The two of them reached the cache, a sled covered with a blanket of greenery and holding a number of odd-looking containers. For anyone who knew, they were obviously of Cato's manufacture, printed with odd notations of *this end up* and *open here*. Yet what struck Raine the most was that her own hands had put that sled there — and yet, not her hands. A *version* of her, an alternate that was not quite the same.

Part of Raine regretted allowing Cato to create more of them to begin with. It was one thing to know she could wake up again if she died, it was another to know that there was someone else with her mind and her eyes and her name, wandering around the planets. But then again, the other version of her was stuck working on Uriva, preparing to free the planet. It was not a task she would want for herself.

"Oh, this looks nice," Leese said, having already cracked open one of the crates. She pulled out a small garment of silken fur, black trimmed with white and gold. Leese draped it over her shoulders, settling the capelet into place and securing the front by simply pressing the edges together. It merged seamlessly, then actually *moved*, settling itself into place and sliding a collar up to cover the back of her neck. Raine shivered, finding it a little eerie.

“That’s odd,” Leese said, then pointed to the near-identical twin still in the crate, clearly labeled with Raine’s name, along with some brief instructions. “Your turn.” Raine gave it an [Appraise], even if it was unlikely, as one of Cato’s creations, that the System’s description would help much.

[Wary Mat – Low Copper. This life form is very sensitive to the environment]

Raine snorted and picked up the capelet, following Leese’s example. The material was soft, ever so slightly warm, and it was hard to imagine it was a living being rather than a piece of clothing as she draped it over her shoulders. When the collar shaped itself to her neck, there was a brief wave of phantom sensation, then a thing that was utterly alien to her. Something like a presence, but also a sense, somewhere in the back of her mind. A phantom limb, a Skill, all of that and yet not quite like any of them.

*“I’ve included some exercises to help you synchronize with the anti-stealth capelets,”* Cato said, intruding on her thoughts. *“But ultimately it’s going to be a process of learning and adjustment, since everyone parses information differently. They’re tailored to you, so you won’t be able to share them. And they ought to regrow from damage, given resources. Speaking of which, that’s what’s in the rest of the crates. Supplies.”*

Raine and Leese quickly checked and itemized what Cato had sent them. More rations, though the name really didn’t do the blocks of food justice. They were *incredibly* good, came in different flavors, and just one of them was enough sustenance for a full day. More Cato-spears, for delivery to different worlds, and more plants in their little metal stakes, to be driven into the ground and so increase the range of Cato’s communication.

Cato was far more generous than the System.

So far they’d been unlucky with loot, but that was simply because they hadn’t delved enough dungeons. They could manage them far faster than most groups, but Peak Gold or Platinum dungeons still took a day or more, and they’d only had a few months. Even with their augmented bodies, they couldn’t spend every waking hour fighting through a dungeon, so they’d only managed two or three dozen delves. Far more than they could have accomplished in the same time frame before, but they’d spent *years* at it in their prior lives.

“We’ll get some practice with these and then head on out,” Raine decided. The sooner they started Cato going, and the more planets they spread him to, the more likely it was he’d be able to help with the assassination issue. Although she still thought dropping one of Cato’s railguns on the Urivan Temple would solve the issue pretty thoroughly.

*“Be careful,”* Cato told them. *“Whatever happened to Dyen, anyway?”*

“He’s skulking around by the portal,” Leese replied. “I’m glad he came to tell us but I’m not fully certain what he wants. He wasn’t warning us just because we’re all Sydean.”

*“Well, if he wants to present a bill, I’ll pay it, not you two,”* Cato said, and Raine’s tail swished in amusement. For all of Cato’s protestations to the contrary, he was practically a god, and a favor from him was more than either Raine or Leese could ever offer. Not that they exactly owed Dyen, but neither of them wanted to give him cause to join up with Muar or hunt them down himself. Unlike Muar, Dyen *did* have an augmented body and was a *serious* threat at his rank.

They stored the supplies in their spatial bags, though the plants had to come along on the sled. It wasn't until after they received their Platinum estates that spatial bags could start carrying along living things. Considering Dyen was still lurking at the capital, they felt safe enough heading in to take the teleportation pylon, risking a city to jump to a dungeon with stealth monsters for testing. It was only Silver, and generally disused because it wasn't worth the risk, but it'd be a good place to get used to Cato's newest gift.

The [Shifting Safyx Dungeon] was located in an enormous tree, below which was a jungle of riotous colors, dense foliage pressing in from every side. The disguised creatures were long, slinky things reminiscent of the Tornok Clan, though they moved on all fours and didn't quite reach her waist. They were also no threat to Gold-Rank physiques, giving the sisters plenty of latitude to test out the capelets.

It started out as a sort of itch inside her mind, a gentle pressure, a sense of having just forgotten something somewhere. A half-whisper, that made her reflexively look in directions where nothing was. Or at least, it didn't seem so at first.

Establishing a rapport with her new equipment was like having a conversation, if one without words. Step by step, Raine could understand more, react better, and incorporate the little hints and prods into her actions. The capelet shifted so it stretched over her cloak, tendrils creeping around the edges and seeming to almost merge with the fabric — a reminder that it was a living being, not just cloth.

The oddest thing, once she got used to it, was how she could see behind her. It wasn't vision, not at all, but rather just a *knowledge* of it. As if she *had* seen it and fixed it in her head, an environmental awareness that everyone learned in their first few combats. The camouflaged creatures became represented the same way — she *knew* where they were, even if she couldn't see them.

In all, it took maybe an hour to acclimate to the new acquisition. Leese was ready at almost the exact same time, the two of them able point out the camouflaged creatures at up to one hundred paces. Their essence sense had a longer range, but it was far better than their sight and hearing, and any assassin would be able to hide from essence senses anyway.

"I know Cato only meant this for protection, but this is incredible for combat," Leese remarked as they left the dungeon. "Far easier to keep track of everything and everyone."

"You do have a tendency to over-focus," Raine agreed. Leese had always been more precise, but there was a reason why Raine was the one to take the lead in combat. If the capelet helped close that weakness, that alone made the equipment priceless. Leese just bumped her shoulder against Raine's protest and changed the subject.

"Which world should we go to next?" She pulled out her map, which Raine could no longer use without thinking of Cato's technology. Before, she'd never questioned the System's contribution, the piece of almost-paper that could show all sorts of different places and scales, updating itself from exploration or from the pylons in central cities. After seeing Cato's ability to do something similar, and how much machinery it took to do so, she had to wonder where the System's workings were and how they operated.

"Kachyl," Raine said aloud, peering over at Leese's map. "Better to get further away from Uriva, and we don't need to cover every world right now. We can circle back later." The map showed

an entire network of worlds through the portals, where Uriva was a sole, dangling point at the end of interlinked connections. Their current world, Ellesz, had three connections, and their target had five. If nothing else, it gave them more routes out if they had to flee.

“Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that,” Leese said, responding to her thoughts rather than her words. “Anyway, we have work to do.”

The first real test of their capelets was at the capital city, where the portal from Ellesz to Kachyl lay. Not because they were expecting an ambush there, but because they knew Dyen was lurking around. If they could spot him, it would be proof that the equipment worked on more than just lower ranked enemies.

“One up on the roof there,” Raine muttered, while Leese swiveled her head to warn off a few lower rankers who seemed interested in their sled. “Not Dyen.”

The capelet didn’t let her see the individual under stealth, but it was more like a hole in the wind and ambient noise. The silhouette had some fur, distinct from the crablike denizens of Ellesz, but was mostly covered in some kind of armor that *sounded* smooth and slick — though Raine would have been hard-pressed to say what exactly smooth and slick sounded like.

Whoever it was didn’t seem to have much interest in them, however. The void of a person stayed perched on top of its chosen building, not appearing to notice or care about them. Raine had to wonder how much she’d never known existed within the System, simply because they weren’t *meant* to be known to anyone else. Or because she was from a small, unimportant world.

There would be more of that the closer they got to the core worlds, things that just hadn’t existed or mattered on Sydea. With no high-rank patron, they would have to navigate much of it on their own, relying on their own abilities — and Cato’s. Which Raine suspected they had not even begun to see.

“There’s Dyen,” Leese said, subtly indicating toward another void, one standing atop a tavern building not far from the Nexus. Raine grunted, then deliberately looked in Dyen’s direction and flicked her tail toward the Nexus. Continuing on, the pair went straight in and through the portal, while Dyen’s stealthy presence trailed behind them. It was only after they had traveled to Kachyl’s Nexus, gotten their map updates, and teleported to a frontier town that Dyen actually revealed himself.

“How did you spot me?” It was more of a demand than a question, but Raine just shook her head.

“Cato,” she said, and figured that was enough of an explanation. She didn’t want to give away that it was the capelets, or how they worked. Dyen wasn’t enough of an ally for that kind of information, and there was always the chance it would leak out if they spoke of it where anyone might be listening.

“Could I learn how to do that?” That was a question, as Dyen eyed them thoughtfully.

“Cato did say that if you wanted something for helping us out, he would be the one to settle accounts,” Raine said. “But it will be some time before we’re back in areas that Cato has sway.”

“I’ll keep a tally,” Dyen said, and faded back into stealth.

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Dyen found that trailing around behind Raine and Leese was both more interesting and more lucrative than he'd expected. It was an excuse to go to different worlds, many of which had their own native races, and while he'd not considered himself the traveling sort before, there was at least *something* to be drawn from different lands and different skies. The lucrative part was how many people he got to kill.

Tornok-Clan were more prevalent on worlds closer to the sprawl they controlled, just outside the core, but it was mostly other assassins that Dyen got to remove. Despite being in the Guild himself, he couldn't pinpoint precisely what everyone was using to track down Raine and Leese. They did stand out as the only Sydeans around, but it was still concerning how quickly they could find the pair. His best guess was that there was information being bought and sold somewhere, perhaps even by Guild members who were not confident in taking on the sisters themselves.

Especially considering how many people had already failed.

He'd followed them to over a dozen worlds in the course of two months, where they sought out high places. It was easy to deduce what they were doing, after having seen Cato's so-called technology for himself, but it was hard to actually *believe*. The entire concept of just hurling a weapon into the sky and then for that to somehow become a god was utterly insane. But perhaps that sort of impossibility was what made Cato a god to begin with.

In the process he'd removed at least ten different assassins, and watched the sisters utterly destroy just as many on their own. The disturbing thing was that he was almost certain the pair hadn't actually *beaten* the stealth Skills. All such Skills came with a knowledge of when the stealth effect failed, barring greater stealth on the part of the opponent. Since neither Raine nor Leese had any such Skills, they shouldn't have been able to silently detect either him or the opponents stalking them.

Regardless of the reasons, they were perfectly capable of removing any amount of Gold-tier opponents. It was the Platinums that were the problem, mostly because the pair lacked appropriate gear. Their fundamental strength and prowess was monstrous, but there was still a certain gap that should have been filled by weapons, armor, and trinkets. Things to make their Skills more flexible or hit harder, bypass armor, or counter movement Skills.

The fact that they were able to deal with mid-Platinums while using only C- and D-tier gear, mostly Gold with some Silver-Rank trinkets, was a testament to how *much* Cato's gifts improved them. Dyen himself was far better equipped, as killing other assassins did mean he inherited quite a few items that were appropriate for his build, but he would have struggled against the sisters even with his own improved body.

Dyen absolutely intended to cash in his aid with Cato.

He did not have a death-wish, despite how he felt sometimes. If he died, he couldn't punish the people who took his wife from him — something he was still determined to do, and by adding Cato's power to the System's he had a genuine chance at it. Even if he grew to Bismuth or Azoth, normally challenging the old monsters was ridiculous with the advantages from having centuries to gather equipment and upgrade Skills. Cato's gifts could make up the gap.

Unfortunately, so long as he followed the sisters he wasn't going to be near any worlds where Cato had established his power. Certainly Dyen hadn't heard of any defense quests through the rumor mill, though he wasn't as connected as others. Nor were there any other assassin's bounties for anyone obviously connected with Cato — at least, not until now.

He was still learning all the nuances of how the Assassin's Guild operated, but clearly someone had taken note of how many failures there had been in trying to complete the contract on Raine and Leese. Not only had the reward been increased, but someone had — anonymously, of course — put together a *group* to deal with the pair. Dyen hadn't even known that was possible, or allowed.

After paying the nominal essence cost for a copy of the group announcement, he left the Guild Hall on the world of Vereem where they'd fetched up. There was only a faint temptation to join the group himself; there was no way they wouldn't suspect something when they found out he was Sydean. Singletons or pairs, assured in their superior stealth and Skills and equipment, were easily dealt with. A full eight Platimums was more than even the three of them together would care to risk — especially since they'd not had the chance to hit Platinum themselves. Nor had he, since it relied on a specific sort of assassination contract that had yet to become available.

Dyen breezed through Vereem's capital to the teleportation pylon, selecting the town where the pair were staying. His surroundings shifted, a sudden wash of hammering rain pounding against the Nexus, accompanied by a sticky tropical heat as he slipped out into the night. Even at Gold, even if he couldn't be *hurt* by the environment, it was still unpleasant.

His tracking Skill let him locate the exact room they were staying in, though after the past attacks that wasn't as helpful as one might think. The doors and windows were *too* obvious as entry points, and anyone who tried breaking in would regret it. The sisters were capable of applying monstrous force. Instead, he just tapped on the door.

"Time to go," he said, trusting that their ridiculously potent senses would penetrate the privacy shielding around the room. As expected, the door opened a moment later as Raine squinted out at him. Instead of words, he just thrust the copy of the group contract at her and let her read it.

"Definitely time," Raine agreed, and shut the door again. Two minutes later, it opened and the pair slipped out, weapons ready. Dyen faded back into stealth as they returned to the capital, and overheard Raine muttering under her breath.

"Cato? What's the closest world you can provide support? Right, we've got an entire group after us." He couldn't hear the reply, but he knew how it worked, at least. At some point he'd have to get one of those lizards for himself. "Come on," she said after a moment, and gestured at one of the portals.

It might have seemed an overreaction, given how many assassins they'd already dealt with, but numbers and context made a difference. They were being hunted by Platimums, who had few issues traveling offworld, and who had more than enough money to pay for rapid-fire teleportation in order to cover more area. Combined with Raine and Leese's builds having no room for any kind of stealth Skills, and them being about the only Sydeans around anymore, hunters could converge in very short order.

In all, they made it four worlds before they were attacked.

Raine and Leese were the first to notice, movement Skills sending them skating away from the area in front of the next portal a moment before a cloud of dark blades erupted from the walls. Dyen only managed to glimpse the Platinum assassin before he faded back into stealth, finding it was a species he didn't recognize offhand — a furred frog rendered in grayscale. The attack was so potent it shredded the Nexus walls, Platinum-rank stone that they were.

Raine and Leese blurred as they dodged several more follow-up attacks — and not from the frog. One of the two groups had either gotten ahead of them or gotten lucky staking out the portal network. Dyen readied his Skills, sliding around the outside of the sudden burst of weapons and energy. Blades of ice hissed through a cloud of orange poison that had appeared to envelop the pair, but the two were faster than any Gold had a right to be. They hit a teleportation pylon and vanished.

Dyen didn't follow. Unlike their pursuers, he actually knew what mattered, and that was getting just one or two worlds further on, where Cato had a presence. For most, running from the assassins would be a losing proposition, but Raine and Leese had very heavy backup not too far away. All Dyen had to do was ensure they reached it.

He ignored the shocked bystanders and ran his perception Skills over the portal area, finding two separate traps and, rather than risk running out of time disarming them, tripped them with his rapier even as he jumped backward with his movement Skill, shadowjumping through the Nexus door.

A screech of protesting metal came from within, but when he poked his head back inside, there wasn't anything visible. Only his essence sense caught the lingering remains of whatever Skills had been used, framing the portal. Like most offworlders, the Platitudes hardly cared about who had been caught up in their hunt. Dyen sneered silently around at the damage to the Nexus, the bloodstains where people had been caught by shrapnel. At least assassin Skills tended to be precise, rather than destroying entire areas.

Less than one minute later, Leese appeared by the teleportation pylon, with Raine following a moment later. They blazed through the portal with their movement Skills, and Dyen hastily followed — he didn't want to lose the chance to speak with Cato again. Ahead of him, the sisters plunged forward one more world, to Zeken, then hit the teleportation pylon, with Leese tossing back the name of a town before she vanished.

Dyen found the town in question and arrived, invoking his movement Skill and only barely catching a glimpse of Raine and Leese as they left over the town walls. It seemed entirely unfair how well they could move when they clearly had barely anything for equipment, just relying on Skills and brute physicality alone. Even if Dyen's own movement Skill was meant more for short jaunts, he had found boots and a cloak that greatly enhanced the Skill — yet the sisters were still faster than him.

It delayed him enough that he caught the assassination squad emerging from the teleportation pylon, essence rippling outward before they vanished. Then a second squad, close behind. Fortunately they didn't know to look for *him*; apparently only the one assassin had realized that Dyen was a Sydean and worth tracking down. Of course, Dyen had also been considerably more careful since then.

By the time he left the town walls the sisters were mere specks in the distance, but Platinums were astoundingly fast. Essence erupted as the kill squads closed in, with Dyen lagging behind. Even as far away as he was, he caught Raine's voice, hard and cold.

"Leave, or die," she said. "So says Cato." From far above, in the cloudless sky, came the crack of thunder.

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

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Raine Uriv clicked politely at the effusive praise from the young Copper she had been instructing, and sent him on his way. After the trip offworld, they'd kept in touch with the Warden's Claw as a potential start for introducing Cato's goals, and in the process gotten introduced to more Urivans. Advising some of the friends of Orek's – all of them in Copper or low Silver – was no great hardship and she marked it as a credit to Orek that he still *had* friends in lower ranks. That could only last for so long, since there was so little each rank had in common with the others, but she still thought it spoke well of him.

At the same time, she found him so restricted, so unimaginative, focused only on ranking up. It was hypocrisy of course, because not only had she been the same way before she met Cato, there wasn't anything else that *could* be done within the System. Yet after tasting some of the other options, she found it so tiresome.

Part of her ached to be back flying. She actually liked some of the simulated mechanisms better than the System version, and the physical drone she got to pilot before heading down to Uriva was even better. There was just something visceral about the sensation of braking and thrust, of raw inertia, that wasn't present within the System. Flying was *easy*, to the point where it was almost cheating.

And speaking of taste, it was strange how *lacking* the System food was. For the most part it was fine, and edible enough, but bereft of imagination. What she had thought was incredibly delicious before, the higher-rank meals available to Golds and Platinums, turned out to be using essence to hide a relatively small flavor profile. The same mechanisms that deadened the rush from killing and leveling also reduced the artificial impressions created by higher rank foods, meaning Raine and Leese turned more and more to Cato's supplies, simply because they were better. Just the ration sticks had more variety than was in the System's store.

Which was why she had started using them as payment for some of the contacts she was trying to cultivate.

The entire reason she and Leese were down on Uriva was to try and prepare it for System removal. That was why they were Gold, and would be Platinum when they got the chance, but it was also why they were talking to people and getting information on all the various towns. Not so much layout, as Cato could simply observe that from above, but what people actually thought. Their problems and their concerns. Without knowing what life was like on Uriva, it would be hard to know how to convince people of Cato's viewpoint.

Annoyingly, it seemed like Uriva was actually doing quite well. There were high-tier buildings for every combat approach, including the Hall of Combat that Raine was using to teach, the taxes



were low, and there were plenty of quests. Far more than she'd ever seen on Sydea, thanks to the higher tier buildings, not to mention spontaneous quests assigned out in the various zones. The entire planet had a sense of purpose, lacking the general malaise that had hung over Sydea.

"I suppose it comes down to power, in the end," Leese said, clearly able to read her musing from across the room. The two of them had been gaining status and goodwill by offering instruction for cheap or free, exactly because Cato had shown they *couldn't* just rely on power. When the System came down they'd need people who actually wanted to help maintain order, not just those who had ruled by fiat of higher rank.

"I don't think just telling people *this will happen* is going to go over as well," Raine sighed, joining Leese as they left the Hall of Combat. "But there doesn't seem to be much to entice the higher ranks with, and I'd rather not with lower-rank malcontents. Most of them aren't reliable."

She'd been hoping by teaching the lower ranks she would be able to find those who had merely been the victims of bad luck, or had been betrayed by group-mates, or otherwise left stranded at Copper or Silver by circumstance. Instead, she had found that most of them were incompetent or lazy, taking no risks and doing the bare minimum, or simply very, very young. In fact, they were all fairly young, which seemed strange to Raine. There should have been *some* older types, stalled at Copper or Silver, but the oldest she'd seen was Mokri — who still hadn't been *that* aged, for a Silver.

"There is something odd." Leese agreed with Raine's unspoken confusion. "Not exactly something we can ask about, though." The two of them *looked* Urivan, and had the right body language, but they hadn't grown up on the planet, and weren't ready to reveal themselves as outworlders. Though she imagined some people already suspected.

"*At worst we can just show people how boring the System is,*" Raine commented through their alternate link as the two of them made the trek back to their tavern room. "*Show them there can be more to the world than an endless fight.*" She didn't want to say something aloud that would draw too much attention. Not in public.

"*True, but that's only after Cato reveals himself.*" Leese clicked in irritation. "*I'd rather give him something he can use before then. I refuse to believe Uriva is doing so well there's no System-created problems here.*"

Raine clicked agreement, the reflex still not quite natural even after several months with the Urivan bodies, and stepped into the room. The moment the door closed, a sudden heaviness flooded the room, and Raine could feel her mind shift into the extra speed that Cato had given their bodies. A rent tore itself open in front of them, a portal appearing in fractions of an instant, and an Urivan with a gleaming black carapace stepped through. Reflexively, Raine used [Appraise] and gawked at the result.

[World Deity Initik].