

Chapter 4 — First Moves

Cato found that, despite everything, he did enjoy the chance to explore a completely alien solar system. There was a distinctly pragmatic reason to survey the planets and moons around the K-class primary, because he absolutely would need resources and hardened backups, but it was also just interesting. Most of the bodies around Sol had been surveyed and tracked long ago – save for a zillion chunks of ice out in the Oort Cloud – so even if he'd dabbled in exogeology, there hadn't been much novel work to do.

His little probes found that the varicolored moons were, almost certainly, completely natural. Aeons ago when they had formed, different energy and light levels on each of the balls of ice had led to a different strain of proto-bacteria dominating the methane- and water-rich bodies, which had just enough gravity to keep the bulk of the volatiles that boiled off the day sides. The profiles he could glean, ratios of elements and molecules, implied that it was the same biochemistry as the Urivans themselves, so even if the moons had been moved they were likely original to the planet. He didn't think the System would go so far as to imitate the natural circumstances, anyway.

The jewel of the outer system was a mini-Jovian binary, orbiting close enough that the atmospheres visibly bulged toward each other. One was an absolutely stunning blue, the other a seafoam green, and both bearing the distinctive curdled clouds of gas giants. There were no rings, of course, but a cluttering of circumbinary moons made up for it, one of them actually out-massing Uriva itself even if the rest were of a much more reasonable size.

Cato assembled a fully stocked probe and dispatched it to the binary, to set up another industrial base. Not on the oversized moon, of course – there was no point in being at the bottom of a gravity well – but on a high-metallicity moonlet somewhat further out. All the volatiles around made it simple enough to scavenge some deuterium from the abundant hydrogen and load the thing up with fusion fuel. That cut the trip down to weeks, from the years required for a chemical rocket considering the various planetary positions.

He hadn't needed such a backup on Sydea — at least, not so far as he knew. It was always possible something had happened after this version of himself had been updated, but he'd also pushed things on Sydea quite a bit faster than was wise. Uriva would require a more deliberate approach, and quite a bit more buildup. There was no point in tripping any alarms before he was ready to descend in force.

Assuming it wasn't too late for that already. The odds of running into the single person who would recognize Raine and Leese outside of Sydea seemed to be astronomical, though portraying multiple worlds as worlds under the System was misleading. There were only a few major cities per planet, and maybe hundreds of towns but that was still not much compared to hundreds of *millions* of square miles of land area.

Paring that down even further, the quests required to move from Gold to Platinum would naturally funnel people together, though Cato was somewhat surprised that Muar had kept up. He had figured the man would just fade into irrelevancy, but that clearly was not the case. Time had shown that just letting Muar go was a mistake, but at the time he hadn't even considered the cold-blooded murder of a man who was clearly upset, and rightfully so. The events since had changed that, and now Muar was most definitely an enemy.

Not that he was in any position to do anything about it. He was still putting together his surveillance, and definitely wouldn't be suggesting either set of the sisters go anywhere near a Urivan town until he could warn them well in advance if he spotted Muar. It was an oversight he had corrected, and while he was at it he added the Bismuth had had run into, Yaniss, into his surveillance matrix.

Of course, he didn't need that matrix to keep track of Raine and Leese *Uriv*, as they had styled themselves, thanks to their new bodies. The pair had gone with frames closer to what Cato would consider the standard augment, integrating a number of improvements beyond raw physical might. Now they had full electromagnetic communications abilities built into their biology, and tracking them from orbit was easy enough. It also meant they could be backed up continuously, without needing the kludge of the pseudo-bioweapon technology.

They had also taken the lineage approach to their postbiological nature seriously and, while they hadn't changed their given names, they had taken on a lineage-based surname. He would have preferred a more radical change, but there was no easy path to doing so. The System lifted the names straight out of their heads, so they couldn't just assume cover identities by just wanting to. They had to actually *believe* a different name applied to them. At least there was hardly anyone who would have the context to suspect anything, though it was another reason to stay in dungeons and the general wilderness until he could get proper surveillance up and running.

"It's almost scary how easy it is to hit Silver," Raine Uriv observed, the words being broadcast back out of the dungeon through the communications-relaying fern they'd planted near the entrance. "This dungeon was *nothing*."

"Best not get overconfident," Leese warned. "Though yes, Silver is simple now. Especially since we don't need to go to towns for our early gear. Or rations." In addition to weapons, Cato had supplied the pair with a hefty amount of food and drink, though their altered and improved biology meant that they needed less than usual.

He'd dropped them in by way of glider, in a rerun of his early entrance to Sydea, though he didn't send any of his own frames along. As much as he ached to get back on the ground and get a feel for things personally, Sydea had made it clear he needed to be more deliberate. Besides which, Uriva didn't seem to have a handy crisis for him to leverage.

Not only were there far more Urivans than there had been Sydeans, but the infrastructure he could observe was far better. More buildings with more color, taller walls, broader footprints, and of course more settlements in general. Somewhere around ten to twenty million Urivans was still hardly anything for a worldwide culture, but relative to the Sydeans they were thriving.

All the arguments against the System still applied, but it was harder to demonstrate to people who were doing well enough. So what if all they could ever do was fighting, if fighting worked for them? Nor did Cato have any handy ruined cities to point to, whether it was because they had been erased over time or the System hadn't preserved them during its initial purge.

Then there was the System-God, who had been frighteningly responsive, if not outright aggressive. If Uriva had been the world that Cato had first encountered, he never would have had a chance. Fortunately, he *had* been able to gain a foothold, and even if Uriva was going to be tough to deal with, the Talis sisters were his insurance against it being *too* difficult.

He wasn't going to be restricted to Uriva, and at the very worst he could deal with it by cutting off all the worlds connected to it. Or rather, some other versions of himself would do so. Even with his communication ferns he wasn't certain he'd be able to reconcile himself across multiple worlds — nor was he certain he wanted to. That would require merging extremely different pasts, completely different approaches and thought processes, and just what he'd done on Sydea was strain enough. He'd have to commit to divergence, and just send information back and forth.

It was hardly a new problem. Every variation of digital minds had cropped up somewhere and sometime, from a Summer Civilization created by a single egotist copying herself into the millions, to hapless civilians being scanned and duplicated by terrorists and criminals. There was even a case of a community substrate being damaged, triggering their backups — only for a repair crew to restore the substrate years later, finding the entire thousands-strong community had been perfectly fine, merely cut off from communication.

There were, thanks to these lessons, protocols for communicating between versions of the same person who didn't want to reconcile. It wasn't as simple as just chatting, considering the strange feedback loops that could cause, but something less involved than a full gestalt merge. Certain complex sub-processes bundled up information, preparing and packaging it for later transmission. It was like an outer layer to his consciousness, part of the floating cloud of ancillary mind augmentation that he'd adopted over the years.

"Cato?" Leese's voice came over an entirely different channel, from an entirely different Leese than the pair he was watching down on Uriva.

"Here," he responded, his virtualized human self touching the microphone controls on his access console. The routing protocols for the comms-plants were extremely simple, mostly because he didn't want to expose an actual biological computer to the System, but still good enough that he could tell where Leese was calling from, and that she was communicating through the radio lizard.

"We ran into Dyen," Leese said. "Someone put a bounty on our heads, so there's an Assassin's Guild contract on us. I didn't even know the Assassin's Guild *existed* until just now."

"Ah." Cato said, not really certain what else to say, blindsided as he was. It wasn't that he'd never expected organized opposition, it was just that he had figured that the two of them would fly under the radar — figuratively speaking — for a bit longer. "Does Dyen have any other information on the Guild? How do we get that contract *off* you? Also it sounds like I need to get you backed up again, soon as I can."

"Well, we can die," Raine said dryly, matching one of Cato's thoughts. They'd have to level up once again, but given the advantages of Cato's technology that wasn't a tremendous imposition — though it wasn't really a solution. Not only was dying not exactly pleasant, the ability to come back from the dead was something best kept as a secret. Muar knew it was possible, but he'd only been exposed to the physical version, so Cato was happy to let his opponents continue to believe physical access was necessary for that particular trick.

"That won't help in the long run," Cato replied. "And I'm assuming you don't want to do that either."

“Not really,” Raine admitted. “Dyen said the person who put out the bounty can withdraw it. Or they can die, and that would remove it as well.”

“So, you have to find Muar?” Cato hazarded.

“I think it was the local Bismuth that posted the contract, actually,” Leese said. “Muar certainly couldn’t afford to do it, even if he knew *how* to contact the Assassin’s Guild. It’s all anonymous, but Dyen said that we’re wanted for heresy so the Temple on Uriva is probably involved too.”

“I bet if you used that *railgun* of yours on the Temple that’d fix things,” Raine said, not at all joking. Cato wasn’t exactly shocked, but it took him a moment to parse it as more than an offhand comment. For all that he enjoyed the company of the two Sydeans, they had been raised in the System and were more casually violent than he’d ever been. Violence was a useful tool, but Cato preferred to make it his last tool, as he well knew how many problems it ultimately caused.

“I’m not up to that level of infrastructure just yet,” he replied, trying to be diplomatic. It probably wouldn’t be a good idea to start out with the destruction of a beloved institution if he wanted to be friendly to the Urivan populace. Though he didn’t really know how serious the worship of the System was. Sydea hadn’t had any tradition, but Sydea was also a fringe, frontier world. “I can deliver you more supplies if you want to stay out away from cities. Can assassins find you if you’re out in the wilderness?”

“Dyen says probably not, at least, not with the ranks that the reward is likely to draw,” Leese replied after a moment, reminding Cato that if they attracted the attention of *really* high ranks, entire planets could be at risk. “I really hate the idea of just squatting in a dungeon while we wait, though. Muar is probably Platinum by now, while we have to wait for another defense quest. Even Dyen might beat us to ranking up!”

“Unfortunately, there’s nothing I can do to speed up the System processes,” Cato said, though he understood why she was so aggrieved. Considering the additional augments he’d given them, they should have easily beat their peers – or opponents – to the next rank. Unfortunately, they were being kept back by circumstances not under either his control or theirs. If it was a process of intrinsic prowess, Raine and Leese would be miles ahead, but the System’s bottlenecks had crippled their timeline.

“How about this,” Cato said after a moment of thought. He had framejacked himself a little bit to chew over the idea, but unfortunately thinking faster was no substitute for thinking better. “This defense quest, it randomly pops up, correct? So the further afield you travel the more likely you are to encounter it. I’ll drop caches here, and you can loop back every once in a while to pick some up.”

“Every time we go through a portal, that’s a chance someone could see us,” Raine objected. “It might be better to go to further worlds, but definitely not back to Uriva.”

“Then I can have someone bring you the supplies,” Cato said, conceding to Raine’s argument. “Unfortunately the only place I have *any* kind of support is Uriva, and the System-God here is so aggressive I’m afraid that’d be worse than any assassin.” Raine growled in frustration, and Cato sympathized.

“If you can hold out a few months, the other versions of me you’ve delivered ought to be in a position to support you, and I might be able to find out more here.” He didn’t know if it was useful to have the Uriv lineage delve into the Assassin’s Guild, but the further he got into the System the more likely it was that things *like* the Assassin’s Guild would contest him.

He couldn’t assume they’d never figure out Cato needed native agents to get around, or that he could only spread by portals. Those were obvious and crippling weaknesses, only countered by the fact that *System* people needed those portals as well. Until and unless Cato could work out better ways to transmit himself around, his best bet was to spread far and wide. With enough redundancy, even the greatest concentration of force the System could manage wouldn’t be enough.

Until then, he was vulnerable, as were Raine and Leese. Patience was their ally, even if it felt like he was pressed for time everywhere. He had to remind himself that this was a marathon, that there could be millions of System worlds and just *getting* to them all could take centuries, let alone dealing with the complexity of engaging with the local forces.

At least for most of them those forces would be only Platinum or, at most, Bismuth. The true powerhouses were all in the core worlds and had other interests than dealing with petty politics or local spats. Or so he had been told; the knowledge of people like Onswa and the sisters was necessarily limited. The System was a big place, and when it came to the core worlds it might well be that Bismuths were as common as Coppers. Which was a major reason he needed Raine and Leese to rank up, aside from their own desires.

“We’re here on Ellesz,” Leese said after a moment. “If we can convince Dyen to stick around we’ll see what else we can figure out about the Guild.”

“I’ll send some stuff through, just give me a town,” Cato said, checking the sort-of-a-map he had of known System worlds and links. He had a network map of dozens of worlds, some of which were connected only to one other planet and some of which had multiple portals. “There’s not much I can do immediately, since I imagine the real problem is spotting assassins, given your other advantages. Your senses are probably better than anything I can engineer on a moment’s notice, but maybe something that operates a bit outside the System will help. I’ll see what I can do.”

“We aren’t going anywhere,” Raine said, sounding glum. “Anyway, we’re out of spears to distribute. Though there were two worlds that didn’t have any moons.”

“Oh? That is unfortunate.” The arguments about what was necessary for life to evolve had never truly been settled, but most people agreed that moonless worlds weren’t a likely prospect. Finding a life-bearing world without any satellites sounded like more System nonsense, in the same way that Uriva’s polar moons were. While it wasn’t like humanity had never dabbled in extreme orbital engineering, unilaterally altering the sky offended his sensibilities. More pressingly, it meant he wouldn’t have any presence on those worlds without an alternate invasion plan.

“I’ll have to figure out something for them too,” he concluded, though he didn’t have any thoughts at the moment, other than waiting until he had built up on all the other nearby worlds. If the System-Gods in charge were as lazy as the Sydean one had been, he might be able to manage a blitzkrieg. Or perhaps he wouldn’t need to, if he severed entire arms of the world

networks. Just as long as he got *something* through the portal before it closed. “For the moment, just avoid any places like that, and don’t stray too far out of range of the comms network. If worst comes to worst, we’ll see what I can get away with on Uriva.”

It wouldn’t be optimal, but he couldn’t be so heartless as to just leave the two because it would be inconvenient to help. One of the great disconnects between those who lived the postbiological lifestyle and those who only knew of it was the attitude toward variant selves. It was all too easy for those outside to think of additional versions of a person as expendable or backups, but the truth was that every variant was a complete person and needed to be treated as such. He certainly didn’t want to promote that attitude in the sisters — or have them think he held such a perspective toward them.

“Understood,” Raine said. “We’ll stay in the area for the moment.”

“Do what you need to,” Cato told them, and signed off before he sighed and brought up his design suite. He did take a moment to summarize the conversation for the Uriv Lineage pair, not so much for a fresh perspective — they were the same people, after all — as to keep them up to date with what needed to be done. Though offworld travel was a little bit risky for anyone below Platinum, even if the bodies he’d helped design for the Uriv Lineage had no issues with foreign food.

“So are we going to meet...” Leese hesitated, looking for the right word. “Ourselves?” She finished, sounding doubtful.

“Not if you don’t want to. Generally, I advise against it, but you know yourself better than I do,” Cato told them. Some people could manage it, others found it too viscerally strange to be confronted with someone else wearing their skin and speaking in their words. It’d be worse for the Uriv pair, as they didn’t even have their original morphologies. “It’s probably best to just set up a dead drop, cache the supplies somewhere and let the Sydean Lineage pick them up.”

“That will be easy enough,” Leese said.

“We’ll probably break into Gold by tomorrow,” Raine put in. “If we’ve time, it’d be better to join a group already going offworld. Safety in numbers.”

“Whatever you think best,” Cato told them. “Carry on.”

Cato was extremely limited in what kind of advantage he could design for the Sydean sisters to help them against the Assassin’s Guild. Without being able to hide the most advanced biotech behind System jamming, he was running at a disadvantage against the esoteric nature of Skills, and he doubted they would consent to or be able to handle a radical biological redesign anyway, even if he could manage it within the System’s confines. Especially since that might well render the gear they had acquired to augment their existing abilities useless, making them even worse off.

So there wasn’t anything he could do to make them immediately more powerful, and there wasn’t anything he could do *within* the System. He couldn’t make them better gear, improve their Skills, or remove the contract against them — though the last might be possible as a last resort. But he probably *could* obviate the stealth advantage that assassins used.

System Stealth skills generally worked in opposition to perception Skills — magical and esoteric senses outside the realm of ordinary physics. So invisibility might well mask a user against

visible light, but not necessarily against the entire electromagnetic spectrum. Some kind of silence Skill might mask a user's sound, but not necessarily their sound *occlusion*, which essentially no natural creature had the biological ability to process. Then there were things like magnetoreception and electroreception, or complex chemical sampling to detect volatiles and exhaled breath.

There were reasons he hadn't put all those into any of the frames he'd made for the sisters so far. The main one being that it was a lot of information to process, and even with specialized cortices processing so much information required energy, which raised temperatures and required more plumbing to bring blood and nutrients in and carry heat out. Within the confines of a fixed skull size and temperature-sensitive wet chemistry, that required a lot of alteration. Not to mention actually comprehending that information, which was a limitation of the mind rather than body.

He decided the best approach would be something like the radio-lizards he had already given them. An additional bio-engineered creature, maybe even an addition to the radio-lizard — though it was probably best not to put everything into a single, easily squished piece of meat. Frankly he needed to do a little bit of surgery and add in a radio transceiver to the Sydean Lineage the next chance he got, now that they were more used to radio communications in general.

As it was, they'd need *some* way to communicate with the sensor-beast, something like growing a small microwave gland for very short distance communication. Cato was glad he'd had the foresight to include genetic self-modification packages in the bodies he'd given the Sydean Lineage, though there was a reason he had to include significant amounts of rations along with the catalyst ampoules. It was just too much to ask the frames to produce all the specialized proteins and macromolecules necessary for significant alterations. Not to mention find all the elements and compounds exotic biology required.

Out on the moon, the biological factories began churning, drawing in electricity to fuel the chemical foundries producing acids and proteins from raw carbon and hydrogen, nitrogen and phosphorous. Solar energy fed computronium, which in turn supported programs that crunched the complex chemical and topographical problems of tailored biology. Micro-labs grew tissue samples, stimulated with simulated environments, and collected data.

Building custom creatures from scratch wasn't particularly easy, but Cato owed it to them.

Raine Uriv hefted the poleaxe easily, shifting her stance slightly to catch the monster's pincer on one of her shields before bringing her weapon down in a whistling blow. The enormous ant-thing offered no real resistance to the Cato-supplied weapon, ichor spraying out and coating the dungeon walls. Beside her, Leese performed a similar execution, then followed it up with bashing the menacing spike on the front of one of her shields into the next monster.

The Urivan bodies were strange. Without a tail they should have been off-balance, but they weren't, especially not with the broader, armored feet. In fact, the Urivan bodies were bigger and bulkier in general, with chitin plates over a tough, leathery hide that, according to Cato, shielded bones that were normally relatively soft. Not a problem for them; she probably could have withstood a beating from Copper-rank monsters entirely naked.

The biggest feature of Urivan bodies was the pair of gripping claws extending from the back and resting on the shoulders. They were surprisingly strong, if slow, but extremely clumsy. Three digits and very little articulation meant they could really only hold things. However, shields were things, and between Urivan anatomy and Cato's augments, she could wield two massive, spiked shields with reasonable alacrity while still plying a polearm. She'd seen other Urivans do it, though they usually went for something a little bit smaller.

"Looks like the Guardian's through there," Leese said, as the final ant-monster fell. Raine grunted acknowledgement and collected her rewards from the kills, which she had had to put in an ordinary pouch. They hadn't yet gone to a city to get maps and wallets from a pylon. Then she joined Leese at the entrance to the Guardian's room.

Once, a lifetime ago, the enormous silver-rank ant Guardian would have been intimidating, especially with the slowly shifting rock spikes around it indicating at least one of its Skills. Now, it was just meat. They'd spent enough time figuring out how to operate their new bodies to be confident they could destroy anything that wasn't Gold Rank. The two of them set themselves and rushed it.

The proper way to kill the huge monster was likely to bait out its attacks, and whittle it down little by little while avoiding the earthen spikes. Raine and Leese simply dodged the spike attacks, vaulting off the ground at speed and smashing into the monster like a pair of insectile meteors. It was large enough that even with Cato's impossibly sharp weapons they couldn't simply behead it, but even large monsters had trouble dealing with massive rents running through vital areas. A few minutes of chopping at a screeching, writhing behemoth resulted in it going still beneath them.

[Squirming Depths Dungeon Cleared! Essence Awarded. Additional Essence awarded due to low Rank.

Silver Rank Quest Completed – Advancing to Silver Rank]

The rush of ranking up was muted compared to what she remembered — and on purpose. Cato had been candid about his reservations with that kind of feedback, and the two of them had put in damping for the effect. Raine hadn't really felt it necessary, but after seeing how easy it was to go from nothing to Peak Silver, she appreciated it far more. The entire process seemed pointless, and it was almost insulting how long it had taken the two of them to get there the first time.

Perhaps if they had their original aspirations of climbing to the top, it would have been different, but they'd been able to experience the alternatives, and Raine found that just killing monsters wasn't particularly fun. Besides which, they had an alternate goal, one that had to be done before she could write off killing monsters entirely. Their purpose was to free Uriva from the System.

Strength flowed into her limbs, and the System offered her the opportunity to promote Skills into the newly-opened Silver-rank slots. The two of them spent a little bit of time with that while the Guardian corpse vanished into the dungeon floor, leaving behind the drops. For once, they actually seemed like something one of them could use — a pair armlets sized for gripping claws, likely with some sort of protective bonus.

"Heads up, you've got another group headed for the dungeon." Cato's voice came as Leese was picking up the armlets. *"Don't think they know you're there but unless you hurry they'll probably find out."*

"I thought we were far enough out to avoid that, but I guess no Silver dungeon is going to be totally remote," Leese said examining the armlets and then tossing them to Raine as she sent her comment back through the link they had with Cato. "The question is what we do."

"We could just move quick," Raine said, donning the armlets – they *did* add a small amount of toughness – and turning to grab the sled they'd been using to carry the drops. It wasn't a great solution, as if they were separated from the sled too long or left it too far behind they ran the risk of the dungeon absorbing it, but it was better than trying to fight with backpacks. Even with Urivan frames that was uncomfortable.

"Or we could meet them," Leese said thoughtfully. "We have to talk to the Urivans eventually. And a group of Silvers isn't going to be an actual threat to us."

"They aren't," Raine agreed. She wasn't exactly looking forward to dealing with other people, but that was the entire reason they were ranking up. Both of them had hit Peak Silver from banked essence and bonuses thanks to clearing the entire dungeon at Copper, so they wouldn't look out of place, and they'd just told Cato they needed to at least temporarily join up with a group.

"Good luck," Cato said. Raine was actually rather glad that Cato didn't try to second-guess their decisions, as she probably would have in his place. Though such faith meant that any success or failure was entirely their own responsibility, and that was a burden in and of itself.

After one last check the two of them made for the return pylon, which stood at the far end of the Guardian's room. They didn't bother to look for the dungeon's core; they weren't Cato and it wasn't time to worry about destroying anchors. Not yet.

The sled bumped up the stairs, and within a few minutes they emerged from the [Squirming Depths Dungeon]. The entrance was set into the side of a lone hill, one that had Cato muttering about erosion profiles and stone composition, and the area around it was rocky and devoid of trees. From that vantage they could see the group – the standard four of a delving party – approaching.

Meetings out in the wilderness always had a touch of wariness about them. There were no higher rank presences to remind people to stay civil, or other witnesses to intervene in a scuffle. Not that there were too many people who would just attack another group of their own rank out of nowhere, but a rich or vulnerable target might prove too great a temptation for someone clawing their way toward more power.

Neither Raine nor Leese looked like they fit either of those categories. Cato's arms and armor looked functional but no more than that, and of course were technically at Copper rank or below. Still, the two of them were fully equipped and the simple confidence they had in their own abilities was a clear warning they were not to be taken lightly.

The group stopped to confer for a moment after catching sight of Raine and Leese, shifting slightly before continuing on. They already had weapons readied, simply because there were

always monsters and beasts out and about, but the foursome had clearly changed their focus from defending against random attacks to defending against Raine and Leese in particular.

“Hail,” Leese called to them, when they got closer. “We just finished the dungeon. You might have to wait for it to repopulate everything.”

“Oh?” The leader of the group tilted his blue-carapaced head, gripping claws clicking once. “I appreciate the warning, though we can at least start on the first floor.”

“We cleared the whole thing in six hours,” Raine told them. The leader gawked, and Raine used the [Appraise] that she’d picked up during the dungeon run.

[Harik Lim – Peak Silver]

[Koret Lim — Peak Silver]

[Mokri Stek — Peak Silver]

[Orek En-Stek — High Silver]

“That is a twelve level dungeon,” Harik objected. “Three days at least. And you say the two of you cleared in in six hours?”

“We did,” Raine said, not boasting, just stating a fact. Cato was oddly coy about admitting his power, and in fact she knew for certain that she hadn’t yet seen its limits, but within the System it was better to be blunt about their capabilities. If she had said they had gone in as fresh Coppers, *that* would be boasting, and unbelievable besides. Two people completing an appropriate dungeon as martial savants was one thing; two people completing an impossible dungeon as immortal agents of an outsider god was another.

The four exchanged glances and Raine did feel a little sorry for them. A single extra day of waiting might not sound like much, but having to camp out in the wilderness was not easy and depending on their finances it might well be a strain on their supplies. She’d been in that position before. Or it might just be a minor annoyance, there was no real way to tell.

“We can stay here and help keep camp until it’s ready again,” Leese offered. “Then you’ll be needing your [World Elite], yes?” Raine understood the angle right away; this was an opportunity. While the group might not be anyone important, she and Leese were *literally* nobody and hadn’t even existed within the System until eight hours before. They needed contacts.

“Yes...” Koret spoke up, the slightly smaller brother of Harik, by Raine’s reckoning. The green-blue Urivan clearly didn’t trust them, which was only appropriate. “We haven’t yet decided on which one just yet.” Which was a polite way of telling them to mind their own business.

“We have a way to locate many [World Elites] fairly easily,” Leese said, vastly understating the abilities of Cato’s observation satellites. “We need to kill one ourselves, which of course we can do, but we don’t have anyone to travel with offworld. We could help you kill a Peak Gold [World Elite] if you don’t mind us tagging along later on.”

“A tempting proposition,” Hark said after a moment, clearly not *quite* believing it. “But before we consider anything, we have to delve the dungeon first.”

“Of course,” Leese told them. “We have time.”