

Chapter 7 – Revive

Raine Talis of the Gosruk Guardians woke with a start. She sat bolt upright in an unfamiliar bed, flinging off the sheets in one convulsive motion as she tried to defend herself from a threat that was no longer there. Her hands flew to her chest and her neck, but everything was intact despite her last memories, of the horrible jaws coming for her and the tearing grief of her sister's scream.

Adventuring instincts made her check herself over, and then her location, taking stock of injuries and dangers. Yet she found she felt better than she had in a very long time, fully alert and healthy. The room was small and plain, with pale blue walls and an off-white ceiling lit by a single glowing panel, the simple bed with white linens, and a small table with neatly folded clothes piled atop it.

By reflex she tried to use her perception Skill, but nothing happened. She blinked and tried to summon the System, but there was nothing there either. Her tail twitched involuntarily, lashing against the bedding in uncontrollable spasms of creeping fear. She trusted nothing about the situation, the place, even the furnishings and the air she breathed. Feeling the need for any protection she could find, Raine grabbed the southern-style clothes and dressed herself in haste. Already she missed the comfort of her armor, which was nowhere to be found.

Aside from the furnishings, there was a single door in the room. No windows to show her where she was or provide an alternate exit. Creeping closer, she listened at the door and heard someone humming a tune she did not recognize, but nothing else. That alone made the situation more eerie, but Raine could see no point in waiting so she opened the door.

She was immediately struck by an impossible sight. The far wall of the room, capturing her attention to the exclusion of all else, was a massive glass window beyond which a green and blue circle, swirled with white, floated in a sea of stars. She stared for a moment, until suddenly she recognized the outlines of the shapes from the System's maps and globes. It was Sydea.

The sinking feeling in her gut hardened into something more concrete. Raine remembered dying, and while some extremely high rank Skills could revive someone in the right circumstances, this was nothing familiar. The System didn't rule here.

That revelation made her sway, and she put out her hand to brace herself against the wall as she realized what that meant. She had known there was something wrong when the System had sent them against something impossible, as if it were grappling with something even *it* didn't know. Something outside the System, or even greater than it. That was the power that had her.

"It's quite the view, isn't it?" The voice came from the side, startling her away from the view and whirling her around by reflex. Her body automatically assumed a defensive posture, even if she didn't have any energy to call on.

The rest of the small room was similar to where she had awoken, with plain blue walls and an off-white ceiling, but furnished with a pair of chairs facing each other across a small table. A being sat in one of the chairs, a biped with pinkish skin instead of scales, a flat face, and a mop

of dark hair. It was no species Raine recognized, and despite looking completely unthreatening she didn't trust it a single bit.

"Come, have a seat," the being invited, gesturing to the opposite chair. Raine didn't move.

"Who are you?" She asked the obvious question, but there were a thousand of them bubbling up through the panic swirling inside her. "Where is this place? How am I alive?"

"My name is Cato," the being replied, lacing fingers across its chest as it leaned back in its chair, regarding her. "I come from Earth, which you know as Ahrusk — terrible name, by the way. From beyond the System. To my people, death is a somewhat blurrier concept than it is to you, so I was able to preserve you and bring you here. Near your planet, but still out of reach of the System."

"So we *did* die," she said, having to force herself to say it aloud, her fingers flying up to her throat, where she remember teeth sinking into her scales. "That thing — it came from Ahrusk as well, didn't it?"

"I'm afraid I must apologize," Cato said, its oddly mobile face wrinkling in some expression she couldn't quite place. "That thing was me."

Raine firmed up her combat stance by instinct, she automatically raising her hands to try and call on [Firelance]. Nothing happened, and she felt her heart pounding against her scales, reverberating all the way down to the tip of her tail — which wouldn't stop lashing in the grip of unnamable fear. Her mind spun uselessly, struggling to grasp that she was facing her sister's murderer. Her *own* murderer.

"Peace," Cato said, raising its hands. "I have no desire to harm you. Even at our unfortunate first meeting I was only defending myself, and have no ill will toward you."

"Easy for you to say," she spat. "I don't have anything! No Skills, no armor, no weapons. You took away my group, you took away Leese. Did you just bring me back to gloat?"

"Certainly not," Cato said, sounding almost affronted. "I brought you back because I want your help."

"You're insane," Raine said, her throat tight with grief. "I would never—"

"I should correct at least one misapprehension," Cato said, holding up a hand. "Your sister is just as alive as you are."

"Don't toy with me!" Raine shouted, fury narrowing her vision down to Cato's face, muscles aching with unreleased tension as she pushed away a hope she didn't dare to feel. Instead of replying, the being waved at one of the walls and it split along a previously unseen seam, a section pulling away to reveal another, near identical room. It had the same view, the same chairs, the same Cato in one. But standing there, alive and whole and intact, was Leese.

"Leese!" She said, rocked backward on her feet, and then she was moving before she realized it. Her sister met her halfway, the impact smarting, but she relished the feeling of that reality, and the crushing hug that they shared.

It had always been just the two of them, ever since they were young and a passing Gold had flattened half their village. There had only been a handful of survivors, and it had been a long hard road to the higher ranks. Even Muar and Cormok were distant friends in comparison.

“Raine!” Leese replied, almost laughing. “We’re alive!”

For a moment Raine forgot all about Cato and the strange surroundings, just glorying in the fact that her sister was there, whole and hale. Then the moment passed, Leese’s arms loosened, and they stepped back slightly to look each other up and down. Leese was just as intact as she was, and dressed in an outfit that was nearly identical — but not quite. The difference was subtle and made something in her instincts prickle, but Leese never stopped grinning.

“We might be alive,” Raine said in an undertone, conscious of their audience. “But it’s hard to be grateful when our killer is standing right there.”

“Is he really our killer? He *defeated* us, yes, but went to some pains to keep us alive.” Leese replied in the same low voice, her eyes darting to Cato and then to the view of Sydea through the glass. “With how powerful he is, there has to be a reason.”

“There does,” Raine sighed, following Leese’s glance. “Which is not something I’m looking forward to. We can’t touch the System here, so we’re completely helpless.”

“We were before, even *with* our rank and Skills,” Leese pointed out, voice gentle. “The best thing we can do is ask Cato what it wants.” Raine nodded, conscious that the being – both versions of it – were waiting patiently, giving them plenty of time to talk. Surely it could hear them, but it was at least pretending to give them privacy.

“I don’t like being subject to the whims of some inscrutable monster,” Raine said, under her breath. “We can’t possibly trust it.”

“Raine, we’re *alive*. Everything else can be dealt with,” Leese replied, giving her another squeeze. “There’s no use dwelling right now. One step at a time.”

“Right,” Raine said, drawing in a breath, then turning to look at the closest of the two identical beings. It chuckled, and the other version brought over the spare chair before departing back into the other room. The wall sealed itself, and the Cato seated at the table waved at the chairs, inviting them to sit.

Hesitantly, Raine did so. It became immediately apparent the chairs had been tailored specifically for them; hers matched her frame perfectly, with the exact proportions to accommodate her tail and torso, precisely the right height off the floor. It was by far the most comfortable chair she had ever used, far and away more than anything the System had offered.

She exchanged glances with Leese, neither of them actually needing words to convey what they were thinking. The combination of simplicity, absurdity, kindness, and coercion made no sense at all. Either Cato was utterly insane, or it was playing some game they didn’t understand.

“As I said,” Cato continued, entirely patient. “I would like your help. So as to not lead you on, I will tell you right now that my goal is to destroy the System.”

That sent a down Raine’s spine, from neck to tailtip, and she and Leese looked at each other once again. Again, neither of them needed to speak, but Leese was far less surprised than

Raine, more focused on his words. Raine didn't have anything to say to that, and neither did Leese, so after a brief pause he continued.

"When the System arrived on Earth – on Ahrusk – it destroyed entire worlds," Cato said, somber and serious. "It killed people I love, twisted others beyond recognition. That's my motivation, but here is yours." He leaned forward and looked at them seriously. "The System is doing the same to you."

"The *System* isn't what killed us," Raine pointed out, her mouth moving before her mind. Cato shook his head.

"Perhaps not directly, but the System aimed you at me, when I would have let you be and simply gone on my way. However, what I mean is something on a far greater scale." Cato waved at the view of Sydea, and the glass wall lit with some very System-like notations on the far-away globe. Ruins, tracks, numbers, only half of which she could understand.

"From what I can tell, you had a world-wide civilization before the System came. Enough to support hundreds of millions of people, and creating art and architecture far surpassing anything provided by the System." The System-like display showed an inset picture of a sculpture, obviously of a Sydean, tail coiled about its ankles and hands reaching beseechingly upward. "I recovered this from a sunken city, for example. Yet I haven't seen a single painting or sculpture that is of Sydean origin in any of your towns or cities."

Raine and Leese exchanged glances, neither of them entirely clear about why Cato was telling *them* such things. The fate of the entire world was too big, too distant. Some ancient history was barely relevant to today's worries, even if Cato seemed to think it was. Raine looked at the strange being, trying to arrange a diplomatic way to ask why it mattered, but Leese beat her to it.

"I'm sure that's true, honored Cato, but I confess I don't understand why you are telling us. My sister and I are merely simple adventurers. I'm sure everything you say is true but there is nothing either of us can do about it." Leese waved at the view of Sydea. "You say you need our help, but we aren't anyone. Something like the fate of Sydea, let alone the System, is far beyond us. We're just Golds."

"I see," Cato said, though at least the words didn't sound upset. It was difficult to read the emotion on the odd flat face, but Raine thought that the being was considering something. "I suppose it is rather much to spring on you." The displays vanished, leaving only the view of the globe in a night sky, and Cato regarded them.

"Let me try another approach. In order to deal with the System, I cannot simply sit outside it. I will need collaborators, confidants, people who know it and can maneuver within it." He spread his hands, inclining his head in their direction. "When you return, it would be most helpful if I could count on your support."

"*When* we return?" Raine asked, emphasizing the word.

"Certainly," Cato replied. "Unfortunately, my method of preserving you required that I bring you here, outside the System, but when we are ready I will be returning all of you. That is guaranteed, but it would be quite helpful if I had someone to help me approach your leaders.

And of course, someone who will help me with things within the System in general. With that quest following me everywhere, I'm afraid all my meetings would wind up like our first."

"That does make sense," Leese admitted. "Though again, we are merely Golds. If we are still Golds?" She made it a question, and Cato sighed.

"I'm afraid not," it told them regretfully. "When I bring you back into the System you'll have to start all over. We tried some experiments when we were pushing the System off Earth, and we could never get the ranks to stick."

"As Coppers, we can only do so much," Leese said, and Raine looked at her. For a moment she couldn't believe Leese was trying to negotiate with someone who had them entirely at its mercy, but then she understood. As powerful as Cato was, it had to have something it could offer them for what it wanted. Something they could grab and hold onto as their own.

"I understand that," Cato assured them. "Of course I would provide aid and assistance if you were to help me, above and beyond merely returning you to the surface."

"Like what?" Raine asked, perhaps a little too quickly, but she needed something to concrete to fix her mind on.

"As I am sure you have concluded, I have significant knowledge when it comes to living things." Cato said, gesturing to the two of them. "The most profound benefit I could offer you would be augmented bodies and brains. You would be significantly faster, stronger, healthier. Less able to tire, more able to focus and think faster. I can set it to your preferred age and make any cosmetic changes you like."

"Wait," Leese interrupted. "You can make us *young* again?"

"Certainly," Cato said, and Raine would have sworn it sounded amused.

"Why didn't you do that to start with?" Raine asked, feeling obscurely cheated.

"It is *extremely* rude to alter someone's body without their permission," Cato responded. "If you'd woken up in an unfamiliar form, I don't imagine you would have taken it well."

"Mmph," Raine said. She hated that it was right about that. Being *reasonable* was, itself, suspicious under the circumstances. "This all sounds too good to be true."

"There are many things I *can't* offer you." Cato said by way of rebuttal. "Immediate power, the way the System does. Political power. Any stake on Sydea — it's not mine to give, after all. Though I can say that with my augmentations you'd be able to advance within the System quite rapidly indeed — for as long as it is around, at least."

Raine exchanged glances with Leese, needing no actual words to discuss what they were thinking. The System itself didn't offer people like them true youth — there were rumors about something of the sort at Bismuth, but that rank had always been out of reach. Beyond that, beyond even being given what sounded like Gold-rank bodies while still at Copper, there was the matter of aligning themselves with Cato.

If Cato had wanted to conquer Sydea there might have been some second thoughts, but he didn't even want to do that. Replacing the System was nothing Raine intrinsically cared much about, even if she had a hard time imagining what the result would be. Especially not after it

had failed them. As a divine caster, Leese should have had more reservations, but she seemed even more eager to take advantage of Cato's offer.

Both of them had learned long ago that having power mattered, and Cato seemed to be even more powerful than the System. With that kind of power on their side, all kinds of worries would vanish. Their youth made the offer even more stunning, after having lost so much time to simply grinding away on getting to a rank where they couldn't be casually crushed by careless or malicious passers-by.

"I'm not sure what's involved in this crusade against the System," Leese said after a few moments, though it was clear they were going to accept. "But wouldn't destroying it be just as harmful for our people as you claim the System is? I confess I don't have the slightest clue what life would be like without it, and I don't think anyone else would."

"It would be worse than anything you've ever seen if I merely destroyed it without anything else," Cato agreed. "That's why I want to talk to your leaders. Why I need you to act as my agents on the ground. So I can do this right, and actually provide the tools for your people to flourish afterward." The being looked from one to the other, fingers laced together as it made sure they were listening.

"I'm fully aware that if I take someone who has been a slave all her life, tell her she's free, and shove her off into the wider world, I'm doing her no favors," it continued. Raine felt her muzzle curl back from her teeth at that, something Cato noticed.

"If you find that insulting, that is on purpose," it said, baring its teeth in reply. "You should be affronted by what the System has done to you. What I hope to teach you is how to never be slaves again."

"I see," Leese said, exchanging another look with Raine before bumping her shoulder. "Well, we are interested, especially if it involves helping out the rest of Sydea."

"That is greatly appreciated," Cato said, then cocked his head. "I would appreciate you beginning now, by addressing a more local issue. I have two other Sydeans who are, for perfectly understandable reasons, entirely intractable. Perhaps you could help me reason with them."

"Muar and Cormok?" Raine asked, feeling almost guilty she hadn't asked after her group-mates before. "You brought them too?"

"Muar, yes. I am afraid I was not able to preserve Cormok," Cato said soberly.

"Oh," said Leese, going still for a moment.

"I rescued a young pair from some high rankers who were tracking me," Cato said. "They were already dead by System terms, but not by mine." He paused again, regarding them. "In truth, I was not able to preserve either Cormok or the other one because one of yours attacked me. A high-ranker that used fire. It's not her fault; she was only trying to deal with what the System told her was a threat. But I wasn't able to protect everyone."

"Wait, you fought Arene Fire-Wing?" Raine leaned forward, a faint swirl of mixed envy and concern adding to the confused welter of emotions. "Was she — did you kill her?"

“Hardly,” Cato said, with a genuine laugh. “I was lucky to get away as it was. Yet I find I am not certain how much of it to tell, lest it seem like I am trying to blame someone else. I am trying to establish trust, and relating this particular truth could so easily break it.”

“We’ll talk to them,” Leese said, bumping Raine’s shoulder again and stirring her out of her contemplations. “We don’t have to decide anything right now?”

“Certainly not,” Cato said. “You’ve all the time in the world.”

Arene blinked to the side with [Wings of Khuroon], gathering [Calamity Lance] in her hand as she gauged the opposing Platinum. Any lingering thoughts that keeping the portal closed was an overreaction had been thoroughly dispelled by what happened once travel was open. The System had not only spread news of the defense quest and its rewards to neighboring worlds, but it’d revoked their ability to control portals or teleports. Now there were not only all kinds of scavengers and predators arriving, but there was no telling where they had gone.

The outworlder she was dealing with opened his beak again, the sonic attack visibly distorting the air as she darted in closer, losing her [Calamity Lance]. The beam of condensed fire splattered off the thick armor the Platinum wore, but wasn’t stopped entirely. She smirked as its plumage crisped and caught fire, drawing an indignant squawk at a volume fit to shake the trees.

“Last warning,” she shouted, charging the Skill again and letting the ball of enraged fire dance in her palm. “Leave, or die!” The bird was lucky he was getting even that much of a choice, but he’d merely injured people in his pursuit of the System quest. Many other Platins weren’t so careful.

“The System quest is open to anyone!” The bird screeched back, affronted. “You can’t keep the divine System’s offerings for yourself!” Arene replied with another [Calamity Lance], and the opposing Platinum spat insults as he zipped back toward Mosaw City and its attendant portal. Arene kept pace with him until she saw him duck through and back to Uriva, wishing she could properly lock the thing down. Some might have called the thought blasphemous, but they probably weren’t finding the System as heavily set against them.

Her farcaster vibrated and she scowled at it. The device was ruinously expensive to operate, especially since the entire planet seemed to be low on essence despite all the foreign high-rankers coming in. Yet with Onswa’s administration access still restricted, and with Platins putting out fires all over the planet, it was necessary. She took it out, noting it was nearly out of charge, so she pressed a Platinum token against its front plate before answering it.

“What?” She snapped.

“A Bismuth just moved into Koish Town.” Karsa’s voice sounded sleepy as always, like she had just woken up, though Arene knew that wasn’t the case.

“Did you get anyone out?” Arene didn’t bother asking if Karsa had tried to stop the outworlder in question. A Bismuth was just too much for them to deal with. Even all five Platins together wouldn’t stand much of a chance, and that wasn’t the first Bismuth to simply stake a claim.

After the strange creature had vanished into the sky, the quest had not simply gone away. Every few days, a new zone was added, at random, as if it were able to teleport from place to place. Or as if it were descending from the heavens. No matter the truth, the quest persisted, and all kinds of people wanted to take the riches for themselves.

“Most of them. Not everyone.” The tired drawl lacked emotion, but the short, bitten-off sentences said more than Karsa’s tone ever could. “Need somewhere to put them.”

“Got it,” Arene said, temper cooling as she thought about the problem. Everyone she knew had already used their building tokens, let alone town tokens, and getting more was no easy task. They were generally awarded on breaking through to Gold, or sometimes from special quests. The former was not something that could be rushed, the latter was so rare that Arene had only ever seen it once.

She pumped her wings and blazed through the sky before teleporting herself across the continent to the anchor nearest Karsa. Most of Arene’s own towns were overcrowded already from other refugees, but she still had her own personal estate that she hardly used. It wasn’t all that large, not for a Platinum, but she could at least cram a few dozen low-ranks into its walls.

Karsa’s own estate stood at the center of [Gyen Town], the central tower taller than the city walls and courtyard visibly full even from the air. Arene pulled her wings in as she descended, thumping down in the middle of a milling crowd. Despite her care, some people cringed away from the heat she radiated, made worse by the scorching suns overhead.

The Platinum herself stood vigil over three families with children; infants and those young enough they didn’t even have a rank. To call Karsa statuesque would be an understatement; she was by far the largest Sydean that Arene had ever seen, with muscles straining to burst out from the deep indigo scales containing them. Her enormous war hammer was slung over one shoulder as she guarded the children, though Arene didn’t think there was anyone in the crowd who was a threat. Karsa was simply too on-edge from dealing with an outworld Bismuth.

“Arene,” Karsa said by way of greeting, and nothing else. The tone and half-shut eyes didn’t match her posture and never had, but Arene couldn’t fault either Karsa’s instincts or her ability. “Take some.”

“Yes,” Arene said, turning around to look at the crowd. It took serious effort to keep herself under control, seeing all the unfortunate low-rankers huddled in the courtyard. They shouldn’t be refugees on their own damn planet, and if she could have simply cut Sydea off from the other worlds, she would have.

Instead, all she could do was help her people weather the storm, just as she always had.

Elder Norom of the Tornok Clan was not happy. As wealthy and powerful as the Tornok Clan was, it really couldn’t afford to lose promising Platinites, especially not on some fifth-rate planet rather than in a conflict where their deaths might have *won* something. He approved of the pair’s ambition in going through the portal to the new world – there were always opportunities when the System added territory – but it seemed they hadn’t even gotten that far.

He continued to read through the report as the terrified messenger-creature, one of a particular winged servant race that Tornok Clan had taken under its protection millennia ago, stayed silent

and still. Norom had never heard of a portal to new territories being simply *closed* before. Or really, any portal being permanently closed. They could be relocated from one System Nexus to another by a Planetary Administrator, but once they were open, the System maintained them. No Skills could interact with them, no magical spells could influence their location or destination. Only Administrators or world deities could alter how they operated — though most planets had guards posted as a matter of course. A System Nexus with sufficient upgrades even paid for the guards itself.

The closure was actually a minor disaster for a number of clans who had sent their scions there to claim land and people. Taking the [Staging Area] away from the locals had been simplicity itself, and accomplished with only a single nearby Tornok Clan Bismuth — though the [Staging Area] had since been passed to other interests. His own Deity, the Divine Alren, had informed him of another deity clan's intentions to take Sydea, and while that seemed a waste of a perfectly useful servant race, like the messenger-creature, it wasn't Norom's place to question the machinations of deities.

Tornok Clan had investments to secure closer to home, so they'd sent only a token force, mostly Silvers and Golds. A wise decision, as with the portal closure all those who had been vying for new territory were beyond reach. The pair of Platinums had been there of their own accord, but it wasn't the portal that had done for them. According to the report — which was vague, and Norom doubted the local patriarch had done much investigating — they had vanished in a dungeon collapse.

It was a blatant cover-up, and not even a very clever one. Probably one of the local creatures had been at fault. The Sydeans *did* have some Platinums, apparently, despite their shortcomings. Those deaths alone warranted some punishment, but frankly the other part of the report was more interesting.

A very strange, very profitable, very *easy* recurring quest.

Tornok Clan had its own private dungeons and hunting grounds, of course, but none of them consistently yielded a B-Tier Skill and enough essence to jump to nearly the peak of Copper. There was no telling how long it would last, but there were innumerable fresh scions that would benefit from the largesse. Anyone who didn't grasp that sort of easy advantage would be a fool. All that mattered was power, and anything that granted power had to be seized. Or others would.

He regarded the messenger-creature and decided it had groveled sufficiently. With a flick of his finger he dismissed it, and it vanished back out of the study with alacrity. Elder Nomok stood, crossing over to the balcony that looked out over the garden in the estate grounds to consider his options.

The Clan Holdings were upgraded nearly to the maximum the System offered, a massive spawl of high-rank stone and metal. Glass windows and open balconies faced out onto extensive gardens, each household equipped with the System pylons so they could customize the weather at their whim. Their official Clan Holdings covered several thousand square miles, but in actual fact Tornok Clan controlled several core planets. Not the largest Clan, but large enough to have real power.

It was worth considering whether they wanted to acquire a stake in Sydea, as well, if it was to be so valuable. It certainly wasn't worth offending whatever deities were interested in permanently acquiring the planet, but a temporary occupation might not be out of the question. Yet Sydea was far from Tornok Clan's holdings, and the only thing it had to offer was the quest — which would surely run dry soon enough.

He didn't even know who controlled the other planets around there. That particular frontier was far enough from the Core Worlds that it was an eclectic mix of minor powers and Clan footholds, so subjugating Sydea, even for only a few years, might be politically impolite. He would have to assign some research to whatever initiates were in the rotation, and decide on which Bismuth to send to shepherd the Coppers. Someone who could take a firm hand and move rapidly, to make sure Tornok Clan had its proper share of the quests and rewards.

After a moment, Elder Nomok nodded to himself. He knew just the one.