

## Chapter 3 — Unfortunate Encounters

Muar strode through the city streets, still slightly frazzled around the edges from his time in the [Dungeon of Charged Steps]. It hadn't been pleasant, but the healing of his divine Skills had kept his group intact. He wasn't with the Spikey Delves anymore, simply because he had advanced too quickly, but the Temple had been quite helpful in giving him opportunities to fill in for groups who needed a temporary member.

Sometimes he missed *being* in a group, even if the fate of the Gosruk Guardians had left a foul taste in his mouth. Poor Cormok was dead, of course, but it was the other two who tainted the memory of that time. Though with the portal to Sydea gone he wasn't certain he ever needed to worry about them again. Still, if something like Cato could appear on one world, it could appear on others, and Muar was not about to relax simply because the Sydean portal was closed. Perhaps especially because Sydea had been removed from the System, as it showed Cato *was* a real danger, and something that could compromise an entire world wouldn't stop at just one.

At peak Gold, Muar could hardly do much about Cato's plans, but Gold was only a single step. It was amazing how fast he was rising with the proper support and the burning belief in the divine System driving him forward. Soon he'd be Platinum, and then soon after that Bismuth, and then he would actually begin to see the power he needed. The System rewarded its defenders.

First, he needed to ascend to Platinum, and that meant the town defense quest. The System had chosen [Okrik Town], in a piece of timing that was so perfect as to be unbelievable. He had finished the last piece of his preparation quest mere hours before the timer finished, so he simply needed to turn it in, refresh himself, and he'd be ready.

Muar entered the Temple, circling the nave and going to the more private pylon reserved for those in better standing. The quest rewarded him with a trio of [Charged Defensive Emplacements] for the quest, poles with a crystal at the top that could be placed on the town's walls. He had no idea how many Golds would be taking place in the ascension quest but, if there were enough, the emplacements alone could control the battlefield.

After a quick [Clean] and a visit to the equipment pylon to ensure his armor and weapons were repaired, he proceeded to the Temple's teleport. The moment he appeared at the [Okrik Town] Nexus, he could feel the presence of a Platinum, somewhere in the building. That did make some sense; if the Gold defenders failed, the Platinum would still be able to deal with the attacking monsters and prevent too much damage.

It also meant that the Gold defenders had a far tougher job, as they couldn't use the buildings for cover. The town's Nexus was what *truly* had to be defended, not the actual walls, but the Platinum would likely not let it go that far, and invalidate the quest by interfering. In fact, that made things so much more difficult that Muar doubted it was ultimately a good idea, but the Urivans could run their own towns as they wished.

He left the Nexus and headed for the town's walls. At least two groups of Golds were there, with a dozen [Defense Emplacements] already deployed. The crystals sparked at intervals, crackling as Urivans paced along the tops of the walls. Muar vaulted up to join them, offering unfamiliar insectile faces a nod before finding gaps in the coverage and withdrawing his own quest rewards to help.

[Defend Okrik Town. Begins in 3 Hours, 2 Minutes. Recommended Rank: Peak Gold]

Even if it was still some time before the defense event would begin, he could feel essence gathering somewhere out beyond the walls, and clouds were starting to roll in from the horizon. Muar had never seen the Peak Gold quest himself, of course, as Sydea never had qualified for it and all the Platinums had needed to go offworld, but the advice he had gotten from the Platinum at the temple painted it as an intense affair. It wasn't just any quest, it was the barrier between Gold and Platinum and the entry to the first real step into independent power.

In his previous life he wouldn't have made Platinum for years, if not decades. They'd only fought at-rank beasts and dungeons, and Sydea hadn't offered many quests. His new role as a Paladin and access to the Temple gave him so many opportunities for equipment and Skill upgrades, as well as a hefty amount of essence to accelerate his development. The difference between the two worlds was astounding.

Muar patrolled the walls, taking the measure of his fellow Golds and introducing himself. Even if he wasn't part of any of the groups as such, it was best to know where a Paladin could best fit in with the others. Some of the insect-beings were in heavy armor, with massive shields held in their gripping claws, but quite a few seemed to be pure casters, bearing orbs or discs that would help them focus their Skills.

After completing two circuits of the walls, he noticed new arrivals landing near the town gate — and they were Sydeans. For a moment he just stared, half-excited and half-stunned to see some of his own. Ones who must have fled before the portals closed. Reflexively, he [Appraised] them.

[Raine Talis — Peak Gold]

[Leese Talis — Peak Gold]

He stared for another moment, but for a completely different reason. Those two shouldn't have been on Uriva at all; they should have been stuck on Sydea with Cato. If not actually dead, considering the Bismuth would have flattened them the moment he saw them. But they were here, and that meant Cato was too.

The few moments of shock were enough that Raine turned around and saw him. She narrowed her eyes at him and sprung forward, followed by Leese, the two of them flashing his way. Muar pulled his shield out with his Skill, bracing it with the rising fury of seeing the traitors whole and unbound. Golden light rose around him as Raine's spear blazed through air toward him, weapon and shield colliding in a thunderous impact.

Despite all his Skills, despite the peerless defenses of his divine protection and superior equipment, Raine's attack pushed him back, sending him skidding along the top of the wall. His mace manifested in his hand, barely knocking aside Leese's strike, the shock of the impact ringing through his arm. It was far beyond what any Gold should have been able to do, especially with clearly substandard equipment. The Temple's quests had allowed him to be outfitted with items far superior to most at his rank, but it wasn't enough.

They were using Cato's heretical strength. Even with all his advantages, all the gifts bestowed upon him by the System, he couldn't stand up to the two of them with his current strength. He blocked another terrible blow with his shield, finding himself hurled backward as if a Platinum

had hit him. None of the Urivans seemed interested in interceding; to them, it was merely a dispute between outworlders.

Muar had no compunctions about fleeing. It wasn't just about his own life; the Temple had to be informed. They had to know that Cato's agents were still alive and on Uriva, and even if *he* couldn't stand up to them, a real Platinum could. Or maybe even a Bismuth, since the Urivans had a few somewhere on the planet.

Landing on the ground, he turned and bolted, his movement Skill sending him blurring along like golden lightning. He heard the crackle and hiss of fire and ice behind him, but in the scant few seconds before he blew through the Nexus door they couldn't catch him. One more burst of speed brought him to the teleportation pylon, the Temple selection being muscle memory at that point and practically instantaneous.

When the familiar confines of the Temple walls appeared, Muar relaxed. The heretics wouldn't even have the option available to them, and if they did somehow make it to the Temple they would find themselves very quickly suppressed. He almost wished they would be so unwise, but he wouldn't be so lucky.

Rushing to the High Priest's quarters, he barely bothered knocking before shoving his way into the Platinum's office. The Urivan gave Muar a severe look, the gripping claws clicking softly as they shifted, but Muar didn't worry about it. Not only were members of the Temple given more latitude, Muar himself was in good personal standing.

"I've spotted Cato's agents," Muar said bluntly. "In [Okrik Town]."

The High Priest blinked once, then stood. He didn't bother asking if Muar was certain, or interrogate him for any details. Instead, the Platinum merely withdrew a farcaster from his desk and activated it.

"Honored Bismuth, we have an emergency at [Okrik Town]. Two enemies." The Platinum looked at Muar, who supplied the details.

"Two Peak Gold, Sydean, named Raine and Leese Talis. They hit like they're Platinitums." Not that it would matter to a Bismuth, but if the High Priest intended to go himself it would be best that he not be caught by surprise. He doubted even heretical Golds could actually harm the High Priest, but there was no virtue in being caught unawares.

"Yes," the High Priest said into the farcaster. "Very well. Yes, Honored Bismuth." The High Priest attached the farcaster to his belt and beckoned for Muar to follow him back to the teleportation pylon.

In a moment they were back at [Okrik Town], the chill wind sweeping in through the still-broken front door, and the High Priest stalked out to find the two Talis sisters. Muar followed, a moment later the heavy presence of a Bismuth appeared behind them. Only a few seconds passed before the Urivan Bismuth breezed past Muar to address the High Priest.

"They're not here," the Bismuth said, then pointed at one of the Golds that had gathered for the defense quest, now gawking at them from the walls. "Did you see two Sydeans leave?"

“Yes, Honored Bismuth!” One of them replied promptly, with an odd sort of salute. “They went to the teleport pylon!” Muar growled under his breath. Apparently they had not only been smart enough to realize pursuing him was a mistake, but also that staying would be a problem.

“If they are still on Uriva, I will find them,” the Bismuth said to the High Priest, blurring back into the System Nexus.

“You might as well finish your quest,” the High Priest said to Muar, as the startled sentinel Platinum descended from the top of the Nexus to find out what was going on. “We’ll take it from here.”

Muar nodded, but he knew that it wasn’t going to stop there. The sisters were slippery, but they were not more powerful than gods and for whatever reason it seemed that they were fated to keep crossing his path. In his second life, the System had seen fit to grant him many blessings, bringing him further than he had ever managed before. It was only right that such largesse was meant to challenge the agents of a threat like Cato.

He knew that he would meet the pair again, and so he had to make sure he was up to the task.

\*\*\*

“Gods damn it,” Raine snarled as Muar vanished at the teleportation pylon. There was no telling where he had gone, but given how well he had been equipped and the divine Skills he had used, he was probably closely connected to the local Temple and representatives of the World Deity.

“We have to leave,” Leese said, not commenting on Raine’s choice of expletive.

“On,” Raine snarled, to ensure that they could transmit to Cato. “We ran into Muar. I don’t know what he was doing here, but he was better equipped than we were and Peak Gold as well. Not enough to fight us but he still managed to escape.”

“*How the hell?*” Cato sounded as blindsided as they had been. “*Well, you’re going to have to bail. Get offworld. I saw the Planetary Administrator console and they can definitely find you if they know to look. Best go someplace that the Urivans and their System-God can’t beg favors.*”

“Good thing we already planted some of those communication ferns,” Raine muttered in resignation. “But who knows when we’ll have the chance to do a defense quest again?”

“*The timing is awful, I agree, but you can take the chance to distribute those spears I gave you. The more versions of me you can get up and running, the better the support network you’ll have.*”

Raine grunted and then followed Leese to touch the teleportation pylon. Giving up on the ascension to Platinum with less than an hour to go physically hurt, but both Leese and Cato were right. They couldn’t stay on Uriva when higher ranks were looking for them. The quest would have to be some other time, on some other world.

She appeared next to Leese in one of the major cities, one that had a portal. They slipped through it to Milau, then quickly transited to Reszen and from there to Ikent. Cato’s communications ferns did work through those portals, though imperfectly. The two of them had

made sure to plant the ferns outside the city walls – each capital city they could easily reach from Uriva – but it had been more than a little stressful.

As outworlders, they didn't have the protection of any local powers or clans, so even if they no longer had to worry about starving to death from lack of any palatable food, any foreign city could be dangerous. If they had made Platinum, there would be very few who would be willing to start trouble with them — Bismuths had better things to do than interfere with spats between lower ranks. If they ever made Bismuth themselves, they would match anyone outside of the core worlds, which were essentially the only places to find Azoth and Alum ranks.

In Ikent, the natives at least seemed uninterested in them. The bird-like people were half-sized, creating a sort of distance even beyond the normal separation of natives and outworlders. They didn't frequent the same shops and taverns, which meant that the bar Leese and Raine slipped into was entirely deserted despite being in a larger city. Raine touched the pylon and selected one of the cheaper, local drinks, which she normally would have avoided.

With the changes that Cato had provided to their bodies, the foamy drink, which sloshed oddly in the lower gravity of Ikent, was not actually bad. There was a strange moment where she couldn't tell *what* she was supposed to be tasting, before something clicked and the flavors settled on something a little bit fruity and bitter. But it wouldn't poison her, which was the risk she would normally run by eating offworld food.

"So can you still hear us, Cato?" Raine muttered, since they'd planted the ferns days ago, and there was no telling what had happened in the meantime.

*"I can, but it's not the best connection."* Cato's voice came through the lizard's vibrations. *"Certainly won't last if you leave the city. I'll try and get more ferns to you though, so you can start distributing them there."*

"That will help," Raine admitted, then sighed. "But we're a bit stuck until we can find another town defense quest. We *do* need better equipment though; seeing Muar reminded me of how far behind we are."

"We're so powerful it's easy to forget," Leese agreed. "If we had proper weapons and armor, Muar wouldn't have escaped."

*"It's that big a difference?"* Cato asked, sounding intrigued. *"I was under the impression it was mostly Rank and Skills."*

"Equipment does more for you the higher your Rank and better your Skills," Leese said, making Raine wonder how they hadn't had the conversation before. But then, Cato hadn't been involved with their equipment outside of his nigh-onto-Gold starting gear, which they'd only just replaced. "Your stuff is amazing, but it doesn't have special abilities, or interactions with our Skills like what we'd find in dungeons."

*"Indeed, there's nothing I can do to make the System give me a specific result. I doubt you could get any raw materials forged, either?"* It was a question, and Raine flicked her tail in an equivocal gesture, even if Cato couldn't see it.

"There are certain quests that require materials," she said thoughtfully. "And powerful items will generate quests to allow you to upgrade them. But I can't imagine that we could specifically get anything made from your materials."

*“So no crafters, then, huh?”* He sounded more resigned than disappointed.

“Some people learn how to craft, but usually not until much higher rank,” Leese replied. “It’s not worth the time or the Skill slots otherwise, not when you can get useful equipment from the stores or dungeons.”

*“Damn. My best advantage is manufacturing, and I knew that I couldn’t generally match the System top end, but that really cuts down on the substantive aid I can send you,”* Cato complained. *“Well, at least long term substantive aid. The more of me you can get up and running the more information and overwatch I can do.”*

“We’ll want to avoid the larger cities anyway,” Leese said. The only reason they had stopped was to make sure they could still stay in contact with Cato, so Raine drained her glass and stood.

“You’ll hear from us in a day or so,” she said, and tilted her head toward the door. Leese followed her out, and the two of them slipped back to the Nexus. Ikent had an abundance of high mountains, and while they would have liked to select the tallest, Cato had suggested that a mountain near the equator would have worked better than raw height. At least for a planet with normal moons.

She hadn’t thought of Uriva’s north-south moons as being particularly odd, but Cato had seemed quite upset.

Emerging in a town near their target, the heat swept over them. If it weren’t for their rank and the extra resistance from Cato’s augmentations it would have been nearly as unpleasant as the polar climb on Uriva, the mountain emerging from a sun-baked jungle under the blazing sun. The moon itself was low on the horizon, just rising from the east, and so far as they’d been able to tell there was only one.

Climbing the mountain was easier, as the region was merely Gold Rank, and nothing there offered any real danger to them. With one exception — Raine could sense a Bismuth in the area, the pressure of the essence unmistakable to her senses. Whoever it was didn’t seem to be paying them any attention, but she’d never forget the terrible and casual power wielded by the sole Bismuth they had encountered.

“We should at least wait until the Bismuth is gone,” she muttered, and Leese nodded. Although it wasn’t likely a Bismuth would notice two Golds moving through Gold-rank territory, flinging things into the air at the speeds Raine could manage with her Skill was quite obvious and unusual.

The two of them pulled out their maps on the slopes and consulted. There was a dungeon set into the peak of the mountain – something which was not unusual – that they could run, though neither of them had done the research to discern what was actually within the dungeon. Still, as merely a Gold rank dungeon it would not be too difficult, and there was always the chance some powerful item could drop. While they could delve Platinum dungeons, and did, Gold dungeons still had good enough rewards to be worth it.

If it took months for Cato to establish a new foothold, then one day wasn’t going to matter one way or the other.

\*\*\*

The Assassin's Guild was not what Dyen had expected. The quest text had only given him the name of the guild, and considering the attitude toward killing people that had been common on Sydea he had thought it would be buried in the shadows, away from Platinums and Bismuths. What he hadn't expected was for the Guildhouse to be a bland building directly next to the Temple on Mowara, six or seven worlds away from Uriva depending on which portals were taken.

He had never been inside an advanced building on Sydea, but there were supposed to be variants for every sort of Skill and build. Mage and warrior guildhalls, stealth and scout encampments, temples, and probably others that he'd never thought of. The Assassin's Guild was not only entirely bare, it was entirely deserted, but not for lack of members. The quest to join the Guild upon rising to Gold had informed him that each member of the Guild would never see another within its walls. Assassins did not often work together, they certainly were not friends, but they all worked from the same Guild.

There were the usual shop pylons, a teleportation pylon, private room, tiny tavern with a food pylon, but the most distinct feature was a display with bounties. Dyen had found killing Tornok Clan for their possessions to be lucrative enough, but if he were paid *extra* for doing so, it was even better. Besides which, he had a number of quests associated with taking assassination contracts, including his Platinum advancement.

For the most part, Dyen stuck to Clan Tornok contracts. There were not quite as many as he would have expected, given how that particular Clan treated everyone in their territory, but the sheer power Clan Tornok wielded probably made them unpopular targets. Not that Dyen cared; that just meant there was more for him.

He chewed on a Mowaran meat-stick as he perused the contract board, ignoring the strange taste. It was fortunate he had found something palatable at all, and one of his quests had given him an armband that rendered him virtually immune to imbibed toxins so he didn't have to worry about the usual issues of eating offworld. Just one of the advantages of the assassin path.

The board held the usual contracts — some tokens for the death of one particular person or another, with occasionally something more interesting. A specific item offered in lieu of payment, or even occasional favors. Dyen didn't trust those at all, since he couldn't imagine anyone willing to offer a contract to the Assassin's Guild being willing to follow through on any supposed debt. Easier to just kill the person showing up to claim the favor, even if everything was purportedly anonymous.

He reached out to the board, about to accept a contract to remove someone who was squatting on a dungeon and monopolizing it, before noticing a brand new contract as it scrolled onto the board. They were names that he knew.

*[Raine Talis and Leese Talis*

*Sydean*

*Last seen on Uriva*

*Wanted for heresy*

*Reward: 5 Bismuth Tokens, 1 Platinum Rank Equipment Token*

*Recommended Rank: Peak Platinum]*

“What have *you* been doing?” He muttered, more to himself than anything. They must have attracted the attention of someone who was both wealthy and knew how to post a contract with the Assassin’s Guild. Likely someone from a Temple, considering that the reason on the contract was *heresy*, rather than anything reasonable.

He had no temptation to take the contract. Rather the reverse; the two were his only link to Cato, and while Dyen had been doing well enough for himself, it was better to at least have the options Cato offered if the being was going to be foolish enough to help Dyen. There was no telling when he’d need someone to destroy a Bismuth — though Dyen was getting closer to that goal himself.

Only one condition remained for Dyen’s ascension to Platinum, and that was to find and execute a contract for an entire delving group of Peak Gold or higher. Such contracts weren’t common, and inspired vicious competition when they did appear, so he’d been stalled at Peak Gold for months. It wasn’t like the System created them. But so long as there were at least three people in the world, one would want another one killed. It was just a matter of time.

Dyen’s hand hovered over the contract for the Talis sisters, then he let it drop. He wasn’t quite sure what the penalties were for failing or sabotaging a contract, and he didn’t want to find out. There wasn’t much the contract would tell him about them that he didn’t know anyway. Instead he turned and strode to the teleportation pylon, intent on finding them himself.

Unlike anyone else who took the contract, he knew what their goal was. He hadn’t been privy to the details, but they had a mandate to help spread Cato to other worlds. If they’d been discovered, they certainly wouldn’t be staying — no individual or world was their goal. They’d be moving on, and they’d be looking to stay out of sight of the local powers. Most importantly, they needed mountains.

He followed the portal chain to Risham first, Uriva’s second world connection, and touched his map against the appropriate pylon. Studying the map, he found only one large mountain, and after another teleportation he was at the nearest town. Thanks to all his work he had more than enough tokens to pay for as much teleportation as he wished, which was a far cry from how it had been on Sydea.

There was too much traffic at the portal Nexus for his tracking Skills to have found anything useful, but the town was practically deserted and there were clearly only three different people who had been through its Nexus in the past week. None of them were Sydeans. Unbothered, Dyen continued onward, chewing on some rations as he made extensive use of teleports and portals, hopping from world to world on the chain outward from Uriva.

It almost surprised him when he picked up their trail on Ellesz, three worlds and fifteen hours later, in a remote town near an extensive range of volcanoes. The scent of salt blew in on lava-hot air, a glance outside showing towering peaks jutting from a broad ocean, though according to the map it was merely a Silver area. By his Skill the sisters had come through only hours beforehand — a stroke of luck on his part — so he could probably just wait for them. He wouldn’t want to try tracking them over water and lava.

He settled in by the teleportation pylon, to ensure that he could talk to them before they used it, and let time pass. Dyen’s many assassination quests had taught him patience, and merely



waiting under low stealth – enough so that no Silver who happened by would notice him – was no great hardship. Sure enough, his senses caught two Peak Gold signatures nearing the Nexus only a few hours later, and he straightened up as the pair entered the Nexus, their weapons ready as they had clearly sensed him in turn.

“Raine,” he greeted them. “Leese.”

“Dyen?” Leese asked cautiously, as if disbelieving what she saw. “What are you doing here?”

“More importantly, how did you find us?” Raine said, considerably more hostile.

“I knew where to look,” Dyen said with a shrug. “But I am not the only one looking for you. I’m here to warn you that there’s a contract out for you at the Assassin’s Guild.” The two sisters glanced at each other, then Raine planted her spear haft on the floor of the Nexus.

“Tell us,” she said.