

## Chapter 17 — Divine Intervention

Grand Paladin Nikhil Tornok meditated before the System pylon at the center of the temple, subtly channeling his keystone Skill, [Divine Conduit]. Ever since heard that Copper's strange testimony, it had been nudging him to stay, to consider, to commune. He didn't know what the gods had in mind just yet, but he had complete faith that there was a reason he was supposed to wait.

His faith was rewarded when [Divine Conduit] suddenly blazed to life, the energy of the System pouring into him. Visions arose in his mind, of towns on Sydea being destroyed by a sudden cataclysm — along with the Bismuths dwelling there, and the hasty abandonment of nearby towns. He *knew* where they were, just as he *knew* how intense the destruction was, the [Divine Conduit] putting the knowledge directly into his mind.

Along with that knowledge came the command, a divine decree, that he should use all his efforts to punish the heretics and purge the thing known as *Cato* from the face of Sydea. Nor would he be unsupported in that effort. The pylon glowed as the System informed him of the gifts that he had been granted.

[Equipment Bestowed: The God's Eye]

[Equipment Bestowed: Crystal of Immunity]

[Equipment Bestowed: Scepter of Annihilation]

[Equipment Bestowed: Clasp of Stone]

[Reward Bestowed: Overloaded S-Tier Skill Token: Stone Lance]

[Quest Ordained: Cleanse Sydea. Reward to be determined. This Quest contributes toward Feats of Glory required for Azoth Rank]

Nikhil took in a long, slow breath. To be simply granted items for *accepting* the quest meant that it was a special one, indeed. Something the power of the items confirmed.

[The God's Eye: This monocle grants the wearer vision of arbitrary distance, and provides the wearer with the tools to accurately strike targets with any applicable Skill.]

[Crystal of Immunity: This small crystal grants the bearer complete immunity to a single attack that would otherwise kill them.]

[Scepter of Annihilation: This divine tool will instantly destroy any creations of the being known as *Cato*.]

[Clasp of Divine Stone: This necklace vastly reduces the costs associated with divine and stone-type Skills and amplifies their power.]

All that was amazing enough, but the Overloaded S-Tier Skill Token was astounding. An S-Tier Skill was, of course, impossibly valuable, but an *Overloaded* Skill bypassed the normal restrictions on Skills, effectively granting him an extra Skill at his best rank. [Stone Lance] instead of a proper divine Skill was an odd choice for him, but he understood the gods' intentions. If the Copper was to be believed, one of the very *moons* of Sydea was

compromised, and perhaps the origin of the town-destroying Skill was in the heavens as well. If so, between the [God's Eye Monocle] and [Stone Lance] he would be well capable of destroying them, with the [Clasp of Stone] boosting his ability to use the unfamiliar Skill.

The [Scepter of Annihilation] was simultaneously the most powerful and most useless item the System had ever granted him. He could feel the divine touch within the long spiraled rod, a thing wrought out of a material he didn't recognize and inlaid with gold, a latent power beyond what any Skill could accomplish. To simply destroy anything he wished, with no ability to resist or contest it, was something reserved for deities. Yet the rod was created for a singular purpose, and once that purpose was fulfilled that almighty power would be impotent.

Nikhil wouldn't complain. It was likely all the tools – even the Skill – would be taken back by the gods once the quest was over regardless. The actual quest's rewards were more than enough anyway. He was certain the essence and money and perhaps even equipment would be generous, but the real prize was the step toward Azoth rank. Merely reaching the peak of Bismuth was a fraction of the effort needed to step into the next rank, and this quest would put him within reach of that advancement.

He tucked the rod into his belt, the magical equipment growing a small sheath for it automatically, and then donned the monocle. It was merely a thin piece of crystal, rimmed in blue metal, but it fixed itself in place and he immediately began to see its effect. Wherever he looked, it gave him an intrinsic knowledge of how precisely he had to manipulate his Skill reach the target. Within the confines of the temple that was not much, but in the open it would be exceedingly useful.

The [Crystal of Immunity] simply went into his storage pouch. Items that bestowed an effect merely by possession were rare, and often restricted in effect like the Crystal — though rarely quite so potent. The Clasp replaced the normal divine pendant at his neck, and then finally he absorbed the Skill token. The expansion of his mind to encompass the new Skill was an odd sensation, far more intense than acquiring new Skills with normal tokens. Nikhil had never had an Overloaded Skill before, and it was an unusual strain.

Fully equipped, Nikhil rose from where he was meditating and glanced around at the Coppers he had brought with him. Unfortunately, it seemed Sydea would be far too dangerous to bring them for their easy quest rewards, at least at first. Perhaps when the greatest threats had been dealt with, there would be time. In the interim, Uriva was surprisingly well-equipped for a frontier world and his Coppers could do quests for the Temple.

He strode over to find the Platinum in charge of the temple and transferred responsibility for the Coppers to him, along with the appropriate compensation. Even if they all served the gods of the divine System, it wouldn't do to expect such services for free. The well-being of Tornok Clan Coppers was a serious responsibility, especially for an uncivilized frontier world.

Then he made his way to the System Nexus in a flash, considering the portal to Sydea. There were few people near it, but even as he watched several Clan Morkrom Silvers came through, claws waving with disgruntlement. The squat crablike people were nominal allies with Clan Tornok, or at least too powerful to push around without issue. Still, they were merely Silvers.

“What is happening on the other side?” Nikhil asked, foregoing any pleasantries. The Silvers jolted, then realized who was addressing them and bowed with a tilt of their low, armored bodies.

“Honored Bismuth! The Sydean Platinums are ejecting all offworlders,” one of the Silvers said.

“Oh? When did this begin?” Nikhil had an idea. An intuition. It had to have begun once the strange Skill – Cato’s Skill, most certainly – had destroyed the towns and the Bismuths therein. Only then would mere Platinums have dared to enforce such a thing.

“Two days ago,” the Silver replied, and Nikhil nodded at the confirmation.

“You may go about your business,” he said in dismissal and stepped through the portal himself. The Nexus building on the other side was more in line with what he expected of the frontier; the minimum size, modified little beyond the initial layout and amenities. It was nearly empty, save for a few Sydeans at the quest pylon and one that was obviously watching the portal.

Nikhil scoffed at the Gold-rank observer and retrieved the [Scepter of Annihilation] from his belt. Raising in the air, he invoked [Divine Sanctuary] and channeled the Scepter’s power into the expanding sphere of golden energy. He could feel a buzz of feedback as the empowered Sanctuary encountered Cato-creations and summarily destroyed them, [Divine Sanctuary] expanding to cover the entire city. The observing Gold stared with widened eyes and brought a farcaster up to its muzzle, but Nikhil simply crushed it with a quick [Holy Lance].

[Low Gold rank Sydean defeated. Essence awarded.]

He ignored the other two lizards bolting out the door, crossing to the System pylon and updating his map. There was only one other city of consequence, so he paid for the teleportation there, blinking into another, even more paltry and bare Nexus. Once again he lifted the Scepter, a second [Divine Sanctuary] blanketed the city. There seemed to be even more of the Cato things there, to judge by how much the Scepter drew from him, but not enough to strain his energy. It was almost *too* easy, in fact, but that was only to be expected of divine tools.

There were other towns to be cleansed, of course, but as Nikhil was not stupid he had to attend to certain matters first. He had seen the devastation that Cato’s Skill could wreak, but also that such devastation was directly *solely* toward small towns with no Sydean inhabitants. The [Crystal of Immunity] gave him a certain level of protection, but he wasn’t going to waste it by making a target of himself.

[Wings of Ishell] brought him from the interior of the nexus to its top in a single burst of divine radiance as he looked up into the sky. It was evening, the close-paired suns near the horizon, but the moons were not yet in sight. The [God’s Eye Monocle] caught small glints in the darkening sky anyway, things impossibly far away.

He didn’t exactly understand what he was looking at. Even with Bismuth senses, they were merely small blocky shapes resting at a remove that was hard to credit. Yet with the [God’s Eye Monocle] he had no issues locating them — or knowing how to hit them. It was for this reason that he had been given [Stone Lance].

That particular Skill was unfamiliar and yet similar enough to his [Holy Lance]. It felt the same when invoked but, instead of light, a dull grey, impossibly hard stone congealed from nowhere into a long, man-size spear. He narrowed his eyes at the information the Monocle gave him —

the degree to which he had to lead his aim was frankly astounding, but he trusted the System's guidance.

He charged the Skill, the S-tier version readying an array of hundreds, then thousands of the lances about him, holding them in the air until he released the Skill. The lances screamed into the air, vanishing from the sight of any low ranks in mere seconds, but his own vision tracked them as they ascended. And ascended.

It was considerably further than he had thought, the sort of vast expanses he had only associated with the Alum-rank worlds where [Conflict Zones] stretched beyond what could be imagined. He counted entire minutes as the S-tier Skill flew, until it finally impacted the small and distant shape. A cloud of debris puffed outward, but the System didn't inform him of his success.

Nikhil didn't know whether that was because the attack had failed, or whether Cato was correct in saying it was beyond the System's scope. Either way, what had been a steady, single brick was slowly tilting, bits and pieces spreading away from it. He decided he would be satisfied with that, and turned his attention to the next. He could spot several others, all slowly moving in the heavens, and until the moons came around, he would practice his Skill on the targets he could see.

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Cato swore in five separate languages, none of them known to the System, as all his scouts and warframes in Kalhan City vanished. The only frame that was left was the much-restricted and diminished Sydean frame, which had only a low-bandwidth connection to one of the drop pods floating high above the city, effectively just text communication. Which was better than nothing, but it was only a matter of time before that connection failed as well.

A wave of gold went past that particular frame, where he stood in Onswa's office, and disintegrated the System-jamming biomass that he'd been using to try and get access to the System Interface. Like the warframes that went through the portal, it simply dissipated into nothingness, violating conservation of matter in a very thoroughly System-like manner.

"Divine user," Onswa said grimly, eyes unfocusing for a moment. "Another Bismuth, but — ah, he's already gone."

"Mosaw City," Cato said, as he received a message update about his scouts vanishing there as well. He couldn't maintain enough different versions of himself to have warframes in all the cities, so he was mostly restricted to the augmented sisters, overwatch, Onswa, and Arene. "I have him on surveillance."

From orbit, Cato could see the Bismuth in question was one of the rat people — Clan Tornok. The spy satellite showed him standing on the top of the belltower-like peak of the central System building, staring upward. For a normal person, that wouldn't mean much, but Cato felt uncomfortably like the rat-person was looking back at him.

The records were clear that higher rank System folks could see and reach things in orbit, even when the System itself could not, but there was a difference between the recordings and actually witnessing it personally. A massive fusillade of what seemed to be stone or metal was launched upward from Mosaw city at double-digit Mach numbers, not even losing velocity from

air drag. It didn't take more than a fraction of a calculation to tell the bombardment was aimed directly at one of his railguns.

He began firing the fusion maneuvering jets, but the enormously massy orbital weapons were not designed to move quickly, not to mention they just didn't have much fuel. Given the limitations on the deuterium and tritium extracted from the pockets of water-ice he'd found on his small moon, and the tiny mining stations beginning to extend across the primary moon, they'd only been fueled enough to get them into orbit. Not that it mattered, since the oncoming cloud of projectiles actually *changed course* to follow that slight shift.

The railguns were outside the System's sphere of influence, but only just, and if the spell was tracking there was no way that he'd be able to shift the orbital emplacements enough to matter in so little time. Not to mention the vast field of solar panels surrounding it, which were completely exposed and ridiculously fragile. He had seen rankers take out orbital facilities before, but actually having to manage his own made it that much more a problem.

"Can you deal with him?" Onswa asked back on the surface, obviously disgruntled by his own inability to contest a Bismuth.

"If he leaves a city, yes. I think." The Sydean frame replied after a moment, needing the time to get an update from the version of himself up on the moon. He was certain that the connection would drop before long, as attacks and Kessler Syndrome – the inevitable result of debris and destruction in the useful orbitals – destroyed his communication relays. "But he's targeting my orbital infrastructure — I think this is the System-God finally reacting." Onswa's long face grew even more dour, but Cato was more vindicated than worried. There was nothing he could do to stop the Bismuth from smashing his orbital machinery, but he might have the chance to actually hit the System-God and remove that anchor.

A railgun wouldn't be enough for that. Not even close. A System-God had a toughness borne of altered reality, an ability to simply ignore physics. Most physics, at least. A particle beam had worked by dint of raw energy, but before that the best results had been with antimatter.

Nobody really worked with the stuff, as antimatter just wasn't very useful. It was enormously energy-intensive to make, couldn't be stored in any amount, and annihilation was *too* energetic to be captured easily. Even then, most of the energy was carried away by neutrinos, so it was a poor return on investment. Still, antimatter *did* destroy even the most nonsensical System matter on contact.

Cato had only a few grams of the stuff, in two separate containment bullets. They weren't actually physical projectiles, but rather intensely magnetic capsules with plasma sheaths to protect them. The outer envelope would destabilize practically instantly when they hit the System, but it'd be long enough to reach the target given the near-relativistic speeds. It wasn't much, and while it was still survivable by a System-God it would demonstrate that Cato *could* kill him. A fear that could be almost as potent as the weapon itself.

All that was assuming that the System-God itself appeared and Cato could actually hit it. With the Bismuth destroying his orbital infrastructure that was far less likely, but Cato doubted that the antimatter guns themselves were at risk. They were small enough to try and make stealthy, so he had hastily altered their coating to be light absorbing before launching the two God-Poke railguns, assigning them to opposing polar orbits so he'd have the best coverage possible.

Between their vastly smaller size – their payload was tiny, after all – and greater distance, they were far less noticeable to any senses.

“We should probably leave before he returns,” Onswa said, standing and glancing over the System Interface before shutting it down. “If he’s here for you, then I’m going to be in the way.”

“Let’s go,” Cato said, though the Sydean version of himself wasn’t overly important. Onswa, on the other hand, wasn’t replaceable. Or backed up.

Onswa made a gesture with one hand, then frowned as the strange, silvery-grey radiance failed to manifest into a portal. The Sydean visibly strained, then dropped the magic when nothing happened. Then he tried again, the portal showing the city from a perspective just above the office before Onswa stepped through, flying into the air. Cato exited the office door at a more normal speed, looking out at the great golden dome that covered the city.

System cities weren’t all that large compared to those on earth, but the Skill still stretched over a mile in each direction. Onswa’s form was visible in the air as he flitted up to the top of the dome and physically pressed against it as if it were solid. Which perhaps it was; the System’s alternate physics was perfectly capable of producing the absurdity of glowing energy barriers.

Cato started down the stairs to the bottom of the nexus building, and by the time he reached it Onswa was inside. Hot fury flared in the Sydean frame, inciting an angry lash of his tail, as he saw the blood-splattered remains of the poor Gold who had no other duty than to keep an eye on the portal. Cato’s equipment was replaceable, his railguns and warframes were ultimately just *things*, but the casual destruction of *people* was sickening. What was worse was that if the shield had been down, it *might* have been possible for Cato to save him.

Orbital Cato was no happier, but lacking the same visceral, biological reaction he could consider it more calmly and found there was nothing he could do. The best he could manage was to write the name of the Gold in question into a specific database, for a memorial somewhere far down the line. It was going to be a large memorial, even leaving out all the generations that the System had ruined since it had arrived. Onswa only gave the corpse a glance, a callous response that was surely the result of simply seeing so much death, as he prodded the pylon at the far end the room.

“Teleport is blocked,” he announced. “We’re trapped here.”

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“We have a problem.” The small Cato-beast interrupted his own explanation – first of the so-called orbital bombardment, then of the nature of the new, non-combat spears he had given them – and Raine felt a sudden sense of dread curling her tail. For as powerful a being as Cato to encounter an actual *problem* meant there was something truly dire happening.

“A divine-type Bismuth has come through the portal and locked down both Kalhan and Mosaw City. A big dome that doesn’t let anyone out,” Cato continued. “Onswa is stuck and there’s nothing I can do about it until the Bismuth leaves a city.”

“We’re still Silver,” Leese pointed out. “We may be on par with Gold, but that’s still nothing to a Bismuth. You think we can do something?”

“People can get in, and the version of me that’s there isn’t going to be around much longer,” Cato replied, turning toward the door of the room. “Yup, reconciled and gone. I need some insight if I’m going to do anything, and a few Silvers should be more or less invisible. Besides, you know more about that kind of person than I do. If you’re willing, some eyes on the situation would help, and maybe we can figure out a way to get Onswa out of there. I figure you might as well try to take the teleport in, which is something I can’t do at all.”

Raine and Leese exchanged glances. Only a day before, they would have tried to turn it down, and even now it was a nigh-suicidal idea. Yet the two of them had just woken up from several hours spent in small, narrow cots wrought of Cato’s strange materials, and if they trusted his word they were just as immortal as he.

He had been at pains to make them understand the individuals they were could very easily die, and there would be no coming back from that. There would still *be* a Leese and Raine though, and they would lack only a few hours or days of experience. If all went well, they could return to the cots and fill in the missing time.

The distinctions Cato was most concerned with seemed hardly relevant to Raine. Missing a few days or a few weeks was a small price to pay for a peace of mind and the ability to take risks. Their experience since returning to Sydea had shown that they could get back to peak Silver in a matter of hours if they pushed it, now that they were more conversant with their new bodies. Perhaps when they reached Bismuth themselves the time needed for ranking up again would become troublesome, but for now it was a mere annoyance.

“We’ll go,” Raine said, once she and Leese were in agreement. “Just don’t expect too much.” If Cato were merely an Alum-rank, she would have said to expect nothing, but he wasn’t from within the System. Even allowing – or really, encouraging – the casual mode of address she had just used was far different from what a powerful person should accept. The perspectives the two of them could offer were genuinely valuable, not merely the blathering of low tiers.

“Fantastic,” Cato said with enthusiasm, the small Cato-beast pushing open the door and leading them to the next room. It was an armory, but the swords and spears weren’t what they were there to acquire. Instead the Cato-beast approached the oddly organic-looking desk next to the door, withdrawing two tiny lizards from what seemed to be cocoons inside drawers there.

“Ooh, how cute!” Leese squealed as the small creatures blinked at them with overly-large eyes, shifting on big toes and flexing their long, curled tails. They were color-coded, one red-orange to match Raine’s scales and one white for Leese’s, so it was obvious which was meant for whom. Cato extended their respective lizards to them with his back-tendrils, and Raine took hers uncertainly.

[Quickpulse Lizard: This small lizard can vibrate its tail at amazing speeds in order to communicate.]

“These will allow you to remain in contact with me,” Cato informed them. “Just feed them from your rations and give them water from time to time. They should obey simple commands, as well. Just let them sit on your head, just back of your horns, and you ought to be able to hear everything.

Leese stroked the head of her [Quickpulse Lizard] and then proceeded to lift it up to let it settle on the scales covering her skull. Raine followed suit, and the lizard crouched down, its toes

gripping her scales and its tailtip wrapping around the base of her left horn. It was so small it was nearly weightless and, unless someone was specifically looking, it would probably be unnoticeable.

*“Can you both hear this?”* The words rang oddly, almost like they were inside her skull rather than coming in through her ears, but they each nodded. *“Great. Just tell it if you want it to transmit to me or not with ‘on’ or ‘off.’”* The words Cato used were not System terms, but easy enough to pronounce, and a moment of testing showed that it worked just fine.

“I’ll let you head to the teleports then,” Cato said, this time through the actual Cato-beast. “I might be in and out of contact, depending on how much orbital infrastructure he decides to destroy. I’ll try to land some forces near Kalhan City, but it’ll be a couple hours.” Raine hissed; a few hours was enough time for a Bismuth to lay waste to everything he could see.

“We’ll try to keep you informed,” Leese said, and the Cato-beast opened the door for them. The two of them hurried into town, heading for the System Nexus. Teleporting between towns was moderately expensive, but delving Silver dungeons at Copper and Gold dungeons at Silver meant they were flush with tokens. The rewards for fighting up a rank were terribly impressive. They’d never been wealthy before, but they were well on their way now.

Raine touched the teleportation pylon, selected Kalhan City, and watched it take a wince-inducing number of silver-rank tokens from her wallet. The world shifted around them, and they appeared in the capital city’s Nexus building. It was unfortunately crowded, mostly with outworlders, and the reason why became obvious when Raine glanced at the portal. It was covered with a shimmering golden film, and even as she watched one of Clan Morkrom press his claw against the film, only to find it completely impermeable.

Leese bumped her shoulder and the two of them carefully threaded their way around the edges of the room, especially avoiding the Clan Tornok Golds and Silvers. Her Silver-rank, C-tier essence sense wasn’t the best, but it was enough to tell that the Bismuth wasn’t around at the moment. She didn’t know exactly how his Skill was still active, but Bismuth was the first step into real power and divine users had certain advantages.

“On,” Raine whispered in Cato’s odd tongue once they left the main room, turning onto the stairway up to Onswa’s office. “The portal is blocked off, the Nexus is full of outworlders,” she reported, following Leese up the stairs. “The Bismuth hasn’t returned, we’re trying to find Onswa first.”

*“He’s still thrashing my orbital infrastructure, but he’s running out of targets. I don’t think you have much time.”* The strange buzzing voice spoke inside her skull. *“I don’t know if you can hide Onswa or what. I’m not even sure what the Bismuth intends to do.”*

“Whatever he wants,” Raine muttered. Leese sighed in agreement.

“Before, there was nothing here for Bismuth or higher ranks,” Leese explained. “We were left alone because we were a waste of time for anyone with real power. Now there’s someone here to counter you, and nobody on Sydea could hope to oppose him.”

*“We’re going to need to evacuate the city after this,”* Cato said after a moment. *“The only method I have for dealing with high rankers just has too much collateral damage. I was honestly expecting more conflict to happen away from soft targets.”*



“Normally high rankers don’t fight in lower rank cities,” Raine agreed. “A city upgraded to Bismuth-rank materials wouldn’t be much affected by someone like him, but Kalhan is mostly Gold, I think.” It felt silly to explain something so blatantly obvious, but Cato had said he didn’t know all the thousand and one blatantly obvious things that anyone who lived within the System would realize.

“*Good to know,*” Cato said, as they reached the office door. Leese pressed her hand against the entrance panel, and the door chimed before opening. The two of them had only been to the Planetary Administrator’s office once, in congratulations for their ascent to Gold, so while Raine couldn’t claim much familiarity with it, she did think it looked incredibly bare compared to her memories.

“What are you two doing here?” Onswa asked, staring at them in surprise.

“Cato’s eyes and ears,” Leese replied, looking around for the Sydean version of Cato.

“He said something about a gestalt dump and then keeled over,” Onswa said, interpreting Leese’s interest correctly. “Damned unnerving. I had the Interface clean it up.”

“*I wouldn’t want an ordinary version of myself vulnerable to a Bismuth,*” Cato said, half-apologetically. “*Now, how do we get this guy away from a city so I can hit him? And not get Onswa or anyone killed in the process?*”

“I doubt we’ll be so lucky,” Onswa said grimly, once Raine conveyed the question. That Onswa couldn’t hear the transmission himself was strange, but only one more oddity to be piled on top of Cato’s nature. “He trapped us here on purpose, which is to say he trapped *me* here on purpose. The gods would hold me responsible as the Planetary Administrator, even if they don’t know precisely how much I’ve been cooperating.”

“*Damn,*” Cato’s voice came. “*We need to get you out of here.*”

“I doubt you can,” Onswa said, his face still set. “But my wife is in the compound outside the city to the north. Evacuate *her*.”

“*I will,*” Cato promised. “*But I want to get everyone out if I can.*”

“If I—” Onswa started, then suddenly flipped his hand. A swirl of aether surrounded Raine and Leese, dumping them in the open square outside the Nexus. Raine steadied Leese as she stumbled, staring back at the Nexus building as a powerful source of essence blazed to her senses.

The Bismuth had returned.