

## Chapter 10 — Complications

If they weren't going to play nice, neither was he.

When there was a burst of thermal energy and the spy satellite watching the village saw everyone leave the System Nexus without the frame, it was obvious what had happened. Cato didn't have a direct connection to the version of himself on the ground, but that was due to limits he couldn't exceed without triggering the quest or tipping his hand. Now that he had to use force, the quest didn't matter.

Certain satellites in the network he'd built around Sydea came to life, launching small railgun projectiles on a descent trajectory not unlike the one that the glider had taken. They were far faster than the glider, and slowed themselves by parachutes that puffed out from the missiles the moment they hit atmosphere. Each one was a small aerial organism, little more than a set of sensory organs and a transmitter to relay back to the satellites, and as stealthy as he could manage in visual and thermal wavelengths.

There were thousands of them, exhausting all the stocks he'd built up. The satellites began using their remnant fuel to alter trajectories and return to the moon; no need to create any sort of Kessler Syndrome with the expended husks and junk up the orbitals he'd need in the future with discarded metal and glass. It would have been amazing if he could have gotten the benefits of obfuscation and distraction from orbital infrastructure alone, but the zones had both a height and a depth limit. He needed actual fliers.

Stealthy scout drones weren't the only things he'd readied. Six much larger satellites – really, genuine ships, given their capabilities – held four of the larger warframes each, the type he'd armed with the light-gas guns. He deployed two of them, one to the town where the Platinum was, and the other to one of the central cities where there were planetary portals.

Sydea was an entire planet, but it was *only* one planet. The System had hundreds, thousands, or maybe even more, so he couldn't afford to think linearly. Now that he had a reasonable amount of infrastructure, he needed to start spreading again. With Sydea as a model, he knew it was possible to establish himself out in the broader System.

Each quartet of warframes locked themselves into individual padded cells, keeping them secured as the launch vehicle was accelerated down the superconducting rail. The vehicle itself was its own custom-grown organism, disposable but more than capable of managing the descent and targeting the drop of the bioweapons. He would have loved to simply wrap proper technology in the System-jamming biology, but the altered physics still held even if the System's direct and active effects were held at bay.

Outside the System, his deployment satellites showed the big black pods falling downward toward Sydea, most of their relative velocity stripped by the launch. The recoil shoved the launchers up into a higher orbit, where they would eventually rendezvous with the moon once again. He'd be launching a lot of warframes eventually, but he was personally limited in how many he could handle at a time.

Even if there were four separate warframes, there was essentially one mind in each of them. Technically there were a multitude of different brains, but with the link between them to reconcile their gestalts real-time, it was closer to one person in four bodies than four versions of

himself. Those versions were in turn reconciled with the prime version sitting in the computronium core in the moon, to keep all his operations coordinated.

The carbon-black pod aimed at the larger city hit the atmosphere first, gossamer strands of graphene billowing out like wings to adjust its trajectory. With all the scouts junking up the defense quest, there was nothing special about the city, and from his observations it didn't have any regular visits by the high-ranking Sydeans. Hopefully his frames wouldn't be there long enough for anyone to react.

The pod smashed down through the thick soup of air near Sydea's surface, suddenly flaring out its parachutes and slowing down to merely a few dozen miles per hour. The chamber coverings popped open, the four bioweapon frames dropping the remaining distance to land heavily on the streets in front of the System Nexus. Panicked Sydeans threw Skills toward them, but Cato was framejacked to the maximum and dodged or deflected weapons and projectiles of various energies as he bulled inside.

Forty tons of bioweapon smashed the door itself off its hinges, the impact sending one unfortunate offworld visitor flying backward. Cato ignored those inside and launched himself at the portal, the four massive hexapods squeezing through one after another. The portal size was the real limiter on how big he could make the frames; it would have been embarrassing to be stuck simply because he couldn't fit through. He needed all four so he could immediately launch a remote into space; he'd learned his lesson and had packed in enough fuel and power between them to get outside the System's grasp the instant he was outside city walls.

The other side of the portal was nearly identical, a variation on the same template, only more crowded and more colorful. Most of the inhabitants were one of the insectile species of the System, with bulky gray-green carapaces and four arms. The most striking feature was how the secondary gripping claws extended from the back and rested in grooves in what Cato would call shoulders — though it was clear the insect-people didn't have the same kind of joints.

He took in all this in accelerated time, different ranks reacting at visibly different speeds as he charged out of the portal. Sheer mass gave him an advantage in his headlong flight, as even the highest-rank people needed something more than just the System boosting to deflect that much inertia. The first of the bioweapons was nearly to the door when there was a bright flash that didn't register on any of the sensors save ordinary eyes.

Other modes of vision caught an insect person stepping out of a brief, ephemeral portal, and Cato scrambled to focus every sense he'd given the warframes through that opening. He was almost completely certain the newcomer was a System-god, and the space beyond was some sort of basement dimension, but it didn't last long enough for him to properly catalogue the small slice of room he could see. Nor did it last long enough for him to aim through it, even though he tried.

Seeing the presumed System-god, Cato was of four and a half minds about whether to confront the being or not. The bioweapon frames were not nearly strong enough to provide a credible threat to such an entity, but he *could* negotiate. Or at least, plant seeds of doubt, provided that the System-god was willing to talk. Yet he needed to have force he could apply, and for *that* he needed to get into the planet's orbitals. Given another thirty seconds or so to get clear, he would have that advantage.

The trailing bioweapon scabbled its claws against the floor as it tried to decelerate, a rather involved process for something so massive, while the forward three warframes continued their sprint to the door. One of the benefits of multiples of himself was that he really *could* take both options. At full framejack, hundreds of times faster than normal, he had enough time to second-guess himself as the System-god studied the four warframes. It seemed that he could operate at essentially framejack speed, unburdened by physics, whereas Cato could only move so fast even if he could think quite quickly.

“I—” Cato managed the single word from the trailing warframe in the extended seconds of framejack before the System-god stretched out its hand toward the bioweapons. There was no visible conjuration of energy, no elemental blaze, but the leading warframe simply puffed into dust, the signal terminated. Then the second, third, and finally the last before a second syllable made it out.

Up in the moon base, Cato cursed and glared out at the view of Sydea. If it weren't for the warframes relaying things through the drop pod, which was floating above the Sydean city on hydrogen lift bubbles, he wouldn't have known anything about their sudden destruction. System-god indeed.

He had no idea what exactly had happened. There was no feedback, it had happened too quickly to get any real data. The neural static kept the System from integrating the bioweapons, and prevented it from accessing his mind, but it didn't stop the System's actual physics or any directed effects. He couldn't even resist it as such, save for the inherent toughness of the materials. But to simply *dust* the bioweapons with no noticeable energy release was a little eerie.

It also raised the question of why the System-god for Sydea hadn't done the same thing. That would have cut his campaign pretty short. Though the same could be said for Earth's System-god, so there had to be limits. Either of energy, or capability, or some esoteric System rules.

He was certain the only reason that he'd gotten attention was the System's defense quest tagging his location. Anyone of moderate intelligence would pay close attention to the portals, and if the System popped its defense quest the obvious conclusion would be to check the portal. The speed at which the System-god had reacted was a little off-putting, but Cato wasn't too discouraged yet. The worst of the losses was the element of surprise, but there was precious little of that to begin with if people were coming to Sydea in order to hunt down his scouts.

It was a consideration for the future, after he'd resolved things locally. That started with the second pod, still descending toward Sokhal Town. The covers popped as the bioweapons ejected, clawed and fanged warframes falling into the town at just under terminal velocity. Over one hundred fifty tons of combat materiel smashed into the bland stone streets around the tavern where his guests and the high-ranker were staying, sending people mostly fleeing indoors.

He could see right through the walls, thanks to glands and organs that operated in spectrums other than visible light. The high-ranker was easy to spot simply because of her equipment, which was far more opaque than any mundane metal would be. He targeted her with the organic light-gas guns built into his new warframes, but didn't fire. The ammunition he had

loaded wasn't the organic fusion snot, not with innocent folk around, but rather something a lot more evil.

If it worked, anyway.

Even if normal diseases and bioweapons were of uncertain value given the System's foibles, he still had biowarfare itself. Inside of armor-piercing projectiles – a necessity, given the toughness of high rankers – he had a culture tailored specifically to Sydeans. Rather than trying to kill them, it would integrate seamlessly with their body and spread the neural static cells as fast as possible, jamming their System connection. He wasn't certain how much it'd slow them down, but surely it would interfere with their Skills and make them far easier to handle.

He didn't fire just yet, however. It was clear he needed to demonstrate *some* degree of force but with the active System-god on the other side of the portals he was suddenly far more constrained. Until he could spread himself to more worlds, he had to treat Sydea as the most precarious toehold. The more he had to coerce people, the worse his chances of securing any System-side confederates, and the harder everything would become.

The one thing he absolutely refused to do was to indiscriminately destroy the people the System put in his way. The System destroyed worlds and peoples; he was not willing to be so monstrous. It was worth the attempt to try and come across as something other than creeping existential doom. Which he probably did anyway, considering his distraction scouts were covering practically every zone across the globe to ensure the System's own feedback was useless.

Framejack time stretched out the seconds after impact, his light-gas guns trained on the high-ranker and the warframes coiled and ready as they surrounded the building. The insane plasma beam of hers would still cut through his new-model warframes, but only if it hit, and at every moment his sub-brains were generating trajectory predictions. The only question was whether she'd use it in such a populated area, where there were low-rankers scattered around the surrounding buildings.

"Are you—" he said through four throats, before the high-ranker launched herself out of her chair and straight up through the roof. She was moving quick, and had System nonsense augmenting her motions, but he had four warframes running at hundreds of times normal speed. Muscles composed of fullerenes and ultra-dense proteins, powered by fusion organelles and anchored to foamed metal bones, exploded into motion as he launched one of the warframes to intercept her.

Forty tons of armored bioweapon hammered into her at well over a hundred miles an hour, an impact that would have reduced any normal person – or even anyone of lower rank – to paste, but the Sydean merely grunted as massive claws wrapped around her torso and conjured that plasma beam of hers. One of the tendrils whipped out to bat her hand aside, sending the beam shooting off into the air where it barely missed the hovering pod, a half-mile above.

Fiery wings burst from her back as she flickered and vanished, reappearing above a nearby building, the warframes tracking her as she dropped down and landed on the roof. She crouched, gathering fire into her hands, then her eyes widened as one of his warframes prepared to fire. Cato had no idea what gave him away, but she blurred to the side just before he fired, too fast for him to reacquire. The projectile flew off into the air with the ripping power of

hypersonic flight, a muzzle velocity measured in miles per second, joining the plasma beam in uselessly parting the atmosphere.

The moment she stopped herself against a nearby building he had another warframe in the air. Stone crumbled under her feet as she launched herself away just before it impacted, the warframe's landing serving to shatter the roof the rest of the way. Cato kept the warframe moving, flipping it over the side of the building while another one dogged the high-ranker's steps.

It would have been easier if he was just trying to kill her, or to cause devastation. Restrained fighting was so much more difficult, but with over ten times the tonnage he wasn't fleeing for his life like before — though she was clearly holding back as well. That beam could have leveled the town with ease. He had no problem taking advantage of that, trying to keep her off-balance and out of the air long enough to force her to at least *listen* to him. People kept attacking him before he could get a word out and it was beginning to get old.

"Wait!" The front door of the tavern banged open, and Raine rushed out into the combat zone. Leese tagged behind, the two sisters throwing themselves into the line of fire. Or more accurately, into an active industrial zone, given how fast the warframes moved and how massy they were. Cato was forced to send one of his warframes leaping up into the air to avoid flattening the pair into paste, redirecting his encirclement of the high-ranker.

The appearance of the younger Sydeans at least made the high-ranker pause, and Cato shifted his warframes back a touch. He recognized the chance to de-escalate and didn't want to ruin it by trying for a fractional tactical advantage. Instead he had one of his warframes casually pad over to loom behind the sisters, the massive bioweapon nearly filling the street.

"Please, Honored Platinum, at least give him a chance to talk," Raine said, as Cato subtly altered the stances of his other warframes to target the high-ranker with the light-gas guns. He didn't go so far as to actually prepare the chambers yet, waiting to see what she did.

"Talk about what?" The flame lady said, voice booming over the town. "He's killed people, he's flooded this insane quest everywhere, he's brought outworlders down upon us and made it so we're being punished with ridiculous essence prices. He's *ruining* Sydea!"

"It is not I," Cato said, using the warframe behind Raine to speak. "The System is the one bringing people in, assigning this quest, and extorting you with essence. The System is the one trying to kill you." He tilted his head, eyeing the flame lady as she stood and glared, breathing hard.

"You're being made to play a game you can't win," Cato continued, letting the toothed muzzles of the warframes stretch into a smile. "I'm here to flip the board."

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Arene fought to keep her lips from curling away from her fangs as she eyed the massive beasts filling the streets of Sokhal Town. Every instinct was screaming out about how dangerous they were, their strange lines unlike any monster or beast that Arene had ever seen before. And it *spoke*, it *thought*, marking it as something far beyond any of the System events Arene had seen before.

[Appraise] didn't help at all, still returning the question marks that refused to even gauge its rank. Her Essence senses implied that the things were below Copper rank, but they fought like Platitudes. And there were four of them, all much larger than the one that had dropped a mountain on her.

The entire thing disturbed her. The bizarre return to life of the Gosruk Guardians frankly frightened her, as that was *not* how the world worked, but there was no arguing with the results of [Appraise] — either on them, or on her grand-niece's husband. Everything about the situation was wrong, which meant she had to stop and take a different approach. She hadn't gotten to Platinum by only running at problems headlong.

"You're speaking riddles," she said, having no patience for the being's oblique statements. If the Talis sisters were to be believed, this was the same Cato that she had removed only minutes ago — and the same one that had nearly killed, yet spared her. The source of the worldwide quest, now so large a block that it wasn't even possible to look through it. The farcaster at her side was shaking and chiming, so she reached down to silence it — then set it to transmit, just in case. She didn't know who would be listening, but the more people knew what was happening the better.

"Sydea is dying," the creature said bluntly. "Sydeans are dying. For the past hundred years or more, your population has been shrinking, you've been losing towns, and the wilderness has been closing in. You know this, I'm sure."

Arene gritted her teeth, not needing the reminder. Despite all her efforts, and those of the other Platitudes, there just weren't enough people ranking up fast enough. She'd wondered more than once where they had been going wrong over her past hundred and fifty years of life, even talking to outworlders about it, but no answers had been forthcoming.

"It's not anything you're doing," the creature continued, as if it could read her mind. "Sydea isn't dying. *It is being killed.* Before the System you were flourishing. Before the System, you had vast cities all over the world. The System is killing you. I'm here to kill the System."

She stared at the creatures, eyes flicking from one to another. None of them gave anything away, and she felt a laugh bubbling up in her throat. It escaped as a dark chuckle, and she shook her head at the bizarre being.

"That doesn't even make sense. Kill the System? Are you going to kill the sun and the moon, too?"

"That won't be necessary," the being said, flat and humorless. Arene felt a chill down her spine, all the way to the tip of her tail, the sort she'd only gotten when witnessing Azoth or Alum ranks.

"I don't believe it's as ridiculous as it sounds, Honored Platinum," Raine said, the young Sydean — younger than she *had* been, which was another oddity to unpack — not at all threatened by the massive and deadly beast behind her. "I've *seen* that there's something outside the System. The four of us all saw the welcome message as we went *into* the System."

"Betrayer," accused a voice, as Muar — who had *not* been made younger, for some reason — stepped out of the front of the damaged tavern. "This Cato is an invader, a conqueror. Everything it says is deception, and Raine has sold herself out for purely venal and hollow rewards."

Cato, Arene saw, was curiously unbothered by the accusation, even if Raine's scales flushed with anger. Muar stalked toward Raine, though his lack of concern for the deadly creatures undercut his own accusations. She flicked out her fire whip between the two, since if *they* came to blows the entire situation might devolve back to combat — and she was not at all certain she could win.

The four beasts shifted slightly at her use of the Skill, but very correctly did not interpret it as an attack. In that respect they were very close to other Platinums she had sparred with, where their situational awareness was enough that they were actually *safe* to fight. Too many that reached that rank had no idea how to deal with those less powerful than themselves.

"I find it hard to believe you are here simply because you have some sympathy for our struggles," Arene said instead, as Muar backed off.

"No," Cato said bluntly. "I'm from the other side of that portal. From Earth — what the System called Ahrusk. The System destroyed entire worlds, killed millions and billions. We removed it from Earth, but until it is gone completely, there is always the threat it will return — and do worse. How can I not see a kinship in what it has done to you?"

Arene growled. What infuriated her the most was that his argument was *persuasive*. After so long dealing with so much trouble, someone who actually seemed to be on her side was far too tempting. Any answer to the problems facing Sydea was worth looking at, even one that was utter madness.

"Why didn't you kill me when you had the chance?" She asked abruptly, since that question still burned at the back of her mind. It was really her own fault she'd been caught in the collapse, but there was no good reason for him to not take advantage, regardless of his goals.

"The victims of the System are not my enemies, even when they think they are," Cato said, which seemed an obscenely lax attitude. Only someone of overwhelming power could afford to keep opponents alive. "And I really do want your cooperation. I didn't think things would get this bad, but even as they are, they'd be worse without you to keep the invaders in line."

"You're an invader, too," Arene snapped, narrowing her eyes at the spokesbeast.

"I prefer to think of myself as a very aggressive guest," Cato demurred, all four of the beasts blinking at her. "I have no desire or need to take over or control Sydea, but I would be a very poor guest indeed if I did not aid my hosts with their problem."

"It would be a lot easier to believe you if you'd sent someone to talk first," Arene said with a scowl. Leese Talis, standing at her sister's shoulder, winced.

"I did," Cato replied, one the beasts chuckling. "We both know how that worked out."

"You can't be thinking of agreeing with this thing!" Muar protested. Arene narrowed her eyes at him, flexing her Essence aura to bear down on him. She didn't generally hold with the attitude that high-rankers often had toward the lower ranks, but Muar was not in her good graces. His interference had clearly been meant to set her against Cato, rather than letting her make up her mind of her own accord.

"You will be silent," she told him, as Dyen stepped outside the tavern and took in the tableau with narrowed eyes. "I don't want to hear a word from *anyone* unless I ask." Dyen just snorted

and crossed his arms, leaning against the building and apparently content to watch for now, while the Talis sisters nodded in disturbing synchronization. She returned her regard to the spokesbeast, though she was quite aware of the other three crouched in the surrounding streets.

“I don’t entirely understand or believe your goals, but for any sort of discussion we need one other person. Planetary Administrator Onswa makes the final decision, but you can believe that you’re going to need something more certain than words to get anyone on your side.” Cato’s suggestion of simply upending reality was almost impossibly insane — but so was what had happened since he arrived.

“That is something I am quite willing to provide,” Cato said, seeming to be unreasonably smug. Arene didn’t like that, but if he was willing to let her bring in other Platinums to even the odds, she wasn’t going to object. If they were forced to fight Cato anyway, she’d much rather do so with the support of the other Platinums.

Maybe then they’d have a chance.

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Initik clicked softly to himself as the last remnants of the invaders dissolved into essence, ignoring the System warnings flashing in his vision. Personally manifesting in the world he governed was frowned upon, though it took far more action than merely nullifying some intruders to accrue any real penalties. Even then, he’d be willing to suffer quite a few demerits to keep out the rot that had been allowed to spread in Sydea.

He slit open a portal back to his personal space, the ascended version of the home he’d been granted when he’d reached Gold, ages and ages ago and now its own tiny world. Orange grasses stretched to a false horizon and tall fruit trees stood sentinel inside a courtyard walled by pale turquoise terracotta. None of it was what the System had provided by default, but he had spent much time on it back when he had first been elevated, mere decades after the System had blessed Uriva.

The full World Deity interface stood as a crystal console, out of place with the surrounding pale colors and smooth shapes. Even if everything else in his System space could be modified, that could not — though he didn’t use it that much. Most World Deities, he’d found, merely worked the controls. Initik preferred to work with the essence flows directly.

He crossed to the console, arranging himself on the standing-stool he preferred to ordinary seats, and opening himself up to the essence flowing within. Initik would, in private, compare manipulating the System to playing an instrument. In private, in part because fools like Marus would be aghast at bypassing the tried-and-true methods for governing worlds, and in part because very few World Deities had ever played an instrument.

It took some time for him to filter out the proper strains and currents of the System that governed Uriva, but he did find what he was looking for. The particular and peculiar essence signature of the invaders was unique enough that he could put it into an extraordinarily dangerous portion of the System, and so bar it from entry. Or rather, the moment any entity of any type whatsoever with the bizarre, not-System-recognized makeup crossed the portal from Sydea into Uriva, the Interface would use his authority and essence reserve to obliterate it.



Such a thing was not cheap. Most World Deities would probably consider it a waste, and leave it to the inhabitants of the planet — but he'd already seen what had happened with Sydea. Initik kept a close eye on his neighbors, to the extent of persuading his own console to show the public status of their planets. Normally there was nothing untoward, but the sudden infestation on Sydea was somewhere past alarming.

Yet it didn't surprise him that something had gone horribly wrong and was not being properly handled. The stewardship exhibited by Marus in particular, and Clan Eln at large, was terrible. Generally abusive, specifically malicious, and universally incompetent, they ran their planets to enrich themselves and their fellow World Deities. Perhaps it was due to Clan Eln being born into the Deity classification, but they didn't seem to understand the value in cultivating the lower ranks, in raising them up through proper quests and challenges.

Initik was all for challenging his people, but pitting a Copper against a Platinum wasn't challenge, it was an execution. Whatever was going on with the not-System quest was far too dangerous to allow in before he knew more. There was a reason he kept an emergency reserve of essence in both his own and the planetary stores.

Once he was certain that the blanket destruction order was in place, he returned to the more conventional functions of his console and began composing messages to the few other World Deities with whom he had any sort of rapport. There weren't many, and Marus certainly wasn't one.

It was a truism that there was nothing new under the sun, and while Initik had not encountered something like what had befallen Sydea in his more than a millennium of stewardship, there were those out there far older, who knew beings even older than that. Someone surely knew what kind of bizarre event this was, why it had suddenly exploded, and what sort of threat it truly posed. Some, like Marus, wouldn't dare think of controlling what the System did on their worlds, but Initik knew the System was a tool to be used. Used, but never trusted.