

Chapter 15 — Escalation

Cato had gotten a lot of people killed for no reason.

If he'd had more time, if he'd been allowed to open discussions and negotiations with those on Haekos, if he'd realized what the Azoth had been intending to do — if and if and if. Instead, people, hundreds of thousands of innocent lives, had been annihilated because of the whims of a high ranker that he should have stopped, but hadn't. Worse, the entire disaster didn't even *matter*. The expansion was still going on, and he didn't even know if the Azoth was *permanently* dead, as Yaniss had heard the highest ranks *could* resurrect under the right circumstances.

"I suppose it's controlled from the core worlds," Leese mused.

"That means we need to get *access* to the core worlds before we can be sure of stopping an expansion," Raine said grimly.

Cato Koh-rel didn't reply, his human frame still staring at the visual feed of where the portal to Haekos had once been. A small bit of him was envious of the version of himself on the other side, as *that* instance would only know that the System was gone and the portal wasn't opening — but that was a small twinge, ruthlessly squashed. That version *also* had to deal with an utterly devastated population and equally devastated planet.

Something he would be addressing himself, and soon. Seventeen hours was not nearly enough time to move the forces he had around Koh-rel into position, and it had just been demonstrated that was a useless gesture anyway. He needed to get into the world itself and shut it down from that end — *after* the apocalypse brought on by the System. The only comfort he could draw from situation was that the people on the other side would be genuinely happy about removing the System from their world, and they would have the memories and artifacts of whatever civilization had been destroyed. There would be *something* to rebuild.

"Things could have gone worse," Leese said, sending a ping through the network to make sure she had his attention. "And now we know some of the consequences when we take over a world."

"We do," Cato replied, taking a long breath and letting it out, finding himself too soul-weary to contest Leese's choice of words. The Haekos version of himself had managed to transmit a lot of data before the portals closed, giving him a first-hand look at System collapse. Landscapes rearranging themselves, swaths of flora and fauna choking and dying in an atmosphere no longer meant for them, or vanishing outright as the System-stuff that composed them collapsed back into base reality. There was even a very clear shot of a Bismuth puffing into nothingness just before the portals closed, demonstrating a very grim reality that they would have to contend with.

He, on the other hand, had a lot of work to do in order to prepare for the portal opening, since he needed to pour as much biomass through the portal as he could. If he wanted to actually save people, he needed to get things going fast, not through the slow and subtle growth he'd used on thousands of worlds. To judge by how things had gone on Earth, the higher ranks would be discouraged from going through until the lower ranks had been given a chance — but with Cato's presence, there was no telling what would happen.

They had to assume that the various System-gods if not the System itself anticipated their interference with the new world. So they wouldn't be trying to liberate Koh-rel directly, even if they could. If the System side was proactive enough with its orbital defenses, like sending people who could hurl rocks and burn anything coming into the atmosphere, it could keep Cato from establishing the sort of supremacy he'd need for delicate operations — or for that matter, what Raine and Leese needed to command ground forces.

Despite knowing he was responsible for the deaths of so many people, he was more determined than ever to bring down the System. And now he knew that simple containment wouldn't be enough; to keep any more worlds from being ruined he would have to go beyond subverting the System's frontier. It was a plague, a fungus-mold that would keep growing no matter what, rerouting around damage and spreading destruction everywhere it touched.

"I don't like the idea of Bismuths vanishing like that," Yaniss mused. She'd not had any role in the actual campaign, for a variety of mostly obvious reasons, but as the resident expert on higher ranks of the System, he'd at least allowed her an observer position. "It implies very *strange* things about my existence."

"No more than a digital mind vanishing when the substrate is damaged. Or an organic mind dissipating if the meat fails," Cato replied, sending checklists off to Raine and Leese, to eventually make their way to versions of him on other worlds. His distributed systems had a lot of computation power between them, however, and it was worth intelligently splitting up certain tasks, even if there wasn't enough divergence between his various selves to generate truly independent analysis.

"I thought you didn't consider the System real," Yaniss objected.

"It's not base reality, but that's not the same thing," Cato said, regarding Yaniss. She was projecting herself from her own private aestivation, as he only allowed her a limited perspective into the ongoing campaign. "The world you live in is your reality, regardless of how it came to be, and the only chauvinism that makes sense is recognizing that base reality always has the final say. But Summer Civilizations or even just aestivations are real enough, and writing off such things as ephemeral dream-experiences creates its own problems."

In truth, Cato was a little surprised Yaniss was still responsive. She seemed exactly the sort to get caught by a behavioral sink and vanish into a virtual world of her own design. Yes, she was insatiably curious and interested in the workings of things, but there were methods to create virtual universes with infinitely unspooling vistas of discovery. Not that he was complaining, since her insight into the System was still useful, and he would prefer to have a consultant rather than a dependent.

"Actually, there have been plenty of virtual worlds like the System," he told Yaniss, as Raine and Leese already knew what he was going to say. "That's not the problem in and of itself. I certainly wouldn't want to live in one, but if someone else wants to that's their business. The issue is the System expands, it assimilates, and it forces everyone into the single mode of existence that it allows."

"Maybe you could negotiate with the Elders in the core worlds?" Yaniss suggested. "If anyone controls the expansion of the System, it's them."

"I can't imagine that working," Cato said. It wasn't that he'd never considered negotiating, it was that he never considered it to be viable. "They've got to be thousands or millions of years old, set in their ways and used to their power, and I have no leverage to keep them from expanding *except* destroying the System. Even if they agreed to it, at some point they would think my attention had slipped and start expanding again. No, better to deal with it permanently the first time."

"That seems very System-like of you," Yaniss observed with amusement. "I thought you didn't like resorting to violence."

"There is a time and a place," Cato told her. He hadn't tried to give her the full introduction to the postbiological society he'd come from, since she still thought of herself as an extension of a Bismuth, but that was easy enough to rectify — so he sent her the full primer and associated databases then and there. Without any background on his civilization it was easy to think that, since Cato scorned the System's paradigm, that he preferred nonviolent solutions in all things. But it was a lesson learned in every age, often painfully, that some things needed to be stamped out with extreme prejudice, and that some people didn't deserve second chances.

But it was also necessary to have a devil's advocate, and for that it was good to have someone like Yaniss around. Raine and Leese were very firmly on his side, and after years in a postbiological milieu — both subjective and objective — the digital versions of themselves were more like Cato than a System native. Yaniss was an entirely different perspective and that never hurt.

Especially since the Sydean Lineage was still incommunicado. The feeds, relayed all the way out to Koh-Rel by FungusNet, showed the Ascension Grounds still domed over, but the real problem was the sisters were deep inside a dungeon or perhaps somewhere else in the System entirely. There were portals, so it could be anything. Not that he was worried about them, not with all the advantages they had, but the Bismuth Ascension was a major step, and one that might change their very nature and personality.

If it were him, he would flatly reject such a thing. For many and varied reasons, even, but the Sydean Lineage had just seen it as part of ranking up. A thing to be cautious of, but no more unreasonable than Skills themselves.

It wasn't Cato's place to stop them, and besides, he needed someone who *could* get into the core worlds, so he could only hope they emerged from the process close enough to themselves. If they decided they were no longer interested in Cato's campaign, he would be left in quite the lurch. Even if one of the other Lineages took up the torch, there was no guarantee they would be any more immune to the System's distortion.

Those thoughts were hardly new, and really it was borrowing trouble to worry about it, but with his state of mind he was more inclined to consider the worst possible outcomes. With the new information, Raine was already spinning up new wargaming simulations, and some of the worst case scenarios were quite bad. Ranging from a full betrayal by some Lineage to gods and high-rankers wrecking planets, all of them could be ruinous if Cato played his cards poorly.

The lack of ability to directly grapple with the System-gods was the largest frustration. He was sure they had the same gripes about the impossibility of engaging with him, assuming they had put some thought into what he was. Both sides were forced into a bizarre proxy war, fighting for

territory rather than each other. To the detriment of those who *lived* in the territory, even if Cato firmly believed they'd be better off without the System, once the dust had settled.

Unfortunately, Koh-rel wasn't likely to much thank him. It didn't seem to have a native species – or its inhabitants had gone extinct a long time ago – and was inhabited by a tripartite coalition of Tornok, Mokrom, and a third Clan that seemed to have a degree of local dominance, a hunched and thick-skinned humanoid race called the Soach. There was the usual degree of infighting on Koh-rel, but they were all very firmly adherents to the System way of doing things.

Cato Koh-rel was not looking forward to trying to untangle that particular mess, but he'd have to. Even if the portal – and Gogri beyond it – was the real target, at some point Koh-rel itself would have to be severed from the System and he'd be the one inheriting that disaster. It might happen as a result of trying to free Gogri, because even if he was retooling a few biofactories, there was only so much mass he could put through a portal. All the rest of the infrastructure could only be used against Koh-rel itself, but whether that was a good idea or not remained to be seen.

"We're not going to have as much materiel as I'd like," Raine said, her tail lashing even in her virtual space as she considered the manufactory visualizations.

"Well, now we know that we should have an invasion force on hand," Leese said meditatively, sending out the message for all their various instances to start production. Designing such an invasion force on a moment's notice was not actually a problem, given the tools and simulations available to the three of them, and with judicious use of framejacking. Most of it was just tweaks to the warframes anyway, slotting in pre-existing packages or augmentations from Cato's databases. But framejacking did not help with the actual creation, which took real time, and overhauling the growth facilities was not a simple matter either.

Two of the massive bioforges were already on the way to Koh-rel high orbit, frantically retooling in-flight, but both he and the sisters really would have preferred *days* of production, not hours. Every other version of them was doing the same, though with less haste, making sure they had sufficient volume of invasion-ready bioweapons. The risk, of course, was that the System-gods could completely no-sell them through their instant eradication method, but Haekos had shown there *were* limits.

Where there were limits, there were exploits.

He already knew that only the biowarfare platform and its associated System-jamming were affected by that particular counter, and while warframes were relatively expensive to produce, he didn't have to make *only* those. Various versions of him worked on different feints and probes to see precisely what counted, loading up megatons of inert carbon and silica with simple lattices of various types. When the time came, he'd be dropping them along with – or ahead of – the real warframes to see if he could exhaust that weapon.

There was not enough time for any real experimentation in advance of the deployment on Koh-rel, as it became obvious very quickly that the System folks were anticipating Cato's interference. Projectiles from the surface began sniping some of his larger observation satellites, the ones close enough to the System's edge that they were effectively expendable. Other versions of himself hastily worked to improve the stealth in other systems, now that his hand was tipped, in hopes that it wouldn't be so obvious how widely he's spread himself.

So far nothing was targeting his larger structures further out, but those also had heavy armor and point defenses, so he didn't bother replying to the provocation. The wargaming simulations had come down firmly on the side of launching a single massive assault on the portal staging area, compared to trying to take and hold a region. Choosing when and where to strike had always been the attacker's advantage, and he wanted to hold onto that as long as possible.

The seventeen hours passed quickly, even with the occasional framejack to solve some minor problem or another. Despite years of preparation and simulation, actually deploying forces into a gravity well always resulted in unforeseen issues. Unlike the System's Skills, which were identical every time, or digital information which could be copied perfectly, analog biology and mechanics required adjustment and maintenance.

One of Cato's spy satellites caught the formation of the staging area an hour before the timer was set to end, which was one of the first things he'd seen done by the *System* rather than by people within it. A space some dozen miles from a town in the southern hemisphere abruptly cleared, trees and creatures vanishing with no fanfare at all to leave a grassy circle a bit over a mile wide. Moments later, System buildings appeared from nowhere, a rough semicircle of white boxes and open, paved pavilions, and the familiar pylons.

He was half-expecting some kind of non-player character to manifest too, just by how incredibly game-like the instantiation was, but of course the System didn't have those — so he felt no compunction about promptly blowing it to hell. Kinetic impactors, launched from one of the still-moving weapons platforms, hammered the area mere minutes after it appeared in a demonstration that was *meant* to be noticeable. It wasn't like he could affect the portal itself — they'd found that out on Earth — so he could just drop an impactor from *Sandkicker*, one of his kiloton-rated railguns. One projectile hitting home every thirty seconds or so would do very well to deny the area to anyone else.

With a four-minute transit time, he wasn't going to be hitting anything *but* a stationary target, and he wasn't able to even *stop* firing without a lot of lag, but finesse wasn't the point. The impactors eradicated the initial System buildings, though his observation satellites spotted one particular pylon that remained undamaged. That one would probably take a particle beam to remove, but in fact Cato didn't dare to even plan on it before he got a version of himself through the portal.

The System answer to his continuous bombardment came some twenty minutes before the timer was up, when a higher rank Tornok-clan appeared with no fanfare directly in the middle of the cratered and blasted staging area and gestured with one hand. A giant matte-white dome appeared, looking as if it were made of rough marble, and the next projectile simply skittered off of it in a physics-defying manner. The silicon rod should have shattered, but instead simply bounced off with the vast majority of its velocity nullified, landing in the ruined foliage outside the dome. The next eight projectiles fared no better — most of them having already been in flight at the time, already on a ballistic trajectory from *Sandkicker* to the planet's surface.

"Not an Azoth I recognize," Yaniss said, though Cato wasn't sure it would have been useful to know who it was. They were far past the point of negotiations being possible.

"And we're still hours out from getting particle beams in place," Raine grumbled.

“Either I’m missing something about the [Crusade] quest or people are getting far more *interesting* quests to lure Azoths this far out,” Leese said, pulling up a virtual version of the quest available to her frame on the planet below. “Rewards variable doesn’t mean too much to me.”

“It means they scale with your rank and contribution,” Yaniss said, sounding a touch impatient. Cato was sure that she’d repeated the same thing to a number of different versions of Raine and Leese across a number of different worlds, as not every piece of information was proliferated. Just the important things. “Everyone can benefit from taking part, if there’s something that actually challenges you.”

“I suppose we should be glad we’re only seeing one or two Azoths,” Cato mused. “And that they’re not interested in dealing with the orbitals.” He was still keeping his most important equipment far enough away from the System edge that maneuvering and point defenses could deal with the majority of attacks, but if an Azoth’s energy output was roughly on the order of *scour a continent* then the right skillset could absolutely give him trouble.

The timer finally completed and Cato flinched, knowing that marked the point of no return for whatever world was on the other side. All the death and destruction, reality being upended, and a war they’d never asked for. But if he got through quickly enough, it might be possible to mitigate some of it.

It took another hour for his forces to come within range, but when they did he started sending them down en masse. Drop pods de-orbited with effectively no attempt to slow down; all the organisms inside were instead cushioned by inert, shock-absorbing gel and the containers simply smashed into the ground at something above terminal velocity. He put several thousand light scout frames down all around the dome, less to assault it as to get precise targeting for the particle beam weapons that were finally within range.

About as expected, the first wave got wiped by divine power, but even if Cato didn’t have a full, planet-scale invasion force, he still had enough for a few *dozen* waves. The first few didn’t have any heavy warframes at all, let alone the special ones meant to launch themselves into orbit via biological Orion drive the moment they could. He only had a few hundred of those, even with the bioforges growing more as fast as he could manage, and while one would be enough to get a foothold, he wanted to send them all. There was no such thing as overkill.

The entrances to the dome were arches spaced about its perimeter, and the first of his scouts to survive showed him that, underneath the dome, the staging point had been reconstituted. In fact, the blasted, cratered landscape had been returned to something approaching normal, as if the bombardment had been completely undone. Which it might have; if the System could mess with entropy, simply rewinding that way was not out of the question.

The Azoth wasn’t inside. There were a few dozen System inhabitants which had presumably teleported there via the Nexus, but the Azoth himself was missing. Ignoring the lower ranks, Cato sent his warframes charging at the portal, aiming to establish a beachhead of some sort, and hopefully get enough perspective for one of his Orion warframes. Instead, what he found was the Azoth waiting on the other end, as the Tornok-clan promptly annihilated his scout.

“Damn.” Cato didn’t have a good answer for that problem. He couldn’t aim a particle-beam through the portal, or rather, even if he could, it’d only hit what could be seen *through* the portal, and the Azoth had made the simple decision to stand off to one side. None of his ground forces

had the punch to deal with someone of that rank, and there was no way to get at the planet except through the portal. More would appear over time, to judge from Earth, but only from elsewhere on this planet leading to that one.

“Someone seems to realize you need the portal,” Yaniss observed, and Cato resisted the urge to glare at her virtual avatar.

“We always figured they’d come to that conclusion eventually,” he said instead. “I’m not sure we have many options.” Even if he crashed the System on Koh-rel, and there were probably more high-rankers arriving to contest that, then that would leave the newly annexed world without any support at all. He needed to get that Azoth away, and keep any other forces from going through, but he didn’t want to break the portal yet.

More, since it was clear that dealing with this annexation would take time, he wanted to prevent the whole entire System from getting involved, especially lower-ranked people who would only die in the crossfire. Even if the System generated more than its fair share of psychopaths, most of the lower ranks were just doing what reality told them and trying to survive. In was in Cato’s best interests to close things out quickly, before the conflict spread.

“Is it worth escalating yet?” Leese asked. They did have plans for operations of all scales, specifically because the portals were such a chokepoint. Wargaming sims really showed the only reasonable way to free up such a chokepoint was to force people to worry more about other parts of the System.

“We’re spread widely enough, and the Sydean Lineage is well outside the target area,” Cato said, drawing up a message to his other selves. It was time to show the System what advanced technology could manage. After Haekos, he would be glad of a reason to give the entire edifice a bloody nose. “Saving an entire civilization is *exactly* what brought me here from Earth. I’m sure they have this world hardened, but that’s fine. I doubt they’ll be ready for fifty planets at once.”

Marus was cautiously optimistic.

The portal had opened and so far it seemed that Cato was not waiting on the other side. Rather, it was obvious he was trying to invade through the very portal the System had provided, which reassured Marus that the being was not quite as all-pervasive as he had seemed for a moment. Whatever Cato’s abilities were, they did not yet seem up to breaching the twin barriers of both god and Azoth protecting the portal itself.

Cato’s forces were also far, *far* less than they’d been at Haekos. Even if Lakor had ultimately been forced to abandon that world, that skirmish had clearly massively depleted what Cato had been building up, and with what they’d learned there it should be possible to thoroughly eradicate him on Koh-rel. A few additions to the [Crusade] turned the mortals attention to the skies, and there was an additional Azoth on the way.

True, Cato seemed to have the capacity to kill Azoths, but it was clear he was unable or unwilling to use that weapon except in dire circumstances. And it was easy enough to avoid with a little bit of intelligence; simply avoid exposure to the sky. That wasn’t always possible,

but ensuring there were shelters was easy enough for a [World Deity], at least compared to the essence cost of other actions.

With the portal open, Marus could have anchored his System Space to Gogri. Oran already had, and while Marus was loath to let the Lundt Clan make movements without Marus to curb him, he wasn't quite ready to make that leap. The main reason was that he had not seen the same weapon that had obliterated the Paladin back on Sydea, and cracked the divine protection the mortal had been given. That implied that Cato had yet to show his full hand, and Marus wasn't going to waste the time and essence to merge in his personal realm until he was more assured of the situation.

"I believe the Azoths will bring the situation under control," Lakor said, studying the scrying windows. He'd actively given a quest for the Azoth to protect the portal — *from the other side*. Which had some obvious dividends, as the relatively paltry assault force Cato had summoned couldn't do anything about the chokepoint. The attempts had gone on for almost two days, but each wave dwindled ever so slightly. A second quest had been given to entice other Azoths to come and remove some of Cato's creations from the skies, though those particular mortals had yet to arrive. "I think Cato has come to the end of his strength regardless."

"Perhaps, but he works in ways we do not yet understand," Initik cautioned. Marus didn't *like* the insect being there, but Initik's suggestions had all been actionable and to the point. He would have preferred if the suggestions had come with the essence to enact them, but Koh-rel was very clearly going to be less of an expense than Haekos. It was unfortunate that they had to spend any essence at all, but the total proceeds from the [Crusade] might make up for it. That was an accounting to be done at a later time, after the crisis was over.

"Maybe Cato has some strange Skills, but even he can't fight a war over multiple worlds," Lakor said dismissively. "With the [Crusade] bringing the might of the System against him, I doubt he can last much longer."

Logically, Marus had to agree, but there was still an unease in his gut, placed there by witnessing the violation of divine mandate. If it had been by another god within the System, that would have been one thing, but Cato had gone at it an entirely different way, and that shock lingered with him. The revelation that things *could* violate the System's dictates, and that which should be absolute was not, made him question other things he had taken for granted.

Suddenly Lakor's interface began wailing at him, warbling as all kinds of alerts began to appear. Initik moved up in a flash, with Mii-Es crowding in on the other side as Lakor wordlessly pulled up the status and scries from his other worlds. Lakor was in charge of eleven total, with Haekos gone, and every single one of them was generating the defense quest, the [Crusade] activating in tandem.

He couldn't help but think that perhaps *they* were the ones who couldn't last much longer.

"Hey! Morvan!" Justin yelled from the shore several miles away, the giant wolf's Azoth-rank physique giving his naturally stentorian voice a truly heroic boost. Morvan scowled at Justin, and gestured in the direction of the massive rolling wave, then down at his home-made surfboard. The storm-tossed ocean of the war-world was as oversized as everything else on

the planet, and that included the waves. They'd kill any normal person, but were only mildly rough for Morvan's Azoth-ranked body.

Having to fight off the occasional sea monster while riding the currents was really just a bonus.

"You can do that later! I've had a message from the gods!"

Morvan grabbed his surfboard and invoked his movement Skill, riding on the boundary between normal space and something else, the aether bringing him to the shore in an instant. Not that anyone from Earth was particularly devout, but the System admins were still important enough to be respected. Or at least, exploited for favors.

"What's up?" Morvan asked, stowing the surfboard in his voluminous Estate, now linked to his spatial bags.

"There's a special quest going on out on the frontier, called a [Crusade]," Justin said. "That's not what's interesting though. Apparently the main thing is that it's gotten *big*, and it's all been sparked by, supposedly, something from outside the System. Called *Cato*."

"You've got to be kidding," Morvan groaned. "That killjoy again? Still? Bad enough that he was trying to ruin our fun back on Earth, but he followed us here, too?"

"I don't know, but it sounded like something we can get paid to look into," Justin snorted, his tail thumping the ground. "Not like anyone here is going to have the first clue what's going on if it really *is* someone from Earth."

"Probably not," Morvan sighed. "Where's Kierstan? We'll have to go investigate. There's probably nothing to worry about if it's just him. He's too damned soft to actually threaten anyone, and there's the technology issue, too, so there aren't going to be any creepy AIs around."

"True," Justin agreed. "He really should just have stayed on Earth if he didn't want to have fun."