

Chapter 9 – Back Down

“This is probably going to feel like someone is sitting on you,” Cato told his passengers as he ran through the final checks on their descent craft. Everyone was strapped into the small compartment, and while it ran against the grain to have biologicals on board with no proper vacuum suits, such suits would become dead weight once the System kicked in. Instead they were all wearing lightweight composite armor, which was both System-compatible and would be useful once they reached the surface.

There were also weapons aboard, stowed on each of the seats. Not guns; rather he had provided spears, knives, and bows. Since Cato didn’t dare try to land within the bounds of a town or settlement, they’d have to brave the wilds for a bit. Nothing high-level, but even the starter areas could be rough. Especially since they’d all be starting out at Copper rank.

In fairness, that was deceptive. He was stronger, faster, and tougher than he looked, and Leese and Raine had been likewise augmented. Even the two who hadn’t taken him on his offer for upgrades had proper combat experience and would be starting out with extremely fine, if mundane, weaponry. Good enough to get them into town, at least.

He half expected someone to make a rude joke based on his comment, but it seemed that kind of humor didn’t translate. Or maybe they just weren’t in the mood. The smooth, metal-and-glass interior of the craft was surely alien to them, and even the manual, muscle-powered controls for their flight down were likely unfamiliar.

“Just get on with it,” Muar said tiredly.

“Tough crowd,” Cato muttered, and triggered the departure. What felt like a giant hand shoved them back into their padded seats as the rail launch system accelerated them out of the moon base, hurling them toward Sydea at a fairly hefty velocity — but opposite the moon’s orbit, so really they were slowing down. Then weightlessness returned, and the only thing that indicated movement for the flesh-and-blood senses was the sight of the moon slowly diminishing behind them.

“We were really on one of the Empress’ Handmaidens,” Raine muttered, and Cato looked back at her with interest.

“Oh? Is there a story behind that name?” For some reason, Raine’s tail curled in on itself with what Cato recognized as the Sydean version of a blush.

“Just what my mother called them.”

“Do tell! It sounds like some of your culture survived the System apocalypse,” Cato said, finding it to be a good sign.

“It was just something she said. The Emperor, the Empress, and her two Handmaidens.” Raine gestured out the window at the local binary, then behind them at the moons. For a moment Cato was confused, before realizing that to unaugmented senses the binary simply looked like one star with a variable brightness. All the stories and legends would have been built from that, which meant it was an old set of names indeed.

“Do you think she might know more?” Cato asked, considering the massive effort of recovering and transcribing any remaining stories and legends of Sydean culture. It had to start somewhere.

“She’s dead,” Leese answered for Raine, the two of them grim-faced.

“I am sorry,” he told them sincerely. Even after heading out to the stars, humanity had yet to find a proper way to deal with loss.

“It was a long time ago,” Raine said, not quite a dismissal, and Cato let it lay.

Even with the speeds they were going it took several hours to reach the edge of System space. The outer hull hissed as it disengaged, cold gas jets pushing it away to let them coast. Cato floated up from his seat and retrieved the presents he’d prepared — little blobs that would register as system invaders and could be easily killed. Just creating them felt distasteful, but if he could exploit the System and drain even the tiniest part of its power for his own purposes, the resources were well spent.

“We’ll be hitting the System soon, this should give you a boost to start,” he said, each little blob in a pot like a plant, with a knife secured to the side.

“I don’t think this thing is going to give any essence,” Dyen scoffed, poking at the balloon-like organism with a claw.

“It won’t, but the quest ought to,” Cato said.

“Isn’t that — wouldn’t the System punish us for exploiting things that way?” Leese asked, uncertain.

“That isn’t something I can speak to,” Cato replied, securing himself at his seat again and checking the instruments. The globe of Sydea was much closer, the white swirls of clouds clearly visible, along with the shapes of islands and continents below. “Although as you can imagine, I am not overly concerned with what the System wants.”

“Easy for you to say — you’ve got power outside it,” Muar pointed out.

“Nobody truly has power within the System, do they? After all, it’s the *System* that allows you to do these things — and can take that ability away.” Cato glanced down at Sydea. “Just about time.”

[Welcome to the System!]

It came without any of the extra announcements that the survivors from Earth had reported. All the rigamarole about Earth being integrated into the System and how it was so much better.

[Name: Cato]

[Species: Neo-human]

[Global Defense Quest! Destroy the Incursion: Recommended Rank: High Gold. Reward: B-tier Skill. Locations (...)]

Cato winced at the letters wrote themselves into his consciousness like an intrusive hardware link. The feel of the System clawing through his brain was only imagined; its magic more subtle

than that. It still made him exceedingly uncomfortable to have his name and species plucked right out of his head like that, and was exactly why the current him had far less knowledge than he preferred. If it could obtain and parse simple facts like name and species, it could grab any other knowledge the frame had.

For all Cato knew, it had his entire mind simulated somewhere in some kind of magical virtual prison. As if he needed another reason to destroy it. Mind-ripping every single one of its beings was pretty high on the level of crimes against sapient life, though so far as Cato could tell it wasn't really analyzing that information. Though maybe when there were hundreds of trillions of beings, some of them on the level of gods, a few people on a border world with some wild ideas was too ridiculous to even notice.

"Go ahead and fulfill the quest," Cato said aloud, and stabbed the plant-flesh-blob in front of him. It promptly turned to goo as it self-destructed, and there was a euphoric rush as the System pushed essence into his body. Cato grimaced. The fact that it literally felt *good* to kill was one of those horrible little things that created the absolute murderous psychopaths that populated the top of the ranks.

[New Rank: High Copper]

Several tokens manifested in front of him, hovering for a moment before he swiped them out of the air. Most of them were copper-colored discs with an abstract glyph, what the System used for currency. Those were essentially irrelevant to him, but one was a shimmering wafer of blue metal with the icon for B-tier. When he touched that one, there was a sort of a buzz similar to a message request, and when he accepted the wafer vanished.

[Choose your B-tier Skill: (...)]

Cato had little interest in any of the Skills. He wasn't planning on staying in this particular frame long enough to engage with the System to that level, and he didn't trust Skills anyway. Like the feeling of essence, their feedback could create all kinds of bad behavior. Everyone's reflexive use of [Appraise], for example. Brains evolved to be lazy to begin with, and with something like [Appraise], very few people stopped to actually look at an object and consider its reality beyond the System's description.

Naturally, Cato chose it for his free Skill, because it was the only thing he actually needed from the System. [Appraise] and its ilk were the equivalent of basic literacy within the System, and replaced things like signs and labeling, so it was something he could hardly do without, even for the smallest portion of time. Nothing would undercut negotiations like appearing to be an unlettered savage.

"High Copper just from that?" Muar muttered to himself, eyes glazed as he considered his System choices. "I bet we could hit Silver in one dungeon run."

Raine just sighed, conjuring a small ball of fire in one hand. Cato had to suppress the urge to tell her to not waste oxygen; he wasn't certain essence fire needed an oxidizer to begin with and they weren't too far from the atmosphere anyway. He was pretty sure the canned air in the back, slowly leaking in through valves to replace what was lost, would more than last until then.

"So now that we're back near Sydea, how are we going to get down?" Leese asked, glancing around the cabin interior. "Is this boat actually going to fly?"

“Not so much fly as fall with grace,” Cato corrected, looking out the reinforced glass. They were almost low enough to have a sense of down, only minutes away from actual atmospheric re-entry. They wouldn’t be hitting at orbital velocity, thanks to their carrier, but it wasn’t exactly slow. “It might be a bit rough to start, though.”

“Just get it over with,” Dyan grumped, as if Cato was deliberately stalling and not waiting for time and gravity to take their course. Though perhaps he did think that was the case; orbital mechanics were not easily grasped, and these four had only recently even realized there was something outside the bounds of the atmosphere.

Cato turned back to the controls and instruments, which were entirely manual. No electronics, nothing more complicated than a few gears and levers. It wasn’t even his design, but rather had been cribbed from hobbyists who had done a lot more investigation into the joys of purely muscle-powered flight than any accredited engineers ever had. Low-tech atmospheric re-entry was its own sort of extreme sport.

The glider began to shudder as it encountered the first wisps of real atmosphere, the sound transmitting through the hull. The wind growled and howled, but they weren’t going fast enough for true re-entry heating. They still began to feel the pull of deceleration, quickly mounting above one standard gravity as the glider aerobraked over one of the planet’s oceans.

[Welcome to White Beach Border –

[Welcome to Far Hills Resource –

[Welcome to Deep Valley Conflict –

Zone names flashed by on the System display, flickering in a kaleidoscopic frenzy as they slowed down from supersonic velocity. The pull of deceleration peaked as they hit properly thick atmosphere, and words of surprise came from behind him as he cranked the wings out and they caught air. In a moment they went from a fall to a proper flight, muscle and wire pulling on ailerons and flaps.

“You’re doing this *without* essence?” Leese asked, muzzle plastered against the cold glass-like synthetic of the window.

“I’m just the pilot,” Cato demurred. “The rest of this works by clever use of tools. I’d be happy to explain it some other time.”

The press of deceleration stabilized into something approximating normal gravity, then reduced again as Cato sent them toward the ground. Their target was one of the outlying towns not too far from where he had entered Sydea, though not the *same* one. The [Southern Jungle Conflict Zone] was too high-level for them, and three of his passengers were known there — and known to be dead, besides. That was a sort of confusion they didn’t need.

He worked the controls as actual weather began: crosswinds, updrafts, and downdrafts sending the glider rocking and swooping. The observation satellites had ensured they weren’t flying into a storm, but the thick soup of planetary gas was always in motion and hard to predict. A quick glance back showed his passengers were not too put out, but Leese and Dyan were gripping the straps that held them into their seats harder than was strictly necessary.

Below them a broad plain crossed with rivers and flecked with lakes swept by, with brilliant spots of more esoteric landmarks. Dungeon entrances, micro-zones, and beast lairs stood out from the greenery, each one more a prison or a zoo for monsters than a natural area. There was no sprawl of agriculture and villages; towns and cities were strictly System affairs, and he wasn't even sure farms existed, or if they did, if they were anything beyond cosmetic.

"Right, we're nearly down," Cato said, matching the landmarks he could see with his satellite imagery. They were within five miles of Sokhal Town, which Cato thought was pretty damn good even if the hobbyists who had designed the gliders could probably have landed in the town center itself.

"Finally," Dyen breathed. "This has been—"

He was interrupted by a sudden impact as a bird half the size of the glider took issue with their presence in its territory. Cato cursed and grabbed one of the pull-cords by his feet as talons rent at the lightweight composite. The glider groaned and shook, rattling him and his passengers as it skewed out of control, completely useless for flight.

"Everyone grab weapons!" He shouted, as a talon punched through the ceiling above him and severed several control lines with a distinct twang and snap. It was an almost redundant command; these were hard people well used to combat, and a little thing like an attack triggered more useful reflexes than panic and screams. Cato yanked the pull-cord, and pulleys embedded in the floor and walls spooled in.

The top half of the glider folded away, the lightweight material collapsing along previously-invisible hinges, and then the latches holding the seats to the floor disengaged. Springs flung the seats into the sudden gale of air, hurling them away from the damaged glider and the bird trying to tear it to pieces, a secondary timer constructed from a second spiral spring ticking away for a few seconds before triggering the parachutes.

[Stormhawk – Copper]

[Skills: Stormbeak, Swift Wing, Claw, Deafening Screech]

For all its size and the damage it had done to the glider, the bird wasn't ranked very highly. Of course, the glider had *no* essence, and had been made out of as simple a set of materials as possible so as to avoid any sudden failures when the System kicked in. The restrictions on purely physical systems were pretty grim.

Cato withdrew the collapsible spear from its pocket on his own seat as the Stormhawk pulled its talons from the remains of the glider and turned on the passengers floating through the air. Not that it was necessary, as a jet of fire smashed into its feathers and drew an ear-piercing squawk. Lightning flashed around its beak as it charged toward Raine in the mindless hyperaggression of System beasts.

He tracked it with his spear, tweaked reflexes and neural acceleration making it simple enough to hurl the spear with a snap, driving it into a muscle group at the base of its wing. Two other spears joined his, from Dyen and Muar. Only Leese didn't join in, but if she had once again decided to become a healer she might not have any ranged options.

[Copper Stormhawk defeated. Essence awarded]

The rush of essence made Cato grimace, nauseated by the direct programming attempt. He had altered his neurology to prevent too much feedback from the essence euphoria, but there was only so much he could do. The System's rewards worked on something other than normal biology.

Some thirty feet above the ground, an open field peppered with small clusters of bright blue flowers, Cato yanked on the clasp that held his straps together. He jumped the rest of the way, his augmented body with the essence reinforcement making the drop no trouble at all. The Sydeans followed suit, thudding to the ground just before the sound of the glider crashing washed over them. A metallic crushing, tearing noise that promised unpleasantness had they remained inside, essence-boosted or not.

"Your clever tools don't seem very good," Maur observed, trekking through the waist-high grass toward the corpse of the Stormhawk to retrieve his spear.

"It was always meant to be disposable," Cato replied, not at all put out by the near-disaster. It was better than having high ranks show up due to the System quest. "We're down, and close to a town, and that's the important part."

"Let's just go," Dyen said, yanking one of the spears from the Stormhawk and turning around, looking for the town in question. His hand instinctively went to his waist, where no doubt he usually kept his System map. Cato had the local area mapped into his brain instead, though it did look far different at ground level compared to the overhead view from orbital reconnaissance.

"That way," Cato pointed, as Raine and Leese fell in. Their party was hardly balanced, but they weren't out gain essence or retrieve resources. All they needed to do was to get to town as fast as possible.

Despite the Zone being fairly low rank, the animals there were still aggressive beyond belief. Normal birds and deer and rodents would flee from potential danger, or at the very least only defend a small area. They wouldn't home in on a group of people and attack headlong as if starving and rabid.

Yet that was what System animals did in a Conflict Zone, and several times they were forced to fend off random beasts as if they were enemy soldiers. It might have been dangerous for unaugmented types, or in System terms low Coppers, but none of the beasts were more than mere inconveniences after the boosts Cato had provided.

A half-hour of rapid march brought them within sight of Sokhal Town's walls, though the low-level conflict zone ran right up to the town's walls. Places outside of System-defined safe areas not only weren't tamed, they couldn't be. Cato had never seen a monster or beast spawn out of nowhere, but there had been an unending stream of the things on Earth — at least, until they'd destroyed the anchors and dropped the essence concentration to nothing so the portals finally closed.

With his augmented eyesight he could see the guards posted at the gate tense as the set of five figures came into sight, relax as their party resolved into Sydeans, and then grow wary again as it became clear one of them *wasn't* a lizard-person. Cato still wasn't entirely certain his decision to look human was the best one to start out, but in the long term he couldn't keep up such a pretense. Best to start as he meant to go on.

The last creature attack came when they were no more than ten paces from the edge of the cropped grass that defined the perimeter of the System town. It was as if someone had set a nest of weasel-things specifically to ambush anyone leaving the town. Cato's current frame didn't have the data, but he made a reminder to ask himself to check whether the System on Earth had been so petty. Admittedly, wiping out uncounted billions of people just to enslave them in a stunted version of reality made any further sins fairly irrelevant.

One of the guards moved to help as four dog-sized mustelids sprang out of nowhere, but a series of spearjabs and a pointed bolt of fire put down the attackers before the Sydean reached them. Leese had her hands up, ready to do something, but hadn't visibly used any Skill. [Appraise] put the guard at mid Silver, and so more a match for any Copper-rank creatures, but of course he'd receive no serious benefit from killing them. The Silver in question looked impressed, although it was likely unusual to see Coppers with the reflexes of Golds.

"Where did you all come from?" The guard beckoned them over to the town gate, his partner watching with a casual hand on a poleaxe. "I know for sure we didn't let you out this morning."

"No, we came from another Zone." Dyen spoke up, taking immediate charge of the situation. He was at least smart enough not to claim they'd come from the sky. "I'm Dyen Lassiron, and I need to send a message to Arene Firewing. Now." Apparently the name meant something to the guard, since he exchanged an uncertain glance with his partner, who nodded in response.

"And your companion here?" The guard tilted his head toward Cato.

"He's what I have to message her *about*." Dyen said, not bothering to hide the scorn in his voice.

"I see," said the guard, though Cato had no idea what implication the Sydean might have taken from Dyen's words. "I'd advise you to stay with your group," he said, speaking directly to Cato the first time. "We've been having trouble with outworlders of late."

"I completely understand," Cato reassured the guard, who didn't take the pronouncement with any relief. After another hard look at Cato, the gate swung open and let them inside.

All System towns were essentially the same. Straight streets and boxes for buildings, often without any real decoration. From what he understood, decoration cost extra, and the closer a town was to plain white the more impoverished it truly was. Sokhal Town was almost entirely unadorned, and there was an air of disrepair despite the cleanliness and light of the System-provided buildings.

The few people out on the street looked harried and ragged around the eyes, even if they were dressed in perfectly acceptable clothing and armor. There was a quiet air of desperation, of despair, the people hunched under the weight of too many expectations and a hopeless future. Cato had seen that attitude among refugees of various stripes — though by the time the postbiologicals got down to Earth, nobody who might have been a refugee was left.

He didn't mind the hostile glances sent his way. Cato wasn't there to be loved, or to be friends. What mattered was convincing people to work with him instead of against him. Specifically, the high-rankers, since the pragmatic fact was that personal power was all that mattered under the System. There were no merchants or industrial moguls, no politicians or representatives. Only rank.

Sokhal Town was small enough that the System Nexus was barely even a walk, the central building plainly visible even from the gate. That building was by far the tallest building anyway, the characteristic belltower-like decoration at the top rising into the sky over all the other bland boxy buildings. The sight of it set him on edge, though the System was hardly more present there than anywhere else.

Dyen shoved the door open and strode inside, followed by the rest of them, with Muar bringing up the rear behind Cato. He wasn't certain how Dyen intended to send a message, but he wasn't fully conversant with all the aspects of System. None of the towns on earth had managed to get too advanced, so if there was any kind of mail infrastructure he didn't know how it worked.

Aside from Dyen, the Sydeans made a straight line over to the crystalline obelisk on one side, getting their System Maps and some other tokens. Seeing the rolls of pseudo-paper and metal badges rendered out of nothing like something from a virtual environment was genuinely strange, and made him want to double-check his own environment commands. Nothing happened of course, since the frame he was in didn't have those capabilities and this wasn't a virtual space, but he still felt out of place.

Raine and Leese fell into a quiet discussion about ranking up, excluding a grim and dour Muar. Dyen busied himself at a different crystal pedestal, recording a message in an undertone. Cato could hear it, of course, but there was nothing untoward in what Dyen said. Just mentioning the run-in with the Platinums and a need to discuss his wife. Frankly it was more circumspect than Cato would have thought, considering Dyen's continuously simmering anger.

"Now we wait," Dyen said, crossing over to where they stood and following the other Sydean's lead in retrieving his System map and tokens.

"How long is it going to take?" Leese asked, nervously folding and refolding her System map. "I'm not really looking forward to explaining how we're still alive to one of the Platinums."

"I should be able to do most of the explaining," Cato assured her. "Now, proof might be a little trickier, but I would hope the very fact that you *are* coming back from the dead will be suggestive."

"Assuming they know you're dead," Dyen said. "Hardly a guarantee."

"We were Gold," Muar said, with a glare at Cato. "They'd know."

Before they could begin squabbling, a flare of fire shone through the windows, one that Cato knew well. Whatever mechanism Dyen had used, it had gotten the Platinum's attention. A moment later the door burst open as the orange-and-red scaled flame lady rushed into the room.

[Arene Flamewing – Platinum]

"Where is Kiya?" She demanded, ignoring all of them to focus on Dyen.

"My wife is dead," Dyen said, his voice harsh and dark. "The reason for that, and the reason I am still here, lies with that one." He pointed in Cato's direction. Arene turned blazing eyes his way.

“Who are you?” She demanded, voice thundering with Platinum-rank force.

“He’s the one responsible for the defense quest,” Muar said quickly, before Cato could properly reply. “He’s from outside the System.”

“You are?” Arene’s eyes narrowed, her posture shifting to the defensive.

“Yes, but—”

That was as far as he got before Arene’s hand swept up, glowing with a ball of incandescent fury. Cato had a moment to resign himself to doing things the hard way before the world went up in fire.

“Why did you do that?” Raine blurted, as the charred half-corpse toppled to the floor. She and Leese huddled together by instinct, recognizing the danger of an irritated high-ranker, even in bodies that felt like they were Silver or even Gold. While Raine had always idolized Arene, and had modeled her own build after the Platinum, meeting her in the flesh was not the opportunity she had always hoped.

“Eliminating the threat.” Arene turned those glowing eyes on them, no doubt using [Appraise]. “How are *you* alive, too?”

“Honored Platinum, we are alive through Cato’s efforts,” Leese replied, tilting her head toward the remains on the floor. She kept her movements small and circumspect, so as not to invite misunderstanding and retaliation. “His story is complex and I admit I do not understand it all. He said he actually wants to help us.”

“*Help* us?” Arene laughed derisively, making a rude gesture in the direction of the smoldering remains. “It’s been a disaster here ever since that quest started!”

“If I may, Honored Platinum,” Raine started, and Arene turned to her. “Cato says he has proof that the System has been deliberately set up to harm our people and —”

“As if it can possibly be believed,” Muar interrupted with a snort. “That thing *killed* us! It’s from outside the System! Even if it did bring us back somehow, that means nothing. High level healing can do the same.”

“Not the way he did it,” Leese disagreed, frowning at Muar. If there was any doubt about whether Muar was on their side anymore, it was gone. He could have gotten them *all* killed, and Cato probably wouldn’t have been able to bring them back again. “Besides, with what we’ve seen, there’s no way he’s actually dead.”

“I got essence from the kill,” Arene said dryly, glancing between them. “He’s definitely dead.”

“There’s more than one of him,” Dyen put in, tail flicking back and forth as he sneered down at the remains. “Or something like that. I’ve seen it myself.”

“Honored Platinum, I think it would be best if you heard our story out,” Leese ventured.

“I should.” Arene seemed to relax ever so slightly, the dangerous aura about her withdrawing just a touch, as she flicked out a lash of flame to pull the remains from the System Nexus floor. She flitted over to the redemption stone almost faster than the eye could see, and after a

moment the charred body vanished. The smeared charcoal on the floor vanished with it as Arene sighed and scrubbed at her muzzle.

“Come on, then,” she said, and beckoned for them to follow her out of the System Nexus. “I need a drink.”

Small as Sokhal Town was, it still had the requisite System buildings, including a tavern for them to get some proper drinks. Arene paid for their tab without asking, which was fortunate given that they didn't have many copper tokens and the price for ordinary ale was absolutely outrageous. There was only a trio in the corner when they arrived, who promptly pretended not to exist as Arene entered the building.

“Now, tell me what this is all about, grand-nephew,” Arene said, sweeping her gaze over them and then settling on Dyen. “I want to get rid of this ridiculous quest.” Dyen started his story with a terse overview of his death at the hands of offworld Platinums and continuing through meeting Cato outside the System. Raine added some details of her own, finding it strangely easy to organize her thoughts in the new body, but they'd been talking for no more than a few minutes when Arene jolted and groaned.

“I guess you were right,” Arene said grimly. “The quest...”

Confused, Raine pulled up her System interface and checked the defense quest. What had been no more than a dozen zones had ballooned to three times that much. Even as she watched, names were added on, scrolling out to hundreds of zones. Then hundreds more, the names tacking on faster than she could read them. Dyen cursed softly, and even Leese muttered something under her breath.

Raine really hoped Cato was still willing to talk.