

Chapter 13 — Flashpoint

“Oh, heck.”

Cato’s human frame felt like he’d been punched in the gut when he saw a full ten percent of his forces vaporized in a single instant. It was exactly the same thing that had happened on Uriva, and while he’d always known such a response was possible he’d hoped that the technique was limited. After all, the few times he’d needed to use System-jamming biotechnology, it hadn’t provoked that level of response.

He *had* planned for it though, so he simply slapped metaphorical buttons to cancel the deployment of all the bioweaponry still in distant orbit. There was nothing he could do about the forces on ballistic trajectories down into the atmosphere, and he’d lose another ten percent just from that. Not that they were *deaths*, but that was all biomass that couldn’t be used in the future. Worse, he’d have to deal with things in a far more heavy-handed manner. He couldn’t just leave a new planet to the System’s apocalyptic arrival. Billions of lives might be on the line.

Yet as the next wave fell into the atmosphere, nothing happened. The warframes and support biologics passed into System territory unmolested and intact. He stared for a moment, then scrambled to un-cancel the fleet movements he’d just canceled, because if they were going to give him an opening he’d take it.

“I wonder if that’s a limitation or they just think it’s not worth doing again,” Raine mused. In fact, most of the forces that had been destroyed were ones under her control. “How long is the cooldown on divine Skills like that? Or maybe it’s a cost issue? It’s not like divine intervention is common.”

“Exceedingly rare, in fact,” Yaniss said. This version of her was being allowed to watch what was going on — but Cato had restricted her use of the fungal radio network for the moment. Not only because he needed all that bandwidth himself, but also because he didn’t quite trust her commitment to operational security. “They usually work through divine classes and quests.”

They were all sharing a compound reality, part virtual and part real, so he could see her body language easily enough as she ruffled her feathers in thought. She didn’t seem too put out by the restrictions, certainly less than Cato was. While bandwidth wasn’t exactly *sustenance* for digital life, it was damned close and cutting people off even for good reason disturbed him in ways that were difficult to articulate. But he didn’t have infinite resources and infinite goodwill to play with, so he had to put restrictions in someplace.

“This isn’t the usual situation though,” Cato sighed. “I’m an outside threat, so there’s the possibility that whatever rules they play by will be suspended. Essence is weird and I might have to worry about running up against nearly infinite energy. I know each planet is separate, so it might not be that bad, but the worst case scenario was really bad.” The energies he was contemplating scaled all the way up to planet-cracking levels, and he really did not want to face the awful possibility of needing to kill millions of innocents on some world to save billions of innocents in the long run, in the remainder of the System and whatever worlds it targeted in the future.

“I think you’re putting too much trust in your simulations,” Raine said bluntly. “Even if it *might* be that you can stop entropy with enough essence, I’ve never seen anything even measuring up to what *you* do. Maybe there’s something in the inner or core worlds, but now that I’m out of it — the gods seem like administrators. They can do a *lot*, but they aren’t omnipotent.”

“If I *can* exhaust their resources that would make things so much easier for me,” Cato acknowledged, watching the warframes descend through the atmosphere of Haekos toward their hundreds of targets.

“Even if they have infinite resources, it doesn’t seem to be infinite everywhere. We’ve already shown that. Essence may well make more of itself, and the System might be able to just *remove matter from existence* —” Cato growled, surprising himself with how much such a thing bothered him and needing a moment to suppress his outrage. “Slow attrition doesn’t work. But it looks like I can *scale* faster than the System. Certainly I can print a warform faster than it takes to go from Copper to Silver to Gold, or build a particle beam faster than the System can elevate a Bismuth.”

“Then we move to operations based on overwhelming mass,” Raine half-asked, and Cato nodded agreement.

“We’ll shift the simulations in that direction, figure out ways to make them spend their energy on dead mass. And I’ll crank the factories all the way up.”

The original deployment simulations had anticipated upwards of ninety percent losses, and the new ones were looking even worse. But in the end, it was merely mass, and he had a *lot* of that to throw at problems. They couldn’t replace it all instantly, but the extraction operations spread throughout the star system were supplying raw materials to the bioforges sitting in a distant orbit beyond the moon. He was getting several thousand tons per day, though unfortunately they didn’t have enough *time* for that sort of supply chain to really come into its own. There was less than sixty hours remaining, and every single minute of that needed to be targeted at Haekos’ System.

If the gods saw fit to leave the defenses to the individuals, that was fine with him. He’d take that mistake, since they didn’t seem to be hardening Cato’s true targets, either out of ignorance or inability. The longer they took to address that deficiency, the more effective he could be and the longer he’d have to evolve strategies and counter-strategies. At the same time, the gods were the ones who were ultimately responsible and deserved to bear the brunt of Cato’s efforts, while all the folks on the ground were victims of the apparatus. That stuck him with trying to prosecute as nonlethal a war as he could manage, something that made every objective far more difficult than it would be otherwise.

He took command of one of the backup warframes aimed at the capital city, one of the five ton models that was more capable of getting inside the System buildings. The spun-graphene drogue chute anchored directly to the warframe’s bones caught the air, slowing him down just enough to avoid injury before specialized enzymes severed those connections to let him freefall the remaining distance.

The city below was hardly unaware of the deluge from the sky; beyond the standard defense quest there was some sort of *Crusade* quest, a word that translated perfectly between System-speak and Cato’s native tongue. Fortunately, the lower ranks — Copper, Silver, and Gold —

didn't pose too much threat to the actual war-machines. Leese had spent the time to come up with a number of nonlethal toxins appropriate for the Haekos natives in addition to the other discombobulators, ones that would still apply to some extent at the lower ranks, and Raine had free reign to apply them en masse.

Years ago he might have worried about letting someone raised in the System have the keys to hundreds of thousands of killing machines, simply because their instincts were far more ruthless. It was not an insult to say they had been raised in a world where killing was not only expected, it was *required*, so their perspective on appropriate force was necessarily askew from his. But time and distance from that life had given Cato confidence in their judgement — in fact, it might be better than his in some instances, as the sisters were better able to appraise the true threat of people.

Skills lashed out from the city below, bolts and beams in a variety of colors, some splashing against the deluge of bioengineered, fullerene-laced armor, others actually punching through. Far above, computronium ran combat algorithms on the thousands of sensor feeds, and the few System types with properly dangerous Skills were preferentially targeted. For most of them he had the right biological analysis to instantly paralyze or render insensate anyone of lower rank, but even for those he didn't, he had the sheer weight of biomatter to render problematic individuals helpless in a System-jamming cocoon.

Even where he didn't have clever solutions, the new doctrine of overwhelming mass meant that he could drown the actions of any low rank individual in the tide of bodies. He was sure it was a horror show from the ground, with thousands of creatures falling from the sky, every single one of which was wholly unknown. To those on the ground, every single one of those refused to be classified under their known reality, the simple reflex action of [Appraise] failing to give any useful information.

Just before impact, one of the higher ranks below managed to damage the warframe he'd chosen to the extent that he couldn't use it, and he hopped to a different one, somewhat annoyed that random sniping had managed to target his frame in particular. Seconds later, the brand-new frame smashed down onto the Nexus of the capital city, in the middle of a number of Gold-rank defenders.

Immediately he, and all the other nearby warframes, emitted the tones that he'd determined were the most damaging psychologically. As he'd hoped, all the Haekos natives recoiled, struck by an attack completely ungoverned by the System. After all, while the sounds were horribly and viscerally disturbing, they did no damage. The stinkbombs could wait for a moment, since he needed to drive the Platinum *out* of his office.

Raine and the oversight algorithms located the exterior door on the Nexus tower, and he leapt the short distance, claws first. Five tons of bioweapon backing monomolecular blades shredded the door — which still was tougher than it should have been, thanks to the System — and Cato burst into an office that looked remarkably like the one back on Sydea. The decorations were different, but certain aspects seemed to be standard, including the interface.

The Planetary Administrator reacted the moment Cato appeared, a narrow beam of water extending from his fingertip and punching straight through the warframe. It destroyed five separate organs and two sub-brains, but such things weren't actually lethal for the bioweapons and he was still able to spit small, gel-like ampoules from the warframe's tendrils. They didn't

hit the Platinum, but they weren't aimed at him. Instead, they impacted the walls and floor and burst, releasing a specially formulated, aerosolized chemical at a temperature slightly above ambient.

It was invisible in the common wavelengths, but quite opaque at the proper infrared, boiling out like smoke and flooding the room. It would take time to *truly* suffuse the office, but like some of the incredibly nasty chemicals humanity had worked with, it only took a trace amount to have an effect. Stochastic diffusion meant that those traces spread with baffling speed, and only a moment after the stinkbombs popped the Haekos-clan Platinum choked and groaned, toothy face twisting in a grimace of unrivaled disgust.

"By the gods, what — *hurk!*" The man could barely keep his feet, and Cato backed the warframe away from the door to give the Platinum an avenue to escape the tainted room. A fraction of a second later, the poor guy shot out of the door at supersonic speed, looking green around the gills. An aphorism that was a bit more literal than usual, given their physiology. He made it maybe a hundred feet or so before losing his lunch.

As awful as the experience seemed, it was better than being forced to actually kill the guy. Cato sent another warframe into the office, one with the mindripper tools. The mindripper hardware was mostly composed of several hundred simple false minds with a single essence perception Skill each, awarded from abusing the defense quest, all hooked up to a high bandwidth link to orbit.

If the Interface were strictly a computer, getting it to respond without proper authorization would have been impossible. All he would have been able to map would be the authentication protocols. But Interfaces were active, aware, alert, and it certainly was aware of a few hundred pounds of System-defying biomatter flopping down on top of it. He rattled off half a hundred orders that he'd gotten from Onswa in quick succession — not that he expected it to actually respond to him, but the more data he forced it to process, the better.

Leaving the process running, he skipped to another warframe, one that had landed closer to where the Platinum was still dry-heaving outside the office. It had been maybe three seconds since he'd launched the stink attack, and half of the biowarfare frames were still falling from the sky. A silver dome suddenly snapped into existence, but it didn't affect any of his warframes; presumably, it was an anti-monster defense and Cato's creations were not monsters.

"Platinum Sekhel!" He shouted over the sound of so many Skills being used at once. Most people nearby were still focused on the sky, or the warframes nearest them, but he wanted to at least say something before one of the defenders tried sniping his chosen frame. "I am not here to harm you or yours, but I *cannot* allow the portal to Gogri to open."

Sekhel straightened, spitting once more and taking a deep breath, the amphibious native half-glaring, half-staring at Cato's frame. Cato didn't really expect much; he hadn't had the time to make peaceful contact or lay any groundwork. What he wasn't expecting was for Sekhel to simply gesture incredulously around at the combat raging all over the city — which was fair enough.

"I'm not actually *hurting* anyone," he said, though it probably didn't look that way, with some of the Coppers and Silvers cocooned in system-jamming biomatter already. "Unfortunately you've

gotten caught in a war, but after it's all over I'll need you to take back control." The middle of a fight was no time to be reasoning with the Platinum, but better to plant the seeds early.

"I'd never work with a demon!" Sekhel spat, and flicked his webbed hands. A spiral thread of water lashed out a net of corroding liquid, and Cato abandoned the warframe as it was diced into pieces. Having the luxury of disposable bodies made dealing with intractable System folk so much easier, but Sekhel's words bothered Cato.

He had never maintained the illusion that he could peacefully convert every – or even any – world within the System, but he did have to somehow manage to deal with the world *after* he cut them off. Now that he was faced with severing a world where the primary powers were going to be entirely hostile to him, he didn't know what he was going to do. People who fully believed that they were ruled by some foreign demon would, entirely reasonably, do all in their power to resist. Up to and including destroying infrastructure meant to keep them alive.

Killing their god wasn't going to help with that, either. Clearly the Sydean version of himself had managed it, which meant the plan roughly worked. Destroy enough System infrastructure and the System-god was forced to manifest to personally protect the last few anchors; at least, that was what had happened on Earth. He had particle beams ready and waiting for such an eventuality, though he actually intended to break the city anchors earlier and leave some easily-evacuated towns as the bait anchors. The collateral damage from a particle beam weapon was not kind to anything near the impact site.

Unfortunately, it seemed he was the only one concerned about collateral damage. Already offworlders were pouring through the portals, and none of them showed any interest in working with the natives. A dark-furred, almost bestial pseudo-canine Platinum emerged from the Nexus, glanced around, and started to unleash waves of barbed chain. In a matter of moments it had tangled everything within a hundred feet, digging into warframe and defender alike and painting the streets with the blood Cato had been trying to avoid spilling.

Cato flagged it for Raine and the combat algorithms, but they were way ahead of him. A number of warframes tried to engage the Platinum with their light-gas guns, but that was mostly just a distraction. The sudden assault kept the Platinum pinned down, staying in the same place long enough for a low-yield rail flechette to thunder down from the sky, a full thirty seconds later. It wasn't the megaton-styled yields he'd used to deal with Bismuths, but the saturation fire was enough to send deafening shockwaves through the city — and leave very little remaining of the intruding Platinum.

Unfortunately, he very much doubted anyone would recognize exactly why that particular individual had deserved a lethal response, not in the middle of a pitched battle. One that he was slowly winning, though one he was willing to *lose* if it was necessary to preserve the life of innocents — including the Interface. It was difficult *not* to be the victor when he had ten times the mass of his opponents in weaponry, but no high ranks had yet arrived. Hopefully he could move fast enough that very few of them would.

"Cato has appeared on Haekos."

Initik regarded Mii-Es, reflecting that this was the first time anyone had come to *him* with news — at the very least the first time in the past several hundred years. It was certainly the first time

anyone else seemed to be interested in Cato. Apparently Mii-Es had taken the warning more seriously than he'd first thought.

"That is ill news indeed," Initik said, summoning a seat and refreshment for Mii-Es with a wave of his hand. He was almost tempted to turn the weather of his personal space stormy to match his mood, but it was just a passing fancy. "How did you find out?"

"A [Crusade] was called in this entire area," Mii-Es replied, conjuring a map of System Space and waving her hand at a segment not too far distant from his own — but still quite a few nodes distant. Initik knew that the [Crusade] had to stem from *his* quest to Muar, yet he hadn't been included in the call. Perhaps that was for the best, as he wouldn't wish to send *his* people into the absolute disaster Haekos was certain to be.

"Ah," Initik said, flexing his gripping claws. "Unfortunately, I have no contacts in that area."

"Actually, I didn't even hear of it from other deities," Mii-Es admitted. "I've been keeping a close eye on my traitorous little bird, and *she* knew of it right away."

Initik grunted. Personally he would have removed the Bismuth himself, and immediately, rules be damned. He used essence directly so much that he didn't need access to all of his Deity perks at all times, though he believed a [Crusade] did loosen the restrictions somewhat. But keeping her under surveillance and finding out more about Cato's activities was an acceptable alternative.

"There's something even more interesting, darling," Mii-Es said, eyes sparkling as she sipped from the narrow, fluted spout of her glass. "Your friend Marus Eln is in attendance — apparently he is to take control of the new world the System is connecting there."

"Surely not coincidence," Initik said, though he was not referring to Marus. Cato had come from without the System, and despite the glimpses of his presence here and there, Initik had not seen or heard of more than that. That their enemy had revealed himself at the site of a new world was certainly not coincidence, though Initik couldn't say what precisely that connection meant. "Perhaps I should visit."

"The clans aren't going to like you intruding on their business," Mii-Es warned him. "Even if they are doing poorly. *Especiallly* if they are doing poorly."

"I have weathered their displeasure before," Initik said dryly. None of them had enough spine to actually try to *fight* him, and since he lacked interests outside his own world there was very little pressure they could apply. "I would far rather that I offer *some* advice than leave it to people like Marus Eln."

"Why, one might think you didn't believe in your fellow deities!" Mii-es tittered, an orange tongue flicking out to lick a drop of liquor from her beak. "By all means, let us see how things are proceeding," she said, shamelessly inviting herself along. Initik didn't mind; despite her demeanor Mii-Es was not actually a fool. She had managed to almost fight him to a draw, and while he had of course won in the end, it showed she was more formidable than most. She might possibly have something useful to contribute.

Initik rose and conjured an exit to the in-between space of the System, the vast network that connected World Deities both to each other and to the mortal plane. Haekos was not a world he was immediately familiar with, but his Interface gave him the precise location in the vast panoply

of the System's sprawl. He stepped into the currents of essence that flowed between them, hopping across all the dozens of worlds between Uriva and Haekos.

He fetched up at a System Space that was very clearly of Clan Eln, with the tasteless, pristine opulence that was favored in the core worlds. While it was tempting to simply bypass the protections, he wanted to keep his presence legitimate — and he was well aware of Mii-Es behind him, who would no doubt be *quite* interested in his techniques. He certainly didn't want to share that sort of thing with a gossip like her.

Instead he politely notified the owner of the space he was there and only moments later was let into what could best be described as a war room. The walls were filled with scrying images of various parts of the planet, with three deities gathered around an Interface projection of the essence flow on the planet. A list of the highest-ranked mortals hung unsupported off to one side, flickering as new forces arrive and departed. Or were killed.

"You!?" Marus Eln stared at Initik, then shook his head. "Of course it's you. I hope you have something useful to contribute."

"Check the moon," Initik responded promptly, slipping into fast-time to take in all that was going on. If what had happened on Sydea was alarming, Haekos was downright apocalyptic. There were tens of thousands of Cato-creatures on the ground, more arriving from the air, and already a number of dungeons had been destroyed.

Eliminating a dungeon was not generally done, given the heavy penalties levied on anyone who did so. But it did happen on occasion when a dungeon was particularly problematic or useless, in hopes that the next one would be an improvement. Wholesale annihilation was new, and it clearly wasn't simply opportune. With such deliberate targeting, Initik had to conclude Cato either had some personal grudge, or he *needed* to eliminate the dungeons. Of the two, he thought the latter was more likely.

"Suspend your dungeons," he added, while the other Eln scrambled to redirect one of the scrying views to the moon above. The silvery-blue orb didn't show any signs of the rot that characterized Cato's presence — but then, his own moons hadn't either, as Cato had built them on the far side. Without stretching the System out there, even gods couldn't tell if there was some infestation. There *were* swarms of lights near the moon, but they were merely one tiny part of what seemed to be a complete englobement.

"Do my what?" The other Eln — Lakor, according to [Appraise] — blinked at Initik, and he had to wonder what kind of training the Eln clan actually give. Though admittedly, he couldn't think of a single *normal* reason to suspend dungeons, and had only come across the option while digging through his Interface to understand the essence flows better. Instead of answering, Initik conjured a memory crystal with the instructions and flipped it to the deity.

Shutting down dungeon portals was a strictly temporary measure. They were an essential part of the massive essence management system of each world, both creating and regulating essence, and so the costs for sequestering them were fairly usurious. But it might at least stymie Cato's push, and give them more time. Time to come up with better solutions, ones that didn't involve the destruction of half the planet.

The third deity, the crustacean-like Lundt Clan member who had remained so far silent, was quicker on the uptake. He brought up the list of dungeons with his own Interface, displaying

how many had already been destroyed as wordless evidence of what Initik was advising. Even if they managed to fend Cato off, it would take quite a while for the planet to recover.

“Very well, fine,” Lakor Eln said, and turned to his Interface, clumsily going through the steps required to suspend the dungeons. Initik itched to do it himself, but this was not his System Space. Unless he was willing to show more cards than he preferred, he wasn’t capable of using another deity’s Interface.

“This is more than I expected, even with your warnings,” Mii-Es murmured, her voice sounding in Initik’s ears despite the fact that she’d drifted forward to examine the various scries, lingering especially on the one with many tiny dots drifting across the face of the moon. “How was he able to summon all these creatures?” Her voice was louder that time, projected to everyone. “Only the core world deities would have the essence for this spread of forces.”

“Whatever Cato is, it seems best to treat him exactly like he *is* a core deity,” Initik said grimly. “Perhaps something even more dangerous. He has power I don’t quite understand, and dare not underestimate.” Lakor sneered at that, but Marus smacked his tail against the ground in agreement.

“Somehow he can hide his essence,” Marus said. “Or he uses some different version of essence we’re not used to. Either way he’s far more powerful than it may seem. And he’s already powerful enough to blanket the planet with creatures.”

“So what?” Lakor scoffed. “It’s impressive, I’ll grant you, but they’re not *doing* much.”

“Do you have *any* idea how hard it is to fight *non-lethally*?” Mii-Es demanded, waving at the scrying images. “He’s *subduing* most of these mortals! Not all of them, but he’s taken *thousands* prisoner. Tens of thousands!”

“Tens of thousands of Coppers and Silvers,” Lakor said dismissively, but the Lundt Clan shook his carapaced head slowly.

“They’re more fragile, easier to damage,” he said, voice a grinding rumble. “If anything, being able to gauge force so precisely is more impressive.”

“The question is why he’s holding back.” Initik studied the scrying displays, eyes flicking from one to the other, trying to find something useful among all the noise. Even if gods could see anything they wished, that hardly helped when there was no telling *where* they should look. “There!” He pointed to one of the screens, where it seemed someone was actually talking. For once, Lakor wasn’t utterly useless and enlarged it, bringing out its sound.

“—cannot allow the portal to Gogri to open.” The Cato beast told the Silver in question, who looked to be protecting some Platinum’s estate. “*Preferably without too much collateral damage. Unfortunately, it seems my hand has been forced.*”

“That explains—” Initik started, then stopped again as the essence flows all over Haekos writhed and trembled. The Nexus for over two thirds of all the cities and towns had been destroyed, in a single instant, throwing the planet’s economy and dynamics into chaos. Some of the scrying windows fuzzed out, the constructs disrupted by the sudden disorder. The strain trebled the cost of holding the dungeons closed, tremendously cutting into the time they had to counter Cato’s strategy.

Though in truth it might already be too late. It was obvious that once Cato got a foothold he was incredibly tenacious, and Initik shuddered to think what might have happened to Uriva if Cato had been allowed to run free. He'd never seen the results of having so much infrastructure destroyed, and wasn't certain how close he wanted to be if it got much worse.

"Why is he so focused on this?" Lakor complained, touching his Interface and purging Cato's forces from the towns with an intact Nexus. Initik recognized his own technique, so at least Marus had learned *something* from Sydea. "It's just going to be some barbaric waste of a planet! Why is he ruining Haekos for it?"

"It's his *own* [Crusade]," Initik replied, even though the question was clearly rhetorical. "He's stated that his goal is to bring down the System. Any and every world is a target if that's true, but I admit I don't quite understand why this is what made him show his hand." That gap in understanding made Initik uneasy, for if he didn't understand his enemy's motives, he could never be certain of victory. The System had saved his people, and so seeing someone so dead set against it was difficult to credit.

"Spending all those resources on a fringe world, though?" Lakor grumbled, bringing up more scrying images. "The clan gave us extra essence but at some point it just won't be worth hanging onto a single world like this."

Initik was almost shocked, but then, it was true that Clan Eln had hundreds of worlds. Losing one was more of a blow to the ego than to their actual power, and bleeding Cato's forces or pushing him to reveal his tactics might be worth it. Initik doubted that Lakos or Marus or, for the matter, Clan Eln and Clan Lundt were willing to commit the sort of resources it'd take to *kill* Cato on Haekos, and even if they did, it might well destroy the planet.

"Besides which, I don't believe it's about the annexation," Lakor said. "It's not like taking Haekos would actually stop it."