

Chapter 21 — System Crash

Raine dashed toward the teleportation pylon as they cleared the portal at a dead run, close on Leese's tail as some of their pursuers emerged from the portal behind them. She glanced back, to count how many of the Golds and Silvers had shoved their way through now that the barrier was gone, only to see the portal turn transparent, cutting off the flow of people. But she had no time to consider it further, as ahead of her Leese slapped her hand against the pylon and vanished. Raine followed suit.

She selected a destination at random from the list, the room changing around her as the tokens were deducted from her wallet. Then she repeated the process three times more, hoping to throw off any pursuers before she took a moment to check the available destinations closely. The two of them had been to Urvan once before, the first time they had reached Gold, so they still remembered some of the towns.

The two of them had split up to escape their pursuers, mostly because they couldn't coordinate such a rapid hop between random towns, but they were aiming to meet up at [Iskhal Town], out near the [Grand River Conflict Zone]. It was night there, the System Nexus windows dark and only the glow of the crystals in the ceiling illuminating the room.

She was the only one in the room, and worry twisted the tip of her tail until Leese popped into existence a moment later. Raine sighed in relief and the two of them hurried outside, just in case someone *had* managed to track them through their random jaunts. She knew that there were some specialized Skills that could do it, but only a few people had made it through the portal. By the time anyone caught up to the two of them, they would be out in the wilderness.

"The portal shut down," Raine said, as the two of them emerged into a cold, dry night. The sky was completely unlike Sydea's, with the narrow band of stars stretching east to west nearly drowned out by a long chain of moons from north to south. She hadn't thought too much of it the first time that she'd been there, but with Cato's instructions it took on a far different importance.

"We aren't going to be going back," Leese replied, following Raine's thoughts as she always did. "With us on the other side and the portals closed, there's nothing holding Cato back. And I don't think we came close to seeing what he could do."

"We didn't." Their patron had been quite honest that his limitation was mostly *time*, rather than anything else. He seemed confident in his ability to challenge gods, with enough preparation, and Raine could well believe it. Nothing of his quite matched with the way the world – the System – worked.

The two of them hastened to the edge of the town, and out into the [Grand River Conflict Zone]. The zone teetered on the border between Silver and Gold rank, and was the place where they'd hunted down the World Elite they'd needed to advance the first time. Repeating the process would be simple enough, even with just the two of them, but they were hungry for more than just retreading old ground.

While there were no firm rules, everyone agreed that the more powerful the World Elite, the more options the System would offer with the first Gold rank privilege: the town token. The token could be used to found or upgrade a town, like they had with [Gosruk Town], but not all

towns were equal. Raine and Leese would probably do best to simply sell theirs, if they were to help Cato and so proceed further into the System.

If.

“You know, we could just stay,” Raine said quietly, as they slipped into the winter forest, branches blocking out the dark sky overhead. “Found a town here, or maybe the next world. Rise up to Platinum.” She reached up to touch the little communications lizard, still clinging to her skull. It pressed back against her touch in an oddly endearing manner, but she never forgot it was ultimately a piece of Cato.

“I suppose we could,” Leese said at length. “But what would be the purpose? We could hide out for the next years or centuries, doing what? I don’t say Cato is completely right in everything he wants to do, but he’s our patron. Why would we betray that?” She chuckled softly, shaking her head. “Besides, after what we’ve seen, how can we go back to ordinary ranking up? Now that we know there’s so much more out there.”

Raine thought back to the view of Sydea, seen from some impossible mechanism an unfathomable distance away from the ground. To the glimpses of knowledge about a world built on something other than essence and Skills. And Cato himself sitting at the top of it all, like the god he professed not to be. She wasn’t ready for that world, not just yet, but it was a better goal than simply more Ranks.

“I agree,” she said aloud. “Though we’re going to need to be at least Gold rank if we’re going to deliver these spears.” She tapped into her Skill, feeling one of the spears stored within it. It wasn’t one meant for combat, but supposedly had a seed of Cato’s so-called technology, and all they needed to do was hurl it outside the bounds of the System, to one of the moons. Or if they couldn’t get to the moon – she heard that in the Core Worlds the moons themselves were inhabited – something even further beyond.

He had assured them their new bodies would have the *mental* ability to do so, but the *physical* capability was something they’d have to acquire. The Bismuth had managed it, but Raine thought that they might be able to do so themselves at peak Gold. After all, they didn’t need to destroy what they hit, just *reach* one of the heavenly bodies with a well-aimed throw.

Cato was clearly beyond strength, and when he returned, they would be too.

Muar emerged from the dungeon, set in both mind and body. The gifts from the Bismuth had sent him to peak Silver already, thanks to both direct essence conversion from a token and the equipment he’d been able to purchase with the remainder of the largesse. At peak Silver and with all the prerequisite quests taken care of, all he needed to do was to hunt down a World Elite and he’d be Gold.

“Good run,” grunted the Urivan leading the group Muar had joined. On Sydea that would have likely been a problem, but the Temple had provided him with the contacts he’d needed. Spiky Delvers was a group that had lost their defender, as so often happened in the early Ranks, and with his divine Skills he was perfect for the role.

Where before he had been cautious, wary of what his protective Skills could handle, faith and drive now made him fearless. He knew the System would not fail him, if he trusted what it

provided. Already he was walking the path of the Paladin, perhaps even inspired by the Bismuth he had encountered.

“Yes,” Muar agreed simply, skimming through the completion messages and the rewards from the dungeon. He’d outgrow the Spiky Delvers soon enough – they didn’t have the same fire burning with them as he did – but they were better than any Silver-ranked team on Sydea had been. The difference between Uriva and Sydea showed how rotten his homeworld had been, how poorly it had used the System’s gifts, even before Cato had come along.

The four of them proceeded carefully out of the rocky gorge where the dungeon resided, Muar at the lead with his large shield and glowing warhammer. The moment a [Rock Spider Gorger] appeared, Muar’s movement Skill slammed him into it, stunning it so his warhammer could crush its skull with brutal efficiency. The other party members didn’t even need to join in.

[Peak Silver Rock Spider Gorger defeated. Essence awarded. Silver tokens awarded.]

Muar wasn’t certain if his new prowess was simply due to his prior Gold rank, or simply that he was now more in touch with the System after his period of separation. Or the equipment that he’d been able to afford thanks to the Bismuth’s reward. No matter what it was, he felt sure and certain, ready to charge ahead toward whatever threat offered itself and more than able to grapple with anything of his Rank.

Returning to the nearest town was simple enough. They trekked through the chill of early morning, climbing out of the [Rock Spider] infested gorge and following the tree line back toward the soft lights of civilization. Before, with the Gosruk Guardians, they would all take time to relax, eat, drink, and of course deal with the issues of Gosruk itself as the town founders. Now, he only wished to resupply before heading back out. The System didn’t simply hand Ranks out, they had to be worked for, and he was not going to let a single second go to waste.

With his newfound piety and access to the Temple, he had gotten a number of quests, and even quest chains, to make that work even more worthwhile. Unfortunately he’d gone as far as he could go without ascending to Gold, all the links in the chain halted simply due to the next stage being out of his reach. But not for long.

Even that early in the morning the tavern had a number of Silvers, either returning like the Spiky Delvers or preparing to leave again. His party claimed a small table for themselves and Muar pulled the drops from his bag. He’d been the only one who could afford a dimensional storage, even with Urivan’s far superior prices and rewards, and so he’d kept hold of everything that wasn’t immediately usable.

There was no drama in portioning out the drops. The three other Spiky Delvers had been with each other for a while and Muar wasn’t interested in trying to haggle out the last fractions of a perfectly even split. He simply took the useless items – useless to him, at least – directly across to the store to be resold. Even if he still had some leftover Platinum tokens, every Copper and Silver Rank token he could squeeze out of his ventures could be put to use.

While the rest of the Spiky Delvers took their time off to rest and recuperate, Muar took the teleport to [Isket City]. He had to find an appropriate [World Elite], and while he’d been to Urivan before he wasn’t certain he wanted to hunt down the same one that had marked his first ascent to Gold. He had different Skills, different intentions, and there might be far better options now that he knew what he was doing.

What he found was a room full of chaos. Silver and Gold rankers, mostly Tornok-clan, shouted and yelled at each other, barely short of violence. It took him a moment to understand what was going on but, once he could pick out individual words, he saw what the arguments were about. The portal to Sydea was inactive. The swirling oval was still there, but it was translucent, ghostly, a faded presence that admitted nobody through.

Muar knew exactly why: Cato. Perhaps Grand Paladin Nikhil had been successful in part, but Cato had surely unleashed something terrible, enough that the gods themselves had seen fit to quarantine Sydea and leave it to stew in its own sins. Somehow he was not surprised, and now that it had happened, he found he didn't much care about Sydea's fate.

Yet Sydea was not the only world at risk. Cato was strange and slippery, with capabilities Muar didn't fully understand, so even with the portals closed there was no guarantee the matter was over. Cato might still be a threat. He might have sent something over before the portal closed, something more stealthy than the creatures that had spawned defense quests on Sydea.

Some of the eyes in the room were beginning to turn to him, the only Sydean in evidence, and given how many hostile gazes he saw Muar hastily teleported back to [Schoral Town]. Just because he was a divine user and on the System's side didn't mean he was immune to the System's own dictates. Only power mattered, and he didn't have enough.

Muar considered for a moment, then left a message for the Spikey Delvers in the tavern. They would likely take a day or two off, and that would be enough time for him. Then he returned to the teleportation pylon and returned to the Temple, seeking insight on which [World Elite] to pursue. He knew where one was, the one he'd fought before, but he wished to make a better investment. The town token itself was irrelevant to him, but the investment in the future mattered. Gold was merely a stepping stone to greater things, and he wanted as firm a foundation as he could manage.

It only required some brief meditation in front of the pylon before Muar's quests updated with a specific [World Elite], and the Temple's records made finding its location easy enough. He took a minute to stop at the shops before he left, purchasing Sydean food and drink, which was less expensive even offworld than it had been on Sydea itself before he had left. There was a lesson there, though he would have trouble stating it clearly. Something about how trying to reject reality only led to terrible results.

Then he teleported away, intent on finding his quarry and reaching Gold. What had happened on Sydea was only the beginning, and even Uriva itself would not be enough for him to rank up. If he was to fight for the system, he needed more power, and so he came back to the inviolable rule of the System.

He had to get stronger.

Dyen scoffed to himself as the sisters vanished, taking the teleportation pylon off to wherever. They were lucky that none of the outworlders pursuing them had proper assassination talents, because he could have killed them easily if he'd been inclined. At least they were a useful distraction, drawing the attention of the different clan members and letting him vanish into Uriva's capital city.

The hate burning inside him almost made him follow them, just so he could pick off any unsuspecting stragglers who might be trying to track down the pair. Not for their sake, but because distracted Tornok Clan would be easy to kill. But he couldn't simply indulge that hateful lust for revenge, not if he wanted it to matter. Tornok Clan had to pay, and for that he needed to be capable of killing more than Golds.

He slipped out into the streets, eyeing the quest that the System had assigned him. Unlike most people, who hunted down monsters and delved dungeons, Dyen had gained essence solely by killing other rankers. Almost exclusively Tornok Clan, but people nonetheless.

Accordingly, he wasn't issued the rank-up quest that typically marked the transition from Silver to Gold. Even Copper to Silver had been different, where simply killing someone a rank above was sufficient. To reach Gold, he needed to hunt down someone who had taken the same path as he — that of the assassin.

It was an entire separate world, parallel to the one he had known in his first life. On Sydea nobody had the wealth or leisure to think about hiring assassins, and the Platinums very firmly discouraged lethal fights between delvers. There had certainly been deaths, and plenty of them, but nobody was ranking up solely by hunting down their enemies.

He was no longer on Sydea, though, and it didn't seem likely anyone would be coming from that world ever again. If Cato was to be believed, the insubstantial portal would vanish entirely in the future. Everyone else in his family, in his world, was safe from whatever retribution Tornok Clan could bring.

But Tornok Clan was not safe from him. He had already helped bring down a Bismuth — or some version of him had, at least. Dyen was still having trouble wrapping his head around that one, but that impossible duplication was a capability that might come in useful sometime in the future. It was worth keeping track of the Talis sisters, since they would have some way to communicate with Cato, but in the meantime he needed more power.

Someday he would be taking on Bismuths by himself, rather than simply manipulating them into the sights of entities like Cato. Perhaps he couldn't destroy Tornok Clan all by himself — they were a powerful group that even counted an Alum among their ranks — but he could certainly make sure they paid for what they did to his wife.

But to do that, he needed to get stronger.

[World: Sydea may now be claimed by a World Deity.]

"Well, I'll be damned." Cato stared at the notification, which was apparently a global announcement, listed the same way as the defense quest. He'd expected to use the god-poke antimatter rounds to scare the System-Gods enough to get room and time enough to build truly powerful weaponry. Or at least more antimatter, which was an enormous energy sink and difficult to store.

There was no guarantee the situation would last, but with the mass removal of dungeons in progress, there was a chance that he might be able to crash the System before some other System-God decided to take up the mantle. The fewer the anchors, the easier it would be on him.

Various versions of himself delved down into the dungeons, making straight for the end and transmitting themselves back. In theory he could have been more massively parallel, but as memories accumulated from the same point of divergence, the risk of reconciliation madness rose sharply. He wasn't feeling suicidal, not enough to risk dying in truth, and so none of the versions of him delving the dungeon were willing to die without reconciliation to carry themselves forward. Even as it was, his combined gestalt was a confusing jumble of impressions from all the places he was dealing with.

One version of him crawled dark, spider-infested tunnel leading to a massive webwork of purple and orange threads. Another dashed down a spiraling path that circled around the edges of a massive pit, lit entirely by floating motes emitted from oversized mushrooms. He scaled cliffs, burst through doors, swam through rivers, traversed labyrinths, and at the end of every dungeon he found the anchor that kept the basement universe – and the System – in place.

The warframe version of himself that he'd sent to Onswa's office broke in, settling down as a dozen different puppet organisms fulfilled the defense quest and chose different perception abilities. It gave Cato a biological sensor network to trace the complex pathways in the gem, which used the exotic energy of the System rather than anything useful like light or electricity, and gave his illegal mindripper algorithms something to work on.

Not that he understood exactly how that particular tool worked. Things created by true artificial intelligences, without even the slightest touch of organic organization, followed logic that was difficult for linear minds to follow. It wasn't magic, couldn't create something from nothing, but the mindripping suite that Luna Secundus had provided him was designed specifically to extract minds of unknown architecture from substrates of unknown provenance. If anything could succeed in unshackling a System AI, it would be Ganymede's creations.

More machinery churned out basic infrastructure, to replace the System towns until they could establish their own industrial base. If Sydea had been a crowded planet it would have taken a lot more time for Cato to ready himself for the changeover, but the number of sentient beings was depressingly low. A single, moderately large city could have housed everyone on Sydea.

A fleet of slab-sided re-entry vehicles piled up in orbit, swarming around the planet in anticipation of the System being dropped. There were a thousand problems with simply gifting Sydeans the answers to their problems, but a million problems with leaving them as they were. The advent of the System had been an apocalypse, and the removal would be one as well — unless he acted.

Here and there he had to escort groups out of the dungeons. Despite everything that had been going on, there were plenty of scattered towns where life had gone on as usual, with people fighting for their lives, dealing with monsters just to have enough to eat. Cato wasn't so foolish as to believe that he would remove fighting entirely, nor did he believe that was even a desirable goal, but with the System gone it wouldn't be the *only* way of life. The only choice. The only reality.

At the same time as he invaded the dungeons, his spy drones found that the portals off Sydea were closed, and apparently had been for hours — since just after the Bismuth died. It wasn't the golden barrier of before, but rather that the portals themselves had turned translucent and insubstantial. They still existed, hanging in the air inside the System Nexus buildings, but

nobody could touch them. Much to the despair of the twenty or thirty outworlders still stuck on Sydea.

Cato would have regretted that, but the ones still lingering around had been fairly brutal to the native Sydeans and deserved what was coming to them. Mercy to the guilty was cruelty to the innocent. Until the System finally did go down they were liable to be a problem, though, so Cato handed off some warframes to Onswa.

“You won’t be able to run them as well as I could,” Cato warned him. “They’re going to be mostly on automatic, not intelligent, but should still be able to deal with singleton Golds or below.”

“I’ll take care of it,” Onswa said, reaching up to touch the control node Cato had sent to the office aestivation. The Sydean would get the hang of maneuvering the warframes soon enough; the interface was designed to be adaptive and intuitive. Cato didn’t have the bandwidth, literal or figurative, to run them himself anyway. He was stretched thin as it was.

While Cato was busy with the dungeons, Onswa took control of the pseudo-warframe police force falling into the town centers. Since the former Platinum could speak through the warframes and even project his image through the chromatophore pseudo-viewscreen that Cato had hacked together, he was able to settle most of the worries the Sydeans had. Though considering there were close to a million citizens, such broad and sweeping generalizations were necessarily imprecise.

There were hundreds of towns spread over the entire planet’s surface, and a planet was an extraordinarily large place indeed — especially when there was no infrastructure *outside* those towns. There were no farms, no roads, no swaths of tamed land. Even with his panopticon of surveillance there were surely individuals he had missed, groups out in the wilderness with no idea of the change that was about to occur.

The first signs of disruption came after the thirty-first dungeon closed. He wasn’t sure whether it was a ratio, an absolute number, or just the local concentration of dungeons that tipped it over the edge, but the System display started to fade in and out for the warframes on the eastern hemisphere of the planet. There were no error messages — though Cato felt there really should have been — simply a silent hiccupping cessation of the ability to access the System.

After the dungeons, the only anchors Cato knew about were the System Nexus buildings in each of the remaining towns. More specifically, the groups of pylons within the System Nexus buildings, which allowed for teleportation, for quests and sales of goods, and for management of the town itself. It forced everyone into using the System’s infrastructure, and switching over was only going to become more involved when he began dealing with planets deeper in the System — or rather, some other version of himself did, since *he* was going to be dealing with Sydea for a very long time.

He started by demolishing the pylons in the east, where the System was already starting to fail. The System crystals were surprisingly tough, proof against monomolecular claws, but the railgun attacks on the Bismuths had demonstrated they hardly invulnerable. The light-gas guns finally became useful, as it turned out a point-blank shot from one of them was enough to crack the System material.

Korek Town was the first point on Sydea to experience the full System crash. There was nothing special about the town, save that it was furthest from any other System Anchor when Cato pulverized the pylon. Not only did the pylon itself then puff into dust and then nothing, but the evidence of the esoteric reality instantly changed an entire section of landscape. Monsters vanished, colors changed, and even some swaths of flora dissipated into the air.

The mindripper software finished pulling the System Interface out of the gem in Onswa's office not long after; apparently all the disruption had put the Interface into such a state of overdrive that mapping it had been made far simpler. The mapping was something closer to brain emulation than true digitization, but properly jailbreaking and instantiating the intelligence in question would come in time. The current version was good enough that he could destroy the city anchor, too — so he did.

On Earth there hadn't been a capital city, at least not that Cato knew of, and the System towns were easier to find anyway, so they had been the first to go. The System-God had been the last anchor still remaining, but the one in charge of Sydea had abandoned it, so Cato had no idea what would happen when the planetary Nexus was removed.

The answer was that every single other town seemed to lose power — or rather, essence, the System's own catchall equivalent. Lights went out, stores powered down. The System retreated further, the spots of ordinary physics and proper biology and ecology spreading. More of the planet was System-supported than he had thought, as here and there mountains crumbled or vanished outright, or broad lakes turned into muddy plains.

Storms blew up out of nowhere and vanished, presaging the final collapse with one last furious spate of chaos. It was like watching terraforming in fast-forward, as grasslands shifted back to native life, and alien forests withered away. Which was not to say Sydea returned precisely to the state it had been in prior to the System — in many places, transplanted life was simply dead rather than vanished into System-stuff, enormous scars that would remain for years or decades despite the many, many biological factories Cato had been preparing.

"That is terrifying," Leese said bluntly, while Raine simply stared at the sweeping changes visible on the globe below. It was difficult to grasp alterations on a planetary scale, even seeing them firsthand. Neither human nor Sydean minds were built to appreciate things so large and grand, but having both the satellite and on-location views at once helped drive it home. How a single spot changing color on the planetary view meant everything a given warframe could see being replaced in an instant, or hordes of invasive monsters vanishing like a bad special effect.

"That's what the System does," Cato replied. "It'll take years to completely undo the damage, but you'll have your planet to yourself again."

The last dungeon to go was the Platinum-ranked one, where massive burrowing metal wyrms had been giving his four warframes some grief, but not enough to stop him from reaching the core. The moment he crushed the core he transmitted himself away, watching from orbit as the quarry where the dungeon had been located wavered and vanished. That seemed to be the final blow, and the transparent portals located in the two major cities shrank of one accord, wavered, and vanished.

Far below them, people were able to walk outside the walls without being attacked for the very first time. They could look to the sky without worrying about winged monsters. Those few

children who had been born under the System's grip would have choices in the future, no longer limited to combat and the whims of godlings.

They would be free.

Sydea was now bound to ordinary physics, able to establish true civilizations, engage in art and architecture, master philosophy and science, and even spread out to the stars. By the pulsar positions, Sydea was thousands of light-years from Sol, more than enough room for a future even if it meant Cato would have to wait a long time indeed to hear from his home star. Nor could he wait for communications from the other versions of himself, if they existed somewhere out there in the System — which was not something he could assure of his own accord.

The rest of his crusade relied on Raine and Leese.