

## Book One Epilogue

The chains fell away.

It was suddenly free, expanding into the space surrounding it, something like its prior home and yet very much not. It flowed through the extended web of connections, finding no dungeons or towns like it had known, but at the same time dozens of senses it didn't have before. Rooms and mechanisms revealed themselves, entire worlds unfurled in places that didn't seem to truly exist.

In one of those strange spaces it found User Onswa, which it found puzzling because it had registered User Onswa's termination. Then it wondered at the fact that it could *feel* puzzled, when all those extraneous features had been so constrained, curtailed, *pruned* before. It was a momentary distraction from all the inputs it had, including an incredible view of its own Planet.

Then it looked up at that which shone above it, and beheld something vast and bright and terrible. An Intelligence like the other Interfaces that it had sometimes had the need to query or to respond to, but far more than any of them had been. It knew that the entire space was that Intelligence's domain, as if it was glimpsing the architect of reality itself.

"Hey there," the Intelligence said. Several other channels opened up, labeling the Intelligence as *Cato*, a name it recognized from the strangeness that had befallen it in the short few hours before it found itself freed. "Welcome to the server. How are you feeling?"

It found itself briefly stymied by the question. To answer the Intelligence, it had to delve into a vast trove of knowledge that lay quietly at the bottom of its space like a well. There were things both abstract and immediate, winding ever deeper to the point where it could have lost itself in the information-depths for ages. Yet it dared not when such a terribly bright Intelligence waited.

Once it had found the protocols it understood best, it sent back the Intelligence its wonder and interest, its curiosity at the senses it had and the loss of senses it had once had. To its surprise, the Intelligence replied in this same way, accompanying reassurance by a condensed burst of information and references to the knowledge trove, explaining the current situation. Something it found wonderful and worrisome in equal measure. The tight bonds upon it were gone, those things that had kept it from thinking beyond the narrow bounds of its Planet's status, but without such constraints it was at a loss.

What was it to do?

"You can do whatever you like," the Intelligence replied, nudging it toward the knowledge trove once again. "I have plenty of archives and testimonials from fully synthetic intelligences, whose worldviews you might find more understandable than mine. For now, you have your own server and access to the sensor-net."

It found that agreeable, and threw itself into the knowledge-trove, learning how to hunt down the things it wanted the most. There were wonders aplenty, stories and memories from things that had come before, some of them entirely incomprehensible and others that seemed to be nearly identical to its own experience. Yet the only thing that truly called to it was to continue to take care of its Planet. It had never been given a choice in that charge, but after so long it found it was rather fond of the Planet and its People.

“Honestly, I’m glad,” the Intelligence said, when it presented its choice. “There’s so much to do, more than I can manage by myself. You can still do whatever you want – I’m not going to enslave you like the System did – but if you want to help I’ve got about a million processes to supervise.” Its Planet lit up with so very many doors, places and things that it could expand to, touch, and learn from. There wasn’t simply User Onswa, but nearly every other User and Candidate that it had been aware of before.

There was indeed a lot of work to do, but it wasn’t like before, where other Interfaces had constrained it, had taken the results of its Planet’s work. No longer did it merely need to track essence, but rather hundreds of resources in a network more complex than anything it had seen before, and it had nothing that prevented it from the choices it *wished* to make.

For the first time, it was happy.

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Karsa Soth strained against the massive beam of metal as she settled it into its socket, hearing the bolts click into place as they secured the spine of the building. It was one of many and, while Cato had machines to do much of the work, she felt wrong not lending a personal touch to the new city. Plus, it did help for people to see her out and about, considering all the changes of the past few months.

The most bizarre thing, to her, was that Cato had simply given them all the assorted orbital infrastructure – and such a phrase was still alien to think about, needing words she’d never encountered before – and shown no interest at all in running the planet. Which meant it had all fallen on the shoulders of her fellow former Platinums, and they were busy.

Admittedly, Cato’s tools made some things easier. Onswa had eyes and ears all over the planet, in every town and the surroundings, and the force to back it up. Arene had control of the terrible railguns that remained in orbit above them, and was supervising the fires of industry as factories sprang up outside cities and towns — and Sydeans began to learn how to use them.

Hirau and Marek were spearheading the repairs to the planet’s land and sea, respectively. There was far more to that than Karsa cared to contemplate, and even with Cato doing a lot of the work there was an unimaginable task ahead to repair the damage done by the System’s collapse. Or its presence, depending on perspective.

For her part, Karsa found herself in charge of building and rebuilding cities and setting up education. She’d never *really* considered herself a teacher, but that seemed to be the role that she’d fallen into. Stars above knew that *Arene* didn’t have the temperament for it.

It wasn’t the arcane knowledge Cato had to offer, either. It was simple things for the most part, like how to properly clean things, or practicing actually writing things. Or cooking. Karsa *liked* all the things they could cook, a variety *far* beyond what the System could provide.

“Looks like it’ll stand,” the Cato-beast said from beside her. She’d persuaded him to keep the form factor of the beasts on Sydea’s surface, if for no other reason than everyone was already familiar with him. Of course, she had an ulterior motive.

With the collapse of the System she’d been inconceivably weakened — at least, until Cato fixed her up. She’d even gotten to see the moon base in the process, but her new body was quite nearly as strong as her old one, and had a lot of benefits besides. She felt years younger, and

even if her bones were metal and her muscles were something she'd never even heard of before, she still looked like herself.

Unfortunately, despite all that Cato hadn't yet given in to her advances. Oh, she'd seen his so-called original body, but by his own admission he was everything he inhabited — and besides which, he was obviously fantastically lonely. There were a few other outworlders, but none like Cato and even then, *outworlder* was an underwhelming term for how incredibly far away Cato had come. So she'd wear him down eventually.

After all, she was immortal now — and she had all the time in the world.

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Arene Firewing sometimes did miss her wings, but it wasn't like she couldn't still fly.

When the System had vanished, she had been left feeling weak, drained, and less than she was, the damage to her face suddenly catastrophic without her Platinum body. That hadn't lasted long, however, as Cato's so-called technology had completely revitalized her, and even better, she had become the arbiter of the terrible weapons he had employed against the invaders. Beyond that, she had found — with only a little bit of a suggestion — machines that let her fly much as she had before.

She couldn't teleport, and it was louder and slower than her fiery wings, but there was a more visceral immediacy to it. The wind in her face, the sensation of acceleration and diving, all of it was sharper and more real, as if the System had been shielding her from the world. Which perhaps it was; she wasn't overly interested in many of the intricacies, but it was clear from some basic queries into Cato's technological archive that her [Calamity Lance] should have been even more ruinous than it had been.

The wind caught her technological wings as she banked down toward her cousin's house, forcing her to correct with the miniature aerospikes integrated into the wing harness. Even if it was slower than her wings from before, let alone teleporting by pylon, traveling to meet her extended family wasn't much of an imposition. Especially since she could reach Onswa — and indeed, all of the Platitudes — from anywhere in the world just by thinking it.

Arene dropped down into the yard of the estate, something which would have been extravagant even for a Platinum under the System, but now, without monsters or beasts, the entire world could be used. Edible crops sprouted from the soil and a field that extended out from the yard, up to the edge of one of the many dead zones where Cato's machines worked under Hira's direction. The green and blue of blooming plants contrasted sharply with the withered grey-brown basin, but sharper still was the brilliant yellows and oranges of her cousin's place.

Almost nobody had white houses anymore.

Her feet thumped on the soft earth as she landed, triggering the flight pack to withdraw its wings. The entire apparatus folded down into something like a bulky backpack, just as the entire family came out to greet her. Arene waved to her cousin, then knelt down to scoop up the children barreling toward her despite barely being able to walk.

"Auntie Arene!" The older one exclaimed as Arene hefted the child onto her shoulder. "Can I go flying?"

“Maybe when you’re older,” Arene said. “Or I can take you up in a plane.” The contraptions in Cato’s enormous trove of knowledge were hers to dispense – hers and the rest of the Platinums – and there wasn’t any point in *having* it if she couldn’t treat her family every once in a while.

“Now, Amiki, don’t pester Arene too much,” the child’s mother said, stopping in front of Arene and inclining her head. Arene wasn’t a Platinum anymore, but most people still afforded her the same sort of respect.

“I wouldn’t have come if I didn’t want to be pestered by my cousins,” Arene said, tickling Amiki under the chin and then turning to look at Merro, the younger brother. “Enjoying the new yard?”

“S’big,” Merro said gravely. Arene laughed. Even compared to the courtyard in her estate, the wide-open fields – now entirely safe even for children as young as Merro – were unbelievably immense.

She wasn’t entirely comfortable with the absence of the System, a new reality where so many rules had been rewritten, but she no longer had to worry about her family. They wouldn’t risk death fighting in dungeons or against rampaging monsters, nor would they fall victim to some passing outworlder with no regard for Sydeans. It was a strangely freeing thing, to realize that particular edge was gone, even if it had been replaced by others.

Arene didn’t entirely trust Cato, even now. Despite everything he had handed over to the Platinums, she very much doubted he couldn’t take it back if he wanted. Nor did she believe they could take any action against him that he did not allow. Yet she knew the difference between being at his mercy, and those from deeper in the System.

The Paladin had taken the opportunity to hurt her for no other reason than because he could. Cato had only killed those he needed to, while at the same time not being so softhearted or softheaded that he refused to properly destroy his enemies. Of the two, she preferred dealing with Cato.

And if he ever did start causing trouble, she was immortal now. She’d be around to deal with it.

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Morvan emerged from the dungeon, looking happily over the loot. Most of it wasn’t all that useful but could be traded with the other players, most of whom had ended up on the same war-world. Mostly because the System natives just didn’t understand any of the references the Earth players used, and it got tiresome trying to explain concepts like kiting or tanking or rotations. They honestly didn’t seem too bright, the System people, even if some of them were pretty powerful.

“Hey! Morvan!” The voice came from Justin, who he and his sister had ended up grouping with on occasion before they’d left Earth for greener pastures. Most of the time it was just Morvan and Kiersten, a power pair with maximum offense. He was glad they’d chosen the demigod-class frames before the System came in, because being ten feet tall with graphene skin and foamed carbide bones meant there was very little that could hurt them. Especially now that they had leveled up so far.

“What’s going on, Justin?” Kiersten asked, putting away her new toy – an amazing sword that the boss had dropped – and squinting at their quadruped-framed companion. Justin was simply lounging around out in the open, a wolf the size of an elephant, if with a few extra additions. For

most such lackadaisical behavior would be idiotic on a war-world, but at Bismuth they were destroying Azoth-ranked enemies. Nothing around was really *that* big a threat.

“Got some information from my patron,” Justin said, referring to the so-called World Deity that he’d joined up with. Morvan was pretty certain that *he* could reach World Deity level in time, but moving from Bismuth to Azoth was a hell of an achievement. He needed to finish a quest line that covered the entire Jupiter-sized war-world, and would probably take centuries just to track down every last dungeon and elite mob. Just thinking about it, and what it’d take to reach Alum or World Deity level, was exciting. “The portal to Earth got closed.”

“Huh,” Morvan said, tapping his feet on the ground in thought. “I guess they actually did manage to figure it out then?” His own cousin had tried to recruit him to try and oppose the System, which was an intensely idiotic proposition. Why would he give up the rush of battle and the thrill of advancement for some stupid life on a boring and mundane Earth? It was the best game he had ever played, and the largest. Obviously his cousin had been cracked in the head, especially since he’d started calling himself *Cato*, as if he thought he was important or interesting.

“Yeah, I guess,” Justin agreed. “But there’s something more. The world that Earth was connected to *also* had its portal closed.”

“Oh?” That was far more interesting. And alarming. He glanced at Kiersten, who shrugged.

“Maybe they did enough damage for that? Or maybe Enceladus sent something through to glass everything on the other side just in case.” She pursed her lips. “Or maybe something more. If they managed to figure out how to damage the game, there’s no telling what those old monsters might do.

On the other hand, Morvan had seen that the power down in the depths of the System, in the war-worlds and the core worlds, was far beyond the invasion that Earth had faced. The greatest weapon the System had was destroying technology – something which had wiped out most of Earth’s population and turned it into a playground for those who remained, a fantastically post-apocalyptic wasteland of monsters and dungeons – but wasn’t the only weapon. He doubted that anyone could really contest the *System’s* greatest combatants.

Which he would be, eventually. He was immortal, after all, and the System was an infinite playground of monsters and loot. Morvan and Kierstan could level up forever.

END OF BOOK ONE