

Chapter 7 — Powerful People

Cato-Zeken was unreasonable happy to have an excuse to get back down to the surface. The other versions of himself would have to content themselves with secondhand memories, but he got to actually *do* something. Maybe he would have preferred something other than fighting, but protecting Raine and Leese Talis from assassins had no moral ambiguity.

The drop pod screamed through the atmosphere, carrying six of the forty-ton bioweapons, now further tweaked for Cato's use and, more importantly, with proper orbital backup for both combat algorithms and bombardment. That was originally how they had been designed and Cato could only alter the design so much without running into constraints he couldn't solve. The boys back on Titan were *very* bright, and really he suspected *Leese* would have more luck tweaking it than he would. She'd taken to bioengineering in a way he never had, and was getting the best education his databases could provide.

But not at the moment, because Raine and Leese Zek were riding two of the bioweapons. He still wasn't certain that it was best for the sisters to directly interact with their counterparts, but they could make their own decisions. Plus, he didn't blame them for wanting to help instead of simply watching from afar.

The pod deployed silk-like drogue parachutes, then released the compression on the stored hydrogen to inflate itself and catch the air, decelerating at multiples of a standard gravity. A second later, the pod released the warframes, letting them fall the last hundred feet or so to the ground around the Talis sisters, the massive bioweapons shaking the earth with their impacts.

He'd ensured the warframes had the upgrades they needed to spot the stealthy high-rankers, painting their ghostly presences into his sensorium as he landed. For most people under the System, he had to be somewhat forgiving, because they had grown up in a framework where fighting and killing was the only answer, always. But assassins, those who specialized in killing other people rather than monsters, had taken more deliberate steps to become murderers.

It was a little hypocritical that he wasn't going after Dyen for the same thing, but Dyen wasn't trying to kill the Talis sisters. Cato knew that there was going to be trouble with Dyen sooner or later, but sufficient unto the day was the evil thereof. Without Dyen's warning the assassination contract definitely would have blindsided them.

"I believe the ladies told you to leave, or die," Cato rumbled from four throats, combat system flushing out the constant accumulation of rage from the mere presence of serial murderers. He could well imagine all the killings a Platinum-level assassin needed to have performed.

"You really shouldn't give them time," Leese Zek sent through the microwave communications. *"These warframes all look Copper, so the warning won't help."*

Sure enough, the warning did no more than stall the two groups for a fraction of a second before they moved in to attack. Shadows lanced out, rocks split, water whips cracked through the air, and metal threads lashed. It would have overwhelmed Cato's original warframe, but this time he had algorithmic combat coding backing up his reactions. The six warframes broke and scattered, but not in flight.

Predictive analysis tools took in data from their sensors, and those of the pod above, crunching through the movements and demonstrated Skills of the Platinums. The light-gas guns went off, sharp cracks that targeted only two of the eight, bracketing them to prevent any Skill-driven dodge. The projectiles in question were simple bullets, with the supposition that they'd injure the Platinums but would be insufficient to kill them.

The combat algorithms and the Zek sisters agreed that the first priority was the crab-like Clan Mokrom individual with what was termed *aether* Skills, some sort of System-only concept with no concrete analogy to physics. Onswa's Skill, whatever it was called, had acted a bit like sourceless radiation damage when used on the warframes — and that was probably just the *incidental* effect. The Mokrom was one of the primary targets for the light-gas guns, and after managing several hits on the carapaced torso, the Zek sisters descended upon him mercilessly in a pair of forty-ton warframes.

Cato was in full framejack as he joined the assault, operating only slightly faster than the Platinums, but still able to precisely bring monomolecular claws to punch through a gap in the crab's armor. Industrial-strength muscle combined with forty tons of mass bested the System's esoteric toughness and let his claws gouge a hole into where his modeling programs guessed the vital organs would be. His warframe's vital sensors registered all kinds of warnings as the esoteric radiation of *aether* flushed through it, doing all kinds of damage in unpredictable patterns, but the warframe was disposable and the sisters had managed to avoid the Skill so only his was affected. Better that damage was done to a war machine than a person, regardless.

The aether user was, of course, not the only target. With six warframes, along with Raine, Leese, and Dyen, the assassins were technically outnumbered. The latter three weren't tied into the combat network, but they were competent fighters in their own right and more than capable of dealing with a Platinum one-on-one.

The assassins had no idea what hit them.

A Tornok Clan archer half a mile away loosed some sort of seeking arrow, which roared through the air as a lightning-charged bolide, just before Dyen emerged from the shadows in a brutal backstab to prevent any more ranged attacks. Another crab person tried to take to the air, only to be intercepted by the Talis sisters, who had more aerial supremacy than the warframes. The Zek sisters worked together to tear apart another Tornok Clan — fully half of the eight assassins were of the ratlike race — while Cato's last two warframes grappled with casters to keep them from any wide-range Skills.

In a matter of moments, they halved the number of assailants, the combat algorithms guiding the warframes around System-empowered blows or Skill effects that would have destroyed them. Even with machine assistance, Cato had found he was far less effective at exploiting openings than the sisters, so he focused on *creating* those openings. The back-tendrils of his frames snapped out to hammer against hands and feet, disrupting stances and aim while the others methodically disassembled the assassins. The one warframe that had absorbed the aether retaliation started to undergo catastrophic failure, but it still had several seconds — time enough, in combat.

He threw the failing warframe — one which was being operated more by remote control than properly inhabited — into the path of some massive shadow-ball in a sacrificial gambit while the

Talis sisters plunged from above onto the caster like baleful meteors, having dispatched the airborne Platinum. A moment later, silence fell over the battleground as all the opponents were dead. No more than ten seconds had elapsed since the fight had started.

Cato took stock of everyone, finding that the Sydean trio had only scuffs and scrapes, despite the grievous damage done to some of the warframes. Unfortunately, his biotech couldn't stand up to higher rank System attacks, not in the way Dyen and the Talis sisters could, but he'd designed the bioweapons to be disposable so it hardly mattered.

"You've gotten better at fighting," Raine Talis said, eyeing the pair of warframes her digital counterparts were controlling. "More cooperation, more variants."

"Thank you," Cato said, not correcting her about who, exactly, she was complimenting.

"*We're going to head back before this gets weird,*" Leese-Zek said, and the Zek sisters handed over control of their warframes as they returned to the orbital high above. They hadn't yet committed to Zeken-specific bodies, in part because it was evenly split between Clan Mokrom and the furred, flat-tailed Clan Eln — so no actual natives. Not to mention that neither of them had any interest in presenting themselves as being members of either clan.

"I can't stay too long," Cato said, turning the nearest intact warframe to face the Sydeans. "Someone will come to check out that defense quest soon enough. Looks like I'll have to actually focus on getting the contract removed at its source." He sighed with three of his remaining warframes. "We can't keep doing this."

Not least because it tipped his hand in ways he didn't want. If Zeken were embargoed, it wouldn't be too bad, given the other worlds and portal connections his other selves had spread to, but he would have preferred nobody really know he was still around. The global defense quest was a dead giveaway.

"I'd like whatever they have that can break Stealth skills," Dyen butted in, striding up to the gathering of warframes. "As payment for my help. And a way to contact you."

"The former is doable. The latter — I'll consider." Cato certainly didn't trust Dyen to know about the radio plants and how that network was being set up. The stealth capelet was a one-off, nothing that could compromise his efforts, but if Dyen wanted to, he could figure out which worlds Cato had presence on simply by testing the communications.

"We need to hit Platinum," Raine said, ignoring Dyen. "We probably have the Feat of Glory, given how far up-rank we're delving, so we might be able to get to Bismuth in record time. At that point, I doubt we'll need to worry about assassins."

"Or it'll be worse," Dyen said with a shrug. "Even with all Cato's advantages, I don't think it'll be enough to fend off *Azoth* rank assassins at Bismuth."

"Possibly so," Leese said, her spear vanishing in that strange, pseudo-virtual-reality manner. "But we aren't even properly geared yet. There's a lot more we can do to become more powerful."

"We can discuss this somewhere else," Cato said. "Best for you to get off-world before — ah."

The world of Zeken had a surveillance network, just like every other world where Cato had established a foothold, and in learning from his mistakes he'd added alerts for every single individual of note that he'd gotten surveillance on. He didn't want to be surprised by anyone they knew. That wasn't the same as being able to do anything about such alerts, like the one that had just drawn his attention to a bird-person who had just emerged from the Nexus.

The Bismuth known as Yaniss, of Ikent, had arrived.

Cato had last met her on Sydea, just before the System went down, when she had been surprisingly – for a System elite – cooperative, seeming more interested in Cato and the origin of the quest than any Sydean natives or indeed even fulfilling the quest. While she had left at his request, she'd also tried to kidnap a version of him to ensure that he would follow up on his promise to tell her more about what was going on. Of course, that version was lobotomized, mindless, and would have died the moment it lost connection, so all she had managed to take was a corpse.

"You'd better leave now. Bismuth on the way," Cato told them, judging it worth the time to meet with Yaniss there and then, while he was already compromised, than draw more attention on some other planet. His words jolted them into movement, racing away from the battle site at speed. Yet even with the warning from his satellites, he was still too late — the teleportation she used was far faster than he'd seen from Platinums.

A metal pillar thrust up from the ground and then bent open into a portal, the diminutive bird-like Bismuth stepping through. With a ripple, a translucent, metallic barrier sprung into existence around them, encompassing the entire area of the battle, the three Sydeans, and the remaining warframes. When she spoke, it was in a lilting, almost sing-song tone.

"Found you!"

Yaniss regarded the strange creatures belonging to the entity that called itself *Cato* with the same delightful confusion as the first time. They should have been merely Coppers, except that her essence sense showed something fuzzy about them, an oddness she had never seen before. The corpses on the ground showed that they certainly *weren't* Copper, though she knew that already. What she didn't know was *how*.

She very much didn't think it was as simple as a stealth or shielding piece of equipment, not least because there were multiples of the creatures. The being she had taken to try and assure Cato's future cooperation had simply collapsed like a puppet — but she was familiar with puppet-type Skills. Yaniss had studied the way essence flowed around all types of techniques, and she could list off all the Skills used in the battle just from their lingering signature. Except the *Cato* creatures *had* no signatures.

It was quite the wonderful puzzle.

"That was not a very nice trick," she chided the *Cato*-creature, keeping half an eye on the Golds that were prodding the edges of her domain Skill. "The one that I took with me was never actually a person, was it?"

“Not exactly,” Cato replied, apparently perfectly calm and not at all aware of the rank difference between them. Not that she could tell what rank he actually was. “Though you didn’t give me much time to explain.”

“*You* didn’t *spend* much time to explain,” Yaniss shot back, sauntering up to the massive beast, which didn’t either shy away from her or make any aggressive moves. Up close, it was even stranger, as it didn’t seem to be quite like any animal she had encountered, lacking even a proper heartbeat “Whatever happened to the other Bismuths? I hear Sydea’s portal closed.”

“They’re dead,” Cato said, matter-of-factly, and Yaniss chuckled.

“Is that a threat?” She idly poked one of the beasts, which was a dozen times her height, finding the scales on it far tougher than any Copper-rank material should be.

“You’re the one who asked,” Cato pointed out, still unruffled. “I find things go better without threats.”

“I’ve always thought it was the opposite,” Yaniss disagreed, taking a step back and looking up at the beast. “It’s the fastest way to get someone to do what you want.”

“Only so long as you can still reach them.” The Cato-beast shook his head. “Perhaps we can have this philosophical discussion after you let my agents head out. I’m afraid the quest will draw more attention than is safe for them.”

“But *they’re* the threat I’m using to keep you here!” Yaniss chided him, glancing over at the three Sydeans. They didn’t seem quite properly cowed for mere Golds, but they didn’t have the strange fuzzy feeling to their Essence and [Appraise] properly reported who they were.

“That’s hardly necessary,” Cato told her. Normally Yaniss had no trouble distinguishing between truth and lies, as people were very poor at dissembling in general, but the Cato-beasts were so foreign that she couldn’t tell if he were truly as relaxed as it seemed, or taking advantage of the puppet’s remove to simply act exceedingly well.

“I think it is! Otherwise you’ll simply drop your puppets and leave again,” Yaniss said, waving a talon to take in the beasts. “I want to meet with the real you.”

“Well, that would be a problem,” Cato said after a moment. “You would have to leave the planet.”

“I didn’t *think* you were on Zeken,” Yaniss chirped, trying to trace whatever threads might be animating the puppets, but still finding nothing. “Which world are you on?”

“You misunderstand me,” Cato told her. “I am not *on* a world. I am *outside* the worlds. Outside the System, and I’m not sure what that would do to you.”

It was impossible, of course. The very phrase *outside the System* was almost meaningless; gibberish invented by a madman. And yet, *and yet*. Taken seriously, it resolved the strange patterns that she had found lingering around Cato and the global defense quest that seemed to follow him.

So few people actually presented a puzzle, so few things were actually a challenge anymore, now that she was a Bismuth and with all the power that entailed. She had gotten powerful by following patterns, puzzling out the interlocking designs of the world and using them to her

advantage, but there seemed to be fewer and fewer mysteries that she could delve into. Essence didn't get *that* much more complex, from what she'd seen, only more potent. Even on the great war-worlds, the breathtaking scale was merely the same patterns repeated or amplified.

If Cato were truly from outside reality, from some place where there were different laws and different patterns, then that might explain some of the oddities. It might even explain why he was hard to read, as even *people* mostly operated by the same patterns. Something which had made it easy enough to ensure that if the quest she had first seen on Sydea appeared on any nearby world, she would be notified. Which had certainly paid off, and hadn't even taken very long. She knew the old monsters of the System planned on timescales of centuries or more, so after Sydea closed she had thought she might have to wait that long for another chance.

"You may not be lying," Yaniss said slowly, looking the strange creature up and down. "But that still leaves us at an impasse. If I want something from you, the only thing I have is your *not*-puppets."

"Then I suppose I will have to give you something now," Cato said, which made her feathers ruffle in surprise. Nobody gave up anything for free. "I can tell you that I am from outside the System, from the reality that the System is corrupting. That your planet was long ago conquered and your people enslaved by the System, chained to a framework with only one choice."

"Words," she said dismissively, even if the words in question ignited her imagination. Yaniss had *never* heard of someone speak of the System so disparagingly; those that spoke of it at all called it the *divine* System, as it granted all Skills and advancements. To consider reality itself somehow an interloper, a disease, was the sort of blasphemy reserved for madmen — or the sort of foreigner Cato proclaimed himself to be.

"I have been told you might consider a change in perspective more compelling," Cato said, and she had to wonder exactly where he had heard that. If he had been asking questions about her, none of her intelligence network had picked it up. "You lean toward an affinity for metal, correct?"

"Clearly," Yaniss chirped, as if the nature of her Skills was not evidence enough.

"Then you've seen that some metals are brittle, others are soft. Some conduct heat, others simply melt." The black scales on the beast flickered, suddenly becoming a very System-like display. It showed strangely alien symbols, alluring patterns, named for the metals of the early tiers: Copper, Silver, Gold, Platinum. "I can show you why they do that."

The symbols multiplied, arranging themselves row by row, some of the symbols labeled with words she knew — iron, tin, lead, azoth — but with many she didn't. There was a clear order there, and a tantalizing glimpse of an enormous space of possibility beyond the metals that she knew. Even stranger, some things were clearly labeled as *non-metals*, yet were included in the same structure, as if they were somehow connected.

"What *is* this?" She committed the entire thing to the memory, to be dissected at some later date. Just because it looked good did not mean it held any actual meaning; it could simply be a pretty lie.

"It's called the periodic table of elements," Cato said, and it vanished, only to be replaced with more diagrams. "It's the crudest and broadest description of what is known outside the System. Here are different versions of a single metal, *steel*. There are thousands of versions, each with different properties and different uses." She recognized the iron, and the other components of each structure were other pieces from the previous *periodic table*. Carbon, chromium, nickel, cobalt.

"What does [Sochic Steel] look like?" She asked, touching the band wound about her left wrist, the Growth Weapon that she had found so long ago.

"I have no idea," Cato admitted, the diagrams vanishing as the scales returned to black. "That's the System modifying things, so there's no guarantee that it conforms to the patterns of nature — or to any at all, really. It could be arbitrary, a one-off, as the System distorts reality to do whatever it needs."

"That is..." Yaniss clicked her beak. "Disappointing." She wasn't certain how *much* she believed him, but it accorded with some things she'd noticed. How similarities between lower Rank materials were eroded at higher ranks, becoming ever more idiosyncratic and difficult to predict. The idea that there *were* no patterns there, no connections she could trace, was all too easy an answer, yet one that *almost* made sense.

"You won't find me arguing against that," Cato said, and Yaniss laughed.

"I suppose you have given me *something* interesting," she said, but before she could continue the feel of another Bismuth intruded on her perceptions. Yaniss frowned and then tore open a portal to her Estate, an ability usually reserved for Azoths and above — but Yaniss had always been a savant, delving into essence and finding the most interesting things offered by the System. Then she simply flung the Golds through, just before the other Bismuth appeared with a roar of cold fire, just at the edge of her Domain.

"They're at my Estate," she told Cato as she gathered her Skills, eyeing the Tornok Clan Bismuth with disfavor. "I'll deal with this."

"What are *you* doing here?" The Tornok Clan asked. [Appraise] revealed his name to be Stoln, which was only vaguely familiar. There weren't so many Bismuths outside of the Core Worlds that it was easy to lose track, but Yaniss had found most of the local Bismuths were uninteresting. They were there because they had stalled out, unable to compete at the higher levels of the core worlds, not because they had something keeping them attached to the frontier.

"I am finding out interesting things," Yaniss said, completely unthreatened by Stoln's attempt to push his water-based Skills through her metal Domain. He hadn't even managed to evolve his own Skills far enough to get his own domain, so he was barely worth considering, as a Bismuth. "And you are intruding."

"There is a quest," Stoln said, as if that excused everything.

"And *I* am *talking*," the weapon on her wrist unraveling and lashing out beyond her Domain dome, less an attack as a chiding smack, sending the surprised Bismuth flying backward before his movement Skill stopped him. Unharmful, of course, given his own defenses, but it was an effective rebuke.

“It’s probably best I meet you at your estate in a more surreptitious form,” Cato said, as Stoln bristled. “It’s the building north of the capital on Ikent?”

“If you knew, why didn’t you visit?” Yaniss complained. “Fine, yes.”

“Then I will see you there,” the Cato beast said, and all of them suddenly seem to lose cohesion, slumping down into a puddle of undefined muck, mixed organics and metals that she could feel now that they were no longer part of something living. The quest vanished, and Stoln pointed a finger at her accusingly.

“What did you do? I wanted that quest!”

Yaniss sneered, turning to Stoln and gathering her Skills. He was the usual sort of backwater Bismuth, good enough or lucky enough to surpass Platinum but lacking any kind of imagination or interest beyond getting more powerful. She would return to her Estate in a bit, but first she needed to give Stoln a minor thrashing, to ensure he was more respectful in the future. It wouldn’t do to let such disrespect pass unanswered.

Initik was no stranger to foreigners trying to push in on his territory. From the advent of the System itself, there had been people who had designs on Uriva. Warlords, clans, even gods, and he’d suffered none of them. Even now, the mortal clans occasionally tried to establish a presence on Uriva; even the great clans had made attempts, likely at the urging of their respective [World Deities].

He paid close attention to the events on Uriva, keeping an eye and ear on both his divine users and the advanced buildings — a compromise, as even he couldn’t keep an entire planet under personal surveillance. Nor did he want to; his role was to guide his people, not spy on them. But he knew of almost every promising candidate as they rose through the ranks; even without the occasional tournament, it was not difficult to know who was on the lips of the Golds and Platinitiums in the various Halls.

So when he started hearing of a pair of Urivans who not only came from nowhere, but arrived with an almost impossible breadth of knowledge, he was naturally suspicious. While it was a credit that they were tutoring the younger and lower ranked, that was an easy way to ingratiate themselves with his people. A false kindness, hiding a more dire purpose.

But then he heard the names. The *names*. Scrying them directly, there was no denying it. They were the same names as Cato’s agents, and *that* surely was not coincidence. Yet the pair were in Urivan forms, and moved like they had been born that way. A family named after the planet itself was strange, if not wholly unknown, and perhaps evidence of some attempt to fool the System even if it hadn’t extended to their given names.

Initik scryed them for days, keeping an eye on what they said and did. It was a shame they were not one of *his* though, because their abilities were absolutely incredible. The speed and strength gave them a full rank advantage, and the skill matched or even exceeding Bismuth or perhaps even Azoth. He didn’t know from whence came the incredible analytic prowess, but if they had been on *his* side, he would have been confident that there would be an entire generation capable of reaching Platinum, if not Bismuth.

Unfortunately, they were not his. Some of the half-conversations he heard made that clear enough, though he was absolutely certain they had a way to communicate that he wasn't seeing. The two certainly didn't have any Skills or equipment that would allow it, and he couldn't even intercept any essence that might be carrying messages. Which was unfortunate, because that only left direct confrontation — and the last time he had tried that with one of Cato's agents, he'd been left with nothing.

On the other claw, Raine and Leese were not *Cato*, like the one he had kidnapped. There was a difference between the principal actor and those he used. Though considering that the originals — if they *were* the originals, and not some strange construct — were Sydean and not Urivan, he couldn't be certain *what* he was looking at. Or *who*.

When it became clear that there was little else he could learn by simple observation — and that he was neglecting other duties in the course of keeping a close eye on the intruders — he moved to action. As a [World Deity] he had access to any Skill he wanted, but that was such an enormous catalogue that even he didn't have everything he ever wanted at the tips of his claws.

He selected a mix of temporal and divine Skills, to ensure that he would have *time* to interrogate them as well as the means. There were Skills to compel action, but twisting *thoughts* was far more fraught and he had no guarantee that he could stop them from turning themselves into mindless bodies. In fact he rather thought it unlikely he could in the end, but he didn't need to get *that* much information from them.

Once they were by themselves, secluded — as he preferred not to draw any attention to what would be a very blatant intervention by the gods — Initik tore open a portal. The pair of Urivans goggled at him, and he invoked his Skills. Time around them froze as essence drained away from his domain into the mortal world, and he pulled them into his System Space. That stopped most of the essence loss, though he'd have to make something more concrete if he wanted to keep time-stopped without undue cost.

Initik layered several Skills on the pair before he released them. There was no such thing as true mind *control*, but he could induce lassitude, muddle their wits, force them to answer, and ensure those answers were the truth. An effective method of interrogation, though it could be gotten around even by those with relatively little essence. Questioning someone was, unfortunately, not a matter of brute force.

Initik put the two time-frozen Urivans in chairs in a secluded area of his space. His presence was sufficient to keep them held there, the essence within his domain bending to his will, but he didn't quite trust that something affiliated with Cato would be completely safe. When he was satisfied with his preparations, he released them from their temporal prison, instead casting them into a time-accelerated bubble. Just in case Cato decided to move when he realized his agents had been found out.

"Answer yes or no," he snapped, as the two of them blinked, bewildered and blindsided. "Are you working with Cato?"

"Yes," answered the one — Raine.

"Is Cato here on Uriva?"

"No," answered the other — Leese. Initik clicked to himself, then realized his mistake.

“Is Cato beyond Uriva? On one of the moons?”

“Yes.”

“Is he on other System worlds?”

“Yes.”

“Answer in full,” Initik said crisply, feeling the compulsion Skills wriggling as *somehow* the Gold-rankers were fighting back. “On which moons? On which worlds?”

“I don’t know.” The words came from both of them, and Initik grunted, not particularly surprised. There was little point in providing information to people who *could* be caught, question, or turned against their master.

“What are Cato’s plans for Uriva?” He wasn’t expecting much from it, but it was worth a try.

“To remove the System,” said Leese.

“To free Uriva,” said Raine. Initik clicked in disappointment. It would have been so much easier if they knew – or had been told – that Cato wished Uriva for himself. *That* kind of motivation was easy to deal with. But removing the System was harder to grapple with, if no less a threat. He well remembered what it was like before the System had saved his people, and if Cato had his way it would spell doom for Initik and all his kind.

He would have more questions later, but he had an immediate response to make. He froze Cato’s agents in time once again, dredging up a ring of god-metal from his estate to lock the Skill into place. Then he returned to his Interface with a single step, teleporting across his System Space with a thought.

Though his essence reserves were nowhere near the gluttonous worlds at the System’s core, he was far more flush than nearly anyone nearby. Unfortunately, he would have to spend everything he had banked, as well as exercise some of the direct essence control that he had mastered over the past thousand years as a [World Deity]. He reached out to his Interface, which chimed happily as he rested his hands on the console.

The essence field of the entire world flexed, shuddered, and then heaved as massive bolts lashed out, in an upset that everyone on the planet could feel. Each one snared a moon, a thin cable connecting the world’s essence field to the one that claimed each of Uriva’s partners. The Interface hummed as it processed each of them, though Initik didn’t know if it would be worth trying to *keep* them, to establish towns and dungeons. A fleeting thought that he could turn a moon or two into an area for Bismuths and Azoths crossed his mind, but that was in the background.

Instead he frantically scried through the moons, following any essence anomalies, until he found what had to be Cato’s bases. There were three of them, on three different moons, and widely distributed at that. With a flicker of will he crossed to the moon himself, stepping out of a portal and looking at what was there, the airless surroundings bothered him not at all.

A massive cavern had been hollowed out, and filled with arcane machinery that even as he watched simply ground to a halt, whatever strange energies that fueled them failing. Here, there were domes of air with plants inside; there, impossibly abstruse mechanisms spooled out

living things, the Cato-beasts that he had seen before. Yet all of it had ceased functioning, the moment he had seized control of it. Things melted, caught fire, even exploded. There was nothing dangerous to *him*, but it did seem that Cato had told the truth about one thing. He was not compatible with the System.

It took hours more, mostly scrying to prevent further essence leakage from his already depleted stocks, but Initik was convinced that Cato's presence had been removed. Even the small bits of things in orbit had been caught in the wave of essence, and rendered inert. Which was fortunate, as even if he didn't understand what many of them *were*, in some he recognized the peculiar lines of weapons, pointed downward toward the planet's surface.

Of course, that wasn't the end of it. Cato was on other worlds, spread like some malignant fungus through means unknown. But for the moment Uriva was safe.

It was everyone else that was at risk.

Light-hours from Uriva, in an industrial complex around a double gas giant, Cato sighed in virtual space. He checked over the gestalt from the sisters, from the final update before Initik had whisked them away, and started another instantiation. The system-god of Uriva was even more active than he'd thought.