

Chapter 11 — A Summit

Cato watched the planet through ten thousand eyes.

Most of those eyes were mindless drones, tiny scouts doing little more than beaming sensor data back toward satellites, where it was ingested by analysis software and processed for the version of himself on the moon. The warframe bodies didn't need to worry about that and it would be a waste of bandwidth anyway, as they could just inherit the decisions made by the moon version of himself.

Dozens of his tiny, high-flying spy-eyes had already been downed either by system folks or by random monsters, but that was barely a fraction of the total. The attrition was in line with what he had experienced on Earth, where the System folks had destroyed thousands of warframes and innumerable lesser frames and drones — many of them managed by people with more talent than he possessed. That was why he had vastly overproduced the surveillance drones and wasn't particularly worried.

To offset his lower level of competence, he was making machinery in job lots — though he would have done that anyway. The cost of that overproduction was basically irrelevant — Cato had entire moons worth of resources all for himself. He'd spread his outposts and infrastructure beyond the single, planet-facing habitat onto the other moons, a situation that still felt very strange. In the Solar System the majority of large objects inside the Kuiper Belt were already claimed, if not actually populated. That still left plenty of icy outer bodies, but Cato had maintained too many ties in the near-Earth region to consider moving light-hours away.

The communications delay to Sydea was considerably shorter, his panopticon letting him track each high-ranker as they received the news and used their own personal brand of teleportation to travel to the little town. Two of them he recognized; the one with the System-specific radiation and the water-user. The former seemed to be able to actually create temporary portals, whereas the latter simply dived into the ocean in one spot and emerged at the coast of the target continent a few second later.

Cato did have to admit that the variety of travel options was impressive, if maybe unnecessarily showy. Though inside of purely virtual worlds, some people went with far more elaborate entry and departure sequences than bursts of flame or portals, so perhaps he had no reason to critique. When he'd been younger, he'd been prone to a rather baroque style himself.

There were two remaining high-rankers he had only seen from a distance. One looked like a professional bodybuilder, and her method of fast travel seemed to be some kind of ultra-rapid short-distance teleportation. She sprinted along as if just using her muscles, but with each step she blinked several miles, and she had no trouble running on top of water. The last one was the hardest to track, because he mostly moved under the cover of the local foliage. So far as Cato could tell, the green-scaled Sydean was using trees as anchors for teleportation, and there wasn't any obvious rhyme or reason to the distance covered each time.

That made five at the highest rank, and if there were any others on the planet Cato hadn't spotted them. So far as he could see they all had a piece of equipment, something he'd noticed on the person of the fire lady, that they were using to coordinate. Which implied the System didn't have a direct messaging function, only mail- and telephone-equivalent. Communications was definitely an area he needed to know more about, but searching for potential weaknesses

in the System's messaging abilities was something that would have to wait until he was on better terms.

Upending the entire reality of Sydea was going to be a hard enough pitch.

The fire lady – Arene – paced impatiently on top of the System Nexus, her fingers tapping the communications item at her waist. Cato's warframes still waited in the streets, and all the inhabitants of the town had decided to withdraw themselves to the other side of the safe zone defined by the town's boundaries. He felt a little bad about that, but it was understandable. If a serious fight broke out, the collateral damage would be catastrophic. Unfortunately they couldn't fully evacuate the town, because it was impossible to tame the surrounding areas and it wasn't like a bunch of low ranks would be safe out in the middle of an infinitely respawning swarm of highly aggressive wildlife.

He didn't really mind being outnumbered, though he did debate quite strongly about whether he should spend the mass and energy on sending down another batch. In the System, the only way anyone would be taken seriously was their ability to apply force. In a way that was true in any reality, yet here it was simply impossible to build other kinds of structures. But by forcing Arene to the point where she had to listen, he had accomplished the vast majority of his goals.

For Sydea, anyway.

"What are we to do?" The question came, unexpectedly, from Leese. The two Sydean women were essentially the only ones who didn't have any obvious fear response to his massive warframes, and they were standing out in the open near one of them even after Muar and Dyen had closeted themselves inside the System Nexus. It wasn't merely a brave face, either; he could sample the stress molecules they were giving off and while neither of them were as calm as they appeared, they didn't have the fear pheromones that came from everyone save for Arene. That one was just angry.

"How do you mean?" Cato asked, the voice of the warframe a deep rumble. He didn't *need* to use a voicebox that went low enough to vibrate walls, but he preferred for his warframes to sound like they looked.

"We're Coppers, but with the bodies of Silver or even Gold," Raine answered. "We are both stronger and more vulnerable than we have been for years. Surely you had some plan if you offered these gifts to begin with."

Cato had to remind himself that despite their new looks, the two Sydeans weren't young women. The question wasn't an uncertain desire to know what to do. She was a soldier reporting for duty.

His offer to return them to Sydea with augmented bodies hadn't been given on a whim. He had no desire to keep prisoners and, while the System needed to be eradicated, it would not be an instantaneous process and people would still need to live within its confines. The Sydeans were people, not toys or children, but perhaps he had been rather too cavalier in his attempt to rectify the damage done by their temporary deaths.

Raine and Leese had seen more than a little bit of his moon base, of what he could do. Even if they weren't familiar with all the fruits of technology, they had some idea of the scale he operated at. He doubted they had any particular loyalty to him – he'd killed them, after all, and

utterly derailed any plans they may have had for their lives – but they were deciding to align themselves with what they saw as power.

Hopefully he could inspire that loyalty, when they saw how he acted and what he was trying to do. Cato really would prefer people to align with him because of morality, or because they understood what a threat the System was. Merely going along with him because they saw no real choice was horrifically fragile.

“No matter how this goes, I’m going to need people on the inside of the System, who aren’t going to generate a quest everywhere they go,” he replied. That was especially true considering what had happened with the portal. He didn’t know whether the System-God would always show up to nuke his constructs or what, but he clearly needed someone to sneak something through.

“With the augments I’ve given you, it shouldn’t be too difficult to rank up,” he continued. Cato knew this for a fact, given what had happened with the survivors of the System’s initial apocalyptic onset on Earth. Gene-tweaked and augmented bodies were ahead of the leveling curve — or whatever the best term was for how ranks were divided. Essence reinforced what was naturally there, so that which was already ahead stayed ahead, a snowball effect that meant those who had the inclination and knowledge to fight could compete at least an entire rank threshold above, if not more.

It wasn’t just humaniform frames either. Earth had been a teeming mass of people in all kinds of physiognomies, not all of them even bipedal. Some people had been trapped in a nightmare of a limbless form when cybernetics failed, others had been labeled entirely different species as they shared almost nothing with the base human model. There were even those with bespoke predator bodies who had become absolutely nightmarish monsters, nearly as effective as a warframe with only the smallest amount of System support.

The Sydean pair would have the same advantage. Force multipliers stacked on force multipliers, and while he wasn’t sure how much the body enhancements would help pure casters, they would be considerably more able than most Sydeans. Earth-stock sapients had a bit of an advantage since they knew what bioengineered bodies could do, but the System’s augmentations weren’t much different in some ways, so they probably could take advantage of the boosted abilities just as well.

“Running dungeons,” Leese said conversationally to Raine, and Cato had to restrain himself from twitching. It was his own suggestion that they rank up, as sadly they *would* be more useful the more powerful they were within the System.

“I’m also from outside the System. You just know millions of tiny things I don’t, things I should know and would never think to ask,” Cato said. He didn’t have any problem admitting that particular shortcoming. “So question everything. Suggest anything.”

To judge by the expression on Raine’s face, that was certainly not what she expected. Cato probably seemed all-knowing from certain angles, but one of the dubious of advantages of knowing a lot was being painfully aware of the vast territories of ignorance that remained. Then her expression firmed and she nodded.

“If we’re going to be ranking up quickly, we’ll need the best equipment you have, and supplies so we can stay in dungeons for days on end,” Raine said, tail slowly swishing from side to side.

“But we have to go offworld if we want to progress past Silver, let alone reach Platinum or higher. Since nobody is going to listen to a Copper, it’s going to be a while since we can actually represent you on our own.”

“Fair enough,” Cato conceded, though he hadn’t gotten as far as asking them to advocate for his viewpoint. Another cultural gap he had to be wary of. “So who am I going to be talking to?”

“The most important one you have to convince is Onswa the Unstoppable,” Raine began, unprompted, offering a brief précis of each of the Platinums while they waited, with interjections by Leese. It at least let him fit names to faces and was frankly something he should have asked before going down, but he had been too fixated on his own surveillance and too worried about pressing the Sydeans for information. Interrogating them on the station would have been too coercive for his tastes.

Onswa, Arene, Marek, Karsa, Hirau. Only five people to keep an entire planet safe and secure, because anyone of a lower rank simply could not. And still clearly insufficient, considering what he’d seen. The Platinums could deal with almost any threat that originated from Sydea, but the portals linked it to the myriads worlds of the System and they had no way to stop higher ranks from coming through and doing as they pleased.

Even as he waited, the industrial engines far up on the moon were assembling orbital railguns for the sole purpose of dealing with the foreign high-rankers who had decided to squat in the Sydean towns. He didn’t quite have what he needed for particle beams, especially with how far out from the planet they’d need to be, but kinetic kill weaponry worked perfectly fine within the System. The best case scenario would be to never actually *need* such weapons, but Cato knew that wasn’t possible. His warframes, powerful as they were, didn’t use essence and had no rank.

Without that, no System denizen would take him seriously.

Onswa Ramik didn’t actually *like* being the Planetary Administrator. Yes, he did have access to some luxuries that weren’t available anywhere else on Sydea, but it took work. Most of the time it was busywork, but sometimes he had to make decisions that affected a lot of people in a very profound way. There was no higher authority he could turn to; even if he could contact the gods, they worked at the level of *the System*, not the people inside it. Any Sydeans who were Bismuth or even Azoth rank were no longer interested or even reachable, off gaining power in the vast expanse of the other worlds.

When Arene had sent a message that the origin of that damnable Quest was there and wanted to *talk*, he had the feeling of seeing some enormous looming cloud. A powerful storm, like the ones that swept [Long Grass Conflict Zone] where it stretched from horizon to horizon and turned the sky black. Not that such a storm was a threat to him at Platinum, but he still remembered huddling in [Ramik-es Town] with his parents while rain and wind lashed the walls. [Ramik-es Town] was gone now, but the storms still blew there.

At least the other Platinums would actually answer his hastily-issued Emergency Quest. Onswa *still* didn’t have his full privileges back, but he no longer had to go down to the central nexus and pay essence. The newfound responsiveness was about the only positive aspect of the past few

months, even if it was solely out of self-preservation. No part of Sydea had gone untouched by the swarm of outsiders looking to capitalize on the windfall.

The sudden, horrifying expansion of the quest's scope certainly added extra incentive.

It was in some ways a relief that there *was* some singular source, something that could be talked and reasoned with. Something that had a goal, rather than endless swarms of Platinum level monsters destroying cities and people. Yet a part of him knew that no matter the true nature of it all, this was the end of the Sydea he knew. It clearly wanted something from them, but Onswa could think of nothing that Sydea could spare.

He tore through the last leg of the journey, to where Arene's essence burned bright atop Sokhal Town's Nexus. His senses found more instances of that strange fuzz which accompanied the invaders, but much larger than any he'd so far encountered. It was difficult to suppress his urge to simply eradicate them with his A-tier [Aether Purge], but that would make discussion difficult. Especially since it was clear such an action would do nothing but satisfy his own pique. It was just too bad that Arene hadn't bothered to convey any real detail via farcaster.

Onswa swooped down to join Arene on the roof of the Nexus, in the shadow of its characteristic tower, laying eyes on the foreign creatures for the first time. They weren't camouflaged, nor vague black blobs like the one he had dealt with in [Frozen Peaks Conflict Zone]. They were massive things, far larger than the first ones, and something about them gave him a sense of danger.

It wasn't Skills. The things were barely even Copper rank, with only a trace of essence, but [Appraise] still only returned [???]. Then there was the way their heads tracked him as he approached, though he should have been moving too fast and his presence too well-hidden for anything of that rank.

High above in the sky, a few thousand feet up, was another fuzzy signature, though this one was camouflaged and seemed like some strange floating blob to his senses rather than a proper creature. Also concerning, but it seemed to be drifting in the wind, bobbing erratically rather than properly hovering. That made no sense, considering how high rank flight skills were, but it was another possible threat.

Every single Platinum arriving at the same town was the best show of force he could manage, but it also put every single Platinum in the same town. With the strangeness of everything surrounding the Defense Quest and the being responsible, he felt he had to be wary. Any of the Bismuth ranks that had invaded Sydea could do enormous damage if they found such a gathering.

"Arene," he greeted his fellow Platinum. One of the beasts below was holding a muttered conversation with a pair of fine-looking young women, and by stretching his senses he found the discussion was simply covering who the Platins were. The basics every Sydean knew, but it still rankled that someone was a traitor. Or perhaps a hostage; it was difficult to tell.

"This is one unholy mess," Arene said, not bothering to lower her voice. She kept making a fist with one of her hands and then releasing it. "It's unbelievable, but at the same time, what else can explain what's going on?"

"I haven't the faintest clue what you're talking about," Onswa said dryly. He'd never seen Arene so flustered, though he could hardly blame her. Four identical, oversized monsters crouching in the streets of a town was bad enough. Towns were safe zones, and monsters shouldn't have been able to enter. That they tracked things with eerie synchronization, and things that copper ranks really shouldn't be able to, only made things worse.

"I'm going to have to explain this three more times, aren't I?" Arene muttered. "It says — well, a lot of things, actually. That it's from outside the System, and that it actually wants to help."

"Odd way of showing it," Onswa replied, narrowing his eyes at the creatures.

"That's not even the unbelievable part." Arene said, continuing her pacing.

"Oh?"

"It says it wants to destroy the System."

Onswa stared, then laughed. Then stopped laughing, because it was clear Arene was serious. He tried to consider it, and his mind simply bounced off the concept because it was too ridiculous.

"So it wants to destroy the world," he said, looking down at the creatures again. He'd heard about such things in the further recess of the System, worlds with far more essence. Things that could challenge even Alum-rank adventurers.

"Just the System," a deep voice answered, a rumble that fit the enormous, hexapedal lizard that stood easily in the street below. It didn't surprise him that it had been listening, though just hearing coherent speech from the odd-looking thing was a shock. "The others should be here in a few minutes. Marek is lagging behind but at the rate he's going it still won't take very long."

The casual assessment chilled Onswa. At Platinum his sensory range was extraordinary, but not *that* good. He stretched out with his A-Tier [Aether Perception] until he found the nearest river, but there was no touch of water essence that would imply Marek had reached it yet. Even as he did so the greenery bloomed with brilliant wood essence and Hirau walked out of one of the trees. There was no essence interference from any other Skills either, so whatever senses the being had were far beyond his ken.

Beyond that comment, the thing didn't attempt to start a conversation, and Arene was too busy pacing. Onswa took a long breath and tried to consider it rationally. New worlds *were* added to the System on occasion, and thinking was split on whether they were created or found. Before, it had been a useless debate that he'd never bothered with. Now, it was incredibly important.

Dealing with something from outside reality was *entirely* beyond him.

The first to arrive was not actually Hirau, though it should have been. Karsa burst from nowhere and vaulted over the city walls to land on top of the System Nexus hard enough to make the building tremble. She rested her immense hammer over her shoulder and looked down at the beasts with eyes that were more interested than sleepy. Arene started to explain herself once again but was interrupted by Hirau.

"No fighting," Onswa snapped, as he felt Hirau's essence surge at the sight of the enormous monsters taking up space in the streets. Platinums fighting in a town would level it, and be

pointless besides. Going by the quest there could be thousands or more of the things, and all they'd do by attacking these ones was make more enemies. For all he knew this strange creature could assault every town simultaneously – the safe zone clearly didn't keep it out – and there would be nothing even a Bismuth could do about it.

Hirau narrowed his eyes but obeyed, keeping a close watch on the monsters as he circled around to where the other Platinums were. The creatures just looked amused. Their staring contest was interrupted when Marek finally arrived, surfing along a swirl of floating water to drop down next to the others on the crowded roof.

"We're all here," Onswa said, taking charge and glancing from Arene to the creatures in the streets. "What exactly do you have to say?"

"I am Cato," one of the creatures rumbled. "Ten years ago, the System invaded Earth — what you were told was Ahrusk. We pushed it back."

Onswa suppressed the urge to reject the implications of those simple statements. Cato had more than proved that something *very* strange was going on.

"But that alone isn't good enough," a different creature said, though in the exact same voice and tone. "Given time, the System will return, and we may not be as lucky as we were the first time. Then there is holding the System accountable for its crimes. Untold billions *died* because of it, and that is just on Earth. It did the same to Sydea, however many hundreds of even thousands of years ago." The accusation in the deep voice jolted Onswa, the thick boiling hate and disgust completely undisguised. The amused air had vanished entirely, leaving behind something much darker and harder.

"That is quite an accusation," Onswa said cautiously. "But even if that's true, that's in the past."

"And the present is still that the System is killing you." One of the creatures shifted and its scales shimmered, suddenly turning into a map. With its broad bulk facing them, it suddenly became some strange version of a System display, showing the very town they were in, seen from above. He could see the figures on the Nexus roof shift and he reflexively glanced upward, to the camouflaged blob above.

Then the map expanded outward, and it became impossible that they were seeing simply through the eyes of the hovering entity. The map labeled Sokhal Town in a distinctly System-like method, but then labeled other points on the slowly expanding map as former cities. Some of them he recognized; towns that had simply failed decades or centuries or go. Some of them he didn't, and Onswa wasn't sure if he had simply forgotten or they had been before his time. He certainly didn't think that Cato was inventing them.

"You have lost most of your towns," Cato rumbled. "A steady recession over hundreds of years. The System won't let you tame the wilds, or dig into a prime location and build up. It is the one that selects where cities and towns are located. It is the one that decides when and how they can expand, and how much it costs."

"Maybe, but you're the reason why everything is going so badly *right now*," Hirau snapped, a vine braided between his fingers and slowly slithering back and forth like a snake. Small as it was, it was Hirau's A-tier weapon and far more dangerous than most would guess.

“Am I?” The tone of the rumbling voice was back to almost amused. “All the reaction to my presence is entirely the System. What have I actually *done* besides exist?”

“You did kill us,” the young, white-scaled Sydean responded, looking up at the creature towering over her.

“And I apologized for that!” Cato protested. “Unfortunately, I was pressed for time and had to defend myself.”

“Dyen said that the Tornok Clan Platinums killed him and Esca,” Arene broke in, staring fixedly at Cato. “But he’s alive. They’re alive. Why isn’t my *grand-niece* alive?” For the first time, Cato hesitated. One of the creatures even glanced at the young Sydean woman before he replied.

“Because I’m not as good as I should be. Death is a hazier concept for me, but I’m not a god who can simply raise people up. I can preserve those who have died, but I need to be outside the System to restore them. On that day on the mountain, I wasn’t good enough to protect everyone while at the same time escaping you. Which I certainly do not hold against you.”

“You mean I—” Arene bit off her sentence, her aggressive posture suddenly wilting.

“No, the Tornok Clan killed her, and I failed at preserving her,” Cato said firmly, which rang oddly to Onswa. If Cato was incredibly powerful, why was he bothering to try and spare Arene’s feelings? If he wasn’t, why did he feel so comfortable confronting them? Karsa put her hand on Arene’s shoulder as Onswa tried to order his mind.

“I would prefer to leave explanations for *after* you tell us what you want,” Onswa said. “What do you possibly need us for?”

“Because if I just removed the System it’d hurt you nearly as much as when the System destroyed us,” Cato replied. “When the System came to Earth I saw people die. My friends, my family.” Arene twitched at that, and even Onswa had to admit the dark resignation in Cato’s voice sounded genuine. “I saw an entire civilization reduced to one choice: kill or die. If I am to oppose the system, I *must* ensure that when it goes away all those choices that were taken from you are returned, not that you are cut from everything you know.”

“A pretty speech, but you’re still coming in as a conqueror,” Marek objected.

“Oh, God no,” Cato said with a laugh. “Ruling a planet and a people is a lot of work. Who’d want that?” Onswa winced, because it was so true. Even if he wasn’t exactly a ruler, it was more work than he’d thought when he was merely Gold rank. “Besides, you’re not human. What would I know about how you work best?” The spokebeast waved a forepaw dismissively. “No, you all are the ones that should be in charge. I’m just support staff.”

“But you’re still going to be going after the System, somehow,” Onswa pointed out.

“Yes.” Cato’s voice went hard and flat. “*That* I cannot negotiate on. Though I would think you’d be perfectly happy yourself,” he continued more easily. “Without the System, you would be able to produce enough food to feed your people, you could build towns where you wanted and when. There wouldn’t be enemies spilling through a portal you cannot close or control.”

“You think we would have some sort of perfect life without the System?” Onswa’s muzzle wrinkled in disbelief, though part of him admitted there was a certain allure to the idea of no longer needing to deal with the morass of other System worlds and the constant worry of some Bismuth or Azoth rank deciding to take Sydea for themselves.

“We have a word for that,” Cato said. “*Utopia*.” The syllables were a tongue Onswa had never heard, something that felt as alien and out of place as Cato looked. “It means *no place*, because it cannot exist. I would never promise that your lives without the System would be perfect, but I do think they would be better.”

The other Platinums looked contemplative, in their own ways. Arene’s brow was furrowed, Karsa looked even more sleepy than usual, Marek had his arms folded and Hirau’s vine kept rolling around his fingers. Yet it was Onswa who needed to actually *decide*. Not only was he Planetary Administrator – at least for the moment – he was the most powerful and oldest Platinum on the planet.

In a way it was obvious. Cato had demonstrated that he had capabilities beyond most Platinums, if in no other way but being able to encompass the entire world. The quest text made that clear. Even if Cato had declared his intent to subjugate Sydea, Onswa’s best bet would have been to send a plea for help out to whatever Azoth or perhaps even Alum ranks might hear it. He doubted a Bismuth rank could manage to fend off a planetary-scale threat like Cato.

Onswa didn’t trust Cato, of course, whatever the being’s protestations were. Yet he couldn’t imagine anything the being would actually *want* from Sydea that it couldn’t simply take. And Onswa had to admit he did find what Cato was offering to be enticing — even though all Cato was offering was a *lack* of things. He couldn’t possibly say no, but didn’t dare say yes.

“You are asking for more than is reasonable,” Onswa said slowly. “We are hardly in a position where we can afford to lose what little we have, even if it’s for some theoretical future. We have families and low ranks that need to be protected, housed, and fed, and there are foreign high-rankers coming through to deal with the quests you’ve sparked. Perhaps you can demonstrate your ability by aiding us with those issues, and then we can decide.”

“I’d be glad to!” Cato said, and indeed he sounded genuinely happy, which made Onswa even more uneasy but there was no withdrawing the request. “Those are problems that I’d have had to deal with anyway.”

“And the quest itself?” Onswa asked, pulling up his System interface and glancing at the thousands of entries. “I can start spreading the word to stop hunting down your — troops?” He made the last word a question. “But the sheer scale is going to cause panic no matter what.”

“Oh, by all means hunt down the troops,” Cato said. “In fact, I’ll send you versions that are *designed* to be killed, to give your people an advantage for now, while we’re making preparations. As for the scale — well. It’s meant to hide things like this, the *important* meetings, so they’re not constantly interrupted. But I suppose it doesn’t need to be quite so widespread.” One of the beasts snapped the claws of its forepaw, and the entries in the quest suddenly fell from nearly ten thousand to merely several hundred.

Onswa hoped he hadn’t made a serious mistake.

World Deity Marus cursed to himself as his System Interface nagged him. Things had been going well; the essence stocks were filling and depleting as they should and the strange quest had been doing its job. Then an alert had pulled him from his well-deserved relaxation, away from the basking sands and the exotic drinks imported from the core systems.

Only the most extreme deviations actually caused any kind of alarm. Marus had long set the Interface to simply run on automatic, having no need to coddle the natives or ensure anything beyond the steady flow of essence. There should have been nothing that *could* trouble him, considering he had revoked the majority of the Planetary Administrator privileges — and yet, here was yet another problem.

He grumbled as he combed the sand from his fur and dressed, not willing to meet whatever the new crisis was less than properly alert, and then finally crossed to his console to see the true extent of the problem. The sheer wall of text in the System-generated quest alert made him stare, stretching over the entire display and even beyond, seemingly listing every single zone on Sydea. He stared, dumbstruck, for long enough that the System Interface began nagging him again, and he growled and swiped at the notifications.

The useless animals on Sydea clearly couldn't do anything right, even with the help of the off-world rankers attracted by the quest. For a moment Marus was tempted to send a message to his direct superior in the core worlds, but only for a moment. To do that would be to admit failure, or even get the attention of the EIn clan elders, and that was *far* worse than any troubles that might arise from a System quest getting out of hand on some frontier world. He had to handle it himself.

After a moment, he grinned as the simple, obvious, and effective solution presented itself. The original System-quest had been useful, but its proliferation was undeniable evidence that something had slipped out of Marus' control. He certainly didn't want to advertise that, so going to other Deities was out of the question — but simply issuing a quest to mortals, one for all the outworlders to recruit someone to help complete the defense quest, addressed the matter perfectly.

With any luck, the extra bodies would get things under control and nobody in the core world would ever find out about his mistake.