

Chapter 12 — Annexation

In a clearing in the middle of a Silver-rank conflict zone on the planet of Makel, an encampment of roving murderers and extortionists ceased to exist. They were removed, not by a higher rank – though there were several on the planet – or by a more moral group of adventurers. Instead, they were erased by a rain of projectiles traveling faster than the speed of sound, leaving behind only a blasted crater.

Despite the grim solemnity of the task, Cato did take *some* satisfaction in executing people that he'd caught murdering juveniles still in their Copper ranks, basically kids. He didn't know what their motives were, and he didn't care. Since he had the ability to take them to task, he did.

His smaller railguns, the ones with a yield far below nuclear, were effective enough against the gold rank types and below. He could reach out and touch the worst offenders without having to be present himself, though Cato tried to restrict himself to only those performing the most blatant and obvious predation.

On one world, he had removed a similar group ambushing and murdering or robbing people leaving a dungeon. On another, he'd repeatedly eradicated a wandering elite that had a penchant for targeting the nearby lower-rank zone and those within it. Small touches like that he could manage, but little else until he was ready to make a larger move.

By pure logic he shouldn't have even been doing the small things until he had thoroughly saturated System space, but pure logic hadn't driven him to invade the System to begin with. If he was the one who had to watch people fighting and dying, or being enslaved, or otherwise being abused, then would take any actions short of risking the greater campaign to help. It was all he could do.

Until the System demanded more.

"Cato, we just got a quest," Sili Kenek, née Leese Haekos, reported from the surface of that world, one at the edge of the frontier but comfortably in the middle of his expansion, thirty or forty hops from Ikent and a few thousand light years toward the galactic rim in real space. "There's a new world opening up."

"What." Cato's mind spun without catching for a few moments, the human frame sitting in the station on Haekos' largest moon blinking dumbly at the wall. Then he took a long breath. "Is it to *Ahrusk*?"

"It says that the Gogri Portal Staging Area will be opening in three days," Raine replied.

"Then we have three days to bring down the System here," Cato said, starting a long series of commands to his industrial infrastructure above the planet. The vast majority of it was still tied up in the process of exponential growth. Mines fed factories to build more machines to disassemble more asteroids to feed more factories. Mass drivers hurled multi-ton projectiles through the vacuum, solar fields bloomed across millions of square miles, and the orbits just outside the planet's moon swarmed with specialized facilities. The outermost edges of his territory had very little beyond their initial infrastructure, but the worlds nearer the center of his expansion had fleets ready and waiting. Hundreds of thousands of warframes, supertankers of raw material, railgun platforms, and even a few particle beam weapons.

The calculus balancing action against inaction held for the worlds that existed in a status quo, however much he disliked it. A brand new world was different. There was little to save on worlds that had been overrun by the System for thousands of years or more, but he would be damned if he was going to sit and watch some other planet suffer Earth's fate when he could intervene. He might be able to head off an entire apocalypse and keep some poor bastards from having all of reality ripped out from under them.

If he had to justify it further, there was no way that any action against the System would go perfectly, and he'd encounter things that needed to be changed, adjusted, or dealt with in better ways in the future, for larger campaigns. If there was no other reason, then this was a test run for a number of approaches that he could only plan and simulate, and needed now to test against reality. Unlike with Sydea, he'd be able to keep transmitting the whole time until the portals went down, so the other versions of himself would actually benefit from the insight.

Three days was barely enough time to get things moving. His military fleets alone would need at least a day to de-orbit from where they were parked, far enough away to avoid a potential retreat of the Urivan solution. Mass drivers were light-hours away, around gas giants or seeded among asteroids and, while they retargeted their payloads and began sending packages toward Haekos, that cargo wouldn't arrive until things were well underway, serving as reinforcements.

Factories retooled themselves, rebuilding material printers and chemical baths to churn out bioweaponry and orbital emplacements rather than more production capacity, and extra communications relays were launched into varying orbits. He double-checked the deep backup, hidden and quiescent out in the Kuiper Belt and Oort cloud, tiny probes that could nonetheless rebuild from a disaster short of the System engulfing the entire heliosphere in its anti-technology reality.

Raine and Leese joined him after a few hours, needing to find a spot to stow their System frames first. Though there was a good chance they wouldn't be using them for much longer, and they had avoided making any waves. Rather, they were masquerading as Peak Silvers under appropriate names for the amphibious, almost shark-like natives of the planet below.

The natives weren't doing as poorly as the Sydeans had been, but he wouldn't exactly have called them thriving, either. Though it wasn't like he even considered the big clans to be prosperous, just the most successful crab in the bucket — a comparison that might have been in poor taste, considering Clan Mokrom's resemblance to the crustaceans in question.

"Do we even have the ability to deal with it in three days?" Raine looked over the timetables and deployment plans, some of which she — or some version of her, anyway — had a hand in designing. At the scale they were operating, just unloading cargo and weapons was a massive logistical challenge. "It's going to be close," she said, answering her own question as she examined their plans.

"It is," Cato agreed grimly, sorting through the wargaming simulations for the ones that actually operated on such a short timescale. "Do we know where the staging area is going to be? I suppose it doesn't matter too much, though," he muttered. Three days to crash the System was a blitzkrieg; simultaneous assault, no buildup, no negotiations, no measured expulsion of outworlders.

Then there was the cleanup and remediation, which was going to be even more frenzied than the actual fighting. He had to assume a total ecosystem collapse, up to and including the single-celled life responsible for producing oxygen. The System didn't really worry about such niceties – it clearly regulated atmospheres, especially since the air didn't seem to leak through portals from one world to the next despite different pressures and compositions – but the real world had to account for little things like breathing.

"I'm most worried about the oceans," Leese sighed, her virtual tail flicking back and forth. "The coasts have a *lot* of obvious alteration, and I don't know what will happen when the System goes away. I wish we could have seen what happened with Sydea — though I guess Sydea didn't have as many changes as Haekos seems to."

"Someone was always going to have to be first." Cato flicked through the deployment options and finally selecting one. There was no point in dithering, and there weren't many choices to begin with. "We just got unlucky."

Fusion engines lit, certainly visible from the surface, as heavily-armored transports moved into a closer orbit. There were thousands of them, though still only a tithe of what Cato would have preferred. Given a few more years of production he could have had ten times that number; a decade of buildup and he could have gotten into the thousands of times. After only five years on Haekos, he was still on the early end of the exponential curve.

He made sure to send everything out through the radio network, which had grown fairly robust over the past five years. The fringe worlds still used FernNet rather than FungusNet, but the total bandwidth was slowly growing. It seemed to be consumed as fast as he could generate it, but for something like this all the ancillary messages could wait.

The other versions of himself, or the other versions of Raine and Leese, weren't likely to be able to help directly, but FungusNet meant that they could still help. They could give him eyes and ears on worlds further up the chain, spotting any significant movement through the portals and giving him time to prepare for reinforcements or whatever else might be going on. Same with quests, and perhaps they could even provide distractions, depending on what happened, so all the nearby worlds started to move to a proper combat footing. Despite all the wargaming simulations, they'd have to play a lot of it by ear.

With only three of them – Yaniss definitely was not involved in this operation – there wasn't really a need for a real military structure. Most of the forces would be running on their own programming or by remote, despite being biological. Nevertheless, each of the three of them had their own area of expertise.

Leese was less interested in the actual fighting than the brutal work of cleaning up the biological wreckage the System inflicted on its planets. Something Cato was grateful for, because that kind of repair was an utter slog. Raine had become more comfortable – in sims, at least – with acting as a commander-general for the swarm forces, all the thousands of tiny bio-drones. That freed Cato to take overall command, handle the orbital weaponry, and pilot any warframes that needed a delicate touch.

There probably wouldn't be many of those. The hope was that they could hit things hard and fast enough to not need to engage any local forces, though that would be exceedingly difficult when it came to, for example, the Planetary Administrator Interface. Cato didn't *know* if the prior

version of himself had been successful in cracking the intelligence out of the System construct, but considering how fast the portals had gone down it had been decided one way or another in short order.

Messages flew thick and fast for the following hours, Catos far and wide preparing their forces as around Haekos massive craft fell inward toward the planet. Long-range surveillance coupled with the groundwork from Raine and Leese meant he had the exact location of every dungeon, and the towns were of course obvious. There were a good twenty Platinums around, including the local Planetary Administrator, and all of them earmarked for special attention.

He didn't need to fight them, as such, merely keep them from interfering, and to that end had dredged up various non-lethal methods from the databanks. With a full analysis of their biology he could at least try to sneak around some of the protections the System granted, taking the same tack as forces up against warframes like the ones Cato tended to use. Rather than trying to damage the body, inconvenience the mind.

Project Cringe had loaded the warframes with effects that would be absolutely horrible for Haekosians to experience. A stink so bad that it drove away all coherent thought; sounds like nails-on-chalkboard but a thousand times worse. Lights flashing at frequencies and in spectra to instantly nauseate and disorient the beholder.

None of them were attacks as such. They didn't do damage, they didn't have any lasting effects. They were simply unbelievably harrowing to experience in the moment, as Cato could attest from actually inhabiting a Haekosian frame during testing. He doubted that he could render a Platinum fully unconscious, but he could at least drive them away from an area temporarily. The surprise would be as much a weapon as the experience itself.

Cato flicked through the various tell-tales, sensor readouts, and condition reports — or at least one version of himself did, closeted away in a purpose-built virtual environment solely dedicated to monitoring the invasion effort. He would have vastly preferred a softer approach, and hated the idea of coming down on the world below with all the same consideration that the System had showed Earth. Yet he had been given no choice, and if he could manage to head off the death of millions or billions on whatever world the System was trying to annex, he would count that as a victory.

He gave the order, and the campaign began.

"I'm needing to cut off a world out on the fringes, so now might be a good time to run your Bismuth quest. If anything is going to distract the powers that be, it'll be this."

Raine twitched as Cato's voice sounded in her head unexpectedly, just as she was falling asleep. At Peak Platinum she didn't technically *need* much sleep, but after finishing a grueling Bismuth-ranked dungeon she certainly *wanted* it. So of course something would happen as she was lying down for the first time in a month.

"What's going on? Do you need us there?" She glanced over at Leese, who yawned and struggled upright.

“No, you need to stay well away. You’re my vanguard; if you’re caught up in any wars, then I’ve already lost. If anything, now is when you need to be striking out as much as possible. Since I’m going to be taking action, now is probably the best time to go deeper.”

“Then we’d better do it,” Leese sent, rubbing at her eyes. *“We could use a few more bits of equipment, but we’re probably better suited for ascension than anyone else at this point.”*

The past few years had been grueling, even with all their advantages. Less because of the danger of the fights than the sheer amount of time they’d needed to spend in dungeons. Cato had referred to it as *grinding*, repeatedly fighting the same elites and guardians to seek uncommon gear. The sort that they wanted wasn’t even often for sale, because few people sought out equipment that multiplied abilities, rather than added to them, and most people just turned it into the System pylons for tokens.

Most people just didn’t have the raw capability that an increase of ten to fifteen percent was worth it over the flat, direct boosts from more common equipment. After all their upgrades, it was the other way entirely for Raine and Leese, and after years of slowly accumulating useful gear they could blaze through High Bismuth dungeons. Not Peak Bismuth; area effects were still too powerful and they couldn’t quite cross the gap, but fighting Bismuths at Platinum was nigh unheard-of to begin with.

They had technically been ready for the ascension for over a year, but they’d spent that time cutting a line out through the frontier worlds, spreading Cato’s spears and searching for incremental equipment upgrades. Part of the delay was simply trying to get as many advantages as possible, but part of it was because they weren’t sure how long it would take and that Bismuths wandering the frontier would stick out even more than Platinums.

“Time to go,” Raine said aloud, and pulled up the Bismuth Ascendance quest.

[Ascend to Bismuth!

Required Rank: Peak Platinum

Feats of Glory: 1/1

Dungeon Delves: 50/50

World Elites: 75/75

Current Task: Report to Bismuth Ascension Grounds. Nearest world: Akea]

Ironically, it turned out their Feat of Glory was not related to delving above their rank at all. Instead, they had been granted it for surviving fifty assassination attempts by the Assassin’s Guild. Nobody had tried to jump them since they beat Peak Platinum, but from their infrequent contacts with Dyen they knew the contract was still active. It had been upgraded to Bismuth-only after so many deaths trying to complete it, but they had also gotten the jewelry that altered the results of [Appraise].

There were hardly any Sydeans out in the System, but at the same time most people didn’t know what Sydeans looked like, so their cover identities simply used the species of a vaguely similar reptilian race from the world of Kellach. The differences weren’t too obvious under their

armor, and so long as they didn't run into anyone from Clan Kellach it would hold up to casual scrutiny.

Raine was pretty certain that they'd be able to spot and handle any assassins regardless. While most people relied on their perception Skills to track enemies, especially the ebb and flow of essence, the sensory capelet sprouting from her shoulders gave her a superior view of her surroundings compared to most Skills. Better, it benefitted from multiplier gear as well.

She followed Leese out of their room, the two of them heading through the night for the Nexus portal to Akea. According to Yaniss there were easier and better Ascension Grounds in the inner worlds, but they didn't dare brave that before Bismuth. True, they still wouldn't be able to stand up against Azoths or Alums, but without direct clan backing the pair would not be welcome as mere Platitudes.

The Bismuth Ascension Grounds were on a remote mesa on Akea, not near any town, surrounded by a glowing dome that couldn't even be passed through by anyone below Peak Platinum — or above Low Bismuth. Crossing the boundary to the interior of the ground, she could see four circular metal frames, where portals might live, wrought out of copper, silver, gold, and platinum metals. Though Raine doubted the enemies within would correspond to the ranks.

There was a pillar in the middle of the space bounded by the four portals, and as they approached two pedestals raised up, one for each of them. Each pedestal had a slot with a symbol inscribed on it, matching the one on the estate tokens they had received at Platinum. There was probably a benefit to not having used it yet, and she had no problem dropping it into the slot. Leese followed suit, and the copper frame lit, creating a portal within — and just as the System recognized Cato's invasion.

[A Crusade!

An enemy of the System has been spotted on a far distant world. All those who dare should make their way to Haekos, and destroy the invader.

Rewards: Variable]

The notification appeared only a few moments after they had used their tokens, and considering how far they were from Haekos Raine imagined the Crusade quest had popped up *everywhere*. Or at least, the entire region, perhaps stretching all the way from the frontier to the core worlds. She'd heard snippets about the Crusade quest, and though nobody seemed to be *doing* anything about it, clearly some of the gods realized Cato was still about.

But dealing with the gods was Cato's problem. He could clearly deal with divinity, so it was best if she and Leese ignored the entire thing and focused on what was important: getting stronger and preparing the way. The two of them readied their weapons and stepped through into a blazing desert landscape.

[Bismuth Ascension Grounds: Copper Trial

Skill and equipment strength restricted to Copper.

Choose four Skills. All others will be locked for the duration of the trial]

Raine almost laughed. The restriction would probably have been troublesome for most Platitudes, having to remember how to fight as a far weaker version of themselves, but neither she nor Leese had been Platinum for all *that* long. Besides, with all of Cato's augmentations they were far, *far* more powerful than any normal Copper would be.

She just selected her Platinum Skills, then went through a quick stretch and series of weapon movements as her combat algorithms adapted. Beside her, Leese did the same, the two of them taking a moment to acclimate as they eyed the surroundings. There was no real cover, just low dunes, but she wasn't worried. The way they were now, they could probably deal with *Golds* with their Copper-rank strength.

A hissing noise and shifting sands preceded the sudden appearance of a horde of Copper-ranked scorpions, a black tide rushing in toward them. Raine switched her weapon's form to a broad-bladed poleaxe, almost smirking as she regarded the incoming swarm. This was going to be *fun*.

The ensuing slaughter was relatively simple, but stretched on and on. The corpses melted into the sands in moments, preventing them from piling into a mounded wall around the pair as they easily cut through the endless waves. Minutes ticked by, and suddenly the scorpions pulled away, vanishing back among the dunes as something far larger made the sand tremble underfoot. A single enormous specimen burst forth from below, towering over them as it readied its claws.

They unceremoniously dispatched it in a matter of seconds.

Raine doubted that the entire Ascension trial would be so easy, but the System was clearly not designed for what Cato had given them. They weren't even winded after destroying the first guardian, and were more than ready by the time the second wave began, this one of hook-beaked birds. Each wave was not much more difficult than the last, though they differed drastically in the type of fight. Birds, monsters with pikes and spiked balls, stone golems, sand elementals — each one required a different approach, but with the same small set of Skills. It was obvious what kind of lessons the trial was *trying* to test, but they had more than enough experience and the combat algorithms besides.

"I wonder about the other Earthers," Leese said, following the same train of thought as the Copper trial ended. They were awarded no essence or loot drops save a single token to open the Silver trial. "If they all found it this easy, or maybe even easier."

"Probably," Raine agreed as they stepped through the portal that had appeared. "The System must be an entirely different experience for them. Take a break here?"

"A short one," Leese agreed, stretching and flexing her fingers. The Copper trial had taken most of a day, and the higher rank ones would probably take even longer, but that was not so great an imposition. They were restored to Platinum strength the moment they left the trial grounds, and at Platinum they could go for ages without sleep. At Bismuth, they'd technically never need it again.

Raine broke out some of Cato's special rations, heating up a hearty stew for both of them as she glanced over her status. There was no further update to the Crusade quest, but it had been less than a day. Whatever happened, it would probably be resolved before they finished their Ascension.

“That’s definitely Cato,” Marus Eln said grimly, glancing over the shoulder of Lakor Eln, a very far distant cousin and the World Deity of Haekos. Annoyingly, he had to share the space with Oran Lundt, a particularly hard-carapaced dullard of the lamentable Lundt clan. Marus didn’t quite follow all the wrangling that had occurred at the highest echelons of the clans, but he’d been saddled with the brute for this annexation. The new world was to be a *joint* venture, and Marus had no idea how that was supposed to work but he’d have to deal with it.

“That doesn’t look very...” Oran trailed off as the few things falling from the sky multiplied from tens to hundreds to thousands. Then even more, all over the planet. “I stand corrected,” Oran rumbled, shifting his four armored legs. “That is *quite* an impressive force.”

“Here,” Marus said, offering Lakor the memory crystal copied from Initik, the one that had the precise signature of Cato’s creations. “Best to destroy them before they can start to spread.”

“Yes, but...” Lakor said, accepting the crystal and letting his fingers play over the Interface. “The cost to destroy all this is already close to bankrupting the world reserves.”

“Better that than losing the world entirely,” Marus said. “We can—” He stopped as the Interface displayed a quest notification, one that would make their lives much easier.

[A Crusade!

An enemy of the System has been spotted on a far distant world. All those who dare should make their way to Haekos, and destroy the invader.

Rewards: Variable]

Marus had no idea where a Crusade quest had come from – they weren’t exactly common, for a variety of reasons – but it seemed that fate and the System were on their side. A frontier world such as Haekos had very few powerful mortals, but the Crusade quest would certainly bring in more. Better, the defenses and the quest rewards wouldn’t be coming out *their* pockets.

“Destroy what you can,” Marus suggested, eyeing the quest. “It’ll make it easier when the reinforcements arrive, and we can empower *them*. More efficient than trying to erase all this directly.”

“I still don’t like it,” Lakor said with a grimace, but pressed his hand against the Interface. A wave of divine light rolled over Haekos, and all of Cato’s forces that were on the ground suddenly dissolved in a wash of gold. It would have been entirely satisfying to see the result of that divine intervention if that had been all — but the forces kept coming.

“Where is this all *coming* from?” Lakor said as, five minutes later, the hundreds of thousands of creatures Lakor had vaporized were replaced by more coming down from the heavens.

“If we’re to believe what Cato has said, from outside the System.” Marus was secretly glad he’d left Sydea before he’d had to deal with *that* level of invasion. Weapons that could hurt gods were bad enough, but being able to summon enough warriors to blanket an entire world was its own kind of power. “Scry the skies and we might see something.”

Lakor grunted and manipulated the scrying, changing from all the various cities and towns to looking upward at the sky on the night half of the planet. For a moment, there seemed to be

nothing but stars and the dark silhouettes of descending forces. Then they saw that the stars were *moving*, the entire heavens seeming to swirl. Lakor waved a hand, trying to expand the view, but even ten times closer, a hundred times, they didn't resolve to more than points of light. Some appeared, some vanished, but they had to be further away than Haekos' moon if they stayed so insubstantial.

The scry suddenly caught on a descending construct, a dark bulbous pod that would be difficult to spot with low-rank, mortal eyes, for it had very little essence in it. It streaked down through the air, fire boiling from the underside, until it reached a certain point where it seemed to puff into vast gossamer sheets. Dark hexapedal creatures clung to the thin strands like seeds of an exceedingly strange plant, waiting until the headlong plunge had slowed before dropping the remaining few hundred feet to the ground.

Alongside the Crusade was the defense quest that Marus was all too familiar with, one that would be a boon for a world if Cato were less of a threat. For any mortal foe, Lakor's divine intervention would have been enough, even if high-rank mortals couldn't handle it themselves. But Cato could hurt a god, which meant that wherever he lurked, he had the essence of a god as well.

"We may have to ask our clans for extra essence," Marus half-suggested, though he didn't know if they'd actually *get* such an allowance. He knew his father had already stretched a point to give Marus another chance, and he doubted many would think that defending a frontier world, or a newly annexed one, was worth spending too much.

"What I want to know," Oran rumbled. "How did he know to come *here*? Clearly this Cato has been building up his forces for some time, but nobody outside our clans knew there was to be an annexation, let alone when and where. The mortal races were only informed a day ago, but what we see is more than the work of a single day."

"He seems to be from outside the System," Marus started, and Oran shrugged.

"Maybe. Probably. Some sort of [Tamer] class, it looks like, and if he isn't using *our* transport network, then he has his own." He waved at the sky visible in Lakor's scry. "Somewhere out there. That still doesn't explain how he clearly knew beforehand."

Marus grunted, hating to concede the point, but it was a worrisome item. Cato obviously had forces beyond what even a normal [World Deity] would be able to conjure, but the fact that he had brought them all to this specific world implied some subversion deep within the System's core. Either that or he could move all his beasts at a moment's notice, but if that was true, why hadn't he moved before? No, clearly he had some interest in annexations.

"Perhaps..." he said aloud. "Perhaps the annexations are infringing upon this Cato's territory — or his master's. He may have known because he sensed the System moving upon Gogri."

"Heresy," snorted Lakor. "All the highest level divines hold that the System *creates* these worlds for us."

"Which means it created Cato, too." Marus pointed out the obvious logical loophole.

"The System gives us tests," Lakor said stubbornly. "If this Cato believes he is defending his territory, is that any different than any other monster or world elite or dungeon guardian the System creates?"

Marus swallowed his objections, finding it hard to argue with Lakor's logic. He didn't believe it, deep down, not after seeing Cato use something that bypassed divine protection without divine essence, but it was indeed hard to believe there was really something outside the System's aegis. So far as he knew, such challenges were reserved for mortals and not for gods, but he wouldn't presume to say he understood everything the System did.

"The origin doesn't matter," Oran Lundt said, rumbling from beneath his carapace. "What matters is whether we can defeat him."

"No," Lakor said. "What matters is whether we can earn more from defeating him than what we spend to do it."