

Systema Delenda Est

Book 2: Undermining the System

Spreading into the wider System, Cato is confronted with the full scope of his crusade. Tens of thousands of worlds or more, beings capable of destroying planets, and even stricter limitations on technology if he doesn't want to show his hand early.

All he has are his two agents and a few dubious allies. If he were a being of flesh and blood, forced to go planet by planet in a slow march from one end of the System to the other, it would be the work of thousands or millions of years. But Cato is of Sol, a postbiological citizen with no such restrictions, and he can move in ways that no conventional human could.

The System may be immense, and the people within it have powers impossible to a technological civilization, but Cato has exponential growth.

Chapter 1 — Orbital Insertion

Working for a god involved more tedium than Raine had first imagined.

It wasn't sufficient to simply rank up. She had to ensure she could do what her Patron needed, and sometimes that meant delving the same dungeon on repeat, no matter how frustrating it might be. Even worse, no matter how many times she fought the same dungeon guardian, it still took care and she couldn't afford to be careless. Cato couldn't resurrect them just yet.

Even knowing that, she still barely dodged the massive club.

The peak Platinum monster had four of them, each twice the size of her body and beating a tattoo against the packed earth as it tried to flatten both her and Leese. Raine's [Blazing Steps] gave her the momentum to leap up onto the nearest arm, one slowed by Leese's freezing cuts, and then flashed further upward. Her poleaxe flared with blue fire as she crashed into one enormous eye, drawing a deafening bellow of pain.

Below, her attack gave Leese an opening to sever the monster's tendons — all four of them. Four arms and four legs was entirely too many limbs, especially attached to a monster the size of a small building, but Platinum monsters were not meant to be taken lightly. The thing tried to take a step back, reaching up to pluck Raine from its face, but it collapsed as its legs gave way and Raine drew a swath of fire down its neck, slicing open steel-hard skin.

The monster squalled as she and Leese methodically cut it open, perforating arteries and cutting into joints to keep ahead of the regeneration, dodging the flailing of the massive body that could still easily crush them despite their Gold-rank defenses. With it downed and most of its mobility gone, finishing it off didn't take too long, especially not with the weapons they'd acquired from other runs.

[Peak Platinum Rank monster defeated. Essence awarded.]

[Dungeon cleared. Essence Awarded. Platinum Tokens awarded. Overloaded B-tier, Gold-rank skill token awarded]

“Finally!” Raine said, accepting the dungeon reward and plucking the [Overloaded Skill Token] out of the air. “Do you want to use it or should I?”

“You, I think,” Leese said. “We can always try to get another.”

Raine grimaced, looking around the bottom floor of the dungeon, the massive stone pillars and giant flagstones that had become all too familiar. They’d needed to offer up both their town tokens from hitting Gold rank to even find out that this dungeon had a chance of dropping an [Overloaded Skill Token], and even then only if it was delved at Gold rather than Platinum. Which wasn’t actually a problem for the pair of them, and beating the dungeon with two people rather than four or five improved the chances even more, but they’d still run the same dungeon over thirty times.

She invoked the Token, and chose [Throwing Mastery] as her Overloaded Skill. It would be stuck at Gold forever, but a free Gold skill was hardly a waste. [Throwing Mastery] would synergize with [Blazing Spearwork] and give her a reasonable ranged option that could take advantage of her augmented body, but more importantly would finally mean they could fulfill Cato’s mandate.

The thought made her reach up to touch the little lizard that still clung to the top of her head. It was trivial to keep it fed and watered, and it was easy to coax off and back onto its perch, so it was hardly an imposition, but she was still surprised sometimes that it seemed to come out of their combats entirely intact. It was also their only link to Cato, so she was glad it seemed to be doing well.

“Let’s get out of here,” Raine said, as Leese bent to pick up the guardian drops: a spear and a cloak. They’d already seen the spear a half-dozen times, and in fact they both had a copy stored in their [Spearwork] Skills for closer combat. The cloak was a rarer drop, but welcome enough. Raine already had one, so Leese shrugged it on, flipping the hood up over her head and letting it settle over her horns. It was a multiplier item, which for many was disappointing as a few percent increase paled to a direct, flat boost to strength. But with Cato’s improvements it was incredible.

The two of them proceeded to the pylon at the end of the room, which returned them to the entrance. It was set into the side of a mountain, far from most towns. As a Platinum dungeon it didn’t see all that much traffic, either — though far more than Sydea’s Platinum dungeon ever had. The Urivan population was much higher ranked on average, and there were multiple teams of rising Platitudes rather than just five individuals for the whole planet.

None of them were about when she and Leese emerged, however, the surrounding wilderness of blue-leafed trees screening out most of the sky. The two of them had spent most of their time outside of towns solely because they didn’t know who was looking for them. The Tornok Clan types certainly hadn’t forgotten about them, and the divine attention Cato had attracted wasn’t something Raine would forget.

“We need to take a break before we go to [Mount Elkitat],” Leese said firmly. Raine looked at her, then sighed as she saw there was no arguing. They *had* been out for a while, and their small spatial bags only fit so much in the way of camping supplies. It *was* time to get some proper rest, especially since there were no towns or teleports near [Mount Elkitat]. It’d be a long

and grueling trek to the top of the world, and while Raine was eager to get started they couldn't afford to do so without some preparation.

They headed back to [Kerekik Town], over a hundred miles away but not so bad a trip with their Gold-rank movement Skills. Neither of them had wings anymore, their movement Skills instead allowing them to literally skate or run through the air. At full tilt they were faster than they ever had been before, cutting two streaks of glowing light above the forest.

Raine surveyed [Kerekik Town] before they actually entered, trying to spot any higher ranks or Tornok Clan in advance. Seeing it was safe, they crossed into the safe space of the walls and went right for the tavern. The only people visible in the town were Urivans, the insects all sporting different bright colors of chitin, something which was starting to wear on Raine. With the Sydean portal closed, she knew that there were precious few of her kind out in the greater System, but she still felt the isolation of being surrounded by another race entirely. At least she had Leese.

They paid for a meal and had it sent to their rooms rather than eating out in the open. It wasn't likely the Urivans would do anything, but as outworlders they'd draw more attention than either of them was comfortable with at the moment. There were no Sydean Platinums as an implicit threat against any who might see them as prey, and while the two of them could hold their own, that was the kind of fight that could spiral into a planet-wide hunt.

"Getting expensive," Leese said, as the little crystal in their room materialized the dish. It was a heavily sauced meat, along with some sweet and incredibly crunchy strips of green. Something Raine had quite enjoyed for years, but after tasting some of what Cato served she realized it was unimaginative. Maybe not bland, but even the rations he had provided had more variety to them.

"It is," Raine sighed, taking a bite and wincing at the cost. Ever since the portal to Sydea closed, the cost of Sydean meals had been slowly climbing. They could afford it thanks to their ability to delve up a full rank, but at some point it'd be too expensive even for them, especially if they wanted to move deeper into the System.

Perhaps it was an issue Cato could solve, or maybe they'd have to start seeing what other races had palatable food. They wouldn't be completely free of the issue until they hit Bismuth, and that was still a long way off. They still had to reach Platinum, which required both taking on a World Elite solo and completing a Town Defense Quest. The former was easy enough, but the latter would probably require moving worlds again just to find one. It would have been nice to consult any of the Sydean Platinums about where they had found such a quest, but that was no longer possible. Nor was it wise to pester non-Sydean Platinums about it.

So they kept to themselves, in their own room, and talked only with each other. Which resulted sometimes in agreeing on some odd details, like how the Gold-rank beds were still not as comfortable as Cato's System-less accommodations. It wasn't simply bias, either, as she had enough clarity of memory to *know* that Cato's creations were superior. Something she found obscurely encouraging, as with their course set on removing the System entirely it was good to know that what replaced it could be better.

She was still dwelling on it when they set off in the morning, beginning with a teleport to one of the most distant frontier towns on Uriva. Instantly they were hit with a blast of bitter cold, even

within the Nexus room, and a blinding white from where the windows looked out on towering, bright mountain in otherwise dark surroundings. [Ichok Town] was so far north that the sun did not rise, and blue and green ribbons danced in the dark skies.

[Mount Elkitat] was more northerly still, rising high enough that the sun shone upon its uppermost peaks where they rose above the endless snow. It was a solidly Platinum rank region, and for normal Golds venturing there would be suicide. But neither she nor Leese were normal Golds.

Both of them had [Cold Resistance] slotted in at Silver, cold-warding accessories, and with the innate defenses of their bodies it was more than enough to cut the deathly freeze down to minor discomfort. Heavy jackets over their scales did the rest, the two of them setting out from the blocky buildings that seemed hunched against the cold.

Leese and Raine ran against the wind, Leese's Skill dropping long lines of ice to shatter on the ground below while Raine's melted the falling snow, briefly turning it to a chill rain that spattered down behind them. They only touched the ground on occasion, alighting on stony outcrops jutting from the deep drifts.

Some were actually creatures, the Platinum giants and ambushers of the polar north. A roar split the air as teeth opened in one of the rocks, a dozen eyes appearing on the shaggy mound. The nearby snow crunched suddenly into whirling blades, a blizzard of knives sleeting down on them so as to cut them to ribbons. Raine sliced through the icy onslaught with her fire, while Leese danced and whirled among the deluge.

The two of them hit the hulking form at the same time. Raine's poleaxe left a trail of fire behind it as it crashed down hard enough to leave a crater, while Leese's own weapon drilled precise holes in its flesh. That wasn't enough to put it down, as Platinum rank monsters were extraordinarily tough, but between them Leese and Raine battered it into a corpse before it could slice them to ribbons with its ice magic.

There were a few other, similar interruptions on their trek, but the two of them did their best to avoid the wandering monsters. Most were just Platins and a waste of time to deal with, but there was one [World Elite] that they had to hide from simply because it wasn't worth the risk. Neither of them could see exactly what it was, but heavy wingbeats rattled through the floor of the cave they used for shelter as it flew by.

When they broke out into sunlight it was a surreal experience. The sun rested on the horizon, slowly rolling along it rather than properly lifting into the sky overhead, and the shadows crept from left to right instead of from west to east. It didn't even improve the temperature, the freezing gusts howling down the steep cliffs of the mountain as cold as ever.

The air became thinner as the mountain narrowed toward its peak. So high up, the horizon became a thin band of scattered cloud, the blue overhead fading away. Harsh as it was, monsters still inhabited the mountain, vast ice wyrms lairing near an obvious dungeon. Perhaps it would be worth investigating, as Raine doubted many frequented such an out-of-the-way place. The rich orange glow that flickered from between fluted ice columns also promised something warmer than the surroundings, which would probably be worth the delve by itself. Assuming it was Platinum and not something of even greater rank.

Higher still, and it became difficult to breathe. The wind was just as cold as ever, but in the scarce air it had barely any force despite whistling past fast enough to snatch away any words they might have said. They still weren't at the peak, but it was nearly as high as they could go. The sun was passing behind the mountain on their right, a sideways sunset, and the moons were clearly visible. One was nearly overhead.

"Here," she said, finding a bare ledge with no monsters visible, at least for the moment. Leese nodded, swapping to her defensive equipment and taking up the appropriate stance as Raine withdrew one of Cato's special spears from her storage space. From her pack she took the tiny vial that accompanied it, and added some water before shaking it up. The vial turned green, the preserved stuff within it coming to life, and she slotted it in the base of the spear.

Retrieving several crystals from her storage, she crushed them for a temporary boost to strength, dexterity, and throwing distance. Such boosting crystals were expensive, but under the circumstances she didn't want to take any chances. Then she turned her gaze skyward, tapping into her Skills as she readied the spear for throwing.

The Skills themselves didn't help her focus on the moon, but rather something else, something Cato had added to their augmented bodies. Somewhere in her brain was knowledge of the vast distances and the tremendous speeds of things beyond the heavens. She drew back her arm and, with everything she had, hurled the spear into the sky.

It sparkled in the sun a moment, ascending into the blackness, past the dancing lights of furthest north, then vanished from sight. The understanding in her head told her that it would be days before it even reached its destination, assuming her aim was true, and perhaps months before Cato could contact them again. If that failed, then they would have to try again, perhaps on a different world, for they had three of the Cato-spears left between them, but they would have to wait to see if this one had succeeded first.

The next few months would be long ones.

Far above the globe of Urivan, the dark spear traveled through the void of space. There was no visible distinction in the vacuum of Uriva's orbitals between nothingness controlled by the System and nothingness under the sway of reality, but the spear knew. Certain processes sputtered to life, and the organic primer loaded into the haft imbibed the materials provided by the spear itself and began to grow.

Thin, crystalline solar sail wings extended from miniscule slits in the haft, fanning out over hundreds of meters and dwarfing the body of the weapon-craft from which it had sprung. Small sensors, eyes adapted for the void, grew at intervals, and gravity sensors strung themselves along the solar wings in thin threads. Electricity flowed, and ions radiated off patterns printed on the enormous wings. The slight spin and tumble corrected itself, altering its trajectory slowly but surely during the days-long coast out of Uriva's gravity well.

The spear only barely made it into the moon's sphere of influence, the sum of all the velocity corrections and the anemic thrust converting a near miss into an intersection. A slow drift at the apoapsis of the spear's trajectory turned into a rapid descent toward the purple-red surface below. Solar wings furled, wrapping around the shaft as the projectile screamed through the faintest haze of an atmosphere before driving a deep crater into the icy surface of the moon.

While the impact shattered some of the solar wings, the rest of the spear was built for such lithobraking and, resting at the bottom of a crater full of volatiles, the rest of the machinery began assembling itself. The remnants of the solar wings reassembled themselves into a light-drinking flower as miniscule void life began to scavenge from the rocky ice. It had more than just methane and water, the organic molecules from eons ago not only giving it a striking color but providing phosphates and nitrates to supplement silicon and carbon.

Each minute addition of mass meant more machinery could be created, and soon enough the casing of the spear was being broken down for useful materials. The relatively paltry computing power gave way to something better, and then better still, until there was enough energy and mass to instantiate Cato's gestalt from the diamond-composite crystal that encoded it.

To say he woke up would be to imply things that weren't true. Rendered down into physical encoding in static crystals, the patterns were merely the *potential* of a person, frozen in time. When Cato's gestalt sprung into motion it was in a specific manner unique to digital life, where he was braced and ready for it, so from his perspective he merely pressed a metaphorical button and his surroundings changed.

Cato's gestalt was sourced from just before he had moved against the Bismuth, and his very presence showed that he had been successful. At least in part — he didn't know the disposition of Sydea itself, but certainly Raine and Leese had gotten through. Unfortunately he didn't know more, and wouldn't for a while, because he had an infrastructure problem.

For the moment he was little more than a solar-fed server, and even then only until the moon's rotation brought him into shadow again. Power infrastructure was by far the most important goal, but fortunately being surrounded by methane and water ice gave him options. Solar and fusion were the preferred power sources, but he had enough volatiles to run, essentially, by burning things, though he wasn't going to be building a standard internal combustion engine. Hyper-efficient void biology could metabolize the volatiles and turn them into electricity, and even the waste heat was useful to melt the surrounding ice into slush.

Cato spent some time in his virtual office — the barest simulated space possible, without even full sensory input, to keep the costs down — tracking resources totals and issuing orders, but there was only so much he could do manually. Complicated algorithms and embedded programming did much of the management and optimization, leaving him to essentially pace the floor while time ticked by. It was much like his initial set-up after leaving Sydea, even down to some of the same passengers.

He had the gestalts for Raine and Leese. They were stored in the database, encoded in the same diamond-like crystal as he, just in case he needed them. Calling them *passengers* was rather strong, as gestalts necessarily could not be considered people even if they weren't far off.

Surrounded by rock, ice, and the blackness of space, Cato chewed over whether or not he should activate another instance of the pair. There were already a set active on the planet below — or there had been, several days ago. Unfortunately, that wasn't enough.

If they were to simply go planet by planet, one at a time, not only would it begin attracting more and worse attention, it would be easy for the System to cut him off, like with Sydea. He needed the versions down on the ground to venture out and spread him to more worlds, and to stay ahead of the consequences of his crusade. They couldn't be trapped in the morass of

negotiating the details of each world, or risk someone more powerful deciding that mass destruction was preferable to letting Cato win.

Those were the logical reasons for instantiating another Raine and Leese, but they were really justifications for an emotional reaction. Cato was lonely and didn't want to spend another few months, or perhaps longer, isolated and watching metaphorical grass grow. Especially since he intended to update his gestalts if he could get in touch with the Raine and Leese on the surface. There were surely things that other versions of himself would need to know to stay coordinated, so in the future he'd have to go through the waiting game again, and maybe more than once.

It still took several more days before the scant few molecular assemblers put together enough computronium for him to spin up a proper virtual world. He wasn't about to ask anyone to wander around in a space that didn't have enough processing power to synthesize a full sensory experience. Once they each had their own substrate – it was terrible manners to expect someone to live on a piece of hardware they couldn't control – he started them up.

Raine Talis woke with a start. For a moment she thought she was back at Cato's habitat above Sydea, thanks to the lack of essence, but the details were all wrong. There was a fresh breeze blowing through the open windows of the pale blue room, carrying with it the salt scent of the ocean and sun-warmed sand. The faint wash of waves crashing on the shore filled the room as she sat up, finding herself already fully dressed, albeit in simple clothing rather than armor.

The moment she got off the bed the far wall suddenly shifted from open windows to a gray square with text printed on it. It reminded her a little bit of Cato's not-quite-System-messages, but there was something different there too. The shift was too abrupt, and the style wasn't his, though she was certain he was the only one who could have brought her there. The last thing she remembered was getting into the cot to be digitized and planning for the trip through the portal once the Bismuth was dead.

Welcome to Cosmic Beach Aestivation. Current setting: summer morning. You have not determined your interface method! Please select from the following.

Direct feed

Verbal commands

Haptic commands

Custom interface (note from Cato: touch this and then the introductory preset. It'll make things easier for you)

Raine snorted, but followed the note, reaching out to press her fingers against the gray wall. The text on the square shifted to a bewildering array of options, but the line *introductory preset* was visible at the top so she ignored the rest of it and prodded the line in question. The wall flickered back to windows, looking out on lush and colorful flowers, and a very System-like transparent screen flickered into existence beside her.

User: Raine Talis

Current Global Clock: 52% standard

Substrate Interface

Energy and Supplies Interface

Aestivation Protocols

(‘Status’ to summon/dismiss)

“Status,” she said aloud, and the screen vanished. She wasn’t actually all that interested in exploring Cato’s strangeness just yet, and instead just wanted to see where she was. The phrase *Cosmic Beach Aestivation* didn’t mean anything to her, but the surroundings seemed pleasant enough and she was sure Leese was somewhere nearby.

She stepped out of the nearest door, onto a wooden deck that looked out over a beach of pure white sand. A bright sun shone down onto an ocean that shimmered with faintly opalescent colors, while in the clear blue sky floated an enormous ringed planet, intricate whorls of green and purple slowly shifting on its surface. Off to her right was a second beach house, directly next to her own, and as she watched Leese emerged from within.

“Nice place,” Leese said cheerily, waving across the way.

“If it’s real,” Raine said skeptically, studying the improbable landscape. It was pleasant, and nothing seemed false to her senses, but she couldn’t shake the impression that there was something suspicious about it. Leese tilted her head at Raine, and then hopped over the deck railing to the sand a few feet below.

“Seems real enough to me,” Leese said, wriggling her bare toes in the sand. “I’m sure there’s some wrinkle to it though, because it’s Cato.”

As if her words had prompted something, Raine’s interface reappeared, with a notification at the top. *User: Cato requests guest access to Cosmic Beach Aestivation. Accept/Reject/More?* She glanced over at Leese, who was clearly examining her own interface even if it wasn’t visible, and then touched *accept*.

1 out of 2 Users have accepted.

2 out of 2 Users have accepted.

On the beach outside a section of sand abruptly turned into a stone circle, and Cato appeared on it in his Ahruskian – human – form. The alteration was so sudden and strange that Raine had to imagine it was some manner of Cato-specific magic. Or at least part of the reason she found their surroundings so odd.

“Hello, you two!” Cato said cheerfully, stepping out onto the sands. “I’m sure you’re wondering what exactly is going on since you’re not carrying on with the plans we made. The reason is, all that already happened. The first versions of you already delivered me to a moon on a completely different world, and I’m in the process of building up there.”

“That planet?” Raine asked, waving at the ringed titan that dominated the horizon.

“Ah, no, this is a sort of private reality, originally designed as a vacation or retirement spot.” Cato gestured around them. “One of the benefits of being digital is that it’s fairly easy to hop to whatever reality you like, though of course they’re all hosted locally.”

“So this *isn't* real?” Leese asked, as Raine decided to jump over the railing of her own deck to join the other two on the sand. It was pleasantly warm underfoot, softer than the sand Raine was familiar with and free of debris.

“Yes and no.” Cato tilted his hand back and forth in an equivocal gesture. “Is it something you can touch, taste, walk around in, all of that, yes. Is it the base universe? No, but I don’t have the ability to build this sort of thing in the base universe yet. Try pulling up your Substrate Interface and you’ll see what I mean.”

Raine did as he suggested, and found a diagram as well as what seemed to be an actual perspective of what the interface termed her *substrate*. It took her a few seconds of staring at the helpful units to realize it was smaller than her thumbnail, but was supposedly where she lived. The interface had other information as well; how much energy it was consuming of what was available, an ability to adjust her personal perception of time, and some maintenance options that she didn’t want to touch when she didn’t understand them.

“This is a little creepy,” Leese said doubtfully. “I’m just a little square?”

“I did warn you that digital life wasn’t as easy as it might seem,” Cato said mildly. “I thought I’d go ahead and read you in while we’re still in the start-up phase and have nothing else to do. After all, if you want to continue forward, it’ll be best if you can take full advantage of the format.” He spread his hands, indicating them both. “Although I understand it can be a little overwhelming.”

“What sort of advantage?” Raine asked. Seeing the surroundings, she felt like she was finally able to glimpse the source of Cato’s power. There was something more to it than just the ability to produce unheard-of items and call down devastation from the heavens. He was, fundamentally, not the same as them. Not a mortal, and with an entire reality that transcended rank.

“Time, for one,” Cato said promptly, waving his hand around at the beach. “Right now, for every second here, two pass outside, because there’s not much we can do while I’m still scraping together an industrial base. But if need be that can go to one hundred seconds here for one outside. Or a thousand.”

“Really?” Leese let out a slow breath, tilting her head back as she considered the possibilities. “With that much time, how could you ever make a mistake?”

“You’d be surprised,” Cato said dryly. “Thinking faster isn’t the same as thinking smarter, unfortunately. There’s also this.” He lifted one hand and snapped it, instantly changing from his normal form to a Sydean one. Then again, to Urivan, then to Tornok Clan, then to a Cato-beast, then to other forms that Raine had never seen. The implications were obvious, and Leese even raised her hand to snap her fingers, looking almost disappointed when nothing happened.

“We can start training you on morphism,” Cato said with a laugh. “There’s no guarantee you can handle it – a lot of people can’t – but you can imagine the value if we can give you non-Sydean bodies.”

“We could blend in perfectly,” Raine said thoughtfully. “But I don’t know about being an insect-person my whole life.”

“Well, you don’t have to be. You’d want bodies with all the proper safeguards and upload ability, so you can come back here.” Cato waved around at the endless beach. “Or really, whichever aestivation you want to call home. It’s your world, you can do with it what you want.”

“*Our* world?” Raine asked sharply, finding something odd in Cato’s tone when he said those words.

“Certainly. If I controlled your substrates and your virtual locations, then no matter how nicely I acted you’d still be slaves,” Cato said, sounding disgusted at the thought. “So you control your substrates; bodily autonomy. This aestivation is jointly yours, property autonomy. And all the basic libraries are available in your databanks so you can be as independent as you like.”

“That’s a lot of effort go through for us,” Leese said suspiciously, as it was considerably more generosity than generally made sense.

“I *really* don’t like the responsibility that comes with such total authority,” Cato told them frankly. “Makes me feel unclean.”

Raine wasn’t sure she completely believed Cato. No gift so rich came without a cost — but perhaps Cato didn’t see it as a rich gift. If this was what he considered ordinary, then perhaps this was little more than gifting a fresh Copper their first weapon before heading out into the field.

In which case, they had a long way to go.