

Chapter 6 – Interregnum

Onswa frantically sorted through the notifications and controls on his interface, trying to finish the last orders as the essence counter ticked down. He knew there would be no point in trying to guard the portals manually, not when Platinums or Bismuths could come through at any moment, so the best he could do was create incentive for people to be away from Kalhan to avoid any frustrated offworlders. He was still in the middle of spending what essence remained in the reserves on special and explanatory quests when the a notification blocked him.

[Interplanetary Travel Restrictions lifted]

[Planetary Administrator privileges suspended]

Onswa growled at the message. He didn't even know that such privileges *could* be suspended. If someone else had taken the job that would be one thing, but nobody had displaced him. He was simply locked out. Though it wasn't like the job had come with instructions — as the highest ranking Platinum, he had simply inherited it after the last Planetary Administrator decided to depart to break into Bismuth.

He had known there would be consequences for locking down the portals and teleports for so long, but he'd expected it would be mostly related to burning through all the reserves normally used for cities. Most of what he did day to day was the painful and ticklish business of deciding who most needed what little essence there was to spare and trying to make up for the inevitable shortfalls. People were supposed to generate essence and resources through quests and dungeons, and bring in resources from Resource Zones. Yet very few towns on Sydea had enough of an income to keep above the penalty line every day.

Burning through that buffer had seemed to be necessary, to keep them from being flooded by outworlders, but time had passed and the quest hadn't gone away. Onswa had no idea how they were going to manage until they had reserves again, because offworlders didn't contribute nearly the same amount to the cities or towns. They didn't have access to as many quests, either, but that hardly mattered when *the* quest, the one that was drawing so much attention, was global.

Having no planetary-level administer abilities at all was going to make his life entirely difficult. He barely had control over the other Platinums, and there weren't many Golds who he could call on to pick up the slack and divert their efforts to helping out towns in need. It wasn't even that they were unwilling, but without the administration console he couldn't coordinate efforts with targeted quests. Instead, he would have to track people down in person. It was a temporary circumstance, he was sure, but that didn't make it any less a crisis. He could only be in one place at a time.

Onswa stepped out of his now-useless office and dropped down to street level. Kalhan was a fair-sized city, with rows of housing interspersed with System businesses. Smithing, jewelcrafting, woodworking, alchemy, and other shops to buy or adjust equipment, or to sell or trade dropped items. Dozens of places serving food and drink, both for sustenance and for temporary benefits provided by the more expensive dishes. Sydeans of various ranks filled the streets, going about the usual business of buying and selling.

Unfortunately, there were also a number of outworlders, all pouring out from the System Nexus and its attendant portal. Onswa doubted many people had been camping the portal for weeks just to go through, so this flood was just those who happened to be nearby when travel was reinstated. Soon enough the higher ranks would come, along with more organized incursions to take advantage of the absurd value of the defense quest.

The presence of a Platinum abruptly shifted the chaotic outflow to something more orderly. The visitors, mostly Golds and below to Onswa's rapid-fire [Appraise], didn't dare to misbehave with Onswa watching. He surveyed them with disfavor, seeing everything from the insectile Uriva of their neighboring world to the slinking Tornok Clan in their characteristic armor. It was clear that the news of the quest had been spread far and wide, and not just passed through the portal by word of mouth.

"If you're here for the quest, be patient," he addressed them, hoping to stem some of the inevitable infighting. "There does not seem to be a *lack* of creatures, though they can be difficult to find. None of them can be identified, and they all appear to be of Copper rank to essence perception. Most of them appear to be entirely toothless, but any large ones should be treated as being of Platinum rank despite their apparent weakness."

He kept an eye on the traffic for a few more minutes, as the outworlders filtered out to the edges of the city, some of them took flight, others merely grouped together and voyaged out into the surrounding zones. That was all the time he had to spare and, since there didn't seem to be any fights breaking out at that precise moment, he had to take a message to his other Platinites.

Onswa wrapped his [Path of Aether] around himself and accelerated into the air, blurring into the between-space of his teleport. The flowing rivers and quiet pools of the Aether stretched out before him, the nearest one close enough to touch and ride across the world. Swift currents brought him to the slow eddy of Arene's Musahr City in Southern Coren. That area still had the greatest concentration of zones named by the Defense Quest, but fortunately Arene was also the most capable of keeping any offworlders under control. Even if she was technically less powerful than Onswa, she was far more aggressive and practiced.

He dropped down toward her estate, just outside Musahr city itself. Every Platinum had one, awarded by the System after completing the advancement Quest, though most Sydean Platinites didn't spend the estate token on Sydea itself. In fact, most of them didn't even advance on Sydea, let alone return home.

Arene's version was a walled courtyard, paved in white and orange, with a set of quarters and service buildings attached to a tower at one end. The Platinum herself emerged the moment he entered the range of her perceptions, door flying open with a bang as she flew out of her bedroom. Not that Onswa blamed her; they'd all been on edge after having to deal with the strange thing that had come through the now-closed portal. He tried not to think about how deliciously ruffled she looked, and kept his mind on business.

"The blockade's down," he said shortly, even before he touched down on the courtyard stone. "Worse, I'm locked out of administrator controls. The System didn't like it, I suppose. You're going to have to keep a tight reign on people here for a while."

“Gods above and below,” Arene swore. “I think we’re cursed. Are we ever going to catch a break?”

“Probably not,” Onswa said bluntly. “Anyway, I have to go tell the others. I’d appreciate it if you’d get someone to stay at the local Nexus and check for any courier messages, and I’ll tell the other Platinums to do the same.”

“Go,” Arene said, summoning her armor onto herself and spreading blazing wings. She was off into the sky before he could get out another word, so he slipped into the network of aether to make for his next destination.

Marek’s seaside city seemed to be in the middle of fending off a Dungeon Break, to judge from the piles of crab and sea-serpent corpses mounding the beaches. The Platinum himself was patrolling the battle lines, darting in to make sure none of the Copper and Silver ranks got overwhelmed. Onswa flitted over, matching speed with the swirl of water Marek was surfing, and filled him in. Marek just grunted.

“Costs for food went up, too,” he said, flicking a hand as he pulled a monstrous crab monster away from the party it was trying to flank. “We’re going to need everything we can get from this dungeon break.”

Onswa winced. Crystallized essence tokens were created as the result of killing monsters or clearing dungeons, and were the only currency System pylons recognized. The truly rich could redeem them for essence directly, boosting their way up the ranks, but on Sydea there had never been enough income for that. As it was many people were forced to choose between paying for food and paying for equipment upgrades. It was all too easy to wind up just slightly too poor to ever make any real headway into higher level equipment, just because so much income went toward basic necessities.

“I can’t do as much as I’d like with my privileges suspended,” Onswa said, reaching for his System wallet. “But — here.” He pulled out a pile of Platinum essence tokens, which would suffice to feed quite a lot of people for quite a long time after being converted down to Copper tokens. Considering the man’s pride, Marek had probably already spent most of his own tokens if he was even mentioning costs.

“Appreciate it,” Marek said, whisking the tokens away into his own wallet. “Don’t worry too much, though. We’ll make out. We always do.”

“I know,” Onswa said, clapping his friend on the shoulder. “Keep me informed though, eh?”

“Yes,” Marek said, his attention focused on the running combat sprawling across the beach below. Onswa left him to it, moving onto the areas administered – in a very loose sense of the word – by Hirau and Karsa. Perhaps he should have tried to force the issue, and insisted that they report to him, but it didn’t seem worth it so long as they took care of their areas. Gods knew he didn’t have anyone to replace them.

By the time he made it back home, he felt wrung out, no matter that his travel Skill didn’t really burn *that* much power. Nobody had good news, there were outworlders everywhere trying to crowd out the Sydeans from the global quest, and he’d practically run himself out of essence tokens. He’d have to get his fellows together to run the sole Platinum dungeon on Sydea, if for

no other reason than to have *something* to make up for any shortfalls. Without the planetary reserves, the excess spillover from quests and dungeon clears, that was all he could do.

“Rough day?” Aceila, his wife, asked sympathetically as he dropped into the Gold-ranked lounge next to the window looking out over his own Platinum estate. She was Gold herself, and usually spent her time shepherding the lower ranks.

“I think the world hates us,” Onswa replied. Acelia chuckled and came over, draping herself atop him.

“It’ll get better,” she assured him, as his arms went around her.

But it didn’t.

As the days stretched on, token prices remained high. Outworlders kept arriving, causing trouble and taking away quests from native Sydeans and running his high rankers ragged trying to keep them in line. Onswa spent barely any time in his now-useless office, the interface unhappily chiming the [Planetary Administrator privileges suspended] message at him every time he accessed the System.

For a while he thought it would all subside as the number of regions marked by the Defense Quest dwindled, down to five, then two, then just the one. But then new regions began being added, no longer adjacent to the original but all over the world. There seemed to be no rhyme or reason, they just sprouted up out of nowhere.

After two weeks, they lost their first town. Aruel Town had been borderline for years, just barely sustaining itself at the edge of the [Spotted Cliffs Resource Zone], but with the reduced essence income there simply wasn’t enough to keep the local System Nexus running. Too long at a deficit, without enough quests and resources coming into the town, and the Nexus would simply go inactive, removing the safe zone and all the building benefits, a state of affairs that threatened far too many cities on Sydea. He didn’t even know when the building failed with his reduced Administrator access; it was Hirau that alerted him.

Onswa found himself outside the small assemblage of buildings in Aruel Town, grimly holding open a portal for the refugees to file through back to Khopir City. Without essence, all the buildings were dark and dull, lifeless blocks of grey-white stone, and soon enough monsters would come to turn it into a miniature Conflict Zone until it was fully recaptured and restored — if that ever happened. Humble as it was, the faces of those who had once dwelt there were taut with grief as they were forced to abandon their homes. It wasn’t the first town Onswa had been forced to evacuate, but never had it occurred so quickly.

Things could hardly be going worse.

Things could hardly be going better for World Deity Marus. He reclined in the house inside his System Space, surrounded by luxurious furniture, with windows that looked out on the core worlds. Just little luxuries he’d purchased with essence siphoned off from Sydea’s churn. The mortal races couldn’t use essence directly, not in the way World Deities could, merely empowering themselves with it. He had always felt that to be a wasteful state of affairs, but without them essence wouldn’t flow.

His Interface grumbled and chimed as it went about the business of managing all the thousands of complexities that the System required to manage a planet. The only thing he was uncertain about was that strange defense quest, but his Interface had assured him that aside from a single dungeon, there were no other losses associated with it. There weren't even any elites dying in the zones that the Interface had marked as being associated with the unknown entity, so Marus had to assume that it was the visiting Platinums that had wrecked the dungeon, not the entity.

Even if his Interface freely admitted it wasn't sure what was causing the confusion, it was also certain there was nothing major going on, so Marus was happy to not only leave it be but ensure the quest was spread to neighboring worlds. In fact, it was actually helping with his general plans by continuing to reduce the planetary budget.

People fighting or clearing dungeons on a planet created essence, split between them, the rewards, and the planet's own reserves. It was those reserves that paid for upgrades to cities and towns, creating dungeons, and for special quests like ranking up or the system defense quest that had cropped up on Sydea. Of course, he'd been siphoning off those funds for himself, so that Sydea would be a perfectly blank and fresh world for his clan. After the natives lost their last foothold and his clan's allies moved in, he could dump all that siphoned essence back in to boost its growth.

Minus what he kept for himself, of course.

Marus had no idea how long the quest conditions would last, but so long as it went on it was accelerating his timetable by years. Decades, even. The faster that the towns collapsed, the fewer Sydeans the planet could support, and soon enough there wouldn't be any left. Without any native claim, the Eln Clan's favored races could take it over for themselves.

Such an approach took time to execute within the bounds of the System's limitations, of course. Marus was patient and would have been content to wait out the centuries, but having so many years cut off his plans was a pleasant surprise. Any rank below Bismuth was managed by their homeworld's System Interface, so all the outworlders were pulling essence out of the planetary budget completely. That meant less for him, but he felt it was worth the extra speed at this point. The only issue would be if any of those outworlders he'd lured in would be tempted to make their own claims — but that was unlikely since he'd systematically starved Sydea of the essence it needed to grow. To any of the mortal races, it would seem completely unpalatable.

"I do not appreciate your interference with my world." The voice was raspy, gruff, and made Marus jump up from his very comfortable chair in surprise. He pulled on the essence of his System Space to empower himself before realizing it was merely the World Deity of neighboring Urivan. The insectile being stood at attention in the middle of the vestibule of Marus' house, well inside Marus' System-granted private dimension, one set of arms clasped behind his back while his gripping claws rested in their grooves in his broad shoulders.

"I'm not—" Marus started, then interrupted himself. "How did you get in here?" He demanded, as it shouldn't have been possible for even another World Deity to simply barge into his System Space. Especially not all the way into his actual house without Marus noticing. The Urivan ignored the question.

"This quest you're spreading has far too high a reward for the risk," the insect-man continued, and Marus resorted to using [Appraise] because he certainly couldn't remember the name. The Skill reported that the being was *Initik Varis*, but Marus didn't really care enough to commit it to memory. Initik was more or less irrelevant, since he didn't belong to any of the big clans and held the dubious honor of being Deity for his own homeworld. So long as he was attached to just one planet he would never have real power.

"It's not *my* quest," Marus denied, irritated by Initik's tone. "It is something generated by the divine System itself. I'm certainly not going to try and alter it." He glanced back at his Interface by reflex, but he didn't have the details of the defense quest displayed and certainly wasn't going to dig for them.

"Then why hasn't it been resolved?" Initik asked, not moving from the vestibule. The green carapace was entirely out of place in the soft purples and oranges that the Eln clan preferred.

"Either come in or leave," Marus said, stretching his tail. "Don't just hover there." Initik regarded him through the flat, solid violet eyes of his kind and then took three paces to stand just on the other side of the vestibule. Marus bared his teeth at the insult to his hospitality, vowing that he'd make sure the Eln clan knew of Initik's childishness. He *should* have addressed it himself, but some tiny corner of his mind knew that he'd be flattened if he tried. Initik had killed the Deity that was originally put in charge of Uriva, after all.

"It hasn't been resolved," Marus bit off each of the worlds to keep the pique from his tone.

"Because it hasn't been resolved. My purpose here is not to solve the Sydean's problems. Spreading the quest offworld is the best way to ensure that it is properly addressed." He didn't want to spill the way he was exploiting the oddly recurring issue to someone he barely knew, even if it wasn't likely Initik could make any trouble for him.

Just because Marus wasn't actually crossing any lines didn't mean he wasn't skirting them, and someone in the right position could make trouble if his exact strategy became known. Some of the core clans – even some of his own Eln clan – were quite devout and did not believe in pushing the boundaries of what the divine System allowed. They were wealthy and well-established enough that they believed their approach was the best one, and disapproved of anyone who strayed from what they considered the proper path.

"If the people of your world are unready for the challenge, does that not reflect poorly upon your administration?" Initik rasped in a clipped tone, his carapace rustling as he shifted slightly, moving from one statue-still stance to another.

"Hardly," Marus scoffed. "I can't turn clay into steel, nor would I wish to try. They can barely generate essence enough for the planet to maintain itself, so you can't fault me for wanting to allow others in to help with this quest."

"It is disrupting the balance I have created," Initik said, gripping claws clicking against his shoulder chitin. "Many young rankers are traveling to Sydea for an easy boost to essence and Skills."

"So they're getting a quick start?" Marus shrugged. "That's a good thing."

"That is not a good thing," Initik disagreed, his voice sharp with displeasure. "Those who begin their lives unchallenged will be ill prepared for the realities later."

“Look, I’m not going to debate administration details with you,” Marus said, flicking a finger and summoning a drink to his hand. He would have gotten one for Initik, but so far as Marus was concerned the other Administrator had declared himself an enemy by ignoring proper guest behavior. Marus certainly wasn’t going to offer him any hospitality. “You shouldn’t even be in here. I certainly didn’t invite you in. If you have anything actionable to say, say it.”

By all rights Marus should have flexed his will and shoved Initik back out of his private space. He was still tempted to, but he didn’t know how Initik had gotten in to begin with, so it wasn’t worth risking looking like an absolute fool if it didn’t work. Better to indulge the insect for the moment, then shore up his defenses and punish Initik later.

“Resolve your planet’s problems properly instead of letting them leak,” Initik told him, clicking again, exoskeleton rubbing against exoskeleton. The sound reached right into Marus’ brain to annoy him, making the fur on the back of his neck prickle and his ears twitch. He found the Urivans nearly as distasteful as Sydeans, but they weren’t his responsibility so he barely ever interacted with them. Initik made him remember why he preferred it that way.

“If you can’t handle a little extra traffic and a few people taking advantage of an opportunity, maybe you should look to your own duties,” Marus scoffed. “The Eln clan has been managing worlds for thousands of years, and this is the exact technique we’ve applied to many worlds. I know precisely what I’m doing.”

“Hardly something to boast of,” Initik replied, the staccato voice carrying something like scorn.

“I care little for the words of a clanless upstart,” Marus said, sneering at Initik. “Go back to your own planet and pay attention to your own business. I have work to do.”

Initik didn’t bother replying. He was there one moment, and then gone from the System Space with barely a ripple. Marus scowled at where Initik had been, then sighed and pulled up his full Interface. He did have work to do, but not with regards to Sydea. Its collapse was going to plan. Rather, it was the System Space that needed fixing, and there was no telling where the hole was that Initik had used to enter — and leave.

Exponential growth could be incredibly slow sometimes.

Cato huddled in a crater on the moon, doing little more than keeping watch over his drones. He had brought enough mass from the surface for a bare few, and they dug through the regolith, burrowing into the silicates and carbides in search of volatiles and metals. He’d spared enough production power to put together a very rudimentary solar array, lying just outside the shadow of the crater wall, as bio-fusion didn’t scale particularly well, nor was it any good at charging batteries. At least, not without more infrastructure than he had mass for.

The hacked-together manufactory squatted next to the solar array, dug into the ground and shielded from the sun so it could vent excess heat, chewing patiently through all the materials the drones brought it. A surprising amount of machinery could be built solely from silicon, carbon, and the lighter elements below those two, but there was no substitute for proper metals.

He could see the sphere of the planet hanging above him, taunting him with its nearness. At least, near in relative terms, as it was still some hundred thousand miles away. He knew there was bound to be fallout there, that his distraction organisms might all have been destroyed — or

left alone enough that they'd reproduced beyond his initial expectations. Unfortunately, there was no choice in being out of contact for so long. He couldn't even work harder to make up the difference. Energy and mass constrained him, and he couldn't squeeze blood – or more importantly, iron – from a stone.

Cato tried to draw up plots and plans as he waited, watching the manufactory speed through new solar panels, and his drones return with more detailed and more useful mapping of the stone underneath his crater. On rare occasion they returned with some particularly metal-rich chunk of material, those tiny morsel accelerating what he could build.

Essentially, he could only afford to build factories and solar panels, like the world's most boring strategy game. Each factory and attendant energy influx, along with some very rudimentary mining equipment, let him put together the next set of equipment that much faster. The crater began to fill up with solar arrays as machinery dug down into the surface, reorganizing mass into something more useful.

The most dramatic change was, at least to Cato's mind, when he could finally interface with the database he carried in his spine and no longer had to rely on the designs he had managed to extract from damaged sub-brains. That marked the point where he could actually use *real* technology, rather than the constrained biotech and simple primary school designs he had before.

Light and heavy elements got spun together into computronium: a matrix of superconductive and optronic processing components that could run anything from simple scripts to entire virtual worlds with billions of people. Cato could finally move out of the sessile remains of the bioweapon frame, though it wasn't like he could take much advantage of the increase in processing power.

True, he could make a virtual setting as luxurious as he wanted, but digital life had learned how destructive that path truly was. That, or dissipated themselves into an infinitely hedonistic lifestyle until their substrate failed, which was something that still happened on occasion. All Cato did was give himself a functional virtual home with an exterior to match the moonscape, as a reminder of what he was doing and why.

His guests needed more infrastructure to bring back to consciousness, however. Air, water, spin gravity, and all the amenities of a planetside habitation. Cloning banks and the material necessary to rapidly grow and condition their replacement bodies. A full medical suite, because there was no possible way that the process would proceed without issue.

At least the time and extra processing power gave Cato room to properly sequence their genetics and run through simulations. Which was in a way horrifically invasive and oddly clinical, when he was going to be meeting with these people and likely interacting with them for some time to come. He wasn't their doctor or their friend, but he was the only one who could resurrect them regardless and it would make the inevitable relationship between them, whatever its tenor, a strange thing on his end.

It was a blessing that he could lose himself in the intricate morass of it all instead of dwelling on the *who* he was dealing with. Any biology was horribly complex, and almost all the information that had been gathered on Sydeans had been essentially by-the-way, with no concerted attempt

to fully map the function of every protein and acid. At least Sydean biology was at least marginally similar to what Earth had to offer.

Cato didn't know if the System encompassed any life that wasn't based on carbon and water, but the intelligence he had implied everything that was connected by way of portals was close enough to breathe each other's air. There was some massaging there thanks to System nonsense – making up for different relative concentrations and difficult or deadly trace molecules – but everything fit into a certain category. Close enough that the synthetic intelligence programs didn't need any particular prodding to do the analysis, even if he still had to put in long hours making that output useful.

“Ah, damn. I wish the Titan boys had sent a gestalt with me,” Cato sighed, wrestling his way through a morass of clotting cascades and protein chains after his tissue sample solidified from some quirk of alien chemistry. It wasn't just because dealing with alien biology was hard. The problem was, he was coming to grips with the fact that he was the only human around.

He had plenty of media to read and watch, but nobody to discuss it with. Setting up a self-evolving virtual world to distract himself with was simplicity itself, but without anyone else inside it, such a thing was hollow. In a word, he was lonely.

Cato had known that he'd be in for the long haul and by himself, but it was one thing to know and it was another to experience it. As much as he didn't want to treat the Sydeans like they were something other, they simply weren't human and they weren't anywhere *near* postbiological. The System mimicked many aspects of technology, but not the entire culture that had grown up around postbiological life, or the tens of thousands of simulated years people like Cato had to draw from.

It was a problem he would have to deal with, because it was one he would be encountering a lot. Sydea was hardly the only planet he would be dealing with. In fact, it was barely a start.

Cato's plans were relatively simple. First, spread himself throughout the System's systems. Gain the assistance of the locals if possible, but even if not, build up the required infrastructure to clear out the System anchors. Once removed, cushion the loss of the System's presence with technological equivalents and find trustworthy natives to ease the transition because he sure wouldn't be a good judge of how to deal with all the alien psychologies he was sure to encounter.

Each planet would have a version of himself, completely cut off from all the other versions of himself as well as Earth itself. How exactly each version of himself would handle things was something that would have to wait for the actual event, but he trusted he'd choose wisely. After all, he had no desire to become a monster or some kind of hegemonizing swarm converting everything, so he had no worries any version of himself would.

That trust was one of the final barriers toward becoming properly postbiological, and it was a trust few people had. Most would feel the need to put a limiter on their alternate selves, or alter or lobotomize them in some way to prevent them from working at cross-purposes. Yet the strongest limiter that could possibly exist was that *he was himself*. That was the key piece of the mind that even allowed reconciliation among alternate selves in the first place, so he had no worries about his various selves being split among thousands of worlds.

Unfortunately his plans to do so had already hit a snag. All the portals seemed to be in city centers rather than popping up in the middle of nowhere like on Earth. Clearly that had been because Earth was still in some initial phase, before all the infrastructure was sorted out, but it still meant it wasn't easy for him to slip over to other worlds. Combined with the System quest, it was pretty obvious he'd need more than just a single stealthy warframe.

Nor was he cut out for ranking up within the System himself, becoming some twisted magical version of himself just to transport a trojan entity. He'd have to so alter and lobotomize any version of himself that was fully open to the system that it *wouldn't* be him, and it really would risk some terrible divergence. Not to mention he'd be inflicting that on someone who, ultimately, would be a different person entirely.

The conclusion, then, was that he would need a System confederate, or likely more than one. At the very least he'd need some from this initial foothold, which led to why he was so anxious to resurrect his guests. He really needed to get their bodies right if they were to listen to him, and it was a struggle. Growing Sydean biology was one thing, because life generally was pretty good at propagating itself, but growing it rapidly and to specification was another issue entirely. That was another reason it would have been nice if someone with more experience and understanding were along for the ride, but such was not to be.

One of the major contributors to the defense, Luna Secundus, had been very firm about keeping things Earth-side. Cato wasn't sure whether the moon colony was afraid of somehow gaining the System's ire or didn't want the System to have any chance at understanding Titan biotechnology, but he'd found the entire attitude short-sighted. Which was why he'd had to take the chance at the last moment, so nobody could stop him or talk him out of it.

Unfortunately he was on his own, at least until he got to the point where he could wake up the slumbering brains. Not that he spent every processing cycle on work, and he took time out to relax with reading or shows or sims. The database held a not-inconsiderable amount of media from the Solar System, ranging from the classics of Rome and Nippon to the ephemera produced by Summer Civilizations.

Such was the derogatory name for groups of uploads running at tens of thousands or millions of times normal speed, who could create civilizations that rose and then fell in mere months. Often the collapse left little more than scorched computronium behind as the legacy of anywhere from thousands to billions of people and uncounted centuries of history.

It was the sort of fate he was hoping to avoid happening a second time for the Sydean people. Cato's own father was an émigré from a Summer Civilization, so he had some insight on how it was for people to find out their reality wasn't entirely true. The System might not exactly be the same as one of those hyper-accelerated virtual realities, but it wasn't far off. The Sydeans surely had been operating inside it for centuries, and emerging from the other end would be the same kind of shock.

The globe spun above him in the blackness of space as machines made more machines and dug down. The tipping point where he could finally afford to start doing real work and not just expand his factories came nearly a month in, a month spent on tests and simulations and chewing over difficult problems that Cato didn't really have any good answers to. Wisdom was much harder to come by than factual knowledge.

His machines had found a few pockets of water-ice, totaling a few hundred tons, along with sufficient heavy metal deposits to build some proper industry. Several incubators, to make bioweapon frames, and large-scale manufactories to assemble a habitat. He was *finally* able to start launching communications and surveillance satellites, even if they had a higher minimum orbit than he would have preferred. He might even be able to get in touch with his remaining scouts, and if there was anything useful recorded into memory he could start putting it into a proper surveillance database.

New scouts were grown in the incubators, and launched down to the world below in a rough-and-ready re-entry trajectory. Falling to ground from space, even at something far below orbital velocity, wasn't particularly easy, and the System quest made them targets, but he needed a better view on things than orbit could give him.

What he found was not promising.

The population centers, small as they were, had become flush with non-Sydean types. They were actively hunting down his remaining scouts, and to judge from the bits and pieces he saw they didn't get along particularly well with the natives. Several of the tiny System towns were dark and dead, which seemed to be a recent development, but he couldn't see what had caused the evacuation.

Making things harder for the native was the absolute last thing Cato wanted to do. Not only was that basic human decency, Cato really needed to have the Sydeans on his side, or at least some of them. Without confederates within the System, it probably wasn't *possible* to take it down. There were too many things it could do, both known and in theory, to absolutely cripple Cato if he was forced to approach it wholly from without.

He had known that Sydea was doing poorly before, but the fallout of his presence seemed to have accelerated the collapse. It wasn't *truly* his fault, but it was certainly his responsibility. There wasn't too much he could do for the moment, not when he was restricted to a few square miles of solar – half of it already in shadow and being replaced by satellites beaming power in – and a few hundred tons of equipment. Once he truly hit his stride, though, he'd demonstrate what a self-replicating industrial base could manage.