

Chapter 14 — Skirmish

Haekos could have been going better.

Being suddenly denied access to the dungeons Cato was trying to destroy gave him little choice but to raze the majority of Nexus buildings. At least it was clear there were limitations on the technique that atomized all his bioweapon forces. More, it was obvious that it *only* affected System-jamming constructs, leaving all his communications and stealth drones intact, which was a weakness he could absolutely exploit in the future.

For the present he just had to hope he could do enough damage to the System to start to collapse or, better, draw out the System-God without commensurate harm to the native populace. Though that was looking less and less likely as the higher ranks were starting to arrive, and they were far less concerned with collateral damage than he was. Or rather, than Kili Frei – née Raine Haekos – was, considering how much of the invasion force she controlled.

“I really do hate this,” Raine said, referring not to the combat but to the huddled groups of low-rankers being herded away from the concentrated chokepoints of System towns — some of which were nonfunctional anyway. It was for their own safety, but it was still ripping people away from their homes and marching them about through force of arms. In a way it was not so unnatural to those within the System, where the threat of violence saturated every dealing, but Cato wasn't from the System, and Raine and Leese were distant from it by way of deep time. They were not much happier than he was, and had both abandoned their Haekosi bodies in favor of an orbital presence.

“It's not great,” Cato admitted, really wishing that the System-god would show up so he could just put an end to things. The massive particle beams were in place, ready and waiting for one of the self-proclaimed divine beings, but so far he'd only seen evidence of their action, not their persons.

“Could be worse,” Leese said, who was dealing with the noncombatants in the cities, the young mothers and pre-Copper juveniles, getting them out and away from the line of fire. The shark-like Haekos children were quite adorable, in the way of juveniles everywhere, and Leese was herding the families out into bodies of water where they would be safe.

Despite the obvious affinity for water, the actual System towns were land-oriented, with no real consideration for the physiology of the native Haekos. They'd all been founded on rivers and lakes, however, or on the coasts of the large freshwater seas, so each had a ready waterway along which the amphibious inhabitants could evacuate. Everything he'd seen showed that those within the System were focused on the cities and towns, and to a lesser extent dungeons, and generally didn't bother with bodies of water at all. Only a tiny set of species were amphibious or otherwise at home in the water, and while that limitation hardly mattered at higher ranks, it was not something the System catered to.

The families were surrounded by a swarm of aquatic warframes keeping the monster fish at bay and providing floating platforms for the Haekos natives. In a worst-case scenario the water surface might serve to blunt the energetic results of orbital weaponry, though he hoped that most of the populace would be well away before that. Most of them were riding – or being forced to ride – warframes just for the sake of speed. Others were being carried, insensate, for their own safety. They were entirely in the right to defend themselves and their families and

homes, but Cato didn't want them to die for a hopeless cause. There were already enough senseless deaths on Cato's ledger as it was.

So far he'd managed to avoid such casualties on Haekos, as the only orbital weaponry he'd brought into play was the low-powered railguns. But that was not going to last forever, as higher ranks meant he needed to exert more force, and unlike the System he didn't have a way of mitigating the side effects of energy expenditure. Using Skills, someone could hurl a spear at supersonic velocities and avoid all the collateral damage that kind of launch or impact ought to have. He was restricted to base physics, and thermodynamics offered not a single iota of grace.

A restriction that he was reminded of when one of the world's Platinums advanced upon a flotilla nearly a hundred miles away from the capital city. Raine pinged his orbital defenses, but the water made the pressure wave from any impacts liable to outright kill the lower ranks — and he definitely didn't want to murder any of the natives, even by collateral damage. He still had the nonlethal methods of deterrence, but words were better still — when they worked.

"If you want to help, that's great!" Cato shouted as the Platinum swooped in on great leathery wings. From surveillance he knew the man had a shapeshifting Skill, and frankly was more vulnerable to some of Cato's attacks than other high rankers because all his abilities were merely physical — he didn't embody any esoteric energy, merely focusing on marital prowess. Though hopefully by coming off as friendly, there would be no need for battle. Clearly the man wasn't expecting such a greeting and paused for a moment in bewilderment.

"What?" He stared down at the warframes and the several thousand low-rank refugees the flotilla was safeguarding. "But you're—"

"Getting them to safety!" Cato interrupted, even if it was actually Raine who was doing the grunt work. She could have dealt with the Platinum too, but it was better if Cato was the one doing the diplomacy. Best not to let anyone else think that Cato had allies, let alone ones that could be easily named — or were the exact same ones who were even now undergoing their ascension to Bismuth. "When the higher ranks start coming through, the cities will *not* be safe."

"*You're* the one who brought them here!" The Platinum snapped, his eyes flicking over the mixed group of aquatic warframes and civilians, clearly looking for some sort of opening. The thorough mixing probably seemed like he was using them as shields, but his warframes were really there for their safety. Even as he was speaking, the bioweapons had fended off eight separate attacks by oversized fish and sea monsters.

"Yes," Cato admitted. "But if I let that portal open, it will kill millions, or maybe even billions." He had no way of knowing what was on the other side, and whether the target civilization was barely into agriculture or packed into an ecumenopolis, but no matter what the technological level, the arrival of the System was apocalyptic.

"But you're attacking *us*!" The Platinum protested, not that Cato blamed him. Almost everyone within the System was victim of it, and none of them deserved the strife that it would take to destroy the System properly. But its existence could not be borne.

"*Azoth!*" Raine snapped through her link, the warning accompanied by a ping from Yaniss and a short file-dump, no more than a paragraph. Kosch, Azoth of Clan Renni. Shadow Affinity user. The orbital version of Cato focused all his attention on the capital city, where the portals were,

and spotted the Azoth fairly quickly. So far he'd only seen people as high as Bismuth, but he understood that the ranks above were exponentially more powerful. He hadn't been present where they had appeared on Earth, but he'd seen footage and *walking nuclear bomb* was not too unrealistic a descriptor.

The feeds from his warframes and drones showed a flat-faced, almost monkey-like individual with pale fur, clad in black armor — more than black, something that actively drew in the light around it and created clinging, shifting shadows atop a vantablack, almost two-dimensional cutout of a person. His movements conveyed languid ease, completely unhurried, but he was in reality incredibly quick, moving as if framejacked to ten times normal. The Azoth glided out the door of the Nexus and into the city streets, and Cato took the opportunity to at least *try* and address him before something precipitous occurred.

"Kosch of Clan Renni!" He called through one of his warframes, peeling it away from a group carrying a few unconscious Silvers away from the potential blast zone. The Azoth jerked in surprise for a micro-instant, Cato's body-language analysis programs operating at full speed through a dozen framejacked eyes, and then turned to face the warframe in question.

"You know of me," Kosch drawled, the shadows rippling at his feet rising up into a billowing black cape with a theatricality that Cato found entirely out of place for an active war zone. Or perhaps that was just how high-rankers were, either by inclination or by the System twisting their minds for centuries or millennia on end.

"There is nothing for you here," Cato said, having no interest in explaining exactly how he recognized the Azoth in question. "Whatever fight you are hoping for will not happen. Haekos will be severed from the System, and it is best if you are not here when that comes to pass."

"Words," Kosch said, completely unworried. "The gods have called a [Crusade] to stop you, and so you shall be stopped. The forces you have here are expansive, true, but you are merely insects fighting other insects. There is nothing here of any *real* power."

"I'm afraid you're mistaken," Cato told him, already knowing words were useless. He began the targeting preparations, but he didn't dare fire his most powerful weapons just yet. There were still civilians nearby — for all that he had been trying to remove them from the cities — and the mindripper wasn't quite done either, though it was dominating his bandwidth as it processed through the final checks of the mind-state it pulled from the Interface.

"Then let me demonstrate the futility of your swarm tactics," Kosch said, spreading his arms and baring his teeth. The shadows gathered around him exploded outward, and Cato lost the warframe he was using to talk to the Azoth. From orbit, the magical wave expanded visibly, crossing miles in moments and sweeping out from the central city, blanketing half the continent in less than a minute and creating a perfect circle of vantablank emptiness.

The Platinum he had been arguing with, out over the ocean, dived under the water to escape it, and the rest of his convoy pulled the refugees under, heading away from the suddenly lightless surface. It didn't stop him from communicating, the light absorption not extending to radio waves, but he didn't have any clear idea of what was going on as the entire thousand-mile circle of darkness simply *writhed* for a moment.

When it pulled back, it left nothing behind.

It was like looking at a moonscape; everything the shadow had once covered had been rendered into dust, save for the System buildings; cities, towns and dungeon entrances. They alone were intact, surrounded by bare rock and earth scoured clean of every living thing. Every tree, bush, and blade of grass. Every monster, creature, and every single person within that entire radius had been utterly annihilated.

“God damn that Azoth,” Cato swore into the shared communications system, and meant it. The embodied versions of himself felt sick from the utter devastation, and for once he regretted the crystalline clarity of digital memory. He knew with absolute certainty the exact number of men, women, and children murdered in that single instant.

“What — that’s, that’s…” Leese sputtered, out of words, while Raine merely sent a grim-faced emoticon over the comms. Cato merely pulled the trigger on one of the orbital particle beams.

“There’s a reason Azoths don’t bother with the frontier worlds,” Yaniss said, more sanguine about the destruction than he. *“Only the warworlds have anything that can withstand them.”*

“Warworlds — and me,” Cato said grimly, in the moment before the beam weapon fired.

Such a weapon was simple enough, in the abstract. Take a partly or fully ionized atom, accelerate it through a magnetic field and hurl it downrange at speeds within spitting distance of light. When it came to actually engineering something that could turn that concept into reality, rather a lot of finesse was involved.

The result was a colossal cylinder below an immense halo of solar panels, rock and ice and metal wrapped protectively around the delicate internals. Fractal heat radiators rated for tens of thousands of degree sprouted from the solid surface like feathery antennae, but it was otherwise featureless except for a phrase engraved in thirty-foot letters. *To Whom It May Concern.*

The weapon was created entirely from the designs made at the end of the No Fun Allowed War, and most of the intricacies of its engineering were beyond Cato’s expertise. He did know the particle beams took absolutely *ungodly* amounts of power, with literal thousands of square miles of solar array supplemented by small fusion generators to keep the supply stable. Containing, directing, and focusing the ionized nuclei without the energy corroding the mechanisms was a delicate dance, as was neutralizing the beams after they exited the aperture with electrons accelerated in parallel. Especially since it wasn’t enough to do this with a few hundred or few thousand atoms at a time.

A beam nearly a foot thick lanced forth from one of the monumental orbital weapon, traveling as close to lightspeed as made no difference, crossing the nearly fifty thousand miles to the planet’s surface in a quarter of a second. In full framejack, Cato watched the counter tick down, the actual emission invisible save for a few energetic twinkles where the beam intersected a stray piece of gas. When it hit the atmosphere the reaction was considerably more energetic, but the Azoth had less than a billionth of a second of warning before the stream of relativistic particles reached out and touched him.

Cato’s larger railguns had an impact yield that was best compared to nuclear weaponry. The particle beam could be best compared to standing in the heart of such a nuclear detonation, but *continuously*. The particle beam wasn’t a single shot, but a relentless lance of impossibly

energetic mass. Though it wasn't the heat nor the impact that did damage, not in a conventional sense.

The System seemed to leave atomic and subatomic interactions alone, either by choice or because altering them would have too many consequences, as demonstrated by antimatter functioning exactly as expected. With a particle beam, the particles were moving so fast and were so energetic that they actually *collided* with the atomic structure of what they hit. The number of collisions was small, from a statistical point of view, but there were so *many* particles that the unending flood tore even System matter asunder.

Perhaps the Azoth could stand in a nuclear detonation and survive. Perhaps the Azoth was immune to heat and pressure, to radiation and scouring plasma. But not even the System Gods were immune to being torn apart on an atomic level – simultaneously throughout their entire body – by a weapon they could not reach or deflect. It was not light or heat for the System to invalidate; most of it would simply pass *through* all but the most exotic physical matter, as even the strongest System material didn't have the neutronium density that would be required for a reasonable shield.

The Azoth's body actually absorbed the impact for a moment or two, whatever defensive skills and abilities he possessed preventing the devastation at the point where it hit him, though the atmosphere roiled as stray nitrogen and oxygen were stripped to ions by the particle beam. Cato's entire orbital surveillance network strained to track the Azoth through the energetic mess, the other particle beams ready to take up the task should the enemy teleport or move out of coverage.

It wasn't necessary. An Azoth was not a System-god, and his toughness was actually limited. Kosch vanished in a flash with a spectrum consistent with the constituents of carbon-based life, and a sudden bloom of ravaging fire exploded outward from where the particle beam hit ground. It took a quarter-second for the beam to cease, leaving only scorched and blasted ground and the capital city's Nexus building. Nothing else was intact, all of it scorched and broken rubble in a slowly dissipating firestorm.

"*What was that?*" Yaniss demanded, but nobody answered her.

Cato stared down at the wasteland in grim satisfaction, undercut by the oily sickness of contemplating how many had just died because of one power-drunk System-psychopath. Neural alerts flashed as algorithms purged virtualized stress chemistry to prevent a spiral into something truly dark, but he still swore to himself that the next Azoth through wouldn't get the benefit of the doubt.

If anyone was going to have nightmares about the conflict, it should be *them*.

[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]

Muar was quite tempted to go. It was, after all, *his* [Crusade], and the confirmation that Cato really *was* out there gave him an itch to address it himself. But Muar was only Bismuth, and he well knew that Cato was able to deal with Bismuths. Besides, he'd already sent several Bismuths and an Azoth in that direction, and while he had personal understanding of Cato that might well help, his primary task was to spread the [Crusade] to the core worlds.

His core Bismuth Skill, [Divine Aegis], was like a warm glow at the back of his mind, providing a certain surety about his goals and his place in the world. The System would not give him special treatment, but if he acted in the correct manner there was no limit to the rewards it would offer. A point proven by the equipment he had acquired from Temple quests immediately after his Bismuth Ascension, the crystalline armor practically tailor-made for him. A sign that the System favored him.

So he proceeded with the work only he could do, which was why he was on the small moon of the planet Gos-Gos, just outside of the core worlds. The inner worlds often had their moons included in the System's influence, as high-rank regions where those who had achieved Bismuth or Azoth could exercise their powers to the fullest. Muar himself was there less for the experience of a proper Bismuth-rank Conflict Zone as to ensure there were no vestiges of Cato — or any place where he could get a foothold.

"Are you *certain* this is necessary, [Crusader] Muar?" The Platinum wrung his hands, and Muar had to refrain from snapping at him. He was the Planetary Administrator of Gos-Gos, as no Bismuth would waste their time with the job, and the patronage of Clan Mokrom meant nobody in their right mind would exploit the rank difference. Yet it seemed the backing of deities trumped clan influence, to judge by the crablike being's demeanor. Ever since Muar had arrived, the Administrator had been overly obsequious.

"You've seen the quest," Muar responded, his divine senses sharpening his vision enough to bring the small moonlets into view, riding high in the sky just beyond the fringes of the System's authority. They were small, barely more than floating mountains, but Muar wasn't willing to take any chances. "Cato has already spread to elsewhere in the System, and you certainly don't want him here. Something like that is a perfect invitation for him to ruin your world." He pointed upward, gesturing at the tiny crescents floating in the sky.

He couldn't be absolutely certain the moon itself was not a problem, even inside the System. Muar knew that Cato had a penchant for such bodies, but he didn't know if that was a rule. Even if he'd experienced Cato's nature directly, he didn't fully understand it or its rules. While Cato was from outside the System, there was no telling if he had Skills related to moons and the gulf of emptiness outside of planets, or if there was something less direct. Muar was fairly certain that the moon itself was free of heretical influence given that Cato was so adamantly opposed to the System, but Muar had still taken the time for a close survey.

"Very well," the Administrator said, reaching for his badge of office. Muar didn't know what the precise limits were on the authority of Planetary Administrators, but those in the inner worlds clearly had more they could do. Or perhaps it was simply the presence of Temples and other advanced buildings; either way, the Administrator seemed to have far more leeway than Onswa ever had.

Another quest bloomed in Muar's interface, for Bismuths and above, to bring down the moonlets. It would normally be impossible, or at least exceedingly difficult, given that the

System did not extend that far, but there was a solution even for that. The quest issued a small, portable version of a Nexus, to allow the System to be projected beyond its usual limits. Even if they were merely on loan, the expense explained the Administrator's hesitancy, but Muar knew they were entirely necessary.

Unfortunately, he did not himself have a skillset appropriate to fulfilling the quest. As a Paladin he was far more suited to defense, to be a bulwark between Cato's machinations and the loyal residents of the System. Simply ensuring places like Gos-Gos were safe from Cato's interference was far more than he could ever manage by contesting the being directly.

"Thank you, Administrator," Muar said, and invoked [Divine Aegis] in a particular way to bless the man. The Platinum was mostly a bureaucrat, but even at that rank, he needed to maintain himself by running dungeons or visiting conflict zones. A Bismuth-rank boost to defense, to be held in abeyance and invoked only when needed, was a reasonable gift. Not that he needed it, given how wealthy Gos-Gos was, but it was wrong to leave him empty-handed even if Muar was certain the [Crusade] would provide something in time.

"As you say, [Crusader] Muar," the Administrator said, tilting his carapace in a sort of bow.

"If nobody takes up the quest soon, be sure to contact me," Muar said, lifting his farcaster. As expensive as the device was to use across different worlds, it was invaluable for keeping in touch with other members of the [Crusade], or the Clan Elders who had gotten themselves involved. Both Clan Tornok and Clan Mokrom saw the advantages in participating, even if many of them were not properly believers.

Muar was not going to deceive himself. Outside of some of the divine users he encountered, most did not have the proper fire of faith, and required more corporeal motivations to join the [Crusade]. But then, that was exactly why the System provided rewards, knowing as it did that people required some surety in their lives. The rewards might not be quite tempting enough without a few words from the local Clans or Administrators, and he didn't trust the man in charge of Gos-Gos to put himself forth that way.

The administrator dutifully connected his own farcaster to Muar's, so they could speak in the future, but his lack of verve implied that Muar would be the one initiating any communication. But that would have to be a concern for the future, as there were still dozens or hundreds of worlds to which he had to carry the word of the [Crusade]. Others had taken up the call, of course, but *he* was the vanguard, the ultimate holder of the quest, the [Crusader], and the only one who had actually met Cato and not been suborned. Haekos was still a frontier world, which at least implied that Muar was ahead of Cato and his agents, but Muar knew they were further spread than anyone but himself could imagine.

What worried him was that he'd only had a few unconfirmed sightings of Raine and Leese, and none of Dyen, for years. He considered it impossible that they'd simply met misfortune, and he also considered it impossible that they were being quiet. In fact, traces of Dyen's movements had been fairly obvious, considering he was preying on the Tornok Clan, but the man himself was elusive.

The alternative was that Cato's agents were being extremely stealthy, and had learned to avoid any obvious identification. He doubted they could truly slip past the attention of the gods, but with a low enough profile, there might not be anything to draw that attention in the first place.

Such was the role of those within the [Crusade], to act as the eyes and ears of the System and the deities within it. While he was confident in dealing with them, should they ever meet, that was not his purpose.

The best way to combat Cato was to stay ahead of him, and so Muar was headed ever deeper toward the core. In the end, it wouldn't matter what Cato did at the frontier, if the core worlds were unassailable. Muar would make sure that they were.

"We can't afford this anymore," proclaimed Lakor Eln, [World Deity] of Haekos.

Initik was not much impressed, even if Marus Eln and Oran Lundt looked suitably grave. Rendering all the damage to the planet, the fight for the people and their lives, as something that was merely *expensive* was anathema to Initik's way of thinking. It wasn't as if the Eln clan deities were incapable, or lacking in skills and resources — they simply didn't care enough.

Of course, Lakor had more than one world under his authority, and so could afford to lose one. Or rather, he had other restrictions and *couldn't* afford to spend everything he had on defending Haekos. That was the excuse, but Initik doubted it was genuinely anything more than an unwillingness to spend the effort it would take to truly secure Haekos from Cato.

They'd come at it too late to stop him from cluttering the skies, and destroying everything would be tricky considering it was all outside of the System's grasp — and incredibly far away, at that. He'd already suggested expanding the System's range of influence, but not only were the essence stores relatively low, the bulk of Cato's forces were coming from much, much further away than the moon.

"This has been quite instructive," Mii-Es said brightly, unbothered by the idea of abandoning Hakeos to its fate. Of course, she had come out from somewhere in the inner worlds herself, and so was not unfamiliar with worlds changing hands. Though Initik suspected none of them quite understood that this wasn't like ceding a world to another clan. Haekos, and everyone and everything on it, would be forever condemned to that terrible reality outside the System.

Not that there was much left to lose, not after the Azoth had flexed his Skill. In just a few moments, he had done far more damage than Cato had. It did not escape Initik's attention that Cato had been *very* careful with his targets, with miraculously few deaths prior to the Azoth's intervention. Perhaps it might have been worth the cold cost of lives if that level of power had actually countered Cato's stratagem, but ultimately it had been to no purpose.

More disturbing, the weapon that had been used on the Azoth was *not* the same weapon that had been used on Grand Paladin Nikhil. While an Azoth's defenses weren't the divinely-granted immunity that had been given to Nikhil, they should have held up for more than a few fractions of a second — so Initik was forced to imagine this weapon *also* could be used against deities.

He didn't bother to point that out. Either they understood it, or they didn't. Of the Elns, only Marus seemed actually upset by seeing the Azoth obliterated by something with no essence signature and an origin far outside anything they could scry, but that was only to be expected. None of the clan gods had experienced a real threat in thousands of years or more.

"I think it's best to assume that Cato will go after the annexation again," Initik said at last. "Whichever world it appears on needs to be highly protected, and the portal connection

protected on both sides. Along with constantly scrying the skies. That might our best method of countering Cato and catching how he spreads between worlds.”

“We can issue special quests under the [Crusade],” Marus volunteered, though Lakor glared at him for it. Likely due to the very same ledger that led Lakor to abandon Haekos. “I know I’d rather not have my new world infested like this.”

“*Our* world,” Oran Lundt corrected, his voice a warning rumble. “I will ensure Clan Lundt knows the threat of this Cato is not overstated. Though perhaps this is a blessing. If he is busy here, then he will not be able to assault Gogri when the portal actually opens.”

“We can hope,” Initik said. The assemblage of forces *was* quite impressive, and it *did* seem unlikely that Cato could conjure the same for another world, but it wasn’t advisable to simply assume that would be true. The System’s rules did not apply to him.

Lakor reached out to his Interface, going through the necessary process to sever Haekos from the rest of the network. Since he controlled both Haekos and the worlds it linked to, he needed no cooperation to suspend the portals and rip away all the essence he could before detangling his System Space and leaving it to Cato. Unlike with Sydea, he kept the scrying windows up to see what happened.

No longer barred from the dungeons, Cato destroyed them in quick succession, the scrying windows starting to fail as the System was disrupted. Initik hadn’t even known that the System was vulnerable in that way, and while he had no idea how he might use the information, he marked very closely how Cato systematically removed every dungeon and town Nexus, and how the essence cycle on Haekos slowly failed.

Suddenly, all the scry windows disappeared at once, the portals vanishing as Haekos was removed from the System entirely. It was astounding how *quickly* that it was done, a matter of hours, although for anyone else it would have been impossible. Half the dungeons collapsed before anyone of lower rank could leave them, and no high rank would risk the malus the System would assign for such an act. Yet, the fact that it could be done at all showed Initik a glaring vulnerability that he would have to consider.

“There, it’s relocated,” Lakor said, pulling up a particular line from his Interface.

[A new world is appearing!

The Gogri staging area has been established on the world of Koh-rel. Voyage into the new world and test its inhabitants. Recommended rank: Copper to Silver.

Time until portal open: 17 Hours]