

Chapter 8 – Choices

Cato really tried his best not to eavesdrop on his guests.

He was perfectly capable of it, given how laden the habitat was with sensors just as a matter of course. Pressure sensors, light sensors, all the normal things to ensure there were no sudden emergencies from a stray micrometeorite or a moonquake. As any neophyte knew, speech was merely waves through the air, so it really wasn't any effort at all to decode the readouts from the room the Sydeans had retreated to.

After being given the first taste of real conversation in *months*, it took some real wrestling with himself to keep from sitting in as a ghostly spectator just for the company. Having genuine people around whetted his appetite for more, but he couldn't simply bustle in with drinks and join their debate. His guests feared him, viewed him the same as the highest-rank elites, and so they couldn't possibly be honest with themselves or each other if they felt he was around. Nor did he want to be dishonest with them, so he very consciously blocked the algorithms that had started to run entirely automatically.

Or really, autonomically. For a properly postbiological brain to run it had a lot of extra features that didn't make sense in a squishy bio-brain. That included automatic sensor analysis, integrated as smoothly and completely as natural senses, as well as reconciling every version of himself as they communicated with each other, to keep all his selves roughly on the same page. Even when they hadn't synchronized in days.

It was that synchronization that interrupted his lonely vigil and made it even tortuous, as the version of himself that had been running the spy network integrated with the rest of his consciousness. Instead of temptation, that version brought with it an incandescent fury at the events unfolding on the surface. Between the satellites and the innumerable bioweapon scouts that were flitting about, he had a good understanding of what was happening but was unable to do a single thing about it.

It wouldn't be too dramatic to call it an invasion, as non-Sydeans streamed through the portal in the capital city and teleported their way to other locations, spreading out over the entire planet. They displaced, attacked, or outright murdered the natives and each other, at least in places where no higher ranks were about to keep order. It was exactly the savagery that had sprung up on Earth before the postbiological forces had arrived, a deliberate erasure of civilization.

That was the sort of thing that made him near-frantic to get back on the ground himself. Cato had no desire to try and manipulate things from the shadows, moving pieces around while he stayed in orbit, and though he would keep an orbital presence he still wanted – needed – to go down and see things with his own eyes. To talk, fight, and witness for himself. A full light-second of delay from Sydea's surface made everything seem indistinct and unreal, making a game of it the way the System did. Though he should really be thankful the moons were even that close.

When the System had come to Earth, it had never spread beyond the atmosphere. On Sydea, the reach of the alternate physics was quite a bit further, extending thousands of miles beyond the planet's surface. Considering the vast distances of space, that wasn't much in a relative sense, but it did imply that given time the System could or would add the rest of the planets.

That was ignoring whatever mechanism let it spread to begin with, which could potentially target any of his bases and erase everything technological in an instant.

Accordingly, he'd surveyed the other planets in the system and started sending probes. Cato was pretty certain he needed to be a proper cockroach, especially once the System took serious notice of him. The quests had been bad enough, and Cato hadn't yet inflicted any *real* damage. Once it became clear what Cato was doing, he had to assume it would bring greater forces to bear.

The trick was making sure that it didn't catch everyone else in the crossfire when that happened.

In a way, he'd already failed at that particular task. There was no question that the sudden influx of non-Sydeans, especially those of high rank, was due to his meddling. Considering how poorly they treated the natives, not to mention displacing them from their own towns and even homes, that was no good for any of the people he was trying to help. He'd tried to mitigate the issue by keeping the scouts away from heavily populated areas, both to avoid disruption and in case of a sudden smiting from heaven, but so far the local System-God had not been paying attention.

Cato wasn't ready for that conflict yet anyway, but he was ready to start aiding the Sydeans with the forces he'd created. He had nothing major just yet, since he was still building his infrastructure, but he had multiple bioweapons incubating for deployment. The incident with the Platinums showed his warframes didn't have quite enough punch, so a version of himself had put his nose to the virtual grindstone and spent some time working on better ranged options.

The species-specific toxin he'd brewed up on the fly had been no good, and he figured the same would be true for any other poison or disease that didn't have the System's blessing, so he was stuck with more brute force options for the moment. Biofusion was too uncertain and unstable to scale beyond the levels he had already used in the Sneeze of Doom — there was only so much coordination to be had with the infrastructure, and the moment a fusion detonation began any organelles that weren't already perfectly synchronized simply vaporized rather than adding their efforts to the payload.

At least after consulting the archives, he found a ranged weapon that would work called a light-gas gun. It was closer to a hydraulic system than an explosive one, but could still achieve incredible muzzle velocity and could be done with bioweapon muscles. Unfortunately it took up quite a bit of mass and space, and the reload time was measured in seconds at best, minutes to hours at worst as he needed to repair pieces of bioweapon that wouldn't be able to handle the stress. There was a reason his warframe hadn't been equipped with anything like that, but at least it was a projectile weapon.

Being able to deliver doom-sneezes at a distance would be helpful, but there was disappointingly little deuterium or helium-three on the moon — or for that matter lithium-6 or other fusion candidates. Considering how inefficient using it for an actual weaponized detonation was — both with the fusion material itself and with the relatively expensive organelles required — it'd have to remain a sort of last resort. Especially since at some point the warframes would suffer more damage than the target.

Beyond that he mostly had gone for tougher and bigger. The dearth of fusion fuel wasn't bad enough that he couldn't power a few warframes, since these ones wouldn't be designed to run for centuries on end. Such thinking was just a matter of course in the scattered polities of the solar system, where *post-scarcity* had really only meant they'd become a *pro-maintenance* society. When the nearest neighbor could be months away physically, it was important to be self-sufficient to the point of extremity.

Dropping such big frames – and his guests – back on Sydea was going to be an adventure. Small, light organisms were one thing, delivered via railgun to relative null velocity and simply using wings or fine parachutes to reach the ground safely. Heavier payloads were trickier, not least because of the risk of interception.

It would be so much easier if he could negotiate with the locals first, get the high-rankers to allow or even help a landing, but he was pretty certain that wouldn't work too well. His scouts were getting popped with extreme prejudice the moment they were spotted, and most of the time not even by the Sydeans. Even if he could get someone to listen, it was difficult to argue against the System telling people outright to kill the invader and be rewarded.

Even with all that, he could have probably landed anyway if it weren't for the foreign high-rankers. Planets were huge, and with a population of only a million or so there were enormous tracts of pure wilderness, where nobody had ventured in decades. In a worst-case scenario he could simply drop them at one of the poles, which definitely had nobody about.

The incredibly high rank newcomers, though, could cross half the planet in a blink and with that mobility there was no real chance of avoiding a confrontation. Unless, of course, he didn't drop any System-jamming biology, and that meant he'd have a lot fewer options to work with. It was a problem he'd have to resolve soon, since he didn't want to keep his guests waiting.

"I can't believe you're considering working with it," Muar rumbled, arms crossed, his tail lashing with annoyance. "You're a priestess, and it is against the System! You shouldn't be listening to a single word!"

"I'm not a priestess anymore," Leese demurred. "Besides, some of his arguments are convincing, and it's not as if the System gave us any warning about what he really was. It should have set the quest at Platinum-rank quest, not Silver."

"Should it have?" Muar growled, pacing across the floor and glancing out the window at the globe of Sydea before looking back at Leese. "That thing had just arrived. It was weak, then. Vulnerable. We had a chance, but we failed. Now it has us, *because* we failed. Expecting us to turn against the System and break all the rules."

"If we've already failed then what does it matter?" Leese objected. Raine was happy enough to let Leese speak for both of them, since Raine had never found herself to be particularly diplomatic. "This is after. We're outside the System; the rules don't matter here."

"They don't—" Muar took a furious step forward, and Raine finally interjected.

"No, Muar," she said coldly. "The only thing that has ever mattered is power, and look around you. What we see is beyond anything but maybe the System itself." She sighed and sipped an odd but flavorful tea from an exquisite cup, the sort that the System would charge Gold or even

Platinum tokens for. Only it had been provided for free and without any apparent consideration of its value.

“What Cato wants is too big for the likes of us,” she concluded. “Everything here is strange, and I know I certainly don’t know what to think of it all.” She gestured at their surroundings, which were just as odd as they’d been when she had first awoken. “The best we can do is decide how much we want to be involved.”

They were in something like a sitting room, with one wall being the impossible glass facing out onto that impossible view. The rest was taken up with ordinary tables and chairs, the not-essence lamps set in the ceiling to illuminate it, and a stocked bar with liquor and tea and sweet jerky. How Cato had brought any of it to this place away from the world, she could not fathom.

Raine found the room’s furnishings, well-made as they were, to be more disconcerting than the view of Sydea through the glass. The chairs and cushions, while nominally the same, had subtle variations between them. When the System provided such objects, no matter the rank or tokens spent, they were reassuringly regular and identical. Every cushioned blue chair was a *cushioned blue chair*, a constant.

Yet the things Cato provided did vary. It was as if every single one was unique, its own individual type. There was no denying their quality, even if it was impossible to tell ranks without System access, and some of them even struck her eye, to the point that she wouldn’t mind having them herself. If only they weren’t so strangely unique.

“Why are you even arguing?” Dyen snapped. The fourth member of their group had only stewed in his own anger, from the moment Raine had seen him up to the latest second, pacing the floor and lashing out at even simple questions. It didn’t help that every time Raine looked his way she expected to see Cormok, not someone far younger and with an eastern, pale blue coloring.

“You can all do what you please,” he continued, making a rude gesture with one hand. “I need to go back down. Arene needs to know what happened to my wife. *Someone* is going to pay for it.”

“I agree that this is something we should put to Administrator Onswa, but Cato already killed the Platins that attacked you,” Raine reminded him. Cato’s ability to deal with off-world Platins, but being thoroughly thrashed by Arene, should have pinpointed his exact rank. Except that normal rank considerations didn’t apply. Even putting aside what Cato said about essence, the facility surrounding them showed a kind of power that probably wouldn’t show up to an [Appraise].

“According to Cato,” Dyen growled. “I haven’t forgotten his role in all this, either.” How he expected to hold Cato to account, Raine had no idea. Even if his wife *had* been Arene’s grand-niece, she couldn’t imagine that the Platinum would find that to be sufficient reason to side with Dyen. The sad fact was that Cato had power, they didn’t, and allowances had to be made.

Cato had tried to convince them of his position by showing them ruins, the ever-shrinking areas where cities and towns were placed, and the slow march of Border Zone and Conflict Zones, but that evidence was not an argument that mattered to anyone. Muar didn’t believe, Dyen didn’t care, and it was Cato’s personal power rather than his motives that mattered to Leese and Raine.

Simply the perch outside their world showed that he was serious, that he should be taken at his word. Most of his propositions were abstract, things to be offered to Administrator Onswa and Arene Firewing, but the offer of patronage was one that the sisters found ridiculous to refuse. Especially if it came with better and younger bodies.

The pair of them had never had time for a family or even much in the way of romance. The only thing that mattered was that they wouldn't be crushed underfoot by careless high-rankers, and that required power. It required delving dungeons for hours a day, risking their lives in conflict zones. It required trusting others of their rank very little, and those above them even less, and making some very grievous mistakes along the way. More than once they'd been betrayed by someone either enticed by rewards and gear, or just by essence. Some chose the path of ranking up by killing people rather than monsters, and the System would reward them for it.

All their youth had been spent trying to climb the ranks, and that had been rendered entirely moot now that they were outside the System. It would have been crushing, except for Cato's offer. She could be *young* again, and she wouldn't need to get to Platinum to maintain it. Leese had been a little clearer-minded than her, and pestered Cato with endless questions about what, exactly, he could do with regards to better bodies. Assuming she credited the answers, the System had very little to compare.

"We can't dither forever," Leese said, unperturbed by either Muar's grumblings or Dyen's waspish tone. "I don't know about you but I don't want to just sit here and stare. If Cato is right about the System, we have a clear goal. If he isn't, we *also* have a clear goal. Either way, I would prefer to know sooner. And I'd rather be in the best shape to do so." Muar squinted doubtfully at Leese, so Raine clarified.

"We're going to take the offer," she said bluntly. "It's too good a chance. We're all going to have to start from scratch anyway—"

"So he says," Muar said. "I still say it's some kind of suppression." Raine waved it away.

"I'd rather start with as much of an advantage as I can manage," she finished.

"You are aware it's absolutely blasphemous," Muar said, teeth clenched. "Even if he *can* create new bodies in some sort of fake Bismuth ascension, you couldn't trust that it was fully *yours*."

"They're already not ours," Dyen said, taking time out from being bitter to heap scorn on Muar. "Even if you don't believe everything he says, we have no essence and I know I'm missing some scars." Dyen pressed his hand against his chest, where he said he had been cut in two. "No, they're brand new."

"Very well," Muar said at length. "I can't stop you from choosing your own destruction and damnation, but I have warned you. I knew the Gosruk Guardians were done anyway, with Cormok gone." Raine's tail lashed at the dismissal, as if she were somehow insulting Cormok by taking opportunity with both hands when it showed itself. Any ranker knew that you took what you could get, and death was an ever-present companion. If Cormok had died to a monster instead, they would have toasted his memory, sold off his equipment, and moved on.

"Come on," she said to Leese. "Let's go."

Leese rose from one of the comfortable chairs and joined her, the two of them walking out of the sitting room into the strange, upward-curving halls of the residence. Cato called it a habitat, and

claimed that there was no essence involved at all. Though how he managed to make every point of a circle feel like it was *down* she could not fathom. She knew that they'd only seen the smallest bit of it, as the few glimpses of their actual surroundings showed a sprawl of incomprehensible artifice shrouded in sharp-edged shadows.

Finding Cato was no problem. Raine was fairly certain he knew where they were at all times, and he was always coincidentally just a few rooms away. Or one of him was — she had never forgotten that when they had been woken up, there was one Cato for each of them, like some kind of duplication Skill. That had never been demonstrated again, but there were subtle differences each time they met that made her think each one she encountered was actually a different one.

This time, the Cato they found was waiting in a small, comfortably-furnished room along the hub of the habitat, working on one of the things that resembled System displays, only physically manifested instead of in the mind's eye. None of the displays made any sense to her, full of unfamiliar symbols and notation. She'd heard of artifacts with ciphered descriptions, special secrets that needed a quest to unlock, but never herself run into something she couldn't read. Just another small strange detail that lent credence to Cato's story.

"Come on in," Cato invited them, looking up from his work. "Have you made your decision?"

"Leese and I would like the improvements before we go down," Raine told him. He didn't seem surprised. "Muar doesn't trust you at all, and Dyen just doesn't care."

"It's their choice," Cato said mildly. "Very well, come this way. I'll take care of your upgrades and then we'll head back down to Sydea."

Cato was genuinely surprised how amenable the two Sydean sisters were toward getting new bodies. It was by far the most powerful thing he could offer, but it was also the most difficult for people to accept. The vast majority of people who weren't already postbiological had issues with such invasive and extensive physical changes, and for good reason. Any mind was shaped by the body that housed it, even when care was taken to mimic the appropriate chemical balances. He was far more aggressive in the warframe, for example, than when he was inhabiting the server core of the habitat he'd made. There was a reason he had physical bodies, performing manual work, even making tea and cookies for his guests and cleaning up the kitchen, rather than just sitting as a disembodied mind in a pure dataspace.

As the mind was a plaything of the body, the System's alterations changed how people thought. People entered a feedback loop with their skills, both simply by so many of them being geared toward killing but also changing environmental and personality preferences to match the forms of exotic energies people preferred. People with fire and water skillsets not getting along, for example. The priestly or so-called holy set was an extreme example of such, since it allowed System-Gods direct access to the individual in question. With thousands or millions of cleric sorts running around, no given individual was *likely* to be commandeered by a bored pseudo-deity, but any one of them *could* be.

On the other hand, the System did include augmentations of various sorts through skills and ranks, and even things it termed *evolutions*, though the changes really represented a complete biological overhaul. There was even footage of higher ranks completely transforming. They

weren't particularly common, but it was a known quantity, the sort of change he was offering might not be as foreign as it might have otherwise seemed.

Unfortunately, it was *only* those two who were taking the offer. Which meant he was going to have to design a re-entry vehicle fit for unaugmented flesh and blood. Or barely augmented, as they would be encountering the System before they hit atmosphere, and even the lowest rank was more robust than the biology would indicate.

The System force-multiplied what was already there, so the strong and tough only got stronger and tougher. The same wasn't true for smarts, which was a far trickier concept anyway. Trying to optimize a mind architecture to be much brighter than it could handle ended up creating things that were entirely alien, and sometimes completely malevolent. More than once, an AI or upload that tried to meddle with their own minds too much had needed to be put down. Sometimes at significant cost.

It was something to keep in mind as he touched up the neural infrastructure in the new brains he was going to be giving the Sydeans. The changes were minor overall, otherwise they wouldn't remain Sydeans, but he was working in some slight efficiencies in speed, improved reactions to stress chemicals, and easing some of the load when it came to information processing.

Other adaptations were easier. Denser muscle fibers, using slightly different proteins. More robust chemical chains, fueled by a more efficient gut — biochemistry was far more forgiving when it didn't have to be optimized around energy scarcity. Tweaks to bone structure and joint connections. Increased nerve density in some places, moderated by far better scaling and processing of what those nerves reported. They'd be more resistant to pain without losing any sensitivity in other areas.

Generally, the result looked the same as their original forms except younger, healthier, and far more fit. None of the biological tweaking contained any of the serious biotech from Titan, or even his home-grown tricks. It was all more or less standard, especially since it'd be difficult for most people to add rare earths or heavy elements to their diet.

He led the two women deeper into the habitat, where there was a transfer tube to the microgravity area of the station. All the labs and manufactories were deeper in the moon, hidden from the view of Sydea. The rotating habitat was small and low-albedo enough that even high-rank eyes wouldn't see anything unusual, but if he started deploying thousands of square miles of solar panels and reflectors and the sprawl of automated industry, it'd be hard to miss.

"This won't take too long," he told them with one of his human frames. "Just sit down in those chairs there and by the time you wake up we'll be ready to head down to the surface."

The pair of Sydeans looked at the very comfortable lounge chairs, without a hint of anything medical or, for the matter, magical about them. Of course that wasn't entirely true; there were certain electromagnetic devices within them that would render an unaugmented person instantly unconscious. A necessity, since he was going to rework their bodies from the cellular level up and tinker with their existing nervous system.

One thing he *hadn't* offered them was to rehouse their minds entirely. For most people, the exact mechanics of moving a person from one substrate to another — be it meat or machine —

were incredibly important, and quite a few methods were considered indistinguishable from death. Nor was such an appraisal precisely wrong, but as he'd told the Sydeans, the entire concept became somewhat blurrier with the techniques available to him. To the point where there was no real consensus, even back on Sol.

The sisters communicated in a high-density body language, clearly evolved over years of working together. He couldn't read it, not unless he was prepared to spend a lot more time observing and testing, but he could guess that they were making sure there were no second thoughts. For a moment he thought they *would* reject it, but after a long pause they settled themselves.

Cato rendered them unconscious and went to work, shuttling the pair back into the guts of the base so he could carry through on his offer. Essentially just stripping out their brains again – less traumatically this time – and doing a little bit of biochemical surgery as the new, altered bodies were grown around them. The new bodies still carried their original genetic information despite the extensive alterations, because he wasn't a jerk. It would be very rude for them to wind up with kids that didn't look or act like them.

In parallel with the two Sydeans, Cato had to grow himself his own body. One that was System-compatible. He really hated to do it, but the System quest meant that if he wanted to avoid potentially lethal attention he'd need to go undercover for a little bit. It wasn't something he liked to do, not only because he wasn't all that good at it but also because any version of himself that was accessible by the system would have been effectively crippled.

He had to assume that anything inside his fleshy skull under those circumstances was compromised, so thousands of details of how certain things worked – and even about his future plans – would have to be sanitized away. Even his ability to think would have been constrained, the version of himself effectively lobotomized and expendable.

It was terrible, but everyone who had been involved in retaking Earth from the System had learned to be ruthless with themselves. If the defense had been a concerted effort from the larger forces in the Solar System, that wouldn't have been the case, but the entire force was composed of volunteers with some kind of personal stake. Hobbyists and civilians, most of whom were talented amateurs at best. Even Cato might not have been invested if it weren't for the members of his family that had been on Earth, and familiar, well-loved virtual worlds that had been destroyed when technology abruptly stopped working.

Some of the real AI entities could have dropped billions of organic killing machines, working in perfect concert, and there were Summer Civilizations that produced professional soldiers more savage than anything the System had to offer. But with the restrictions of the System and the isolation of those polities from Earth's own government, they didn't care. Almost all the forces that *did* care had fallen when the System arrived.

Cato had been in the early round of volunteers, after someone from Titan realized that their exotic biology projects actually functioned where more conventional technology did not, and had dropped down to try to find his aunt's family, who had been on Earth at the time. Very quickly people had learned that they had to have a particular attitude in order to actually fight within the system.

Time lag to the ground was too long to run things remotely, and any individual had a good chance of dying no matter what precautions were taken so singleton people risked a very permanent death. Those who couldn't handle integrating multiple copies, or stomach the idea of some version of themselves being annihilated without re-integrating with the main copy, had dropped out extremely quickly.

Cato himself could manage fairly well, though there were limits to how many versions of himself could be running around without it descending into an incredible mess. There was a reason all the backup versions he'd made on Sydea were in stasis, rather than out doing things and deviating further and further from the prime version of himself — desynchronization madness was no joke.

He had nearly succumbed to it himself, when one of his warframes had finally found his cousins. If he'd been a little faster he might have been able to save them, to save the rest of their family, and bring back *something* to salve his grieving parents. Instead, it became the shock he needed to make sure a version of himself would be ready go take the fight past Earth.

Accordingly, he already had a design for a lobotomized, System-compatible version of his normal human frame, and it wasn't much of a stretch to create a Sydean version of the same. Neither one was meant for extended use, but he couldn't avoid having *some* ability to interact within the System. He hated it too much to pretend to be a proper System individual, but he could at least avoid the System's direct attention.

"Cato!" One of his human frames sighed as Dyen yelled outside his door. The young Sydean was perpetually angry, but Cato couldn't be upset about that. It was Cato's fault that the couple had gotten involved at all, and it was Cato's shortcomings that had led to the death of the young man's wife.

"Yes, Dyen?" He asked politely, opening the door and peering into the hall where the young lizard-man was shouting.

"You said we'd leave as soon as a decision was made. We've made our decisions." Dyen glared at him, head canted slightly and muzzle wrinkled. Cato wasn't certain how much of his attitude was current circumstances, and how much was natural, but had decided to be tolerant. At least until he could foist the young man off onto one of his relatives.

"And we will be leaving," Cato said equably. "Things do take time, however. If you like I can show you the vehicle we will be using to return to the planet."

"You don't have a portal? Or a teleporter?" Dyen seemed skeptical, which was fair. The System seemed to allow very few mechanisms; everything was centered in the power of individuals, or of the System nexus and its functions. The functioning of technology was alien to them.

"Such things don't operate outside the System," Cato explained, gesturing for Dyen to follow him toward the rear of the habitat.

"Seems pretty terrible then," Dyen said bluntly. "How would you get around?"

"Believe it or not, instantaneous transport has a number of downsides," Cato said, gesturing for Dyen to enter the lift that would take them up to the habitat's center — and into null gravity.

"Like being invaded, for example. Or centralizing everyone and everything, and all the

vulnerabilities that creates. I've seen entire civilizations die because they crowded in so close that a tiny accident, the most minute collision, destroyed them all. Fair warning, this ride may feel like it's falling."

It had been a digital civilization, so the actual size was much smaller than any city of flesh and blood, but the point still stood. Of course you still needed a certain amount of people close by to even have a civilization, and he was pretty certain if anyone had been able to figure out faster-than-light travel under real physics they'd be using it. But Cato was still certain that things like the System portals weren't all good.

Dyen merely grunted, either in acknowledgement of the warning, or in disbelief about Cato's story. It was impossible to tell either way. Then he grabbed onto the holdfast as the gravity began to drop, centrifugal force fading and leaving them both floating in microgravity. Cato was used to null-gravity, of course, and since many System skills involved flying Dyen didn't seem *too* discomfited.

They reached the axis of the habitat, and from there Cato directed Dyen the short distance through the connecting hall to where a window looked out on the vast hangar where Cato was launching his ships. Or really, probes at this point, since nothing was truly manned. Here at last Dyen seemed to be impressed.

Large, gleaming spheres were clustered at intervals in the huge cylindrical hollow; tanks holding volatiles of various sorts. Water, gasses, fuels. Gantries ran the length of the cavity, articulated arms nearly the size of the entire habitat sliding along them to administer spot-manufacturing to the skeletons of vessels under construction. Flashes of welding and the soft blinking of hazard lighting added to the illumination from large mirrors reflecting the local primary.

Most of the craft were small, meant solely for digital life or no life at all, but further away from the observation window were the beginning of some large and menacing shapes. Most were weapons platforms, for the inevitable future in which he needed orbital support, but some were simply larger expeditionary vessels for venturing to the other planets. Then there was the landing ship they'd be using.

It looked like a large arrowhead, but that was deceiving. Within the outer hull – the shuttle that would bring them to the System's influence – was an inner, System-friendly portion that would actually land them. Cato had to suppress the urge to explain it at length to Dyen, who surely wouldn't care, but he did take some petty satisfaction in being able to strike the young, rude Sydean dumb.

He shouldn't have, but after all, he was only human.