

Chapter 2 – Dungeon Delve

The lush, riotous jungle stopped abruptly at a deep chasm of layered blue stone, a ribbon of water winding through far below while a rolling golden savannah stretched out on the other side. At something over a mile across it was bit too far to jump, even for the warframe, but Cato had business at the bottom. Two kinds of business, in fact.

One was to plant his seed into the river, a turn of phrase that made the warframe's ominous muzzle curl into a juvenile grin. Even if the label was amusing, the action was a serious one, borne of the knowledge that some quirk of the System could erase him at any moment. The package of biomatter would bury into the ground, leech material from its surroundings to grow and reinforce itself, and be a hard-to-find nuisance that would keep System folks searching for an unknown, well-hidden anomaly. Besides which, it could operate as a backup version of himself on the off chance the worst did happen, and the warframe was destroyed.

Then there was the anchor. According to the map he'd scanned, there was a dungeon in the chasm, and like all major System creations it served to anchor the System to Sydea. This particular planet had upwards of fifty known dungeons, and God and System alone knew how many others. One thing they'd found during the Earth campaign was that destroying the anchors disrupted the System's operations nearby for some time, and with how many zones there were – and how small they were – he needed that disruption. Otherwise the moment he crossed over, especially with the narrow boundary zones, he'd give away his position.

The risk, of course, was that being *inside* a dungeon created that self-same problem, that anyone paying attention to the System quest would know exactly where to go. Cato judged the risk to be fairly low, as he had managed to avoid any further combat in the past thirty hours. The quest itself was still active, but hadn't been upgraded, and his bird hadn't spotted anyone that might be looking for him. Which wasn't conclusive where the System was concerned, but Cato would bet engineered senses against System-boosted stealth any day of the week.

He left the bird to circle up above and ran down the side of the canyon at full speed, framejacked ever so slightly – boosting his personal perception of time to thrice normal – as he found purchase with all six limbs. The warframe adjusted for each loose pebble and dislodged rock, dodging outcrops and boulders before reaching the ground at near terminal velocity. There was enough of a slope to turn that into a headlong rush, right into the river.

Of course, he sank like the stone he practically was, but that was by design. At the bottom of the river he found a likely place, a small pit surrounded by reaching weeds, and plucked the nascent seed off the armor of his back with one of his tendrils. It looked like nothing so much as a black stone maybe six inches in diameter, but the moment it touched the bottom of the pit, it flexed and contorted itself and burrowed down. He could still contact it with his microwave glands, but soon enough it would be independent.

If it had enough resources – which it probably wouldn't, at the bottom of a river – it could grow a new warframe, but more likely it would take on one of a number of lesser forms should it ever be necessary. Of course, it also had a copy of himself, in stasis, in case there had been no contact after a full year. Given sufficient time, Cato could be *quite* tenacious, though the System would always know there was something disrupting its reach. He couldn't fully hide himself from the

System so long as the jamming was in place, and he wasn't willing to give that up and fully assimilate into the System.

Cato stayed in the river, following it downstream as he let the current help him along. Small silver fish darted away from the disruption in the water, as even with camouflage he couldn't disguise the pressure waves of his movement. The warframe was not designed for the cavitation necessary for underwater stealth, and it wasn't worth trying to reconfigure it for such a short jaunt.

According to the map, the dungeon was located in a lake at the end of the canyon, and was rated for upper Silver and lower Gold ranks. Which was a huge jump in power by System standards, so it was a curious anomaly. The few dungeons on Earth had barely gotten out of their nascent phase before they were removed and hadn't had the time to grow even low Silver levels. He had records of all the delves, however, along with the System's helpful explanatory texts, so he had a fair handle on what to expect.

The interiors tended to be labyrinthine tunnels connecting open spaces simulating different biomes. All of this in aid of luring people in for a chance at materials, items, and the exotic energy of the System — essence. Or mana, or qi, depending on the translation. The System language dictionary wasn't entirely complete.

As far as Cato was concerned, dungeons were just weird murder-holes that showcased the more exotic aspects of the System — ignoring magic and how guns and computers were rendered into fused chunks of metal and glass. Their entrances were physical enough, but the deeper layers of dungeons seemed to be in some sort of basement universe. There had been no little consternation after orbital bombardment had turned out to be of limited use. Cato figured that the weird dimensional disjunct that dungeons introduced was the main mechanism of System anchoring, though a lot of very smart people had a lot of very good speculation to the contrary.

He didn't actually care. They were anchors, they were part of the System, and they were murder-holes. They killed people. They were built to kill, to teach people to kill and be comfortable with killing. All too many normal, ordinary people had emerged from them forever changed.

Cato would never be able to shake that moment when his cousins, kids he'd known from the cradle, had completely fallen to the System's seductions. Of the pair emerging bloody and triumphant from a dungeon with a wild and terrible light in their eyes, hungry only for more. And of how they had been utterly unwilling to listen to reason.

He only dwelt on it for a few minutes as he half-swam, half-slogged through the river until it brought him to the lake with the dungeon's island. Water slid off hydrophobic scales, leaving him dry from muzzle to tailtip, as Cato emerged onto the shore and found the entrance to be more than just a hole in the ground. Someone — perhaps the dungeon itself — had arrayed small fountains around a dome of deep blue stone, giving the appearance of some sort of shrine. The entrance to the dome was fortunately large, as some of the System races had significant bulk, but the warframe still practically scraped the ceiling as Cato entered.

A broad staircase led downward, and Cato took it. The System-symbiote received a notification as Cato passed the threshold, heading down into the passages beneath the island, as well as an update on the defense quest.

[Welcome to Azure Canyon Dungeon! Suggested tier: High Silver or Low Gold.]

[Global Defense Quest! Destroy the Incursion: Recommended Rank: High Gold. Reward: C-Rank Skill. Locations: Southern Jungle Conflict Zone, Azure Canyon Border Zone, Azure Canyon Dungeon]

At the end of the staircase, swampy landscape stretched out in front of him, brightly lit by false sky. To ordinary eyes that saw only the classic visible spectrum the illusion was good enough, but his senses extended much further and in higher and lower frequencies it was clearly just stone. The vaulted ceiling was still higher than it had any right to be, but that was only to be expected.

Cato headed straight through the first floor at speed. He had no need for or interest in the rewards offered by the dungeon, so there was no point in doing anything but descending as quickly as possible. Giant amphibians, froglike things the size of small horses, leapt out of the pools of water that lay on either side of the narrow, swampy path, but between the adaptive camouflage and loping along at over eighty miles an hour they had no chance of actually engaging him.

The first floor boss was a huge two-headed pseudo-salamander in a shallow pond at the end of the cave, probably magical in some way, but still actually smaller than the warframe. It stared in Cato's direction with visible confusion before ten tons of camouflaged bioweapon smashed into it at full speed. The salamander managed only a pained squawk as Cato impacted it, then flattened it against the wall with sheer inertia and turned it into bloody pulp.

A stone door ground open at the edge of the pond, and the salamander's corpse vanished into the ground a moment later like some bad special effect. Several items appeared in its place, but Cato had no need for them and just squeezed himself into the next stairwell. The map didn't have any notations on how deep the dungeon was, but probably not too many floors given the rating.

His very good ears – really, full acoustic sensors, distributed over his entire body – picked up a disturbance below. Grunts, the sounds of metal, and the rushing of moving water implied what was going on, and when Cato emerged he could see them in the distance. Someone was already running the dungeon.

The second floor was structured along the same style as the dome outside, a temple of blue stone with deep pools all about, fed by fountains on the walls. Frogmen with coral blades and fish-scale armor crawled out of the pools, focusing on two of the natives. The purple-scaled pair stood in a sheltered corner, a female in a blue robe with blades of water hovering nearby, protected by an armored male with a spear and shield. The pair were methodically engaging the frogmen where only a few could attack at a time, grinding down the small horde.

Also, they were just kids. Juveniles of the species so far as he could tell, so they couldn't have too much experience, though it seemed they were doing fairly well for themselves. He couldn't tell if their current predicament was actually a danger to them or they were simply playing things safe, but either way their time in the dungeon was at an end.

He dashed along the central temple floor, reaching the frogman horde and dicing them to bloody pieces with several quick swipes of monomolecular claws. The pair of lizard-people were notably upset, with the girl squealing and hurling her water blades at the big invisible thing that had just destroyed a dozen enemies in two seconds flat. Cato hardly blamed her, nor did he blame the boy for raising his shield and invoking a defensive skill that created a shimmering barrier in front of them.

“You two need to get out of here,” Cato said, dropping the camouflage for a moment. The sight of a massive clawed and toothed war machine didn’t seem to calm them any, for some reason. His command of the System language was handled by a sub-brain rather than his main gestalt, so it might be said he didn’t *truly* know it, but the difference was academic at best. The fact that there was only *one* language for thousands of species was useful for the moment, but the absolute effrontery of erasing the natives’ tongue was another in the long list of the System’s crimes.

“What—” The boy stammered, staring at the monstrosity in front of him. The girl didn’t say anything, but by the way she was hunched in on herself she was clearly distressed.

“I’m short on time, and you don’t want to be here when the dungeon collapses. Get to the surface and go,” he said, pointing the way he’d come with one of the tendrils sprouting from his back. Then he stepped away to give them room.

The pair didn’t try to argue, sidling away from him before joining hands and making a mad dash for the staircase. Cato was satisfied with that, though part of him really wanted to make *sure* they were out and away. He had no idea what the kids were doing in such an out-of-the-way dungeon, but it really wasn’t his business. As soon as they vanished up the stairs he resumed his rush, charging toward the end of the temple. There were a few tricky twists and turns, but he kept his steps heavy enough to generate an acoustic signature so he could map the place with his senses.

He charged past the mindlessly aggressive frog-people, winding through the cramped halls and splashing through shallow puddles, until he reached the second floor guardian — an enormously oversized frog-person with a crown on its head, sitting on a throne. It was almost laughably generic, as if it were simply plucked from some catalogue preset.

Something which might well be the case. So far as anyone could tell the dungeons were entirely mechanistic, the decorations and architecture having the quality of creatively bankrupt, procedurally-generated areas. All the flourishes were the same, all architecture merely repetition of the same few key features.

Cato leapt forward and decapitated the frog king with a single swipe of his claws. Higher ranks could resist the absurd sharpness that metamaterials could reach, but the dungeon was not anywhere near that rank. The dungeon boss toppled into gory halves before being absorbed once again, leaving more equipment in its place.

Once upon a time Cato had played more than a few games that operated on similar principles with his cousins, but the fight against the System had beaten his game-oriented reflexes out of him. Random loot rewards in a game were fine, once they had become consolation prizes in a deathmatch it had permanently destroyed any fond memories he had once had of such pastimes.

Down he went, to a third floor that was more ice themed than water. Temperatures dropped to well below freezing, and his acoustic mapping showed massive slush pits of near-freezing water underneath the blanket of snow that covered the blizzard-wracked floor. Cato had no idea how a pair like the Sydeans he'd just sent out of the dungeon were supposed to traverse it, but his warframe didn't have any issues. Even the cold wasn't much, since all he needed to do was dial up the heat output of his cells.

The floating bits of ice did little to slow him down. The elementals were blatantly impossible by the standards of physics, but at the same time weren't capable of doing much to the warframe. It was moderately immune to variations in temperature, and regular ice was not strong enough to prevent him from moving, so he just broke through the attempts to freeze him to the floor or slow him down and made a straight line for the end.

The boss there was simply a much larger elemental, a motile blizzard with ice shards the size of the warframe's head. Yet it just wasn't moving fast enough to actually be a threat, apparently relying simply on temperatures. Cato was glad that such things had been encountered before on Earth so he knew how to deal with it, though destroying the central core wasn't too much a leap of logic.

He lunged through the swirling fragments with a single, powerful motion and crushed the core against the far wall with a single motion. The blizzard faded as a staircase ground open, and Cato squeezed the warframe down once more. The dungeon didn't offer any challenge at all, the System's silver rank being well within the capabilities of Cato's technology. Not that Cato was there to challenge himself; he was there to remove an anchor.

As he emerged into some sort of flooded canal-work, he was swarmed by long, eel-like forms crackling with electricity. He laughed, a deep booming noise, because electricity was far and away the *least* terrifying thing that any System creature could throw at him. As a matter of course, a good chunk of the warframe was superconducting, and those parts that were vulnerable were fully insulated.

It took only raw muscle to push past the swarming eels and breeze through the dark, deep-water tunnels that characterized the final floor. His acoustic mapping found the final boss, a huge serpent in a deep pool at the end, as well as the actual core. The System anchors were physical things, chunks of some sort of crystal embedded at the bottom of their respective basement universes. Obvious enough, at least to nonvisual senses.

The serpent reared up as Cato approached the pool, striking like a snake with an open mouth full of razor sharp teeth. The sheer amount of mass in motion would pulverize any normal biology, but Cato was tougher than the serpent and that reversed the calculus of impact. He launched himself forward, past the teeth, and clawed his way through the top of the mouth and the brain in a matter of seconds.

Putting the most vulnerable part of the body right next to its weapons was such a design flaw.

He dove down into the bottom of the pool, toward where the core was embedded in a niche in the stone, from which it simply couldn't be removed. Cato's lips drew back from the insanely sharp teeth of his muzzle as he grabbed the dungeon core in one huge paw. It was responsible for everything he'd encountered on the way down, and in its own way a miraculous piece of machinery, but he just hated it and everything it stood for.

Muscles wrought of graphene and boron and exotic proteins squeezed the crystalline core, shattering it into powder with a satisfying crunch. The stuff was just like the System maps — something completely and wholly constructed by the System, with no underlying reality. Practically imaginary, but no less deadly for all of that.

The moment that the core shattered, the basement universe started to collapse. He didn't have the sensory apparatus to see essence directly, but there was enough of the stuff swirling around to have a palpable effect on the atmosphere, rendering it thick and clingy while the water started to evaporate into nothingness. The ground trembled, and he turned and ran.

Cato was used to seeing magic and physics-defying nonsense from the System, but the entire reality of the dungeon space being destroyed was something else. The ground cracked, heaving underfoot, but a moment later sealed itself as the physical size of the level shrank. Stone bulged and bubbled like molten glass, vapor pluming from arbitrary spots on the walls.

He powered up the steps, skirting around columns hanging in the air, twisting and distorting as if seen through a dynamic lens. Ice skated around, sizzling as if it were on a red-hot griddle, before suddenly halting in midair as if it had slammed into some invisible obstacle. Another level up, and the halls warped and stretched, his acoustic mapping showing the passages swaying and twisting as if the entire thing were drawn on a deflating ball. Cato grinned to himself as the entire pocket dimension crumpled behind him like cheap paper, gleeful in the destruction of the System space as he aimed himself up the final staircase. With one last convulsive leap he emerged into the light of the twin suns.

"Location updated," Onek grunted. Golsan checked the quest.

[Global Defense Quest! Destroy the Incursion: Recommended Rank: High Gold. Reward: C-Rank Skill. Locations: Southern Jungle Conflict Zone, Azure Canyon Border Zone, Azure Canyon Dungeon]

Combing the [Southern Jungle Conflict Zone] had proven fruitless, even for a pair of newly-minted Tornok Clan Platitudes. True, neither of them had tracking skills as such, but at Platinum their ability to sense essence should have made it simplicity itself to find anything out of place. Especially after they'd returned to the tiny town and found the disturbed essence inside the strange doppelganger-corpse that had walked into the System nexus building for reasons that escaped them both.

The two of them had to put down half a dozen local golds who had been hunting the rewards for themselves — as if the backwards natives of Sydea deserved new skills more than Tornok Platitudes. At least the Essence reward had been acceptable recompense for their time. The two of them really wanted that Skill selection, so after finding nothing for several days, Golsan was quite happy to see that one of the locations was more precise. At their rank they could sweep any nearby dungeon, and at worse camp at the entrance.

He nodded to his brother and retrieved his map from his belt, giving it a glance before heading off in the proper direction. The two of them used [Windripper] to tear through the air, far faster than any of the local dullards could have managed. Sydea was a fairly unimpressive place overall, and neither Onek or Golsan would have been there if it hadn't been for the series of

quests that came out regarding the [Ahrusk Portal Staging Area] while they'd been just one portal hop away.

Of course they'd been too late for those, since the staging area was destroyed and the portal closed. New worlds weren't all that common an occurrence, but Golsan had never heard of a new world failing at its initial integration so badly that the System decided to wipe the whole thing and start over. It did make some kind of sense though, as Sydea itself was terrible, and anything further in that line would be horrendous. It was no wonder everyone involved had turned it into a catastrophe. At least the System had been considerate enough to provide compensation for anyone who'd had their time wasted.

The [Southern Jungle Conflict Zone] blurred below them, giving way to the [Azure Canyon Border Zone] in only a few minutes. The sound of their passage echoed off the canyon walls and sent rocks tumbling down in their wake, churning the water of the river below into froth. The dungeon itself was easy enough to spot, and the two of them came to a halt just as a pair of locals stumbled out of it.

Golsan exchanged a glance with his brother and the two of them slammed down in front of the pathetic lizard-things, making them topple amusingly from the shockwave. From the feel of their essence they were somewhere in Silver, barely more than ants, but that was to be expected in such a pathetic backwater as Sydea. The planet really had nothing going for it.

"You two," Golsan stated, narrowing his eyes at the pair. "Did you see anything strange enter the dungeon?" The brothers could have gone in themselves and it might have been faster, but even low rank dungeons interfered with essence senses, and of course the interior was completely opaque from the outside.

"I..." The armored one started to say something as it struggled to its feet, before turning to help the robed one. Golsan snorted impatiently.

"Speak up! Look at me when you're talking!" He ordered, voice booming. The armored one stiffened its spine and looked Golsan in the eye.

"A monster came by and told us to leave," it said. Golsan snarled and slapped it for the temerity of daring to address him so familiarly. As a Platinum he moved in a blur, and he could feel the lizard's jaw shatter from the casual backhand. As it swayed and started to topple, the robed one grabbed it and shrieked at them.

"What are you *doing*?"

Of course, Onek wouldn't let some low rank animal speak to them that way, and he responded with a simple [Wind Cut].

[Low Silver Rank Sydean defeated. Essence awarded.]

[Low Silver Rank Sydean defeated. Essence awarded.]

Golsan snorted at the System's confirmation of their actions. Even if it wasn't much Essence, barely enough to feel, it was nice to be rewarded for dealing with such nonsense. The lizard things wouldn't have been much help anyway, their rank being so low that they couldn't have even been able to [Identify] something that was a peak Gold threat.

"I guess we go in," he remarked to Onek, stepping past the carcasses, only to stop as all the ambient essence began to tremble. The two of them leapt back, taking to the air again as the atmosphere was churned into a nearly visible haze, the ground rumbling and shaking and making the water of the lake dance. It took Golsan a moment to realize what was going on, for dungeon collapses were far from common. But he had seen one once before, and the widespread essence disruption was hard to forget.

"Or not," Onek said, readying his blade. Golsan followed suit. Both of them used thin, whiplike swords to amplify their skills such as [Wind Cut] and [Gale Volley], though really their entire bodies were weapons in that vein. Long practice with their Skills made him confident they could deal with whatever this particular beast was, especially since they could ambush it the moment it emerged from the dungeon. Which it had to, or be destroyed in the collapse.

He caught it more with [Wind Perception] than his eyes, something big pushing a pressure wave in front of it and displacing the air in the dungeon's dome. It was surprisingly stealthy for something that size, but not nearly good enough to fool Platinum senses. As one, the two brothers unleashed [Gale Volley], followed by a thundering snap meant to deafen and disorient even before the Skill landed.

Air cut into stone. Explosions boomed. The blue dome crumbled. But the thing had dodged.

The moment Cato emerged from the dungeon, the threat-scanning neural lattice sent him into a crash framejack. The emergency measures sent subjective time running at over a hundred times faster than reality and flushed his primary neurons with the proper chemical mix to help him think clearly and calmly, rather than panic. Which was blatantly cheating, but that's why it was a *warframe*.

He recognized the pair hovering in the air as the slinky rodent things in articulated armor that he'd seen earlier. Since he hadn't spotted any real pursuit for a while, he had hoped they'd given up, but apparently not. Maybe his decision to remove the dungeon had been a poor one. The combat flush made him recognize he'd been just angry enough to take a chance that perhaps he shouldn't have, even if it wasn't a complete loss. The collapse would still let him shroud his location for a while, but just the scant minutes he had been pinpointed to a single place meant he'd drawn attention he really didn't want to. In the excess of time he had while the System people reacted, and the warframe started to move at speeds constrained by physics, he studied them and the surroundings.

Judging by the distortions of wind – visible in certain electromagnetic bands – they were air users, which was a problem. Cato mostly had close quarters options, since creating any projectile of real significance without combustion or electromagnetics was a losing proposition. The System could do it with magic, but that was just an unfairness he had to live with.

Then he noticed the two bodies on the ground, and grim anger leaked past the induced chemical calm. The rats had clearly murdered the kids, and he had no doubt it was at least in part due to the System actively rewarding such behavior. Even if it wasn't, he'd seen for himself how the System so inured people to killing that randomly slaughtering lower ranks was worth barely even a thought.

The two air users waved their little whippy swords, rippling distortions issuing forth like dozens of invisible spears. Cato launched himself forward, ahead of the attack and mostly ignoring the subsequent sonic burst that damaged a few of his eardrums. He didn't dare make himself airborne, not with *air users*, but at maximum framejack he could at least dodge their attacks and perhaps force them to close in.

Several more volleys came his way, and he simply outpaced them. In his slowed time they moved sluggishly, and he spent his focus on ensuring each movement was optimized. That he had appropriate lines of retreat and evasion, calculating angles to force the pair to interfere with each other.

He calculated feints, the warframe moving sluggishly compared to his perceptions, skirting their attacks in what would have seemed a blur of motion at normal speed. After several accelerated seconds of evading their long-range attacks, the pair swooped down to try and flank him at sword range. At which point he decided that getting them close had been, in fact, a very poor idea, because they were extremely fast. And strong.

He sliced at one with his forward claws, and while the whippy sword was interposed – and wasn't even cut by the monomolecular edge – the sheer mass of the blow meant it landed. But it did nothing other than push the rodent back and score some lines on its armor. The other rodent took the opportunity to punch an air blade into, and through, Cato's side.

The System-enhanced physics cut right through the fullerine-and-metal plating and into the flesh underneath. The attack drove a long puncture wound through what would have been the guts of the warframe, if the warframe had guts. It also sent ten tons of bioweapon sprawling from the impact, though he was back on his feet before they could capitalize on the opportunity.

"Ow," Cato said to himself, though it didn't hurt. Pain had its place, but it would have been a supremely bad idea to give a bioweapon designed to regularly engage in combat such a deleterious and imprecise method of reporting damage. The air attack had obliterated one sub-brain, damaged several specialized organs that he was using to support his passengers, and come perilously close to actually skewering one of the preserved brains he was carrying around.

There was no way that he'd be able to beat those two on a physical basis alone, which they clearly understood. Even if they were an unfamiliar species, he could recognize that much of their body language. Given a few more minutes they'd cut him into so many bloody chunks.

Of course, this was a problem that the Earth defenders had run into before. Not everyone had the benefits of orbital overwatch, and the ability to simply call a particle beam from the heavens down upon whatever System entity was being difficult. Fortunately, there were lots of clever people with far more imagination than Cato, and he had a ready solution to his current problem. The originator of the tactic had called it the *Gesundheit Surprise*, but most everyone else called it the *Sneeze of Doom*.

Cato partially aerosolized a large number of cell structures whose sole purpose was to induce a tiny amount of nuclear fusion, packed with as much deuterium fuel as he could manage from his reserves. Wrapped with some motile cells and a few neuron threads to produce the System-blocking static, the mess looked a bit like snot. It was disgusting but that was something the defenders had become used to, with bioweapons as the only option. He split the mess into

packets, arming two of his back-tendrils. Then he lunged forward, tendrils swiveling as he tracked the large noses on their muzzles.

Very precisely, he sneezed on each of their noses. The deuterated organelles immediately slid themselves inside the nostrils, which surely was not comfortable and got the pair of rodents to disengage, rubbing furiously at their muzzles. That wasn't the end though, and Cato turned and ran. Only moments later, the organelles all went off at once, and half a gram of deuterium fused itself inside each of their sinus cavities.

The rear-facing sets of eyes saw their eyes, noses, and mouths vent fusion plasma, followed by their heads more or less exploding. Yet the corpses were still intact after they dropped, and Cato reversed course to bound over to where they lay. The high ranks of the System had insane regenerative capabilities, and even the Sneeze of Doom might not be enough to put them down permanently. So he ate them.

Cut off from the System, there was far less they could do, and out of an abundance of caution he directed everything to one of the molecular disassembly chambers that were the closest things the warframe had to stomachs. The chemical foundry there went to work, tearing apart the bodies and studying the biochemistry for future use and reclaiming any rare elements it could manage from the armor.

The battle clarity faded, and Cato shuddered at how damn outclassed he had been. Another couple direct hits and he would have been severely impaired, at which point it was a downward spiral. He would have been forced to self-destruct the warframe, and hope his backup fared better. It was only through the work and genius of others that he'd had any idea what to do.

Shaking off the virtual chills, he trotted over to where the two lizard-people corpses were, because he'd be damned if he would let some kids get killed if he could help it. Fortunately for them, their heads seemed to be intact. He ate them as well, but their brains got excised and preserved while he let his foundry analyze their bodies. With luck he could grow them exact duplicates.

They would never get the lost ranks back, but that hardly mattered. One way or another, they'd be living outside the System soon enough. He checked the quest updates with his symbiotic blank, wanting to make sure the entire diversion hadn't been for naught.

[Global Defense Quest! Destroy the Incursion: Recommended Rank: High Gold. Reward: B-Rank Skill. Locations: Southeastern Coren]

Having half a continent to hide in was good enough.