

## Chapter 5 – The Ascent

Arene watched from a distance as the group of High Copper kids carefully approached the nigh-invisible bird-thing as it perched by a creek, drinking in water. Despite being cut from the same cloth as the Ahruskian menace, such birds didn't seem to offer any real danger, though they were quite skittish. The group pounced, the mage entrapping it with a watery cage while the bulwark fighter attacked it with a spear.

Like with all the others, it silently slumped and began to melt, turning into some sort of awful goo rather than dying properly. The Copper group checked their System messages and exulted, the mage even dancing on the spot. Arene didn't blame them since, beyond the Skill reward, the essence reward for completing a Platinum-rank quest at Copper was substantial.

While the portal itself had been lackluster at best, a disaster at worst, the incursion quest was making some steps toward redressing that issue. Arene had no compunctions about abusing the System's generosity and giving some of their most talented young ones a leg up by fulfilling the worryingly easy quest requirements. There were dozens of locations by this point, which made it all the more important that Onswa had shut down the teleporters and embargoed the portals. If it got out that there was such an easy method of boosting young rankers, some Bismuth or Azoth would come with a whole passel of children and take it away from Sydeans.

Then to solve the actual problem, some Alum-rank might well flatten half the planet.

As good as the quests were, it still bothered her that none of the creatures she was finding were like the one that she'd fought. The little birds and occasional plant bulb did have the same strange essence static around them, barely noticeable but distinct once she'd gotten close enough. They were still hard to find – she and Onswa had really only been able to locate them in the smallest zones – but at least she knew that rooting them out wasn't completely impossible.

"Right," she said, clapping her hands and getting the attention of the group, who went by the name of Deepest Ventures. "Head back to town, get to work on consolidating your gains and look over your possible Skills. You'll probably be taking that B-tier Skill all the way up to Platinum, and ranking its rarity up from there, so don't waste it on something you only need *right now*. You'll have plenty of chances at lesser Skills at your rank."

"Yes, Lady Flamewing," the bulwark fighter said, saluting her with his spear. She snorted and waved them off. The group gave her a few more glances before fairly running back in the direction of the local town, leaving her to consider the quest text once again.

[Global Defense Quest! Destroy the Incursion: Recommended Rank: Platinum. Reward: B-tier Skill. Locations: [...] Great Western Sea Ocean Zone, Clashing Slopes Conflict Zone, Rocky Rill Resource Zone, Gravel Beach Border Zone...]

It was spreading faster than the assorted Platinites could find and destroy the agents, though it wasn't like they had many to spare. Besides herself and Onswa, Marek was in charge of the Canepa continent, while Hirau and Karsa had their own cities they ruled over on the sparsely-settled continent of Remal. Most Platinites went offworld and never came back. Some because they preferred the higher-rank planets and dungeons and zones, others because they got themselves killed in those selfsame higher-rank areas.

So far she hadn't seen any actual *consequences* of the spread, aside from the Gosruk Guardians and Tornok Clan's Platinums — and of course her niece, who had been in the dungeon which had been destroyed by what she thought of as the actual Ahruskian. All the small brushfires they were dealing with were distractions — and for all she knew, the allure of the quest rewards for such easy work was part of its plan. A massive reward with no real risk very much distracted people from trying to find the genuine source of the problem.

She invoked [Wings of Khuroon], the flames guiding her back to Kalhan and Onswa's office. Hirau and Karsa didn't think the defense quest was at all their problem, but at least Onswa was taking it seriously and Marek always went along with whatever Onswa wanted. Five Platinums would have been preferable to three, but three was better than none.

"I know, I know," Onswa said, the moment she stepped into his office, a chime accompanying her entrance. He was deep in the Planetary Administrator interface, the display above his desk glowing with the world map and a number of option boxes. "It's only getting worse. I know that sometimes these global quests last years or decades, but I don't think *this* one was meant to."

"If I'd gone myself when it first popped up rather than letting lower ranks have their chance..." Arene sighed. She hadn't really thought much of it at the time, especially since she hadn't even known the portal staging area had been destroyed. Not that there had been any Sydeans there by that point.

"And maybe you'd have ended up dead," Onswa was blunt. "This is going to need all of us when we actually *find* the thing again. If we can. You're still the only one who's laid eyes on it."

"For all the good that did me," Arene said, and squinted at Onswa's display. There was a sort of creeping horror in seeing how many zones were included in the global quest, with a frighteningly large swath of land and sea infested with the whatever-it-was. If they couldn't deal with the source of it soon, they'd have no choice but to appeal to some Bismuth or Azoth ranker — assuming the System itself didn't start spreading the quest.

"We've only got a few more days before my Administrator reserves run out and I have to let the portals run again," Onswa said frankly. "If we don't solve it by then, then we're going to have worse problems than the System quest."

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Cato's claws dug into the rock of a near-vertical cliff as he scaled the mountain, glad that his diversions had worked and he'd been left alone since he emerged from the ocean. His rough estimate was that its summit was nearly thirty thousand feet above sea level — and it wasn't even the largest in the chain. In the distance he could see an even more mammoth peak breaking through the clouds, but there were also flying monsters and structures very high up. He was hoping to avoid most of those, since unlike System people, he didn't really get anything from fighting and it wasn't even something he particularly enjoyed. Or was good at.

He'd seen his metrics compared to other people and he was at best dead average. Though considering the sheer amount of knowledge and reflexes he could borrow from others, programmed into sub-brains and encoded in molecular databanks, average was still devastatingly effective. Unfortunately, at higher ranks the sheer forces involved meant that even his best efforts would have no effect at all.

The greatest contrast between power created by technology and the power created by the System was how concentrated it became in an individual. A high rank System person could crack mountains all by himself, whereas Cato needed massive machines to accomplish the same thing. If he didn't get off the planet, he couldn't make those machines, and he couldn't reach the scales necessary.

He scrambled across a small plateau, impossibly oversized beetle-type insects living in impossibly low temperatures clicking and clacking as they followed the wake he ploughed through the snow. There shouldn't have been enough energy to support a robust ecosystem, let alone multi-ton invertebrates, but the System was always strange.

The few ice spiders and beetles that did get in his way were easily enough dealt with. Large as they were, they still lacked the force to punch through the warframe's armor, and unlike the high-rankers his claws worked just fine to shred them to pieces. Most of the time he simply evaded the local wildlife, as he only cared about getting high enough that he could get out of the atmosphere with his warframe's resources. The equations of the thrust available to him, his material limitations, and the planet's own gravity and atmospheric density gave him a minimum threshold, and he wasn't quite there yet.

Acoustic mapping kept him from falling into the innumerable powder-snow pits, like some demented version of quicksand, which would have been a hazard to any conventional exploration of the area. The map that he'd gotten from the System pillar had no information on the area beyond naming it the [Frozen Peaks Conflict Zone]. There wasn't even a proper definition of the zone borders, showing it was practically unexplored. Considering the number of zones and the lack of population on the planet, that was hardly surprising. Some high level had probably swung by to get it on the map and never visited again.

The plateau was crowded by glaciers on all sides, with a narrow ravine cutting its way upward toward the peak, so Cato simply made straight for the defile and clawed his way along the ascent. There were caves scattered throughout – there were always caves – but he was past the time when he needed what they offered. Accordingly, he didn't pay too much attention to them, simply routing around the entrances as he climbed.

Then the symbiotic brain got an update.

[Welcome to Icy Defile Dungeon! Suggested Rank: High Gold]

"Oh, dammit," Cato said to himself, hardly able to believe his bad luck.

The dungeon hadn't appeared on Cato's map, and none of his scouts had actually gone into the caves, so its appearance was a complete surprise. It only appeared for a moment before his momentum carried him further away from the cave in question, and perhaps it didn't matter because he had fliers out everywhere.

For a moment he considered directing a scout back there, to perhaps misdirect anyone who came to check, but upon consideration it didn't seem worth the time. Or the resources, as he was reaching the point where he needed to calculate everything to make it off-world. Better to simply move as quickly as possible than give in to paranoia.

Instead he redoubled his efforts, driving claws into rock and ice like pitons. What would be a harsh, deserted landscape of rock and snow on any other world, up where the atmosphere

became thin, instead had ice-themed trees and flowers. Glinting, blue-and-silver birds flew over, while furred predators stalked through crystalline forests clinging to the steep slopes. Not that the System completely obviated normal physics. The atmosphere was thin, the birds had extremely outsized wings and probably flew more with magic than with feathers, and quite a lot of the local biomass was stashed inside the relative warmth of caves worming their way through the mountain.

He mostly bypassed it all, keeping himself camouflaged and climbing on vertical cliffs, though that wasn't always enough. He had to deal with a few too-curious birds, and ramp up the heat production of his outer shell as gusts of extremely cold and dense ice were sprayed from their wings in an attempt to freeze him. Cato found himself grumbling about his lack of ranged options, and promised himself he'd find a solution to that somehow, because it was a crippling weakness. There *had* been solutions back on Earth, he knew, but he hadn't gotten ahold of any of the bespoke modifications made by the more aggressive combatants.

Soon enough he had scaled past most of the [Frozen Peaks Conflict Zone] and began to near where he could take off from Sydea. The moment he passed the minimum threshold he started the processes necessary to convert the warframe and planted himself on a flat spot. The methodology for launching himself and his passengers into space was a bit tricky, and he'd have to sacrifice most of his mass, which meant he wouldn't be mobile until it was ready.

A sudden burst of flame from below caught his attention, coupled with a strange spectral shimmer that didn't accord with any known elements. The latter was nothing he recognized, but the former was familiar enough. The flame lady had arrived.

It had been long enough since his accidental clipping of the random dungeon that he'd hoped that it had gone unnoticed, but it seemed it was not to be. At least he'd had enough time to put distance between himself and the lower slopes where his position might be more obvious. The only question was whether he could finish in time, before the rankers found him.

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"Got you, you bastard."

Arene had taken to glancing at the quest text every few minutes, like worrying a loose tooth, to no real profit. Until now. The invader's distractions had covered an enormous number of zones, but only the main, real one had ever entered a dungeon. There on the list of zones, if just for a moment, was [Icy Defile Dungeon] — which wasn't a dungeon she'd even heard of, but that alone was suggestive.

Then it vanished, and she launched into action. She called upon [Wings of Khuroon] and pulled herself to Onswa's office, the fiery wings nearly scorching the building from how close she emerged. The hinges bent as she slammed through the front door of the office, Onswa jumping up from his seat and ready for anything. The interface chimed belatedly as she strode forward.

"The thing was in [Icy Defile Dungeon]," she said shortly, not needing to explain the significance. "Is it on the map?"

Onswa immediately turned to his Planetary Administrator interface, and it brought up the map of the world without needing to be asked. The globe floated in front of them and spun, narrowing in on where the dungeon was located. A Planetary Administrator had access to more

information than any public map provided, though it came with restrictions Arene didn't quite understand.

"Here," Onswa said, jabbing his finger at the [Frozen Peaks Conflict Zone], in the middle of the thin strip of continent that was Corsova. "Brand new, undiscovered. Until now, it seems."

"Then let's go," Arene said, turning toward the door.

"Let me inform the other Platinums first," Onswa replied, making her stop and wait impatiently. She couldn't well object; even if they didn't join her and Onswa, they would need to know if something went wrong. Onswa worked the Planetary Administrator's console for a moment, and a new quest appeared on Arene's system readout.

[Platinum Timed Quest from Onswa Ramik: All Platinums are to make their way to Frozen Peaks Conflict Zone as quickly as possible. Time Remaining: 5 minutes]

"Now we can go," Onswa said, and Arene fairly launched herself out of the door, wings spreading as she took to the air. Unlike with the cities and Onswa's office, she didn't have an anchor directly in the Zone, so she had to go in stages. North, then west, then north again, flying high through the air with Onswa just behind her. He didn't have wings, but he flew on a bubble of aether that surrounded him like an aura. It wasn't as fast a movement skill as hers, outside teleportation, except that the odd properties of aether let him ride in her wake.

She skipped over the ocean, spending as much energy as she dared, until the mountains of Corsova loomed on the horizon. Then Onswa drew up next to her, flinging out a hand and opening a portal for them. He was the one who knew precisely where the dungeon was, with his Planetary Administrator access, so she darted through the portal after him without complaint.

The mountain was suddenly right in front of them, the steep snowy slopes scattered with lower Gold rank beasts. She honed in on the faint presence of a dungeon not far away, barely noticeable if she hadn't already been looking for it. Her wings flashed and she darted toward it, flying inside a cave entrance. The System gave her warning that she had entered the [Icy Defile Dungeon] but she ignored it, stretching out her senses for any of that strange crackling in essence that betrayed the presence of the invader.

There was nothing. It was an undiscovered dungeon, so she could tell that nearly all the monsters outside were the result of repeated dungeon breaks, but nobody actually lived on Corsova so that was hardly a surprise. There were only a few floors, nothing that stymied her senses, though she wasn't expecting to find anything since it had dropped off the quest list anyway.

"Where's Marek?" She snapped at Onswa, who didn't actually deserve it. Arene took a moment to reign in her temper, since while she might be able to get away with being abrupt to Onswa, plenty of other Platinums and, especially, higher ranks would not take it well. The camaraderie between fellow Sydeans was something which did not apply to others in the System.

"Still a few minutes out," Onswa said, hovering in his bubble and checking the Planetary Administrator interface. "He's not as fast as you."

"Nobody is," Arene said, a touch impatiently. She cast out her Platinum-rank sensory Skill, running it over the mountain to try and find a trace of that strange signature. It had to be

nearby, but if the thing was equivalent to a Platinum or better, that *nearby* could encompass hundreds of miles or more.

There didn't seem to be anything on the slopes around or in the distance. Plenty of creatures, including some elites that would challenge even peak Gold, but not the thing she was looking for. It wasn't until she cast her senses upward, all the way up the slopes toward the distant peak, that the bizarre essence fuzzing appeared.

"Above!" She pumped her wings to ascend.

"Arene, wait!" Onswa called to her back, but he could catch up with Marek. She wanted to lay eyes on the thing before it slipped away again, and this time it was out in the open. There were no caves to drop on her head, and she was certain it wasn't much more powerful than Platinum, else it would have engaged with her directly instead of running away.

Her massive wings brought her up to near the peak, and she finally managed to properly see what she had been chasing. It was still camouflaged, but far less effectively than before, and for a moment she thought it was actually a different being. Unlike the large, six-limbed form of before, it seemed to have almost rooted itself in the mountain like some kind of bizarre plant. Yet it still had the tendrils, and the shape of the head was the same, so she decided it was indeed the same entity.

She gathered [Calamity Lance] in her right hand, the apocalyptic glow leaking out between her fingers, but she held back for the moment. One thing Onswa was right about was that it was better to all attack together, just in case the thing was too slippery for just one of them. Her fire, Onswa's aether, and Marek's water together would be far more effective.

Every moment they delayed was another moment for it to act, however, and Arene's instincts told her that she had to move quickly. Even as she watched, its shape was changing, part of it flowing like water. Arene readied [Calamity Lance], glancing down at Onswa's softly glowing bubble.

There was a flex of aether and Marek arrived through Onswa's portal, riding atop a vortex of flowing water. The two of them raced up toward her, which did not go unnoticed by their target. A dark bubble grew outward from its body, forming a shell in a matter of moments. Arene's [Appraise] still gave her no information, and whatever Skill it was using didn't seem to take any essence, which made her instincts scream. It wasn't playing by the rules, and it might do anything.

"Just hit it," she said, and released [Calamity Lance]. Rooted to the ground as it was, it couldn't evade like it had before. Onswa's aether attack swirled right through whatever defense the black bubble offered, as Marek summoned a massive vortex of water. Marek was better with an actual weapon, but by unspoken agreement nobody wanted to get *too* close to the thing.

The black bubble shattered, but in a strange way, turning into a shimmering, opaque cloud. She could feel it sapping at the power of [Calamity Lance] while several small projectiles sailed out through it toward the Platitudes. They weren't moving particularly quickly, for Platinum rank, and Arene snapped out with [Incineration Lash] to intercept them.

The little balls puffed into another cloud at the contact, one that kept moving toward her despite the prevailing winds. She pulsed [Incarnate Flame], her body searing the cloud away, but Onswa's aether was far less effective. He jetted back from the cloud, coughing.

"Poison!" He warned, as Marek's vortex hammered down on the shrouding cloud, washing it away. It revealed the creature had changed even more, the tendrils and head drawn into a bloated body. Arene's muzzle curled in disgust as she hurled another [Calamity Lance], determined to sear the thing from the face of Sydea.

A bright flash, brighter than the suns, seared her eyes. A roar hammered at her, at Onswa and Marek, and she blinked to find the place where the intruder had been scorched and slagged from the force of the explosion. Yet there was no sign of it.

"That was *it*?" Marek said, his gravely voice both disbelieving and contemptuous. She didn't blame him; that was far less troublesome than she had been expecting. She approached the blasted rock, then suddenly froze as another flash of light came — but this one from high, high above. She looked upward, to where far above the dome of the sky another explosion faded away, and she caught the tiniest glimpse of a small speck of something before it was gone.

"Oh, you god-rotten piece of—" Arene shouted imprecations at the heavens, but knew it was impotent, while Onswa stared grimly upward.

"No," Onswa said, his voice heavy. "That was not it."

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World Deity of Sydea Marus Eln stifled a groan as notifications crowded into his vision. One of the reasons why he wasn't too bothered by his Sydea posting, despite its lack of real status, was that the planet didn't require much of his valuable time. There was no point in investing much time in a populace that was meant to be removed anyway, and having an administrator meant that the local animals ought to be self governing.

With the irritating Lundt scion busy with the new world that had just opened up, it had been the perfect opportunity for Marus to spend some time in the core worlds, reacquainting himself with the Eln clan's various allies. At least, he had thought it would be perfect; apparently some of the idiotic Sydean locals had decided it was a good time to do something stupid enough to rise to the level of an emergency. The entire point of having a Planetary Administrator was to *avoid* emergencies, and if the locals couldn't even manage that he might be better off eliminating the position entirely.

"If you'll excuse me, it seems that duty is interrupting." Marus disengaged himself from the couple he had been listening to, patiently nodding along with their high-breathless descriptions of their own worlds. He knew it was at least partly to flaunt their much-more-favorable postings, but Marus had to play the game to get ahead. He wouldn't be stuck on Sydea forever, and clearing a frontier planet so it could be turned into something properly tame and ready for the Eln Clan's own people was its own sort of merit.

The planet was ripe for the servants of the Eln Clan to come in and take it, but the native population had to go first. Only when it was unclaimed would the System recognize the transfer of ownership, and such a thing had to be done within the rules. Fortunately, as the

administrator he had a certain latitude to change how things worked, and all he really required was patience.

Finding a bit of privacy to go through the notifications was more difficult than it should have been. The System space hosting the party was a series of platforms floating in a vast sea of slowly shifting aurorae, lacking walls or ceilings or anything more concrete than decorative arches and long tables loaded with delicacies from a thousand worlds. Music from his uncle's world, his pet band, floated from where they played near the center of the arrayed platforms. No bridges connected them; everyone who was truly recognized by the System could cross the gaps with no more difficulty than thinking about it.

He flitted over to one of the arches, cutting off the view of most of the guests as he flipped through the notifications. It was at the very least *rude* to do so in plain view, though the more intelligent would realize something had gone drastically wrong and the rumors *that* would start couldn't be borne. Marus had spent far too much time building up his reputation and connections, his value to the clan and his ability to manage the lesser races, to have it ruined by a faux pas.

Most of the notifications wouldn't have risen to the level of emergency if it weren't for one pressing issue — the planet's essence reserves had been nearly depleted. Which meant everything was suddenly far more urgent, as it began creating shortfalls beyond the ones he had planned. Marus thought it was a waste of time to give lesser species any access to the planetary essence at all, and the fact that they'd somehow managed to spend it in the few years he'd been away was proof of that. He'd never openly question the System, but sometimes he did wonder why it introduced races that were so clearly unfit.

He glanced through the other notifications on the stack, finding some of them somewhat disturbing now that he was paying attention. Several instances of [Unidentified Entity], which was not something Marus had ever heard of before. Once the System integrated a world, everything was identified — or at least, identifiable, by those with the lesser [Appraisal]. Even if something had come through the portal to the new world, it shouldn't have been unidentified. Then he came to one that made him stop entirely.

[Ahrusk Portal Terminated]

Marus *almost* laughed. It seemed the Lundt had managed to make such an *incredible* hash of the new world that the System had shut it all down. No doubt trapping Lundt on the other side until the System decided to try again, and not even World Deities like himself knew when *that* would be. Only those who ruled the System Core would know that, and perhaps not even them. The divine System worked in mysterious ways, and he wouldn't dare guess at what transcendent logic drove its most profound processes.

Actually addressing the reason for the essence deficit on Sydea would require returning to his own System space, but even with the remote interface he could tell why it had happened. In their utter lack of wisdom, the natives had decided to spend it on blocking out-planet portals and teleporters. Once he got back he'd have to revoke that and then he could hand out some penalties, but first he had to go inform his clan about the Lundt's poor fortune.

Whatever was happening on Sydea was far less important than that.

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Cato worked desperately to keep his remaining passengers alive.

It was bad enough that they'd been subjected to a biological Orion Drive. A point-blank fusion detonation, however small, and the concomitant acceleration was not healthy for naturally evolved tissue. He'd accounted for both of those, since he at least could fix radiation damage and had cushioned the brains with a short-lived aerogel. It was still not the best thing, but he'd been pressed for time and couldn't finish growing all the infrastructure the operation was meant to have.

Then there were the attacks. The strange radiance had caused all kinds of unexplained replication errors and caused a number of specialized organs to cease functioning for no apparent reason. A good reminder that even if he wasn't part of the System and it couldn't target him directly, its effects were still dangerous.

The worst of it, though, was the fire beam. He'd had enough matter to try mitigating it with a sort of chaff cloud, but that hadn't lasted long thanks to the water guy, and the fire lady managed to punch a hole straight through him. It had obliterated one of the passenger brains outright and lightly toasted another two, as well as puncturing his pusher plate and causing the first fusion explosion to rip through his internal structures.

Now he had all kinds of failing organs, radiation damage, thermal fluctuations, and the usual rigors of vacuum trying to kill the people he was hoping to protect. Cato scrambled to juggle nutrient feeds and rehydrate cushioning armor, to purge toxic buildup and to repair sudden cell death from dozens of sources. He was forced to be a spendthrift with his resources, having to vent some of the volatile waste rather than recycle it to carry away heat in the vacuum of space. A long plume of frozen gas stretched out behind him as he rocketed away – quite literally – from the planet below.

One brain stabilized, but the other continued to deteriorate. If he had access to his full suite of technologies, if he knew more about Sydean biochemistry, if he hadn't gotten himself speared by the high-rankers — but he couldn't change reality. Cascading failures disrupted sensitive neural chemistry, causing the bioelectrical patterns of thought to stutter, then collapse.

He tried stimulating the neurons themselves, compromising the integrity of the brain in question in the hopes that he could resuscitate the personality inside and worry about rehousing it later, but it was too late and there was too much damage. The lump of fat was no more than that — technically alive, but without anything inside. He had no idea what mistakes he'd made, and he hadn't been able to scan the brain structure before the failure so there was no way to even properly reconstruct that much.

After a long struggle with himself, silently sailing through the vacuum of space, he terminated support to the dead brain. Better a definite death than to present the living with a false puppet of life, with no chance of the person within returning. He was certain he *could* return the rest of them, so long as he reached his destination.

His original plan had been to target the primary moon. Sydea had three, one large – if still not as big as Luna – and two much smaller ones in the Lagrange points. But he'd been forced to ascend early, and in his haste he only had the resources and trajectory to aim for a lesser moon. It would have to do.

At least the System's physics had dropped away, leaving only the damage behind. Having real physics available to him didn't give him any benefits yet, but it would as soon as he impacted the moon. It'd be a bit of a rough landing, given his imprecise delta-vee, but once there he'd have all the time and mass he needed.