

## Chapter 1 – System Invasion

Cato stepped through the portal from Earth just as it began to close.

“Cato! What are you doing?” His commander’s voice came simultaneously through the air and through the microwave gland in Cato’s head, as the portal shimmered and shrank.

“Systema delenda est,” he replied. It was his slogan for the past decade of earth, and the reason he’d adopted his current moniker. Some of his comrades thought that it was enough to push the System off earth, but Cato knew that as long as it existed, humanity would still be in danger — and the debt it had to pay for what it had done to his family and friends was too great to let go. There was a long pause before the reply.

“Godspeed,” his commander’s voice came, just before it closed. He wished the prime version of himself around Luna well, because there’d be hell to pay for Cato’s actions. Then put his former home out of mind and turned his attention to the alien planet. It wasn’t likely *he* would be seeing Earth again. Outside of the System, there was no such thing as faster-than-light travel.

The staging area on the other side was desolate, kinetic impactors through the portal having turned it into a blasted, burnt wasteland. It didn’t bother Cato. He strode through the still-smoldering wreckage without a care for heat or sharp edges. Ten tons of bioweapon crunched the bubbled glass of impact craters underfoot, the charred remnants of wood and clay impossible to avoid. A close binary overhead cast ever-so-slightly tinted shadows, but he merely stored the views for later, because he was on a timeline.

[Instant Defense Quest! Investigate the Incursion: Recommended Rank: Silver Reward: C-rank Skill. Location: Ahrusk Portal Staging Area]

The System might have been disrupted and destroyed on Earth, but this wasn’t Earth. The System was already bringing attention to Cato’s counter-invasion, something he only knew thanks to specialized sub-brains designed to parallelize his thinking. The actual System interface was a single blank brain, puppeted long enough for the System to integrate it, that resided in the crown of the warframe’s cranium and was the only part of it not protected against the System’s interface.

It was a strange approach, and he would have vastly preferred real electronics, not to mention proper armor and actual guns, but such things were impossible under the System. The exotic physics the System imposed rendered almost everything more complex than gears nonfunctional. Sort of.

Bypassing the System’s ban on advanced technology required everything to be organic — but Titan’s geneticists had discovered there was considerable play in what organic really meant. While his body was described by genetics, the chromosomes and acids used compounds rarely found outside of high-energy chemistry. While his body was grown in a womb, that womb had been part of an industrial complex in the vastness of space. While he had cells and organs, those cells fused individual deuterium atoms instead of burning sugar and the organs functioned closer to industrial machinery. He lived and breathed, but he was far from natural.

Cato raced across the battered ground and into the surrounding jungle. While war frames were incredibly powerful, by himself he wasn't a match for most of the nonsense that the System could bring down upon his head. Fortunately, it wasn't delivering a nemesis directly to him.

The System couldn't or didn't hand out an exact location or up-to-date tracking, which was a vulnerability humanity definitely exploited. It took more specialized minds than his to explain how and why the crackling neural lattice kept him from being exposed to the System interface, but the jamming it produced was a kind of thought-static that kept him safe. Unfortunately, even with that protection he couldn't hide from the System's imposed physics — which wasn't to say he couldn't hide from those who used it.

Chromatophores embedded in the armored scales of the war frame shifted colors, camouflaging him against casual scrutiny. He didn't have any System-granted stealth Skills that could be defeated by some arbitrary System mechanism, but it still required extreme methods to defeat tracking by System types. The bioengineered body also had essentially no odor, needing no pheromonal signaling and the outer surfaces being made of dense and heavy-molecule polymer to prevent any kind of shedding or outgassing. Cato didn't even need to breathe, save for chemical sampling.

Besides which, the war frame was surprisingly light on its feet — all six of them — for a ten-ton bioweapon. Defeating the enhanced senses of a System-augmented combatant, even when the war frame itself wasn't engaging with the System's effects, was not an easy task. As a consequence his feet were engineered to be nearly silent despite the underbrush, his scales altering their surface to be nearly frictionless as he slipped away under full stealth.

Cato roughly knew where he was, from the System individuals that had come through to Earth. A world called Sydea, out on what could be considered the frontier of the System. The precise geography was less known — cartography was a lost art when the System did it for most people. All he needed was a sufficiently tall mountain, or really anything to get him out of the heavy soup of the lower atmosphere.

As robust as the warframe was, rocket equations were cruel and he had some strict limitations on what he could do without destroying himself. Launching from the surface was not quite possible. Since he couldn't see anything useful on the horizon, he'd be doing a lot of running — and maybe he'd have to ask a local.

He slithered through the jungle, past unsuspecting beasts and even the occasional elite creature, the latter obvious even without direct system access. A cat or bird or monkey-like animal far larger and brighter-colored than the others around it was not exactly subtle. Empowered by the System, they were faster and more powerful than their lesser cousins, leading flocks or herds or packs and making them just that much more dangerous. He had to wait until he could spot a normal bird out on its own before he could secure it. One of the combat tendrils on his back lashed out, instantly killing it by driving a bone spike into its brain, and pulled the body into one of the body cavities along his spine.

It was blind idiocy to try and travel around without any sort of air power, even if it was just surveillance, but native earth life would stand out unacceptably. Given enough time he could probably figure out how to duplicate the phenotype of what he saw, but it was easier to simply parasitize and puppet the corpse of some native life. That process was often quite horrifying, but such was the nature of a biological warframe.

In a matter of minutes the remains of the creature's brain had been replaced with a new neural lattice, one protected from System interference. If someone [Appraised] the bird it'd give the game away, but hopefully selecting something common and innocuous would make that unlikely — besides which, the larger birds that needed System help to fly were useless to him. He sent the bird-drone back into the sky, a special microwave-band organ keeping it linked to him so he could see through its eyes.

Beyond the devastation around the invasion portal, a road led north to another town whose wall and towers were visible in the distance. The bird couldn't have seen it normally, but its eyes were already being replaced with far better ones as the bioweapon culture continued its work. In a day the bird's biology would be almost entirely replaced by Cato's engineered cells, keeping the form but vastly improving the function.

The jungle extended south, a clear conflict zone and the best place for Cato to hide. He'd need to return to civilization eventually, but skirting around the edge of settled lands meant it was unlikely anyone would stumble across him. He hardly needed to worry about food, water, or shelter. The genetic monstrosity he inhabited didn't need the last at all, and could pull the former from practically anything.

He turned slightly, altering his path to cut a shallow chord into the jungle's perimeter, not willing to go too deep — System-juiced animals could be just as dangerous as high-leveled sapients. The goal was to put enough distance between him and the incursion camp to make it impractical for anyone to track him. The System would always point out his general location, but given enough time he could be practically impossible to find.

Time he didn't have. While he considered himself to be moving at a fair pace, considering he had to slither between trees and around nests of up-jumped wild animals, it wasn't nearly as fast as flight. The bird spotted several dots moving quickly over the treetops, coming from the direction of the town. A quartet of people, making a line directly for the remains of the portal staging area.

If he and they both were lucky, they wouldn't be able track him. Despite his general attitude, he didn't really want to kill System people who had no idea what they were getting into. Invaders were one thing, but those who were simply responding to a call for defense deserved more consideration. His enemy was the System, not those unfortunate enough to dwell within it.

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"Do you think we can handle this?" Raine stared at the blasted craters, some lined with molten glass, where the portal staging camp had once been. There had been strange reports about the frontier world known as Ahrusk, but she hadn't really considered it her business. At least, not until the System had issued a defense quest in the same area as the portal. The now *closed* portal, with a camp that had been full of Golds and even Platinums, which meant there were forces at play far beyond her party.

"It's just one creature," Cormok said, glancing over the charred dirt and shattered stone. "It came after all this. Looks to be fairly high level though. [Tracking] is only getting a faint reading."

"Besides, we're Gold," Maur scoffed. "We can surely handle a Silver quest, especially with that reward."

Raine shared a glance with her sister, Leese, who completed their quartet. Cormok and Muar were acceptable so far as party members went, and the four of them had been together for over five years, but the two frontline men were far more willing to take risks than the sisters were comfortable with. As spellcasters, neither of them had quite the defenses of either Cormok or Muar, and the lack of *any* lingering magic in the area meant the devastation was wrought with brute force.

Yet they could hardly ignore the threat of some peak Silver beast in an area that was designed for Copper and Low Silver ranks. The two of them didn't need to speak to convey what they were thinking, and after a moment they reached an agreement. Raine turned to Muar.

"Just make sure you keep its attention when we catch up," she said, invoking [Fire Shield] regardless. The skill would restrict her offensive options slightly, but she should still be able to deal with a single, physically-oriented creature. The flames shimmered around her before fading, and Leese's golden [Divine Shield] did the same.

"Not a problem," Muar said, banging his heavy shield with the tip of his spear. "C'mon, Cormok. Let's get going."

Their tracker grunted and took off. The three of them followed with their movement Skills, Raine and Leese on wings of fire and gold, just behind Muar whose feet simply found purchase on the air itself. Cormok led them on a slow arc through the jungle, tracking the beast on a path that seemed to be circling Gosruk Town. Looking for a place to strike.

Brilliant greens and reds flashed in the light of the suns, the beauty and danger of the [Southern Jungle Conflict Zone] on full display. She couldn't see anything particularly out of place, but if Cormok's Skill could barely track it, then it wasn't likely her untrained eye would find it first. Startled birds rustled and flew away from their passing forms, except for one elite who seemed to want to challenge them. Raine's [Fire Lance] impaled it in passing and sent it down to the leaves below as a flaming corpse.

Cormok flashed hand signals at them, indicating that they were getting close, and they slowed in their flight. None of them were anywhere close to exhausting their travel Skills, so it was worth burning essence on remaining airborne and mobile when hunting something they had never seen before. Quietly, Cormok pointed to a particular area and signaled to Raine.

She invoked [Inferno] and blanketed the whole area with white-hot flames. Leaves crisped, bark scorched to ash, and the entire area went up in a roar of fire. The area skill wasn't as damaging as it might have seemed, but it more than served to reveal whatever might be hiding among the greenery.

Astoundingly, even in the fire it was nearly impossible to see their target. It had to have extraordinarily good camouflage Skills, though they clearly weren't perfect. The crackling, shifting flames revealed a spot where they *weren't*, which was all that her party needed to figure out the target. Raine cast a reflexive [Appraise], and was startled when all it returned was [???]. Not even a failure; the System simply couldn't categorize it.

She didn't know how to interpret that, so she set it aside, glancing at the others before quenching [Inferno] abruptly. That left a sudden stretch of bare ash and charcoal, cueing Cormok and Muar to move in. Muar's [Clamor] Skill should have pulled its attention to him while

Cormok flanked it, leaving Raine and Leese to engage at range. With a single creature, the strategy never needed more than a few flourishes beyond that basic approach.

Yet the thing didn't seem to even notice Muar. The blurry edge of the figure shifted as it launched itself, not at their tank or even at Raine, who had surely done *some* damage with [Inferno], but at *Leese*. A cry tore itself from Raine's throat as the nigh-invisible thing ripped through the air and crashed into Leese's golden shields. Almost by reflex she conjured [Fire Lance], hurling it at the wavery, blurry outline. The hardened flames hit the thing and simply dispersed, as if she'd hit a boulder.

Leese shrieked as she hammered it with holy light, to no avail. At the very least Leese's Skill should have stripped away whatever augmentation Skills the thing was using – *had* to be using – but there didn't seem to be any effect. The enormous bulk of the thing bore Leese down to the ground, shattering the golden shield with a dreadful finality as Leese's scream cut off abruptly.

Muar's retaliatory charge only managed to stagger the beast briefly, then he shouted as a wavery outline of a tendril extending from the thing's back spat some sort of thorn at him — and actually pierced his skin before detonating with enough force to send him flying. Another of those tendrils wrapped around Cormok as their scout leapt on the thing's back, cracking bones with a terrible strength before Cormok vanished back into shadow. Raine only had eyes for her sister, lying so dreadfully still upon the ground.

She screamed as she amplified [Fire Lance] into [Inferno Lance] and poured as much essence into it as she could before releasing the molten spear. It ripped through the air, and the beast's side seemed to explode — but when the flames cleared, it wasn't dead. Once again it ignored Muar's Skills and lunged for Raine, moving faster than anything below Gold had a right to. Its multi-ton bulk hammered her shield hard enough to shatter it.

Her armor took the brunt of the impact, but the force behind it sent her flying into a tree, the bark cracking under the impact as [Molten Scales] flared, soaking up the damage. That was all the respite she got before the dreadful claws were there again, unaffected by the heat pouring off her as they drew lines of agony along her chest. Blood choked her, bubbling inside her throat as the thing's jaws opened, enormous teeth closing down on her. Distantly, beyond the maw, a battered Cormok and bloodied Muar were charging in but far too late. Raine's last thought was that the System had been *drastically* wrong about the target.

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Cato was not entirely happy about how many resources he'd needed to expend in that fight. The blades the melee users had were barely worth mentioning, but the fire user had slagged quite a bit of armor and forced him to expend an ablative plate with that last massive attack. Then there was the monomolecular-edged explosive dart, which took quite a bit of time to grow.

They had made a good showing, for people who clearly had no idea what they were up against. If they'd been smart they would have just tried to pepper him from range, or tracked him until someone more powerful showed up. As it was, he was simply lucky they had thought he was a standard System beast. Instead, he was ten tons of bioengineering with the frame of a panther, the jaws of a hyena with impossibly sharp shark teeth, and a tail that was as much bludgeon as it was balance.

He finished excising the last brain and swallowed it down. As disgusting as it was in some respects, it was also as far from a normal biological process as could be imagined. The four lizard-people were effectively dead, by System terms, but that line was far blurrier for postbiologicals. Cato only had the biological and biochemical data for a small subset of System natives – just the ones who had been involved in the invasion – but at least for these people he could preserve them until he had more infrastructure to deal with them.

Each of the brains was wrapped in protective film, kept in an induced coma and fed nutrients to keep it alive. The bioweapon didn't have a gut as such, but there were a number of multipurpose chambers within that could be used for such tasks. Technically he could have mind-ripped them and pulled everything they knew out of their brains by force, since he had complete hardware access, as it were, but that was not something he was willing to do to anyone but the worst of the System degenerates.

Keeping them alive was hardly *necessary*, but it wasn't enough just to cut the legs out from under the System. That would result in its own sort of apocalypse, though one far less drastic than the onset of the System on Earth. They wouldn't have their very lives cut out from under them, wouldn't have billions of people instantly erased from existence as servers failed and cybernetic implants turned inert. He wanted no apocalypse at all, or even to reverse the one that had happened, and save the millions who dwelt on Sydea.

At least, those who could be.

Taking a lizard-person body as a temporary puppet was not the most auspicious start to that goal, but he desperately needed it to obtain some information. He'd have to apologize to the poor guy once things were more settled, but he only had one choice of corpse. The others had been far too damaged, since Cato had needed to remove them with alacrity, but the shadow-user had been less of a threat and Cato had merely strangled him. Admittedly, to do so took the same amount of force that an industrial hydraulic press could apply, but bioweapons were built with the absurd abilities of System-empowered individuals in mind.

Cato secured the near-corpse in question while he continued to circle around the target town. His bird scout had gone entirely unnoticed, allowing him to send it closer in to see how things stood, though still well outside the range of the casual [Appraise]. With luck, the existence of two instances of System-jamming biology would confuse his location to whatever quests or guidance it would give its people.

On Earth, there had been only a dozen zones over the whole planet. It had been fairly clear the postbiological defenders had interrupted the process of integration, but there was no telling how large or small the zones were on other planets. Nor had Earth created such a defense quest, despite thousands of warframes on the ground. At least, not that Cato had seen, but he hadn't been there at the very earliest deployments so he had to operate at least a little in the dark.

His surveillance showed him a walled town of maybe three or four thousand people, with a massive System pylon at the center and buildings radiating away from it in layers. The white System buildings were blatantly at odds with the native colors, though a few people had clearly splurged and spent System currency on coloring a store or house. Most of the boxes were blank and brutalist, which Cato presumed meant the town was a relatively new one.

Cato had never seen more than the first, initial villages, when he'd retrieved his cousins from the remains of Earth's surface. Neither invaders nor those who had been converted during the System apocalypse had established anything other than the featureless buildings, though Cato refused to believe that the whole breadth of the System universe had cities composed of bland boxes. The System was a malevolent threat to the universe, certainly, but for it to be unimaginative as well would elevate its evil to something even more abhorrent.

Nine out of every ten individuals his bird could see walking the streets of the town were lizard-people, like the unfortunate foursome that had tried to hunt him down. So far as Cato knew, this was their actual homeworld, likely only a few hundred years into their own System integration, and a very likely glimpse of Earth's future had the other powers in the Solar System not intervened.

The other ten percent were an assorted grab-bag of crab-people, bird-people, rock-people, and similar physiognomies. He wouldn't call them entirely humanoid, but there were certain similarities. Not that he was concerned with the precise details of species, but rather with their dress. Priests and other direct representatives of the System were particularly dangerous, less because of their powers and more because they could put eyes on him and betray his position to more powerful entities.

He memorized the layout of the city – though that was a paltry word for writing a fully-rendered and annotated model into the biological computing matrix that threaded through the warframe's body – while waiting for the bioactive mush he'd inserted into the corpse's cranium to do its work. The puppet wouldn't last long, since he couldn't actually use the previous owner's System abilities and any use of [Appraise] would raise some eyebrows. Amusingly, it was far less overt for a humanoid to fail an [Appraise] than an animal, since it could be put down as some kind of skill.

There was also the likelihood that someone would recognize the face of the corpse in question, and without resorting to mindripping its prior owner he wasn't going to be able to fake that identity. All he intended to do, however, was to look at a local map. System maps were fortunately not part of the System interface, otherwise he would have needed to resort to more intrusive measures, but they were *issued* by the System. Any place with a System nexus would have the facilities.

He'd pilfered one from the quartet that had attacked him, though he'd left most of their gear. The majority of it was too System-reinforced for him to even break down for resources. It was the maps and wallets, the former blank and the latter unattached after the death of their owners, that could be useful in the future.

The biolattice inside the lizardman corpse connected up with the brainstem, growing into the optical nerve and the eardrum. Just like the bird's, it was in many ways easier to replace the sense organs than to try and convert the nerve signals into something understandable. He couldn't perform the same task on the spinal column, and had to dedicate a number of sub-brains to the task of debugging the neurotransmitter patterns.

The corpse twitched spastically, then suddenly began breathing again. A heart began to beat, then was joined by a second one. Cato was damn glad there'd already been some work done on the lizard-people anatomy and biology, because trying to figure that out from scratch would

have taken long enough for decay to set in. He paused to set the corpse down on the ground, blinking through its eyes and moving its limbs.

Various sub-brains started building a kinesthetic model based on the observations from his bird; he wouldn't be able to pilot the body as if he were born to it, but at least he wouldn't be some staggering zombie. The puppet headed off toward town while he kept the warframe moving. He imagined the System would escalate the quest with the first responders dead, and it'd be best to find some proper cover before real trouble came along.

Bioweapons were hard to kill, but high-ranked System combatants could absolutely manage it given the chance.

Cato wished he could map out what was underneath his feet, especially as the warframe was equipped for acoustic sounding, but the amount of stomping and tromping that would require would leave too many traces at the moment. A monster hiding in a cave was a bit of a cliché, but being out of the line of sight from any would-be hunters was a great help. Just as importantly, the geologic overhaul the System introduced often lined caves with useful metals and minerals, which Cato could certainly scavenge. Most of the warframe was carbon, but a not-insignificant amount was wrought from heavier elements.

If he wanted those benefits, he had to hunt for caves the old-fashioned way — and there were always caves. The System seemed to love them, and festooned every region with the things. Large and small, regardless of whether they made any actual sense. It was something that particularly offended Cato, considering how much time he'd spent learning exogeology, even if that was the least of the System's sins.

The puppet's strides became more sure and natural over the few minutes it took to traverse the miles between the edge of the jungle and the walls of the town. By the time he piloted it through the gateway, offering a nod to the lizard-people guards standing at bored attention, the movement was entirely natural. Of course, he'd also made sure the damage was repaired, as wandering in with a crushed throat and an incision circling the entire head would be rather suspicious.

If there was one accolade Cato could award System cities, it was that they were clean. The roads were smooth stone, like paved asphalt, with drains at regular intervals and a full plumbing system. The taverns set at the entrance showed evidence of some attempt at decoration, with hand-lettered signs and flowers set in windowsills, but were just as boxy and uninspired from ground level as they had looked from the air.

He made directly for the central System building, the combination transport nexus and, loosely, adventurer's guild. If Cato had been connected to the System properly, he could have used it to accept or fulfill quests, in addition to teleporting himself to other parts of the world. In fact, the last option was still something worth considering, if he could convince the System to move a warframe despite the jamming — and if he could be certain of leaving a city center intact.

The puppet opened the doors to the nexus building, taking in the dozens of people pursuing their business there. Several were the lizard-people, but most weren't; he expected most of the arrivals were there specifically to fulfill the System's quest about him. Even as he crossed over to the information pylon, the teleporter flashed and two sinuous rodent-like creatures in articulated armor prowled out. Likely there for the Earth portal, as it was entirely possible



nobody had been informed it had closed only minutes before. Cato double-checked the System symbiont, and found that the quest had been updated.

[Instant Defense Quest! Investigate the Incursion: Recommended Rank: High Gold. Reward: C-Rank Skill. Locations: Southern Jungle Conflict Zone, Gosruk Town]

The escalation wasn't a surprise, though Cato figured the System would put it higher. The final days of the Earth defense had involved very high ranks indeed — though with most of the System anchors destroyed, they had been rather limited in what the high-rankers could do. If *he* had been the System, he would have put a maximum bounty out on any of the Earth bioweapons the moment they appeared, but it wasn't clear that the System could be so precipitous. Nor was it clear how much was run by some central intelligence, and how much devolved to local control. Even those people who had been questioned knew little about the way the System was run.

His puppet saw the rodents breeze out the door, and his bird caught them emerging onto the plain road just outside the System nexus. One poor native nearly bumped into them, and caught a backhand for his trouble that sent him flying across the road to smash into and through the side of a building. Cato winced. The pair clearly didn't care much for or about the Sydeans, and it wasn't like any authorities were going to deal with them. Not only were they too powerful, but Cato was pretty sure he'd just eaten the nearest authorities.

The bird watched them take to the air, accelerating toward the ruined portal staging area. A sudden sonic boom showed that they were far more dangerous than the group he'd taken out before, enough that Cato would prefer not to engage without orbital support. Or at least a few weeks to dig in and fortify an area. Unfortunately, there was little he could do about it at the moment.

Taking the blank System map from the puppet's belt pouch, he touched it to the information pylon. The rune-covered obelisk rose all the way to the ceiling, set off to the side of the quest board and opposite the alcoves where people could turn in System quests and get their rewards. It had a number of functions, most of which he couldn't access himself, but updating maps was a very simple transaction.

The System map itself was a thin, flexible sheet of some material halfway between metal and glass. Whatever it was fell apart without System support, which meant that all the boffins back in orbit couldn't figure out the nature of the stuff. The updates seemed closer to a proper data download, flashing the blank sheet with a detailed sketch of the world's terrain and landmarks.

Cato wrote it into memory as he flipped through the various regions on the planet of Sydea; the cities, the connections, the dungeons and conflict zones. Faction control, mines and quarries, even farming areas. It was commendably thorough, though he still would have preferred a proper satellite view, as the maps covered maybe a tenth of the planet's landmass at best. At least it had, off in one corner, the thing he was looking for: a tall mountain.

"Hey, Cormok!"

It took Cato a moment to realize that the person was addressing his puppet, and he held up his hand in the universal symbol of *please wait* while he finished perusing the map. There was no real way he could pretend to be this Cormok, so however the conversation went, he wouldn't have any further opportunity to look around.

“Hey,” he replied after he was finished, looking up at the lizard-person. Puppeting people ended up being horrific for a number of reasons, but this was the main one. At some point, usually sooner rather than later, the charade fell apart and the puppet died – or worse – in front of the eyes of friends or family.

“You sound different,” the lizard-person said, squinting at the puppet. “Are you well? I saw the quest you went to do got upgraded.”

“I’m afraid Cormok is not well,” Cato said, after a moment of debate. He just didn’t have the heart to try and play it out. “He did not survive the quest.” Then he triggered the self-destruct purge on the puppet’s neural mass.

Of course, he lost connection with it instantly, but he still knew what would have happened. The puppet would have simply crumpled, the head and part of the spinal cord turned to charred ash as the fusion organelles changed the way they contained their payloads. Every single bioengineered neuron was practically vaporized simultaneously, with the thought-static System protection following a moment later on a dead-man’s switch.

His bird saw a sudden rush of traffic toward the System nexus as the System quest removed Gosruk Town from its location list, and Cato winced despite how useful that was for him. If all the attention was there, it wasn’t toward him, even though he was sure that would traumatize Gosruk Town for the foreseeable future. At least with that puppet gone, he could recall his bird and put more distance between the warframe and the staging area.

According to the map, his target was an entire continent away, so Cato needed to get somewhere he could put on some real speed. Sadly, the warframe couldn’t actually fly, but it was an inexhaustible biological machine that could reach impressive speeds given the chance. Even at that distance it really shouldn’t take him too long.

He’d still need to make good use of the time, and figure out all the little details about the System workings that had never been revealed on Earth. If he wanted to remove the System from this planet, he had a lot of work cut out for him. Not only were the System anchors more numerous, he was sure they were far more insidious and the guardians far more powerful.

The self-proclaimed System god of Earth, some sort of local administrator, Cato was sure, hadn’t fared too well under the assault of an orbital particle beam. That had been only minutes before the portals had failed, and showed the degree of directed energy it would take to deal with anyone at that level. Sadly, that wasn’t something he had on board his bioweapon, and he’d need rather more infrastructure than a single warframe to deal with the equivalent here.

The bird returned to hunker down on his back, and he began running again in earnest. The two rat-people were still out there, and could be serious nuisances, but the further he got from both town and staging area, the harder it’d be for anyone to track him down. Still, he instructed the warframe to begin preparing some backup seeds, just in case. It wouldn’t be much of a bioweapon if it couldn’t reproduce.

Barring interruptions, his goal was simple. Climb a mountain, then kill a god.