

Chapter 13 — New Game Plus

Raine looked upward as what Cato termed a *care package* appeared in the sky. It was just a dot at first, a glint in the broad expanse of blue, and then suddenly it resolved into a metal cylinder falling straight down. She waited for it to sprout wings or something to slow its fall, but that didn't happen. Instead it simply plummeted straight to the ground only a hundred feet away.

She flinched, but it wasn't as loud as she expected. Instead of simply shattering against the ground or embedding itself in the earth, the bottom compacted with a strange hissing, crackling noise. Mist plumed outward from the metal as frost formed on its surface, though she had no idea why it was so deathly cold. A moment after it landed, the metal side tore apart and a quarter-sized Cato-beast emerged, carrying several packs of what were likely supplies, along with their weapons.

"Here you go," the small version said cheerfully, sounding nearly identical to the big one that was standing behind them, though with not so deep a voice. "I made extra of the equipment just in case, so there's ten spears and bucklers and four poleaxes for you. There's extra armor in the bags, too."

"Thank you," Leese said, picking up one of the bundles of weapons with ease and tossing it to Raine. She caught it, feeling the heft and yet finding it no real trouble despite still being at Copper. So far they hadn't had any real chance to test the limits of their new strength, and the [Roloach Depths Dungeon] would be a good start.

"Are you – one of you – coming with us?" Leese asked, as she withdrew one of the spears and performed a few quick lunges. Neither of them had practiced with weapons in ages, but for some reason Raine found her memories of it were fresh and clear. Strapping on the buckler and gripping the poleaxe was just like the very early training she'd gotten from another Copper, so many years ago.

"I'd better not just yet," the small Cato told them. "That will make this dungeon pop up on the quest list and I don't want some high ranker coming by and murdering you because you're in the same general region as I am."

"If there's trouble I'll send the small version down," the big Cato rumbled. "Just be careful, since without a me along I can't bring you back again."

"We've done enough dungeons without that kind of backup," Raine said dryly, and the big Cato ducked his head.

"Yes, of course," he said, settling down just outside the surface portion of [Roloach Depths Dungeon]. It was merely a stairwell surrounded by cracked flagstones and broken pillars, but to her recollection it had a full twelve floors. The two of them shrugged on the packs and secured their weapons, even if they couldn't take everything Cato had provided. They'd need to rank up and get better System storage to be able to stash anything beyond tokens.

The two of them exchanged glances and started down the stairwell. Raine went first, with shortspear and buckler, and Leese followed behind with a poleaxe. The Dungeon warned them that they were under rank, and normally that would have made her turn right around. Neither

she nor Leese had gotten to Gold by taking foolish chances. After seeing what Cato could do, and feeling the strength and celerity of her own body, she was far more confident.

[Welcome to Roloch Depths Dungeon! Suggested Rank: Silver to High Silver. Warning: You are under the suggested Rank.]

“A lot different from the last time we were here,” Leese murmured.

“When was that?” Raine asked. She remembered the dungeon, vaguely, but even with her newfound clarity of mind the stone stairwell didn’t spark any useful memories.

“We came with Hartel’s Smashers,” Leese supplied. “Hartel fell down the spiral staircase on the fifth floor and broke his legs, and we had to drag him back to the safe zone.”

“Oh, right!” That finally brought things into focus, and she could recall the entire dungeon. Except for the final floor, which they hadn’t finished. It had taken them several days of slow and careful progress, especially as they got lower. Even with five people, dealing with mid- and upper-Silver enemies while fresh to the rank had been difficult.

The first monster came just before they reached the base of the staircase, a foretaste of what the dungeon had to offer. A squat, barrel-headed creature, dark green and clad in leather, popped out of a hole in the staircase, and charged at the pair of them with a scream. Raine reflexively cast her [Flame Bolt] at it, but to no avail. The rank difference was too much, so she was forced to switch to her spear.

A simple Copper weapon couldn’t do too much to a Silver, but what Cato had provided was certainly not simple. Raine jabbed her spearhead forward to fend it off, marveling at how easily and precisely she could control the weapon, but rather than a simple deflection the tip punched through the leather and sank into the thick hide with barely any resistance. Leese’s poleaxe swung past a moment later and cut off its anguished squealing.

“That was surprisingly easy,” Leese murmured, confirming Raine’s impression. The rewards scrolled past on her interface a moment later, which were just some Silver-rank tokens. That was fine, but what they were really hoping for were Skill tokens. Considering that the two of them were delving far above their rank, additional Skill tokens should drop relatively frequently, but they’d probably be two or three floors down before they even had a full set of F-tier Skills, let alone anything better.

The B-tier skills they’d selected would have been fantastic to carry them through — except Raine had chosen a Skill that she’d probably be replacing with a more appropriate build. Leese had gone with a perception Skill which worked with any build, but Raine wasn’t certain she’d be able to parley her B-tier ranged option into a proper spellsword Skill. It all depended on Skill tokens dropping and what options the System saw fit to give them, but she could very clearly rely just on martial might for the moment.

The first floor proper opened out at the end of the staircase, a long arched hallway with illumination gems set in the walls, faintly flickering to keep the area in a touch of shadow. Patrolling pairs of monsters walked the halls, sticking close to the walls, their bizarrely cylindrical heads and squat bodies nearly blending in with the stone. From where the two of them stood at the base of the stairs, the doors that led into side rooms weren’t obvious, but she remembered

they were there. She also remembered how the first time through they'd been surprised by the inhabitants of one of those rooms joining the fight after taking too long cutting down a patrol.

By silent accord, she and Leese crept along the wall, flattening themselves in the shadow of one of the arches that gave just the smallest bit of cover. A minute later, one of the patrols passed by and the two of them leapt out in ambush. Once again Raine's spear essentially ignored the armor, simply sinking into the monster's body exactly where she wished, piercing its heart while Leese's poleaxe completely cut the other one in two. That was the sort of effect that usually didn't occur until Gold-rank weaponry.

"Remind me to thank Cato for these," Raine murmured, and Leese hummed agreement. They didn't have any magical effects, and they'd be replaced by late Gold, but they were better than anything that could normally be wielded by Copper or Silver.

She skimmed through the rewards, and moved on. They took down two other patrols by ambush, clearing the hallway, then Leese crept up to the door, using her perception Skill to peer inside before signing what she saw. There were six of the monsters inside, sitting around a light crystal, so Leese swapped her poleaxe for spear and buckler. The longer, larger weapons would be more useful in lower floors, where larger monsters roamed, but against numerous enemies the buckler and a more responsive weapon was a safer bet.

Tempting as it was to rush in, the doorway was narrow and defensible, so Raine and Leese merely kicked the doors open to get the attention of the monsters. Several throwing knives flickered toward them from the monsters, and Raine used [Fire Bolt] to pick them out of the air — a feat that should have been impossible at Copper. It was only the superlative focus and dexterity that allowed her to target them all.

Then they were in melee range. She deflected clubs and hatchets with the buckler while plying her spear, working in perfect harmony with Leese as the monsters crowded in around the doorway. The enemies went down in a matter of moments, and the rewards scrolled past on her System interface. Already, there was a D-tier Skill token, which was substantially better than the F-tier that Coppers normally started with.

"Skill token," Leese said. "F-tier."

"D-tier here," Raine told her. "It might be worth holding off to see if higher ranks drop for you." Then, not following her own advice, she pulled the Skill Token from her wallet and invoked it. She sorted through the available options to find a weapon Skill that applied to spears and polearms, eventually finding one she hoped would eventually hybridize with her B-tier [Fire bolt] and making the selection.

The most important thing was that at Silver it would let her store a weapon, or several if she could upgrade its tier, which would make it far less awkward to haul around a poleaxe. The clumsiness of dealing with spear weapons was, in Raine's opinion, why things like maces and swords were so popular despite being far more suited to fighting people than monsters.

After slotting her new Skill, Raine took a moment to go through some quick forms with her poleaxe; thrust and retreat, strike and reverse-strike, and ripping through the air with the empowered blow the Skill granted her. While she did that, Leese poked through the room to see if there were any hidden treasures, prodding with her spear haft to make sure they didn't set off any traps.

“I think this is something,” Leese said, holding up a pair of leather straps. “I’ll spend mine on [Appraise]. Otherwise we’ll miss half of what’s in the dungeon.” Raine grunted agreement, switching back to her short spear and securing the poleaxe again before they continued onward. Each of the rooms was essentially identical, save for the last which had a caster.

Good as Cato’s equipment was, it certainly didn’t protect from shadowy bolts flashing through the air. Yet she was still able to pivot out of the way, hefting her spear and hurling it hard enough to pin the barrel-headed monster against a chest behind it. Leese moved forward to engage the remaining creatures while Raine grabbed another spear from where she had it secured, the two of them making quick work of the survivors.

Leese pulled a cloth headband from the chest, glanced at it, then shook her head and stuffed it in her pack. So far they hadn’t run into anything useful, but that was to be expected considering the armor and weapons they already had were quite good. Enough to take on the dungeon’s early levels, at least.

They switched to their poleaxes for the floor guardian, who was simply a triple-sized version of one of the monsters with metal armor. This was where their choice of weapon really shone, as with the reach and the blunt faces of the poleaxes, the pair of them had no trouble crushing joints and crippling its ability to move. From there, dodging the clumsy swings of its oversized mace was easy enough and Raine finished it off by opening its throat with the blade of her poleaxe.

Of all things, what it left behind when the dungeon reclaimed it was a massive club, which Raine shoved to the side. It wasn’t even worth carrying it around to sell for tokens, not when they were already loaded down with large weapons. Instead they descended to the next floor, which was larger and had versions of the monsters riding on ugly, squat mounts.

“So, are we going to align ourselves with Cato?” Raine asked, once they had emerged from the stairwell and were out of range of Cato’s hearing for the first time. Even when he was trying to be polite, she was well aware that he could hear their discussions and so they couldn’t really be frank.

“I don’t really care about the System,” Leese said bluntly. “With my Skills gone I realized it was changing how I thought. I just had this idea that I could just trust in the system and it would all work out. Now, I just wonder what it’s going to do to us next.” Raine nodded. She had noticed Leese was less sanguine, more aggressive, and more outspoken since they’d woken up, but there had been so much going on she didn’t know exactly what to think of it.

“So you think we can trust him?” Raine sighed, leaning on her spear. “I would like to, but someone that powerful has to have any number of secret motivations.”

“It’s more that we can trust his goal, I think,” Leese said after some consideration. “Maybe he wants to destroy the System for the reasons he told us, maybe he wants to usurp it for himself, but either way I do think he wants to do so. And for us? If he does get rid of it, fine, we’ve already gotten his favor. If not, we’ll be young and powerful.” Leese shook her head. “I don’t think we can lose.”

“Unless we die again,” Raine pointed out dryly.

“Cato can die and come back,” Leese said thoughtfully. “Maybe we should ask about that. After the dungeon.”

“We should,” Raine agreed, gripping her poleaxe. “After the dungeon.”

Muar stopped at the entrance to the tall building, feeling entirely out of place on the neighboring world of Uriva. Nearly all the others on the streets were insect-people, all of whom moved with unnatural sliding steps and whose bodies clicked as their gripping claws seated and unseated themselves against the chitin on their shoulders. Yet they had a full temple building, to honor their planet’s god and the divine System, so it was the best destination he could make for.

He pressed his palm against the temple door, invoking his divine Skill and feeling the door respond, swinging open before him. Only a few steps inside he could feel the change, something ineffable in the air. It was soothing, as if his time outside the System had been some terrible nightmare from which he had finally awoken.

The memory of that blank, System-less space still made him shudder. A silent void, with no status, no ability to understand or interact with the world around him. That place had been dead and lifeless, devoid of purpose, of meaning. He had no idea how anyone could live without the System to offer the truth, to let them know how they were progressing upon the path they had chosen.

That experience had woken him from his indifference to a bright-burning faith, realizing what the System had to offer. Direction, reward, motivation. Without it, there was nothing but meaningless and aimless nothing, and that was the horror Cato intended to unleash upon unsuspecting worlds. It was something that could not be allowed.

He pressed forward into the broad nave of the temple, to an arrangement of seats centered around a pristine System pylon. There were only a few people there in meditation, focusing on their Skills and the connections between them, and the intentions of the divine System. Sydea had no such building, so he had never experienced it himself, but he had only a single Copper Skill so it wasn’t likely he would draw much favor from the System anyway.

Not that Muar was there to commune with the System. He instead waited patiently for the presiding priest to notice him, a native Platinum in metallic white and blue armor. It was not for a mere Copper to demand the time of a higher rank, even and especially a representative of the System. Muar’s business was important, but not urgent.

Some minutes later, the Platinum stirred and beckoned for Muar to approach. He stepped forward and bowed to the insect-priest, taking a moment to compose his thoughts. Of all things, he didn’t want to be rejected because he sounded too unbelievable.

“I have some news as to the origin of the strange global quest on Sydea,” he told the priest. “It is a long story, which I believe might be better relayed in private. I don’t know how much might touch on things that are privileged.”

Muar couldn’t read the priest’s expression, but he thought he detected approval. Regardless, the Platinum inclined his head briefly and rose to his feet in one smooth movement, beckoning for Muar to follow him deeper into the temple. They passed several training rooms, and some doors to rooms Muar didn’t recognize, ending with what seemed to the priest’s personal office.

“Please, child, tell me what you have learned,” the priest said in his strange clicking voice, sitting down at a desk with a System interface crystal, and gesturing for Muar to be seated in the chair opposite. Muar did so, taking a moment to organize his thoughts, though he’d been rehearsing his story ever since he re-entered the system.

“Several months ago, when the portal to Ahrusk closed, my group was patrolling the area near the town we founded. We saw the defense quest, which was local to our area, and went to investigate...” Muar continued through what he had experienced, trying to keep as factual as possible. His death, his awakening in a room beyond the reach of the System. What Cato had shown them, what he had claimed. The trip back down, and the conversation between Cato and the Platinums. Everything he could remember, down to the word.

Through it all the priest listened, only asking questions to clarify a few points. He did occasionally look at something only visible to him, likely some method of verifying Muar’s truthfulness. Fortunately, Muar didn’t have to invent a single detail. When he was done, the priest sat in silence for a moment before speaking.

“A disturbing story. I can admit I don’t quite know what to think, but it is certainly not something to be taken lightly,” the priest admitted, chitin clicking softly as he spoke. “For the moment you may stay here in the temple, while I reach out to others to see what may be made of your claims.”

“Thank you, esteemed Platinum,” Muar said, glad to at least have a place to stay. With all his Gold-rank wealth gone and only a few Gold-rank tokens from the initial quest, that was certainly a blessing. The priest crooked a finger, and a number of System notifications scrolled across his own interface.

[You have been granted a room at Ekelem Temple]

[You have been awarded Gold Tokens]

[You have been awarded Essence]

Upon accepting the notifications, the tokens went into his wallet, and a heavy key fell into his hand. He bowed again and backed out of the room, turning and feeling the key in his hand tug against his grip. Muar followed the directions and entered, dropping into the Silver-rank bed that was there with a sigh.

While he was waiting, there wasn’t much he could do to rank himself up — at least, not in the usual manner. On Sydea, there was rarely any point in consuming Essence Tokens rather than spending them, considering how terrible the conversion rate was. But at a temple, where he could perhaps earn Skills directly and not as a drop, and with Gold tokens to feed a Copper rank, he might well have a chance.

Muar spent the next few days in meditation and contemplation, communing at the System crystal in the temple, feeling that he was very close to earning another Skill. It was a far different process than earning it through a drop, but feeling the flow of essence, the presence of the divine System, was something he sorely needed. His devotion was even rewarded.

[You have been granted the Divine Insight Skill]

“Copper Muar?” Only a moment after the System notified him of its blessing, the priest called upon him and Muar opened his eyes.

“Yes, esteemed Platinum?”

“I would ask that you remain here for the next few days,” the priest said with a click. “A Bismuth wishes to hear your story.”

Of all the innumerable tasks Cato had, he found that of fabrication the easiest, and negotiating with people the hardest. Stuff was just stuff, and even complicated machinery was straightforward to create. Even better, a machine always did what it was meant to, and consistently. People, on the other hand, were always unpredictable and never got easier to deal with, even after all Cato’s experience.

Accordingly, the moment Onswa mentioned needing to deal with the corporeal needs of his people, Cato started his factories producing the proper facilities to land resources groundside. Most of it would have to be biotech, but bio-printing walls and floors and furniture was easy enough, and barely needed any tweaking to fit within the System’s restrictions. That took merely a moment’s thought, but addressing the concerns of the high-rankers themselves took far longer.

“...and yet, it would be a lot easier for people to trust you if you actually registered as something to [Appraise],” said Marek, on the third or fourth go-round about the topic.

“I’m sure it would,” Cato said as patiently as he could. He’d spent some time explaining the basic reasons behind what he did and why he did it, so they wouldn’t be so disconcerted by the fact that he seemed so low rank, but it turned out that altering someone’s worldview was an involved process. “The thing is, I don’t *want* the System knowing about what I’m doing. We don’t want a System-god calling in one of the world-crusher types, or coming down *himself*.” Marek just scowled.

“I’d rather not invite any divine attention,” Onswa agreed. “Admitting what we’re doing is something the gods will frown upon.”

“I know,” Cato sighed. “The whole religious aspect is something I want to avoid as much as possible.” It was clear that, for example, Muar had religious issues with Cato’s presence. Cato was glad that Onswa had sent him off to a different city, since the discussion was hardly likely to become *less* blasphemous. “I *can* tell you that the System destroyed your original beliefs, replacing them with its own structure. Admittedly, it’s impossible to *not* believe in the System.”

“It’s unwise to disbelieve something we can see and experience.” The last of the high-rankers, Hirau, seemed to be the one that disliked Cato the most, though Cato had no idea why. At least he seemed to be the least influential of the high-rankers, and whatever his personal animus might be, nobody else seemed to worry about it. “Yet your contention is that the System *is not*, in fact, real.”

“No, it’s entirely real,” Cato disagreed, looking up at where Hirau was perched on top of one of the buildings. “It’s just synthetic, and it is *not* friendly to you. The reality I know allows true civilizations to flourish, ones where people can build and live in peace. This one just takes them over and destroys them, twists them into a parody, and restricts everything to one narrow

avenue in life.” He had to bite down on any further comment, just so he didn’t appear to be a crazed zealot.

What Cato really wanted to do was lay out every single piece of information he’d gleaned from his scouts about their prior civilizations and cultures, to point toward what the System had done on Earth. The defenders of Earth had performed all kinds of analyses to show that, beyond the obvious, there were myriad insidious long-term effects from the System’s reality. But none of that would actually matter to the Sydeans, and facts and figures were never convincing anyway. It was always about emotion and personal experience.

“You say normal life, but you don’t seem normal,” Hirau accused him. “The plants don’t like you. There’s an unnatural feeling about you.”

“I would imagine so,” Cato agreed easily, which was the best way to disarm such accusations. “As I was telling Mister Marek, my body is designed to prevent the System from taking it over. I’m sure that unnatural feeling is due to the measures that block off the System’s influence. Or rather, a part of its influence.” If he could block the System’s alternate physics and not just its direct access, things would be much easier for him.

“We don’t need to have these discussions here,” Onswa interrupted. “I think we have enough of an agreement that we can let these people get back to their normal lives.” He waved in the direction of the area where everyone was taking shelter, and Cato nodded agreement.

“I can take these bodies off elsewhere,” he agreed. “Give me a few hours and I can drop some less blatant ones wherever you want to meet. I can even look Sydean if you want, but I didn’t want to misrepresent myself.”

“That’s disturbing,” Marek muttered.

“Useful, though,” Onswa said. “Yes, it would be for the best if you were less obvious should you enter any of our cities. One of those beasts stalking the streets would cause panic even if I were to announce what was going on.” He waved a hand at the massive warframe. “Which I will not. There’s nothing to be gained from starting a panic. Any public discussion can come *after* we secure our refugees and push out the foreign Platinums and Bismuths.”

Cato hadn’t thought too much of Onswa when he first met the guy, but he had to admit the man was quick on his feet. There had been no extended arguing, no need to demonstrate Cato’s ability to apply force. No impossible-to-answer questioning about true motives or secret plans. So far as Cato could tell, he was genuinely trying to make sure his people came out ahead under trying circumstances.

A Sydean frame would have to be practically lobotomized, in the same way that his human frame had been, but it’d give him a chance to try the portal again without causing undue trouble. He did not like how his warframes had been vaporized, and effectively instantly, but there was no telling what had grabbed the attention of the local power.

The System knew he was there, but the jamming kept it from being able to localize him precisely. Except, of course, he’d already found that transitioning between zones gave people the opportunity to track him down, and the portal was likely a more discrete transition even than that. Yet he hadn’t thought that the quest alone would bring down such a response.

He needed to get past Sydea, and that meant he had to figure out how to traverse portals without getting annihilated by the connected world's System-god. Considering how quick the response had been, he was a little confused why Sydea's own System-god hadn't yet taken an interest, but the portal to Earth might well mean things were slightly different on Sydea than more established worlds. More tolerant of oddities.

Or he could be whistling in the dark. Cato was operating in a vast gulf of ignorance and while he could make guesses, he wouldn't know without testing. The System was a machine; malevolent and destructive, but it had rules and processes and those were things he could identify and exploit. If he was dealing with a person actively watching out for him, on the other hand, things would be a lot more difficult.

"We'll reconvene in Kalhan," Onswa said, glancing around at the other Platinums. "Taking on Bismuths is not something to be done haphazardly."

"I'll have a new body there in a few hours," Cato assured them. It took longer than that to grow a new frame from scratch, but he already had several cooking just in case. He had figured that he'd need them at *some* point, so it was mostly a matter of delivering them to the proper point on the surface. At least the moon he had chosen was closer to Sydea than Luna was to Earth, as even with fusion engines it took quite some time to travel that distance.

"You might want to come up with a different way to phrase that," Arene muttered, muzzle wrinkling in discomfort. "Even people with self-duplication Skills don't say it that way."

"I'll take that under advisement," Cato said dryly. It was unfortunately easy to take for granted how casually accepted postbiological life was back in the Solar System, even for those who had never indulged. It was only the System invaders who were lacking in that grounding, and Cato had never much worried about accommodating them.

Onswa opened another portal, waving the Platinums through, and Cato finally managed to tear his one warframe away from Karsa. He hoped that her fixation was just a passing fancy, and that she wasn't going to become an issue. While it was in some ways amusing, having to deal with the affections of one of the major players could utterly wreck his diplomatic standing. Not to mention it was clear that Karsa didn't really understand what he was.

The Sydeans weren't stupid, not at all, but nobody local had the knowledge or context for truly comprehending Cato's existence. The rules of technology were not the rules of the System, the way Cato's power worked was entirely different, and it would take time for even the most willing soul to get used to the truth of Cato's nature. As much as he would have liked to make friends, there would be something intrinsically deceptive about it so long as they had the wrong idea about who and what he was.

For example, Onswa was likely going to take the time to scrape together a list of targets to eject from Sydea, despite seeing that Cato had extensive worldwide surveillance. Any normal person would have more than a little trouble actually sorting through the sheer volume of video, but Cato had sufficient computing power for the task. He wasn't reviewing it all personally, of course, but he had high-powered algorithms that sorted out information and kept the privacy of people whose lives he shouldn't be prying into.

The offworlder high-ranks were emphatically not part of that set. Cato had never fully internalized the System's power structure, but the translation for the rank in question was

Bismuth, what was considered the first major rank by System folks. The intelligence Earth's defense force been able to get out of the invaders was fairly indeterminate, but there was a definite sentiment that Bismuth rank was unusual, a point where the body changed, where aging stopped and immortality was within reach.

Despite that sentiment, orbital weaponry had demonstrated Bismuth ranks were still quite mortal, given adequate application of force. His light-gas gun *might* actually make a mark, but at best was likely to simply leave a hole, which was not nearly enough damage to actually slow down someone of that rank. The sad fact was that the limits of biotechnology just weren't up to dealing with the concentration of force that someone at the top end of the System rankings could bring to bear.

One of the Bismuths was of the slinky rat type, like the ones he had encountered outside Azure Canyon. That one was squatting in an otherwise abandoned town in the same general region as the Earth portal, though not the exact town he had seen when he'd come through, for reasons not apparent to Cato. He was pretty sure it *had* finished the quest, and since it was by itself he had no idea what was keeping it there.

Two others were more understandable. One was a crab-person and the other was an insect-person, and they had with them a gaggle of lower ranks of the same species. Much like the rat Bismuth, they'd each taken over one of the System towns, which meant they'd displaced the natives. While the towns weren't large, none of the other System settlements were built to absorb extra population. The overflow was obvious, with lizard people packed into some neighboring houses, or camping in the courtyards of some of the System-granted mansions assigned to the higher ranks. When the weather turned, those accommodations would go from poor to terrible.

The last of the Bismuths was simply wandering around on the same long strip of mountainous continent where Cato had launched himself into space. It looked like nothing so much as a bird centaur, totaling eight limbs with the wings, though much smaller than either a horse or a human. Despite the surveillance that Cato had in place, he had no idea what that particular one was doing either. It had killed one of his light scouts and so presumably had completed the quest, but had stuck around to explore the snow-covered mountains in a leisurely flight.

With luck, the Sydeans would be able to convince most of them to leave without Cato needing to bring his orbital weapons systems to bear. Though some might well deserve it, since he doubted they'd been very gentle in ejecting the owners of the houses they were squatting in. Though if Cato was forced to intervene, the houses wouldn't exist at all.

It was a shame that he couldn't be as precise with his use of force as System folks, but orbital bombardment was the only way he had of matching the esoteric reality that the System created. As the ranks went up, he'd have to escalate that force, and at some point the consequence would be devastating to anyone and anything nearby. The dungeons would be an even greater problem, as he couldn't bombard them directly, but he had some tools to address that when it finally came to it. Which it wouldn't on Sydea, fortunately.

He'd still have to destroy the dungeons, though, which would require some disposable frames. There was no point in risking anyone with but a single body and a single life in a dungeon collapse. Or any of the fighting, in a sense, since it was fundamentally Cato's war, but it was

also the Sydean's planet. He didn't want to turn them into some sort of kept species, either in his mind or theirs, but that wasn't likely.

If there was one thing that anyone who lived under the System knew how to do, it was fight.