

Chapter 3 – Caves and Ruins

Cato loped over the savannah at something close to one hundred miles per hour, able to really let loose now that he had flat ground. Every hour or so he planted a seed at a river or oasis, where they could bury into the mud and suck in water to try and restock on deuterium, searching for the hidden gems of heavy hydrogen sometimes found in life's favored solvent. After encountering the rodent pair he was more aware that something really potent could swoop down and flatten him, and it was better to have more backups than fewer. Besides which, when the System reorganized itself around the missing anchor, having a huge number of zones to check was better.

He knew that wasn't sufficient, of course. Anyone with a map and the willingness to watch the System updates would be able to chart his course and possibly intercept him. Which was why he needed to muddy the waters, and make it look like he was going in multiple directions at once.

While he wasn't as much of a genius as the tinkerers back on Titan, Cato had learned to be a bit of a dab hand at genetic manipulation over the course of the Earth conflict. It didn't hurt that the bioweapon came with its own chemical programming mechanisms to let him adjust some of the available genetic sequences. It wasn't like a full interface, which would have to wait until he was out of the System, but between that and the very basic neural engrams he could give them simple instructions rather than installing a full copy of himself.

Currently brewing in a pocket on his back were a quartet of very stealthy fliers, which would travel at angles to where Cato was headed and drop more seeds. Considering they were disposable, they were as light on the metallic elements as possible, but Cato really needed to find a cave to see if he couldn't leech some reserves of selenium and ytterbium. Tantalum and tungsten would have been nice too, but those were even less likely.

Creating all that biomass didn't come for free, but he had a certain amount of material kindly generated by two rodents, and it wasn't too hard to take big bites out of passing trees, and stones, or guzzle down a few hundred gallons of water. Bioweapon metabolism was frighteningly efficient relative to normal biology, mostly because it relied on hydrogen and deuterium for energy and could use almost anything for its elemental composition, but he still needed to replenish mass. The special System materials, like those that composed armor and weapons, were practically useless considering the effort it took to extract them.

With the System's pawns distracted and misdirected by the scope of the quest, he could spare some attention for the genuinely alien world of Sydea. Not that he had any idea how much of the flora and fauna was native; when the System had come to Earth a huge chunk of the native ecology had simply collapsed. A few hobbyists out by Venus had the surveys and genetic samplings to reseed it, but fixing up the planet's ruined ecosystems would take longer than pushing the System off in the first place — assuming it got done at all. They were all volunteers and there was enough bad blood between Earth and Venus that nobody might bother.

The tall golden grass was probably native considering it seemed adapted for variant light conditions, a match for the behavior of the binary pair in the sky above. The big, beetle-like grazers wandering through the plains seemed less so, but with the weird alterations from System magic there was no telling. Cato knew at least three people who would have had a field

day, but none of them were silly enough to send versions of themselves through a magical portal to a place where proper technology didn't actually work.

Topping a rise, the replacement for the destroyed sub-brain – one responsible for locomotion – finally came back online, so Cato decided to finally get some sleep. He didn't need it physically, as the neural lattice that supported his gestalt flushed itself fairly regularly, but it did serve to put punctuation around periods of time and helped integrate experiences. Cato hadn't been base human for a very long time, but the architecture was still roughly the same — and by design. Anything else resulted in something that could not be called human, as postbiologicals had found out the hard way.

Of course, there was no need to actually risk anything creeping up on him, so he set the warframe to keep going and framejacked himself to maximum for the sleep period. Total downtime, perhaps three minutes and five miles. Though aside from keeping a close eye on the surroundings, Cato wasn't doing much with his uptime. He had no additional resources to leverage, and with a lack of anything actionable he found he had time to actually reflect on what he was doing.

Normally when he was at an impasse he'd bounce ideas off Luna Secundus herself, one of the few great giga-AIs scattered about the solar system. After all, Cato was hardly some great strategist. Like everyone who took part in the so-called Anti-System War, or the No Fun Allowed War, he was basically a civilian. There were certainly forces that would have prosecuted the war with far more expertise and alacrity, like Enceladus. That particular AI had converted the entire Saturnian moon it was named after to weapons and computing substrate and Cato was completely certain it had been anonymously supplying occasional wargaming simulations, but it hadn't actually bestirred itself.

Nor had many other forces within the Solar System. The general consensus among most of the outsystem polities was that Earth had got what it deserved, which Cato could hardly blame them for, but he'd been born well after the War of Outsystem Independence and he personally had friends on Earth. The planet had its problems but that was true everywhere, and he'd even spent a while in the various simulated worlds. The fond memories of his time there were all that remained though, as all those places had been erased in the System's advent.

Unfortunately, he didn't have a moon-sized AI riding shotgun. Aside from himself, the best he had was a hyper-compressed database loaded onto a crystalline pseudo-diamond embedded in his spine. It wasn't something the System's physics would ruin, like semiconductors and superconductors and industrial microtech, but rather an inert rock that lacked vulnerable mechanisms or properties. He was stuck with biotech, like the fliers that were just finalizing as he arrived at another oasis.

It would have been inaccurate to call the creations birds, for they only bore a faint resemblance to things with feathers and beaks. They were closer to a cross between a bat and an albatross, covered with chromatophores to make themselves difficult to spot, and capable of eating practically anything. More importantly, capable of flying high, quickly, and for very long distances.

The caul they had been constructed in retracted – gestated in was probably more proper, but these were closer to machines than animals – and they launched themselves into the air with enough speed to get clear of the more predatory creatures that called the oasis home. Cato

had a link with them for a short distance, but the moment they passed out of range they'd be independent, with very simple behaviors. Three of them had a track they'd fly based on the map, scavenging foliage and dropping seeds into bodies of water at intervals. Given any trouble at all they'd self-destruct, though sadly Cato wouldn't know if that happened. The last was meant as his eyes in the sky, to keep him from running into trouble. The bird he'd converted had ended up being destroyed by his conflict with the rats, but it would have been out of place on the plains anyway.

For himself, he had to continue north and west until he hit the ocean. Given the speed he was maintaining, that'd happen sooner rather than later, but there was still a swath of inhabited area he had to get through. The savannah itself was technically the [Golden Grass Resource Zone], and he'd spotted a few parties gathering said resources, but it was still quite sparsely populated.

That was fine. He really couldn't afford to encounter any more natives anyway.

Onswa Ramik was always of two minds when he met with Arene. While he ruled Sydea – ignoring the System God, which worked in mysterious ways far beyond the ken of mortals – most of the actual governance was done by people like Arene, and when they came to him it was always with problems. Nobody ever visited him for social calls, it was only ever about business.

On the other hand, Arene was one of the most spectacular specimens of the female sex to grace the surface of Sydea. She'd come into her power early, making Platinum years ago, and her horns maintained the glossy sharpness of youth even though her muzzle had the shape of a mature woman. Her scales were a marvelously complex pattern of orange and red, like leaping flames, and then there was that tail. *That tail.* Every single time he saw her he had to strangle the temptation to make a bid for her attentions. If Arene didn't kill him, his wife surely would.

So he had to content himself with looking.

"I'm starting to get damned tired of seeing this quest in the System list," Arene said as she dropped heavily into the chair across from him, and she didn't have to specify which quest she meant. The Global Defense Quest had been sitting there for days, visible to everyone and tempting anyone on-planet who thought they had even a faint chance of accomplishing it. "Why won't it resolve already? Gives me the creeps."

"Right there with you," Onswa agreed, turning and opening the drinks cabinet. The System-provided Planetary Administrator office was fairly opulent, all Gold rank materials. The fine carpet, the polished slab of wood that was the desk, the crystalline windows, the carved furniture and glittering overhead lights. The drinks, however, were something that he'd paid his own essence for and generally considered a worthwhile investment. He poured one shot of the Platinum-rank liquor for himself and another for Arene, then sighed.

"I have to say I'm tempted myself, but I really don't need more Skills," he said. Onswa still delved dungeons to keep his hand in, but many of the aether-oriented combat Skills that had brought him to mid-Platinum went unused the rest of the time. He couldn't really rank up without going off-planet, and even if he did just the costs of being higher rank would require additional off-planet trips. Sydea couldn't sustain anything higher than Platinum in the long term.

“I went for a look,” Arene said, which didn’t surprise him. “Either the thing is better at hiding than anything I’ve seen before, or the System is a damned liar.” Onswa flinched at the blasphemy, but Arene continued on without a pause. “I couldn’t find any presence at all. There was clearly *something* there at some point though — a team called the Gosruk Guardians are gone. New Golds.” Onswa grimaced, but she wasn’t done. “Then a pair of Tornok Clan brothers showed up. Killed *six more* of our Golds while supposedly patrolling the area.”

Onswa growled. Most people on Sydea wouldn’t recognize the Tornok Clan name, but anyone who’d been offworld was familiar. They were a large and powerful family and had people in ranks all the way up to Alum. Sydea was generally too much of a backwater for them to be interested, but the last [Portal Staging Area] quests had been broadcast far enough to bring in a number of outsiders. At least, before the portal had abruptly closed and the staging area itself was removed.

Trying to deal with members of the Tornok Clan would be a political nightmare, assuming that Arene could have applied sufficient force. She probably could have — she had reached Platinum so quickly for a very good reason — but only if she was in the area.

“Where are they now?” He reflexively brought up the map and the statistics that his Planetary Administrator role granted him. It didn’t show where everyone on the planet was at every moment, but he could at least figure if there were high rankers in the region. It had already helpfully shifted to show the area in question, zooming in and starting to list off individuals.

“That’s the interesting thing. They vanished around the time the Azure Canyon Dungeon collapsed.” Arene bared her teeth in a humorless smile. “Seems they bit off more than they could handle. Which makes me doubt that *I* could take it, whatever it is.”

“At least we can thank our invader for that much,” Onswa said, taking a sip of the fiery whiskey. Arene followed suit, knocking back the whole glass and then letting out a long sigh.

“Yeah, but my nephew’s kid and her husband were delving Azure Canyon at the time. Water skills, and all that.” Arene’s words were neutral, but her posture was stiff.

“Oh, gods,” Onswa said, leaning over to refill her glass. That particular vintage was eye-wateringly expensive, but he wasn’t about to stint Arene at the moment. “I’m sorry. There’s no chance they got out?” Even as he spoke he prodded the System Interface, which helpfully shifted down to Azure Canyon, though the display was sluggish as it approached the area where the dungeon had once been.

“I’ve got people combing the area for *any* survivors, and there’s sure signs of a fight, but no bodies or anything.” Arene reached out to take the glass, staring into it. “One reason I came to you.” Onswa nodded and watched as the interface slowly wrote names onto its screen. Finally it stopped, and Arene shook her head.

“I’m sorry,” he said again. “Maybe I should deal with it myself so we don’t lose anyone else to this invader,” he continued, pulling up the quest next to the map. It would have been far better if one of the upper golds had managed to get the reward, someone who could really use it, but it seemed like that was yet another opportunity for his people that was not to be. The dungeon destruction was another worry, and in many ways worse than the deaths of his people. Without

those, the planet would waste away — both from diminishing essence and less item income in general.

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

“If you can *find* the damned thing,” Arene pointed out sourly, taking another swallow. “Half a continent is a large place to search.”

“It’s that or ask for outside help,” Onswa grumbled. Arene nodded, her muzzle wrinkling in distaste. Inviting a foreign rank above Platinum to deal with Sydea’s problems was not likely to go well. In no world would they escape that with a debt they could handle, and most of the high Rankers were likely to cause more damage than the invader.

The quest blinked, then updated.

“Oh, hells,” Onswa said, staring at it. Arene summoned her own version, looked at it, then groaned.

[Global Defense Quest! Destroy the Incursion: Recommended Rank: High Gold. Reward: B-Tier Skill. Locations: Southeastern Coren, Northeastern Coren, Mosaw City, Korel Town, Mosul Town.]

“How the hell did it spread so fast?” Onswa demanded. Arene lashed her tail, a popping snap that rattled the windows of the tower-top office.

“It has to know it’s being tracked,” Arene said darkly. “I don’t know how it’s fooling the system, but I bet all of those but one are fakes.”

“Fakes or not, we have to do *something*. I’m going to hear screaming from every mayor on Coren in about thirty seconds.” Onswa stood. “I’ll take Mosaw, you take the towns. We need to see to our people first.”

“Especially since the report from [Gosruk Town] said that it somehow imitated one of the golds,” Arene agreed, following his example. “If there’s even a chance of people being replaced...”

“Yes,” Onswa said, summoning his armor and fixing his Planetary Administrator badge to it, which would let him access most of the functions while he was out and about. “Let’s hope we’re lucky.”

Cato slowed as he entered the [Great Southern Ruins Conflict Zone], where the savannah gave way to rolling hills. The looming, overgrown structures that gave the Zone its name were nestled in a pocket of those hills, right on the border between flat land and sloped. It looked to him like the remains of a reasonably industrial city, though with the System it was impossible to know. Perhaps it had sprung full formed from nothingness, but if Earth’s integration was any judge, the System preferred to reuse existing landmarks.

The entire city was made of swooping domes raised up on big stone pylons, elevating it above a no-longer-extant flood plain, and damage to the pylons showed it was some kind of iron-reinforced concrete. That didn’t *necessarily* mean a heavily industrialized society, since the Romans had concrete and could have reinforced it with metal bars if they wanted, but it was a

pretty good guess. There were rusted streaks here and there that probably once belonged to flagpoles and the like, but might possibly have been electrical connections. It was hard to tell with the state of the ruins, and of course the entire thing was crawling with monsters.

Unlike the [Southern Jungle Conflict Zone], where everything was just normal jungle beasts upscaled to heroic proportions, or even the savannah he'd just crossed with its herds of meat animals, the things that inhabited the ruins were clear System abominations. Each of them was vaguely humanoid, scaled like the natives of Sydea but with flat, eyeless faces that were practically split in two by massive jaws filled with sharp teeth. They also lacked legs; their bodies simply stopped at the torso, and they moved around with massively oversized arms, climbing and clambering up and around the domes.

What was truly creepy was the elite version of the same, which was identical save for size. Here and there an enormous versions of the legless things, head tall enough to be level with the domes, hand-walked or dragged itself through the gaps between buildings. The scale could only be truly appreciated through his flying spies high above the ruins. Watching it as he approached, it became clear the big ones moved on a regular patrol route, emerging from and vanishing into a huge central dome in the middle of the ruins. The smaller ones stuck to individual buildings, making them discrete encounters.

Because of course there were people fighting in the Conflict Zone. That's what it was for, after all, and from the air he could spot three different parties of natives working their way through the city. Judging from the skills on display, none of them were of particularly high rank. They didn't fly or teleport, their attacks were simple-looking, and there were long intervals of perfectly mundane cut and thrust between them.

So the ruins were a fairly low level zone, which struck Cato as some sort of vicious morbid joke being played on the Sydeans. Behold, it seemed to say, here was what you constructed without the System, and now they are forever in ruins, forever a battleground against some twisted mutant things inhabiting what remains of your civilization. See how weak it all was, that it is only fit for the least of warriors. He found it hard to believe it was coincidence.

On a hunch he veered closer to one of the buildings, close enough to take a passing bite out of one of the monsters. Not for fun, certainly, but because that was the only way to get a genetic analysis. The fact that his teeth sheared through the monster flesh as if it were paper was further support for this zone being low rank; flesh became as tough as stone, as steel, or beyond normal material limits at higher ranks.

He kept to the city fringe, seeing no reason to go deeper, while the analysis worked. It didn't take very long for his hunch to be confirmed, the chemistry doing its job and matching chromosome structures. Sydean natives used a slightly different set of amino acids – and thus entirely different chemical chains – but the principles were remarkably similar to Earth biology.

The monsters were within a margin of error of the Sydean peoples. Best as he could tell, they were the same species, just twisted by System nonsense into horrible mockeries of the scaled folk. Cato had no idea whether the things were in some way intelligent, or even worse, were in some way degenerate descendants or distorted reproductions of the original inhabitants of the city.

Cato mused on whether it would be best to simply nuke the city from orbit or if, once the System was gone, the inhabitants would be returned to something normal. Which would be its own sort of horror, not to mention a logistical nightmare. Cato had known that he'd be dealing with problems on that scale when he'd made his choice to go through the portal, but seeing each piece of the puzzle and knowing it was one of thousand or millions was another thing entirely.

[Global Defense Quest! Destroy the Incursion: Recommended Rank: High Gold. Reward: B-Tier Skill. Locations: Southeastern Coren, Northeastern Coren, Mosaw City, Korel Town, Mosul Town.]

The quest update jolted him from his consideration. It seemed that the System was starting to recover from the disruption, with the towns resolving first. Judging by the report of being in both south and northeastern Coren, his little fliers had spread far indeed, so even when it all come back he should be well covered. Of course, he still wasn't out of danger. The uppermost Ranks could search that easily, but until the System upgraded the quest to an equivalent rank they wouldn't be interested. Assuming they were even available.

He veered away from the ruins, which was a small zone and so not one he wanted to caught in, and instead skirted around toward the farther hills. According to the map the broad stretch of hilly terrain was unfortunately a border zone and not something he could really avoid, so the best thing to do was to cross it as fast as possible. There were even cave entrances he'd spotted from the air, so there might even be an opportunity to replenish some of his metal stocks.

Considering the lack of nearby water and volcanic features, the positions of the caves made little sense, but that was just what the System did. Especially since he noted that he'd crossed into the [Low Hills Resource Zone], so it was probably deliberately designed to be a place to gather ore.

Though what the System considered ore was generally rather surreal. Nature didn't actually deposit elemental metals in such small quantities, especially not in small nodes rather than proper veins. Not that he would complain if he could take it for himself, given his lack of any proper extraction infrastructure.

Suddenly the System quest updated again, this time scrolling out with dozens of Zones, the disruption finally settling and the zones updating. With so many he would have thought that his actual location would have been well shrouded, but a few moments after the update there was a sudden bloom of fire high in the air over the ruins. Enormous wings of flame, each one a hundred feet across, extended outward from the fireball, followed by one of the locals bursting forth into the air. Through his flier he could see that she had flame-colored scales, which was quite on-brand, and fine red chain over dark orange leather for armor.

The threat processes threw him into framejack again, though this time he could have done it himself. The new arrival was very obviously a high ranker like the rats he'd fought before, and it took him a moment to conclude why she'd shown up just at that instant. The zone borders weren't clear and his fliers couldn't actually see the updates, so he had tried to err on the side of caution to keep them in the proper zone — but one of them seemed to have somehow clipped the ruins zone, just for a moment. Any lummox could realize that meant that either someone in the area had fulfilled the quest there — or what they were looking for had just moved through a very small zone.

The elite was high in the air, obviously surveying the surroundings, so Cato bolted for the nearest cave entrance to get out of sight and hopefully make his way into one of the great underground zones that caves usually led to. His only other options were staying still and hoping his camouflage held, or trying to outrun the elite's perceptions — and he didn't like either of those. He barreled into the entrance, which was about wide enough for two of him, the acoustic mapping generating a labyrinth of twisting passages.

At full framejack, he had the luxury of studying the layout and plotting a route — especially since some of the passages were far too small for the warframe. It would be highly embarrassing to be trapped because he took a wrong turn. He had a course mapped out before he was out of line of sight from the entrance, a single leap taking him over a low-rank party hauling sleds of mined ore. The wind of his passage whipped at their cloaks as he blurred overhead, then he was past them and bounding off the walls as he headed down.

In accelerated time he had the luxury of studying his surroundings properly as he tried to consider every last detail. The grey-white granite was flecked with minerals and, here and there, glowing crystals embedded in the walls to keep it from being pitch black. There was no miniscule threading of random passages leading nowhere, no slippery mud and uneven footing, no collapses or segments that needed bracing. Most of the passages were more than high and wide enough that those traveling didn't need to duck down or squeeze by. Despite lacking any sort of toolmarks, it was clearly unnatural to anyone who knew what caves were truly supposed to be like. Perhaps to those who delved its depths for raw materials it was nice enough, but he found it to be an affront. Possibly because he'd specialized in exogeology for a while, or maybe just because he was prejudiced against obvious System artifice.

He bounced down a near-vertical shaft, claws tearing shards of rock from the walls, and had almost reached bottom when a shockwave of searing air sent his acoustic mapping into overdrive. The elite that he'd glimpsed was after him, and the impact of her arrival generated a high-resolution picture of her pausing briefly at the party before skirting around and diving into the passages. Once again his system flushed his neural lattice with battle chemicals to keep him from panicking, and Cato launched himself into the next passage.

For someone as powerful as the lady lizard on his heels, his best bet was something like the Sneeze of Doom. He hadn't nearly replenished his deuterium reserves yet, but he still had enough for one or two of them — if he got the chance. But this wasn't like the rat things, for a number of reasons. This was *her* world, she was meant to be here, and besides which she'd gone out of her way to avoid harming the low-rank party. Clearly she wasn't a psychopath.

Dealing with her nonlethally would be absurdly difficult, and even if he wanted to kill her, the lady was a fire user. She probably ran hot enough to cook his biomatter before it got the chance to perform its quantum confinement trick and force the miracle of nuclear fusion. But the cave system was enormous, so he might have some luck simply running.

Cato went down and down, taking sharp turns while the warframe ran flat out, barreling past crystalline formations and dodging oversized cave worms or titanic ants. He was moving far too fast for any of them to react, let alone attack, though such things offered no real danger. The threat was behind him, his thermal senses setting off all kinds of warnings. The rock above him trembled at a strange high frequency, and he dodged to the side just before a bar of white-hot fire punched through the ceiling and the floor, nearly overloading his thermal senses.

The lady had managed to target him and hurl her fire spell through a hundred-something feet of solid rock. Cave-riddled rock, more accurately, but it was hardly an open field. At least it was something he *could* dodge. The warframe armor was extremely heat resistant, but that attack exceeded all the limits and would cut through him just as easily as the stone.

He leapt into an open shaft, descending several hundred feet at something faster than terminal velocity by pushing off the ceiling. The warframe's musculature strained as ten tons of mass slammed into the base of the shaft before accelerating off through another passage, religiously following the path the acoustic mapping showed. The ceiling ahead of him vibrated, and he was forced to reroute suddenly to avoid the bar of white that swept across the passage ahead.

The pursuit drove him ever deeper, circling through a massive network of passages and stirring up the inhabitants in the wake of his passage. He couldn't tell exactly where the fire lady was except for when one of the bars of white fire melted through the rock and gave him an angle. For the moment he seemed to be maintaining distance, but not by much. Even if he didn't want to kill her, he absolutely wasn't willing to be killed himself and at Platinum she could *probably* survive a cave collapse.

Yet another lance of intense fire forced him to launch himself into the air, jumping off walls to stay out of the path, and with a sudden report a huge section of the cave ahead gave way. With a roar, uncounted tons of rock crumbled into open passages below, sending clouds of dust and debris billowing upward and drawing alarmed screams and cries from the animals living within. Cato landed on a pile of cracked and broken stone and quickly half-dug, half-shoved his way into a partly obscured passage, finally having an idea of how to be rid of his pursuer.

He began painting the cuts made by the lady's flame jet into the map of passages he'd been making with his acoustic sensing, along with her predicted movements and timings. Each of the cuts was too small for a person to pass through, being maybe six inches diameter, so she was more or less forced to follow the cave's windings. Even if she cut out a hole, it'd still be choked with debris and the fire beams were likely at least a little limited to begin with.

Cato hurtled down the nearest vertical shaft, then fled back upward through a far shallower passage, by that point at least a half-mile down thanks to the shortcut-shafts scattered about. The entire map was a sort of best-guess, but he was pretty certain of his path. He was exceedingly grateful that the warframe didn't get tired, because running flat out over rock and rubble and oddly-angled terrain was exhausting enough mentally. Even with sub-brains dedicated to making sure he didn't trip over his own six feet, at full charge and bouncing off the angles and drops he had a tough time keeping himself coordinated.

Once again a bar of incandescent fury punched through from behind him, but this time he was just a fraction too slow and it clipped the end of his tail and his rear right leg. They were instantly severed, registering all kinds of alarms from the warframe and forcing Cato to go along on five limbs instead of six, while the biomatter remaining behind self-destructed.

"Ow, *dammit*," he said to himself, even if it didn't actually hurt. The wound sealed itself instantly, sub-brains redistributing weight and gait, but he was still slower than before. He had to hope he could implement his idea before the elite finished the job.

He juke'd into a side passage, absolutely flattening a hapless cave toad the size of a cow and only barely managing to avoid another beam attack. This time it was from below, and according

to his map he only needed a few more for the cuts to add up to some serious problems. Cato pulled some of his deuterium reserves into a tendril and began preparing another Sneeze of Doom.

Two more cuts, and if anything the impossible bars of flame burned even *hotter*, leaving rivulets of molten rock dripping all over the caves. She was gaining on him, but he was ready. Between the natural passages and the huge cuts made by the beams of fire, the whole cave system was unstable. Or at least, unstable *enough* that several billion joules worth of explosive would make a right mess of it.

Cato spat the dangerous snot onto the wall just in front of another vertical drop where a waterfall plunged down into a shallow pool, then hurled himself into the chasm. He hit with a splash, then clambered into another passage, one lined with luminous grass and small crystalline flowers. Then time was up, and he tucked in his tendrils and remaining limbs as a very small – relatively, anyway – fusion explosion shocked through the cave system.

Superheated gasses carried on a pressure wave sent him shooting through the confined spaces, bouncing him off rock walls and through hanging formations like some kind of bizarre projectile. The roar of the explosion echoed and grew as the expanding shock front fractured and broke already weakened areas of rock, starting a chain reaction of collapse. Millions of tons of rock both above and below rumbled and ground together, the network of caves crushing down into each other. Jets of displaced air hissed between slabs and sent more fragments flying in the chaos.

Cato smashed into one particularly large chunk of rock and clung to it with monomolecular-edged claws, instructing his armor plates to reinforce themselves as he tried to dig in and stabilize himself in the fall. He'd made sure he was at the edge of the collapsing area, but there was no way to judge such a thing accurately. Not with the processing power available to the warframe.

His thermal senses caught a massive bloom in the distance, leaking through the tons of moving rock. The flame lizard-woman, performing some sort of skill in an effort to ward off the immensity of the crushing rock. It probably helped, but not for long, the bloom vanishing as the collapse ground to a groaning, clattering halt.

With all the strength of a hydraulic press, Cato pulled clawed his way out of the rubble, finding himself at the bottom of a jagged dome, where fires still flared from the cave entrances and the remains of luminescent moss or crystals lay in tatters. He took a moment to orient himself, turning to the lower passageway heading even further down where he could lose himself in deeper zones — then turned back.

Sure, the flame lady had been trying to kill him, but it was tough to blame her. After all, he *was* an invader and she had no real reason to distrust the System. Considering she was a native she was probably one of the official guardians of the planet in question and if she died there might be problems even he didn't want to deal with. It was bad enough that he'd been forced to harm the natives on his way, and that he'd be forced to harm more in the future. If he could save someone that deserved it, he would.

He was fairly certain she wasn't actually dead. If the warframe had been able to survive the cave collapse, so could a high rank System person, but being trapped in an airless coffin might

be too much even for someone like that. He located her tomb easily enough, as it was still radiating heat from below the rock pile remnants of what had become an enormous open cavern, and used his acoustic mapping to find the best path to dig in. Rock flew as monomolecular claws went to work, and in about thirty seconds he breached an inner chamber, causing smoldering lava to flare up again as fresh air entered it.

Her skill had melted all the stone about her, which saved her from being directly crushed, but she was still entombed and didn't seem to be moving. Cato knew he'd curse himself from here to the hereafter if she was shamming, but he reached in and pulled her out. Merely molten rock was within the bounds of what the warframe's armor could handle. Also, what the lizard person's armor could handle, since it wasn't even glowing despite the lava coating it.

Cato laid her out on the ground and wiped her face clear — and incidentally snagged a small piece of scale for a genetic profile. Seeing that she was breathing, despite crushed limbs and torso and really everything, he turned and bolted. She was visibly healing even as he watched, and it would undo everything if he was still around when she awoke.