

## Chapter 4 – Under Land and Sea

Arene woke with a jolt, surging to her feet in a single instant, summoning her Skills and casting out her perceptions — but the thing was long gone. She wasn't even certain what to actually call it, since apparently the System didn't know. The only result [Appraise] had given her was just a blank query, not even a failed attempt.

She summoned a [Light], which took the form of a torch flame given the influence of her other [Skills], and apprised herself and her surroundings. She ached all over, but even that was rapidly diminishing as her Platinum-rank constitution healed away the last of the damage from the collapse. A reflexive [Clean] removed all the soot and dirt, but some specks of hardened stone remained. She'd have to deal with that later.

Above her were faint lights glimmering here and there from tunnel entrances, and below her was debris. There was a tunnel at her feet, and a glance showed her that it reached down into a chamber of still-cooling rock. Obviously the creature had made an effort to retrieve her after [Incendiary Scales] had failed to ward off half a mountain falling on her. Yet it had pulled her out, possibly saving her life, and just left her. She didn't quite understand why she was still alive.

[Quest fulfilled: Investigate the Incursion. Reward: 1 B-Tier Skill. Notice: you cannot complete this Quest multiple times.]

Arene grimaced as she read the System notification, finding it almost insulting. She'd at the very least laid eyes on it, and even wounded it, but she wouldn't really consider her attempt *successful*. The only reason she'd gone after it was that it was clearly dangerous, so the reward made her failure even more sour.

The Skill token popped into her hands, and she rolled it across her knuckles, wishing that it was something she could give to others, but this wasn't one of the rare unlocked Skill tokens. It was something that could only be spent on her, so she went ahead and used it.

[Choose to learn a new Skill, or upgrade a current Skill]

At this point her build was well set and her useful Skills as upgraded as they could get. Each rank someone advanced earned them four Skill slots, with the Skills reaching the maximum power of that rank. She had [Appraise], [Light], [Clean], and [Scribe] slotted in at Copper, while Silver was full of resistances. Gold and Platinum followed the classic rule: one perception, one offensive, one defensive, one movement.

The only things she could still upgrade were D-tier [Scribe] or the C-tier [Light], and neither of them would show much useful improvement from their rarity bonus. With a sigh she chose to upgrade [Scribe], since she found herself doing far more paperwork than she'd prefer — which was to say, more than none — and then reached out to her Platinum movement Skill, [Wings of Khuroon]. Even now she didn't really know what a Khuroon was, or why it was connected to wings and fire and teleportation, but she was hardly going to complain about the effects.

The world turned into dancing flames, rushing by as she seized one particular spot that was close and far at the same time. A moment later she burst out into the air above Mosaw City, where Onswa was still trying to track down the intruder. One of the intruders. She knew now

that it was irrelevant; the thing she'd seen, if only barely, was not something that could hide in a city.

Her great wings swept the air as she dove down to where his bright beacon registered to her essence senses in the distinct not-flavor of aether. He was pacing around an intersection, but he stopped and lifted his hand to greet her as she arrived. By the time she touched down virtually all her injuries had vanished – grievous as they had been, they were all mundane

“Find it, then?” Onswa didn't sound joyful, since the quest was still active.

“Something, anyway,” she told him, the bared claws of her feet scratching against the smooth stone of the upgraded roads. It was technically better than the dirt of the lower-rank villages, but she had never really liked the feel of it under her feet. “Some sort of beast, hard to describe what it looked like. I got exactly one glimpse of it and it appraised as nothing, so I don't think the *System* knows what it is.”

“Looks like you got it, though.” Onswa gestured at her bedraggled appearance. Arene glanced down at the spots of solidified rock on her armor and sighed, brushing at them ineffectually. When she had time she'd have to visit an armor pylon to make sure it was properly cleaned.

“I didn't, actually,” she told him. “The thing dropped half a mountain on top of us both. Then it dug me out and — nothing. I wasn't even conscious, and it could have done anything, but it just let me be.” Arene was happy that she remained alive and intact, but it bothered her more that the anomaly's behavior didn't make sense.

“Maybe your rank had something to do with it?” Onswa suggested, muzzle wrinkled in thought. “Platinum isn't Bismuth, but most people don't want to risk the consequences of killing one of us, either.” He looked around at the streets, where people had come to a halt to gawk at the Planetary Administrator and the Flame of Sydea. “Perhaps we should move this to a more private venue.”

Despite the seriousness of the situation, Arene almost laughed. The man was so clearly besotted with her, yet at the same time retained enough presence of mind enough not to try. Which was fortunate, since she had no interest in him and was friends with his wife, but his words still ended up sounding more suggestive than they actually were.

“Yeah, you aren't going to find anything here. What I saw was the size of one of those Courser beasts from the [Northern Volcano Conflict Zone] in Merdea. Whatever is triggering the quest is some kind of diversion.”

That wouldn't even fit into the streets here,” Onswa agreed. “Back to the office, then?”

“Might as well,” Arene said, and Onswa nodded as he invoked his odd aether travel Skill. His form blurred as he faded out over the course of a few seconds, like mist in the sun, and Arene followed with her own travel Skill. Invoking [Wings of Khuroon] at Platinum level so many times in quick succession was a hefty drain and she'd have to wait for her reserves to refill, but she certainly wasn't going to go after the intruder again right away. She stepped through that bright, fiery world and reappeared in the skies above the capital city of Kalhan, where Onswa's office took up the top of the *System* nexus tower.

She landed on the balcony and stepped inside, finding Onswa already there and rummaging through the drink cabinet. Normally Arene didn't particularly indulge, especially not twice in one

day, but she was still ever so slightly shaky from her near brush with death. Things hadn't gone that wrong for her in a very long time.

"The thing that bothers me most," she said, taking a crystal tumbler from Onswa, filled with something pink and sparkling. "It's smart. Has to be."

"If it's masking its presence over such a wide area, I agree," Onswa remarked, taking a sip of the pink stuff and then wrinkling his muzzle. "I can't remember any beast or dungeon monster that showed awareness of its own System standing."

"It's faintly possible there's a group of them, I suppose," Arene said, also tasting the fizzy drink and finding it to be almost painfully sweet and somehow spicy. It did have quite the kick though. "But you'd expect there to be more traces. Perhaps *one* such — you know, we need an actual name for it."

"Ahruskian," Onswa suggested. "The quest implies it came through before the portal closed."

"Which really throws a light on the reports we heard out of the expeditionary forces," Arene said darkly. Most of them had been from off-planet, as powerful interests had crowded out many of the Sydean teams. Especially as time went on and the required rank jumped upward all the way to Azoth.

"That portal was a fucking disaster," Onswa growled. A new world opening up *should* have enriched Sydea and given its people the chance to rank up quickly, to improve the essence density of Sydea itself. Instead, it had been taken over by offworld interests nearly immediately, and within a year Sydeans were effectively locked out of the portal staging area.

"No argument here," Arene agreed. She'd been too busy dealing with rogue high-Rankers traipsing all over Sydea to go through herself, but it seemed to have been for the best. If that thing was indicative of what was on the other side, it was no wonder the rank kept jumping upward. "Anyway, I don't think the Ahruskian is here just to cause chaos. It's got a plan and a goal. If it just wanted to kill people, it has had plenty of chances. I watched it run straight past a Low Silver group that it could have flattened with a thought." She slapped her hand on Onswa's desk in demonstration. "But it didn't."

"That just makes it worse," Onswa sighed. "If it's got a specific target, that might be a vulnerability we can exploit so we can deal with it ourselves. If it starts just causing havoc, though, we might have to appeal to a higher rank."

Both of them winced. The cost needed to tempt a Bismuth or better to come to Sydea to fulfill a quest — and not just the System defense quest — would be ruinous.

"News of the global quest is going to spread eventually, unless you shut down the teleporters and blockade the portals," Arene pointed out. He did have the authority to do that as Planetary Administrator — though there would be consequences if it went on more than a few weeks.

"I think I just might," Onswa said, reaching over to touch the Administration Interface, a jewel set in the middle of his desk. It woke up with a happy-sounding chime, already projecting the interface for controlling the planetary portal and the few teleporters they had. "And if it is aiming to get off-planet, we can catch it there."

“Then we can try to track it down now that we have some idea where it is.” She glanced at the quest, which had updated with yet another location: [Rushing Depths Conflict Zone]. One of the enormous connecting zones, a confusing warren almost a mile beneath the surface, and not terrain either of them were familiar with. “Though I can’t say it seems likely.”

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Cato admired the massive caverns, full of flowing rivers, waterfalls, and enormous glowing fungi. It was absolutely gorgeous, if utterly unnatural. But that was only to be expected in a world altered by magic and System nonsense. There were glow-bugs the size of horses, eyeless wyrms that could match a freight train, and an entire ecosystem of matching scale. Plants, fish, bats, and even roving monsters of the sorts he’d seen in Azure Canyon, though upscaled to matching proportions.

Of course, a normal world wouldn’t have such a robust spread of plant and animal life in deep caves, nor lakes and rivers that suspiciously mimicked surface features rather than cutting narrow slots through solid rock. Despite its provenance, Cato was quite happy to take advantage of both the sheer amount of biomatter around and the glinting nodes of metals on the wall. He had repairs to make.

He saw no signs of anyone actually using the zone. In fact, more the reverse, as it seemed nearly every pack of beasts or monsters had an elite in it, implying it had been left to mature for quite some time. None of them were a match for him, even down a limb, so he was free to peel chunks from the ore nodes and fell oversized glowing mushrooms with little interference. Some of that was for mass to heal his injuries, but most of the metal was stockpiled for later use. He’d need some starting resources once he got off-planet.

While the molecular foundries went to work chemically separating and repurposing the elements, he restructured one of the tendrils on his back to take in water. Heavy water was no more common in the System than on Earth, so he needed to filter thousands of gallons to even begin to restock his supplies of deuterium. Since he needed to take time out to repair and restructure anyway, he might as well do that at the same time.

All those processes could go along without any interference from him, so he turned his attention to his passengers. The cocoons were doing their job, as none of the brains showed any signs of damage or chemical imbalance. Not even after the cave collapse. The artificial coma even kept them from dreaming, since anyone would have serious issue with the lack of sensory input and autonomic feedback.

He would have vastly preferred to simply map their neurons and biochemical signaling and virtualize them, but there were two good reasons not to. First, and most importantly, was that a lot of people did not like the concept of being transferred to software. Postbiologicals such as himself had a different attitude toward life, death, and the concept of self than those who were raised purely as meat, but that didn’t mean it was a better attitude. Arbitrarily ripping someone’s mind from their earthly clay and sticking it in a simulation or a frame was far worse than ripping off someone’s arm and sticking on a prosthesis just because he could.

Then there was, frankly, the fact that he just didn’t have the knowledge to do so. Given time he could figure it out, but a person was in fact more than just the neural patterns, and body feedback could drastically alter habits, personality, emotional stability, and even memory

retention. He had enough broad stroke information on their biochemistry to keep their neurons from overloading or shutting down, and to keep them anesthetized, but that was a fraction of the analysis he needed to simulate a healthy and happy situation for them.

Cato had sampled their organs and bones and had all that information stored away in one of his sub-brains, but without extensive simulation and actual testing he couldn't turn that into anything useful. The computational capacity of the warframe was not insignificant, but all the software normally used for that kind of thing was stored in the diamond in his spine, and really only ran on more conventional hardware. Fortunately, he did have access to the tools to adjust his *own* biology, so when he was satisfied there were no crises with regard to his passengers, he delved into his sub-brains for that very purpose.

The warframe came with a number of tools, including a chemical programming interface that Cato used to put together a rough and ready amphibious decoy. His fliers had done their jobs well, and it was only his carelessness that had resulted in someone coming to find him. It was clear that he'd been severely underestimating the competence and drive of the native System folk, simply because of his attitude toward them, and he needed to adjust that thinking before he made a more lethal mistake.

He had been making contingencies, of course, but he hadn't truly *believed* he needed them. That was something that needed to be corrected, and deep underground was a good place to start. Progress would be slower, as he had three dimensions to navigate rather than two, but it also meant it was easier to hide. No doubt there would still be people tracking the zones and looking for him, but the sheer scale worked in his favor.

Unlike with the fliers, he did not create his amphibians to leave seeds or give them the ability to reproduce themselves. Once he got himself established, broadcasting to things on or near the surface and shutting them down would be easy, but buried deep in a cave, with who knew how many twists and turns, they could easily stay completely out of contact range. If he wasn't careful, he could end up with versions of himself operating in an information blackout, and making decisions based on poor or outdated intelligence.

If he didn't have to worry about the greater implications of what he was doing, he wouldn't need to be nearly as careful. The bioweapon aspect of the warframe could get into some really nasty levels of self-replication and infiltration, but if he used them he'd have to deal with the consequences. Cato was determined to bring down the System, but he wasn't going to condemn planets full of innocent people to a writhing hellscape to do so.

The surface backups were as far as he was willing to go on self-replication for the moment, so he restricted himself to a small swarm of speedy, camouflaged and incredibly spiny creatures to swim and crawl through the caves. No doubt some of them would get eaten along the way, since he wasn't going to give them too much to defend themselves, but they all had self-destruct mechanisms to turn the potent biology into so much carbon goo.

If he could make them obviously poisonous, that would have been perfect, and by studying the biochemistry of the things around it wasn't too difficult to come up with some candidate chemicals. The problem was that such substances would not be protected by the neural static and would get assimilated by the System. Which meant that things like poison and disease resistance applied, and since his creations were just chemistry, they weren't too potent when it came to high rank creatures or people.

The same consideration applied to engineered plagues, had he been willing to use them. Which he wasn't, because he wasn't genocidal. That didn't mean he wasn't willing to create some toxins specifically tailored to individuals, which hopefully would be so potent that even the System would grant they should have some effect, even if it was just short-term incapacitation.

During all that housekeeping he spat out the remains of the armor and weapons from the two rat-things. While the system-jamming kept active enchantments from being used – at least he was pretty sure it did – the exotic materials created by System physics remained exotic. His molecular foundries had been able to make some headway at disassembling them with superacids, but he didn't have an excess of halogens and rare earth metals to keep at it and the raw materials, once dissolved, weren't too special anyway. At the molecular level they seemed to lose their special System-empowered essence and just became ordinary steel, albeit with interesting trace elements.

After he regrew his rear right foot, he unburied himself and began navigating through the vast cave system once again. His best guess was that he was at about sea level or just below, and it was entirely possible the underground zones stretched to the shore. If not, he was certain there was at least another exit. Either way, his decoys should spread out in every direction to obscure his actual location and direction. He really wished he could obscure himself even further, but unless he ran into another dungeon the best he could do was make the System quest's information less useful.

Just as on the surface, there was little point in moving at anything less than a full sprint, though he was forced to backtrack on more than one occasion even with his acoustic mapping. The [Rushing Depths Conflict Zone] seemed to sprawl over roughly three layers, with plenty of dead ends — or at least, dead ends to him. There were smaller, human-sized passages that branched off the larger caverns and connected them, but he couldn't squeeze through those.

Unlike the surface, many of the creatures relied on senses other than sight, so his camouflage wasn't quite as effective. He still avoided fighting with any of the denizens, especially the ones that outmassed him, but he often left groups of angry creatures or monsters in his wake. Sometimes they even chased him into another population, precipitating brawls between frogs and wyrms or mudfish sparking with electricity and frosted jellyfish floating through the air.

He dedicated a particular sub-brain to recording everything he saw and encoding it into chemical memory. Despite its obvious artifice, the underground habitat was quite striking and deserved to be saved somehow. Pushing the System off Sydea, let alone how many other worlds, was inevitably going to result in the destruction of true beauty, however twisted its origins. If he could, he wanted to keep at least some of it, as beauty deserved to be preserved for its own sake.

So deep underground, all he encountered were animals and monsters, with no real sign of civilized races. That seemed odd to him, that there was an entire zone that was essentially deserted, but at the same time the logistical difficulties of getting into and out of the caves were extensive for anyone of lower rank. Perhaps if there were more people, or the average ranks were higher, something like the [Rushing Depths Conflict Zone] would see more traffic, but as it was, he was essentially traveling through wilderness.

Another several days of travel brought him through two more Zones. By that point he'd built up a small army of outriders, little scouts that communicated with each other and with him to create

a large sensory band and incidentally trip any of the invisible zone boundaries that had been the problem before. That way any surprise teleports would find only a decoy, and not *him*.

Of course, once he had made such plans he didn't actually need them. The trip had been quiet, giving him the chance to scavenge more resources from the cave walls and available biomass. He was still missing some of the more exotic metals, but there were trace amounts of rare earths about and plenty of aluminum from gems. Though finding rubies in an iron vein made no sense whatsoever.

His progress was stopped by a huge brackish moon pool, at least twenty acres in size, which was claimed by an immense pseudo-crab – it seemed that carcinization was indeed universal – but which also seemed to lead out into the open ocean to judge by the acoustic returns and salt content in the air. Preferably he would slip past the boss mob, but to do that he needed to be properly aquatic so he hunkered down to make some alterations to the warframe.

A warframe didn't need to breathe, so becoming aquatic was a matter of optimizing for movement in the water. Musculature needed to be altered, the joints of his legs and feet shifted, and webs and fins grown to give him more control surface for movement in the water. His scales needed to be shifted to introduce cavitation effects, which would massively increase his speed and even his stealth. With less of a pressure wave, he wouldn't stir up as much interest.

He also had to beef up his nonvisual senses. The acoustic mapping brain had been doing a lot of work, but it was time to add active sonar and dedicate a sub-brain to that. Then there were things like electric potential, ionization, and water composition that were more important in a thick fluid than a thin one. It had been a long time since he'd used an aquatic frame, let alone one in something as lively as an inhabited body of water, but he hadn't completely forgotten the skills. The conversion took over a day, but he figured he had time with all the obfuscation his decoys were managing.

[Global Defense Quest! Destroy the Incursion: Recommended Rank: Platinum. Reward: Elite Skill. Locations: Azure Canyon Border Zone, [...] Rushing Depths Conflict Zone, Endless Chasm Resource Zone, Upwell Fields Border Zone, Pillared Halls Conflict Zone...]

The list went on and on. While it didn't cover the full continent, it was still so many places that just figuring out which area they needed to search would be difficult, let alone finding him, or the stealthy creatures he'd sent out to create the distractions. The various towns and cities were off the list, however — apparently the fliers or seeds had been discovered there and, presumably, destroyed. He'd set the triggers for that to be fairly sensitive, as he'd prefer to have one fewer backup than a piece of Titan's biotechnology intact for the System to assimilate. Cato wasn't certain the System could *do* anything with such a sample even if it did get to analyze the stuff, but he had to assume giving the enemy a new tool was a bad idea.

During the conversion, Cato watched the pseudo-crab – nearly thirty feet across and a deep bluish-purple – emerge from the pool once every few hours and scuttle into an equally enormous side corridor, then return only a few minutes later. He suspected that wherever it led, that was where the crab was getting its food, though Cato assumed that it was partly sustained by System nonsense. No matter the reason for its behavior, that was the exact kind of window Cato wanted, and the next time it emerged he slipped into the moon pool and surged downward.

The new form of his body was sleek, slick, and streamlined, with most of the locomotion coming from large fins along the length of his tail. Tendrils and feet, now equally finned, gave him extreme agility to go with the power, and of course the cavitation effects meant he was *fast*. The moment he was in the water the crab came scuttling back with thundering haste, but Cato was down and out through the exit at the bottom of the pool – one which was just slightly too small for the boss to fit through – before it could even get fully submerged.

[Great Western Sea Ocean Zone]

He had to wonder if the entire ocean was in fact a single zone, or if a planet with a more aquatic species would have a more finely divided ocean and a less finely divided land. Or, for that matter, why the System didn't bother to import sea-dwelling peoples – he assumed there were some, considering all the other alterations the System made – to fill the otherwise unused space.

Though it wasn't like the planet was crowded. If anything, it was barely inhabited and mostly wild space. Most people, especially those raised in enclosed habitats, really underestimated how large planets actually were.

He arrowed through the water, maybe even faster than he'd been on land, diving down to where the sunlight stopped. So deep beneath the water, he had to guide himself by the planet's magnetic field, though if the map he'd seen was at all accurate he'd be hard-pressed to miss his target continent. Where he'd come from was a rough blob in the southern hemisphere, whereas his goal was a long mountainous strip crossing the equator at an angle and wrapping around northward toward the pole.

The only problem with swimming through the bathypelagic region – to be absolutely certain that he was out of range of any surface surveys – was that the System liked to place bigger creatures deeper down. A ten-ton warframe wasn't exactly small, but he was minnow-sized compared to some of the returns from his sonar. A skill he used infrequently, since it drew some clear attention from the leviathans lurking in the depths. Though one of the benefits of things being so large was that the small aquatic scouts he had spreading out – once again in all directions, to obscure his trail – were left mostly unmolested.

A serpent the size of a building actually pursued him for a time, and the damn thing had so much power, thanks to whatever System boosts it got, that it was nearly as fast as Cato himself. It wouldn't have enjoyed the experience of swallowing him but it certainly tried anyway, and Cato's non-visual senses painted him a fairly good picture. Enormous teeth, a row of three eyes on each side of a sharp, eel-like head, a huge ribbon of fin running down its back.

It offended Cato's sensibilities.

The System's ruination of normal ecology was bad enough, but what made it even worse was that it consistently did so with no imagination. The boxy buildings in cities, the simple zone names, the lack of proper art or decoration. Even the abyssopelagic sea monsters were merely large.

There was no radial or trilateral symmetry, very little bioluminescence, and not even any color variance he could see. There was nothing like the swirling, dancing fractal scale patterns of the Gleeful Dancers of Europa's world-ocean. No elegance like could be found in the sinuous



curves of Enceladus' benthic acolytes. Sometimes the System seemed determined to absolutely crush creativity.

His ruminations on esoteric ecology were interrupted as he abruptly smashed into a net of fine filaments that none of his senses had warned him about. A good reminder that even if he could block the System's direct effects on him, he could do absolutely nothing about the way it influenced the rest of the world. The filaments stirred, all leading up to the bell of some enormous jellyfish, which tried to wrap him up while the filaments released what was surely an excruciating mix of toxins to anyone who wasn't a bioweapon.

The acids involved were a little irritating, but his outer scales were nearly chemically inert for a reason, and of course the neurotoxins and cytotoxins did nothing at all. There was probably some sort of Skill involved on the jellyfish's part, but that was where the System protection came in handy. Even if the effects were ramped way up from what they should have been – the acid was roughly as potent as triflidic, though he was certain it wasn't – the toxins were forced to rely on chemistry. Which was Cato's terrain.

He cut himself loose in a flurry of claws and shot onward. The jellyfish fell behind, being no more rapid than its smaller cousins. Perhaps animals in the older and more established System worlds would have been a serious threat, but without the intelligence of a person and a reason for persistence he could outrun anything in the ocean. It didn't hurt that he had inexhaustible stamina, so long as his fusion reserves held out. The thought prompted him to doublecheck how his reserves stood, and even after using far too much deuterium for crude explosives, he had enough for several hundred years of normal operation and rising.

There was one significant upside to traveling by ocean, and that was the opportunity to filter all kinds of trace elements out of seawater. Of course he was constantly looking for deuterium, but seawater had scattered atoms of gold and silver, of niobium and neodymium, of cadmium, indium and scandium. All of it was useful, especially since he didn't really need it in bulk, but the traces made up an important fraction of the more exotic biomolecular machinery the warframe used.

His sonar picked up sunken cities scattered about as he neared his destination, so he altered course slightly to pass near one. It wasn't out of his way, and if they were some remnant from the natives, there might be lingering evidence of their original culture. Something he'd certainly need if he wanted to bring the inhabitants over to his side.

The city was overrun with hostile sea life, but none of it was big or bulky enough to be particularly dangerous, and he wasn't exploring the thing properly anyway. Now that he was out of the depths, high-powered sonar was enough to map it and seek out any little details that might be of interest. Like the worn frescoes hidden under a mat of algae, depicting tailed figures looking up at two suns and three moons. Or a statuette buried under sediment, with tiny horns and its arms upraised. He had one of his scouts snatch up that artifact and bring back to him, if for no other reason than it was a remnant of a people the System had erased.

He stored it and continued onward, melancholic. The remains of the alien Atlantis were so much grander than the small clusters of boxes the System provided, but he could only guess at what it had truly been like. How many monuments had been buried under the System's uncaring hand. It was another reminder of what he had to deal with, as he reached the far shore and started to revert his form back to deal with the land.

Determined not to make the same mistake again, Cato spent some time swimming the coast and launching a new set of fliers. His aquatic scouts were aimed at other continents, and some of them had already reached various beaches, further obscuring his trail. At a predetermined time, all his local scouts headed inward at once, crossing into eight Zones simultaneously. Cato followed in their wake, looking upward at the massive peaks rising from the rocky shore. High enough, he decided, for what he wanted.