**Somewhere in the Milky Way Galaxy, enroute to the Mezotis System**

**Jonuth Kidravia’s Ship - Abi**

**September 4, 2019**

**19:32 Ship Time**

The ship had become quite a bit louder over the last day or so. There was an air of excitement, particularly among the dragons and the dragonkin, as everyone knew that we would be arriving in the Mezotis system in less than a day.

A lot of work was planned for the moment we arrived. A survey of each planet had been done when the two planets were originally discovered so Olmith knew exactly where he wanted to build their initial underground settlements. It had been over a thousand years since then, so he also had a number of backup sites in mind if his first choice didn’t pan out.

In addition to hollowing out somewhere to keep their eggs and livestock safe, they also needed to dig deep enough so they could set up one of the teleporters which would allow them to travel from one planet to another. Olmith would be leading the team in creating a safe place to store their eggs while two additional teams would be working concurrently to set up the teleporters. The hope was that they would be done with their initial work within forty-eight hours.

We wouldn’t be leaving until they were done, because Selalea and the other dragons that were returning with us wanted to be sure that their eggs were safe. Once they were safely underground, it would also make it much easier for them to stay hidden, should anyone approach the planet. Dragons and dragonkin should be able to hide from vision and most sensors, but it’s a lot harder for buildings to do the same.

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I had finally pushed Abi’s growth back until a few hours after we arrived in-system, so now I could join my friends and play some games. We weren’t feeling Battlestate, so we loaded into The Escape instead. It had been almost three weeks of in-game time since we had previously played, so we were hoping that the other group had lost interest. We were going to make sure, though.

The last time we played, Mason estimated that I had been shot from about a kilometer away. After zeroing in his scope for that distance, he slowly crouched up the steps. When he was high enough up, he slowly stood up just enough to see over the top step so he could scan the buildings. Within seconds there was a crack from his rifle and he crouched back down.

Once he had cycled the bolt and chambered another round, he crept up again. Just like before, there was another crack and he dropped back down. He continued this another three more times before finally turning back around and descending back into our base.

“I definitely got a guy with my second shot, but didn’t see anyone else. The remaining shots were just in dark rooms that I couldn’t see into. If there was anyone in one of those rooms, then there is a chance I took out more than one, but I think there was only one out there. They could have had guys spread out and set up again, so I want to try the tunnel exit and see if they’re watching it too. If they are, then I think we’ll need to get on the radio and try to get a hold of Araku. Maybe she’ll help.”

“Sounds good,” I said. “How do you want to do this?”

He shook his head. “I need some more information before we plan anything. Ben, can you log out of the game and check what happens if someone gets captured?”

“Sure,” he replied before his character disappeared entirely.

“In any case, you two should remove all of your equipment. We’ll be traveling pretty light regardless, but I would rather not lose a bunch of gear if there are a bunch of guys waiting for us in the tunnels.”

The twins nodded and began unhooking all of their equipment. I hadn’t put any of my own gear back on since I got killed, so there was nothing for me to do but wait.

“Oh, that reminds me. Did Tessa and my sisters ever find out how close they were to Retsas?

“Yup,” Anja replied. “Their base was about one hundred ten kilometers away, so they abandoned it and started making their way here. It’s been a while since then though, so maybe they’re close. They have had a lot more free time than you have, so they’ve been able to put quite a bit of time in. They’re enjoying the game a lot more than I thought they would.”

“Alright, I’ll log out and check with them. If they are close, then maybe we’ll have to meet them in the lobby and draw them a map so they know where to go.”

Mason nodded and I willed myself to log out. When I appeared in the lobby, I saw that Ben had conjured a chair and a tablet, and was currently engrossed in some reading.

“How’s it going? I asked.

“Well, being captured isn’t as big of a deal as I thought it would be. If one of us gets captured and we don’t think that we can be rescued, then we can just delete our character and create a new one. We would have to be invited back to the squad, but we could log back in immediately and start playing.”

“There are two downsides that come along with that, though, and those are that you can only delete your character and create a new one every seven days, and deleting a character also removes you from any accounts. So if one of us gets captured and needs to delete their character, then we’ll need to add them back to our bank account when we get to Retsas.”

“Cool, that’s good to hear. I’ve gotta log out for a sec and see if I can get a hold of my sisters or Tessa. Anja said that they should be close, if they haven’t made it to Retsas already.”

“Alright, I’ll see you back in-game.”

Nodding, I willed myself to wake up. I sent a message to all four women and it wasn’t long before I got a response.

[Hey! What’s up?] Tessa asked.

[We just logged into The Escape, and we were wondering how far the four of you have made it so far.]

She laughed within Mindspeak. [We literally arrived there not fifteen minutes ago. We paid for a few rooms at the inn and we logged out for dinner and so we could let you know. When none of you responded, we figured that you were in-game. I suppose you’ll want to meet up?]

[If we can. You would figure that the guys that were waiting for us would have given up after not seeing us for almost three weeks, but they didn’t. Mason killed a sniper about a kilometer away, but there may have been more of them in closer buildings, or in the surrounding forest. We were going to try the tunnels, but I think we’ll probably wait until you guys log back in so we can draw you a map on where we want to meet.]

[Sounds good,] Alexis replied. [Give us ten minutes or so and we’ll be back in.]

[Got it. See you in a bit.]

Getting back into my pod, I appeared back in the lobby and then quickly logged back into the game. After relaying what the girls told me, I went through my equipment and grabbed my pistol and a spare magazine. We weren’t sure what to expect in the tunnels, so we didn’t want to bring in our good equipment only to lose it immediately.

“Did you ask if they meant in-game time or real time?” Mason asked.

“I didn’t, but I just assumed that they meant real time. I think they were just sitting down for dinner when I talked to them.”

“We should probably head back to the lobby so we can meet them, then. It’ll also give us time to come up with a map. If we even can.”

“Oh, that won’t even be an issue. Meet you there,” Ben replied, disappearing once again.

We followed after him and logged back out of the game.

“Take a seat, this will only take a minute,” he said, turning away from us and then looking at the white expanse in front of him.

After about thirty seconds, a massive grey square appeared on the floor, though it didn’t remain like that for long. As time went on, objects began growing out of the grey square, forming buildings and roads and trees. There were also different elevations, showing what we knew to be Retsas up on a hill. There was a short delay after everything stopped moving, and then colors began to change from the grey they had started out as, making everything easier to see.

The square itself had to be at least fifty feet long by fifty feet wide, giving him a lot of room to make sure that everything was detailed enough. He also included every area we had been to so far, from the town south of Retsas to the industrial area where we found all the brass. With the addition of color, it was also clear that he had marked a few of the locations where we ran into the other group. In red, were two men standing on the roof of the very same building that Ben and I waited in for a few hours. As I looked around, I could see more and more of the red statues dotted around the map.

“That turned out well,” I said, walking around it. “It looks like you’re missing a few things though.”

He nodded. “I wasn’t sure where some of the guys were when Mason and Sonja took them out. If you guys want to point them out, then I’ll add them to the map.”

“Well, you missed the two guys here,” I replied, pointing to the spot where the first two guys were waiting, just inside the tree line.”

“You’re right, I’m not sure how I forgot about that one. We even gathered everything that was useful when we passed.”

Mason and Sonja were particularly useful in pointing out exactly where some of the guys they had killed were, since Ben, Anja and I didn’t see them while we were waiting in the forest. After the men were all accounted for, Mason walked around the table towards the town just south of Retsas.

“Mark this little building,” he said, kneeling and pointing.

The building in question was tiny, looking like a small shack or a backyard shed. It did look like it was made out of concrete, which was odd considering that the rest of the buildings were made out of brick.

“That’s the entrance to the tunnels,” Mason said when we looked at him questioningly. “I’m not sure if I would want them to enter the tunnels and try to make it way here, because it is probably a maze down there. It might be good for them to check it out on the way, though.”

“Good idea. Are we missing anything else?” I asked, looking around the map.

“I don’t think so,” Ben replied.

“What about routes to take?” Sonja asked. “We’ve taken the same route twice now, do we want to show them the route we took and maybe point out some places where they can look around before continuing?”

“That might be best,” Mason answered. “If they follow the same route we did, then we can show them exactly where to stop so they can scout ahead. If one or two of them also have sniper rifles, we can show them where to set up so they can cover the rest of the team’s advance.”

Ben was the only one who could edit the map, but we went around it and had him mark certain areas, as well as draw the path we had taken to get to Retsas and back. When we were done, we continued to walk around the map making sure we didn’t miss anything. When it was clear that we hadn’t, we all sat down and waited.

“So are we going to try to make our way to the town through the tunnels so we can meet them, or are we just going to explore the tunnels for a bit while we wait?” Anja asked. “It should take them two to three hours to arrive once they depart from Retsas, right?”

“I’m still debating that,” Mason said. “I took out one sniper, but by now there could be more watching the front of our base, waiting for us to emerge. I was thinking about having one of us make a run for it with a radio and hide it, but that wouldn’t work if there is anyone in the forest. I think going through the tunnels and meeting them in the town is the only option. That means we’ll need to map the tunnels while we’re down there.”

“What if Tessa and Jonathan’s sisters make a quick stop at Olnain’s shop? Maybe he could help them acquire a radio, that way we could keep in contact with them,” Sonja suggested.

“I doubt that would work while we’re down in the tunnels. Radio signals typically have a hard time penetrating through dirt. I think the only way we could keep in contact with them is if we left two people back here. I’m not sure I’d want to do that.”

“What do you mean?”

“Let’s say we left person A on the stairs to our base. They could radio the girls, getting updates on their progress. Person B would be standing in the tunnels, right by the hatch to our base. Person A could relay information to person B who would be able to radio us, because the signal should be able to travel through the tunnels. So those of us traveling through the tunnels could talk to the girls, albeit indirectly.

“What’s so bad about that?” I asked. “We’re already going into the tunnels with a minimal amount of equipment because we’re not sure what to expect. Three of us should be able to make it through the tunnels, meet the girls and then make our way back here.”

“If we made it through to the town without any issues I was thinking about heading to Retsas to pick up a few things. So whoever was back at the base would just be twiddling their thumbs for three to four hours while they waited.”

“What sort of things?”

“A reloader, for one,” he answered. “It’ll save us quite a bit of money in the future if we start keeping all of our spent casings and reload them. We’ll need to buy gunpowder and bullets occasionally, but neither of those should be particularly expensive. If we get a couple of molds and a small crucible, we could also make bullets ourselves, though we would be limited in the types of rounds we could make.”

“Aside from that, there are some other things that we need. A thermal scope is a big one, as are night vision goggles for all of us. We’ve only been playing during the day, so far, but I doubt that will continue. Oh, and earmuffs similar to the ones we’ve been using for the last few days, but I think I’ll get the ones that have microphones built in. That way we’ll be able to hear each other over the sound of gunfire, as well as be able to communicate without people being able to overhear us.”

“Sounds like we’ll be needing a ton of batteries as well,” Ben said. “Besides the reloader, everything you listed requires batteries.”

“True. I’ll have to look into those as well. I wonder if anyone is able to make them. If not, then I imagine that they’ll be pretty expensive.”

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It turned out that the girls were in possession of a few radios already, having acquired them as they made their way towards us. That’s not all they had, as they collected a number of things as they slowly and cautiously made the trip. They each had some high-quality armor and much better weapons than we did, all picked up from other players and AI they killed on their way.

“So you’ll want someone to set up on this hill here,” Mason said, walking over to it. “It will give you a good vantage point to scan the surrounding area. I’d suggest putting your best shooter up there, along with a spotter, and then have the other two down in one of the buildings. I’m ninety-nine percent sure that this little building is an entrance to the tunnels, so expect us to arrive from here.”

“Once we arrive, then we’ll move to the edge of the forest and regroup before the seven of us make our way to Retsas. I’ve got a few things I need to buy, and then we’ll head back to our base. It should be a pretty quick trip back through the tunnels, assuming we don’t get interrupted along the way.”

“So who is staying back at the base, and who is going with you through the tunnels?” Lucille asked.

“I’d like the twins to stay back at the base,” Mason answered, looking over to the two of them. “I need Ben to come along to map the tunnels, and it might appear odd if our group enters the town and Jonathan isn’t there. Besides, if the tunnels are compromised and we need to take another route, then it would be very helpful if Sonja was back at the base with her rifle.

The twins looked at each other for a moment before nodding. “That’s fine with us.”

“I’ve been wondering something,” I interjected. “We know it is impossible for people outside of our faction to enter our base, so how do Aleena, Lucille, Alexis and Tessa join our faction?”

“That’s easy,” Mason answered, stepping over to the side and conjuring up a screen.

The screen was similar to the screen that he opened when we began playing The Escape, though up top it said ‘Faction’. The name of our faction was currently blank, but there were five names listed, Mason, Ben, Anja, Sonja and myself. Below that, was a green plus sign.

“Ladies, if you wouldn’t mind,” he said, gesturing to the screen.

They went up one by one, entering their character’s names. When they were done, Mason named our faction ‘The Wolves’ and then clicked save.

“Done. They’ll need to actually enter the base so they’re able to respawn here, but it’s as simple as that.”

There were a few more details to go over, but we were soon back inside the game. The twins began putting their best equipment on again while Mason got the radios ready. We were up to four now, which meant that we could split up into smaller numbers and still maintain contact. We were only going to use three today, because each of the twins needed one, but Mason, Ben and I weren’t going to split up. It ensured that we had a spare in case something went wrong.

“I set all of our radios to the same frequency, and you know the backup, right?” he asked the twins.

“397.12,” they replied.

“Good. Remember not to call it out over the radio, just refer to it as the backup channel.”

The two of them nodded and all five of us headed to the hatch that led to the tunnels. Mason, Ben, Anja and I moved into position around the hatch while Sonja moved up to it. At his nod, Sonja began turning the locking mechanism counter-clockwise to disengage it. The moment she was able, she pulled the door hard and the rest of us rushed through.

Mason was the first one through and he immediately started firing. Instead of following him, I turned to the right to engage anyone who might be there. I didn’t see anyone, but I continued to watch my side instead of turning an assisting Mason. The weapons fire didn’t last more than a few seconds before Mason said that it was clear.

We didn’t relax one bit, though. While Ben and Anja checked to make sure that our enemies were dead, Mason and I continued down our respective hallways, making sure that there wasn’t another group waiting behind the corner. We slowly advanced for about five minutes before deeming that it was clear and turning around.

“Alright, you two gather anything useful and then take your positions,” Mason told the twins. “As soon as you have everything sorted, radio the girls and tell them that we’re on our way. It may take a while to find our way, but we’ll be there as soon as possible.”

I hadn’t even seen the two men who Mason killed when we entered the tunnel, but it seemed like they were barely able to get to their feet before they were gunned down. The two of them were positioned as if they had been sitting up against the wall sleeping, or were just lazy. They paid the price for not being alert, one of them having a hole in his head while the other had two in his chest.

We walked past the two of them as we continued East, making sure to keep our eyes and ears open. Thus far every tunnel had been perfectly straight, which meant that it would be much, much harder for us to get turned around. That definitely didn’t stop Ben from making small markings whenever we came across an intersection, just in case we did get lost.

While Ben was making sure we didn’t get lost, Mason was remaining silent as he counted his steps, making sure that we didn’t undershoot or overshoot the exit we were looking for. The small town was a few kilometers away from our base, which meant that it would take about four thousand five hundred of his steps before we would be close.

It was crucial that Mason wasn’t distracted, so I took the lead while Ben remained in the back. It was a pretty uneventful trip, besides the odd rat here or there. Or whatever alien rats were called. After about forty-five minutes of walking, Mason said that we should take the next left and then follow it until we came across the first exit. If he was right, then we would be exactly where we needed to be.

We knew that the faction that was after us frequented these tunnels, so we were especially careful as we approached the exit. We had to make sure that no one was lying in wait and there were no traps placed on our route. There were lights on the wall every ten meters or so, but the tunnels were still pretty dark. It wouldn’t be hard at all to hide a trip wire along our path.

There proved to be nothing, however. Before we started up the steps, Mason used the radio to contact Anja so she could relay a message to the girls, letting them know that we were close. Anja replied back a moment later, saying that the area was clear but there had been some activity.

It seemed like the other faction had been doing something similar to what we were doing, and had someone in the tunnels who could quickly and easily relay information between groups. After we had taken out the two guys in the tunnel, a group of five members of the same faction arrived in the town. They were close to the tunnel entrance that we were on our way to before they were ambushed by the girls. Since then, it had been quiet.

After sending his acknowledgement, we slowly made our way up the steps. Upon opening the door, we quickly realized that we weren’t in the right spot. We could see the town that we were on our way to, but we had exited about two hundred meters past it. We could also see the hill that two of the girls were on, though they weren’t visible from our position.

“Bravo team, it looks like we overshot. Can you look two hundred meters to the east and verify that you can see us?” Mason requested.

“One moment, Alpha team,” Alexis replied.

It took a few seconds for us to see movement up on the hill. It was hard to tell who it was since they were lying down, but one of the girls was looking down to us.

“Affirmative, Alpha team. We see you.”

“Alright, we’re on our way to you. Give us ten minutes.”

While the girls weren’t far away from us, there were a lot of buildings between us and them. We probably could have made it to them in thirty seconds if we sprinted, but that is an easy way to get killed. Instead, we went building to building, giving one a quick once over before continuing onto the next. We only found a few tools and some spent casings, but there was always the chance that someone missed something.

As we arrived at the tunnel entrance that we should have exited from, we saw five corpses between it and the closest buildings. It appeared as if the girls waited until they were as far away from cover as possible before they opened fire. It was clear that they were in the middle of a crossfire, as Tessa and Lucille exited a building just to the south, while Aleena and Alexis were up on the hill to the north-east.

“Nicely done,” Mason said after seeing their handiwork. “Let’s sort through their stuff and then we can continue on to Retsas.”

Unfortunately all of the vests, rigs and backpacks were ruined, either from being riddled with holes or sitting in pools of blood for so long. That didn’t mean that their contents were ruined as well, so we took a few minutes to go through and gather anything useful. There wasn’t anything special, just spare ammo and stuff like cigarettes or water bottles, but it was extra money in our pockets.

The best items were the weapons, however. The last time we dealt with this faction they were mostly using bolt-action rifles, but these ones all had heavily-modified assault rifles. Every single one of them had suppressors, laser/flashlight combos, foregrips and red dots with magazines that held fifty or more rounds. They also had a few different types of grenades. Besides not having helmets, they were really well equipped if they were planning on shooting it out in a cramped area, like the tunnels.

Mason, Ben and I each took one of the assault rifles, and gave the other two to the girls. They, too, had assault rifles, but it didn’t hurt to have some spares. After we had evenly distributed the magazines, we began heading towards the forest. Alexis and Aleena were still positioned up on the hill, but they would join us once we had safely made it to cover. Once they met up with us, we continued towards Retsas.

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“Ah, Mason! Good to see you. The charge I made for you worked, I imagine?” Olnain asked as he saw our party arrive in his store.

We had already made a stop at the bank so the girls would have access, and withdrew a few thousand credits so Mason could buy what he needed to buy. That included brand new sets of armor for Mason, Ben and I, since we hadn’t brought any with us when we left our base. We would be carrying some high-value equipment back with us, so we wanted to stand the best chance of surviving.

“Like a charm,” Mason replied. “You should consider making more of them. From everything I’ve heard, they’re a hell of a lot safer than the alternatives, at least when someone is trying to get back to their base.”

“I’ll think about it,” he said. “I’m busy enough as is, and that took a few hours to put together. What can I do for you today?”

“I’m looking for a few things today, but the main things are bullets, gunpowder and a reloader compatible with all of the common ammo types. We’re just going to be reloading our own spent casings for now, but we’ll probably end up buying new casings sooner or later. I also need a thermal scope. It doesn’t matter if it’s handheld or mountable on a rifle, but we’ve been having issues with another faction, and it would be helpful if we were able to spot them with a lot more ease.”

“Issues?” he asked.

Mason nodded. “When we were on our way to Retsas the first time, we came across another group in the town just south of here. We exchanged gunfire and apparently Anja hit one of them. I don’t think that’s what made them come after us so hard though. If I had to guess, I would say that they heard about our windfall and wanted it for themselves. Unfortunately we ended up leading them right to our base, so they’ve been sitting around waiting for us to show for the last five weeks of in-game time. We’re winning something like seventeen to one, but I think our luck will change sooner or later.”

“I see. Well, I’ve got everything you need. The handheld thermal scopes tend to be better than the mountable ones, simply because of how heavy the better thermal scopes are.”

“That’s what I figured. Do you have batteries too? I think I’ll be needing a bunch of those, especially because we’ll be picking up some night vision goggles as well. We’ve only played during the day so far, but we might start playing more at night, if this other faction persists in trying to kill or capture us.”

“I do. Do you want the single-use variety or the rechargeable kind? I’ve got plenty of both.”

“The rechargeable kind would be great, but we still don’t have power running at our base. I think we’d better go with the single-use kind.”

He nodded. “Alright, I’ll go ahead and start grabbing everything from the back. Is there a specific caliber of bullet you’re looking for?”

“7.78 for sure. Perhaps two hundred or so of those and then the remainder for these,” Mason said, gesturing to the assault rifles we were all carrying. “I’m not sure of the exact caliber, since the ones in-game are different from the ones I’m used to.”

“Well from what I can see most of them are 5.52, though there are a few that are 5.64. They look very similar to each other, but the ammunition isn’t compatible.”

He showed us which rifles were which caliber, and it was almost impossible to tell that they were different. It only became clear when you put one bullet right next to the other. There wasn’t a huge difference, the bullets were very similar in length, but the 5.64 rounds were just a little bit fatter than the 5.52 rounds were. The result was the 5.64 rounds not fitting in the 5.52-chambered rifle, while the 5.52 rounds fell right out of the barrel of the 5.64-chambered rifle. We ended up choosing to go with eight hundred 5.52 bullets, simply because 5.52 was a much more common caliber.

While he was getting everything ready, he let us borrow a few different thermal scopes of both varieties, to see which one we liked the best. To test them, the seven of us left his store and made our way to the wall, looking around with the scopes the entire way. Mason was looking for the one that would be the best at a distance, so he would be looking around with each one to see how each looked.

The one he ended up liking the most was a pair of thermal goggles that required two hands to use effectively. They were similar to binoculars in a way, in that there were two eyepieces, but only one imager on the front. The best thing about it was also the fact that it was possible to mount it to a helmet. It was the only non-monocular thermal scope that was mountable in that way.

“I think I’ll go with this one. Can I get two of them?”

“I figured as much, but I’ve only got one, the one you’re holding. They’re not very common, so I’m lucky if one comes in every month. Will you be wanting the head mount as well?”

“Is it compatible with other tactical mounts? I think I would rather mount it to a helmet and use it that way.”

“It is, but other night vision and thermal goggles aren’t compatible with it. I’ll throw it in anyways, there isn’t any point in keeping it. You’ll have to go see Traruld to pick up a tactical mount, though.”

“We’re headed there next, so that won’t be a problem,” Mason replied.

“Alright,” Olnain nodded. “Give me a minute to get the head mount.”

Mason wouldn’t have had enough credits on him to purchase everything he wanted, but he was able to use the barter tokens to pay almost the entirety of the thermal goggles price. It wouldn’t have been a big deal if he did end up running out of credits, it would just require another trip to the bank.

We had to split everything between the seven of us, just to make sure that no one was weighed down too much. There wasn’t room for the reloader, so Mason carried it while we picked up a backpack that it would fit into. Once that was done, we headed over to our last stop.

Traruld was busy with another group when we arrived, so we looked around at the armor, helmets and other accessories that were hanging around the room. We would probably be going with the same rigs that we did last time, but Mason really needed an upgraded helmet that allowed him to mount his new gadget to. The cheapest helmet with a spot for a mount was sixty credits, and it was worse than the helmets we had purchased the last time we were in Retsas.

The best was two hundred twenty credits, but it offered much more protection in addition to being made out of some very light material. It seemed like that was the one Mason wanted, because he removed it from the wall and tried it on.

“Back again are ya?” Traruld asked as he walked up.

Mason turned and nodded. “We just made the trip with a minimal amount of equipment, so we want to gear up before heading back to our base. I’m looking for a good helmet to mount this on, in particular.”

Mason waved Ben over, receiving the thermal goggles which had been temporarily placed in Ben’s duffle bag.

“Well, you made a good choice if that is the one you want,” Traruld said. “It’s class seven, which is good enough to stop up to 7.78 rounds. It’s also very customizable. There are mandibles, chops, and ear protection you can use even with the goggles, but if you want to use a face shield then you’ll need to remove the goggles.There are also earmuffs that attach directly to the helmet, but they preclude the use of ear protection plates.”

“What armor level are mandibles?”

“They go up to class five,” he replied. “They can’t be made any better without greatly increasing the weight. It’s not like the real world where weight doesn’t matter as much.”

“I’ll take a pair of mandibles and earmuffs as well then. I also need the actual tactical mount for these goggles, as well as two helmets and three Alkey rigs and eight pairs of earmuffs, the ones with a microphone built in..”

“The same helmets as last time?”

“Yeah, the black ones. I forget what they’re called.”

“They’re the Armas 6Bv2. Anything else?”

“I don’t think....” Mason began.

“Night vision,” Ben said, reminding him.

“Oh, right. We also need eight pairs of night vision goggles. They don’t need to mount directly to a helmet, I think a head mount would be just fine.”

Night vision goggles weren’t nearly as expensive as I was expecting them to be. The cheapest one was twenty-seven credits if I wasn’t counting the mountable monocular, and the most expensive was only four times that. We ended up going with some pairs that were in the middle of the pack, costing us only forty credits a pair while offering a good field of view.

Unfortunately Traruld didn’t sell batteries in his shop, so we had to go to the general goods store to get all we needed. Once we had them, we moved over to somewhere quiet and Mason, Ben and I began putting on all of our new equipment. We were under no illusions that we hadn’t been seen buying so much stuff, so we began leaving as soon as the weight was distributed between us.

Mason had inserted batteries and installed the thermal goggles on his helmet, so he kept his head on a swivel while I led us through the ditch. We weren’t in any rush, simply because anyone that was in the forest would light up like a beacon, and people were hesitant to shoot towards Retsas. If a round inadvertently hit the wall, then everyone on the wall would immediately start firing.

It was really weird walking around with our new earmuffs. The sound of the wind was much quieter, but other things, like birds calling in the trees above us, was a little bit louder. Our footsteps were also louder, which would make it just a tad easier to hear another group.

Instead of making our way through the forest to the small town, instead we moved over to the hill that gave us the best vantage point. Rather than everyone going up, Mason went up with Alexis and Aleena. Mason would be able to spot anyone who might be there very easily, while Alexis and Aleena could quickly take them out.

“Looks like the bodies have disappeared, but all of the loot we left behind is still there,” Mason said softly, the voice coming through the earmuffs.

“What do you want to do?” I asked.

“Well, I’m not seeing any heat signatures, but that doesn’t mean that no one is there. I don’t think we’re going to be taking the tunnels back to the base though. You four make your way through the town until you get to the building that the two guys were camped out on. Once you get there, we’ll make our way down.”

We did as he asked, and moved as quickly and quietly as we could until we got to the first building. Once we were there, the four of us pushed into the building, clearing it before moving on to the next and the next. We didn’t see or hear anyone by the time we got to the target building, which meant that the other faction was likely lying in wait. There were kilometers of tunnel between here and our base with plenty of places for someone to hide.

I didn’t have my scope with me, but there was a scope mounted on my rifle. Moving over to the same window I looked through previously, I scanned the edge of the treeline, making sure that there was no one there. Mason would be able to do a better job when he got down to us, but it would be better if he and the girls could take them out from their current position.

Seeing no one, I radioed Mason and he and the girls began heading down. It took about fifteen minutes, simply because there was a possibility that a group followed behind us and they wanted to be safe.

“Alright, same as usual,” Mason said. “We’ll run across the street to the closest building and then follow the fenceline as long as we can. Once there, everyone but Alexis and I will run to the forest, while we cover you. Once you’re across, Aleena will cover Alexis and I, and we’ll make the trip as well.”

It was still nerve wracking making this trip, but as soon as Mason and Alexis were ready, the five of us began sprinting through the open. We made it across once again, and then the five of us scanned the area while the remainder of our party made the trip as well.

Unlike the previous time, we didn’t stop every fifty meters or so to check if anyone was waiting for us in the hills or buildings with line of sight to our base. With the thermal goggles, Mason could look from one location and see if there was anyone set up.

“I just had a thought,” I said as we walked through the forest. “We haven’t seen a single person so far. What are the chances that they found out about your new thermal goggles and pulled back. They would be sitting ducks without the proper equipment to counter them.”

“It’s definitely possible, but keep your guard up,” Mason replied.

Once we were about two hundred meters away from the entrance to our base, Mason had us stay put while he, Alexis and Aleena moved up so they could take a look.

“Alright, not seeing anything yet, not even in the buildings that we’ve seen snipers in. Sonja, do you want to verify that for me?”

“One moment,” she replied.

There was nothing but silence for two to three minutes before Sonja’s voice sounded on the radio again.

“There’s nothing there. I checked every window I could and even stood up in the middle of the entryway. Not a single shot was fired.”

“Keep an eye out. Four are on the way and we’ll be following.”

We began moving again, staying about fifty meters inside the treeline before turning and sprinting back to our base. There wasn’t a single shot and Sonja stepped to the side as the rest of us descended down into the base.

“We’re good!” I called over the radio.

“On our way,” Mason replied.

“How were things on your end?” I asked Sonja.

“Very quiet, both here and in the tunnels,” she answered. “Anja stripped anything useful off the bodies and then waited just inside the hatch. What about you?”

“We got everything we wanted and got back in one piece, so pretty well. We also got some new weapons, as you can see.”

“We heard,” Sonja nodded.

There were heavy footsteps that halted any further conversation as Mason soon rounded the corner with Alexis and Aleena behind him. We stepped to the side to make sure that they could quickly get into the base before following them. Seeing us enter the base, Anja closed the hatch door and locked it before joining us in the workshop. We had a bunch of stuff to unload, and didn’t waste any time doing it.

We were now up to about thirty weapons and had more than enough weapons and armor to go around, giving us quite a bit of breathing room. While Mason and I were setting up the reloader, Ben was helping the girls unload everything so they could organize a bit. Everything had just been set down on the long table in the middle of the room, but we had many different types of guns that were chambered in different calibers. We needed to make sure that everything was marked so someone didn’t grab the wrong ammunition by mistake.

Once everything was set up, Mason went to the entrance of our base and fired off a few rounds from his assault rifle before coming back in. The reloader he purchased was a manual one, though it did measure the amount of gunpowder he needed for each round, so he didn’t have to do that himself.

To those of us watching, it was definitely a lot more complicated than we were expecting. While he was reading a reloading guide, he threw the recently-spent casings into a tumbler and had me spin it to clean them. Once they were clean, he took them out and proceeded to take a bunch of different measurements with a micrometer and a pair of calipers. One of the casings apparently wasn’t to his liking, as he used another of his tools to shorten it slightly before widening it out.

A couple more measurements and work later and he was finally ready to reload his first round. The reloader he purchased had a gunpowder hopper up top, as well as a clear tube in the back. He dropped the casings inside of the clear tube and then pulled down the lever. The first casing was loaded onto the machine where its primer was removed. Pulling the lever again, the disk that the casing was sitting on rotated, allowing a second casing to be loaded and de-primed, while the first one had a new primer installed.

Five bullets could be fit on the disk at a time, and they visited five different stations before being finished. The third station dropped gunpowder into the casing and the fourth one was where a bullet was manually placed on top. When he pulled the lever for a fourth time, the bullet was loaded into the casing, and then ejected from the machine when he pulled the lever for the fifth time.

After each round was loaded, he took a measurement with his calipers and then adjusted a dial on top of the machine. After all three rounds were loaded, he grabbed an empty magazine and loaded them into it, before proceeding to go to the front of the base so he could fire them off. When he came back down, he was all smiles.

“You’re happy, I take it?” I asked.

“Absolutely. It’ll take a bit of time to get the hang of it, but I should be able to pump out several hundred rounds per hour, assuming we’re not missing any of the components.”

“Cool. Is there anything else that needs to be done, or are we done for the night?”

“Let’s call it. We got quite a bit done today, and we need to get up early tomorrow.”

No one was opposed to that. We logged out of the game and exited our pods, heading back to our rooms so we could get some sleep. Tomorrow was going to be a very busy day.