**Somewhere in the Orion-Cygnus Arm, enroute to the Mezotis System**

**Jonuth Kidravia’s Ship - Abi**

**August 25, 2019**

**13:44 Ship Time**

I reached up to protect my chest when there was another spike of pain.

“Again!”

I glared at my newest of taskmasters but did as she said. I was sitting cross-legged on a padded mat in one of the training rooms while Kiri Ulgorsy sat opposite of me, about ten feet away. Above her were a half dozen metal balls that remained stationary as she controlled them. Until she launched one at me, of course.

This was her idea of training under stress. I thought I would be learning how to modify my form first, but she decided to make it a reward for unlocking my telekinesis. Until that happened, I would be under constant bombardment by the small metal balls. The ‘game’ we were playing was rather simple. She would launch one of the balls at me, and I would have to stop it using my telekinesis.

So far, it was proving to be much harder than I had anticipated, evidenced by the large amount of circular bruises that had formed on my chest. If someone had seen me walking around without a shirt, they’d have likely thought that I went paintballing without any protection. Even closing my eyes didn’t help, as it did inside of Battlestate.

“Ready,” I said, setting my hands back on my knees.

A second later, one of the metal balls crossed the distance in an instant. I tried to exert control over it as it flew, but I still wasn’t able to so much as slow it down. It impacted with a smacking sound before floating back over to join the other five that were floating over her head.

There were two reasons why Kiri had me set my hands on my knees. One, to prevent me from blocking the incoming metal balls, and two, to not rely on my hands as a crutch. For some reason, gesturing with one’s hands makes it easier to manipulate objects. I wouldn’t be able to rely on my hands while learning Ikwar Kun, so it was best to nip that in the bud right away.

“I thought you said I might get a headache the first few times I use telekinesis, not before I had even done it once…”

She smiled at that. “It’s a good sign, you’re making at least some progress. Your brain is working a little bit harder than usual, and your body isn’t used to it yet. Once you’ve been using telekinesis for a few weeks that will begin to go away. Telekinesis exercises the brain, almost like a muscle. You won’t be able to lift much at the start, but that will rapidly increase in the first few weeks. To utilize Ikwar Kun to its utmost, it is recommended that you continue to push your limits with telekinesis until you can lift half again your bodyweight. You’re two-fifty, two-sixty, right? You’ll want to aim for around four hundred or so.”

“How long will it take until I can lift myself up?”

“It’s different for everyone. A month, maybe? It really depends on how much you work at it. People usually practice with these things to start with before bigger items,” she said, pointing to the balls above her. “You’ll need to make sure not to strain yourself though. Your brain will have its limits and trying to lift too much too quickly can cause some damage.”

I nodded. “Alright, I’m ready to go again.”

I had just barely stopped speaking when another of the balls was sent rocketing towards me. I tried to slow or stop it as it approached, but it ignored all attempts, as all of them had thus far. I raised my hand up to rub the area it had hit, as there were some spots that hurt more than others. When I was ready again, she sent another forward.

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We had already been going for about an hour and a half at that point, and we continued for nearly three more hours. In that time, I didn’t manage to affect any of the ‘orbs’ as Kiri called them, even slightly, though my headache continued to get worse and worse. Thankfully by the time we were done Kiri had taken two objects out of her dimensional storage to give to me.

The first was a small stoppered vial of a light-green liquid. She explained that it was a modified, highly concentrated healing agent, similar to the ones built into the suits that my friends and I wore, but quite different at the same time. Apparently it was tailored towards those who were practicing telekinesis, as regular healing agents were found to undo the previous few hours of training. It wouldn’t get rid of my headache, but it would dull it down to more bearable levels. Along with managing my headache, the liquid would also remove all of the bruises that covered my chest within an hour or two of taking it.

The headache part of it would continue working for about twelve hours, at which point I would need to take another of the vials if my headache hadn’t subsided by then. She only carried a few vials of the stuff on her at a time, but she would have a case delivered to my room by the end of the night. I was happy about hearing that, as it was a pretty nasty headache. Drinking it down, I re-stoppered the vial and she handed the second item to me.

The item was a case. Upon opening it, I saw that there were twenty ‘orbs’ of various sizes. The smallest of which was identical to the ones that had just been hitting me for the last few hours, while the biggest was about the size of a baseball. We wouldn’t be meeting again for another five days, so my instructions were to practice with the smallest one. If I was able to move it around before our next meeting, then I would move on to the next. If, by the time next Sunday rolled around, I wasn’t able to move any of the orbs, then Shaemu would be at my disposal for the rest of the trip. Kiri thought that I would be able to use it before then, though. Thanking her, the two of us went our separate ways. Me to my room to take a shower, and her to wherever she needed to be.

The morning had been split into two parts. The first hour or so was spent watching Kiri and the members on her team spar, while the remainder was spent practicing. All of us had been expecting to learn a completely alien martial art, but the one Kiri had chosen to start with was one from Earth. Probably because all of us were at least a little familiar with it, and because it was so versatile; Krav Maga.

Versatility was key, especially considering that if you’re on a battlefield, you’re likely to be fighting against many different species. Kiri explained that it is rare that you lose all your weapons over the course of a battle, but if you do then you had better know how to fight. Especially against larger opponents. Krav Maga was perfect for this, as it focuses on techniques from Aikido, Boxing, Judo, Karate and Wrestling.

The first demonstration was with Kiri and a woman named Ulla, both of whom were in their Scyftan forms. On Kiri’s go, Ulla rushed forward with her arms out in front of her, as if she was going to push Kiri. Just before Ulla contacted, Kiri sidestepped to her left while simultaneously raising her right arm up. At full speed it seemed like Kiri was clotheslining Ulla as she went past, but as they slowed it down it was clear that Kiri was almost palming Ulla’s face, causing her to fall backwards.

There was another variation she showed us for situations where you don’t want to seriously injure someone, like if you get into a random street fight. With that one, the scene repeated itself but once Kiri had palmed Ulla’s face with her right hand, she reached up with her left hand until she was holding onto both sides of Ulla’s face. When Ulla’s forward momentum had stopped, Kiri spun around, pulling Ulla along with her until Ulla was facedown on the ground and Kiri was standing over her. If you did it the first way they showed then someone could crack their head if they hit hard, but it was much more controlled the second way.

They ended up showing it to us again, though the second time Kiri was in her Scyftan form and Ulla was in her human form. Ulla had about two feet of height on Kiri, which resulted in Ulla having to bend down further to push Kiri back. That benefitted Kiri, however, as she performed the exact same two-handed maneuver, putting Ulla on the ground.

Getting back up, Kiri had explained that it is harder to use the one-handed technique when you’re smaller, which is where the second part of the two-handed technique comes in. Ulla came at Kiri with Kiri putting her on the ground, again. This time she held her down with her left hand while repeatedly feeding mock-punches into the back of Ulla’s head.

They showed us a few more techniques we could use, with some of them being quite dirty. They ended up pulling out a disembodied artificial head to show it off as it had to deal with head contact, including striking the eyes. The two of them returned to their Scyftan forms while Kiri held out the head in front of her.

When they were ready, Ulla grabbed onto either side of the head and used her thumbs to push on the eyes. After a moment, she let go with her right hand and threw two very quick jabs to the throat before adding in a right hook to the side of the face. It made me wince just watching it.

After that, the eight of us were broken up into pairs and began practicing the first of the techniques she showed us, though we were going for the safer version. After about thirty minutes, we would switch off so we would all have an opportunity to try it on people of different heights and body weights.

When we had switched off two times, she then had us move on to the dirty tactic I had mentioned before. She procured a few more of the disembodied heads, showed us how to hold onto them and then we took turns taking out any frustrations we might have on the inanimate objects.

The three hours flew by, and then I was left with Kiri as my friends and sisters had the rest of the afternoon to do what they wished. Kiri had apparently already spent some time with my sisters in the previous week or so, so they all knew how to use their telekinesis already.

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After showering, I took Vixa with me as we hit up the mess for some dinner. Along the way, I used Mindspeak to let my friends know if they wanted to join us. Vixa immediately looked over to where the beef the dragons were cooking was all laid out, causing me to chuckle. She dutifully followed me over to the buffet line and waited until I got my own dinner. When I had everything I wanted, we headed over and I got her a comparatively smaller plate of beef. By the time we had found a table and sat down, my friends filed in and went over to grab their own dinner.

I set Vixa’s snack down on the bench beside me and then dug into my own meal. But not before snagging one of the smaller pieces, eliciting a little bark out of her.

“So how’d it go?” Anja asked when she and her sister sat down.

“Not well,” I answered, lifting my shirt up to show her all of the bruises on my upper chest.

“Ouch. What happened to you?” Mason asked as he and Ben joined us.

“Kiri’s idea of unlocking my telekinesis. She sat down at one end of a mat and I sat down on the other, then she’d propel a metal ball like the ones I’ve been practicing with in-game. My job was to stop it before it hit. As you can tell, I haven’t had much luck yet. Any, actually.”

“It doesn’t look too bad,” Sonja opined.

I looked down to see that the bruises had already begun fading away.

“Huh. Kiri gave me some sort of healing potion or something to help with the headache and said that the bruises would go away in a few hours. I didn’t expect it to work so quickly.”

“Headaches?”

I nodded while chewing and swallowing a piece of steak. “She said that it is a sign that I’ve at least made some progress. New neural pathways being formed or something like that. Apparently I’ll be dealing with them while I’m learning how to use telekinesis and while pushing my limits with it. Once I’m powerful enough I can stop working on it and the headaches will go away.”

“I don’t envy having to deal with headaches,” Ben said. “That won’t be an issue with Telekinesis from a Skill Gem since that uses mana. We’ll just need to learn the skill and we’ll immediately be able to move stuff.”

“How does that work in terms of the amount you’re able to lift? I’m assuming you’ve already read up on it.”

“It’s not fair!” Anja complained.

“She’s right about that. The amount you can lift increases linearly with your level. So at rank one you’ll be able to lift one percent of your body weight, at rank ten you’ll be able to lift ten percent of your body weight, et cetera. It means that women are at a disadvantage compared to men. I don’t know why it isn’t the same for both, but there are a few skills that are weird like that.”

“So basically, the fatter you are the better you’ll be with telekinesis?”

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I filled them in on the rest and then quickly found my mom so I could hand Vixa off to her for the remainder of the day. When we had all logged into The Escape the night before, Mason checked the job board to see if there was anything that was particularly needed. There weren’t a whole lot of new listings, but one definitely caught his eye. The gunsmith was running out of brass to make new brass shell casings, so he was looking for as much as he could get. The rewards consisted of ammo and weapons, mostly, though there were a few scopes and other weapon attachments that were available if we brought back enough.

The best of all the rewards that were available was a thermal imaging scope. We would need to make sure we had enough batteries to power the thing, but with it we would be able to spot people long before they spotted us. The best part about it, according to Mason, was that the scope could either be handheld or mounted on a weapon. He was currently using a monocular to spot at long distances, but a thermal scope would make that much quicker and easier.

With a thermal scope, everything will appear a certain color. Cold will be a very dark blue while greens, yellows, oranges, reds and whites will appear where there is any sort of heat being generated, for this one at least. On a bright sunny day it won’t be as effective, but if Mason is scanning shot out windows and sees one of those colors, he’s probably seeing someone.

Unfortunately it was on the way back to our base, albeit in a different direction and much more dangerous path, but it was worth it just for the ammo. We would get ten to forty rounds of ammo for each pound of brass we brought back, depending on the type of ammo that we wanted. It would likely be forty rounds of pistol ammo while only half as much for rifle ammo.

The reason that it would be a much more dangerous path is that on our way to Retsas we went through a small suburb, while the place we needed to go was in a dense industrial center. One of the larger buildings was a foundry where metals were cast into molds, meaning that it was a good bet that we would find ingots of brass there.

The job wasn’t one that just one group could claim and do, either. Anyone who saw the post could turn in brass for some of the rewards, and it was very likely that other groups were already on their way there, if not already on their way back. Since Mason had seen the job posting the night before, over three days had already passed in-game. We were behind the eight ball already, but we had very little gear to risk so we weren’t really worried about it.

When we logged in, Mason led us over to the gunsmith to sell back another case of pistol ammo before heading over to the equipment store. Mason didn’t tell us what he was looking for, but he seemed to have spotted it as he was walking up and down the aisles. Picking up the short rod with a round, flat disk on the end, he walked up to the counter to pay for it. The money from the ammo just covered it, and then we were on our way out of the town, with one stop, first.

“What was that?” Ben asked.

Mason turned, grabbing the flat part of the item and pulling it outward. At its max length, it was about a foot and a half long.

“Telescopic mirror. If we’re going to be going somewhere with a lot of corners and doorways, then this little thing will be indispensable. I’ll be able to check for people without any real risk,” he said, collapsing it back down and stowing it.

He led us up the steps and onto the wall and took out his monocular scope. Putting it up to his eye, he began looking in the direction of the industrial center. Since Retsas was up on top of a hill, it afforded us a very good view of the surrounding area. We had arrived from the southern entrance of Retsas, while the industrial center was to the north-east. There wasn’t a ditch we could use to provide at least some protection, so we would likely have to book it and hope for the best.

After looking around for a few minutes, Mason led us over to the north entrance and once again began scanning the area, seemingly looking for the best route. It took about five minutes or so, but we were soon heading back down the closest stairs and stopped just inside the entrance.

“Alright, there is another ditch to the north leading to the forest, so we’ll follow it until we get to the treeline. Once there, I’ll fill you in on the rest of the plan. I don’t want to do it where someone might hear, just in case there is someone here listening that has some friends outside the town.”

“You think that’s likely?” I asked.

“Maybe not, but I would rather be safe than sorry. If there is someone listening right now and they have a radio, then they could give away our positions and this trip could be over before it even started.”

“We’d better get going then,” Anja said. “If someone was listening, then they know that we’re going to be traveling through the forest. The sooner we get there, the less time they’ll have to set up and wait for us.”

“I scanned the treeline while up on the wall, but give me a second to take another look before we start running.”

Rather than use his monocular scope, he instead grabbed his rifle which was hanging off his shoulder, and used that instead. He had gone into the game a few hours earlier to mount the scope to the rifle and fire off a few rounds of very cheap ammo, just to make sure that everything was zeroed properly. With a good perch and favorable conditions, the up to eight times zoom would allow him to take out targets from several hundred meters away.

Once it was deemed clear, Mason swung the rifle back over his shoulder and the five of us ran to the treeline. It didn’t take nearly as long to get there as it had when Mason and I were helping Ben, so within ten minutes we were within the cover of the forest.

“So when looking around, I noticed that there is a rocky outcrop that looks over the industrial center. When we get there, I’m going to climb up and find somewhere to set up, so I can cover your approach. Once the four of you get to the other side, then I’ll come back down and make the trip,” Mason said, taking the monocular out of one of his pouches and handing it to me. “I don’t really need that now that I’ve got a scope, so use it to look around when you get down over there.”

I accepted it and stowed it before the five of us cautiously made our way towards our objective. It seemed like pretty fortuitous timing on our part, in that we logged into The Escape when it was still early morning. That would give us more than enough time to scour our target building and then make it back to Retsas or our base. It didn’t matter which we went to, though we would be taking a big risk in going back to our base, because we would need to go back to Retsas for the rewards anyway.

We arrived at the outcropping that Mason had mentioned and he immediately started climbing it. The rest of us waited until he gave the signal, which was a short whistle, and then we began moving around the outcropping. Once there, we stopped in a safe location and then looked for the best route to take.

It was a relatively open area between the outcropping and the industrial center. There was a highway that we would need to pass first, as well as another five hundred meters where the only cover was small bushes and fallen trees. The forest looked to have extended further, judging by the occasional stump that dotted the area, but most of the trees were cleared out, and none of the stumps looked big enough to hide behind.

Seeing that there wasn’t really an optimal route, the four of us began running. It was about a kilometer between the rocky outcropping and the wall surrounding the industrial center, and we wanted to make it there as soon as possible.

We had just cleared the highway and were continuing on when there was a loud crack, coming from behind us. The four of us immediately dove behind whatever cover we could find. I took the monocular scope out of my pouch and then turned so I could look up at Mason. It didn’t take me long to find him, and he looked to be scanning the area. After a moment he aimed the gun right at me before moving it off to the side and holding up a closed fist, telling us to hold. That wasn’t all he signaled.

“He killed a guy up ahead, but he doesn’t know if the guy was alone or not. He wants us to hold until he thinks it is clear, and then continue on. Pass it on to the girls,” I told Ben.

He nodded and turned, crawling behind the fallen log over to where the girls were hiding.

The four of us had spread out a bit, just to make it harder for someone to take out all of us. When we heard Mason’s shot we spread out even further, so I couldn’t let the girls know what was going on without yelling. Since this was a relatively flat and open area, it would be possible for someone to hear me yelling, especially if they were an alien with much better hearing.

We ended up waiting for about fifteen minutes. I don’t know if Mason got impatient or he just wasn’t seeing any movement, but he gave me the go symbol one of the times I looked up at him. I relayed that to Ben so he could relay it to the girls, and then the four of us ran for the cover of the wall.

When we got there, the four of us hid between the wall and some destroyed cars so we would only be visible from our immediate left and right. I did step out in the open, only briefly, to look up at Mason, but stepped back behind cover when he motioned that he was on his way. There wasn’t much for us to do other than wait. We did separate into two smaller groups, just so we could cover our left and our right if someone did approach, but other than that we just sat there and waited.

We heard movement from the direction we had come from after fifteen to twenty minutes. Peaking my head over the car, I saw Mason coming towards us though he held up a closed fist again, telling us to stay put. When he got close, Ben and I slid over, making room for him to join us in our hiding spot.

“There was someone up on the roof of one of the buildings closest to the wall. He definitely looked like he had some gear on him. I didn’t see anyone else, so he may have been solo, but his gear could just as easily be gone by the time we get there. We’ll check that out first and then head over to the building where we should be able to find brass.”

“Lead away,” I said.

“Hold up,” he replied. “When dealing with industrial buildings, it is very easy to walk into a trap or just get turned around in general. Once we get there, make sure to keep your eyes open for anything that looks odd. If you find any tripwires or lasers, let me know. Only after we have cleared the building will we head up to the roof. It would really suck if we headed there directly and then the guy’s friends popped up behind us.”

We all nodded and Mason began leading us around the wall into the industrial center. I watched our back as we moved, just because of the fact that I had the monocular scope. If something caught my eye, then I could easily check it out. Or perhaps I could just change one of my eyes to that of an eagle once I was able to modify my form. The only reason that I was even in my human form inside of the game was so I wouldn’t draw anymore attention than we already had on us.

We passed by two buildings before finally arriving at the building that the man Mason killed was on. Pausing for a moment before we entered, Mason had all of us take out our small flashlights so we would be able to see. When we were all ready and had our pistols out, Mason led us through the door and into the building.

We all immediately spread out and scanned the large room with our flashlights, making sure that there wasn’t anywhere for someone to hide. When we were confident that it was clear, we went room to room, looking for loot, but more importantly making sure that no one else was present. In total, it took us about an hour to clear the entire building, but it seemed like the guy was alone.

Making our way to the roof, Mason had us stay in the stairwell as he went up and opened the door. The door faced the opposite direction we had come from, which provided excellent cover if anyone was sitting up on the outcropping that Mason had been on. Just to make sure it was clear, Mason unshouldered his rifle, chambered it, and then sat down facing us, his rifle pointed towards the sky. Suddenly, he rolled to his right while simultaneously aiming his rifle towards the outcropping and looking down the scope.

There weren’t any cracks to be heard, nor did Mason fire, so after a minute or so he got back up and began looking around at the other rooftops. When he was confident that we were relatively safe, he had Ben and I run over so we could drag the man’s body back into cover. We didn’t want to stay on the roof for any longer than was needed.

Running over, Ben began flipping the man over while I picked up the rifle that was lying beside him. It had a strap, thankfully, so I shouldered it and grabbed onto an arm and threw it around my neck, Ben doing the same. It only took us about thirty seconds to carry him back, at which time Mason replaced Ben and the two of us carried the corpse down and into one of the rooms.

The man, who was actually an orc, as it turned out, was a hell of a lot better equipped than any of us were, but unfortunately for him, Mason hit the least-protected part of his body. His face. The bullet seemed to have entered around his nose and exited at the base of his skull, which made sense because Mason had elevation over him. It also helped preserve both the man’s armor and his helmet. The latter of which would definitely need to be washed out, but would be perfectly suitable for the rest of us.

“I’m glad you two decided to pick him up rather than drag him,” Mason said. “That would’ve put a huge red stain on everything, and I doubt any of us wants to wear bloodsoaked gear.”

That was definitely true. The roof seemed to have a slight slant, probably for water drainage, which meant that his blood pooled away from his body, rather than under it.

Aside from the rifle that we found beside him, there was also an assault rifle that was attached to his backpack. It was like no assault rifle I had ever seen, but it was the first thing Mason picked up when we began stripping the body of anything that might be useful. He quickly checked the chamber and the magazine before raising it up so he could look down the scope that was on it. Nodding, he set it down beside him and then began pulling the four extra magazines out of the rig. He was pretty happy to see that each and every magazine was full, as that was a free gun with enough ammo to last a decent while.

I handed the rifle over to him next, and he looked it over briefly before handing it, and the spare magazine, to Sonja.

“Me?” she asked.

“You’re sort of the unofficial sniper of the group, at least when we’re inside of dungeons. It will be good practice for you,” he nodded.

Next up was the man’s armored plate carrier plus rig combo and his backpack. It was pretty large in comparison to the backpack and duffle bag we had, which would be quite useful for filling up with brass ingots, if we managed to find any. We didn’t find much inside of it besides a small box of spare ammo for both the rifle and the assault rifle, but it was especially nice to have the extra storage space.

That space almost immediately grew smaller, however, because I filled it with my armor and rig after emptying everything out of the latter so I could wear the plate carrier instead. I also handed the duffle over to Mason after taking some stuff out of it, and took the backpack as well.

We left the man’s clothes, because they weren’t particularly worth anything, though we did take the boots. They looked to be higher quality than the ones that we were wearing, so maybe they would end up fitting one of us. We weren’t going to sit around to put them on right now, so Mason put them inside of my backpack before heading back down to the ground level.

There hadn’t really been anything that had caught our eye, loot-wise, but there was a room that had a number of large wooden crates inside of it. While we had only briefly passed through the room the first time, now it was time to crack them open and see what was inside. Loot was only generated at the beginning of a wipe, so it was odd that no one had gotten to them yet.

It proved easier said than done. Each of the crates was secured with nails, so if we wanted to get inside we would definitely need to find something. Fortunately we were in a factory, so that shouldn’t be too difficult. We had already seen a few tools lying around, but didn’t bother picking them up because of how little they were worth.

We finally ended up finding a pry bar on the other side of the factory which allowed us to start cracking open the crates. The first two were pretty underwhelming, containing some unrecognizable machine parts, but the third was different.

“What are the fucking chances?” Mason asked when he saw the contents.

“Maybe it’s bronze?” Ben asked.

“You’re talking to a guy who deals with brass shell casings pretty often,” Mason said, reaching inside of the crate and grabbing one of the ingots.

Placing it on top of the lid that was still partially on top of the crate, he then reached into one of the pockets on his rig and retrieved a bullet for his rifle, placing it down on top of the ingot. The color of the casing and the ingot were absolutely identical.

“Shit,” Ben replied. “How many do you think are in there?”

“These crates are a little bit bigger than the crates we use for mining in Battlestate, so that puts them over one hundred twenty-five cubic feet,” he said, putting the bullet away and picking up the ingot so he could slide the lid all the way off. “The ingots are about twenty inches long, three inches wide and two inches tall, and we can see that the first layer has three rows of twenty ingots, for sixty ingots per row. Assuming there are thirty rows, that means that there are eighteen hundred ingots in this crate.”

“Eighteen hu… how much do they weigh?” I asked.

“Fifteen pounds or so, maybe?” he replied, handing it to me.

Lifting it, I nodded.

“That’s twenty seven thousand pounds!” Ben exclaimed. “Or twelve tons!”

“How the hell are we going to get twelve tons of brass back to Retsas?” Anja asked. “Even if each of us were to take three ingots per trip, it would still take us what, one hundred and twenty trips?”

“Or two, if we’re smart about things,” Mason said. “We take one of these ingots and then close up the crate again. Once we get to Retsas, then we talk to Araku and see if a deal can’t be made. There were a few vehicles running in town, so she could probably transport everything back in two or three trips. We would likely have to give her the majority of it, but even if we were able to keep a third of the ingots, that would have us set for a while, at least in terms of ammo and weapons. Just think that trading in one of these ingots would get us between one hundred fifty and six hundred rounds of ammo, depending on the caliber.”

“She was already interested in finding out what species we are, so I think she would demand to know before she does anything. If she hasn’t found out already at least. If she hasn’t, then I’m not sure that we should tell her,” I replied.

“What does it really matter?” Mason asked. “There are already contracts out on you that clearly state you are on Earth, right? So anyone who realizes that we’re human will quickly be able to put two and two together. What can they really do about it, though? The majority of the people playing the game are probably just regular people. Even if some are in positions of power, what are they going to do? Send a fleet to Earth? It would take over six months for them to arrive, at which point six hundred top of the line ships, as well as Abi, would be waiting in response.”

“I doubt finding out that humans are playing video games would elicit that sort of response,” Sonja replied. “Besides, it’s not like they’ll know who any of us are. There are eight billion people on Earth. We could be any of them.”

Both of them made good points and the more I thought about the more I realized that they were right. There really was no harm since anyone paying attention would already know that there were Scyftans on Earth. The fact that humans had access to Scyftan technology would likely give them a moment's pause, but that was understandable. Including the initial science team that discovered Earth, Scyftans had been on Earth for the previous thirty-eight hundred years.

“Alright, but I don’t think all five of us should go back. You and Sonja should stay here and find somewhere where both of you can set up your rifles. Or have her spot for you. It will allow you to cover the rest of us and watch over everything in here.”

“Leave Anja with us as well, then,” Mason replied. “If Sonja takes one side of the building and I take the other, then Anja can roam around. If you die along the way, then she can also log out every ten minutes or so. That way we’ll know, at least, and won’t be sitting here for hours waiting.”

“Works for me,” I nodded, taking off my backpack. “I’m going to leave the backpack here and go back to my old armor and rig for the trip. It would be a shame to lose it right after getting it.”

After switching back and getting the duffle bag back from Ben, I loaded one of the ingots into the duffle bag and we were on our way. We planned on taking the same route that we had arrived from, allowing us to get there as quickly as possible. We likely would’ve taken a different route if we were concerned about keeping the location a secret, but there were so many ingots that someone else was bound to find them sooner or later. If we were able to get a deal done then we would be set for quite a while.

One of, or both of Mason and Sonja were watching us as we crossed, which was comforting in that anyone who was hiding on the other side would be taken out if either Ben or I had fallen. That didn’t happen, though, and we made it to the other side without any issue. I looked back and gave a signal to Mason before Ben and I entered the forest and left their sight line. Temporarily, at least.

Mason had found a spot that would actually allow him to see the north entrance of Retsas, so he would know pretty quickly if we made it or not. If Araku agreed to the deal, Mason also instructed me to ask for a flare to be shot into the air. If that didn’t happen, then Mason and the girls would hide as many of the ingots as they could before heading back to our base.

We followed the same path through the forest that we did the first time, which seemed to be a well-traveled path. Thankfully there wasn’t anyone that was sitting and waiting for someone to go by, so we made it to the edge of the forest and into the ditch. We did see another group coming out as we were about halfway back to the city, though they went in another direction and ignored us entirely. It seemed like people really didn’t want to fire close to the city, as they could easily be mowed down by the men and women on the walls.

Once we were safely inside, rather than heading to find Araku, we instead headed directly over to the gunsmith himself. It wasn’t very busy when we arrived, and he had a few employees who helped him out, so we asked if we could speak to him privately. He led us into his office-slash-workshop and we got right into it. After unzipping it, I unshouldered the duffle and set it on the floor between us, just as to not make anything that could be construed as a hostile movement. He was armed, after all.

“How would you like another seventeen hundred ninety-nine of those, today?”

He bent down and picked up the ingot, turning it over as he examined it before looking back up. “How did you get so many?”

“We didn’t, technically,” Ben answered. “We do know where they are though, and we’ve got some friends watching them right now. We had planned to go to the foundry nearby, but we found them along the way. Based on our calculations, there are eighteen hundred total, weighing around fifteen pounds each.”

“That sounds about right for ingots of this size, which means you’ve got a little over twelve and a quarter tons of brass. Am I right in assuming you need a way of transporting it?”

“That’s right,” I replied. “Initially we were going to talk to Araku, but we were hoping that you could give us a more favorable deal. I have a feeling that she would want the majority since she has the vehicles and the manpower to move them quickly.”

“You’re right about that, but it wouldn’t be as bad as you think it is. When it comes to defending this town, she’s a lot more reasonable. Unfortunately while I do have a vehicle that could move the ingots in a single trip, it doesn’t leave this town without security. For that to happen, Araku has to give the go ahead.”

“Wouldn’t she be less reasonable when dealing with a material that will help her defend the town? If we withheld it or went to a different town with the offer because hers wasn’t good enough, then that would actively hinder her efforts.”

“If she were someone who didn’t care about her reputation, or the reputation of her town as a safe place for people, then you would be absolutely correct. Other towns very well might agree to all your conditions and then execute you as soon as they had seen the brass, heedless of the fact that you’re able to respawn if you die. She will be more reasonable, for two simple reasons; you’ll help her arm the defenders of the town, making it harder for attackers to assault it and it is more likely to build goodwill than being a hardass would.”

I definitely had to agree with that. The gunsmith, who’s name we learned was Olnain, handed his store over to one of his employees and then joined us as we headed to see if we could get a meeting with Araku. She wasn’t on the walls like she was when we arrived over a week beforehand, in terms of in-game time, so we headed towards the town’s center instead.

The building wasn’t what I expected. I had figured that there would be a town hall or some other official looking building, not a house that you might see in a suburb on Earth. The only difference, really, was that there were a couple of roving patrols who moved around the house. The one that was at the front nodded at Olnain and let us pass, though the one at the door stopped is.

“Olnain. What brings you here?” the man asked.

He was another species I had never seen before, having only one large eye and a grey skin tone. The rest of his body was rather normal, except for the fact that he had five fingers and a thumb on each hand, and his nose looked incredibly oversized for his head. I saw his eye quickly look up and down my body before looking back to Olnain.

“John here has an opportunity that can’t be missed. We’d like to meet with the boss lady to discuss it.”

He looked me over again and then nodded.

“Wait here,” he said, turning and walking inside.

After a few minutes, the door opened and Araku was standing there with Qish, Zagred, and the as-of-yet unnamed cyclops-looking guy.

“Ah, just the man I wanted to see,” she said, looking right at me.