**The Escape**

**22:24 EDT**

Ben and I immediately lowered our guns, though Anja kept hers raised.

“We only heard rifle fire after a little while, so how do we know you’re actually… you? You could be shapeshifting aliens for all we know.”

Sonja rolled her eyes. “It’s us. We didn’t want to waste any more ammo than we had so we started moving as soon as we thought you three were far enough away. If you want some proof that it’s us, then how about this; We just left Earth aboard one of, if not the most, advanced ships in the galaxy.”

“Alright,” Anja nodded, lowering her weapon.

Mason walked over to Ben and began examining his vest.

“You got really lucky,” he commented. “They had to have been using some really bad ammo if it was able to stop a round. Unfortunately vests provide less and less protection as they take more shots, so we’ll need to pick up a new one for you at Retsas.”

“Aren’t there metal plates that you can just replace?” I asked.

He shook his head. “You’re thinking of plate carriers. These are just simple ballistic vests that are meant to be thrown away when they lose integrity. Anyways, we should keep moving. I doubt they’ll follow us into a forest, but we should put as much distance between us and them.”

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We continued moving through the forest for about thirty minutes or so before we stopped at the edge. The walls of Retsas could easily be seen from our position, but it was still another half a kilometer of open ground between us and it. It looked like the forest used to come right up to the town but it was cut back to provide additional visibility for those who were walking the walls.

Fortunately there was a ditch on either side of the road leading to Retsas to provide us some safety, but it was still a fifty meter run. Ben couldn’t move as quickly as the rest of us, so Mason had Anja go first while her sister provided cover for us. As soon as Anja was across, Mason and I threw one of Ben’s arms around our necks and sprinted the distance.

Not a single shot was fired by the time all five of us got to the ditch, though we didn’t know if that was because no one was around, or people were wary about firing around safe zones. Mason had taken some time to look around with his monocular scope and saw that there were towers around the town at one hundred meter intervals. Each one was big enough to have multiple defenders in it. Near the entrance there were three people in each tower, one with a sniper rifle and two with heavy machine guns, while the rest of the towers only had one of each. That wasn’t even taking into account the roving patrols who were armed with either bolt-action rifles or assault rifles.

While the ditch did provide us with some protection, Retsas was sitting atop a slight incline, which meant that we were still vulnerable the entire way there. There was nothing we could really do about that, so after taking a short break Mason and I grabbed on to Ben just so we could move that little bit faster.

Thankfully we made it there without issue. One of the guards up on the walls turned and called down to whoever was manning the doors on the inside. They slowly swung open and a four-man squad rushed out, taking a position to cover us while one of them waved us in. We certainly weren’t going to stand around, so we quickly accepted the invitation.

The scene on the other side was about what you would expect on a world at this level of technology, though the biggest difference was that nearly everyone had guns. Whether that be a pistol on their hip or something bigger strapped around their shoulder, everyone had something to defend themselves with.

There were some cars and trucks moving around, or alien versions of the ones you might see on Earth, but there were far fewer than would usually be normal. It made sense when you realized that fuel is probably rather hard to come by. The few vehicles that we had come across were nearly entirely stripped of anything useful. It also meant that things like car batteries were probably pretty valuable. It’s too bad that it will probably be gone by the time we head back to our base.

“Welcome to Retsas!” a voice said from behind us.

We turned and saw an alien woman walk down the staircase leading up to the wall. She had blueish-grey skin and short black hair. Besides that, she would’ve looked almost human, if not for her being about seven foot tall, being heavily muscular and having larger ears. If I had to guess, I would put my money on her belonging to one of the ruling races of the Confederation; an Ork.

She had two heavily armed bodyguards behind her. One was a male Ork while the other was something I had never seen before. I couldn’t even tell if it was male or female because of the full suit it wore. It was similar to those old diving dresses with the large spherical helmet, though this one was almost entirely made out of glass or some other material. It also seemed to keep water in, rather than keep it out.

The occupant of the suit looked remarkably like an octopus, with the bulbous head and everything, but had six eyes rather than the normal two. It was also walking on two legs without an issue, though it was hard to tell if it was in some sort of mechanical suit or it had a humanoid body. Either way, it was clear that it wouldn’t be able to survive very long outside of its suit.

“It’s not polite to stare, you know,” the female Ork said, drawing my attention back to her.

“My apologies. My name is John and these are my friends, Mason, Ben, Anja and Sonja,” I replied, pointing each of them out.

“Nice to meet you all. My name is Araku and these are my guards, Zegred and Qish. I saw you looking at Qish. She is a Nazesin, if you were wondering. I’m wondering what race the five of you belong to as well, actually.”

“Erm.. we’d like to keep that to ourselves, if you don’t mind.”

“Suit yourselves,” she said before spreading her arms out to her sides. “Welcome to my town. There is only one rule: don’t start trouble. If you do, then you’ll find yourselves ejected and banned from entering ever again. If one of the guards sees you on approach, they’ll drop you as soon as you get within five hundred meters of Retsas.”

“Understood,” I nodded. “I wasn’t aware that people could own towns, though.”

“They can, but it’s definitely not easy. In the casual game mode there is a wipe that happens every year or so of real time, which is about four years of time in-game. It hasn’t happened since the game was finally released to the public, but it did happen a few times during the alpha and beta. When a wipe occurs, every town in every world will be run by NPCs. If you manage to kill all of the NPCs defending a town, as well as the boss in control of it, and hold it for a week afterwards, then the town is yours. Once it is yours, it is up to you to defend it.”

“Good to know,” Mason replied. “There is a hospital or something in town, right? Our friend’s vest absorbed a hit and some ribs might be broken.”

“Hospitals aren’t really needed in casual mode but we do have a small clinic. It is more of a store, really. Head down the main street for about two hundred meters and you’ll find it on your left,” she said.

“I’m assuming we’ll find the traders on the main street too?”

“That’s right,” she nodded.

She answered a few more of our questions before letting us go on our way. The first stop was the clinic to get Ben sorted out. When we arrived at the small one story building, it was clear why she said it was more of a store than anything else. That remained true when we walked inside, as there was a long glass counter with a variety of supplies on display. There weren’t a lot of supplies as it seemed to be more of a showcase, but there were two doors behind the counter. One of which probably led to a storage room. There wasn’t anyone manning the counter when we arrived, but there was a service bell. After ringing it once, we waited.

We didn’t have to wait long, though the woman who walked out of the back was another species that I didn’t recognize. She was short, at around four and a half feet tall and her skin tone was a very light pink. Actually, as she got closer I realized that it wasn’t skin at all, but very small and delicate looking scales. If the scales didn’t make it clear that she belonged to a race of reptilians, then the complete lack of hair, slits where a human’s nose would be and vertical pupils did. Oh and she also had a tail.

“Now that is a sight!” she smiled, revealing some very sharp, needle-like teeth. “I was not expecting a group of humans to walk into my shop!”

“You recognize our species?” Sonja asked.

The woman nodded. “Only from pictures and information on the Net that were brought back over a thousand years ago, but yes. It is very useful to know the physiology of any species I may come across in my line of work. I’m a doctor, you see. It is very interesting that a group of humans are playing The Escape, however. I didn’t think your species was technologically advanced enough to develop virtual reality technology, yet alone make contact with our region of space.”

“You’ll forgive us if we don’t want to delve into that,” I said. “Araku asked about our species and I told her the same thing I’m telling you.”

“Say no more, though Araku will probably find out sooner or later. She probably already has one of her men searching for information. You’re the first of your species to play The Escape to my knowledge and there are none in The Twelve Hells so human NPCs will now start spawning in the world.”

“What is The Twelve Hells?” Anja asked.

“You don’t know?” she asked in amazement. “The Twelve Hells is what this game is based upon, though there are some pretty big changes. The Twelve Hells are a set of twelve prison worlds in Confederation space. All of their criminals get sent to one of those twelve planets, be they terrorists, pirates or petty thieves.”

“Like The Escape, each of the twelve planets is at a different level of technology. The worst of all criminals are dropped onto Xagantu, which is the least technologically advanced world of the twelve. Criminals dropped there need to make do with wooden or stone weapons and have to kill animals for food and clothing. Igaobos is on the other end of the spectrum, and the world is no different than any other Confederation world with beam weaponry, hover cars and the like.”

“There are no life sentences to The Twelve Hells, as your crime determines which planet you are sent to. Once you’re dropped on the planet corresponding to your crime, you need to survive there for a year while making it to the spaceport on the far side of the planet. If you do that, then you will immediately be transferred to the next planet, if there is one. If you survive on Igaobos for a year and make it to the spaceport, then you will once again be free.”

“That doesn’t sound too difficult, and what is stopping criminals from being picked up by the organizations they belong to?” Mason asked.

“Besides the fleet group that defends each planet, you mean?” she replied with a chuckle. “Each planet has a planetary defense shield that would take a combined assault from many, many ships to bring down. It is also never dropped, so a ship can’t dart in while it is down and then dart back out once they’ve picked someone up. The only way through the planetary defense shield is through a small aperture that is above the spaceport. When criminals are being transferred in or out, that aperture only opens for a few seconds to let a small transport ship through before being close again.”

“And the difficulty?”

“I was getting to that. It may not sound difficult, but each prisoner is injected with a tiny inhibitor at the base of their skull, or wherever their brain might be located in their body. If you’re not familiar with inhibitors, they are devices that produce a type of energy that prevents the use of Skills and entirely negates the effect of Perks and Attributes. That’s where the planets get their name from, actually. Inhibitors are especially unnerving for species with natural abilities as those can’t be used either. Oh, and before you ask, each inhibitor also has a tiny explosive charge that explodes if it is messed with.”

“Alright, that does sound a lot harder.”

“Indeed. Oh, where are my manners. My name is Ta’z. What can I help you with today?”

We introduced ourselves as well and then explained Ben’s injury. She had him take off his tactical rig and his vest before lifting up his shirt. A pretty nasty bruise had already formed, but she led him into one of the back rooms which had a x-ray machine. After getting him ready and setting up, she quickly got an x-ray of his chest before throwing the image up so she could take a look at it.

“Well, you don’t have any broken ribs, but one of them is cracked,” she said. “If this was The Twelve Hells then you’d probably need to take it easy for a few weeks, but here we can fix you up in a day or so.”

She said Ben could put his shirt back on and then she led the five of us back to the front room.

“In the early alpha, healing used to take as long as it would naturally. There were no special pills or potions you could take, nor were there any med chambers you could be put into to heal faster. This naturally had a massive backlash which included people killing off their characters so they could respawn without the weeks or months of time they would’ve needed healing, which the developers didn’t like.”

“As a compromise, they put a number of items in the game that speed up healing, though it isn’t as fast as it is in the real world,” she continued as she opened up the display case and began taking items out of it. Once she seemed to have everything, she started explaining what each one was.

“These are your standard pain pills. They’re fast-acting and they’ll last you a few hours,” she explained, picking up the clear bottle containing lightly-colored green pills.

She picked up another clear bottle next, this time containing lightly-colored red pills. “These ones will accelerate the body’s natural healing by a factor of ten. If you get shot, make sure you remove the bullet, bandage the wound and then take one of these. They don’t work nearly as well on broken or fractured bones as long as you’re moving around, so only take one if you know you won’t be moving around too much.”

“These should be pretty self-explanatory,” she said, taking the cloth object that she had placed on the counter as she proceeded to unfold it. As she did so, there were two molded plastic pieces attached to the inside as well as a couple of straps. It was clearly a leg splint.

“Next up is the emergency field surgery kit,” she said, unsnapping the twelve inch long by six inch wide kit and opening it up. Inside were a whole host of items including everything you would need to perform surgery in the field.

After closing it up, she put it off to the side and then gathered the remaining items, which looked like colored markers. They even had caps and clips.

“These are single-use injectors for when you don’t have time to wait for the slower stuff,” she said as she took the cap off of the light green one and showed us the short needle on the inside. “This one is for pain. Just take off the lid and jam it into your arm or your leg and press the button on the bottom. It will kick in immediately and then you’ll be good to go.”

Aside from the injector for pain, there were three more that all did different things. The light red one was like the same-colored pills on steroids, the purple one was a hemostatic drug to promote blood clotting, and the orange one was a shot of pure adrenaline, otherwise known as epinephrine.

“Well, we’re pretty new to the game so I think the surgery kit and injectors are out of our price range. How much for two of everything else?” Mason asked.

“Twenty-eight credits,” Ta’z replied.

Mason reached into one of the pockets at his waist and retrieved a small pouch. After opening it up, he began pulling out coins of different colors. When he had enough, he placed them on the counter.

“Thanks! Be right back,” Ta’z said before turning around and heading into the other of the two doors behind her. When she came out a minute or so later, she had the items Mason requested. “Here you are!”

Mason handed one of each of the bottles to me, along with one of the splints, while he moved around Ben who was wearing the other backpack. Opening up one of the side pockets, he stored the other half.

We thanked Ta’z and left her store before heading to the traders next. We had a few things to sell off, like the cigarettes and the canned foods, as well as a couple of duplicate tools we had picked up. Aside from that, we also needed to grab a new vest for Ben and see if there were any tasks.

“Give me one of each of those pills, will you?” Ben asked. “And can one of you grab the bottle of water from my backpack?”

We stopped on the sidewalk and I opened up my duffle bag, giving him one of each pill before storing them. Once he had taken the pills and washed them down with the water, we continued on.

The first stop was the garage to sell off the duplicate tools we got but the owner wasn’t interested in buying them. It did give us the opportunity to check the prices on various items as well as see if there was anything he needed in particular. Fuel was naturally a hot ticket item at about one hundred credits for every ten litres, and car batteries were worth up to one hundred credits each, though it depended on how good the battery was.

We also found out that there is a barter system that all traders have to abide by, no matter which town you visit. If a trader is looking for a specific item or items, you can sell it for credits, or you can trade it for a special token. Those tokens could then be used for higher quality items at any of the traders. Batteries were one of the items that the owner offered tokens for, since they were so heavy and hard to carry. An example he gave was that we could trade in a number of tokens for high-quality weapons from the gunsmith or better armor from the armorer.

We thanked him for his time and then headed over to the blacksmith. There were a large number of melee weapons and other tools on display there, as well as the list of what he was looking for. There wasn’t a whole lot there, really. Just a list of metals and how much he was paying per kilogram. Stainless steel was only worth about five credits per kilogram, so the spare wrench and screwdriver we got amounted to a paltry three credits. Every little bit would help, however, since we only started with fifty credits, total.

The general goods store is where we sold off the cans of food and the cigarettes we had gotten. The labels on the cans were worn off and we didn’t know what they contained, but the man who ran the shop purchased them all the same. If the labels hadn’t been worn off we’d have gotten more for each can, but since it was impossible to tell what was inside without opening them, all we got was one credit per can. The pack of cigarettes gave us another seven credits, as well.

Because we didn’t know how many credits we would have left after visiting the gunsmith, we passed it and entered the armor store. The walls were completely covered in different types of chest and head protection, including the exact same armor that the five of us were all wearing. It was surprisingly cheap at only eight credits, but we got it for five by trading in the one Ben was wearing. We took a quick look on the board to see what sorts of materials armorers were looking for and then made our way to the gunsmith.

The visit to the gunsmith was the most lucrative of our stops; We got rid of the sawed off shotgun I had been using and used that money to get a long range sight and ammo for the bolt-action rifle we found in the first building. We also got a couple of cases of ammo for our pistols, just so we would have some spare ammo.

 It was also clear that we needed to save any expended casings as it would make any further ammo purchases cheaper, either by having them reloaded or trading them in to reduce the cost. Or we could reload them on our own, but that would be a ways off. We would definitely need to expand the base and then save enough credit to purchase all the equipment. That wouldn’t be the difficult part, though. Getting back to the base with said equipment would be.

“Alright, it was pretty late when we started and time in The Escape works the same way that it does in Battlestate. That means that it’s probably around 23:00 in the real world. We can either use some of our credits and purchase rooms in the inn so we can log out here, or we can make the trip back to our base. What do you guys want to do?”

“Do we have enough credits to stay at the inn?” Ben asked.

“Yeah, it’s about two credits per room and we’ve got twelve credits remaining.”

“Let’s just get rooms then. It’ll give Ben some time to heal up and that group will be gone the next time we pass through,” I said.

“Works for me. Let’s go,” Mason replied, leading the way to the inn.

Apparently there were two kinds of rooms to choose from, and each determined the price. The first one was the one we were going with, which was smaller than a prison cell. There was just enough room to lie down on the bed and close the door behind you, though it wasn’t for sleeping. Once you were in the room and the door was closed, you were immediately logged out of the game. It meant that your character couldn’t be killed and your equipment couldn’t be taken.

The other option was a normal room. It was larger with a slightly bigger bed and even a table and chair if you wanted to get some work done. It was the sort of room you got when you just wanted somewhere to pass some time while you waited for the sun to come back up, as moving around in the dark without night vision was an easy way to get killed. It was also twice the price.

We made our way up the stairs as soon as the rooms were paid for. The owner of the inn had given each of us a key and warned us that our characters would only be safe for twenty-four hours of real time. If we didn’t log in before the twenty-four hour window was up then we would lose everything on our character and spawn back at our base. It really drove home the need to get back to our base if we wanted to log out for a long period of time, or pay for one of the rooms for days in advance.

All of our rooms were right next to each other, so we all unlocked our rooms and entered them. I put my duffle bag at the head of the bed and then leaned over to close the door behind me. As soon as the door closed with a click everything went dark. A moment later I was standing in the lobby, so I willed myself to wake.

My friends began getting out of their pods shortly after I got out of mine and I saw that Tessa and my sisters were still logged in.

“Abi, please let Tessa and my sisters know that we’re calling it for the night whenever they log out.”

“Sure thing, Jonathan,” she replied.

“Thank you.”

It didn’t take long to get to our rooms thanks to the teleporters aboard. We said goodnight and then entered our respective rooms. Vixa ran over when the door opened, jumping around excitedly as I made my way into my room. Abi had an anti-teleportation field running throughout the entire ship, as people teleporting inside of a ship could have some very deadly consequences unless you knew exactly where you were going. The teleporters found on each deck were the exception since the departure and arrival points never changed. The result was that Vixa and the other Phenidae onboard had to get around by running, rather than teleporting everywhere.

I bent down to pick her up, giving her a quick scratch behind the ears before turning and closing the door behind me. I walked over to her feeders to make sure everything was working properly and then set her on the bed before heading to the bathroom so I could take a shower. Thankfully I had unpacked everything earlier, so I didn’t have to go digging around for my soap or shampoo.

When I was done, I made my way back to the bedroom where Vixa had already claimed her spot on the bed, curled up on one of the large pillows. Chuckling, I walked over to the closet and grabbed some underwear, quickly putting them on and then got into bed.

“Hey Abi, are there alarms in these rooms or do I need to set the alarm on my phone?”

She laughed before responding. “What time would you like to be woken at?”

“Eh, I don’t think we’re working out tomorrow and I feel like sleeping in. How about 08:00.”

“Done,” she replied.

“Cool. So I just looked around the room and didn't notice any light switches… how do I turn off the lights?”

“How do you shut them off at the base?” she asked with some amusement.

“Lights: Off,” I said, causing the room to immediately get dark.

“Goodnight, Jonathan. Goodnight, Vixa,” Abi said.

“Goodnight, you two.”

Vixa gave a little chirp of her own and then there was nothing but silence.

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

**Jonuth Kidravia’s Ship - Abi**

**08:20 Ship Time**

**August 24, 2019**

I wasn’t woken by Vixa barking my ear off, thankfully. Instead there was a gentle chime that slowly rose in volume until it woke me up. Vixa didn’t seem very impressed by it, however, and glared at me for a moment until I finally shut it off. Laughing, I had reached over, scratching her neck and giving her a kiss on the head before heading to the bathroom.

Once I did my business and got dressed, the two of us headed to the mess for some breakfast. I didn’t see any of my friends, though my mom was sitting with my dad while the two of them were talking with Tas and someone else I didn’t recognize. My mom saw me and waved me over, but I pointed over to the buffet line. She nodded and then went back to her conversation.

Vixa followed me over to the buffet line where I got a cup of coffee and a more traditional breakfast. I did get a couple of small pieces of the beef the dragons were cooking as well, but those were more for Vixa than they were for me. When I had everything I wanted, I headed over to the table to join my parents.

“Morning, everyone,” I greeted, sitting down next to my mom.

Vixa hopped up beside me and I handed a piece of the beef to her. She immediately snatched it up and began munching on it.

“Good morning, Jonathan. I want you to meet Kiri Ulgorsy, the woman in charge of protection for your sisters,” my mom said.

“Nice to meet you, Kiri,” I said, reaching across the table to take her hand. “I’ve heard good things.”

“A pleasure, sir,” she nodded.

“Originally Omar was going to take part in your training, but he is another of those who may be exposed. He’ll be staying in Pygmaean space to get stronger, so we needed someone else to take over for him. Kiri is that person. For the duration of the trip, you’ll be doing your usual training Monday through Thursday, but your weekends will be spent learning how to fight in hand-to-hand combat. The mornings will be dedicated to learning as a group and your sisters will be joining you to even things out when it comes to practicing. In the afternoon, the eight of you will be split up into two groups. Your friends will go with Tas, while you and your sisters will stay with Kiri while you learn Ikwar Kun.”

“What’s Ikwar Kun?” I asked, taking a sip of my coffee.

“It’s a form of hand-to-hand combat developed by a man named Ikwar Kun, as requested by your father. Every Spectre is required to learn it, and we are one of the only species in the known universe who are able to use it,” Kiri explained. “To learn Ikwar Kun, you need to have telekinetic ability. You have that ability since you scanned a dragon, we just need to ‘unlock’ it before you’ll be able to use it, as you did for your fire and frost breaths. While we’re working on that, I’ll also teach you how to modify your forms on your own so you can do it on the fly.”

“Why can’t anyone learn Ikwar Kun? Telekinesis is a Tier S skill.”

“People simply can’t lift enough with Telekinesis to use the form effectively. Sure, your friends could augment the strength of attacks and kicks, but they wouldn’t get the massive mobility boost that you and your sisters will end up getting. Why don’t you two give him a quick demonstration,” my mom said, looking between Kiri and my dad.

The two of them nodded and then a number of metal objects appeared in their hands. Both of them slapped the metal objects onto their arms and legs. Nothing happened at first, but the objects began moving until they completed a circle around the limb they were on, like rings. On each arm there was one just below the shoulder, one above the elbow and another below the elbow, with the final one being just above the wrist.

For the legs, it was similar, though there were only three sets; one above the knee, one below, and one above the ankle. When all of the rings were finished moving, the two of them threw two more objects on the ground and stepped onto them. They were originally just flat pieces of metal, but they began moving as well, until they, too, were secured. With that, the two of them moved over to one of the few vacant areas in the room.

“Those rings are built into the suits that Spectres wear, and there are a lot more of them, but we’re not always in our suits,” my mom explained. “You’ll be given a new suit when you start practicing, but watch.”

I turned my attention back to the two of them and watched as the two actually began levitating in the air. They didn’t start fighting right away, instead they began stretching themselves out while floating a few feet above the deck. When they were finally ready, the two of them faced each other and then moved until they were within ten feet of each other.

There wasn’t a sound to start them off, but the two of them suddenly began moving through the air faster than they would be able to move on the ground. They clashed, quieting the mess as people turned to watch the two of them spar. They moved almost like hummingbirds, staying in one place for a short time as they threw kicks and punches or blocked them, before suddenly moving and repeating the process.

Kiri was clearly the better of the two. Either my dad was out of practice or she was using Precognition to give her the edge. Either way, she was on the offensive while my dad was on the defensive. It didn’t seem like there was a lot of force behind her attacks, but she was darting around punching and kicking whenever she found a good opening. My dad was struggling just to intercept her strikes, rarely getting in one of his own. My mom confirmed that they weren’t going all out a moment later.

“Kiri would’ve won by now if this was a real fight, and not just because she has Precognition. The rings that each of them are wearing, as well as the two stirrups on their feet, allow them to use telekinesis to move their bodies around, something which isn’t normally possible. It is a very difficult form of martial arts to master because you need to control how each of the rings are moving at all times. The suits do make it a bit easier because along with the rings there is also a mesh that is built into them to provide more support, but it allows for even people as big as you to ‘float like a butterfly, sting like a bee’, as it were.”

“If those rings allow you to move your body around, then couldn’t you severely injure yourself if you’re not careful?” I asked.

“Oh, absolutely,” she replied. “Early on, there were a number of Spectres who accidently pulled their arms or legs out of their sockets, and in one case one actually pulled one of their arms right off. It was reattached and he was fine, but it is something that you’ll be eased into. You won’t be doing what the two of them are doing for many months down the road.”

We watched for a few more minutes, in which time my friends all entered the mess. They spotted my mom and I sitting there watching, so they walked over and joined us.

“What’s going on?” Mason asked. “How are they moving like that?”

“Good morning, Mason,” my mom said. “It’s a form of martial arts that Spectres use called Ikwar Kun. Kiri and my husband were just giving Jonathan a demonstration.”

“I don’t recall there being any abilities that let you move around like that. Levitation would explain the floating, but not the speed at which they are punching, kicking and blocking…” Ben said before trailing off. “Those rings… it has to be telekinesis, right? They’re using telekinesis to move their arms and legs to kick, punch and block, as well as move around as fast as they are. It’s not Levitation at all. I can’t imagine how hard that must be; controlling all of those rings and still be able to make precise movements like the two of them are.”

“Nicely done, Ben,” my mom replied. “You hit it right on the head with your analysis. They are, indeed, using telekinesis, but it isn’t the Tier S Telekinesis as it is too weak to allow them to do what they are doing. Both of them have visited the planet of Bryke-8 and scanned an animal called a Suprelar that is native to that world. They are very powerful in both telekinesis and telepathy. Jonathan would’ve had to go there eventually, if not for dragons having powerful telekinesis as well.”

“So humans can’t learn Ikwar Kun?” Anja asked

“Unfortunately not, I’m sorry,” my mom replied. “You may be able to increase the strength of your punches and kicks with Telekinesis using the bands, but Telekinesis isn’t powerful enough to lift you up and move you around.”

“Are you sure your people aren’t part werewolf?” Mason asked. “Because I’d like to sign up to get bitten if you are.”

My mom laughed. “No, I’m quite certain we’re not part werewolf.”

“Vampire?”

She just shook her head, her body shaking with mirth.

“Damn!”

“So what do you think?” my dad said as he and Kiri walked back over.

“I can’t wait to get started. How am I going to ‘unlock’ the ability, as you put it, though?” I asked Kiri.

“Well, I watched when you first learned how to breathe fire and frost and both times it was during moments of stress. The first time, the boss you were fighting was able to break through your Mana Shield, leaving you vulnerable. He then stepped into a punch aimed at your stomach and drove all of the air out of your lungs. That air was accompanied by a small jet of flame. After that, you were able to use your fire breath at will.”

“Your frost breath was similar. You were in a situation where hundreds of goblins were bearing down on you and it looked like you breathed in deeper than you usually did. When you expelled all of the air you breathed in, it was an icy wave, rather than a stream of fire. I’ve got something in mind that should help you with it. If not, then Shaemu has offered her expertise.”

“Sounds good. Did you guys get food yet?”

“Nah, we just got up,” Ben answered. “The girls caught us just before we entered the teleporter.”

“Go grab some food so you can be filled in on what is happening during the trip.”

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My friends and I hadn’t realized that we would be spending the trip training, though none of us were too unhappy about that. None of us really wanted to spend all day every day gaming, and that is likely what we would have ended up doing. There wasn’t much else to do, with this amount of people on board, at least. On the trip back there would be a lot more room and that would allow Abi to add in some things. Like a swimming pool.

We were all pretty excited to learn how to fight, though the twins were bummed that they couldn’t learn Ikwar Kun. Still, my mom did agree to give my friends each a Telekinesis Skill Gem when we got to Veria. With that skill, each of them would be able to augment the strength of their attacks, at a minimum. The twins were particularly interested in trying to bend throwing daggers and arrows mid-flight.

Training wouldn’t start up until tomorrow, so with nothing else to do for the day, the five of us headed up to the twenty-fourth deck and the VR pods. We weren’t heading into The Escape right away, instead we were going to play Battlestate for a few hours, maybe check to see if there were any jobs available or do a mining run. Before stepping into the pod I asked Abi to tell Tessa and my sisters where we were, in case they wanted to join us.

“You know, at least you’ll have some prior experience with telekinesis when you’re finally able to use it in the real world. Who knows, maybe you’ll even be able to use it when your eyes are open,” Anja said with a grin, once we were in-game.

“Yeah, yeah. So how are we going to do this? We can kill a bit of time checking for jobs, but if Tessa and my sisters don’t join us soon then you won’t be able to join us in your frigate. She was your pilot, right?”

Sonja nodded. “We did get a little bit of practice when there was downtime, but we need her for those moments when shit hits the fan.”

“Well, let’s head over to The Fenrir and Ben can look for something for us to do in the meantime.”

“The Fenrir huh? I like it,” Anja said.

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Everything was just as we had left it, though nearly a week had passed in-game since we had last played. The Fenrir’s systems were shut down for the duration, so it took a few minutes to get everything up and running. As soon as the computers were up, however, Ben got to work checking the job board to see if there was anything worth doing. So far there hadn’t been any jobs that were more lucrative than what we were doing, but perhaps that would change today.

While he was doing that, I headed to my quarters and gathered some of the metal balls that I was practicing moving around using telekinesis. Anja wasn’t wrong about me having prior experience. If the game was as close to reality as possible, then there was a very real possibility that the learning curve wouldn’t be nearly as steep. Once I had them, I headed back up to the bridge. My goal for today would be moving the balls around while my eyes were actually open.

“Any luck?” I asked when I arrived.

“Nah, not really. There are a few delivery jobs but they pay peanuts, as well as an escort job. It pays very well, but it’s a three week trip. That’s not something that we can really do.”

“Agreed. Let’s wait a bit and see if the girls show. If they don’t, then the five of us will head out on another mining run.”

“It’s been a while since we played last. Isn’t that a little risky if the other group has gotten some upgrades since then?” Anja asked. “It would be an hour until we could jump back out.”

“Not quite,” Ben replied, spinning his chair around. “That little inconvenience went away when we upgraded to this ship. Well for trips as short as this one, at least. I think we can travel in hyperspace for something like fifteen hours straight before needing to drop out for the automated maintenance. If we get there and we can’t handle the other team then we’ll head to the next closest asteroid field and try our luck there. It would add another three hours to our trip though.”

“That’s fine, it only takes us around two hours to get to our usual asteroid field when it used to take double that.”

“It’s going to be quite a bit slower as well, since I’ll have to go back to finding asteroids. Hopefully the girls join us, since that speeds it up by a ton,” Mason said.

Nodding, I closed my eyes and began practicing with telekinesis. It was effortless now, and I could move dozens of the small metal balls around at a time. I would definitely need to take some time to use them as they were meant to be used. When I could move them with my eyes open, of course.

About twenty minutes went by before I got bored of waiting, though it was a little humorous that twenty minutes in-game was only five minutes in the real world.

“Be right back,” I said before logging out of the game and exiting my pod.

Just as I was climbing out of my pod, the door opened and the girls walked in.

“Was just coming to check if the four of you were coming.”

“Sorry, we were up pretty late last night playing The Escape, so we slept in a bit. We were grabbing a quick bite to eat when Abi let us know that the five of you were logging in to Battlestate,” Alexis said. “I assume we’re going on another mining run?”

“Yeah,” I nodded. “Ben did a search and there are no jobs worth doing, so it’s back to the asteroid field. A week or so has passed in-game since we played last, though, so we’ll probably have a fight ahead of us.”

“Looking forward to it. Alright, we’ll be in shortly.”

Nodding again, I leaned back into my pod and closed it. Once I was back in the lobby I immediately logged back into the game.

“They’re on their way. You two should probably head back over to your ship.”

The two of them immediately turned and ran to the exit so they could board their frigate. While they were doing that, I put in the course to take us to the asteroid field. Just in case, I also had Ben send me the coordinates for the secondary asteroid field, in case we got into a situation that we couldn’t handle. It would be a lot faster if I could just immediately jump us back into hyperspace, rather than calculate a new course.

As soon as the girls were clear of the berth that The Fenrir was in, I got clearance to leave. It was quickly given and the berth began depressurizing. I took us out as soon as that was done and the doors opened, burning for only a few seconds before cutting the engines, allowing us to drift while we waited for the girls to catch up.

That didn’t take long at all and we were off.