**Menseio Station, orbiting Veria**

**Jonuth Kidravia’s Ship - Abi**

**14:09 Ship Time**

**September 11, 2019**

When it came time to look over Oya’s initial sketch of Mason’s design, I was both surprised and intrigued. Surprised in that he didn’t meet or exceed the six million cubic meter limit I had imposed--he didn’t even come close, using a little over half--and by the overall design of the ship.

The design was that of a yacht, and not a space yacht, but of an actual water yacht that you might find on Earth. It had an overall length of approximately three hundred fifty meters which was very big for a yacht, but it was a yacht all the same. It didn’t look like it would be a very space worthy design, however. Not with the hundreds of windows. It was when he told me the total volume of the ship, which was somewhere around one-point-two million cubic meters that I knew he was up to something.

“Alright, out with it,” I said.

He smiled and Oya brought out a second design that was just as long, but was a whole lot wider and taller, and it actually looked like a spaceship. There wasn’t anything special about the ship, though like most designs it was wider at the back than the front. The overall dimensions were three hundred fifty meters long, one hundred fifty meters wide and one hundred meters tall. If he was building a Borg cube or something, it would be close to the limit but Oya, working her magic, was able to bring the design down. It was four-point-seven million cubic meters in size, which told me exactly what Mason wanted.

“Both?” I asked, to which he nodded immediately.

“The yacht isn’t just a yacht, either, but as cool as all this is, it isn’t home, if you know what I mean. I’m sure I’ll return to Earth pretty often, and I doubt that my mom would ever want to leave other than for a pseudo vacation like this trip, but with the first design, she would be able to travel back and forth at will. Can you bring up the design again, Oya?”

She nodded and the smaller ship was back on her tablet.

“The ship would be both space worthy and sea worthy, with the former being possible through metal plates. Oya didn’t have time to create another sketch of how it would look, but when ready to head into orbit, thick plates would come up over the windows and lock into place. They won’t be as thick as a regular ships’ hull would be, but I’m told that it would protect the occupants well enough, especially made out of something like Warvynium. With or without forcefield active, the ship would also be fully submersible as well, but they won’t know how deep it can go until it is actually built.”

“Now normally the engines in ships on Earth take up quite a bit of room, but we’ll be upgrading from diesel engines to two smallish power cores that will power one pretty beefy engine and the four thrusters on the back. It won’t be breaking any speed records in space, but it should be able to move a hell of a lot faster than anything else on the water. Still, the engine and the two power cores still take up less room than a diesel engine would, so we get to have some fun with the rest of the design. Do you know what these are?” he asked, pointing to two pairs of tubes that ran parallel with the ship.

One thing immediately came to mind. "Torpedo tubes?"

"Missile tubes, actually. They wouldn't be nearly as big as those massive ones you're planning on using, but they would be pretty respectable. I was thinking about a mass driver or two, but they're such a power hog when charging."

"So what? This ship is basically going to be a pleasure craft, right? Unless you or your mom are going to be hosting wild parties on it, then go all out. You would only need a crew big enough to man all the stations and keep it in working order. You could make a ship that size ten percent living spaces while the rest would be dedicated to offense or defense, or both. I know one thing for sure though, we both know that this is going to be a gift for your mom, so you need to either get her in on the design, or get a woman to design it for you. Done right, it could almost be like a luxury home, all while still being able to bring the pain. So what about the other ship? What are you doing with that one?"

"No idea yet, honestly. I didn't know whether or not you would say yes to two ships, so we just worked on making sure that both would fit under the limit if you did. No point in going into a lot of detail if it was one or the other. I probably would've just gone with the yacht in that case."

"It doesn't matter to me, the cost wouldn't differ much anyways. You could've gone with several thousand fighters if you wanted to. In fact, that would be rather cheap in comparison."

“Anyways,” Mason said, completely ignoring the part about the fighters. “I think I want a ship that is very speedy. Obviously nothing is going to be as fast as those new missile ships since they’re like twenty percent engines, but something faster than the average. For weapons, I don’t know. I’m thinking about ion cannons paired with some powerful turreted railguns. Bigger than gauss cannons, but smaller than mass drivers. Somewhere in the middle. You can do that, right?”

Hayir nodded. “Using human measurements, the railguns on the initial design for Jonathan’s heavy transports are capable of firing solid projectiles with a maximum diameter of three hundred twenty millimeters. Those can easily be scaled up to whatever you like.”

“How big are the rounds in something like the Grasshopper’s gauss cannons? Just for reference,” Mason asked.

“Around forty-two millimeters in diameter,” Oya answered. “That’s rounded up, as our system of measurement and your own don’t match up perfectly.”

Mason whistled upon hearing how big the rounds were. When I looked at him quizzically, he explained. “I know you said that the rounds fired from the gauss cannons were forty percent larger, but I thought you meant in total mass, not diameter. The GAU-8 already shreds through armor using high-explosive incendiary rounds or the depleted uranium armor-piercing rounds, but the gauss cannons are significantly more powerful. On lightly-armored craft, I bet that the gauss cannons suffer from over penetrating when using a round primarily made out of depleted uranium or tungsten. Actually, in space they probably don’t suffer from that at all when you take the vacuum of space into account.”

“What about the overall length of the barrels on the heavy transports?” Mason asked, turning back to look at Hayir.

“I’m not exactly sure, but it is somewhere between four-point-five and five meters. You can make barrels longer or shorter, but you should take three things into account,” he answered. “The first is the velocity of the round being propelled down the barrel. The longer the barrel, the more coils can be added, increasing the velocity and destructive power with each one. Second is power. The more coils you have, the more power you need to fire them at maximum power. Lastly, size. The longer the barrels are, the more spaced out they will need to be so they don’t interfere with each other. Most ships have turrets that can rotate three hundred sixty degrees, with a firing arc of one hundred eighty degrees. They naturally have safeguards in place so one turret doesn’t destroy another turret, but if you have long barrels and turrets that are close together, then that complicates things.”

“I know exactly what you mean,” Mason replied. “I’m just trying to get a sense of how big the rail guns should be. While they would probably be more than sufficient in the atmosphere, a three hundred twenty millimeter round isn’t *that* big. At least I don’t think it is. What…”

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It took a while for Mason to eventually settle on what type of weaponry he wanted on the ship. After that, they focused on the engines, thrusters, shields, and much of the other things that one needed to take into account when designing a ship. Eventually, I interrupted them, since Mason would have plenty of opportunity to finalize the design before we left for Earth, and he could always send Oya his thoughts. There was about thirty minutes before we needed to leave, and I had something else that I needed to get the ball rolling on as well.

“Abi has sent you four separate ideas we want you to mock up for us, Oya,” I said.

She nodded and typed on her tablet, and began speaking without looking up. “Let me see… two tanks, an armored personnel carrier and a mobile missile launcher? Some of the vehicles for your heavy transports, I presume?”

I nodded. “And not just any vehicles. These ones will be rather unique, and there is no real restriction on the size of the first tank on the list. Make it as small as you can, while allowing it to project a forcefield around it with a minimum diameter of twenty meters, as well as the ability to shroud. The gun on it doesn’t need to be that large, as it would fulfill the role of what we would call an infantry tank on Earth.”

“The second tank doesn’t need to have a forcefield capable of extending as far outside of the tank, but we want it to have one. We want it to be able to hover and shroud as we want its main defense to be its ability to hide. In terms of armament, we want something like the railguns on the heavy transport, but fixed in place in the hull. That negates the need for a full-sized turret, but it would need a gauss cannon for anti-personnel and anti-aircraft capability. There should be an image accompanying the rest of the files, giving you an idea of what it might look like.”

She tapped a few times on her tablet and then made a gesture towards the hologram, and an image appeared. “This one?”

“Yup! It’s called the Stridsvagn 103B, also affectionately known as the S-Tank. It was developed by a country called Sweden shortly after the end of the second world war, and as you can see, they elected to go without a turret. It was aimed by turning the entirety of the hull, while also using hydraulic systems to pivot the front of the tank up or down. Now the S-Tank was primarily a defensive tank as Sweden was worried about their neighbors to the East, but the tank we want would be capable of either offense or defense. With the shroud, it would be able to hide in plain sight, allowing it to get surprise attacks off, and with the shield it would be able to stand toe-to-toe with other tanks, and win. In theory, at least.”

“An intriguing design,” Hayir said. “Recoil might be a concern if you want it to hover rather than be on the ground, but I suppose that can be worked around in the prototype stage, or you can leave it to the individual crews.”

“Yeah, Abi figured that there would need to be thrusters on the back of the tank, which would help counteract the recoil while also allow the tank to move into position faster, or make a quick escape, again, in theory. The APC and the missile launcher are pretty straight forward in comparison, I think, though having a shroud on both would be a plus. “

Oya nodded. “I’ll have to confer with some people who deal primarily with ground vehicles, but I’m sure I’ll have a design of each of them for you to look over before you leave. Speaking of which, the two of you should probably be going, if you’re planning on cleaning up a bit or changing before we go.”

I nodded. “That’s why I interrupted. I wanted to let you know about these four ideas we had before we left.”

“You still haven’t said where we’re going,” Mason said, looking right at me.’

“I’d let you know if I knew. Ask her,” I said, thumbing towards Zaszi who was sitting behind me.

“Hah, like that’ll happen,” he replied.

I turned around to see that Zaszi had a smile on her face, but she didn’t say a single word.

“Anyways, we’d better get going then. See you two in a bit?”

Ercan nodded. “We’ll see you in a bit.”

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Rather than lead us through all of the teleporters and back to the hangar, Zaszi instead opened up a portal directly from Ercan’s office to the ramp leading up and into Abi. Mason and I headed to our respective rooms, showered and put on a clean set of clothes, and then stepped into our new suits. Once we were done, we met up with our friends and Vixa, whom they had been looking after for most of the day.

They, too, were in their new suits, as were the majority of people we had seen as we traveled the hallways, en route to the ramp leading us outside of the ship. When we had arrived, Mason and I had noticed that things had changed much in the short time that we were inside of the ship. The six Grasshoppers had been moved out of Abi’s landing bay and the Watchdogs were filing into them. When they loaded, the ramps closed and then all six of them lifted off, turned, and then exited the hangar through the dual airskin shields.

When I looked around the hangar, I saw a very familiar scene, though everyone wasn’t dressed up in dresses or suits this time. No, this time they were all dressed in suits of armor that differed minimally. It seemed that the armor that had been distributed to my friends and I had also been distributed to the many people present. The only people that weren’t wearing the suits were some of the members of The Indomitables, with three people in particular drawing most of the attention. Without saying anything, Vixa and I walked over.

“Jonathan! How are ye’?” the apparent heir to the Dvergr throne, Tala Telar, asked. “I heard ye’ got shot!”

I nodded. “A round from a gauss cannon. It’s all healed up now though. You remember Vixa?”

“I would expect nothin’ less and aye, I do. Hiya, Vixa!”

“So who are your shadows?” I asked, gesturing towards the two men in mechs even bigger than hers. They were colored in the same shade of red and with her family crest on the torso.

“I guess my da’ found out that ye’ were here, and he knows about the bounty and the most recent attempt. Apparently, he also knows tha’ I’ve been in close proximity to ye’, so he sent these to bozos to watch over me. They can’t have their heir up and die on ‘em.”

“Only two? I figured there would be more. I’ve got like ninety.”

“Hey, it’s not a contest!” she laughed. “Nah, there is another team watching little Marra, but the rest of the team is waitin’ at our destination.”

“Where is that, by the way?”

“Uh-uh,” she replied. “I’ve already been told not to tell ye’ where we’re goin’. Ye’ll find out when everyone else does.”

I grinned. “Worth a shot.”

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My friends ended up walking over and joining us, but before long, there were a hundred or so people gathered and all of us were called over where a bunch of people were waiting. That included Zaszi and her team, my mom and dad, my sisters, Ercan, Oya and Hayir as well as Tessa and her parents. Surprisingly, of all of them, it was Tessa to speak.

“Welcome, everyone! I’m sure you’re wondering what the big mystery is, and why you were asked to wear your armor, or were given some if you didn’t have any at all. It’s a security precaution, first and foremost and while we’re not expecting today to be dangerous, it is better to be prepared than not.”

“In a few short moments, a portal will open and everyone will head on through. I will tell you now that our destination is the WI stadium where we’ll be watching the Verian Mostzals go up against the Grenduhr Blacksmiths!”

There were a few cheers throughout the hanger, but none was louder than that of Tala Telar.

“Mostzals? Hah! The Blacksmiths are gonna mop the floor with ‘em!” she shouted.

There was some additional cheering and yelling back and forth, but Tessa was soon able to continue.

“Now, as I was saying… We’ll be watching the Mostzals go up against the Blacksmiths today. For those of you who have no idea what is going on, I’ll explain that now. The Mostzals and the Blacksmiths are two roatag teams, which are part of the Galactic Roatag Premier League, or the GRPL.”

“The GRPL consists of a sixty-three game season in which all sixty-four teams play each other once. After the regular season is over, the top thirty-two teams make the playoffs while the bottom sixteen teams enter the relegation tournament. In the relegation tournament, the bottom sixteen teams in the GRPL are joined by the top sixteen teams of the Galactic Roatag Major League, or GRML.”

“In the relegation tournament, teams are assigned randomly to one of four groups of eight, where each team will proceed to each play three games against other teams in their group. The top four teams in each group by the end of the tournament advance back to the GRPL for the next season, while the bottom four teams in each group are demoted to the GRML.”

“The playoffs are nothing special in terms of how they work. The thirty-two teams are numbered one through thirty-two and seeded into the tournament with one playing against thirty-two, two playing against thirty-one, et cetera. Each series is a best of nine, however, with the final being a best of eleven.”

“We’re only about three quarters of the way through the season, so you won’t see any playoff games today, but I can promise you an entertaining and extremely competitive match. To give you some background, Grenduhr and Veria are two of the original founding teams of the league when it started two thousand, six hundred and twelve years ago. They’ve been rivals all of that time, and that rivalry has only grown more hostile and competitive, especially over the last decade or so.”

“For nine straight years, Veria has defeated Grenduhr in the regular season, but in the four times they have met in the playoffs during that time, Grenduhr has won. They’ve all been extremely close as well, with three of them going to the ninth game and the other ending after the eight.”

“Now, many of you are probably wondering just what roatag is. The easiest way to describe it would be sort of a mix between touch American football, football or soccer, and ice hockey. It is a full contact, thirty versus thirty sport where each team designates three players on their team as Runners. A Runner’s job is to basically run around the field while avoiding the other teams players’ attempts at grabbing a flag attached to their waist. If a flag is stolen by the opposing team then they automatically gain three points, and if a team is in possession of all six flags, then they automatically win the game.”

“That isn’t it, though. Every player wears a pair of hover skates, and this is where the comparison to both soccer and ice hockey comes in. While the flags could be considered the main objective, a team can also win by scoring more goals than the other team has points by the end of the game, using a ball that isn’t dissimilar from a soccer ball. If Team A has scored ten goals and Team B has scored three goals and stolen two flags, then the final score would be ten to nine. Everyone with me?”

There were nods all around the room and Mason and I looked at each other with big grins on our faces. It sounded exactly like our kind of game.

“Oh! One more thing. To make the game as fair as possible, especially with many different species taking part, every player who one day hopes to make it to the big league is absolutely restricted from entering dungeons whatsoever, to make sure that they are all level one. Players are tested regularly and if they are more capable than they otherwise should be, then they are suspended immediately while being the subject of a full investigation. There are other rules in place as well to prevent some species from having massive advantages over others, but it is as fair as it can possibly be, at present.”

“Anyways, enough of my rambling. Zaszi, I think we’re ready,” she finished.

“Thank you, Tessa,” Zaszi said as she stepped forward. “Now, Mr. Warvyn has graciously allowed us to use his suite this evening, which is more than spacious enough to fit everyone here, and still have enough room to fit a hundred or so more people. Once we arrive there, you will be restricted from leaving the suite to explore the stadium for the duration of the game. When it is over and it is time to depart, a portal will be formed leading back here.”

“During the game, there will be waiters and waitresses who will be around to take orders for food and drinks, all of which are completely free. There are also bathrooms and a full bar in the suite, so you should have no need to leave the suit whatsoever. If you do wish to leave the suite, then track down myself or any member of my team, the four of which are behind me, and we will open up a portal back here for you. Keep in mind that it is a one way trip. Are there any questions?”

The volume picked up a little bit, but no one asked any questions. After waiting for a minute or so, Zaszi turned and signaled to Zogyr, who brought up both of his hands and opened up a portal. Ercan, Oya and Hayir were the first to pass through it, though others weren’t far behind. Before long, Zaszi turned towards the rest of us and waved us through.

As I was walking towards it with my friends and Vixa in tow, I heard the sound of engines spooling up behind us.

[I guess you’ll be watching over us this evening?] I asked.

[Indeed,] she replied. [I’ll be in geostationary orbit over the stadium and the six Grasshoppers will be spread out evenly around it. Together, we’ll be scanning the area to ensure that a cloaked ship doesn’t get anywhere near the stadium.]

[Sounds good. I also just had an idea for an upgrade to the Grasshoppers, but I’ll tell you about that later.]

[Alrighty. Enjoy the game, and in the miniscule chance that someone gets passed all of the security, don’t do anything stupid.]

[I won’t,] I promised, before stepping through the portal.

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When we arrived on the other side, we were all standing inside of a large, rectangular room that had a large glass window covering one side. There were a few rows of expensive cushioned chairs on multiple levels close to it and behind those were a number of small tables with chairs positioned looking towards the playing field. In the middle of the back wall was a bar with stools and many screens, so people didn’t necessarily need to watch the game through the glass if they didn’t want to.

Everyone that had come through before us had made their way over to a table or had already taken a seat in one of the cushioned chairs, but I wanted to see what the playing field actually looked like. I was expecting something like a soccer field, and that wasn’t too far off. What was insane was just how large the field was.

[Abi, how big is a standard soccer field?]

[One hundred five meters by sixty-eight meters. Why do you ask?]

[Just wondering how much bigger this roatag field is.]

She chuckled. [Six hundred forty-six meters long, and two hundred two meters wide. The hover skates the players use allow them to get from one side of the field pretty quickly, and that combined with the size of the field and the amount of players playing at a time necessitates the large size. Before hover skates were developed, the field was about a quarter of the size it is now. Much bigger than a rink or a football field, huh?]

[Yup,] I replied.

As I stood there leaning on the railing that separated the cushioned chairs from the small tables, Tessa walked up, bumping my hip as she did so. When I looked over, I saw that Vixa was in her arms.

“Hey. So you set all this up, huh?” I asked.

She smiled and nodded. “Hover skates aren’t just a way for kids to get around. They also play a huge part in what is probably the biggest sport in this region of the galaxy. After you took me skating and talked about hockey, I thought you would appreciate it. I’ve been here a few times since my dad does so much work with Mr. Warvyn. I contacted him while we were on our way here and asked if he would allow us to use it for a game.”

“I see. So how does this work, exactly, especially with the field being so big? Even from up here there is no way that we’ll be able see the entire field. Not with it being well over six hundred meters long.”

“Well, there are two ways to go about that. For Scyftans, like you and I, we can simply change our eyes and that will suffice. For others, special glasses are available that will magnify everything to make it easier to follow. If one doesn’t want to wear the glasses, then the screens are the next best bet,” she finished, pointing up at the large screens that were above the glass. “Oh, I forgot about these new suits. Each one comes equipped with a feature that can magnify whatever you’re looking at, so that is another option.”

I nodded. “So what about the game itself? You gave a little rundown, but you didn’t go too in depth. I also noticed that you compared it to a couple of games from Earth.”

“As soon as I knew it was happening and that I would be the one telling everyone about it, I did a little bit of research so I would be able to explain it a bit better. I suppose you want to know how the game is split up and things like that?”

“Yeah. How long do games last, are there periods or quarters or something similar?”

She nodded and then explained how it worked. “So in the regular season, games last for ninety minutes and are split into six periods of fifteen minutes each, with ten minutes inbetween each period. If the game is tied at that point, then it goes to sudden death overtime, just like many sports on Earth. The difference is that in overtime, goals don’t matter whatsoever and there is no time limit. At that point, the first team to steal a flag from the other team is the winner, so games often end up in a big brawl. Players from each team try to get past the defenders of the other to grab a flag. It usually doesn’t take very long at all.”

“It’s pretty simple, otherwise, and is much like soccer. Highly competitive, full contact soccer. It differs from team to team and species to species, but a portion of the players will be assigned to defend the players holding the flags, while the other portion tries to score goals. It gets harder and harder as one team accrues more of the flags, because only one flag can be held by a player at a time. So team A might have five of the flags, but since they need to pull more players back to defend the flag holders, that leaves them with less players to actually score goals.”

“What happens if a player picks up a flag and they already have one? Are there penalties?” I asked

“Only a few. Since it is a full contact sport, all contact to the head is banned, even accidental head contact. If it happens, the offending player is removed from the game and one of that teams’ flags is handed over to the other team. It can be a game-losing penalty, but brain injuries are incredibly difficult to heal.”

“If a player has a flag and closes their hand on another one, even to throw it to a teammate, that player is penalized, and must forfeit their flag to the opposing team. That rarely happens though, because the player will often take their flag and toss it to a teammate or onto the ground, before grabbing another one. Using abilities to acquire a flag is also a big no-no, and they also incur a penalty of a flag being forfeited over to the other team.”

“That’s about it, really. There are a few other sportsmanship penalties, but they aren’t nearly as severe. Because players being injured isn’t a huge concern, there isn’t really the need to create as many rules that need to be enforced.”

“So what about the size difference between species? I mean, Dvergr and Pygmaeans are relatively close in height, but what about something like Jotunn going up against a smaller species, or Scyftans shifting into different species to gain an advantage?”

“Size is pretty much a non-issue. There is a Jotunn team, but they rarely make it to the premier league. While they can run quite fast, they aren’t nearly as nimble as a Pygmaean might be, which makes it hard for them to grab the other teams’ flags. They can defend their own like no other species can, but they’re too easy to evade. As for Scyftans, there are many rules in place to prevent us from having too much of an advantage. For example, at the start of each match, the captain of the team chooses a form to transform into for that match, if they choose to transform at all. The rest of the team can only use that form, and they must remain in that form for the entirety of the game.”

“I just named Jotunn as an example, I didn’t think they would actually have a team considering they’re part of the Confederation.”

“There are many species from the Confederation that have teams, even though the Confederation is at war with our people,” she replied. “They aren’t at war with any of the other species though, and they allow teams to pass through their borders freely. After heavy inspection, of course. It would take something big to get the Confederation banned, and their leadership definitely doesn’t want that. It’s very good for morale, and it makes them a fair bit of credits in which to fuel their war with. That isn’t to say that the games between Scyftans and Confederation species aren’t the most entertaining, however. They’re just as competitive, if not more so than the game we’ll be watching this evening. Speaking of which…”

It wasn’t even close to being night time, but the entirety of the stadium went dark. After a few moments, an energetic female voice came over the many speakers located around the stadium and even inside the suite. As she spoke, multiple spotlights were trained on one of the entrances to the left-hand side of the field. Suddenly there was a shower of sparks, and a group of people barreled out of the tunnel.

I switched my natural eyes to eagle eyes to get a better view and it was clear that they were the Grenduhr Blacksmiths, as the team was entirely composed of short and stocky men and women. All of them wore red and black skin tight uniforms that had a hammer striking an anvil on their chests. The suits themselves looked more like armor, as my eyes picked out the edges of thin metal plates that were likely sandwiched between two layers of material, giving them some added protection. The uniform was topped off with a pretty sophisticated helmet, which was similar to the one on Tala’s mech. As they skated towards the field, the leader’s faceplate opened up in the middle, allowing her face to be seen as she waved to the crowd.

Her reception was audible even from inside the suite, as the mostly Pygmaean crowd booed her and her team relentlessly. Once they got to the middle of what was apparently their side of the field, they immediately split into two groups and formed up together. It was hard to see what they were trying to do at the start, but it soon became clear. The smaller of the two groups formed into a shape that resembled a blacksmith’s hammer, while the second, larger group formed into an anvil. When the two groups were formed, the smaller team moved towards the larger one, appearing as if a massive hammer was striking an even larger anvil.

Tala immediately started shouting in her native language as if the people below could hear her, and there were a few Pygmaeans in the suite with us that good-naturedly booed her in response.

“The woman who was leading them out is the captain of the Blacksmiths, Naera Thalgrim, and she has been for twenty-one years now. In that time, she has led them to three championships, including two back to back in 12603 and 12604. In both those years, she and her team went through the Mostzals and she was impossible to catch. In the forty-one games in the 12603 playoffs and thirty-nine games in the 12604 playoffs, her flag wasn’t stolen even once,” Tessa informed me.

Just as I was about to respond, the field became utter darkness once again, and the spotlights moved over to one of the entrances at the other side of the field. There were no sparks or fireworks of any sort this time around. Instead, one large creature after another came out of the tunnel. There were three of them total, and they were all reptilian lizards of some kind, though ones with three pairs of legs. They had jagged, swept back scales along their entire bodies, with imposing head crests. Each had a singular long tail, but one that split into two, razor-sharp prongs that definitely looked like they could be used to spear and kill prey.

The last of the three actually came out of the tunnel upside down, as it had apparently been climbing on the ceiling of the tunnel. As soon as each was clear of said tunnel, their riders commanded them and they each went off in a different direction. The stands around the entire field didn’t start until they were at least five meters off the ground, which allowed two of the creatures to actually run sideways around the stadium. As they did so, the fans sitting in the lower bowl reached out to touch them as they ran by.

The third of the creatures was the largest, and rather than run around the edge of the field like the other two, it’s rider actually commanded it to jump up into the stands, instead. There were barriers made out of concrete or some other material spaced out every ten meters or so, and the creature effortlessly made the leap to each one, making seven total jumps before turning towards the field and leaping down to it.

As it had been drawing the attention of much of the crowd, the other two had made remarkable progress around the field. At the same moment that the largest one jumped down to the playing field, so too did the other two. If you had drawn a line between the three of them then a triangle would have been formed, and one that was rapidly shrinking as the closed in on the visiting team, who were still in their hammer and anvil formation.

The three animals looked like they were going to run through the Grenduhr Blacksmiths, but at the very last moment, the riders commanded their animals to leap into the air, easily clearing the dvergr assembled below, and narrowly missing each other by meter centimeters. Credit goes to the Blacksmiths as they didn’t flinch at all, but it was likely that they had been through such a spectacle before.

As the three riders turned and formed up as they headed to their side of the field, they removed their helmets and waved to the adoring crowd. The noise and the vibrations being felt because of it was like nothing I had ever heard or felt, but the stadium really put the ones on Earth to absolute shame.

“Mostzals, I presume?” I asked, referring to the reptilian animals.

“That’s right,” Tessa said. “They’re native to Veria and are incredibly well protected. So much so that they are in no danger of going extinct anytime soon. Their numbers are in the millions, but they’re protected against poachers or people who want to capture them to use them as steeds or in dungeons.”

“That’s Oztas Atalar on the biggest one, and Aylin and Ayben Korun on the two smaller ones. Aylin and Ayben are fraternal twins, and the only pair of twins currently in the GRPL. Together, the three of them form up part of the team’s leadership, with Atalar being the captain and the twins being two of the assistant captains.”

“They’re part of a new changing of the guard, as they’ve been on the team for about thirty years or so now, but now it’s their team with the old leadership group retiring about three years ago. It actually worked, as the Mostzals won the championship two years ago, and lost in the semi-final last year. They picked up a very good Runner in the off season, so they should have a very good shot at the championship this year, assuming they don’t face the Blacksmiths at some point. They always seem to have bad luck against them.”

“So I notice that there are many more than thirty people for each team,” I replied as the teams went back over to the side of the field where there were many benches set up.

“Yup! It’s thirty versus thirty, but each team is allowed to carry fifteen additional players in case of injuries during the game, and also as substitutions. It’s such a rough sport that injuries are inevitable. Sometimes it's an injury that keeps them out of the rest of the game, but other times a player can be taken to a med chamber immediately and then be good later along in the game. Teams need someone to replace them during that time, however. And while it hasn’t happened in quite a long time, especially with advances in medical technology, teams can also call up players from their affiliate teams if they’re short on players.”

“So the rest down there are coaches and assistants?”

“Mhmm,” she replied. “Since everyone is level one, they don’t exactly have the staying power like the vast majority of people do. Each team employs people to make sure that the players remain hydrated and are good to go for the duration of the game. During intermissions, you’ll see physiotherapists going from player to player to massage their legs to make sure that blood is pumping optimally, especially as the game goes on. The top players can end up playing the entire game if the score is close, and as such are prone to cramping up.”

I nodded, understanding that. “All of the popular sports on Earth have restrictions on leveling as well since players are drafted when they’re seventeen or eighteen years old in a lot of cases. Because of that, you’ll often see hockey players drinking pickle juice during shifts, especially during overtime where they can be playing upwards of thirty or forty minutes a night during the playoffs.”

“Pickle… juice…?” she asked.

“Yeah. I don’t know how it works, and there isn’t a whole lot of research into it to learn how it works, but it contains both sodium and electrolytes. Those are two things that everyone loses when they sweat. Still, even though there isn’t much research into it, athletes in many different sports swear by it.”

“Huh. I’ve never heard of any roatag players drinking anything like that, but it might be because there are all sorts of vitamins and minerals in the water they drink during the game. You can see the huge water containers that each team has behind their benches,” she said, pointing to the large barrels that sat one some sort of hover carts.

I nodded and looked around the field as the announcers did their thing and the players got ready. I had noticed something strange about the goals on either end, but totally forgot to ask her about them. She also neglected to mention that there were three goals for each team. They were layered, one behind another, and each was a different size. The first goal was about the size of a soccer goal, if not a little bit bigger, but the second goal was a fifth or a sixth of the size, and was a square rather than a rectangle.

Behind the second goal was the third goal, which was tiny in comparison to the previous two. It was small and circular, and though I hadn’t seen the ball yet, I imagined that getting the ball through the tiny hoop would be exceptionally hard. Not entirely because of its small size, either, because it had four small rectangular objects built into it every ninety degrees around. The small objects seemed to keep the hoop in place, and it could also move it within a small area. The fact that it could move meant that scoring a goal through it would probably be nothing but luck.

“There are a few things I left out now that I think about it,” she replied when I asked about the goals. “So the first goal is worth a single point, the second goal is worth four points, and the third goal is worth ten points. If someone is able to score through all three goals then their team is awarded with fifteen points, but that rarely happens. I’m talking *maybe* once or twice a season, if that.”

“Another thing is that unlike soccer, hands can be used in roatag. You’ll definitely be seeing a mix of both throughout the game as many of the players will throw the ball for greater accuracy, while kicking it for greater power.”

“So are there goalies? It seems like every goal scored would be worth at least five points if there wasn’t.”

“There are, and they play almost exactly like a goalkeeper does in soccer. The difference in roatag is that goalkeepers are a hell of a lot more mobile, thanks to the hover skates. They can often make it from one side of the net to the other in time to prevent a goal, even with nifty passing plays. A goalkeeper on the top of his or her game can make sure that the only way their team loses is if the opposing team captured or holds more flags than their team was able to.”

“How often are teams not able to score goals? I don’t watch a lot of professional soccer, or any, really, but the goalscoring is pretty low from what I’ve heard.”

“It can vary greatly, depending on how the game is going. If it’s a relatively even one where each team has three flags and an equal number of players defending the Runners while also focusing on the ball, then you won’t see much scoring. The style of play and species involved also play a big part of it. Going back to the Jotunn, they’re fast at moving up and down the field and are terrific defenders of their Runners, but goaltending is their big flaw. Even with hover skates, Jotunn goaltenders can’t move back and forth fast enough to stop goals off passing plays. I mean, they might get lucky with their extremely long reach, but they just don’t have the lateral movement required.”

After the players had finished getting ready, the female announcer’s voice came over the speakers, and everyone in the stadium immediately stood up, almost at attention, and put an arm over their chest. The Dvergr team did things a little bit differently as they crossed both arms across their chests and then bowed their heads.

Everyone in the suite was a little bit slower, but they soon followed suit as the stadium grew dark again and a woman in a flowing, magenta-colored dress floated towards the center of the field a lit by the spotlights. When she was in position, she looked around the stadium and waved, before closing her eyes as she began to sing.

Tessa was bouncing up and down a little bit next to me, so I looked over to her.

“That’s Kai’ana Tore!” she whispered.

What followed was an amazing rendition of the Dvergr and Pygmaean anthems, according to Tessa. I had no idea what they sounded like so it was pretty hard to judge, but neither were performed in an opera style, either. It would have been nice if I had actually been able to understand the lyrics, and asked Abi to put together a learning program for me. While she could just download the two languages in my head, that still wouldn’t help me speak or interpret either of them very well.

The cheers for Kai’ana Tore as she left the playing field were nearly as loud as the cheers for the Verian Mostzals when they entered it. As she made her way up to one of the suites on the other side of the stadium, the two teams formed up on their respective sides of the field. The three Runners on each team stood maybe fifty meters in front of their goalkeeper, but the formation differed between each team after that.

For the Mostzals, eleven players had spread out in a line, roughly one hundred meters or so in front of their three Runners, whereas the Blacksmiths used twelve players that were spread out in three rows of four. Additionally, fourteen players for the Mostzals were positioned one hundred meters from the center line, with one of them staying back a little bit further. I recognized the one staying back as Aylin Korun, as she was probably the smallest player on the team. The Blacksmiths had their remaining fourteen players lined up together, without one standing back a little bit, so I wondered what the Mostzals had planned with their Aylin standing back a little bit.

I didn’t have to wait long, as the seemingly lone referee stood just off center and looked to the two teams. When he got a nod from the captains of the respective teams, he raised his arm up which had a little device attached to it. After typing something into it, he turned and got out of the way. I wasn’t sure what was going on at first, but soon a small opening appeared in the center of the field. Nothing could be seen, but soon there was a blur as a bright yellow ball was launched into the air.

The moment it was airborne, the forward groups for each team shot forward, and this was where the Mostzal’s strategy came in. After skating for about seventy meters, two of the largest Mostzal players named Vural and Cevdet stopped, bent down and clasped hands. Aylin then skated onto the platform that they created with their hands. The two players then quite literally threw her up into the air towards the ball that was just coming back down to the field.

Just before she and the ball connected, she somehow spun herself in the air and executed a bicycle kick that would make most soccer fans need to go to the bathroom to clean out their pants. The ball rocketed back towards her own team’s side, where Vural and Cevdet had gone back to retrieve it. She didn’t fall back down to the field either, and instead she righted herself and then skated her way down to join the rest of her team.

The twelve Mostzals who had continued forward had clashed with the fourteen players from the Blacksmiths, and they were holding their own, for the most part. Three Blacksmiths players had ignored the melee entirely, and had decided to go after Aylin and the two other players, and this is where the brilliance of the Mostzal plan came into play.

Vural and Cevdet easily dwarfed the three oncoming Blacksmith players, all three of which made a mistake by staying too close together. After passing the ball back to Aylin, the two of them charged forward and performed a tackle that would make any football coach proud, allowing Aylin to quickly and easily avoid them, while moving to bypass the line of Mostzals and Blacksmiths entirely.

While this was going on, the Mostzals’ three Runners and the group defending them were doing something very weird, and something that also had a lot of the crowd on their feet. As a group, the fourteen players all rushed together, looking like they were skating as fast as they could. Behind them, next to the goalkeeper, were all three of the Mostzals’ flags.

As they approached the line of players who were still fighting it out, the fourteen Mostzals jumped up and leapt over the brawl as they began quickly catching up to Aylin, who was about twenty meters away from the defensive line for the Blacksmiths. She wasn’t kicking the ball as she made her way down the field, instead she had decided to hold onto it like a football player would. She kept to the edge of the field, trying to bypass the defenders and the Runners and make her way to the goal.

It seemed that the Blacksmiths had taken the bait, as three of their players broke off to cut her off and try to retrieve the ball. Apparently the command had been given before the fourteen Mostzal players had leaped over the heap of Mostzal and Blacksmith players in the middle, as they soon turned around, to try to help defend the three Runners.

It was far too late at that point, though the strategy didn’t work out quite as well as the Mostzals were probably hoping. The fourteen Mostzals who had rushed down the field had clashed with the nine who were left defending, allowing five of the Mostzal players to go straight for the Runners. Two of them easily took down one of the Runners and grabbed his flag, while the three defenders who had gone after Aylin had intercepted the two who were going after the third Runner.

That left the captain against the captain, but Naera Thalgrim wasn’t expecting Aylin from the rear. She had given up the ball and quickly skated towards the last of the three Runners, swiping her flag and heading back towards her side of the field. Apparently realizing that her team was incredibly close to losing, Naera skated towards the only Runner on her team and grabbed it before skating away as she gave commands to the rest of her team

The brawl in the middle of the field had ended, but players were still tackling or checking other players as the Blacksmiths moved back to defend their only remaining flag, while the Mostzals advanced to try to secure a quick victory. Unfortunately, just as Aylin was jumping into the air to bypass one of the Blacksmiths, another just barely held onto the flag that was attached to her waist. That made the score 6-3 with the flags being 4-2, rather than the 6-0 with the flags being 5-1 it had been for a short time.

“Damn it! So close…” Tessa grumbled from beside me.

It was incredibly close. When I looked to the other side of the field, I saw that the goalkeeper and Vural and Cevdet were in possession of their team’s flags. The three Blacksmith players that had gone for Aylin at the beginning were trying to catch them, without much luck. The two muscled Pygmaean men were able to handle their two Dvergr opponents, while the goalkeeper just used her speed to avoid the third. If the second trio of Blacksmith players had broken off from the defensive line to go after Aylin were just a tiny bit slower, then the Mostzals would have won in less than a minute. A thought came to me, and I vocalized it to the woman next to me, who seemingly knew a lot about the game.

“One minute and twelve seconds is the record, I believe, though the team that achieved it didn’t try anything so creative,” she replied. “They just grouped up twenty-seven of their players and barreled through the forward group before going something like twenty-two on fifteen to grab the three flags. The majority of the rest of the attempts you see follow some sort of weird set up at the start, but the Mostzals would have been able to abort it if they needed to. They set up the way they normally do, but they don’t usually go head to head with other teams like that. I suppose the fact that Dvergr are only a little bit bigger led them to try it out.”

“They still got a decent advantage out of it too,” I said as we turned our attention fully back to the game.

The first period was spent with the two teams trying to find some sort of normalcy. A little over half of the Mostzals’ team sped back to help out the three flag holders that were doing their best to hold off the three Blacksmiths. About half of the Blacksmiths followed them back as well, and the Blacksmiths also had possession of the ball, so they were headed upfield as well.

The Mostzals were able to hold onto their four flags successfully until the horn sounded, but the Blacksmiths were able to score a single goal during that time, making the score 6-4 for the Mostzals. They would have been losing to the Blacksmiths if not for some incredible athleticism and guessing on her part. There were some amazing passing plays like those you see occasionally in hockey, but she was able to stop all of them. Fortunately the one that did get by her bounced off the second goal’s post, otherwise they would have been down 7-6.

Unlike sports on Earth where the teams head to their dressing rooms after periods, the two roatag teams just walked over to their benches and used the time to refuel. The first period was non-stop action, and the only time there was a whistle was when the Blacksmiths scored a goal. Just like hockey, play began at center, though instead of a faceoff, there was another mad scramble to control the ball instead.

The teams soon lined up for the second period, which started off the exact same way. However, rather than try to win the game immediately, Aylin simply kicked the ball towards her side of the field. Surprisingly, they only kept eight players back to protect the four flag holders, leaving the seventeen remaining players to go on the offensive.

As they made their way up the field, it appeared more like a football game than anything else, as Aylin carried the ball with a large portion of the team intercepting opposing players. It seemed like Vural and Cevdet also stuck by her quite a bit. Even as she skated quickly down the field, her two minders were easily able to keep up with her. Anytime someone attempted to stop her and steal the ball, one of the two men would simply lower their shoulder and a Blacksmith would go sailing over the three of them.

While she was able to successfully make it down the field, she wasn’t able to score on the play, as there is a crease around each of the two nets. As long as a goaltender isn’t in possession of a flag, that crease cannot be entered by the opposing team. Had it not existed then she could have just skated the ball to the net, but it did, so the Blacksmiths attained possession and started heading back up the field.

They didn’t make it very far whatsoever, as Aylin’s two minders grouped up and barreled their way through the small formation that was protecting the ball carrier. With nothing stopping the two men from reaching the ball carrier, the man carrying it tried to dodge them. Unfortunately he wasn’t nearly fast enough, so he went down like a sack of potatoes while the ball popped up into the air. Aylin had been fluttering around the edges looking for an opening, and when she found it, she put on a burst of speed and launched herself into the air. She didn’t bicycle kick this time, but she sent the ball flying directly towards the goal.

The goalkeeper moved and jumped over to intercept it, but the ball struck the goalpost and rebounded back into the open field in front of the net. Racing towards it, Aylin used her speed to get their milliseconds before the closest defender could, and she put it back on net. With the goalkeeper out of position, she easily put it in the net and put her team up 7-4. Or so she thought.

As her team was trying to score, a little under half of the opposing team was going after the four flags they carried. The eight defenders combined with the speed of the Runners was enough to keep the Blacksmiths away from any of the flags for a time, but while the fourth flag carrier was decent at the position, he wasn’t as good as the three dedicated Runners. Just before Aylin scored a goal, a Blacksmiths player by the name of Granbek was able to steal a flag back, making it 7-7.

Things really changed after that with the two teams on even footing. Vural and Cevdet moved back to defense, which freed up three of the defenders to go on offense. With only seven defenders and three very good runners, it allowed them to pour on the offense. While they weren’t able to get even close to a flag to score points that way, they were able to score two goals. None of their flags were taken as well as the defense did their job, so the second period ended 9-7.

As the players were refueling, and being looked at--some had taken some nasty hits--the waitresses in the booth used that opportunity to take orders for food and drink. They had already come around during the first intermission to take orders for drinks, but it seemed like dinner would be served during the third intermission, which was probably less than thirty minutes away.

The menu was more expansive than I ever would have thought, and since I couldn’t read it, I took out my Beacon and stored it in there. I was told that I could remove it almost as soon as I had stored it, so I set it down on the table and had Abi read it out to me. There was a lot of stuff there and I was running out of time, so rather than decide on my own, I asked Tessa to suggest something.

As the players lined up to start the third period, I found myself quite literally on the edge of my seat. I had no idea what would happen next, and I couldn’t wait to find out.

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If the first two periods were very entertaining and fast-paced, the third period was anything but. It seemed like the Mostzals focused more on defense since they were up 9-7, but that almost came back to bite them a few times during what seemed to be the longest fifteen minutes yet. Their goalkeeper, a woman by the name of Solma Sayla, deserved most of the credit for the score staying as it was.

She was incredible out there, and seemed almost as if she was defending an ice hockey-sized net, rather than one that was ten meters long and three meters tall. As she made those ridiculous saves, she also created opportunities for her team to head back up the field with numbers. The rest of her team wasn’t able to capitalize on any of those opportunities, but she at least kept them in the game.

With the game at its midway point, the two teams headed back to their individual dressing rooms, just in time for food to be delivered to everyone in the suite as the equivalent of four peewee teams took to the field for the longer intermission. Apparently after every forty-five minutes, teams take a twenty-five minute break before the start of the fourth period. During this time they might have a snack or change into their secondary suit if the one they were wearing was a little too sweaty, but mostly it was just a little bit more time to rest.

I was told that the food delivered to our table was a favorite for those visiting the stadium, and it was something that I easily recognized. It was just a hell of a lot bigger than what I was used to. The chunks of meat were easily two or three centimeters thick and double that wide, though the vegetables were of various size and thickness.

Since they were in such high demand at the stadium, skewers with a diameter of one centimeter and a length of five meters were used in order to be as efficient as possible with space. Two people were needed to load up each skewer with meat and vegetables, but once a skewer was loaded and cooked on one massive grill, that skewer could be cut into shorter pieces and served. Tessa had ordered us both two skewers, but they were so big that she was only able to eat the one. Vixa and I, on the other hand, had no issues eating mine, nor Tessa’s extra one when offered.

We had watched the four kids teams play during the intermission, which was sort of a mini tournament. They set up widthwise on the field rather than lengthwise, giving them two much more manageable areas for the young kids to play on. It wasn’t full contact and each team had one net rather than three. As a result, it was played more like soccer with each team focusing more on scoring goals than stealing flags, as flags were stolen quite often.

With each game lasting ten minutes, it allowed the four teams to play two games each. After each game was over, the winners played against each other, as did the losers to decide their placings. It was a surprisingly competitive affair, and I soon found out that it was competitive because there were actual prizes at stake. I was told it was different for each game, but for this one it was monetary, in addition to the usual medals.

The team that came in first received fifteen hundred credits, second received twelve hundred credits, third received nine hundred credits, and the fourth placed team received six hundred credits. It wasn’t a lot for an adult when evenly split between thirty players, but it was quite a bit for a seven or eight year old kid. Every one of the four teams was a winner, however, as it was tradition that the kids would get to meet the players and receive autographs or have their pictures taken after the game had ended.

When the game resumed with the fourth period, things didn’t change all that much. At least not until there was a flurry of action in the middle of the period where the Mostzals were able to score a goal to put them up 10-7, but the Blacksmiths followed that up with two quick goals to make it 10-9 and a one goal game. The Mostzals also got incredibly lucky that the second goal bounced off the right post of the second goal. If it was six centimeters or so over to the left then they would have been down 11-10.

The Blacksmiths seemed to make a push after that, and spent a little over four minutes straight in the Mostzal’s end. They put shot after shot on net, while simultaneously pressuring the defense group that was protecting the Runners. Sayla continued playing out of her mind, and things looked good for the Mostzals.

With fifteen seconds left, that seemed to change. One of the Blacksmiths players found an opening and tackled one of the runners. The player wasn’t able to grab the flag as the two of them fell to the ground, but vision of them was soon lost. After seeing one of their Runners go down, at least a half dozen Mostzal’ players jumped on top of the two of them in order to retain the flag as time slowly ran out. Blacksmiths players followed suit, and soon there was a dogpile on top of the two players.

A whistle was soon blown with four seconds left and players were pulled off the pile as the referees tried to figure out what happened. Everyone in the crowd and in the suite waited with bated breath as the referees slowly got to the bottom of it.

“You see this fairly often,” Tessa said from beside me. “While Aziz may not have had his flag stolen as they fell, it’s quite possible that it was stolen as the rest of the players piled on top of them. You won’t see players move on their own as two of the referees pull players off one at a time while the remaining four look for the flag. If Aziz still has his flag or one of his teammates grabbed it, then the score will remain 10-9. If the Blacksmiths player grabbed it, then the Mostzals will definitely have some work ahead of them.”

I nodded without looking at her as I trained my eyes on the pile that was slowly getting smaller and smaller. There had to have been at least twenty players piled up on top of each other, and as the fifth player was pulled off, there was a collective sigh of relief as the Mostzal player was seen to still have his flag. However, rather than being attached to his waist, it was instead balled up in his hands as he curled around it in the fetal position.

After the referees had declared that the Mostzal player had retained his flag, I was expecting the Blacksmiths players to challenge that fact, but both teams simply got ready to continue play. As I thought about it, I realized that even if one of the Blacksmith players had retrieved the flag, the fact that the Mostzal player had it meant that the score wouldn’t have really changed either way. If it had passed hands during the dogpile then each team would have gained three points, but it would otherwise remain a one goal game.

Stoppages in play didn’t happen often. In fact it was only the eighth stoppage during play up to this point in the game. Each time a stoppage did occur, play was brought back to the center of the field for the usual mad scramble. It wasn’t so much of a scramble this time, however, as there wasn’t nearly enough time to get anything done with only four seconds left. The two teams lined up and then simply skated over to their respective benches as the time remaining in the period quickly hit zero.

I used the break to head to the bathroom and then decided that I would sit with my friends and sisters for the remainder of the game. After arriving at the table Tessa and I had shared to grab my drink, I invited her along. She accepted, and then she, Vixa and I headed down the steps to the two vacant cushioned chairs up near the glass.

“Hey,” I said as I sat down next to Mason, with him on my right and Tessa sitting to my left with Vixa on her lap.

“Hey!” Mason replied, leaning forward to look at Tessa. “Thanks for setting this up, Tess. It’s awesome! I can call you Tess, right?”

She quickly nodded. “Tessa, Tess or Syndras is perfectly fine, and you’re welcome, though I can’t take all the credit. It is Mr. Warvyn’s suite, after all.”

“So did anyone explain how the game works, outside of Tessa’s initial explanation?” I asked. “She explained a bit more while we were sitting up at one of the tables.”

“Ava and the rest of our AIs have been helping out, but your sisters also know quite a bit about the sport as well,” Ben replied.

“It definitely seems like someone took a bunch of sports from Earth and combined them together to get roatag,” Mason said. “I think the coolest part about it is the hover skates though. I can’t wait to get my hands on a pair.”

“The lower end models are pretty cheap nowadays, and even then, they’re built well and will last you a long time. The high end models can get pretty ridiculous in terms of price, but they’re often built using high quality mana gems or even mana crystals, and have pretty powerful anti-gravity engines,” Tessa said. “The ones the players use are somewhere in the middle, and follow strict guidelines for each species. With a high end model, Aylin Korun or any other player could have flown up into the air to retrieve the ball, without having to get Goktas Vural and Uke Cevdet to throw her up there.”

“Wait a minute, if they use anti-gravity engines, then how were they able to throw her up in the air? Wouldn’t the engines just push against their hands, making her just hover past?” Ben asked.

Tessa shook her head. “Not at all. While none of the players have any levels, that does not mean that they do not know how to channel the small amount of mana that they naturally produce. Each hand of their suits has a small sensor inside of it that detects their mana. When a player channels mana from their hand to the sensor, then the corresponding hover skate will turn off or turn on. She would have turned off both of her hover skates just before she stepped into their hands, and then would have turned them back on after she kicked the ball back to her teammates.

“Players can also increase or decrease the output of the anti-gravity engines in their hover skates by running their thumbs up or down their index fingers. That is how she was able to glide back down to the field rather than fall and suddenly stop. It’s also part of the reason why the Mostzals players were able to leap over all the players in the middle of the field during the first period as well.”

“They’re really that complicated?” Mason asked.

“Yup! Much more complicated than taking a boot and strapping a blade to the bottom of it, at least. Think about it. You’re basically strapping a pair of engines to your feet, even if they’re not of the conventional sort. While you move around the same way that you do with ice skates, you still need a way to change the output of the engines to allow you to go over an obstacle, or beneath one. The easiest way to do that is with hand controls. Those are usually a pair of gloves that come with the hover skates. There are a few high profile adventuring teams that use them, you know.”

“I can definitely see how they would be useful,” Ben said. “The players are extremely mobile, and they don’t have the benefit of levels. They could also be used to easily bypass any pressure plate traps and they could make certain fights pretty trivial, I suppose. If you have a pair of hover skates on and you’re fighting something that can only fight in melee, then hovering high above would allow you to rain death from above.”

“In lower level dungeons, sure, that could work, but not so in higher level dungeons,” Tessa replied. “You’ll find that as you progress, even creatures that fight primarily in melee will have ways to combat people in the air. That might be by throwing objects around the room, but it is more likely that they will have a trait or ability that allows them to fight back.”

"Didn't we already come across something like that already?" Sonja asked "There were creatures inside the first dungeon that we went to a few days ago. I forget what they're called, but they were really strong and really fast. They seemed built to fight people who would be primarily fighting from a distance, and they looked smart enough to use rocks and stuff lying around the room to combat enemies that can fly."

"She's talking about bakxey, I believe," Ben added.

Tessa chuckled. “Those are just baxkey. Even at lower levels they’re difficult to deal with, and they’re formidable even in the highest levels of dungeons. Teams often have a strategy they employ to deal with them, but early on they are avoided more often than not.”

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The conversation was cut short, as the Blacksmiths and the Mostzals returned to the field to start the fifth period. There was nothing special about the way they lined up this time. After each team signaled that they were ready, the referee typed something into the device attached to his wrist and the ball was launched into the air.

It seemed as if the Mostzals didn’t want the game to continue as it had been, as they left only six players back to defend their three Runners. That allowed the remaining twenty players to go on offense, and that’s exactly what they did. They easily barreled through or over the Blacksmiths’ forward lineup and took possession of the ball as they brought it up field. A Blacksmiths player managed to steal it briefly, but it was quickly stolen back.

It seemed as if they had planned to ignore the opposing three Runners as they were focused purely on scoring goals, rather than the harder, but more rewarding task of stealing flags. Not knowing whether or not it was a ploy to go after their flags, the Blacksmiths defensive players stayed put. That meant that the Mostzals essentially had a two to one advantage, and they used that fact to pot two quick goals in less than two minutes, making the score 12-9 in their favor.

When they lined up for the third time in the period, it looked like Naera Thalgrim and the rest of her team weren’t going to do anything different. They were set up in the exact same way, but it was after the ball was launched into the air that their formation changed. Rather than have their defense and Runners stand back and wait, the entire group of twenty-nine players skated forward.

As Aylin was being launched up into the air to attain possession of the ball as she usually did, the entirety of the Blacksmiths team was crashing into the front line of the Mostzals. They went through them like a hot knife through butter, and then continued on to the minimal defense in front of the three Runners, gathering the ball along the way.

It looked as if it was something that teams were used to, as the Mostzals three Runners and their six man defense didn’t panic in the slightest. In fact, what they did was probably the opposite of panic. As the twenty-nine Blacksmiths players were charging forward, the nine Mostzals players were charging right back.

Though Cevdet and Vural were among the largest players on the Mostzals’ team, that didn’t mean that they were slow. While the forward group was struggling to catch up and get back to help out, the two of them had caught up to and taken down three Blacksmiths players, giving their team a little bit better of a chance of coming out unscathed.

Just before nearly the entire Blacksmiths team collided with the three Runners and their defense group, we saw the Mostzals do something we had seen many times during the game. With the Blacksmiths bearing down on them, the six defenders stopped and formed three pairs of two. Clasping hands to form a platform, they launched the three Runners into the air.

While none of them were as strong as Cevdet and Vural, they were able to throw them high enough to bypass both the Blacksmiths and the Mostzals players who were rushing to get back. The result was a very odd-looking situation where the three Runners were in the middle of the field with twenty Mostzals players protecting them.

Unfortunately, the six defenders were practically run over by the advancing team. Without anyone back to play defense, the Blacksmiths pulled Solma Sayla from one side of her net to the other, and were easily able to score a goal. Fortunately, the shot rang off the goalpost and none of their flags were captured, so it was still a two goal game.

Most unfortunate of all was the fact that that was the last bit of luck that the Mostzals would have for the remainder of the period. While they did a very good job of retaining their flags, the Blacksmiths proceeded to put on a goalscoring clinic. They scored four more goals worth a total of nine points as the third goal went through the second, smaller net, putting them up 20-12.

The Mostzals made a few desperate plays as they tried to close the gap, and while they were able to steal one flag, the Blacksmiths quickly stole it back. From then on, it was basically like a game of keep away for the remaining ninety seconds or so, and thus the fifth period ended with the score being 23-15 in the Blacksmiths' favor.

The suite was pretty quiet for a short while after the period ended as we witnessed the Mostzals collapse spectacularly. Those more familiar with the sport seemed to think the game was a foregone conclusion as well, at this point.

"They would have to do pretty much exactly what the Blacksmiths just did," Tessa was telling us. "That's something I just don't see happening. I told Jonathan that games between these teams are usually low scoring since both teams are pretty good defensively, so it would take an absolute miracle for the Mostzals to come back. Against a lesser team they could probably do it, but I just don't see it happening against an equally skilled team."

She was right about that, but the Mostzals didn't just roll over and die. They probably fought harder than they had the entire game up to that point and their Runners were nigh untouchable for those last fifteen minutes. They even made the beginnings of a comeback when they scored a quick goal and stole a flag all in the first three and a half minutes.

Unfortunately, while the remaining eleven minutes were probably the most entertaining of the evening, the Blacksmiths shut down the Mostzals players, stymying any further attempt at a comeback. Though they retained possession of the ball for the majority of that time, they just weren't able to get anything more done. They even called time out with about thirty seconds left to try one last ditch effort set play, and while they did score on it, it wasn’t the five point goal they were hoping for.

Tessa had to give them some credit, as she didn’t think that they would come close to tying the game to force sudden death overtime. If they had stolen another flag then that would have been the outcome, though it seemed like they wanted to win it outright. If the ball had entered the second of the three nets then they would have won 21-20, and it was the smallest of deflections that stopped that from happening. The ball had bounced off the post and rebounded back into prime position, but since a goal was scored, the whistle was blown with only nine seconds to go.

The Mostzals tried to get something done with the remaining time, but the field was too big and the opposing Runners were too far away. They ignored the ball entirely and charged towards the opposing team who had elected to stay back near their goal. Aylin was the fastest out of all of them and was easily ten or fifteen meters ahead, but even she was over one hundred meters away from the closest Blacksmiths player by the time the horn sounded, signaling the end of the game.

While the Blacksmiths players celebrated their victory, I had expected the Mostzals players to immediately file off the field and head to their locker room, but that didn’t happen. They patiently waited until the Blacksmiths were done, and then a line formed as the two teams shook hands. There were a few cases where players from opposing teams stopped to talk with each other, but soon the Blacksmiths were heading towards the tunnel leading to their locker room while the Mostzals players saluted the crowd.

“Is that normal?” I asked Tessa as Tala could be heard celebrating the victory with the few Blacksmiths fans who were present. “The handshake line, I mean.”

“More or less,” she nodded in reply. “It’s not a rule or anything, but most teams will line up out of respect for each other. It’s not always a hand shake though, that really depends on the culture of the losing team. Pygmaeans are one of the few species that shake hands, but sometimes they will follow the traditions of other species instead. Especially those without hands.”

“Are there many of those?” Ben asked, curious.

She took a moment to pause and think before finally responding. “In the GRPL there are currently six teams without hands like ours, and I believe there are three more in the GRML. There are a few more species without hands throughout the galaxy, but none of those have roatag teams. Some species just aren’t built to play the game, while others require environments that aren’t conducive for playing against other species. That might be a species that is primary aquatic, or they might be one of the very few sulfur- or silicon-based lifeforms that don’t breathe oxygen like we do.”

“Those exist?”

She nodded. “They’re incredibly rare and there are only a small handful of them in this galaxy, that have been discovered at least. You or I couldn’t step foot on one of their planets without wearing a pressurized suit as their atmospheres are extremely toxic to us, but so is our atmosphere to them. They attempted to make suits so they could join the GRPL or GRML, but it’s such a rough sport and there were too many issues. They eventually formed up and created a league of their own, and while it doesn’t have the following that either of the major leagues do, it still has quite the following.”

“So you said that different species do different things. What would the Blacksmiths have done if they had been the losing team today?” I asked.

“They may not seem like it, but Dvergr are a rather physical people. They particularly like to embrace others in back-breaking hugs.”

“Back-breakin’? Yer feeble little bodies are simply too weak to appreciate a good hug!” Tala said from behind us, slurring her words slightly and having heard Tessa.

Tessa chuckled. “It’s even worse with her, because she is never out of that suit of hers. I’m surprised she doesn’t go around cracking peoples’ ribs whenever she hugs someone.”

“Practice! Lots an lots of practice!” Tala replied.

She quickly finished off her drink which while served in a large glass mug wasn’t golden or brown, and was instead a salmon-like pink. If was clearly alcoholic, however, as she got off the stool she had been sitting on and meandered over.

“I’m thinkin’ that tis time fer some more practice!” she continued, reaching for Tessa who shrieked and surprised everyone when there was a quick pop.

Tessa disappeared from where she was sitting and reappeared behind the table where Tala had been eavesdropping from, though that didn’t deter Tala in the slightest. She had us laughing as she ran all around the room for a few minutes trying to catch up to Tessa without any success. After a while, she gave up and headed back over to the bar for another drink, but her two chaperones quickly cut her off for the night.

The suite had slowly started getting quieter until there were only a few of us left as Tessa filled us in on the history Mostzals and the sport itself. It seemed like very little time had passed, and it was when Zogyr said that we needed to go that we realized just how late it was. While the game had started at around 17:30, the six periods and breaks in between meant that the game was nearly three hours long. We had been talking for almost two hours straight which put the time well after 22:00. There wasn’t anything pressing scheduled for the next day, but many of us had still been up for over sixteen hours and were getting pretty sleepy, not that we’d noticed.

Deciding to call it there for the night, Zaszi opened up a portal back to Menseio Station and we all quickly made our way through. All of us thanked Tessa for the excellent evening and she reluctantly handed over the small bundle of fur that had been sleeping in her arms. She didn’t stir even a little bit as we traveled over a hundred thousand kilometers in the blink of an eye, and none of us wanted to change that. Tessa and I exchanged a quick kiss on each other’s cheek and promised to spend some more time together soon, before she turned and skipped her way out of the hangar, heading towards her room on the station itself.

My friends had already climbed aboard and while I expected to make it to my room without waking up Vixa, my stomach had other ideas. It growled pretty loudly, which woke up Vixa from her slumber. She yawned and looked up at me expectantly, causing me to laugh as I changed directions We quickly arrived at the mess and I put together a small plate of food together for the two of us, which nearly evaporated as soon as we sat down. With food in our bellies, I headed back towards our room so we could get ready to sleep.

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(Abi)

As Jonathan safely climbed aboard, Abi let out what could be considered a sigh of relief, if she could actually breathe. With him safe and sound in his room, it meant that she would have eight or so hours of interrupted time to deal with the many projects she was working on. She was easily able to split her attention to many different tasks while also processing information faster than even the most sophisticated supercomputer, but she still appreciated that time to herself.

Most of the machinery in the factory area of the ship was basically working on automatic, though there was one area that even Jonathan didn’t know about, at least not yet. It was here that she did all the work herself, as she wanted things to be absolutely perfect. After many hours of slow, painstaking work, she let herself celebrate a little bit as the first test exceeded her expectations. Setting the component off to the side, she soon began on the matching one, though the two items themselves were only a small part of the whole.