
The Paradromos cafe on the Astraeus habitat was busy, loud, and lively. One of the main reasons for the bustle was its prime location near the habitat's port entry. In the furthest corner, just a few metres away from a bar, a special guest room was tucked away. Usually empty, it was always kept ready for visitors – important ones. The room itself was very cosy, warm, and quite pleasant, but it possessed a secret: it was completely isolated. While its isolation was less sophisticated compared to standard privacy rooms, it held one vital advantage – only a select few people knew this room possessed such a feature.

This time, the room wasn't empty; on the contrary, it was full of people. The old table in the middle was loaded with a variety of food, wine, and other festive spreads. The atmosphere was quiet and relaxed, and nobody was in a hurry. To an outside observer, it looked like a grand dinner organised for old friends. Everything – the room itself, the crowded table, the air, the general vibe – pointed to a mundane gathering, while actually being something completely different.

It was a meeting of shipping company stakeholders operating in the Southern Europe Cluster, primarily within the Greek Protectorate. The low hum of various discussions was interrupted by a man who stepped inside. He was late – almost a standard hour late. Upon entering, he scanned the room, looking around to memorise everyone's face. His skin seemed dried out, a trait only emphasised by his deep expression lines. Despite his worn appearance, the newcomer greeted the room with a warm, friendly expression.

"Oristos! You are so late again! We are all waiting for you to begin," one of the guests called out loudly.

"Treat that as a gift – a gift of time, which I hope you spent with a purpose. Did you enjoy the food and the drinks, yes?" Oristos replied with a friendly smile. He moved toward his specially reserved place and sat down.

"Since you are all sitting here for a while, please, give me something to drink – but something stronger than wine. We should discuss the infrared traces in the Outer System detected by our latest scanning. Probably, it will bring some complications for our new project. Something is out there, and it might concern our new routes," he continued.

The tone of the gathering in the room began to shift into a much more serious mood. Everyone present knew the vital importance of the new routes – increasing the capability and capacity of the supply chain always led not only to hard profit, but it also gave them more resources to expand the business. Any complication could lead to new, unplanned expenses and biting delays.

Oristos took a sip from the glass provided to him, closing his eyes for a brief moment to savour the burning taste of the old brandy.

"Ahh, this taste... it allows me to start with the good news first," he said, pausing for a moment to gauge the reaction of the others and to take a second sip.

"We were scanning the existing routes of the Orbital Crawler project – the one and only connecting the Inner System and the Outer. Our foe, our main competitor. It is always important to learn space routes: velocity, debris impact, the number of emergency cases where projectiles are used... so, everything. It is a very long journey from here to the Outer System, as you know; everything might happen, everything should be insured. And the good news is, a flaw was found in the route. Not a technical thing, but... an unreported close encounter with another spaceship in the Outer System. Again, an unreported case!" Oristos leaned back in his chair with satisfaction.

"Sounds like a tool in a master's hand. What is the bad news, then?" someone asked, interrupting Oristos's pause.

"The bad news... there are more traces. Weak ones, but traces nonetheless. Unnatural ones – I am not sure about the source, but it seems we have overslept the cargo routes in there already, or... that

is the Outer System. A not well-regulated area," he concluded with a deep sigh.

"That is very true, but what are our steps in all of this, Oristos?" one of the guests asked on behalf of the majority.

"The first step is to attack – it is the best we can do in this situation," Oristos began, sharing his conclusion.

"How much power do we have? I know everyone in this room possesses stocks in this inter-Cluster project. You all knew that this time would come – not if, but when. So, I guess it is time to use this weapon. If we unite all our stock in the Orbital Crawler project, we can call for a further investigation. We will make it public," he said, his voice suddenly cutting off as he took another sip from his glass.

"Making such a case public... the stock prices will fall. And if we are ready to buy more of them in a precisely calculated order..." He paused for a moment, looking around to gauge everyone's reaction.

"And if we start our own alternative to this, with slightly lower pricing... Two space crawlers are ready to begin their journey. So, what would you say?" he asked, wearing his warm smile once again.

The dialogue between Adrian and Anni was interrupted by the sudden appearance of Ake, who arrived carrying three beers – two for Adrian and one for himself. Ake, just like Adrian, had not expected to encounter their prey so soon; he had assumed Adrian's plan to play the sitting duck in a public venue would turn out to be a long and incredibly dull process.

His natural instincts flared up instantly – the distinct, burning urge to arrest Anni on the spot surged within him, bringing back that restless feeling of an unfulfilled hunt. However, his professional discipline overrode the impulse, reminding him to stick to Adrian's strategy. Steeling himself, Ake stepped into the game.

"Oh, I did not mention my company – this is my friend and guide in this orbital oasis, the name is Ake," Adrian said, stepping in to help Ake ramp up his play faster.

"Aha! And you perhaps forgot to mention the third member of your company?" Anni asked with the faint trace of a smile, her eyes darting quickly to the three glasses of beer Ake had just placed on the table.

"Awkward situation," Adrian agreed. "But there is no third member. If you take a moment to look at the terminal – the waiting time is quite long, and..." He paused, demonstratively drinking down a third of the glass. "My first beer always disappears quickly. Ordering two is the logical step, you see?" he concluded.

"Mmm, there is another awkward situation – only our names are not fully shared. My friend's name is Adrian," Ake continued smoothly after Adrian's explanation. "Now, you should be perfectly safe to share your name, right?" he ended.

"Sure! This is truly awkward... Anni is my name. Nice to meet you all," she replied with a smile.

"Mmm, how amusing. Three people with names starting with 'A.' Since you shared your name, I can share my beer with you," Adrian said, sliding the third glass closer to Anni. The sound of friction between the table and the glass was loud, but Adrian's expression remained unchanged – serious, without a single hint of emotion.

At that moment, Anni felt a genuine wave of awkwardness. It seemed this man was entirely serious about the gesture – or worse, he was a terrible actor.

"Is this some kind of tradition?" she asked, her expression laced with doubt.

"It is a joke, you see? He is always playing such tricks on me. He is a master of keeping the exact same facial expression – whether it is a joke or the invention of some new technology," Ake replied with a smooth smile, breaking the tension.

"Ake, you just ruined my joke. I was planning to add more weirdness and only reveal it after that," Adrian said, breaking out into a laugh. *"Forgive me, but my internal brakes sometimes lack the force to absorb the torque of jokes of that calibre."*

"Ah, I see! That is something new!" she answered with a laugh of her own.

"That might be funny to you, but somebody needs to go get another beer – and no cheating with an order via the table terminal. Is it my turn?" Adrian asked, looking directly at Ake.

"It wouldn't be fair. Your joke was ruined and... it is your beer, after all. I will go," Anni interrupted. Despite her lingering stress, she found this company strangely relaxing, warm, and highly unfamiliar. She gave them a quick wait sign and moved toward the bar to place the order.

Ake waited for a moment until Anni had fully disappeared into the crowd near the bar. Then, he turned back to Adrian.

"Is it an excuse to walk away? Will she return?" Ake asked in a low voice.

"I am certain she will. It is not an excuse or a kind favour – that is a tactical pause," Adrian replied. He took a slow sip from his glass, his eyes tracking the small green indicator light pulsing on the rim before continuing. *"She is a professional, acting beautifully. But her internal state is so vastly different from her outer facade that even her master-level performance cannot hide it. At least, not from me. I have seen that exact fracture many times in my long life."*

He set the glass down with a soft click. *"She is incredibly stressed,"* he concluded.

"Yes, I know that, but you were acting... weirdly," Ake noted, unconvinced.

"That is a game within a game – to hide a grand play within. I want her confused and stressed at first, and relaxed after. So we must play along. Let me lead," Adrian replied smoothly.

The industrial motion picture – a mix of the reddish hue from the thermal radiator arrays, the dark grey of minor celestial bodies, the absolute void of vast space, and the small, moving specks of drones, transports, and cargo containers – faded completely with the incoming alarm. It was a massive punch to Jakt Woult's mental state. He had been looking at the screen for quite a while; the video stream, collected and combined from different cameras, was usually relaxing. It gave him the feeling of something alive, warm, and cosy. He was the first elected councilman with local roots, born many decades ago right here – in a space habitat, in the Outer System, one of its very first children. The deepness and void of space, combined with this constant industrial activity, was something deeply homely to him. It was truly his home, his native environment, and the one thing he would do absolutely anything to preserve.

The alarm was surprising, but surprising in a bad sense – rare, the kind of warning almost nobody had ever seen. It had been programmed decades ago, but even the engineers who designed it never truly expected to see that alarm triggered in the wild.

"Alert: Incoming spacecraft. No contact."

Jakt rapidly jumped out of his apartments and ran into the situation room. The room was already packed with all the required personnel. Everyone was extremely agitated by this information, by this unexpected alert. Defence officers were grouping separately; they knew that the very first thing that had to be defended was the radiator arrays. Otherwise, despite any emergency measures, it would be a painful, lingering death – nobody wanted to be cooked alive. A single ship of such immense size could be directed toward the habitat, or a mineral extraction station – nobody knew. In space, every vehicle is a weaponized platform, designed to defend against debris but definitely capable of being used as a weapon on its own.

"Sorry, not all video cameras have a good optical zoom on this side. Please wait for a moment," one of the engineers said in a defensive tone. The incoming spacecraft was still far away, and a specialised camera was required to get a clear optical visual. But meanwhile, on the screen, a very tiny spark of light could be seen, and everybody in the room was concentrated on those few pixels.

"We sent EM radio requests across several different bands – no reaction. We tried to use different optical communications – no reaction," the same engineer continued, describing the unfolding situation.

"Why so late?!" Jakt demanded loudly in reply.

"It appeared out of nowhere according to our sensor data, and... it became more and more visible in a very short amount of time. I guess that is intentional on their part. It was probably visible in the infrared spectrum, but our sensors for that range were aimed elsewhere – toward the Inner System and in the direction of Jupiter. Nobody comes out of deep space; it is inefficient and expensive..." the engineer replied.

A moment later, a larger, magnified image of the incoming ship finally locked onto the screen. It was a mirror-like shield, illuminated by the light-blue glow of an active engine exhaust, with two faintly visible, glowing reddish thermal plates trailing behind it.

Everybody in the room understood instantly: it was actively braking on its approach. This wasn't a glitched automated cargo tug. This wasn't something mundane.

The ship remained dead silent – no radio emission, no optical communication, completely ghosted. It wasn't trying to talk to them – at least it wasn't following standard protocols; it had come with its own agenda.

Back on Earth – the planet where civilisation found its roots and beginnings, the place where humanity's darkest impulses had taken their first steps – the think tanks of various Clusters were working tirelessly to sustain a system that had expanded far beyond the sphere of the planetary body. Much like a vast collection of museums displaying the ugly past of torture rooms from different eras of human history, the horrors of wars between long-passed nation-states, or the primitive economies that dominated long ago, Earth had become a luxurious showcase of history for future generations. But like any museum, Earth was funded by the current, functioning system – the very system whose evolution made this civilisation possible. And like any complex machine, it hid its true face beneath layers of intricate design.

One of the think centres occupied at this time belonged to the German Cluster, where Michael was busy with planning – not solving immediate crises, but constructing short-term strategies for the upcoming few standard years. He knew that sooner or later – in about two standard years, when Lizzie's body was finally delivered to the remote outpost – things might change drastically. The outcome of reviving Lizzie Wolters from her current frozen state was still entirely undetermined. A two-year journey through the vastness of space could lead to the unexpected: increased radiation from not predicted solar storms, space debris fracturing the preservation equipment, or logistical delays at the outpost itself. All of these variables led to different branching possibilities. On success, a mountain of already prepared paperwork was waiting, with Lizzie herself being the only unpredictable element. On failure, the paperwork became the least of his problems; the fallout, Sojohan's reaction, and the fate of the research program she had led would all drift into the foggy area of unpredictable space and time.

Michael Berndt analysed every outcome, down to the tiniest detail; the only thing he truly feared was forgetting or missing something. His brain had processed an immense amount of data over the centuries, but that didn't mean it could hold thousands of details across vast spans of time without corruption. He relied heavily on computers, cross-referenced notes, chains of events, and branching outcomes – a massive pile of details that he documented obsessively.

He decided to take a well-earned break; his stress levels had hit their threshold, and a pause was required if he wanted to remain sharp. Stepping outside the massive office building, the sunny weather of early spring in Frankfurt am Main already carried warm notes. He lit a cigarette, just to break his mind out of the loops of the same recurring problems.

The smoke from his cigarette, like any other smoke, was a thread that connected humanity to its very dawn: the smoke of ancient caves, the smoke of the first furnaces melting metal, the smoke of the first industrial engines, all cascading down through history to the small remnants drifting from his fingertips.

Michael relaxed slightly, but his attempt to take a full standard hour to himself was abruptly cut short. His terminal pulsed with a message:

"Incoming report from the meeting on Xenia."

Anni returned carrying four beers. It was a physically challenging routine; even with closed lids on the mugs, the liquid sloshed and shifted constantly – the most ancient and sophisticated of human beverages still demanded absolute attention. The effort added to her stress, but ultimately, it had the opposite effect later, forcing her mind to switch away from her anxieties and focus on the task at hand. She smiled as she placed the mugs on the table.

"Look, we are now supplied with enough drinks for a while," she said, sitting back in her chair.

"Good move! It reminds me of some old-fashioned events back on Earth. I have seen ladies bringing six mugs at once – it was amazing," Ake said, a supportive tone in his voice.

Adrian finished his first glass. He felt the cold liquid spread through his body, tracking the distinctive taste. He closed his eyes for a brief moment to finalise his internal sensations, then looked directly at Anni to continue the discussion.

"Interesting. Oh, you should try it with a long sip; it leaves so many different tastes and flavours," he said, pausing to move the new mug closer to him. *"Just out of curiosity – where are you from, Anni?"*

"It is not a big secret. I am from the Munster space habitat," she replied quickly. She took a long sip, just as Adrian had advised.

"Hm, I was thinking you were living here," Ake continued.

"Mmm, but I was asking where you are from originally," Adrian interrupted, cutting across Ake. *"We all came here from some other place on Earth. Or..."*

Anni felt a cold chill hit her spine immediately after Adrian left his phrase hanging. She wasn't from any place on Earth. Her instincts drove her to take another long sip of beer.

"Ah, in that sense..." she paused. Her entire fake identity was built upon her current occupation, with only a small piece covering her manufactured origin – and that piece had just completely flown out of her head.

"Frankfurt," she replied quickly. It was the city from her mission files.

"Suburbs? Which district? I know this city – I was living there for quite a while," Ake asked.

"Mmm, probably you want to ask for a street too?" Adrian interrupted, cutting across Ake with a laugh.

"My friend is too much into the details, do not pay attention," he continued, directing the phrase to Anni.

"Understood. But where are you from? It is interesting – your accent..." Anni asked in reply. She felt a wave of relief; the cold chill at her spine was beginning to fade.

"That is a secret. But especially for you – I am from Lahdenpohja, Finnish Cluster, very close to the Inkeri Protectorate of the same Finnish Cluster," he replied, with a trace of a smile.

"Ake is from Darmstadt, German Cluster. As you know, Darmstadt is quite close to Frankfurt am Main, so it was a spark of his interest, you see?" Adrian continued. He shifted his gaze back to Ake and took a sip. *"Is that right, Ake?"*

"Yes, exactly. Speaking of these places returns me a bit back to my hometown. It is always a pleasure," Ake confirmed.

"What are you doing here, Anni?" Adrian asked directly.

"On holidays. Why?" she replied.

"Oh, sorry. I meant what are you doing in general, you know. Your occupation? Because if you are from the biotechnical or social sectors – we are not, and we would not be able to support any work-grounded topics," Adrian replied, again with a smile. He took another sip.

"Oh! Got it. No, you are probably more lucky – cooling systems engineer. A lead," she replied. She pronounced the last word of her phrase louder than the rest. She wore a tight smile and took a long sip, finishing her first glass of beer.

Adrian decided to continue the play, intending to soften his strategy to keep her comfortable, but his thoughts were abruptly sliced through by an incoming voice leaplink pulsing from his pocket terminal.

"Very sorry – a leaplink. I will be back quite soon," he said, nodding to both Ake and Anni. He stood up and stepped away from the table to take the call.

As he walked, he glanced down at the terminal's small screen:

"John Berg leaplink: D: 2.59s."

The frightening, total silence in the Helix situation room spread across everyone present. Every mind was occupied with trying to calculate the next steps; even the defence officers, despite their simple, straightforward tactical patterns developed for such emergency cases, had stalled.

"According to the trajectory, dynamics, and deceleration rate, this space vehicle will pass our area very closely, but it will still maintain a significant velocity," one of the engineers broke the dead silence loudly.

"What is that? What is the purpose..." Jakt began, his voice rising sharply.

Silence fell again, but this time the deadly quiet did not hold dominion over the room for long. The communication system screen suddenly displayed an incoming leaplink request, wrapped in standard encryption protocol.

"It is finally emitting in the radio spectrum!" the same engineer announced loudly, his voice thick with relief.

"I already see it – that is obvious. Accept the leaplink from the incoming ship immediately," Jakt ordered, his tone bitterly cold.

"Prepare to depart thirteen containers from your cargo station. Identification numbers are: SGXV063H02, SGXV063H13..." The message from the ship cut through the room in a cold, almost mechanical voice.

The identification numbers were the exact ones Jakt had intercepted on the delivery route to the Inner System.

The same message repeated several times, accompanied by a standard manifest data package transmitted from the ship. Directly following the broadcast, the leaplink switched to duplex mode – granting Jakt, or anyone else in the situation room, the capability to communicate back.

"Welcome to the Helix area. Jakt, the Council, is speaking. Could we negotiate regarding this cargo?" asked Jakt. He fully understood his mistake now; a small, opportunistic bite against such a

powerful economic entity had cascaded into this. This ship had been dispatched specifically to reclaim the assets he had been so satisfied to possess.

"This is not a negotiation, and it will never be, Council Jakt Woult. Prepare the cargo. This is the only permissible outcome for you," the reply returned from the ship in the same cold, indifferent tone.

Jakt turned to the defence officers, a question written plainly across his face as he gestured in their direction.

"Yes, we could send projectiles directly toward this ship's radiators, but I do not recommend even thinking about that," one of the defence officers replied with confidence, wiping a few drops of sweat from his face. *"Any projectiles will be detected, and we will face immediate return fire directed at our own heat dissipation systems. The ship could evade or destroy our incoming salvos, but... we would not be able to destroy all of theirs. This is an undocumented type of space vessel. Our point-defence systems could be simply overloaded. And sir – you hopefully understand – neither a space habitat nor our orbital stations can be moved quickly. We are sitting ducks, Council."*

"I know, there is no need to lecture me. It was a stupid impulse," Jakt replied irritably. *"And even if we were successful in such a bold move – the economic and political consequences would be devastating. And the debris from an exploded ship..."*

"We do not see any immediate activity at your cargo station, Jakt. Our cargo ship will approach your area within exactly five standard hours. The flyby velocity relative to your cargo station will be slow enough to allow the space containers to dock – follow the standard docking protocol. Confirm the move, Council," another phrase came from the ship, its tone the same: cold, indifferent, and slightly mechanical.

"Confirmed. Ordering the preparation for undocking the mentioned space containers," Jakt replied, attempting to mimic that same unyielding tone.

"Our space containers – just to clarify," a final reply came in response to his phrase.

"We are also blocking your communications for a while. Thank you for your cooperation. End of link." The last cold phrase cut the leaplink completely.

The vessel wasn't silent anymore; instead, her active sensors were sweeping the area, communicating directly with the automated systems of the cargo station to synchronise velocity, approach angles, and rotational parameters. Despite being an entirely unknown and advanced design, she was executing a completely common, almost mundane cargo load approach.

Jakt was crushed. Instead of securing the technological advancements he had plotted for his home Pelagicom, he had brought them into deadly danger. His mind was devastated, and to make things worse, another terrifying realisation forced its way to the surface: **"I bit one giant, and he replied. What about the second giant I bit too...?"**

The soft but clearly audible sound of a calendar notification found John Berg busy with new findings on the case of the unclaimed cargo loss, accompanied by the weird telemetry logs – the ones he had sent to Adrian a while ago. The reason to dive deeper into the case wasn't pure curiosity; John was more interested in other things, preferably somewhere outside of his day-to-day job. Instead, he was planning to spend this leaplink time with Adrian as efficiently as possible. The leaplink costs were covered by his firm, but Adrian's time wasn't. And strictly speaking, John wasn't entirely sure about the true nature of his relationship with Adrian. Was it a real friendship, or just nothing? Even in the case of a good friendship, he understood that asking for a favour for free might not be good manners.

Berg requested the full data of the insurance contract. Everything looked dull and normal, but it was a spark of his analytical mindset to retrieve all manifests anyway; for such a long journey, all manifests

recorded at every checkpoint had to be matched. His finding was unsettling – the very first manifest was different from every subsequent one. This first manifest had been generated before the cargo was even ready, a new addition to the delivery procedure introduced about two standard years before, just a few standard days before the orbital crawler approached the Outer System trade hub. According to that initial manifest, the number of unclaimed space containers lost had increased by thirteen more. John also checked the planned cargo list – an important part of distributing assets between orbital crawlers and adjusting queues according to cargo type, delivery estimates, and other parameters – and these containers were on that planned list. The listed identification numbers were the exact same ones from the initial manifest: **"SGXV063H02, SGXV063H13, SGXV063A12, SGXV06Y11..."**

The soft chime of the calendar notification repeated, its vibration generating sound waves that became increasingly annoying. John awakened from his findings and switched it off. It was time – time for the leaplink with Adrian. He decided to smoke first and to call from the green room; the green room was downstairs, and the designated smoking areas were located there too. He slowly moved in the direction of the elevator.

Downstairs, he continued his slow pace, lost in deep thought. The fear of this complicated case was eating him from the inside. He thought that even with some help from Adrian, it was unsolvable, or at least required a real paycheck to get professional help from him. However, he hadn't received any approval for extra funds to resolve this case – which was understandable; dead-end cases are not covered, they are simply a loss for the insurance company. After a while, he realised a lack of another vital resource: time. He finished his cigarette quickly and almost ran into the green room.

The green room was named green because of the excessive amount of different trees and other plants living in the room. Mixed with fountains of fresh water, this room was intended to create a very welcoming and relaxing mood, but this time it did not help; John was already stressed. He took his terminal and initiated the leaplink – the delay was an annoying 2.59 seconds.

"Hello John, it's Adrian as you may expected," the first message of leaplink came.

"Thank you to accept this leaplink, I do not want to take a lot of your time, so let's move directly to the topic of this very leaplink. As you remember I've sent you already these weird logs, that's a materials of a case, the case of unclaimed cargo loss. Could you help me with that?" he replied.

He was nervous; the reply that was coming thru the immense distance and big amount of relays could decide the outcome of the whole case.

"Yes, I would like to help you my friend. I understood this is a dead end case, and if you will solve that a good amount of credits you will get. But no worries, I'm a way more curious about the case itself, credits is a least thing in my list. You could send me the whole picture with all the data about this case, well ... I'll try to figure this out then, so are you in?" Adrian's reply came after eight seconds, eight seconds that felt like an eternity for John.

"Sure, I'm glad you agreed to help me. But there are more complications ... how to say that, but according to the data there are other thirteen space containers loss unclaimed from the same contract. Furthermore, they are only listed in initial manifest and planning cargo list, but for some reason they are absent in the following manifests, guess it's somehow connected to this weird telemetry I gave you. Are you still in?" John replied. His palms were wet and he felt a fever – a fever born from the intensity of the situation.

"Mmm, very interesting, very interesting ... that's a dead end case, and it's very complicated. So, I'm in, but you have to come here to the Heidelberg space habitat. Take few weeks off on your own, so agreed?" Adrian's reply came after nine seconds of nervous waiting.

John took a pause to think. This wasn't an easy choice, but it was the best outcome at the moment.

"Yes, just give me a time to find tickets, you know it should be aligned with the Orbital ring schedule, shuttles ... It will take few standard days ... agreed," John replied. He began to realise that the case was something more than he thought, but he didn't know what exactly.

"No worries, but I prefer to deal with that rather sooner than later. So, a big amount of credits in case of solving the case, huh? I will buy you an express, not scheduled shuttle, expect it within few standard hours. However – you owe me an ale, a lot of. See you here my friend. End of leaplink," reply came with almost the same delay.

Berg was feeling himself satisfied from one point of view, and little bit loss from another. At least the case became something more alive.