
The room on the Xenia space habitat was warming up; every top-tier executive viewed the situation through the lens of their own bottom line. Yet, the situation remained entirely unclear. From the outset, this emergency meeting had been triggered by the logistics safety act – a protocol drafted centuries ago when deep-space piracy was still an active threat, and left completely unchanged ever since. Piracy had long since ceased to exist; the modern landscape of stringent safety acts, inter-Cluster agreements, and global protocols had simply made it economically unfeasible. Rogue organisations stood no chance of outpacing the technology developed within a heavily regulated system. Furthermore, not a single Cluster or global organisation possessed the capability to manufacture a spacecraft in the shadows without doubling or even tripling their overhead. Beyond that, fencing stolen cargo was prohibitively expensive. Combining just these two factors made the entire enterprise economically bankrupt, to say nothing of how difficult it was to hide an unauthorised signature in the absolute void of space.

"There is a problem with your findings," Beatriss interjected, stepping directly into the discussion. *"An incident like this should have been recorded in the Orbital Crawler's logs, yet you haven't mentioned a single thing about that."*

"That's the next complication I was about to lay out for everyone," the Routewarden countered, tossing the question right back to her. *"I didn't mention it... well, because there's nothing to mention. The logs didn't show a single anomaly. So my question is actually for you, as our intel expert – who the hell has the capability to pull that off?"*

After that, all the attention in the room converged on Beatriss. She knew the answer lay squarely in the realm of engineering, which made the question feel less like a routine inquiry and more like a targeted accusation – specifically, a complaint directed at her department's counter-espionage capabilities rather than its intelligence-gathering. For a split second, she felt the ground slip out from under her as the realisation hit that this might be her failure.

"Honestly? Nobody," she said, her voice completely calm. *"Yes, it's technically possible, but it requires... well, let me explain. Every single Cluster and global organisation – even the questionable ones – is heavily dependent on this route. Our intel confirms there are absolutely no plans to interfere with operations in the Inner System. And the Outer System is still entirely dependent on the Inner System's economy. So, dear Routewarden, should I perhaps be questioning the integrity of your data instead?"*

"Our data isn't compromised," the Routewarden replied with absolute confidence. *"The confirmation doesn't rely solely on our scanners. Unless we're going to start entertaining the idea of sabotage on the Orbital Crawler itself... then none of this makes any sense."*

"Look, all of you, we need to deal with the immediate consequences first," a bold, tall man cut in loudly.

It was a powerful, commanding figure of the Technate: Boris Helden. As a major stakeholder on the Board, Boris was one of the foundational pillars shaping the Technate's trajectory, both internally and across the entire system.

"Sooner or later, this information is going to leak," Boris continued, his voice loud but completely steady. *"Or worse – it might end up in the public domain. While the rest of you are desperately trying to find a root cause, the project's stock will fall like leaves in autumn. Every powerful Cluster will start looking for alternatives, and that is going to trigger a cascade failure across our entire portfolio!"*

He paused, his eyes darting between the faces of the executives around the table.

"Come on, give me numbers. Leave your little investigation for later. Here is my solution: we start buying out every single share of project stock available on the free market right now."

"But that will do the exact opposite," one of the top-tier executives from finance argued. *"They'll spike in the short term, and with availability that low, the subsequent crash will be even worse."*

"Then execute it smartly, in tranches," Boris shot back. "And please, let me finish. The second thing we need to do is expand into the Outer System. We establish a local logistics hub, a dedicated supply chain, and a network of service stations. It's an old contingency plan; I'll transmit the files to your slates the moment we adjourn. Finally, we make this expansion plan entirely public to control the narrative. Let's take it to a vote."

Mikko sat at home in his cosy room, enveloped by a relaxed, calm, and slightly sleepy atmosphere. He had a mountain of work to plow through. First on the agenda was closing the file on Lizzie's car accident. On paper, she was officially alive, and luckily, he had received all the necessary paperwork to draft the required explanations and legal statements for that side of the case.

Yet, despite having the administrative side cleared, he had spent hours agonising over the hardware report. The goal was to bury the incident cleanly and without consequences: no one held responsible, but with a new system maintenance recommendation appended to all related device modifications. Mikko rewrote the final conclusion several times, cross-checking it against automation logs, regulatory protocols, and compliance standards.

In the end, he was satisfied with the results. He managed to frame the anomaly as a physical hardware vulnerability that could be mitigated with a specific, cheap, and rapid maintenance procedure. Since the automated driving module in Lizzie's vehicle was relatively old and its existing maintenance checklist was already long, adding one more entry was no big deal. Learning that this specific module was already approaching its end-of-life cycle brought a genuine wave of relief.

Still, he felt uneasy. This was the first time he had ever falsified a report like this.

Compounding that anxiety was the second part of the case – the sheer, manipulative nature of how the vehicle had been compromised. He had to solve it; he needed to find the real cause of the incident. Hit by a sudden wall of writer's block, he stood up and began to slowly pace around the room. As he walked, Mikko's gaze drifted to a new gift from Adrian sitting prominently on a shelf. 'Laurenskerk in Time', the label read, immediately bringing his mind back to Adrian.

"That's the exact point where I wish I possessed his so-called 'magic'," the thought crossed his mind first. He took a few more steps.

"But that magic is just a complex architecture of a highly logical mindset, deductive reasoning, and a deeply layered analysis of every single detail... oh, and ale. Right, ale." The second realisation didn't take long to surface. Adrian had explained it once before: the central nervous system gets quieted down by the ale, filtering out all the unwanted chemical noise.

Mikko left his room and headed to the kitchen. He was desperate for a new clue to uncover the real cause, and Adrian's advice – which he had never taken seriously until now – offered a sudden spark of hope. He poured a glass of brown ale, took a slow sip, and returned to his workspace. He began reconstructing the details of the hack in his mind. By the time his glass was nearly empty, a new idea came as a lightning struck.

"That's not the whole picture," he realised. *"Of course there isn't enough information on the surface to..."*

He lunged back toward his terminal screen. The idea he wanted to explore was buried deep within the module's technical specifications – specifically, the CPU and its surrounding architecture. The module itself had been assembled in the Technate, but the energy-efficient, fast, flexible, and universal CPU at its core was a product of a French Cluster company, the Bouclier Digitale unit. This consortium possessed proprietary, atomic-level semiconductor fabrication technology that was ruthlessly guarded against corporate espionage, especially from the Technate.

Mikko managed to pull up the full architectural specifications for this engineering marvel. He narrowed his focus to the debugging and maintenance modes. Unfortunately, that specific layer of information was entirely locked down. While almost every other aspect of the architecture was open-source, these deep-level maintenance details were restricted to major corporate clients under strict, multi-layered NDA.

However, the case wasn't officially closed. Mikko knew the public incident database was openly accessible—stripped of personal identifiers to comply with Privacy Protocols, but absolutely packed with technical forensics. With his knowledge of the specific module, it would be trivial to cross-reference other incidents and isolate the manufacturers of those vital components. Reputation was the ultimate currency in this economy, and he knew for a fact that several rival Clusters were actively trying to invent this technology to break the French Cluster's monopoly on such a sophisticated fabrication process.

Mikko finally saw his next move clear as day: use the ongoing case to retrieve this vital information, and even more – get consultation from the Bouclier Digitale's engineers.

He drained the last drop from his glass, pulled up his calendar schedule, and logged a single entry for the morning: **"Continue with Bouclier Digitale"**.

The night had grown deep, and he had finally earned a few hours of rest before the real investigation began.

Morning found Mikko alone in his and Virta's home. He noticed a new message from her, but it took him a few moments to shift his focus and actually read it: **"Message to the beloved homesick, I went to the local lab till the very late evening."**

This was entirely expected. He didn't need any further notifications to prompt him; he already knew exactly what his next step had to be – calling the Bouclier Digitale office to arrange a consultation. Everything relevant to the incident file had already been transmitted to their systems. The only thing left for him to do now was call and reference it.

The message containing the reference code was already waiting on his terminal. Deciding not to waste any time, he poured a glass of water from the tap and initiated the connection. The encrypted call to their office went through fast – almost instantaneous compared to a deep-space leaplink.

On the other end, a soft, professional female voice answered.

"Good day, Bouclier Digitale department of inquiry... Mikko Pohjalainen, right?" the calm voice sounded first, with the slight, elegant cadence of the French Cluster.

"Yes, I am calling about the request IIF398W093," Mikko replied, his voice flat as he navigated the awkward sequence of letters and numbers in the formal inter-Cluster notation.

"I see. Do you wish to arrange a consultation? And please, indicate when?" the woman's voice replied, her phrasing carrying that characteristic French lilt.

"Today, if possible... as soon as possible," he replied gently, unconsciously matching the soft, polite tone on the other end of the line.

"Please hold for a moment, let me check the availability..."

While she looked up the schedules, Mikko sat back in his chair. He gazed across the room at Adrian's gift, meticulously planning the upcoming meeting – his questions, the insights he needed to extract, and how he would control the flow of the conversation.

"Yes, you are in luck today," the woman's voice returned after a few minutes of quiet line static. *"Your request has been flagged as high importance. The earliest slot is open today, though you will have to wait for two standard hours. Does this suit you well?"*

"Yes, that works for me," he replied shortly.

"Excellent. You will receive the secure meeting link shortly. Have a productive consultation, and a pleasant rest of your day. Thank you for contacting Bouclier Digitale. Goodbye."

"You too. Thank you, goodbye," Mikko said, and ended the call.

Those two standard hours felt like an eternity. He had already structured and rehearsed every single question in his head. Standing up slowly, he tried to map out a way to kill the remaining time, taking a slow, quiet walk around the house. Mikko could feel the raw excitement for the upcoming meeting building inside him; he hadn't even eaten breakfast, as food simply didn't fit his current state of mind – the anticipation sat like a tight lump in his throat.

He took a quick shower, brewed a fresh cup of coffee, dressed warmly, and stepped outside.

It was the very beginning of spring. A stubborn layer of snow still blanketed the ground, but it was already showing signs of wear – softening and slightly melting under the bright afternoon sun, only to freeze into a hard, glassy crust during the biting cold of the night. Still, the sun carried a genuine warmth now, signalling to the nature around him that a new season was finally beginning. Mikko took a deep breath, enjoying the crisp, fresh air and the sunlight. The days were growing noticeably longer with each passing morning, a welcome sign that the long period of winter darkness was finally moving away.

He returned to the warmth of his room, the combination of the freezing air and the bright sun having woken him up completely. Mikko didn't want to waste a single minute, so he decided to dig deeper into this specific component. This type of investigation wasn't typical for him. Most of the time, troubleshooting a technical problem happened at a much higher level; in any normal case, he wouldn't contact Bouclier Digitale at all, but would instead deal directly with the Technate manufacturer that had assembled the driving automation module.

He decided to pull up more documentation on the automation module itself. It was definitely an older model – still widely utilised across the system, but officially recommended for replacement with the newer generation. Reading through the endless engineering specifications brought him a sense of calm. He had always viewed the engineering world as one massive, stable island of logic inside a vast ocean of uncertainty.

The remaining waiting time passed flawlessly. Spotting the secure call link as it materialised on his screen, Mikko clicked it to start the meeting.

"Hello! Mikko, right?" a fast-speaking engineer replied the moment the connection established.

"Yep, that's me. It's already –" Mikko started, but he was cut off instantly.

"Yes, yes, it took a while to study your materials," the Bouclier engineer rushed out, his English carrying a rapid, rhythmic French accent. *"Actually, I started looking into it way earlier. It has been a completely sleepless night for me. It is amazing, you know, and frightening at the same time."*

He adjusted something off-camera, his face tense on the terminal. *"I see you requested our proprietary documentation – unfortunately, I cannot provide that to you, at least not directly. The NDA are absolute. But let me explain more..."*

"Frightening, huh? Why?" Mikko interrupted him, leaning forward.

"I was thinking you had a sleepless night too," the engineer replied nervously, pausing to wipe his face.

"Because you know that this architecture – or more strictly speaking, this CPU – is used everywhere. Yes, there are different versions: radiation-hardened, special coating versions, different packaging, different sets of cores... but underneath, it is all the same."

"Everywhere?" Mikko replied, his brow furrowing. *"No, I was more concentrated on the different versions of the driving automation module where this CPU is used."*

"Oh, this makes sense, but it is no excuse," the engineer said, his voice truly scared now. *"This CPU is used in automated space tugs, in cargo space containers... for the very same purpose. And your concern about updating the microcode – yes, it is a ROM in a way, but it is still possible to update it."*

I do not want to go into the proprietary technical details, but there is a debugging interface designed to do exactly that. However, on production plates, it is disabled... electrically."

"That is already known to me," Mikko replied, his tone smooth with real interest. He masked his sudden surprise, lying just a little – he absolutely did not want to sound unqualified or out of his depth. "And?"

"I was thinking how it is possible," the fast-paced voice on the other end rushed out, genuinely frightening Mikko now.

"I have read not long ago about a technology – very sophisticated, still in an early research stage – but according to the paper... yes, by manipulating specific microwaves, it is actually possible to trigger this mode through the physical packaging. But this technology, it is in its infancy! It almost does not exist. And... even if you possess this technology, you must know exactly what you are doing inside the silicon. Do you understand?"

"Yes..." Mikko replied, the gravity of the realisation settling into his chest. "Any other ways to do that?"

"No, no, no, it is the only viable explanation. I will send you our official analysis and some more technical details. Tell me, what are you planning to do with this?" the engineer asked.

Mikko paused. This was completely frightening, deeply unsettling, and radically misaligned with his original agenda to bury the case. But in the end, he decided he had to stick to his plan.

"I am planning to close the case," Mikko said, deliberately forcing a calm, reassuring cadence into his voice.

"This all... sounds like a very weird story. An engineering scary tale, you know? And I guess closing this cleanly is a good outcome for your employer, right?"

"Yes... yes, I did not expect anything more," the reply came immediately. Then, the engineer hesitated. *"But in exchange, could you keep me updated on the case? I am also tightly bound by paperwork here, and... this whole thing, it does not feel right. That is why I want to be kept informed."*

"Yes. In exchange for your extended information – will do," Mikko concluded.

"It will work then. But it is really frightening..." The engineer's voice trailed off into a tense pause.

"I will do everything possible on my end," Mikko filled the silence.

"Thank you. Goodbye then, and let us keep in touch."

"Sure. Thank you. Bye."

Mikko ended the call.

The sudden silence in the room left Mikko deeply worried and genuinely frightened—sharing the exact same dread as the Bouclier Digitale engineer. This was a hyper-advanced, cutting-edge manufacturer, yet this vulnerability was completely unknown even to the engineers inside the organisation. The dark realisation that this exact same CPU architecture, in its various specialised versions, was currently running the infrastructure of deep space sent a chill down his spine.

The aftermath of that long, intense session with Ake and Adrian at the Wilde Brauhaus left her in a complex state of mind. Anni walked back toward her apartments – a specially designed guest suite in one of the habitat's residential blocks, built to accommodate weeks-long stays. She could feel the alcohol settling in, a rare sensation for her. Her internal professional voice was screaming that this vulnerability was dangerous, but a deeper part of her mind counter-argued that this state was honest. It felt like a rare, unmasked moment where she could be completely direct with herself, with the universe, and, above all, with the true nature of her occupation.

In this moment, she felt no fear toward Ake, Adrian, or anyone else. She harboured no dread regarding the potential consequences if she were to be arrested. Instead, for the very first time in her

life, she feared herself.

During normal operations, her sharp professionalism easily suppressed this kind of introspection – it was a survival mechanism required to push forward, to conquer new objectives, and to sustain her work despite knowing that, at times, it was terrible, immoral, unethical, and cold. In her line of work, reflection was nothing more than parasitic heat – an unwanted energy to be avoided at all costs.

But now, despite the chemical stabilisers she had taken to suppress the alcohol, that cynical, cold, professional wall had cracked. She could physically feel the crushing weight of everything she had done. Yet, the other side of her consciousness whispered a different narrative – a story of monumental scale, terrifying complexity, and a distinct, lingering pride in those very same achievements. Ultimately, it wasn't pure guilt, nor was it simple pride. It was a chaotic cocktail of new, vibrant, and horrific emotions, simultaneously cynical and profound.

In this heightened condition, a rare, panoramic vision of the situation unfolded before her from multiple perspectives simultaneously. This wasn't the tactical calculation required to execute a mission, nor was it a mental simulation to predict an adversary's next move. It was an entirely abstract view – a detached, crystalline perception of every side at once. It was a sensation she had felt long ago, a capacity she thought had been lost to her for decades, and now, if only for a fleeting moment, it had returned.

Viewing the last few years of her life's work from these raw, unblinking angles, she finally reached her apartment. She sank onto the couch and pulled the terminal from her pocket. The device wasn't silent; two new notifications pulsed against the glass. She unlocked the screen.

The first message was frustratingly bureaucratic: **"Recall all operations."**

The second, however, was entirely contradictory: **"Retrieve KEG five blueprints."**

Anni stared at the glowing text, a weary, knowing smile tugging at the corner of her lips.

"Hah, Jakt... your silly ambitions can be heard from hundreds millions kilometres away," she whispered into the empty room. *"You will never be able to hide them under that cynical, cold tone of yours."*

Her mind, utterly overloaded by the sheer scale of the situation and the clashing directives, finally gave out. Within two minutes, she had collapsed into a deep, heavy sleep.

The Helix Pelagicom was among the vanguard of deep-space enclaves in the Outer System to witness the silent docking of this undocumented, unclassified phantom vessel.

Across the absolute quiet of the situation room, monitors tracked the approach of a leviathan protected by a hull of active composite. Unlike the technicians around him, who stared at the screen with a creeping dread of the unknown, Jakt Woult did not view this spectral arrival as a chilling anomaly. Instead, he observed it with the cold bitterness of a squandered empire.

He recognised the shifting sheen of composite CX2 material immediately. Before his eyes, the ghost ship was systematically loading standard containers directly from the automated cargo spikes – vaults holding the precise, high-tier hardware required to manufacture that very same material. It was a turnkey enterprise delivered in total secrecy, eliminating any tedious necessity for reverse engineering.

It had been his definitive, long-term gambit: scale the manufacturing lines locally, secure an unprecedented influx of trade credits for his Pelagicom, and leverage those investments to pioneer advanced fabrication infrastructure to eventually evolve the composite itself.

But now, the near-flawless, mirror-like facade of the rogue freighter cast back the frozen, skeletal geometry of the Helix infrastructure. To Jakt, that pristine surface did not reflect a marvel of engineering; it reflected the rapid evaporation of an illusion – the silent detonation of all his calculated ambitions.

There were no other options remaining, save for a single, piercingly sharp realisation that spiked through his racing thoughts: *"I shall recall Anni from the German Cluster and abort the operation immediately. Too many gambles have already been made without a single viable outcome."*

The phantom ship blocked all communications, leaving Jakt to wait in agonising silence until it finalised its cargo procedures and vanished back into the frozen void from which it had so suddenly emerged.

He knew that at this very moment, Anni might still be pressing forward with the operation, taking unnecessary, lethal risks. A suffocating dread mounted with every passing second of the waiting time: "Oh, communication delay... forty or more standard minutes. It is more than enough time to make a fatal mistake. Such a devastating waste of time..." The thoughts jumped frantically inside his worried mind.

The realisation that the management board would be eager to lynch him for this failed gambit – perhaps even publicly – and the fact that they could swiftly activate a protocol for snap elections to make his Council duty ineffective within minutes, did not truly terrify him. What genuinely frightened him was the stark understanding of the second giant he had dared to bite. The German Cluster could bite back, too. In the vastness of the Outer System, it was simply a matter of time and immense distances before that retaliation arrived.

The situation room suddenly received a incoming request for a leaplink originating from the space vessel, and Jakt accepted it without a moment's hesitation.

"There is a gift for your Pelagicom, council Jakt. Please intercept the HEI transmitter, and follow the attached instructions to connect and activate it," the same calm, cold voice returned from the ship.

"Amm, what is the purpose of such attention?" Jakt tried to reply calmly; another unexpected event was adding to his mounting anxiety.

"We are blocking your communications... for a while; how will you do that when our ship is out of range?" the reply came almost immediately.

"How long are you planning to block us?" Jakt replied, wiping his nose and forehead. Enough stress had already collected to start a panic attack, but he was forcing himself to cope with the situation.

"As long as it takes for the situation to be settled. You have made a lot of mess, and it affects us. Your further interruptions will only lead to more mess. And please, do not destroy our HEI transmitter like you already did in the Inner System on Heidelberg space habitat," the absolutely cold and indifferent voice replied.

"But... I have to recall my operatives from the Inner System..." Jakt was almost begging, but he was sharply cut off.

"It is one of the messes you made; no operatives of yours should have been in the Inner System in the first place. We will release the communication lock once the situation is settled. End of link," the reply came.

The situation had officially switched from tough to catastrophic for Jakt, for Anni and the other operatives, and likely for his entire Pelagicom, too. It left him trapped in an unsettling, agonising waiting game. Solanes of meticulous planning had been utterly wasted, and what was far more frightening – not only wasted, but weaponized to endanger the entire Helix Pelagicom. It was the definitive fault of Jakt, and the absolute fault of the Board.

The absence of distinct mornings, days, nights, and, most importantly, evenings was felt like a double-edged sword for Adrian. From one point of view, it was neither natural nor habitual for him; from the opposite side, it was exciting and flexible to schedule his activities. He had a clear understanding of the

agenda for the days waiting ahead. Despite the long evening spent in the pub with Ake and Anni, he felt himself clear-headed. Adrian had collected enough information about Anni to arrest her, but at the same time, he understood that there was a way more hiding beneath the surface.

He decided to check the messages on his terminal first – a centuries-old habit that was not able to be wiped even in the unfamiliar environment of a space habitat. Beside a lot of messages from different services, he found a short, urgent message from Mikko: "We have to talk, ASAP. Use the high grade leaplink." This message made him move a little bit quicker, ruining the slow pace of his scheduled morning.

On a way out from the Unity Centre he met Ake; he was looking a little bit tired, but very calm with the marks of confidence on his face.

"Hi Adrian, what are the plans for this very day?" Ake began the dialogue.

"Any suggestions?" Adrian replied with a smile; he wanted to move towards the communication centre quickly.

"We have eight standard hours before the leaplink with Berndt, as received from him," Ake replied calmly.

"Okay, before that I have to call Mikko and..." Adrian paused, trying to fetch a line from the massive structure of his curiosity.

"...and... I would like to see the HEI leftovers myself, and Mair – let's see him before," Adrian replied quickly.

"Right now, huh?" Ake replied; he wasn't surprised to hear that from Adrian.

"Nope, let's meet near the communication centre two standard hours from now, m?" he replied quickly, his curiosity already moving his mind toward Mikko's call.

"Excellent! Now I have time to eat, see you there then!" Ake replied with a satisfied look; his curiosity wasn't so fanatical and left him time for lunch.

Adrian made a friendly sign and moved away towards the communication centre. He was doing that alone, on foot; it was a time to arrange all points in his mind – events, facts, Anni's small reactions to different phrases, and the habitat environment itself. He found walking easy; part of the route lay on the drum's curvature, and visually it felt like going slightly uphill. Furthermore, his direction was opposite the drum's rotation – these two things made for a very light feeling.

Despite the enormous size of the rotating part of the space habitat, some physical effects were still sensible, especially for those who were still not fully used to it. On the right side was the 'northern' end of the drum; it was dark at this time and noticeably less used. In spite of a new portion of people coming every day, the space habitat was still not full. It was a consequence of clever planning, a lesson learned the hard way. Adrian still remembered the planning from before The Shift – space habitats used to be filled with people quite quickly, and in some cases, that led directly to infrastructure failures. But nowadays, the habitat systems were more advanced and settled gradually, increasing the infrastructure load step-by-step and testing every phase.

Accompanied by these memories, and aligning the new events, facts, and senses, he made it to the communication centre. The centre was guarded, not with electronics only, but it was also doubled by people – a necessary move since communications were likely compromised. Adrian decided to use the same new privacy room that he and Ake had been using before to leaplink with Michael. Moving along the corridor, he met the same engineer who had advised the pub earlier.

"Oh, hello! How was your visit to the Brauhaus?" the engineer asked.

"Next time I should reserve a table in advance, but it was nice otherwise," Adrian quickly replied; he wasn't ready for a small talk. He moved quickly to the privacy room, and when he heard the typical hiss of the closing door, he felt himself better – now no people were between him and a leaplink with Mikko.

The joke phrase that names the stomach the second brain was not treated as a phrase containing even point one percent of truth for Ake. But he was hungry; unlike Adrian, he was not adapted to the long-term absence of food, and it was the thing he began to hate in Adrian's behaviour. After a short dialogue with him, Ake found himself lucky to get rid of Adrian for a while and finally refill his body.

The Unity Centre was a multi functional structure – and to fulfil the whole cycle of different functions targeted to satisfy all habitat needs, a few restaurants were placed here, but unfortunately for Ake, only two were opened and fully functioning. The Centre itself was recently opened; however, these places were easily discovered by newcomers and were located just right there. Even the automatic discovery system wasn't required to find them – it was visible from the giant lobby, and that was the reason Ake wasn't able to find any free table to sit. Most of the things were automated in such places, but it didn't mean it was possible to speed up humans to eat faster – that was a quick conclusion made by Ake after he had seen that.

He decided to follow Adrian's example and took a walk to the place where he and Adrian had their first long discussion. During the walk, Ake was commanded by an empty stomach mostly; the environment of the space habitat wasn't something very new for him, as he had spent years in different habitats and at different stages of their construction. When he was close to the desired venue, he decided not to hurry and read the name: "Knights of the Centuries."

He moved in and found his effort wasn't a waste; instead, it was more than worth it – only a few visitors were in here. He ordered a few dishes, juice, and coffee – it was a true satisfaction, a long search with a great reward. The estimated time for the food was short, the room was almost empty, and the chair he chose was great. This almost ideal atmosphere was suddenly interrupted by a notification from his terminal. He located the terminal in his pocket and moved it to the light – the message had come from Michael and was very short, but fully understandable by its designated recipient: **"Matthias Klein T.S."** Working with Michael for decades, Ake had learned to understand such short and cryptic messages, and this time wasn't an exception – this message was an urgent warning that the person named Matthias Klein was a spy, a Technate spy.

The privacy room was filled with thought – not literally, but it felt like as though the tiny, weak electromagnetic fields born from the movement of electrons between synapses in Adrian's brain were stronger than the space around them, completely saturating the room itself. The shared information was profoundly unsettling; the very possibility of updating microcode remotely and at such a distance was an entirely new, chilling deal.

Adrian already grasped how deeply impactful this was, and now he was trying to construct an engineering approximation of the almost never-ending sabotage possible with such a technology. He was silent, afraid to create even a tiny vibration in the air – the scale of this was immense.

"Adrian, are you still with us? Even without leaplink delay you didn't say anything for one standard minute..." Mikko tore apart the heavy silence in the room.

"Sorry friend, I was thinking..." he quickly replied, and dived back into his thinking process again.

"You are always thinking, but what do you think about this all?" Almost after another standard minute of silence, Mikko replied.

"Mmm, I do not want to afraid you more than you already are, but I have to... Such kind of technology could also compromise communications, again – theoretically. Bouclier's chips are used in communications too, and as far as I know – one of the bone of relays, at least major parts of them, is

a Bouclier's APU for cryptography," Adrian replied with a slow pace, still building the whole picture.

"Honestly I didn't think about that, the existing thing is enough to be frightening..." Mikko's reply came after ten seconds.

"Ah, no panic, I'm not an expert in this field. I will send you some technical overview about that, and... Could you ask this engineer you were talking about? What the real expert think about that... And don't panic, it's too early for that," he replied and exhaled, trying to calm himself.

While his message was travelling to Earth, he decided to switch to another problem. It was a good habit to postpone a problem while not all information was collected.

"Yep. Sure. Anything else on your mind?" Mikko replied.

"Yes, could you ask Virta if she can access the list of participants on the last conference she was, the one where this guy Hugo died?" Adrian asked, trying to fit as much as possible into a single message; the picture of a well-established communication system was shattered a little in his mind. *"And if she can, please clarify – was the name Anni Wyde in the list? And let's have a leaplink later, six or more hours from now? Could you?"*

"Understood, wait for a message. End of the leaplink," Mikko's reply came.

Adrian slowly made his way to the privacy room's door, his eyes scanning everywhere – automation, communication, transportation – mapping out all the areas that could be fundamentally compromised according to this new discovery. He walked along the corridor and stopped near the engineer he had seen before.

"Mmm, since you know about pubs, probably you could advice where is the place to smoke?" Adrian asked him.

"Smoke? It's almost forbidden... do not know, sorry man," he replied.

The Venusian orbit and various Lagrange points nearby were in heavy use by the Nordic sector; it was the cradle where the largest and most advanced space vessels were born. Foremost among these key structures were the orbital factories owned by the Finnish Cluster – titanic shipyards suspended in the dark void of space. Their main output consisted of orbital crawlers, the essential engines of commerce for the entire Solar System, and the location chosen to construct them was strategically flawless. Building such ginormous structures required vast collaboration, demanding an endless influx of raw materials, prefabricated sections, and advanced technology delivered from across the Inner System. Even the Technate was on the customer list. Constructing an orbital factory was merely the first step; the far more complex achievement was establishing a full-scale, resilient supply chain, and in this regard, the factories of the Finnish Cluster stood completely unbeatable.

The industrial complex was immense on its own, consisting of four primary assembly factories and dozens of smaller construction facilities tethered to one another. The smallest of these assembly factories was dedicated entirely to maintenance, repair, upgrades, or even the total refitting of the existing fleet; the remaining three, however, were used almost exclusively for constructing entirely new vessels.

Traffic around the complex mega structures was relentless – swarms of assembly drones, shuttle carriers, and various tugs flew back and forth like bees collecting nectar during peak summer weather. Two of the assembly factories contained nearly finished orbital crawlers, their hulls gleaming in the raw sunlight, while the third factory was busy assembling the colossal, eight-kilometre spine of a new vessel.

One of the shuttles detached from the mathematically calculated flow of traffic – it was performing a customer inspection. The first leg of its trajectory was to glide across the closed front debris shield; it was perfect, newly constructed. The next step was to back away from the orbital crawler by a few kilometres to inspect the core structures and installed modules. The core structure was heavily reinforced

with additional support beams to increase the ship's overall structural integrity, allowing the massive vessel to perform sharper, more aggressive manoeuvres. The artificial gravity infrastructure was visible as two counter-rotating rings located just aft of the debris shield. Moving slowly, the shuttle's cameras captured all the major modifications engineered into this new generation of cargo ship.

The subsequent section was dedicated to the communications array – a dense network of radio antennas, laser emitters, and sensory equipment. Moving further back, the shuttle's optics focused on an immense array of kinetic weaponry, followed closely by the massive fuel pods. The most utilitarian and slender segment of the spine was the section intended to carry space containers. Further down, the fusion engine block was completely shielded with a light grey composite material; the shuttle's cameras lingered on the crisp markings painted onto these plates – the symbol of the Union, accompanied by the crest and eye of the Greek Protectorate trade fleet and the vessel's official identification numbers. Finally, the shuttle hovered beside the void-black radiator panels before beginning its journey back. It was the first official presentation of a fully ready-to-use ship, custom-built for its new buyer.

Oristos switched on the expansive display wall inside the private dining room of the Paradromos cafe, deliberately catching everyone off guard.

"My friends, it is an excellent moment to refill your glasses. I have just received a visual inspection stream straight from Taivaantelakka," Oristos announced, his voice effortlessly cutting through the hum of numerous scattered conversations in the room.

"Ah, so you want us to see these new, magnificent cargo ships that we have been planning for decades?!" one of the high-tier directors of the trade fleet remarked, refilling his glass before turning his eyes expectantly toward the screen.

"Precisely. Our true alternative to the standard orbital crawler project," Oristos replied smoothly. *"Carefully designed, enhanced, and brought to life by the finest engineers at Taivaantelakka. It is the crowning achievement of our massive capital investments over the last few decades."*

The video stream, captured just one standard hour ago, played across the screen. The footage had been produced with two distinct goals in mind: to highlight the critical engineering improvements and to visually demonstrate the immense scale of the vessel. The ship was slightly more massive than the vehicles currently in service, a design choice that significantly increased its cargo capacity and, as a direct result, slashed transportation costs per ton. The intentionally reinforced structural design was another major long-term investment, engineered to allow a more flexible route corrections and rapid docking procedures.

"As I have said from the beginning – we must offer the exact same freight services, but at a price they cannot match," Oristos continued, his face lit by the glow of the screen, radiating pride in the new ship design.

"I already know your questions," Oristos said, anticipating their thoughts. *"At the moment, we can launch with only two fully completed ships; however, by the time the first cargo route completes its cycle, the third vessel will be ready to join the fleet."*

"And there are no bottlenecks with our first major batch of production?" the same high-tier director asked, shifting his gaze directly to Oristos.

"None at all. The first ten cargo ships are already locked into the construction queue, so we are completely on schedule," Oristos replied confidently.

The old-fashioned watch displayed the time with reliable precision – an expensive relic from centuries ago, the only remnant of his father. Memories are transient, especially those that go unvisited; even human brain capacity has its hard limits. It reminded Adrian of how fragile a system could be – the most advanced and sophisticated, perhaps, were the most prone to failure.

He stepped outside the communication centre and glanced at the ancient timepiece again. It was nearly time for his meeting with Ake. The information Mikko had shared weighed on his mind, creating a relentless pressure. He turned left, passing one of the guards, and leaned against the communication centre's outer wall – his mind required a physical anchor to ground the rapid-fire processing of the data. A moment later, Adrian arrived at a sobering conclusion: before he could draw any firm inferences or trigger an alarm, he needed more evidence. He was no specialist in this field – he could not afford to be merely ninety-nine percent certain.

Ake found Adrian propping up the wall of the communication centre, arriving just a few standard minutes late. To Ake, Adrian's rigid posture looked genuinely alarming; his skin was even more pale than usual. To see a man who had experienced and survived so much over the centuries look this deeply unsettled was chilling.

"Hey! Are you all right? You look as though something has happened, my friend," Ake said, initiating the conversation with a warm, familiar tone – a deliberate tactic to soothe his own rising stress.

"Mmm, I am fine. But yes – it is probable that something has happened. Though, even if it did, it did not happen just now, or today, but years ago..." Adrian replied, finally shifting his intense gaze directly to Ake's face.

"We should discuss that later today, during a leaplink session with Michael... But do we still have some time before that, huh?" Adrian continued, intentionally forcing a lighter, more uplifting note into the last phrase.

"Oh, another riddle. Yes, I remember the plan, let us follow it," Ake replied. He turned away from the communication centre, gesturing for Adrian to follow him.

"Shall we move on then? I am also not exactly empty-handed..." Ake concluded with a knowing look.

"Oh, yes. But let us visit the investigation facility first. I want to see this CX2 composite for myself, and... I imagine there are rooms with exceptionally good airflow located over there, correct?" Adrian replied, finally peeling himself off the wall.

"Yes, of course. But why?" Ake asked, slightly caught off guard.

"Sometimes I need to smoke, you know..." Adrian replied in an absolutely flat, calm tone. *"Shall we walk?"* he asked, gesturing down.

"It is a waste of time. Too far," Ake countered pragmatically to avoid the long trek on foot.

"Very well. Let us move, then," Adrian quickly agreed.

Both of them turned and moved briskly toward the habitat's transit station, leaving the bustling chaos of the communication centre far behind.

Entering the orbital transit shuttle, Matthias felt a sudden prickle of unease regarding his return to the Heidelberg space habitat. He attempted to parse this exact sensation using pure logic and calculation, but nothing came to his mind. The atmosphere inside the passenger cabin was entirely mundane, almost aggressively typical – people moving methodically from one gravity oasis to another. It was a completely

standard route, filled with a routine mix of business travellers, tourists, and families visiting relatives; the motives of his fellow passengers were utterly ordinary.

Matthias's mind shifted to the piece of composite he had successfully ex-filtrated from the Heidelberg habitat. For him, this assignment was completely uncharacteristic; he had executed similar operations dozens of times before, but the protocol this time was fundamentally different. Usually, intelligence follow-up was fed to him directly without any restrictions, but this time, he had been limited with the follow-up information. Furthermore, in almost every previous case, he was granted a standard cool-down period afterwards – yet again, not this time.

He slid into his designated seat according to the ship's manifest. Looking up at the automated dispenser console in front of him, he browsed a selection of specialised chemical formulations and standard travel pills designed to make the high-velocity commute more tolerable. Klein selected a mild sedative. He understood with pragmatic clarity that this transit window needed to be spent relaxing and regaining his strength. Something completely unpredictable was waiting for him ahead.

The investigation facility comprised an array of specialised laboratories, each outfitted with a distinct suite of analytical tools. Maintaining all of this heavy equipment locally within the space habitat was a simple matter of economics – saving both immense transit costs and invaluable time. Architecturally, the facility was constructed from clean, geometric modules arranged in a sophisticated grid that balanced strict utility with striking visual design. The colour palette reinforced this institutional clarity: a primary coat of light grey was broken up by bold stripes of deep blue, rich red, and saturated orange. These colours neatly demarcated the building into separate zones, with each section dedicated to a specific type of laboratory.

Much like the communication centre, this facility was buzzing with activity, though the demographic here was noticeably different. When Ake and Adrian arrived at the entrance, they found a heavy security presence: teams of guards doubling the automated access checkpoints. Everyone entering the building was thoroughly vetted – even the Technarch of the habitat would not bypass this scrutiny. The security level was absolute.

After passing the rigorous ID checks, Ake and Adrian moved down the corridor toward the laboratory housing the remnants of the destroyed HEI transmitter. As they neared their destination, they passed a specialised security detail assigned by Ake himself, standing vigil outside the room.

"Hi folks. Is this shit frozen? Has anybody tried to access the room?" Ake asked one of the guards, his tone friendly and informal – the usual manner he reserved for his own inner circle.

"Indeed, frozen, sir. And nobody has attempted to reach this room," the massive guard replied. He glanced around the corridor before tilting his head down toward Ake.

"Boss? Could I ask something?" he said quietly.

"Shoot," Ake replied.

"This junk... are we absolutely sure every single piece of it was collected and brought here?" the massive guy asked, frowning.

"That is exactly our intention to check out," Adrian interrupted them suddenly, his voice deadpan and direct.

"Ah, this is Adrian – a very trusted colleague I am currently working with. Forgive the lack of a formal introduction, guys," Ake added, wrapping up the brief conversation.

Adrian and Ake stepped inside the laboratory. The heavy door sealed shut behind them with a sharp, characteristic hiss, completely isolating the room's acoustics from the corridor outside.

"Adrian, when were you planning to explain this sudden urge to verify the quantity of the collected remnants?" Ake asked, turning to him.

"Right now. But your man simply highlighted the issue sooner than I did," Adrian replied, his tone typically flat and brief.

"Though first, let us feed my curiosity," he continued, panning his eyes across the clean surfaces. *"Where is this CX2 piece?"*

Ake gestured for Adrian to follow him to the right. They took only a few paces before stopping in front of a sealed, transparent containment unit housing the CX2 composite. It was a fragment of deep, absolute black material, though the pristine darkness was broken along the edges by distinct marks of rapid, powdery degradation. The digital display etched into the container's glass flashed three warning icons in sequence: chemical hazard, high toxicity, and nano-particles hazard.

"If you wish to examine the structural layers, zoom in, or run a density inspection – we have a complete, high-fidelity digital scan of the fragment ready on the main console," Ake said. He looked at Adrian with an expression like that of a master chef presenting a highly sophisticated, rare dish to a very hungry guest.

"What do you say?"

"Oh, that would be excellent... I can begin looking over it now and finalise my observations later," Adrian replied in his flat, calm tone. He slid into the seat before the terminal and immediately began analysing the structural details of the CX2.

"Ake, you mentioned earlier that you were not empty-handed," Adrian asked, his eyes remaining fixed on the screen as he zoomed in on the digital copy of the composite. *"What is that about?"*

"Michael found another spy – Matthias Klein, a Technate asset," Ake revealed, his voice dropping slightly. *"We are in a position to arrest..."*

"No, no – I am certain this Matthias Klein is a Technate spy; Michael could not be so entirely wrong about something like that. But Anni... she is highly unlikely to be a Technate asset," Adrian replied, his fingers moving across the interface to dissect the composite's structural layers.

"Hm. And you suggest we follow the exact same protocol as before – mimic a pair of sitting ducks, yes?" Ake asked, a flat, sceptical edge creeping into his tone.

"In the case of Matthias, no. This is your specific area of expertise. Use him to locate other Technate assets in the network, hm?" Adrian replied.

On the display, he stripped away all the outer layers except one – a complex, microscopic web of miniature capillaries layered tightly on top of one another.

"Actually, that was precisely my plan," Ake replied, a note of confidence returning to his voice.

"But what about your own findings, Adrian?" Ake continued, leaning in slightly.

"Mmm. It is probable that I know exactly how Lizzie was... reduced to her current state back on Earth," Adrian replied, his fingers stalling as he stared into the microscopic web on the screen.

"And I likely know something far more frightening. I am still not entirely certain, but if my conclusions are correct, we have all been in deep shit... for years."

He stood up abruptly, pacing a short lap around the laboratory before stopping to look directly at the physical fragment of the CX2 composite inside its containment unit.

"Let us review all the high-resolution video streams of the explosion, along with the logs from the subsequent debris collection," Adrian said, suddenly pivoting to a new angle.

"We cannot rely on an automated search algorithm for this – the HEI transmitter architecture isn't exactly something well-catalogued in the standard system databases, correct?"

"Yes... so we are going to review all of this visually, then?" Ake asked, slightly caught off guard by the sheer manual labour required.

"Indeed," Adrian murmured briefly.

They spent the next twenty-five minutes meticulously inspecting the various video streams – watching them intently, rewinding, pausing, and advancing the footage slowly, frame by frame. Adrian was beginning to lose focus; the fluctuating count of debris fragments across the different angles was blurring together, making it impossible to reconcile the data. But suddenly, Ake shattered the quiet of the room.

"Aha! Look here. We are missing a piece that was collected," Ake announced loudly, his voice filled with sudden energy as he quickly toggled to a different video stream. *"Look at this exact frame, and..."*

"Here, do you see that? CX2 can be completely pitch black, or the exact opposite – it can become perfectly reflective like a mirror. But it requires a specific window of time to transition between those states. See? Right there," Ake said, pointing directly to a tiny cluster of shifting pixels on the video display.

"Oh my..." Adrian breathed, a rare spark of shock breaking through his flat demeanour.

"Yes. We are going to catch these cunts very soon," Ake said, a cold, predatory intrigue was absolute in his voice.